

Music by LEI LIANG *Inheritance* Libretto by MATT DONOVAN



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## The Composer

Chinese-born American composer **Lei Liang** is the winner of the Rome Prize, the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Koussevitzky Foundation Commission, two National Endowment for the Arts grants and a Creative Capital Award. His concerto *Xiaoxiang* for saxophone and orchestra was named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Music in 2015. His orchestral work, *A Thousand Mountains, A Million Streams*, won the prestigious Grawemeyer Award for Music Composition in 2020.

Lei Liang was commissioned by the New York Philharmonic and Alan Gilbert for the inaugural concert of the *CONTACT!* new music series. Other commissions came from the Fromm Music Foundation, Meet the Composer, Chamber Music America, among others. Lei Liang's eight portrait discs are released on Naxos, New World, Mode, Albany and Bridge Records. He has edited and co-edited five books and editions, and published more than twenty articles.

Lei Liang studied with Sir Harrison Birtwistle, Robert Cogan, Chaya Czernowin, Mario Davidovsky, and received degrees from the New England Conservatory of Music (B.M. and M.M.) and Harvard University (Ph.D.). He is Chancellor's Distinguished Professor of Music at the University of California, San Diego. His catalogue of more than a hundred works is published exclusively by Schott Music Corporation (New York).

## The Librettist

**Matt Donovan** is the author of two collections of poetry – *Vellum* (Mariner 2007) and *Rapture & the Big Bam* (Tupelo Press 2017) as well as a book of lyric essays, *A Cloud of Unusual Size and Shape: Meditations on Ruin and Redemption* (Trinity University Press 2016). His work has appeared in numerous literary journals, including *AGNI*, *American Poetry Review*, *The Believer*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Poetry*, *Seneca Review*, *Threepenny Review*, and *Virginia Quarterly Review*; his piece “House of the Vettii” was selected as a notable essay for *The Best American Essays 2013*. Donovan is the recipient of a Whiting Award, a Rome Prize in Literature, a Pushcart Prize, a Creative Capital Grant, and an National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in Literature. He serves as the Director of the Poetry Center at Smith College.

## The Music

*Inheritance*, a new chamber opera by Lei Liang, draws attention to the hopelessness associated with gun violence in the United States. It explores the psychological effect of a fortune made from guns, specifically the Winchester rifle, on one of its heirs. At the mansion she built in San José, California, Sarah Winchester sought refuge from the spirits of those killed by these rifles. *Inheritance's* libretto, developed by Matt Donovan in collaboration with the composer, was inspired by her and the house's physical structures and designs, especially the ever-present number 13. *Inheritance's* libretto refers to its “13 cupolas,” stairway with “13 steps” and “13 hooks” in the séance room, this in addition to what Liang noticed in the house itself. The challenge for both librettist and composer was to create a space both real and imagined—simultaneously “prison,” “temple,” and “home” for Sarah and a complex labyrinth in which, later, visitors got lost, confused by “doors to nowhere.”

The opera consists of ten scenes that alternate between past and present, with four characters: Sarah, two ghosts, and a tour guide. The first seven establish the framework, both physical and emotional. Scene 1 begins with Sarah. Unable to sleep, she wanders through the house that seems haunted because of the sounds. Scene 2 presents the never-ending building of the house as the form atonement has taken in her life, one that is never satisfied. In scene 3, a tour guide shows tourists around the house's “marvels,” conceived to “confuse the spirits.” After various interactions between the living and the dead and a nursery rhyme about “a little man with a gun,” the opera begins to delve into Sarah's psychosis as narrated by the Tour Guide: her confusion between what is real and what is not, together with her need for constant additions to her home. The collaborators here include reference to the death of her child at 4 weeks old, alluded to in only three words, “my daughter, Annie,” as a way to get closer to Sarah as a person, to elicit empathy for her. After scene 7, which ends with an instrumental “meditation on gun shots,” come the opera's dual “arrivals.” In scene 8, Sarah's sense of loss leads her consider her own madness, calling on audience reflection and engagement. In scene 9, “a sonic factory,” the rhythms associated with manufacturing, take control while the four characters sing simultaneously without interacting yet coming to the same conclusion: Sarah's final words, “no more,” are echoed by the others in a joint whisper. The “coda” shifts to the present, and Sarah ends with the question: “how to know how to answer, how to even begin.”

Musically, each of the ten scenes consists of three parts of varying lengths, recalling Japanese haiku to which Liang looked for inspiration. These tripartite structures allow the composer to frame and shape perception of what lies at their center, whether the introduction of a character or an important moment in the narrative. What holds the structures of *Inheritance* together are recurring elements, defined by their rhythms, timbres, and instrumentation, especially those associated with characters and spaces. Memories and their correlative musical motives, interlocking the scenes, operate in this opera like Wagnerian leitmotifs, pointing to something specific, from guns and birds to Sarah's daughter, but often appearing first as premonitions. Certain pitches and tonal centers (what the composer calls "harmonics" in reference to their distinct overtone series) also play this role. The "rocking" between E and G, with which Sarah first appeared, gives the feeling of loss, especially when this returns with Annie's name in scene 6. The tritones G C# and C F# are associated with suffering and death. As returning signifiers, they implant not only sonic images that we can remember even before knowing their meaning, but also the emotional effect they evoke in us.

Lei Liang's music gives compelling expression to the themes of obsession and anxiety, the sense of loss and need for atonement associated with Sarah's desire to remember those who died from guns. These involve contrast and continuity, difference as well as repetition; they embody the sentiment of endlessness and of turning-in-place, with Sarah reaching out while "captive in her labyrinth." The opera begins fortissimo (*fff*) with a very memorable musical gesture in the high register of bongo drums, suggesting a quickly repeating rifle shot with its 13 reiterations. Next comes an abrupt shift to another world, like that of nature, mysterious and almost inaudible, characterized by waves of sound. Microtonal "finger glides" near the pegs on the harpsichord, followed by "quasi improvisatory" repetitions and microtonal trills in the clarinet, are meant to sound like aural equivalents of the micro-adjustments birds make when they flip their wings, showing they are upset by something. As if in response to the preceding sonic violence, this section also introduces a close association between the harpsichord and Sarah and links the obsessive presence of the number 13 in its various rhythmic patterns also with her. Although Sarah frequently associates the number with those who have died from gun violence, later, in scene 6, she admits a flipside to this preoccupation: "I want the numbers to be merely numbers, like they were when I was a child... just figures to calculate, recite... the rhyme for counting cows." Yet, numbers also most likely had a mystical quality for Sarah.

In the opera, Sarah Winchester's house, as experienced by the various characters, has its own qualities. The double bass's long drone on a low E "anchors" the piece, like the foundation of the house. Characteristic are its echoes, performed by the instrumentalists as "whispers"—what the composer calls "shadowy sound," as if a vibration of the words uttered in another dimension. These sounds are heard "only by Winchester in her head." There are also "ghost echoes" which connect the singers and the instrumentalists, such as when the trumpeter and guitarist, in a duet, repeat the words "get lost . . . get lost" in interlocking rhythms. To produce "shadowy sound," the composer experiments with unusual performance techniques, such as when the harpsichordist improvises "by writing the character 'gun' on the strings by sweeping with fingers," while the bass player uses "vertical bowing, whistling from the bow," and "harmonics of bow hair." Very quiet tremoli in the clarinet duo and the mysterious sound of spring drums, unseen, played by the trumpeter and guitarist, murmur as one might imagine a chorus of ghosts. In other sections, beginning with scene 2, such eerie sounds lead to a "sonic labyrinth" in which instruments enter in pairs — trumpet and guitar in an imitative duet, temple blocks and shakers with their own rhythmic patterns — as attention goes to the ongoing construction of the home. With Sarah's demands to "hear the hammers working," the composer unleashes a tirade of activity, a percussion duo instructed to "meticulously" sounding like hammer blows, followed by a quartet of bass clarinets, guitar, and harpsichord in chromatic undulations. All this gives multidimensionality to the listener's experience of the house.

The house is also the site of Sarah's relationship with the two ghosts, as if the living and the dead have intertwined existences. Serving multiple roles, including as Sarah's servants, the ghosts answer her questions, reassuring her with "yes m'am," even when she is "irritated," wandering about the tonal palette. They suggest alternate interpretations of her thoughts, following her descending leap on "this house" with their rising one on it as "your fortress," "my prison," "your temple." Ghost 1 asks a question ("How to atone"), after which Sarah's response ("How can I?") is completed by Ghost 1 ("when your name is the same as the weapon you hide from"). In scene 7, when the Ghosts were instructed to "breathe in and out nervously, irregularly, to create an atmosphere of being 'hunted,'" they reengage in a duet, not to get lost and exhausted from their own tales, but something that "has nothing to do with spirits." This time, audiences are invited to consider two kinds of reality: "a sound like a nail gun" and "hammering on the roof" at the same time as the terror of being in same room as "someone with a gun," especially

when this involves “children at school hidden in the closet ... some hid in the bathrooms, in the cafeteria vents,” all references to what American children have experienced recently in their schools.

Occasionally, the Tour Guide “interrupts,” the time of the opera slipping into the present. Before he beckons his visitors to “come close, all the way in,” Sarah and the ghosts acknowledge his presence, albeit in another musical dimension. The Guide, seemingly oblivious, speaks as the others sing. Still, the Ghosts playfully interrupt him, echoing his words, often in a duet as the Guide uses his imagination to conjure for his visitors the idea that spirits built the house. Accompanying the Guide as he traverses the house, the double bass’s *perpetuum mobile* in constant, regular triplets gives a sense of the space as oppressive. It stops only momentarily to allow attention to fall on how many Native Americans were “killed by her family’s gun ... 100,000.” Later he cheerily imagines “spirits waltzing through the night” in the ballroom, as the bass triplet patterns turn into mini-arabesques. This culminates in an improvisatory passage for the entire ensemble, entitled, “The ghosts are having a party,” letting go of control and manipulation and getting louder and louder. Whether this place was “made to hide spirits” or “a home for the dead,” as the ghosts tell him, for the Guide it is “an endless maze and if you get lost no one will ever find you.”

Of signal importance in the opera is the potential for madness that can emerge from fear, suffering, and loss. The composer began his composition of the opera with scene 8, exploring the pain for which one never recovers. Sarah, now “later in life,” tells about losing her daughter. Yet, in arguably the most moving and expressively distinct part of the opera, she focuses on the birds, introduced in scene 1. They allow her to step away from the source of her suffering and conjure Annie’s last moments, the room darkening “as if the sun had been eclipsed.” As Sarah explains that the last carrier pigeon too had disappeared, she asks, who will inherit what they brought to the world, their beauty, their innocence? The “sound of vigil” comes as the change from calm and reflective shifts to assertive and explosive with Sarah’s huge vocal leaps and circling in dissonant augmented seconds. Defining “madness” by what it is not – “to do nothing as the numbers of the dead grow” – Sarah seems more rational than mad. Scene 9 portrays her determination to go on trying, as she did in rebuilding the house after an earthquake. The building sounds, like the manufacturing of guns, continue; however, this time any hopefulness expressed or implied earlier is overshadowed by the breakdown in the characters’ ability to listen and respond to one another. Whereas earlier the characters came together in a harmonious Bible song, here there is nothing but dissonance and what the composer calls “inharmonicity.” The return to the “innocent side”

of a story about killing with guns—as expressed by the “rocking” rhythms of what seems like a nursery song, first heard in scene 4, with only three notes and a straightforward  $\frac{3}{4}$  meter, but complicated by the juxtaposed tritones—allows for a certain sublimation. As in Orfeo’s final lament after losing Iphigenia in Gluck’s opera, this too is momentary escape into beautiful simplicity when what preceded was too painful to express.

Sarah Winchester died in 1922, a year before the family stopped production of the Winchester rifle. The problem of guns in America, as she feared, would continue. Yet, the composer reminds us, “music-making exercises our ability to listen, to reflect, to remember, to face difficult issues and ourselves in a world of madness.” Through the opera, we come to realize what we too have inherited and need not to forget.

— Jann Pasler

**Jann Pasler** is Distinguished Professor of Music at the University of California, San Diego.

## The Performers

**David Aguila** is a performer and composer currently based in San Diego, California. Aguila’s musical focus is in interweaving trumpet and electronics with staging, lighting and narratives while working in/outside the frameworks of contemporary, experimental, electro-acoustic and improvised music. His primary teachers have been Ruth Still, James Thompson, Ed Carroll, Sara Roberts, Vinny Golia, Marco Blaauw and Stephanie Richards. Aguila has received a Bachelor’s degree in Trumpet Performance from the Eastman School of Music 13’, an MFA in Performance and Composition from CalArts 15’ and currently pursuing a Doctorate in Music Performance at UC San Diego.

**Anthony Burr** has enjoyed a distinguished career as an exponent of contemporary music. He has performed in this repertoire with many leading groups, including Elision, Either/Or, Klangforum Wien, Ensemble Sospeso, and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. As a soloist, Anthony has worked with many leading composers in presenting their music, including Alvin Lucier, Helmut Lachenmann, Chaya Czernowin, Liza Lim and Brian Ferneyhough. He has played extensively outside of classical music with major figures including Jim O’Rourke, John Zorn and Laurie Anderson. Anthony also maintains an

active career as a recording engineer and producer. He serves as Professor of Music at UC San Diego.

Original, distinctive, and unconventional, **Pablo Gómez Cano**'s guitar is one of the most remarkable sounds of today's music scene. His repertoire includes: from classics of the twentieth century and contemporary pieces to works written expressly for him by renowned international composers. His performances include works for solo guitar, electro-acoustic music, chamber ensembles and orchestras. He has been soloist with several orchestras and ensembles that include Mexico City Philharmonic, Callithumpian Ensemble (Boston), Ensemble Contemporain de Montreal, Taller Sonoro (Sevilla), among many others. Pablo Gómez Cano is currently the guitar instructor at the music department at UC San Diego.

The 2011-2012 season marked Mexican baritone **Josué Cerón**'s European debut at Teatro Carlo Felice in Genova with Donizetti's *Il Campanello*. From his performance of Respighi's *La Fiamma* at the Kimmel Center, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* states "...his text articulation gave such emotional life to the music that surfaces failed to matter." In the fall 2018, he was a resident artist of the Rossini Festival in Canada. In Mexico City, he sang the title role of *L'Orfeo* by Monteverdi-Maderna, as well as the Latin American premiere of *The Requiem Mass* by Mansurian.

**Fiona Digney** is an Australian percussionist, producer, and educator who enjoys a wide-ranging freelance career performing in Australia, Asia, Europe, and North America. Theatre credits include *Caligula* in New Orleans, *The Cherry Orchard* and *Perestroika* in San Diego, *Caesar* with Het Zuidoerlijk Toneel in The Netherlands and Belgium, *Becoming the System* with Diamantfabriek in The Netherlands, and Anne Washburn's *Mr. Burns* at the Almeida theatre, London. She has produced the Ojai Festival, San Diego New Music, Art of Elan, and international music residencies Ensemble Evolution, Evolution of the Quartet, and Resonant Bodies at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, Canada.

**Sean Dowgray** is a classical percussionist specializing in modern and contemporary music. He is a graduate of the Oberlin Conservatory, the University of Alaska Fairbanks, and is a doctoral candidate at UC San Diego. He has performed in venues including Carnegie Hall, the Walt Disney Concert Hall, and has been featured as a soloist most notably at the Percussive Arts Society International Convention, the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Learning, and the Oberlin Percussion Institute. Dowgray is a proponent of creative collaboration, having commissioned and premiered many works for and with percussion.

**Mark Dresser** is an internationally renowned bass player, improviser, and composer. He has recorded over 140 CDs including four solo CDs, LP, and a DVD. From 1985 to 1994, he was a member of Anthony Braxton's Quartet. He has performed and recorded with Ray Anderson, Jane Ira Bloom, Tim

Berne, Anthony Davis, Dave Douglas, Osvaldo Golijov, Gerry Hemingway, Bob Osertag, Joe Lovano, Roger Reynolds, John Zorn. Since 2007 he has been researching telematic music performance and education. He was awarded a 2015 and 2018 Shifting Foundation Award and 2015 Doris Duke Impact Award. He is Professor of Music at UC San Diego.

**Madison Greenstone** is a clarinetist currently based between New York City and San Diego, working across multiple horizons of contemporary and experimental music. She has performed as a featured artist of the Darmstadt Ferienkurse für Neue Musik and the Lucerne Festival Academy. Notable performances have been as a soloist presented by ISSUE Project Room, as part of the Merce Cunningham Centennial Night of 100 Solos in Los Angeles, in recital at the Vigeland Mausoleum (Oslo) and at the Fondation Abbaye Royaumont. Madison is the clarinetist of TAK Ensemble, a founding member of the [Switch~Ensemble], and can be heard on Wandelweiser Editions and Another Timbre. Madison is a doctoral student at UC San Diego, and she holds a Bachelor's degree from the Eastman School of Music.

American soprano **Susan Narucki** has presented over one hundred and fifty world premieres in opera, concert and recording, enjoying close collaborations with many of the world's leading composers. She has appeared as a soloist with the Cleveland Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic, San Francisco Symphony, MET Chamber Ensemble, Netherlands Opera, on the Great Performers Series at Lincoln Center, and at Carnegie Hall, with conductors such as James Levine, Pierre Boulez, Esa-Pekka Salonen, Michael Tilson Thomas, Oliver Knussen, Reinbert de Leeuw, Herbert Blomstedt, and Kent Nagano. Since joining the faculty at UC San Diego in 2008, Ms. Narucki has been deeply engaged in commissioning, producing and performing chamber operas that illuminate critical issues in society, including *Cuatro Corridos* (2013) and *Inheritance* (2018); earning major philanthropic support from the MAP Fund, UC MEXUS, Creative Capital Foundation, New Music USA and multiple awards from the National Endowment for the Arts. The most recent entries in her extensive discography include a critically acclaimed recording of *Cuatro Corridos*, which earned a 2017 Latin Grammy Nomination and *The Edge of Silence: Vocal Chamber Music of György Kurtág* (AVIE) which earned a 2020 Grammy Nomination in the Best Classical Vocal Album category.

Harpichordist **Takae Ohnishi** has performed extensively as a soloist, chamber musician and continuo player. She has been the principal harpichordist at Atlantic Symphony Orchestra, as well as a soloist with the Berlin Philharmonic Scharoun Ensemble, and Gardner Chamber Orchestra. She performed at the Festival Internacional Cervantino in Mexico, Boston Early Music Festival, and the American Academy in Rome. Ms. Ohnishi's CDs were released on Bridge, New World, Aeolian Classics, and Opal Records.

Since 2007, Ms. Ohnishi has been lecturer of harpsichord and baroque chamber music at UC San Diego.

Percussionist, conductor, and author **Steven Schick** was born in Iowa and raised in a farming family. Hailed by Alex Ross in the *New Yorker* as, “one of our supreme living virtuosos, not just of percussion but of any instrument,” he has championed contemporary percussion music by commissioning some of the most important repertory for solo percussion.

Steven Schick is music director of the La Jolla Symphony and Chorus and the artist director of Breckenridge Music Festival. As conductor, Schick has appeared with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, the Milwaukee Symphony, Ensemble Modern, the International Contemporary Ensemble, and the Asko/Schönberg Ensemble.

Schick’s publications include a book, “The Percussionist’s Art: Same Bed, Different Dreams,” and numerous recordings including the 2010 “Percussion Works of Iannis Xenakis,” and its companion, “The Complete Early Percussion Works of Karlheinz Stockhausen” in 2014 (Mode). For the latter, he received the *Deutscheschallplattenkritikpreis* for the best new music release of 2015. He was inducted into the Percussive Arts Society Hall of Fame in 2014. Steven Schick is Distinguished Professor of Music and is the inaugural holder of the Reed Family Presidential Chair at UC San Diego.

Soprano **Kirsten Ashley Wiest** is an advocate for contemporary classical music, frequently giving world premiere performances of chamber works and operas by composers around the world. Kirsten has worked with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, *Bang on a Can All-Stars*, and the Grammy-winning *Partch Ensemble*, and has recorded for premiere recordings on *MicroFest Records* and *Centaur Records*. She holds a DMA in Contemporary Music Performance in Voice from UC San Diego, and currently lectures in music at San Bernardino Valley College and California State University San Bernardino.

**Hillary Jean Young** is a singer currently based in Toronto. Hillary’s creative practice is diverse, consisting of new opera, contemporary chamber music, improvisation, experimental pop music, and more. Hillary earned her Doctor of Musical Arts in Contemporary Music Performance from UC San Diego (2019), where she studied with Susan Narucki. Most recently, Hillary participated in the Toronto Creative Music Lab, released an album with her performance art project *masc4masc* via *people places records*, and began working as a label administrator for *Paper Bag Records*. Hillary is currently preparing for upcoming performances with *The Happenstancers* and *OperaQ*.

## The Libretto

### **Inheritance: A Chamber Opera**

Jointly supported by  
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and the Music Department at the University of California, San Diego

#### **Characters**

Sarah Winchester  
Ghost 1  
Ghost 2  
Ghost 3/Tour Guide

#### **Scenes**

*Scene 1: Prologue*  
*Scene 2: Sarah Winchester*  
*Scene 3: Tour*  
*Scene 4: Ghost 1, an Interlude Song*  
*Scene 5: Sarah Winchester*  
*Scene 6: Flashlight Tour*  
*Scene 7: Ghost 1 and Ghost 2*  
*Scene 8: Sarah Winchester*  
*Scene 9: Sarah Winchester, Ghost 1, Ghost 2, Ghost 3*  
*Scene 10: Coda*

**Setting**

Sarah Winchester's House

**Scene 1: Prologue**

*As the lights come up, WINCHESTER is already on stage. The three "ghosts" enter from opposite sides of the stage, their voices growing louder during their procession. They move across the stage and each take their place. The first video sequence begins as they sing.*

GHOST 3

It's easy to get lost in here.

GHOST 2

These things happen all the time.

GHOST 3

It's easy to get lost in here.

GHOST 1

The gun that won the West.

GHOST 3

This is where we always lose people.

GHOST 2

These things happen all the time.

GHOST 1

This house.

GHOST 2

Room upon room.

GHOST 1

This house.

GHOST 3

Nail upon nail.

*A hammering that begins during the opening duet builds, then fades as WINCHESTER begins her lines.*

WINCHESTER [*faltering*]

How do I ... There was this time...

But that was before... If there could be...

Once I clutched...

**Scene 2: Sarah Winchester and Ghosts**

GHOST 1

You called, ma'am?

WINCHESTER [*with authority*]

Are the fires lit?

GHOST 1 AND GHOST 2

Yes, ma'am.

WINCHESTER

Has the plastering begun?

GHOST 1 AND GHOST 2

Not yet, ma'am.

WINCHESTER

Tonight, or they're out of a job!

GHOST 1 AND GHOST 2

Yes, ma'am.

WINCHESTER

The gravel for the path? The leaking skylight?

GHOST 1 AND GHOST 2

It's all begun.

WINCHESTER

I want to hear the hammers working.

GHOST 1 AND GHOST 2

Yes, ma'am.

WINCHESTER

I'll call again if I need you.

GHOST 1 AND GHOST 2

Of course, ma'am.

*GHOST 1 and GHOST 2 step back. As they sing the first lines below, they remove their white gloves and masks, signifying a change from their roles as servants. WINCHESTER believes she is alone again.*

WINCHESTER [*reflective*]

I want to hear the hammers working...

This house, this house....

GHOST 1

Your fortress.

WINCHESTER

My prison.

GHOST 2

Your temple.

WINCHESTER

My home. The work never stops.

This is what I wanted, what must never end.

*There is the sound of hammering. During the following exchange, GHOST 3 becomes TOUR GUIDE on stage.*

GHOST 1  
How to atone?

WINCHESTER  
How can I...

GHOST 2  
when your name is the same  
as the weapon you hide from?

WINCHESTER  
How can I...

GHOST 1  
when the gun gives you this splendor,  
the home you built to be absolved?  
*TOUR GUIDE begins walking backward across  
stage. GHOST 1 and GHOST 2 each take up a new  
mask, step into sneakers, and join the tour. Each  
GHOST holds a prop brochure, and each has a  
camera that projects live feed of the audience,  
the theater, and musicians onto the screens  
behind them.*

WINCHESTER  
What is the word for what I need to confess?  
What do I need to build next?

TOUR GUIDE  
Keep up, please. It's easy to get lost in here.

GHOST 1 *[to TOUR GUIDE, as tourist]*  
Was this place made to hide from spirits?

WINCHESTER  
And still they keep coming.

GHOST 2 *[to TOUR GUIDE, as tourist]*  
Or was it a home for the dead?

TOUR GUIDE  
Everyone, come in, come in. This house  
is an endless maze, and if you get lost,  
no one will ever find you.  
*WINCHESTER rings bell on stage.  
The servants do not come.  
TOUR GUIDE gives two short claps  
to gather the group together.  
WINCHESTER rings bell again.  
Nothing happens.*

### Scene 3: Tour Guide

TOUR GUIDE  
Come closer. All the way in. So, any questions?  
If I don't know the answer, don't worry. I went to

M.S.U.: Make Stuff Up. Now, some folks believe  
that a psychic told Winchester to move west in  
order to atone for the Native Americans killed by  
her family's gun. There might have been as many  
as a hundred thousand. For thirty-eight years,  
the hammers never stopped.

If you ask me, rather than feeling guilty about  
the dead, Winchester just wanted to confuse the  
spirits.  
*WINCHESTER attempts to leave the stage. GHOST  
1 and 2 block her  
exit and turn her back.*

GHOST 1 and GHOST 2  
Some stairwells lead to the ceiling,  
some cupboards are only an inch deep.

TOUR GUIDE  
This is the grand ballroom, with its chandelier  
and organ. Mind you, the organ was donated  
to the house, and believe me, folks, it's hard to  
get a good organ donor these days. In this room,  
spirits waltzed through the night.  
*GHOST 1 and GHOST 2 begin waltzing.*

Can you imagine? I just love this place!  
*Claps loudly twice.*

We need to keep moving – keep up and watch  
your head. First, we'll go through the Hall of  
Fires. Then I'll show you the Door to Nowhere.

*INSTRUMENTAL INTERLUDE: THE GHOSTS ARE  
HAVING A PARTY.*

WINCHESTER  
Sometimes I think I'll never lose this desire  
to be lost.

*WINCHESTER rings bell again.  
Exit TOUR GUIDE. GHOST 1 and GHOST 2 stay  
behind, clapping.*

### Scene 4: Interlude Song

GHOST 1  
There was a little man,  
And he had a little gun,  
And his bullets were made of lead, lead, lead.  
He went to the brook  
And saw a little duck,  
And he shot it through the head, head, head.

He carried it home  
To his old wife Joan,  
And bade her a fire to make, make, make,  
To roast the little duck,  
He had shot in the brook,



And he'd go and fetch her the drake, drake,  
drake.

*GHOST 2, accompanied by the sound of  
hammering, begins clapping again.*

### Scene 5: Sarah Winchester

WINCHESTER

The stories they tell: my séances, cloaks,  
that I commune with the dead, each night my  
table is set with plates of gold in the hopes  
spirits will join me. But I've never claimed to  
know anything about the dead or what waits  
beyond. It's like the lines from the Bible my  
mother would recite:

WINCHESTER, GHOST 1 GHOST 2 and TOUR GUIDE  
"The eye hath not seen,  
nor ear heard, the things which God has prepared  
for them."

WINCHESTER

I only know the numbers of the dead will grow  
and no one can hold them all.  
I want  
the numbers to be merely numbers again like  
they were  
when I was a child:

GHOST 1 and GHOST 2  
2, 4, 6

WINCHESTER

we would count in school and it meant nothing.

GHOST 1 and GHOST 2  
7 x 3

WINCHESTER

21  
8 x 8

GHOST 1 and GHOST 2  
64

WINCHESTER  
10 – 3

GHOST 1  
What would that be?

WINCHESTER  
12 – 6

GHOST 2  
A taking away.

GHOST 1 AND GHOST 2  
One for sorrow, Two for joy,

WINCHESTER

These were just figures to calculate, recite

GHOST 1 and GHOST 2  
Three for a girl,

WINCHESTER

to walk away

GHOST 1 and GHOST 2  
Four for a boy.

WINCHESTER

as easy as the rhyme for counting crows.  
*GHOST 1 and 2 step forward wearing the servant  
masks again. During this exchange, and while  
being seemingly deferential, they begin the pro-  
cess of adhering various items to Winchester's  
dress.*

GHOST 2  
Ma'am, your dinner is ready.

WINCHESTER

Some days, yes, this is penance. These hammers  
pound to atone for the dead.

GHOST 1 and GHOST 2  
Ma'am, should we ring the bells?

WINCHESTER

But some days this is simply my home,

GHOST 1 and GHOST 2  
should we ring the bells?

WINCHESTER

splendor  
I love:

GHOST 1 and GHOST 2  
should we ring the bells?

WINCHESTER  
chandeliers, Tiffany glass,

GHOST 1 and GHOST 2  
Ma'am, the hedges are withering.

WINCHESTER  
rows of oaks, my hardwood floors,

GHOST 1 and GHOST 2  
Ma'am, there's work to be done.

WINCHESTER

and I wouldn't change a thing for the world.

GHOST 1 and GHOST 2

Ma'am, we'll ring the bells.

WINCHESTER

Some days, there's no guilt at all.

GHOST 1 and GHOST 2

Ma'am, we'll ring the bells.

WINCHESTER *[as GHOST 1 and 2 ring bells]*

Some days, I never think once of the nameless  
dead or ways the body count could stop.

GHOST 1

There was a little man,  
And he had a little gun,  
And his bullets were made of

GHOST 1, GHOST 2 AND TOUR GUIDE

lead, lead, lead.

#### Scene 6: Flashlight Tour

*TOUR GUIDE enters, holding flashlight. GHOST 1 puts on tour mask and sneakers, picks up a flashlight and joins the tour.*

TOUR GUIDE

Squeeze in close. All the way in. Don't worry, I took a shower today. We're now in the séance room where Winchester spoke with the dead.

GHOST 1 AND GHOST 2

Thirteen panels

TOUR GUIDE

Each night, she would hang her coat on one of these thirteen hooks, lock the door, *Slams doors shut.* and commune with the spirits. Sometimes she'd ask what to build next.

GHOST 1

Thirteen rails

GHOST 2

Thirteen drains

TOUR GUIDE

and sometimes she'd beg for forgiveness. Many also think she'd try to speak with her dead daughter.

WINCHESTER

My daughter.

TOUR GUIDE

But there are lots of other ghosts that visitors have encountered here.

WINCHESTER

Annie.

*Ghost 1 removes tour mask and sneakers.*

GHOST 1

Thirteen cupolas

GHOST 2

Thirteen gas jets

TOUR GUIDE

One of our ghosts is a builder of this home. His spirit has been seen adding bricks to the chimney, and pushing a ghostly wheelbarrow down the hall.

GHOST 1

Thirteen steps

GHOST 2

Thirteen hooks

TOUR GUIDE

It happens all the time.

GHOST 1

Thirteen steps

GHOST 2

Thirteen hooks

TOUR GUIDE

Guests have seen floating lights, or heard the sound of a screw turning, then dropping to the floor.

GHOST 1 and GHOST 2

It happens all the time.

TOUR GUIDE

The shape of a man appearing in a hallway, a sudden patch of cold. A door slam, a rattling handle. Footsteps, a heavy sigh.

GHOST 1 and GHOST 2

It happens all the time.

*The GHOSTS close a door on the TOUR GUIDE, shutting him out.*

#### Scene 7: Ghost Duet

GHOST 1

Listen: it's time to set aside our ghost stories, the mere legends you may have heard.

GHOST 2  
from down the hall

GHOST 1  
What is coming has nothing to do with spirits.

GHOST 2  
A sound like a nail gun, a popping, a bang.

GHOST 1  
Again, there's someone with a gun.

GHOST 2  
That hammering on the roof,  
a noise like pots being thrown down the stairs,

GHOST 1  
Then someone else will be in the room.

GHOST 2  
There will be boots beneath the desk,

GHOST 1  
children at school hidden in the closet,  
a man clutching a gun. A cry,

GHOST 2  
a hand pressing your shoulder,

GHOST 1  
footsteps from down the hall.

GHOST 2  
The door wouldn't open.

GHOST 1  
Some hid in the bathroom,

GHOST 2  
The door wouldn't close.

GHOST 1  
in the cafeteria vents.

GHOST 2  
The sound of breathing, but not from the dead.

GHOST 1  
How many more rooms?

GHOST 2  
How many more times?

GHOST 1  
The eye hath not seen.

GHOST 2  
And yet we've seen it before.

GHOST 1  
The ear hath not heard.

GHOST 2  
And yet we've heard it before.

GHOST 1  
Nor can you hope to see again the stars.

GHOST 2  
Nor can you hope to see again the stars.

GHOST 1  
Here is the door to nowhere.

GHOST 2  
Here is the door to nowhere.

GHOST 1 and GHOST 2  
Nor can you hope to see again the stars.

*INSTRUMENTAL INTERLUDE: A MEDITATION ON  
GUN SHOTS.*

**Scene 8: Winchester, later in life**  
*As WINCHESTER sings, the musicians and  
GHOSTS gradually hang props and objects from  
her costume, accruing literal weight to her. By  
the end of this section, she appears to be  
immobilized by the hanging objects.*

WINCHESTER  
Once, in New Haven, as I held my daughter  
to my breast, hoping she might, my god, feed  
at last,  
our room darkened and it seemed as if the sun  
had been eclipsed. I stepped to the window  
and heard a roar just before I saw a river  
of wings in the sky, miles of passenger pigeons  
streaming through air, millions glistening,  
twisting and curling, devouring the blue, diving  
in a glittering frenzy.  
I clutched Annie and lifted her up so that  
we might watch that endlessness together.  
It seemed as if it would last forever.  
I doubt she saw anything at all. The child  
was only three weeks old and had only  
a week to live. But I want to believe  
she felt something like awe as the sky  
sang and swarmed with wings. Now  
Annie's buried all these years and now,  
after all that slaughter, every last  
passenger pigeon is gone too.  
This week, I read how the last one died  
in the Cincinnati zoo. In her final months,  
she could no longer fly, and most days  
didn't move at all. People flung dirt at her cage  
just to see her strut a bit behind the bars.  
*Enter GHOST 3 as Tour Guide*

**TOUR GUIDE**

As we enter the parlor, turn to the left, and you'll see the spot where Winchester stared down at her garden, a "captive in her labyrinth." She was always living in fear of the dead. Some say it drove her mad.

**WINCHESTER** [*Addressing TOUR GUIDE directly*]

This, then, is madness? To mourn the dead, to at least attempt to respond?

To keep the hammers pounding in order to bear the dead in mind?

This pounding was never meant to keep anything at bay. This is the sound of vigil, of grief. Madness is not to be haunted, to ignore the dead, to act as if they've never been alive. Madness is to be like you: drifting through the same rooms, day after day, saying the same words, again and again, forgetting the dead are there. Repeat, repeat. Madness is to do nothing as the numbers of the dead grow.

**Scene 9: Winchester, Ghost 1, Ghost 2, and Tour Guide**

**GHOST 1**

To assemble the gun:  
put in the trigger, carrier, and hammer.

**GHOST 2**

To dismantle the gun: take off the stock.  
Put the hammer at half-cock and drive out the tang pins.

**WINCHESTER**

To do nothing is madness.

**TOUR GUIDE**

10,000 windows  
2,000 doors

**GHOST 1**

To assemble the gun:  
slide the stirrup over the main-spring.  
Tighten the main-spring screw.

**WINCHESTER**

When the earthquake came  
and destroyed my rooms

**TOUR GUIDE**

The gun that won the West

**WINCHESTER**

some blamed the ruin on ghosts.

**GHOST 2**

To dismantle the gun:

**GHOST 1**

To assemble the gun:  
put in the trigger, carrier and hammer.

**WINCHESTER**

But who can believe death and ruin  
arise from those already dead?

**GHOST 2**

To dismantle the gun:  
take off the stock. Put the hammer at half-cock  
and  
drive out the tang pins.

**WINCHESTER**

Tell that to the Sioux who wore Ghost Shirts.  
They believed could stop any bullet.

**TOUR GUIDE**

10,000 windows  
2,000 doors

**GHOST 1**

To assemble the gun:  
slide the stirrup over the main-spring.  
Tighten the main-spring screw.

**WINCHESTER**

The shirts stopped nothing.  
And the bodies of the men were left to harden in  
the snow.

**TOUR GUIDE**

The gun that won the West.

**GHOST 2**

To dismantle the gun: stock take off, put the  
hammer at half-cock and drive out the tang pins.  
All pins drive out from right to left.

**GHOST 1**

Put the firing pin in the breech-block.

**GHOST 1**

Replace extractor driving in pin from top.  
Slip breech-block into the frame.

**GHOST 2**

To take out breech-block, remove the magazine  
ring pin.  
Draw out magazine and cover plate.

WINCHESTER

I'm trying to bear the dead in mind.

GHOST 1

We have to keep moving.

WINCHESTER

A woman and her child

GHOST 1

Replace action slide.  
and put slide on cover.

WINCHESTER

were hunted and killed for sport.

GHOST 2

Press on the firing pin. Unlock breech-block and draw it out backwards.

GHOST 1

These things happen all the time.

WINCHESTER

Hunted and killed for sport.

GHOST 1

We have to keep moving.

GHOST 2

Magazine. Loading hole.

TOUR GUIDE

Extractor pin. Breech-block.

GHOST 2

Stop spring.

TOUR GUIDE

Stop screw.

WINCHESTER

None of this has anything to do with ghosts.

GHOST 1

13 bathrooms  
2,000 doors

GHOST 2

To assemble the gun:

TOUR GUIDE

To dismantle the gun:

WINCHESTER

Repeat, repeat, repeat

GHOST 2

Magazine. Half cock.  
Drive it into place.

TOUR GUIDE

Firing pin. Hammer. Loosen. Remove.

GHOST 1

Watch your head.

GHOST 2

Tang pin. Hammer. Replace

TOUR GUIDE

Main spring. Trigger. Remove.

WINCHESTER

When will this repeat no more?

GHOST 1

We have to keep moving.

GHOST 2

Muzzle. Breach. Chamber Grip.

WINCHESTER

When will this repeat no more?

TOUR GUIDE

Notch. Lug. Bolt. Piston. Bolt.

When will this repeat no more?

GHOST 1

This is where we always lose someone.

WINCHESTER

When will this repeat no more?

GHOST 1

It's easy to get lost in here.

GHOST 2

Tighten. Replace. Drive in.

TOUR GUIDE

Remove. Take off. Drive out.

*The part of WINCHESTER's costume that had been loaded down with objects is removed by all three ghosts in a single gesture and crashes loudly to the floor.*

## WINCHESTER

When will this repeat no more?

*The sound of a bell tolling and hammering.*

*All props are removed from the stage. All video projection ceases. WINCHESTER is left also on the stage as it was in the beginning, bathed in white light.*

### Scene 10: Coda

## WINCHESTER

Once, my gardener brought me a metal spade.

A man who lived nearby had killed himself –

he was in truth merely a boy and no one seemed to know why he'd put a bullet in his head.

It's one of those stories no doubt you've heard.

Although this time his family brought the gun to a blacksmith and paid to have it hammered into three garden spades – The idea was that from death there might be some growth.

They kept one spade and one was lost –

who knows where – and one they gave

to my gardener. "What should we do with it?"

he asked, and gave it to me. I held its slender shape in my hands. I stared down, and felt its weight and wanted to know how to answer, how to even begin.

END

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