

What Will Stand: Songs from (F)light, a Collaborative Borderlands Song Cycle

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Abstract

(F)light: a borderlands song cycle is a creative response to migration. We wrote and composed the cycle of nine songs in relation to two particular borders: those between Arizona, United States and Sonora, Mexico; and Maine, United States and New Brunswick, Canada. The songs address borders, geopolitics, mobility, emotion, and narrative. We briefly contextualize our collaboration on (F)light and then share three songs from the project, as scores and as sound files performed by Women in Harmony, a women's chorus in Portland, Maine.

In May of 2011, Women in Harmony, a women's chorus in Portland, Maine, premiered the nine songs of (F)light: a borderlands song cycle as the centerpiece of a migration-themed concert. The song cycle is a collaboration between two poets based in southern Arizona and a composer based in northern Maine. (F)light took shape over two week-long residencies along the Arizona (United States)/Sonora (Mexico) border, in December 2009, and the Maine (United States)/New Brunswick (Canada) border, in June 2010. During the residencies, we visited sites along each border, such as the Nogales-Grand Avenue Port of Entry in the twin cities of Nogales, Arizona and Nogales, Sonora; the Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge in southwestern Arizona; and the Saint John River, which flows between Maine and New Brunswick. Learning through our local connections, we spoke with rangers, writers, scientists, and artists of the borderlands; and we gathered with community members in our homes for informal conversations about border and migration narratives. These encounters contributed to the songs of (F)light. Since the premiere by Women in Harmony, the work has been performed multiple times, including at the 2014 Sister Singers Festival in Urbana, Illinois. The three songs included here as MP3s, titled "Lives We Take," "In the First Place," and "What Will Stand," were recorded live at the 2011 premiere.

(F)light is about migration. Quin-Easter, based in northern Maine, proposeda collaborative cycle of songs based on narratives of human migration and bird migration. For Burk and Magrane, based in southern Arizona, a bird species rare to the United States provided a guiding metaphor for the project. In February 2009, theSoutheast Arizona Rare Bird Alert reported the appearance of a Blue mockingbird inDouglas, Arizona—one of only five recorded U.S. sightings of this species, which is native to Mexico. When Burk and Magrane arrived at Slaughter Ranch, where the Blue mockingbird had been spotted, we joined visitors from all over the U.S. and Canada who were there for the same purpose. Although the visitors could more easily see a Blue mockingbird in Mexico, the motivation for their travel to Slaughter Ranch was to see the species in the United States, a place where it does not live and where it had crossed over. We were struck by the language used to describe the Blue mockingbird in printed and online field guides. The Blue mockingbird is called a "Mexican specialty." In (F)light, we wished to explore and provoke the ideologies and narratives that designate a bird migrant as "special" and a human migrant as "illegal."

While geographers have looked to nonhumans as actors in borderlands politics (Sundberg, 2011), the Blue mockingbird rather brought up for us a tension in discourse and language. The juxtaposition of the terms "special" and "illegal" brought a sense of cognitive dissonance¹ around human and non-human

¹ Madsen (2015) writes that "pre-emptively embracing rather than retrospectively minimizing cognitive dissonance can be beneficial" (193) in research. This can perhaps be even more true for creative work, which may present dissonance in a way that allows for multiple interpretations at once.

positionality and value, and around racism, xenophobia, and fear. Indeed, discourse and competing narratives along the border work in an emotional and affective realm, shaping border subjectivities and narratives of the region (Williams & Boyce, 2013).

Narratives invoked and provoked during our work on (F)light in 2010 included discourse about racial profiling in the wake of the then recently enacted Arizona Senate Bill 1070, commonly referred to as the "show me your papers" law; the U.S.-Mexico border wall as an obstacle to ecological migration patterns; border checkpoints as disruptive to transnational family life; tensions between U.S. federal border policies and Indigenous sovereignty; smugglers and violent conflict in border regions; injury or death in the Arizona desert after unsuccessful crossing attempts; employment opportunities and reunion with family after successful crossings; the phenomenon of border tourism; and the policies and statements of controversial public officials such as Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio. Our own subjectivities and multiple levels of privilege-particularly our privilege as white U.S. citizens-mediated our hearing, interpretation, and embodied experience of the narratives. The racialized dimensions of our privilege were manifest, for example, at vehicular border checkpoints in Southern Arizona, where we were not asked to show our papers; our white faces were accepted as proof of our U.S. citizenship.

One way in which we engage the tensions of these and other border narratives within (F) light is through our use of the rhetorical mode in some of the songs, notably in "What Will Stand." With lyrics such as "pushing politics across the border/ people pay the price," the song uses broad rhetorical language drawn from our experience of border narratives: namely, that borderlands politics intervene, often detrimentally and certainly differentially, in borderlands lives. Mirroring this rhetorical mode, the music composed for "What Will Stand" has an anthemic, sweeping quality, particularly in the chorus of "What will stand/ what will stand besides the land?" While aware of their tendency to simplify, we offer rhetorical flourishes such as these to express our belief that—in a borderlands beset by many competing narratives—it can be wise to make a stand.

Other songs build momentum through the use of repetition. "In the First Place," which focuses on the disruptions to Indigenous lifeways and sovereignty caused by political borders, is punctuated by the refrain from which it takes its title. While the phrase "in the first place" can feel essentialized, we intend it to evoke the first right of place of Indigenous peoples, such as the O'odham and Yaqui in the south and the Micmac and Maliseet in the north. It is to these peoples, and other Indigenous peoples whose homelands are interrupted by current political borders, whom we address the phrase "you who belong here." The rejoinder that completes the song, "Learn to see... what was here in the first place," is addressed to ourselves, the artists of (F)light: we who are struggling to learn to see, both artistically and personally.

In the end, *(F)light* is a project about the absence of borders as much as the presence of them. Arizona Poet Laureate Alberto Ríos (2007) writes that "The border is what joins us,/ Not what separates us" – "La frontera es lo que nos une,/No lo que nos separa" (4–5). Born and raised in the twin cities of Nogales on the U.S.–Mexico border, Ríos writes poetry, fiction, and memoir about growing up in the vibrant culture of 'Ambos Nogales': 'both Nogales,' one in Arizona and one in Sonora, Mexico, joined by the border, formerly the site of frequent and informal crossings for visits, work, and errands. Ríos's writing about Ambos Nogales and the border that "joins us, / Not… separates us" (2007, 5) presents an alternative narrative of borders, stressing cooperation rather than conflict.²

Here, we share songs from *(F)light* as acts of creative geography. As in geopoetics (Magrane, 2015), these songs exist as much in an associational, affective, and emotional mode as in an explanatory analytic mode. Attoh (2011) has written that we may "find the trace of a melody, the palpitations of a rhythm, or the beginnings of a tune" (280) in our research and field notes. We agree. And—as our intended product from the beginning of this collaboration was a song cycle—we'd also like to offer the inverse: in our songs and creative work we may find other ways of approaching research.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to an Innovative Production Grant from the Maine Arts Commission, as well as support from Choral Arts New England and the Maine Arts Commission for *(F)light*'s premiere by Women in Harmony. We are grateful to Music Director Catherine Beller-McKenna and to all the members of Women in Harmony for their dedication to and peerless interpretation of *(F)light*. We thank Barclay Goldsmith, Gary Paul Nabhan, Kathryn Olmstead, and the many others who shared their narratives and experience with us during our residencies. We respectfully acknowledge in memoriam the late Marlon B. Evans, poet and friend, whose poem "O'odham Himdag" is quoted in the song "Migrant Counterpoint," and whose influence was felt throughout the composition of *(F)light*. We thank the editors of *ACME*, in particular Sarah de Leeuw, and the anonymous reviewers of an earlier version of this article for their valuable comments. Finally, we are forever grateful to Kate Quin-Easter, who accompanied us throughout the project, and whose perspective and insight on communities and cultures informed the work.

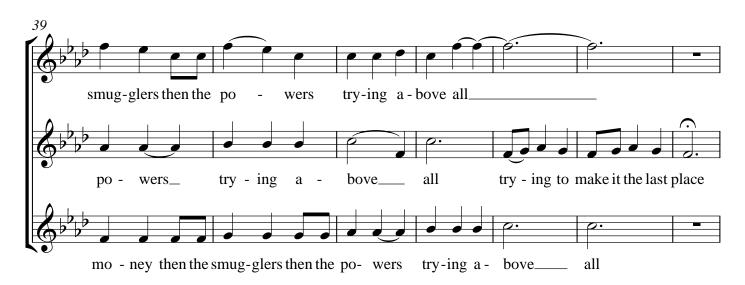
² Similarly, in a case study called "Narrative, Network, and Conservation on the Arizona-Sonora Border," Lejano et al. (2013) write of how "border environmental network activists stress cooperation almost as a sign of protest against more mainstream or grand narratives that portray the border as violent, corrupt" (99).

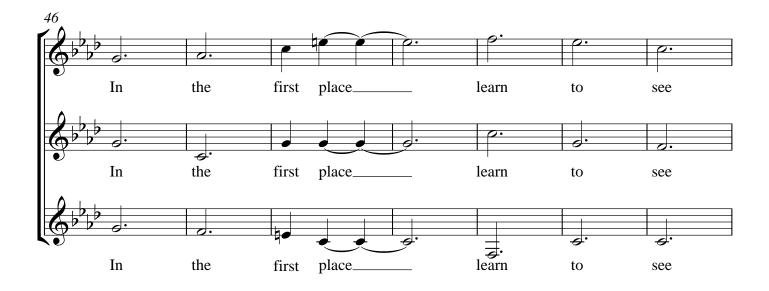
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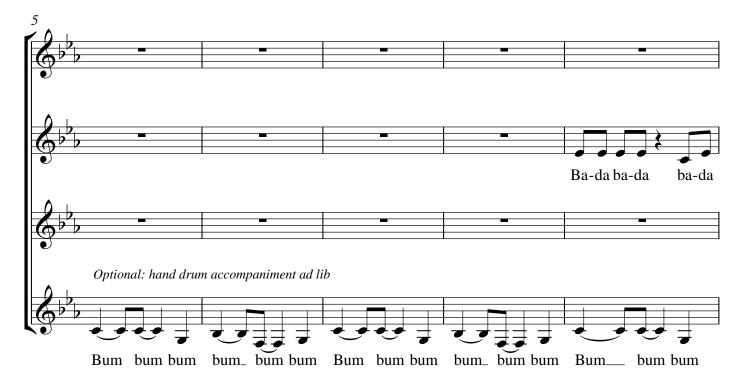


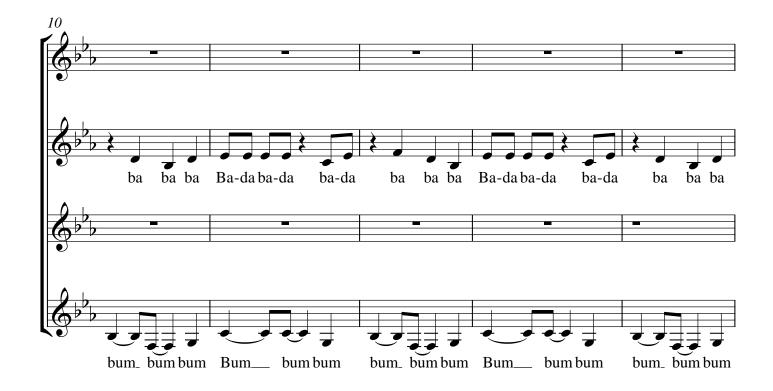


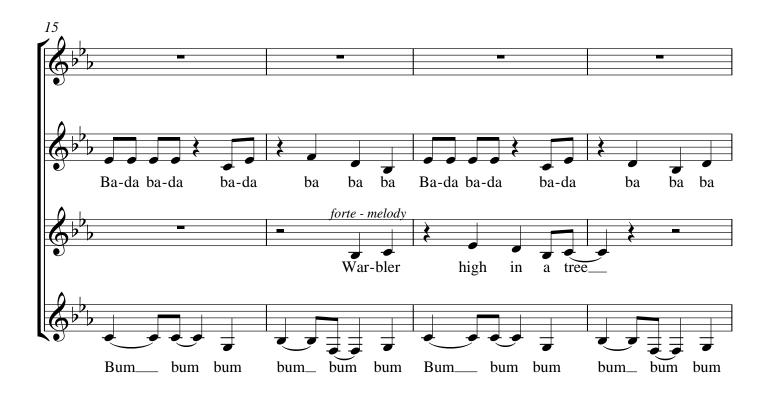


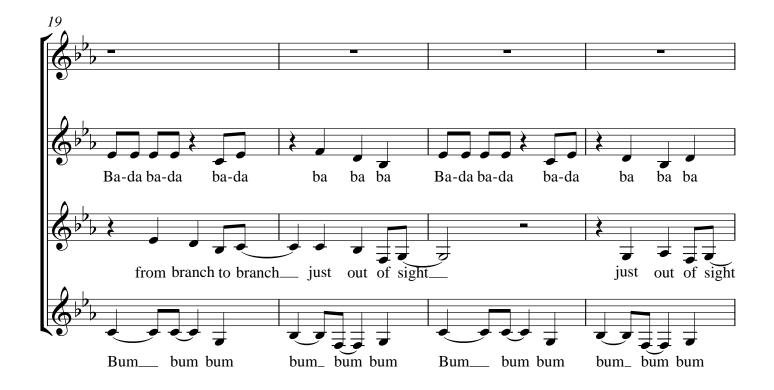


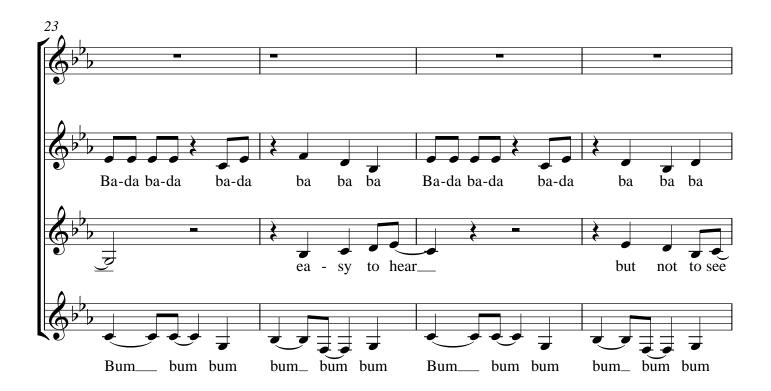
Copyright © 2010 Music by Erica Quin-Easter, lyrics by Wendy Burk and Eric Magrane Song 1 of 9 in (F)light: a borderlands song cycle

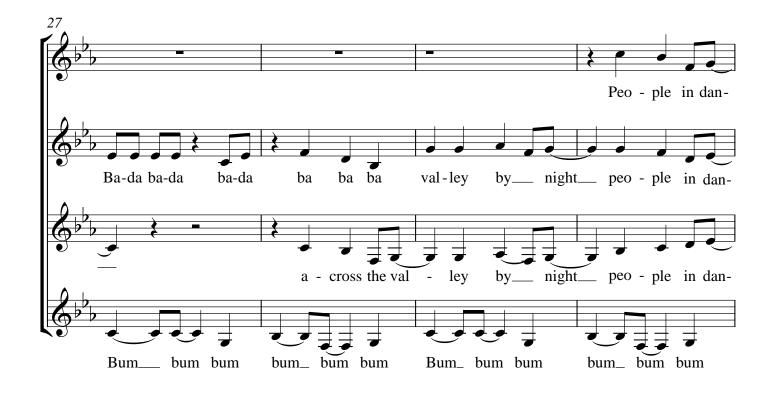


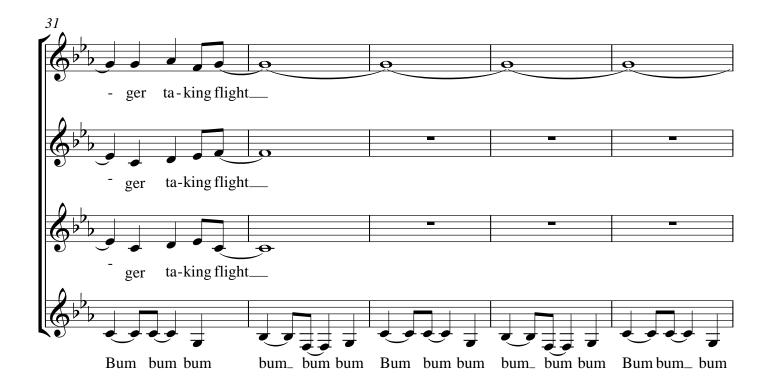


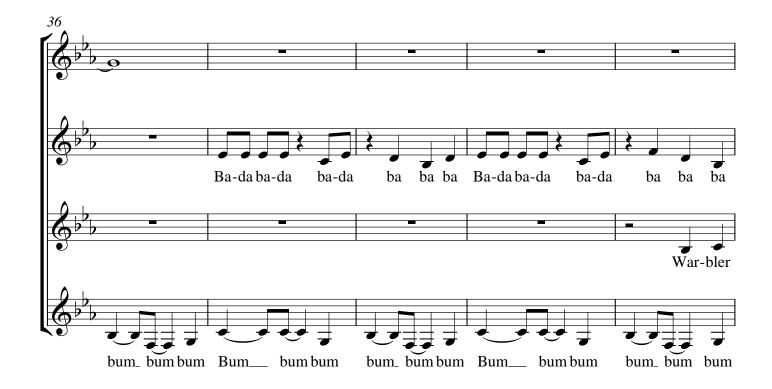


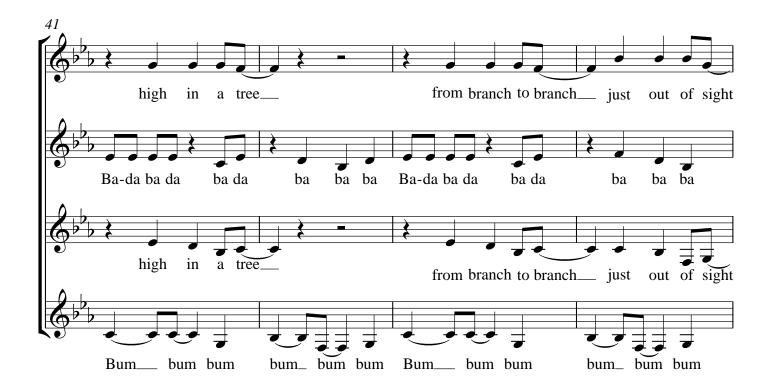


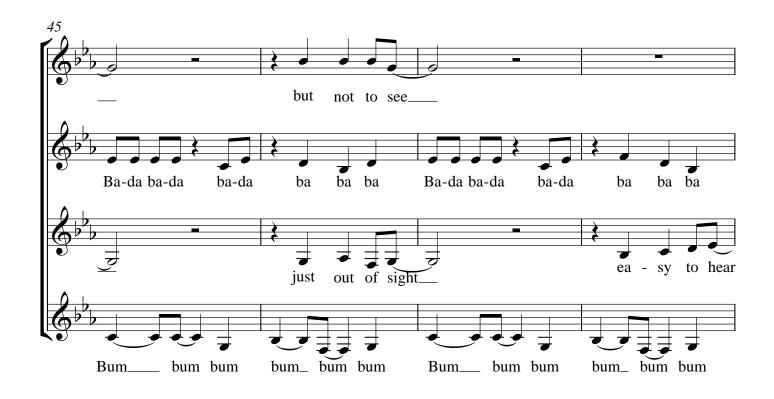


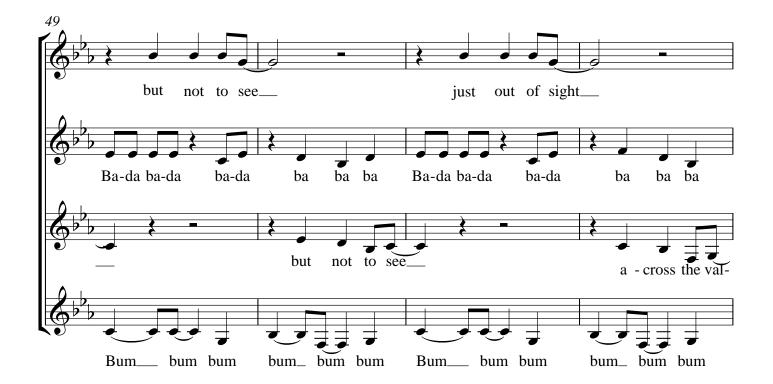


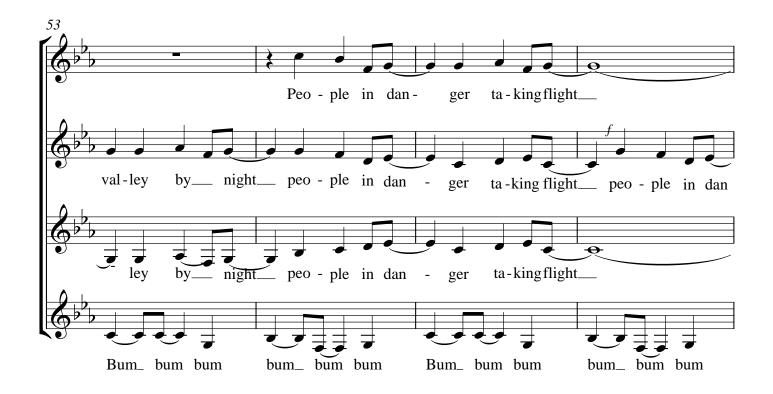


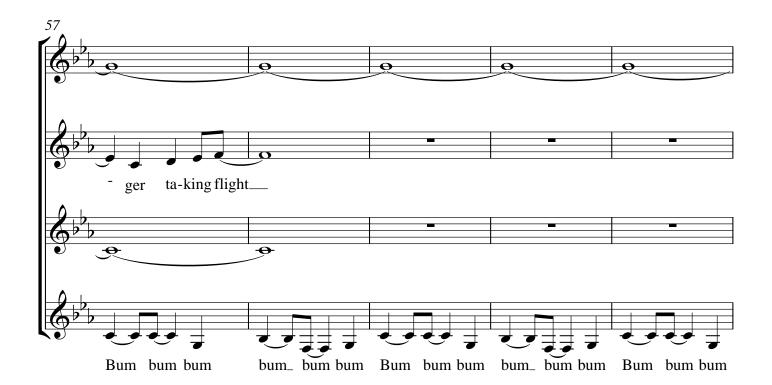


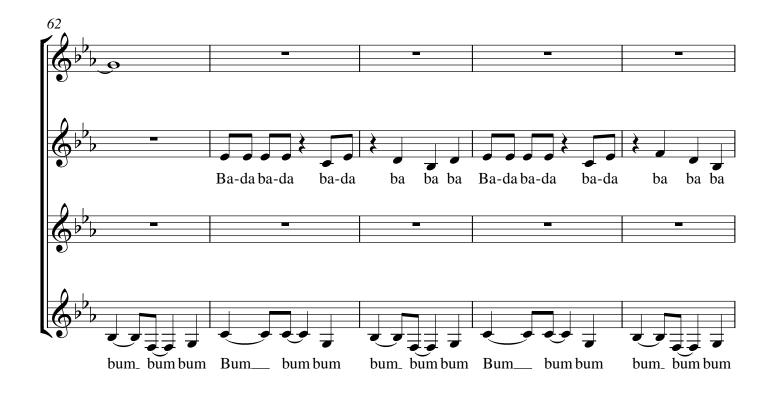


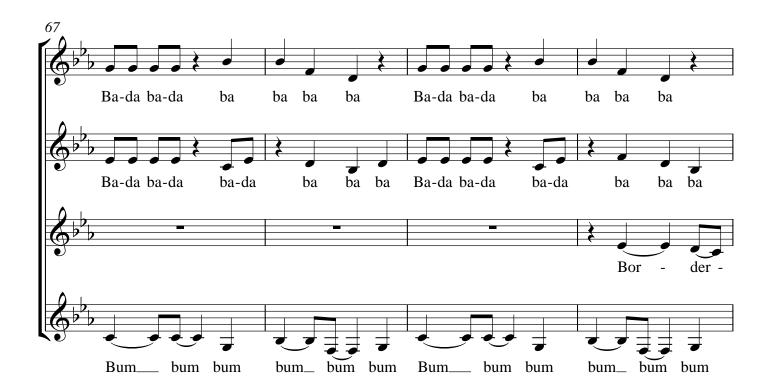


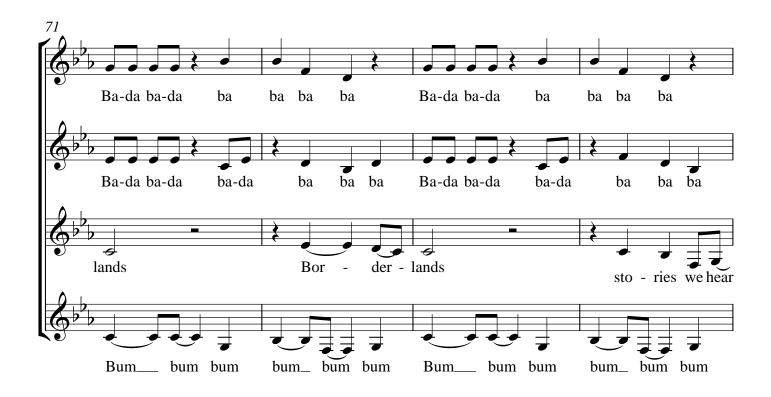


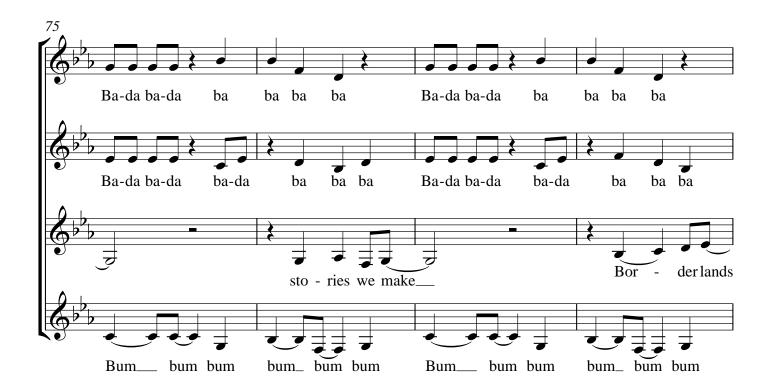


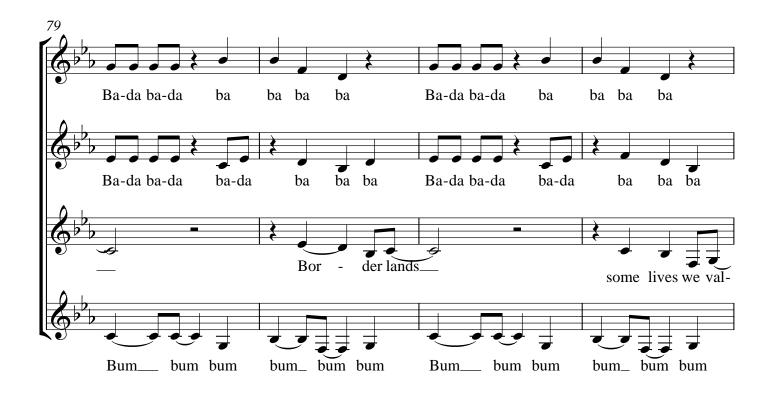


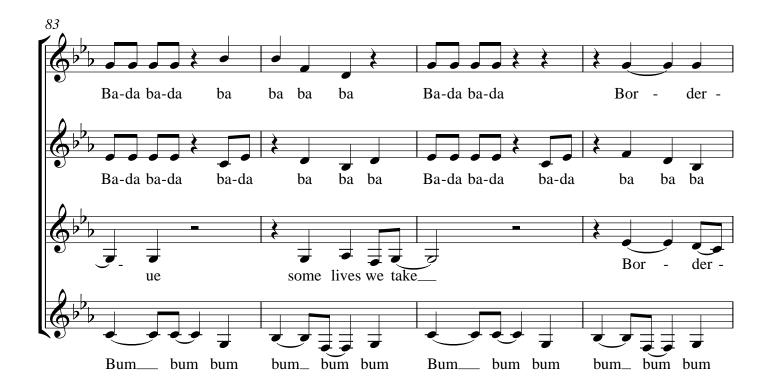


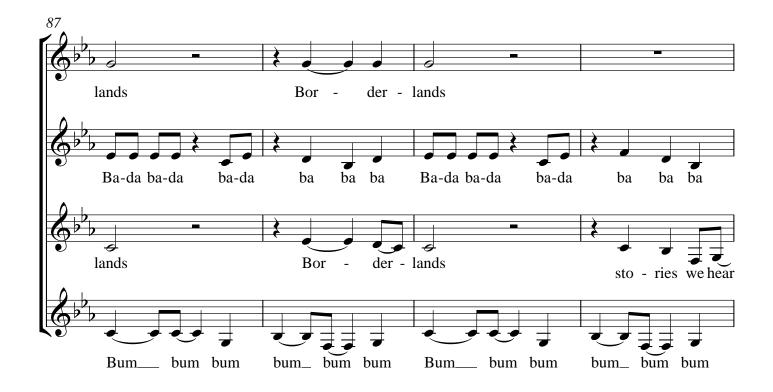


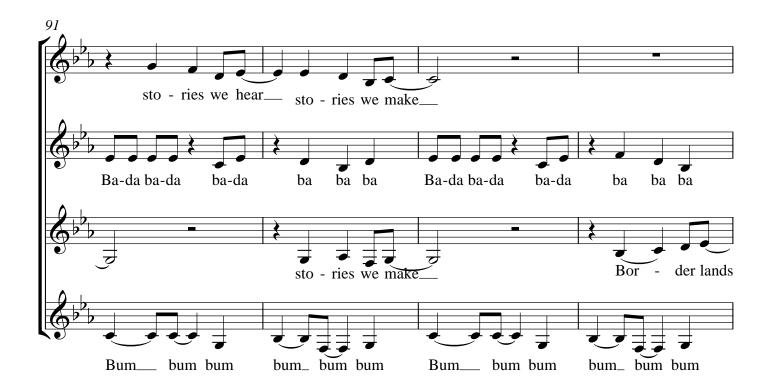


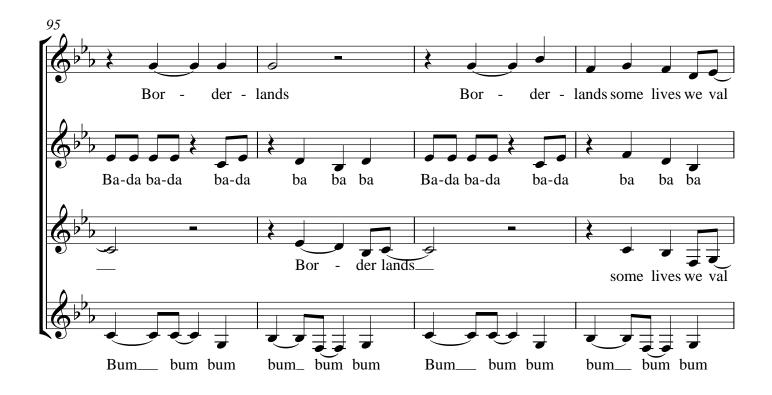


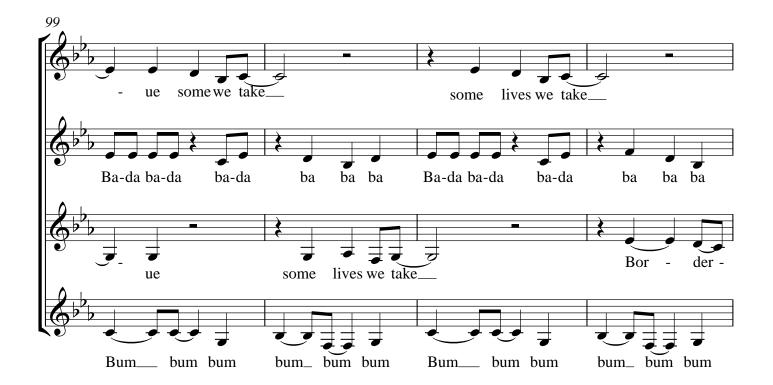


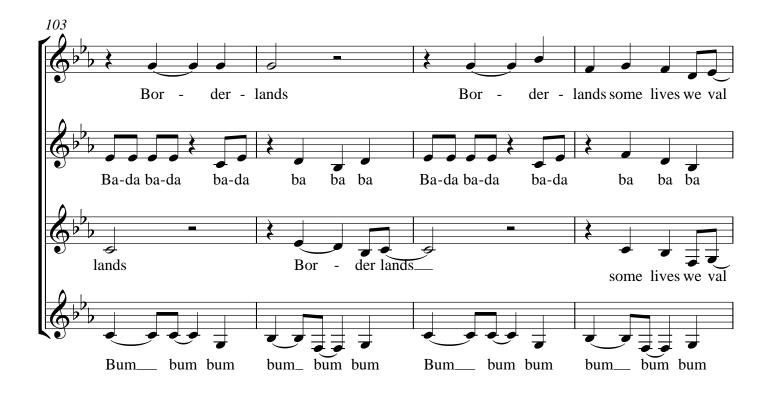


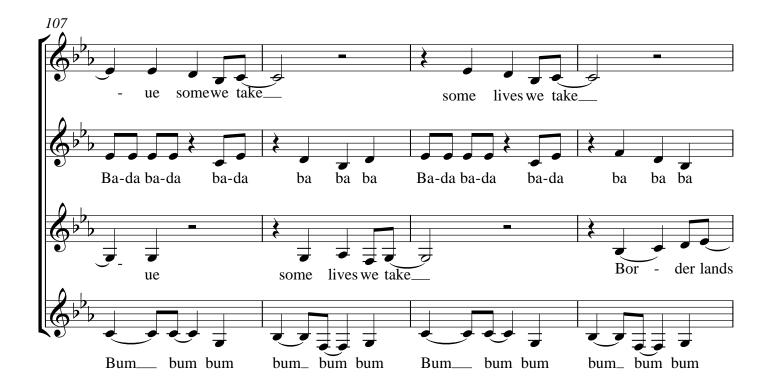


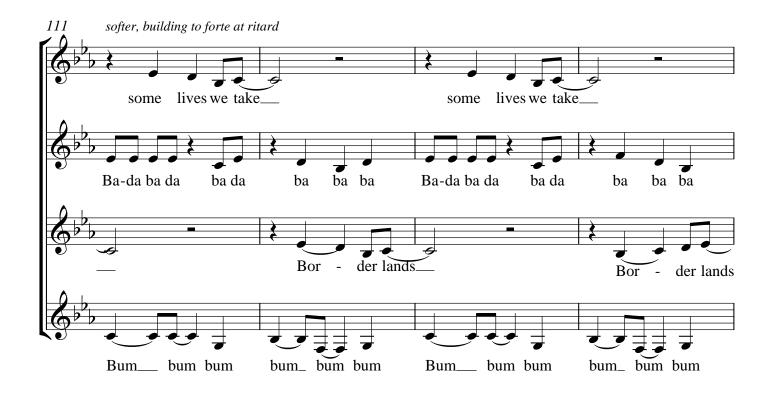


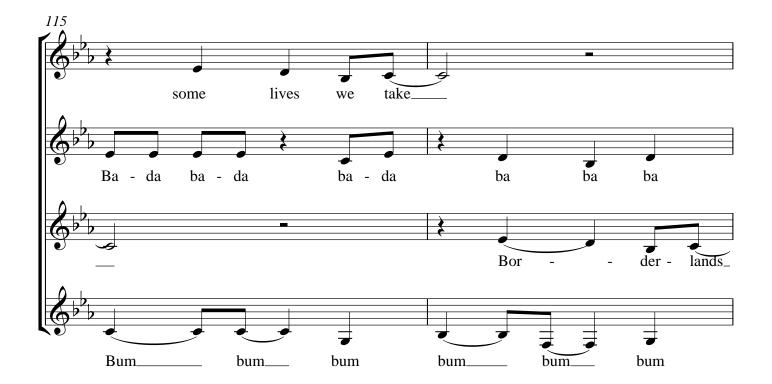


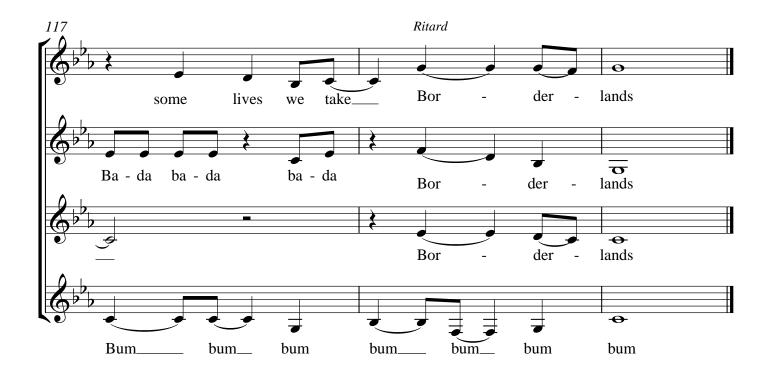






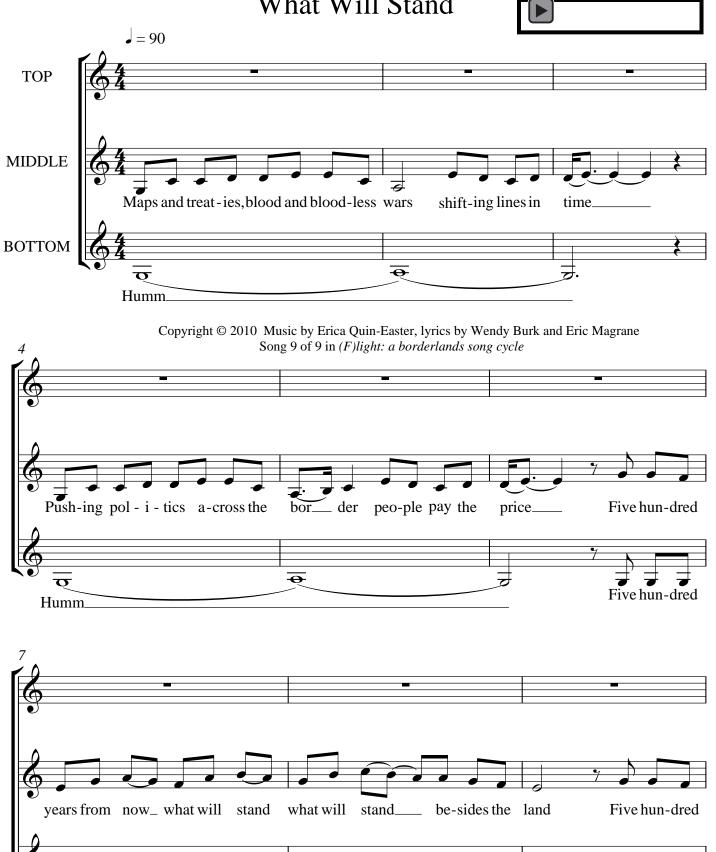






What Will Stand

Listen to song here



what will stand. be-sides the land years from now what will stand







