



JOEL PHILLIP FRIEDMAN

What the Living Do

Poem: Marie Howe

Program Note by the Composer

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A number of years ago, while reading a copy of *The Atlantic Monthly*, I came across a remarkable poem: Marie Howe's incredibly rich and powerful *What The Living Do*. The intense and poignant, yet elegant words leaped off the page and I immediately purchased her volume of poetry (of the same name) and contacted Ms. Howe for permission to set her words. Recently Ms. Howe's poem has received the acclaim it so justly deserves: it has been included in *The Penguin Anthology of 20th-Century American Poetry*.

Howe's *What the Living Do* has both length and a dramatic weight that led me to create more miniature operatic monodrama than art song. It is a "big" song, but then the subject matter demands such.

Everyday mundane, even annoying tasks and sensations – dishes waiting to be washed, buying a hairbrush, spilling coffee on your sleeve – become painfully poignant as these are things that only the living do. The poem was written about the death of Marie Howe's brother Johnny.

The song was written for, and dedicated to, Susan Narucki who has performed it numerous times with pianist Alan Feinberg at such venues as the 92nd St. Y in New York and the Monadnock Festival. Their performance is available on the Americus CD *Extraordinary Vistas*.

Originally *What The Living Do* was the second song of a larger cycle (*One Into One*) but these days I prefer it to be performed alone.

Joel Phillip Friedman (2012)

What the Living Do

Johnny, the kitchen sink has been clogged for days, some utensils probably fell down there.
And the Dräno won't work but smells dangerous, and the crusty dishes have piled up

waiting for the plumber I still haven't called. This is the everyday we spoke of.
It's winter again: the sky's a deep headstrong blue, and the sunlight pours through

the open living-room windows because the heats on too high in here and I can't turn it off.
For weeks now, driving, or dropping a bag of groceries in the street, the bag breaking,

I've been thinking: This is what the living do. And yesterday, hurrying along those
wobbly bricks in the Cambridge sidewalk, spilling my coffee down my wrist and sleeve,

I thought it again, and again later, when buying a hairbrush: This is it.
Parking. Slamming the car door shut in the cold. What you called *that yearning*.

What you finally gave up. We want the spring to come and the winter to pass, We want
whoever to call or not call, a letter, a kiss - we want more and more and then more of it.

But there are moments, walking, when I catch a glimpse of myself in the window glass,
say, the window of the corner video store, and I'm gripped by a cherishing so deep

for my own blowing hair, chapped face, and unbuttoned coat that I'm speechless:
I am living. I remember you.

-- Marie Howe (used by permission of W.W. Norton & Company)