

# *Blue Psalm*

for low voice and piano

Music by John Burge  
Words by Dennis Lee



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Duration: ca. 7.5 minutes



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## BLUE PSALM

Keep low, my  
life. Be still in the  
cardiac sessions, small when the  
cornerstone gives.

I am not my self, I'm  
foreign goods – things own me,  
I know that now.  
Keep low, little life.

Nicotine owns me.

Cholesterol too, and the sweet deadly  
booze owns my body. And in my mind:  
*money, security, fame* – how many non-stop  
compulsions repeat their  
imperious tics in my ego?  
Even the dream of no-ego, of  
goodbye desire: it binds me and owns me.

And,  
being: teach me to be.  
Not crouch like this, in  
cobble time, in stigma. Not  
freak on a leash. Nor  
listless in slavery trudge,  
captive, abroad, and mouthing the alien tongue ...

Yes, and the  
unstrung harp hung high, still dreaming what  
dirge? what rage? what wind-bourne snatch of home?

From *Nightwatch* (McClelland and Stewart Inc., 1996). Copyright © 1996 Dennis Lee.  
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*Blue Psalm* was premiered by Bruce Kelly, baritone, and John Burge, piano,  
on November 23, 1999, at Harrison-LeCaine Hall, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario.

Bruce Kelly also premiered the cello ensemble version on November 24, 1999, in Grant Hall  
at Queen's University, with the Queen's Cello Ensemble, Wolf Tormann, Director.

for Bruce Kelly

# Blue Psalm

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Just one more slow dirge around the block (♩ = 54)

Low Voice

Piano

*mf* *pesante* *dim.* *mf* *dim.*

*mp*

Keep

*mf* *mf* *f* *mp*

low, my\_ life, keep\_ low,

7

*mf* *dim.*

*mf* *p* *mp* *p*

my\_ life, keep low. Be still

13

*mf* *dim.* *mf* *dim.*

**A**



*mf* *mp* *mfp*

in the car-di-ac ses-sions, small when the cor-ner-stone gives.

19

*mf* *dim.*

*mf* *f*

I am not my self,

**B**

23

*f(sub.)*

*dim.*

I'm for-eign goods things own me, I know that now.

28

33

*p* < *mp* *p*

Keep low, lit - tle life.

*p* (no accents)

38

*p* *f*

keep low. Ni-co-tine owns me.

*f* (sub.)

43

Cho - les - trol too, and the sweet dead-ly booze owns my

bo - dy. *mp* And in my mind: *f* *mp* mon-ey, se-cur-i-ty,

48 **D**

*mp (sub.)* *f* *mp*

fame— *f* *mp* how man-y non - stop com - pul - sions *f* *mp* re - peats their im-per-i-ous

52

*f* *mp* *f* *mp*

*f* *mp (no cresc.)*

tics in my e - go?

56

*f* *mp (no cresc.)* *mp* *mp* *mp*



*sempre p*

E - - ven the dream of no e - go,

**E**

61

*mp* *p*

*mp* *p*

of good - bye de - sire: it

66

*mp* *p* *mp* *p*

binds me and owns me.

71

*ritenuto*

*a tempo*

*p*

And, be - ing: \_\_\_\_\_ teach me to be. \_\_\_\_\_

**F**

76

*ritenuto* *a tempo*

*cresc.*

Not crouch like this, \_\_\_\_\_ in cob - bled time, \_\_\_\_\_ in stig -

81

*cresc.*

ma.

not freak on a leash. \_\_\_\_\_

nor list - less\_ in slav - er - y trudge, \_\_\_\_\_

**G**

86

*f*

*più f* *dim.*

cap-tive, a - broad, and mouth - ing the a - li - en

90

*più f* *dim.*

*ritenuto* *a tempo* *p*

tongue ... Yes, and the

95

*ritenuto* *sempre p* *a tempo*

*mp*

un - strung harp hung high, hung high,

100



(mp)

still dream - - - ing what dirge?

106

(mp) *p*

what rage? what

111

wind - borne\_ snatch of\_ home?

116

*distant*

122

Keep\_ low, \_\_\_\_\_ my life, \_\_\_\_\_ keep\_

128

low, \_\_\_\_\_ my life, \_\_\_\_\_ keep low, \_\_\_\_\_

134

keep low. \_\_\_\_\_



John Burge is a classically trained composer and pianist, holding degrees from the University of Toronto (BMus and MMus) and British Columbia (DMA). He has composed a large body of instrumental and vocal music in all genres including opera. Many of his orchestral works, such as *Snowdrift*, *The Canadian Shield* and *Rocky Mountain Overture*, are regularly performed by orchestras across Canada and internationally. His string orchestra work, *Flanders Fields Reflections*, as recorded by Sinfonia Toronto, received the 2009 Juno Award for the Best Canadian Classical Composition. Since 1987 he has been teaching at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, where he is a full professor and was the Director of the School of Music (now named the DAN School of Drama and Music). Since 2013, Red Leaf Pianoworks has been publishing his solo piano music, with a number of these piano pieces now being listed in conservatory syllabi and used as test pieces for competitions. An active music festival adjudicator and clinician, John Burge enjoys working with musicians young and old, greatly enjoying the opportunity to share musical ideas and insights.

*Blue Psalm* is a setting of a poem written by Canadian poet, Dennis Lee. The text is a modern-day slant on the biblical Psalms of David, even making reference to the unstrung harp that is now hanging silently. The viewpoint in Lee's poem is of someone looking back on their life and finding their values and ideals have been compromised too much in a lifetime of consumption. This present-day angst is given a musical voice in the blues inspired harmonies that slowly unfold beneath the melody. While originally written for low voice and piano, the piano part was subsequently rescored for an ensemble of four or more cellos.

This composition is dedicated to baritone, Bruce Kelly. For many years, Bruce taught voice students at Queen's University in the office directly beside John Burge's office. The combination of Bruce's penetrating speaking voice, John's constant piano playing, and lack of sound proofing in the wall made for close colleagues. When Bruce moved to a different office, this piece was written as a kind of parting gift and to let Bruce know just how much the composer enjoyed hearing his resonant vocal projection, jokes and pep-talks to his students over the years.

Difficulty Level: Advanced

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