

# **Considering Matthew Shepard**

## **Craig Hella Johnson**

**Libretto**

Commissioned by Fran and Larry Collmann and Conspirare  
Dedicated to Philip Overbaugh

## **PROLOGUE**

Cattle, Horses, Sky and Grass  
Ordinary Boy  
We Tell Each Other Stories

## **PASSION**

The Fence (before)  
The Fence (that night)  
A Protestor  
Keep It Away From Me (The Wound of Love)  
Fire of the Ancient Heart  
We Are All Sons  
I Am Like You  
The Innocence  
The Fence (one week later)  
Stars  
In Need of Breath  
Gently Rest  
Deer Song (Mist on the Mountains)  
The Fence (after)/The Wind  
Pilgrimage

## **EPILOGUE**

Meet Me Here  
Thanks  
All of Us  
Reprise: This Chant of Life (Cattle, Horses, Sky and Grass)

## **PROLOGUE**

All.

*Yoodle—ooh, yoodle-ooh-hoo, so sings a lone cowboy,  
Who with the wild roses wants you to be free.*

### **Cattle, Horses, Sky and Grass**

Cattle, horses, sky and grass  
These are the things that sway and pass  
Before our eyes and through our dreams  
Through shiny, sparkly, golden gleams  
Within our psyche that find and know  
The value of this special glow  
That only gleams for those who bleed  
Their soul and heart and utter need  
Into the mighty, throbbing Earth  
From which springs life and death and birth.

*I'm alive! I'm alive, I'm alive, golden. I'm alive, I'm alive, I'm alive . . .*

These cattle, horses, grass, and sky  
Dance and dance and never die  
They circle through the realms of air  
And ground and empty spaces where  
A human being can join the song  
Can circle, too, and not go wrong  
Amidst the natural, pulsing forces  
Of sky and grass and cows and horses.

*I'm alive, I'm alive, I'm alive . . .*

This chant of life cannot be heard  
It must be felt, there is no word  
To sing that could express the true  
Significance of how we wind  
Through all these hoops of Earth and mind  
Through horses, cattle, sky and grass  
And all these things that sway and pass.

## Ordinary Boy

Let's talk about Matt—

*Ordinary boy, ordinary boy, ordinary boy . . .*

Born in December in Casper, Wyoming

*Ordinary boy*

to a father, Dennis  
and a mother, Judy

*Ordinary boy, ordinary boy*

Then came a younger brother, Logan

*Ordinary boy*

His name was Matthew Wayne Shepard. And one day his name came to be known around the world. But as his mother said:

Judy Shepard: You knew him as Matthew. To us he was Matt.

He went camping, he went fishing, even hunting for a moose  
He read plays and he read stories and especially *Dr. Seuss*

He wrote poems with illustrations for the neighbors on the street  
And he left them in each mailbox till he learned it was illegal

He made friends and he wore braces and his frame was rather small  
He sang songs his father taught him

*Frere Jacques . . .*

*Row Row Row Your Boat . . .*

*Twinkle Twinkle Little Star . . .*

Judy: He was my son, my first-born, and more. He was my friend, my confidant, my constant reminder of how good life can be—and . . . how hurtful. ^

How good life can be, how good life can be

Judy: *Matt's laugh, his wonderful hugs, his stories . . .*

Matt writes about himself in a notebook:

I am funny, sometimes forgetful and messy and lazy. I am not a lazy person though. I am giving and understanding. And formal and polite. I am sensitive. I am honest. I am sincere. And I am not a pest.

I am not a pest, I am not a pest . . .

I am my own person. I am warm.

I want my life to be happy and I want to be clearer about things. I want to feel good.

I love Wyoming . . .

I love Wyoming very much . . .

I love theatre  
I love good friends  
I love succeeding  
I love pasta  
I love jogging  
I love walking and feeling good

I love Europe and driving and music and helping and smiling and Charlie and Jeopardy  
I love movies and eating and positive people and pasta and driving and walking and jogging  
and kissing and learning and airports and music and smiling and hugging and being myself  
I love theatre! I love theatre!  
And I love to be on stage!+

Such an ordinary boy living ordinary days  
In an ordinary life so worth living  
He felt ordinary yearning and ordinary fears  
With an ordinary hope for belonging

He felt ordinary yearning and ordinary fears  
With an ordinary hope for belonging  
*(Born to live this ordinary life)*  
Just an ordinary boy living ordinary days with extraordinary kindness  
extraordinary laughter extraordinary shining  
extraordinary light and joy  
Joy and light.

I love, I love, I love . . .  
Ordinary boy, ordinary boy

### **We Tell Each Other Stories**

We tell each other stories so that we will remember  
Try and find the meaning in the living of our days

Always telling stories, wanting to remember  
Where and whom we came from  
Who we are

Sometimes there's a story that's painful to remember  
One that breaks the heart of us all  
Still we tell the story  
We're listening and confessing  
What we have forgotten  
In the story of us all

We tell each other stories so that we will remember

Trying to find the meaning . . .

*I am open to hear this story about a boy, an ordinary boy  
Who never had expected his life would be this story,  
(could be any boy)*

*I am open to hear a story*

*Open, listen.  
All.*

## **PASSION**

### ***RECITATION I***

***Laramie, southeastern Wyoming, between the Snowy Range and the Laramie Range.  
Tuesday, October 6, 1998.***

#### **The Fence (before)**

Out and alone  
on the endless empty prairie

the moon bathes me  
the stars bless me

the sun warms me  
the wind soothes me

still still still  
I wonder

will I always be out here  
exposed and alone?

will I ever know why  
I was put (here) on this earth?

will somebody someday  
stumble upon me?

will anyone remember me  
after I'm gone?

*Still, still, still . . . I wonder.*

### ***RECITATION II***

***Tuesday night. Matthew attended a meeting of the University of Wyoming's Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Association, then joined others for coffee at the College Inn. Around 10:30, he went to the Fireside Bar, where he later met Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson. Near midnight, they drove him to a remote area, tied him to a buck and rail fence, beat him horribly and left him to die in the cold of night.***

## **The Fence (that night)**

*Most noble evergreen with your roots in the sun:  
you shine in the cloudless sky of a sphere no earthly eminence can grasp,  
You blush like the dawn,  
you burn like a flame of the sun. ^*

I held him all night long  
He was heavy as a broken heart  
Tears fell from his unblinking eyes  
He was dead weight yet he kept breathing

He was heavy as a broken heart  
His own heart wouldn't stop beating  
The cold wind wouldn't stop blowing  
His face streaked with moonlight and blood  
I tightened my grip and held on

The cold wind wouldn't stop blowing  
We were out on the prairie alone  
I tightened my grip and held on  
I saw what was done to this child

We were out on the prairie alone  
Their truck was the last thing he saw  
I saw what was done to this child  
I cradled him just like a mother

*Most noble evergreen, most noble evergreen, your roots in the sun . . .*

Their truck was the last thing he saw  
Tears fell from his unblinking eyes  
I cradled him just like a mother  
I held him all night long

*Most noble evergreen . . .*

## **RECITATION III**

***The next morning, Matthew was found by a cyclist, a fellow student, who at first thought he was a scarecrow. After several days in a coma and on life support, Matthew Shepard died on Monday, October 12, at 12:53 a.m. At the funeral, which took place on Friday, October 16, at St Mark's Episcopal Church in Casper, Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church protested outside.***



## **A Protestor**

*God Hates Fags, Matt in Hell*

–Signs held by anti-gay protestors at Matthew Shepard's funeral and the trials of his murderers

*kreuzige, kreuzige! (translation: crucify, crucify)*

A boy who takes a boy to bed?  
Where I come from that's not polite  
He asked for it, you got that right  
The fires of Hell burn hot and red  
The only good fag is a fag that's dead

A man and a woman, the Good Lord said  
As sure as Eve took that first bite  
The fires of Hell burn hot and red

*kreuzige, kreuzige!*

Beneath the Hunter's Moon he bled  
That must have been a pretty sight  
The fires of Hell burn hot and red

C'mon, kids, it's time for bed  
Say your prayers, kiss Dad good night  
A boy who takes a boy to bed?  
The fires of Hell burn hot and red

*crucify, crucify . . . the light*

*crucify the light . . .*

## **Keep It Away From Me (The Wound of Love)**

don't wanna look on this  
never get near  
flames too raw for me  
grief too deep  
keep it away from me  
*stay out of my heart*  
*stay out of my hope*  
some son, somebody's pain  
some child gone  
child never mine  
born to this trouble  
don't wanna be born to this world  
world where sometimes yes  
world where mostly no  
*the wound of love^*

smoke round my throat  
rain down my soul

no heaven lies  
keep them gone  
keep them never  
grief too deep, flames too raw  
keep them away from me  
                  *stay out of my heart*  
                  *stay out of my hope*

don't try  
any old story on me  
no wing no song  
no cry no comfort ye  
no wound ever mine  
close up the gates of night  
                  *the wound of love*  
keep this all away from me  
                  *the wound of love*  
                  *you take away*  
                  *the wounds of the world*  
keep it away from me

#### ***RECITATION IV***

***National media began to broadcast the story. As the news began to spread, many people across the country gathered together in candlelight vigils, moved to (silently) speak for life over death, love over hate, light over darkness.***

#### **Fire of the Ancient Heart**

*Cantor:*

*"What have you done? Hark, thy brother's blood  
cries to me from the ground." ^*

*Choir:*

Called by this candle  
Led to the flame  
Called to remember  
Enter the flame

*Cantor:*

all our flames now  
swaying and free  
all our hearts now  
moving as one  
every living spirit  
turned toward peace  
all our tender  
hopes awake

*Choir:*

*Called by this candle  
Led to the flame  
Called to remember  
Enter the flame*

**Fire: howl**  
**Fire: broken**  
**Fire: burst**  
**Fire: rage**  
**Fire: swell**  
**Fire: shatter**  
**Fire: wail**

**Fire**

We all betray the ancient heart  
Ev'ry one of us, all of us  
His heart, my heart, your heart, one heart  
"In each moment the fire rages, it will burn away a hundred veils."#  
Burning Breaking Grasping Raging

*how do we keep these  
flames in our hands?  
how do we guard these  
fears in our hearts?  
how long to hold these  
griefs in our songs?*

*remembering anger  
weave it with hope  
remembering exile  
braid it with praise  
longing past horror  
longing past dread  
dreaming of healing  
past all our pain*

**Fire: living in me**  
**Fire: purify**  
**Fire: now hold me**  
**Fire: seize my heart**

*(enter the flame, enter the flame  
shatter my heart, shatter my heart  
called to enter, burn a hundred veils)*

Called by this flame  
Fire of my heart:  
Break down all walls  
Open all doors  
Only this Love

"Eyes of flesh, eyes of fire"~

*Lumina, lumina, lumina  
Open us,  
All!*

*(In each moment the fire rages, it will burn away a hundred veils.)*

### **RECITATION V**

***Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson were arrested shortly after the attack and charged with murder, kidnapping, and aggravated robbery. The first of two trials began on October 26, 1999; both were convicted of the murder and sentenced to two consecutive life sentences.***

### **We Are All Sons**

*Stray birds of summer come to my window to sing and fly away.  
And yellow leaves of autumn which have no songs flutter and fall there with a sigh.  
Once we dreamt that we were strangers.  
We wake up to find that we were dear to each other.^*

we are all sons of fathers and mothers  
we are all sons

we are all rivers  
the roar of waters, we are all sons

### **I Am Like You**

I am like you

Aaron

and Russell

When I think of you (and honestly I don't like to think about you)  
but sometimes I do,  
I am so horrified, and just so angry and confused (and scared)  
that you could do things to another boy—they were so cruel and  
so undeserved, so dark and hard and full of (I don't know)

Late one night I had a glimpse  
of something I recognized, just a tiny glimpse—  
I don't even like to say this out loud,  
it isn't even all that true—  
but I wondered for a moment,  
am I like you? (in any way)

(I pray the answer is no)  
Am I like you?  
I bet you once had hopes and dreams, too.

Some things we love get lost along the way,  
That's just like me—get lost along the way—  
I am like you, I get confused and I'm afraid  
and I've been reckless, I've been restless, bored,  
unthinking, listless, intoxicated,  
I've come unhinged,  
and made mistakes  
and hurt people very much.

Sometimes I feel (in springtime, in early afternoon)  
the sunshine warm on my face;  
you feel this too (don't you?),  
the sunshine warm on your face.

I am like you  
(this troubles me)  
I am like you  
(just needed to say this)

Some things we love get lost along the way.

we are all sons of fathers and mothers  
we are all sons

sometimes no home for us here on the earth  
no place to lay our heads  
we are all sons of fathers and mothers

if you could know for one moment  
how it is to live in our bodies  
within the world

if you could know

you ask too much of us  
you ask too little

### **The Innocence**

When I think of all the times the world was ours for dreaming,  
When I think of all the times the earth seemed like our home-  
Every heart alive with its own longing,  
Every future we could ever hope to hold.

All the times our laughter rang in summer,  
All the times the rivers sang our tune-  
Was there already sadness in the sunlight?  
Some stormy story waiting to be told?

*Where O where has the innocence gone?  
Where O where has it gone?  
Rains rolling down wash away my memory;  
Where O where has it gone?*

When I think of all the joys, the wonders we remember  
All the treasures we believed we'd never ever lose.  
Too many days gone by without their meaning,  
Too many darkened hours without their peace.

*Where O where has the innocence gone?*

*Where O where has it gone?  
Vows we once swore, now it's just this letting go,  
Where O where has it gone?*

**RECITATION VI**

***In the days and weeks after Matthew's death, many people came to the fence to pay homage and pray and grieve.***

**The Fence (one week later)**

*I have seen people come out here with a pocketknife and take a piece of the fence, like a relic, like an icon. –Rev. Stephen M. Johnson, Unitarian minister*

I keep still  
I stand firm  
I hold my ground  
while they lay down

flowers and photos  
prayers and poems  
crystals and candles  
sticks and stones

they come in herds  
they stand and stare  
they sit and sigh  
they crouch and cry

some of them touch me  
in unexpected ways  
without asking permission  
and then move on

but I don't mind  
being a shrine  
is better than being  
the scene of the crime

**RECITATION VII**

***Matthew's father made his statement to the court on November 5, 1999.***

**STARS**

*By the end of the beating, his body was just trying to survive. You left him out there by himself, but he wasn't alone. There were his lifelong friends with him—friends that he had grown up with. You're probably wondering who these friends were. First, he had the beautiful night sky with the same stars and moon that we used to look at through a telescope. Then, he had the daylight and the sun to shine on him one more time—one more cool, wonderful autumn day in Wyoming. His last day alive in Wyoming. His last day alive in the state that he always proudly called home. And through it all he was breathing in for the last time the smell of Wyoming sagebrush and the scent of pine trees from the snowy range. He heard the wind—the ever-present Wyoming wind—for the last time. He had one more friend with him. One he grew to*

*know through his time in Sunday school and as an acolyte at St. Mark's in Casper as well as through his visits to St. Matthew's in Laramie.*

*I feel better knowing he wasn't alone.*

Stars  
across  
scattered  
the  
sky  
in  
blinking  
dismay  
unable  
being  
to help  
light  
years  
away

***RECITATION VIII***

***Matthew was left tied to the fence for almost eighteen hours.***

**In Need of Breath**

*Matt:*

My heart

Is an unset jewel

Upon the tender night

Yearning for its dear old friend

The Moon.

When the Nameless One debuts again  
Ten thousand facets of my being unfurl wings  
And reveal such a radiance inside

I enter a realm divine—  
I too begin to sweetly cast light,  
Like a lamp,  
I cast light  
Through the streets of this  
World.

My heart is an unset jewel  
Upon existence  
Waiting for the Friend's touch.

Tonight

Tonight  
My heart is an unset ruby  
Offered bowed and weeping to the Sky.  
I am dying in these cold hours  
For the resplendent glance of God.

My heart  
Is an unset jewel  
Upon the tender night

My heart is an unset ruby  
Offered bowed and weeping to the Sky.

### **Gently Rest (Deer Lullaby)**

Gently rest now, you the child of angels  
Spirit shining, resting in creation  
Universe is holding you so deeply  
Gently rest now, you the child of angels

Deer beside you, hear your brother breathing  
With you always in your starry shelter  
Dreaming in the holy home of wonder  
Universe is holding you so deeply  
Light of every sun you felt around you  
Blessing bringing our own hearts of longing  
Spirit sleeping in the arms of ages  
Gently rest now, you the child of angels

Universe now dreaming you so deeply  
Spirit shining, home within creation  
Dreaming in eternal light of wonder  
Gently rest now, you the child of angels  
Spirit sleeping in the arms of angels  
Gently rest . . .



**RECITATION IX**

***Sheriff's Deputy, Reggie Fluty, the first to report to the scene, told Judy Shepard that as she ran to the fence she saw a large doe lying near Matt—as if the deer had been keeping him company all through the night.***

**Deer Song**

*Deer:*

A mist is over the mountain,  
    The stars in their meadows upon the air,  
Your people are waiting below them,  
    And you know there's a gathering there.  
All night I lay there beside you,  
    I cradled your pain in my care,  
We move through creation together,  
    And we know there's a welcoming there.

Welcome, welcome, sounds the song,  
    Calling, calling clear;  
Always with us, evergreen heart,  
    Where can we be but there?

*Matthew:*

I'll find all the love I have longed for,  
    The home that's been calling my heart so long  
So soon I'll be cleansed in those waters,  
    My fevers forever be gone;  
Where else on earth but these waters?  
    No more, no more to be torn;  
My own ones, my dearest, are waiting—  
    And I'll weep to be where I belong.

Welcome, welcome, sounds the song,  
    Calling, calling clear;  
Always with me, evergreen heart,  
    Where can I be but here?

**RECITATION X**

***The fence has been torn down.***

**The Fence (after)/The Wind**

prayed upon  
frowned upon

revered  
feared

adored  
abhorred

despised

idolized

splintered  
scarred

weathered  
worn

broken down  
broken up

ripped apart  
ripped away

gone  
but not forgotten

*The North Wind  
carried his father's laugh  
The South Wind  
carried his mother's song  
The East Wind  
carried his brother's cheer  
The West Wind  
carried his lover's moan  
The Winds of the World  
wove together a prayer  
to carry that hurt boy home*

prayed upon  
frowned upon

revered  
feared

*North Wind, South Wind, East Wind, West Wind*

*(Splintered, scarred, weathered, worn, broken down, gone)*

*Winds of the World: carry him home.*

### **Pilgrimage**

*The land was sold and a new fence now stands about fifty yards away. People still come to pay their respects. – Jim Osborn, friend of Matthew Shepard*

I walk to the fence with beauty before me  
*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want*

I walk to the fence with beauty behind me  
*Yit'gadal v'yit' kadash (may his great name grow)*

I walk to the fence with beauty above me

*Om Mani Padme Ham (Om! the jewel in the lotus, hum!)*

*I walk to the fence with beauty below me  
Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit*

*I reach the fence surrounded by beauty  
wail of wind, cry of hawk*

*I leave the fence surrounded by beauty  
sigh of sagebrush, hush of stone*

*(Beauty above me, beauty below me  
By beauty surrounded)*

*Still, still, still, I wonder....  
wail of wind, cry of hawk*

*Still, still, still, I wonder. . .  
wail of wind, cry of hawk*

*Still still still*

## **EPILOGUE**

### **Meet Me Here**

*Meet me here  
Won't you meet me here  
Where the old fence ends and the horizon begins  
There's a balm in the silence  
Like an understanding air  
Where the old fence ends and the horizon begins*

We've been walking through the darkness  
On this long, hard climb  
Carried ancestral sorrow  
For too long a time  
Will you lay down your burden  
Lay it down, come with me  
It will never be forgotten  
Held in love, so tenderly

*Meet me here  
Won't you meet me here  
Where the old fence ends and the horizon begins  
There's a joy in the singing  
Like an understanding air  
Where the fence ends and the horizon begins.*

Then we'll come to the mountain  
We'll go bounding to see  
That great circle of dancing  
And we'll dance endlessly  
And we'll dance with the all the children  
Who've been lost along the way  
We will welcome each other  
Coming home, this glorious day

*We are home in the mountain  
And we'll gently understand  
That we've been friends forever  
That we've never been alone  
We'll sing on through any darkness  
And our Song will be our sight  
We can learn to offer praise again  
Coming home to the light . . .*

## **Thanks**

*Choir: Thank you*

*Thank you, thank you*

*Hohou, hohou (Arahapo—thank you)*

*Yontonwe (Huron—thank you)*

*Hohou, Yontonwe . . .*

*Thank you*

## **All Of Us**

What could be the song?  
Where begin again?  
Who could meet us there?  
Where might we begin?  
From the shadows climb,  
Rise to sing again;  
Where could be the joy?  
How do we begin?

Never our despair,  
Never the least of us,  
Never turn away,  
Never hide our face;  
Ordinary boy,  
Only all of us,  
Free us from our fear,  
Only all of us.

What could be the song?  
Where begin again?  
Who could meet us there?  
Where might we begin?  
From the shadows climb,  
Rise to sing again;  
Where could be the joy?  
How do we begin?

Never our despair,  
Never the least of us,  
Never turn away,  
Never hide your face;  
Ordinary boy,  
Only all of us,  
Free us from our fear.

Only in the Love,  
Love that lifts us up,

Clear from out the heart  
From the mountain's side,  
Come creation come,  
Strong as any stream;  
How can we let go? How can we forgive?  
How can we be dream?

Out of heaven, rain,  
Rain to wash us free;  
Rivers flowing on,  
Ever to the sea;  
Bind up every wound,  
Every cause to grieve;  
Always to forgive,  
Only to believe.

[Chorale:]

*Most noble Light, Creation's face,  
How should we live but joined in you,  
Remain within your saving grace  
Through all we say and do  
And know we are the Love that moves  
The sun and all the stars?+  
O Love that dwells, O Love that burns  
In every human heart.*

(Only in the Love, Love that lifts us up!)

*This evergreen, this heart, this soul,  
Now moves us to remake our world,  
Reminds us how we are to be  
Your people born to dream;  
How old this joy, how strong this call,  
To sing your radiant care  
With every voice, in cloudless hope  
Of our belonging here.*

Only in the Love . . .  
Only all of us . . .

*(Heaven: Wash me . . .)*

All of us, only all of us.

What could be the song?  
Where do we begin?  
Only in the Love, Love that lifts us up.

All Of Us

All.

**Reprise: This Chant of Life (Cattle, Horses, Sky and Grass)**

(This chant of life cannot be heard

It must be felt, there is no word

To sing that could express the true

Significance of how we wind

Through all these hoops of Earth and mind

Through horses, cattle, sky and grass

And all these things that sway and pass.)

*Yoodle—ooh, yoodle-ooh-hoo, so sings a lone cowboy,*

*Who with the wild roses wants you to be free.*

## Considering Matthew Shepard

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19. **The Fence (one week later)\*** Lesléa Newman
21. **Stars\*** Lesléa Newman / Dennis Shepard Statement to the Court
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- 27. Thank You** "Thanks" from THE RAIN IN THE TREES by W. S. Merwin.  
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- 29. Cattle, Horses, Sky and Grass (reprise)** Cattle, Horses, Sky and Grass by Sue Wallis © by Estate of Sue Wallis. Used by kind permission. / Please Come to Wyoming by John D. Nesbitt © by John D. Nesbitt. Used by kind permission.

**Recitations I-X** compiled from news reports and crafted by Craig Hella Johnson and Michael Dennis Browne.

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**“Introduction” from OCTOBER MOURNING: A SONG FOR MATTHEW SHEPARD by Lesléa Newman**

On Tuesday, October 6, 1998, at approximately 11:45 p.m., twenty-one-year-old Matthew Shepard, a gay college student attending the University of Wyoming, was kidnapped from a bar by twenty-one-year old Aaron McKinney and twenty-one-year-old Russell Henderson. Pretending to be gay, the two men lured Matthew Shepard into their truck, drove him to the outskirts of Laramie, robbed him, beat him with a pistol, tied him to a buck-rail fence, and left him to die. The next day, at about 6:00 p.m. – eighteen hours after the attack – he was discovered and taken to a hospital. He never regained consciousness and died five days later, on Monday, October 12, with his family by his side.

One of the last things Matthew Shepard did that Tuesday night was attend a meeting of the University of Wyoming’s Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered Association. The group was putting final touches on plans for Gay Awareness Week, scheduled to begin the following Sunday, October 11, coinciding with a National Coming Out Day. Planned campus activities included a film showing, an open poetry reading, and a keynote speaker.

That keynote speaker was me.

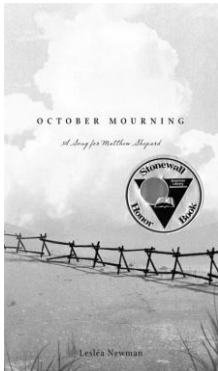
I never forgot what happened in Laramie, and around the tenth anniversary of Matthew Shepard’s death, I found myself thinking more and more about him. And so I began writing a series of poems, striving to create a work of art that explores the events surrounding Matthew Shepard’s murder in order to gain a better understanding of their impact on myself and the world.

What really happened at the fence that night? Only three people know the answer to that question. Two of them are imprisoned, convicted murderers whose stories often contradict each other (for example, in separate interviews both McKinney and Henderson have claimed that he alone tied Matthew Shepard to the fence). The other person who knows what really happened that night is dead. We will never know his side of the story.

This book is my side of the story.

*While the poems in this book are inspired by actual events, they do not in any way represent the statements, thoughts, feelings, opinions, or attitudes of any actual person. The statements, thoughts, feelings, opinions, and attitudes conveyed belong to me. All monologues contained within the poems are figments of my imagination; no actual person spoke any of the words contained within the body of any poem. Those words are mine and mine alone. When the words of an actual person are used as a short epigraph for a poem, the source of that quote is cited at the back of the book in a section entitled "Notes," which contains citations and suggestions for further reading about the crime. The poems, which are meant to be read in sequential order as one whole work, are a work of poetic invention and imagination: a historical novel in verse. The poems are not an objective reporting of Matthew Shepard's murder and its aftermath; rather they are my own personal interpretation of them.*

There is a bench on the campus of the University of Wyoming dedicated to Matthew Shepard, inscribed with the words *He continues to make a difference*. My hope is that readers of *October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard* will be inspired to make a difference and honor his legacy by erasing hate and replacing it with compassion, understanding, and love.



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*Considering Matthew Shepard* was developed with the support of Conspirare. Please visit [conspirare.org](http://conspirare.org) to learn more about this project and learn more about the many individuals and organizations who support this work.

**Conspirare, The Matthew Shepard Foundation, and KLRU-TV, Austin PBS are partnering to ensure that *Considering Matthew Shepard* reaches as many people as possible on the stage and screen.** The Matthew Shepard Foundation has provided ongoing support in outreach and project development. Conspirare and KLRU-TV, Austin PBS are co-producing a *Considering Matthew Shepard* television special commemorating the 20th anniversary of Matthew Shepard's passing. KLRU profiled Craig Hella Johnson's creative process in their documentary series *Arts in Context* (available at [artsincontext.org](http://artsincontext.org)). The film will be accompanied by outreach and engagement programs.