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Cross Rhythm: A Collection of Musical Short Stories

Stephanie Bowker

Johnson & Wales University - Providence, SBowker01@wildcats.jwu.edu

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***Cross Rhythm:
A Collection of
Musical Short Stories***

Stephanie Bowker

College of Arts & Sciences Academic
Symposium

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Radio Static

I was in Boston when I met him. It was December, a week before Christmas, and it was absolutely freezing. No snow yet, but you could feel it coming in the air. I was walking back home from a pub when I heard the music. I turned the corner and there he was, silhouetted against all the glitzy, glimmering storefronts, coaxing a lovely rendition of “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen” out of an alto sax. I shot a quick look down the street and ran over.

As I drew close, I saw how beat-up that alto was; the once-bright brass plating had faded to a dingy orange-brown and it was scratched six ways to Sunday, but damn, if it wasn't the sweetest sound I ever heard come out of a saxophone. The notes rang, echoing and clear and silver-bright, cutting through the winter evening and I sighed. I tossed a five-dollar bill into the open case at the man's feet – the red velvet interior just as worn and shabby as the sax – and sat down on the edge of a nearby planter. He watched me out of the corner of his eye and nodded in acknowledgement. I felt the cold as it soaked in through my jeans and the wind tore at my jacket, but I had to hear him finish.

As the melody rose and fell, I hummed along under my breath, my eyes closed to the night. The last notes of the song faded and I looked up to see the man watching me with thoughtful eyes.

“Cold out tonight, isn't it?” he asked. “You should be headed home.”

I shrugged. “I wanted to hear you play.”

“I'm not good enough that you should sit out in this nasty weather.”

“I figure that's for me to decide.”

He nodded, his mouth quirked. “Suppose it is.”

I looked the man up and down. His skin was dark and his hair had gone grey, the curls of it peeking out from under a beanie. The knitted gloves on his hands had the fingertips cut off, the edges frayed and folding over. The sax hung from an old strap looped around his neck and he cradled the bottom of it protectively against his chest.

“How long have you been playing?”

He paused and his eyes went distant for a moment, remembering. “Gosh, a good... fifty years now? It’s been a long time.”

“That’s impressive.”

“Nah, that’s dedication and love. I love playing, always have. I don’t imagine I’ll stop anytime soon.” His smile was genuine and a bit proud, and I couldn’t help but answer it with one of my own.

We chatted idly for a while, ignorant of the falling temperature and the occasional harried passerby, eager to get home. One by one, the warm window displays turned dark, leaving us with only the streetlamps to see one another. The conversation eventually shifted, as it always does, and I got ready to leave, when he said this:

“You can’t really describe music, you know?”

“What?”

“Music. It’s indescribable. You can describe the tempo, the volume, the tone, but the music itself... there are no words to describe it. It’s just music.”

I didn’t really know what to make of his statement, so I just nodded and waved as I walked away. I trudged down red brick sidewalks with the tune of “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen” on my tongue and the man’s words reverberating in my skull.

I unlocked my apartment and stood in the doorway for a moment, staring at the patterns cast from the streetlights shining through the windows. I had framed records hanging on the walls: Johnny Cash, Elvis Presley, Mabel Mercer, Pearl Bailey, Frank Sinatra, Marty Robbins, Ella Fitzgerald, Patsy Cline... My guitar was lying on the couch, waiting for me to fix a broken string, and the piano I bought at a garage sale stood silent in the corner. The pipes groaned and the floorboards creaked, but it was home. I stepped through and toed off my boots, stomping my feet to get some feeling back into my frozen toes.

As I went about my nightly routines, I rolled the thought around in my mind, swishing it and holding it like a wine taster would a new merlot. I wasn't too sure about what the old man said, to be honest. I could see what he was getting at; people say music is warm, yet it generates no heat. People describe music as *staccato*, but that is simply how notes are played. But still... there's more to it than that, I think.

Most of my life has been defined by music. I was raised on it, loved it, lived it. I've traveled the world for music. I split my fingertips learning guitar and violin, collapsed a lung playing tenor saxophone in high school band, and sang until my voice gave out.

My earliest memories are of music.

I remember being tucked into bed by my mother as she sang soft lullabies to me, always slightly off-key, but I didn't care. I would fall asleep to a wonky rendition of "You Are My Sunshine" or "Hush Little Baby," every night until I was twelve. I can easily recall my father's deep baritone. He'd sing along with the radio in the car, drowning out whoever was singing and making up his own lyrics when he forgot the words.

Now, my family and I, we weren't rich, not by any means, but we weren't struggling, either. I grew up in the country – in the woods, really – and I loved it, for the most part. There

weren't many kids around that were both my age and close by, so I had to entertain myself. Out in the yard, there were these huge, old trees that were perfect for climbing. I'd spend hours scrabbling up the branches and scraping my palms on the rough bark. I even had a tire swing that I liked to wind up and twist around in until the blur of the world was too much and I had to stop before I hurled.

I'd spend winters waist-deep in the snow, with the ice sinking into my snow boots and soaking my socks, and I'd spend the summers barefoot, racing up and down the creek, snatching at frogs in the mud. It was a good life, even without a television or a lot of toys. I had my imagination, my family's old Basset Hound, Frank, and the wireless. Every minute of every day, the wireless radio was on. During the day, it belonged to my mother. She'd listen to her stories as she did chores and yelled at me to get out from under her feet.

"Will you go play outside, like other good little children? And make sure not to track any mud back in here – I just mopped the kitchen floor!"

So I'd hop off the back porch and amuse myself until my dad came home, at which point I would absolutely track mud all over her nice, clean kitchen floor. We'd have dinner together and I'd regale my parents with the stories from my imagination while my dad complained about his boss and my mother would just put up with us and nod. After dinner, we'd snap the radio back on and we'd hear music and theater broadcast all the way from New York and Boston and Chicago. We'd crowd in the living room around the wireless and just spend the night in each other's company before bed.

There was one time... I was only about four or five, but it's probably one of the clearest memories I have of my childhood. I had pretended Frank was a dragon and had to "slay" him to get to the "princess," (a frog had I caught and stuck in a bucket), but Frank had accidently fallen

in the creek. My mother shrieked to high heaven when I dragged a soaked Frank back home and he shook water and algae all over the kitchen. I had gotten grounded and was in a foul mood that night. I had to eat all my lima beans, with *no* dessert after, and then I had to sit in the corner for an hour to “think about what I’d done.”

My parents got to listen to the radio and I had to sit in the time-out corner, just because Frank was a clumsy old dog with stubby legs, who couldn’t play a dragon to save his life. Needless to say, I wasn’t happy about it, but I knew it’d be worse if I complained, so I did my due diligence and sat on the little wooden stool without a word.

The time-out corner was in the short hallway that separated the kitchen from the living room, so I could still hear the radio. It was dark in the hall and the stool was hard and uncomfortable, but I could still hear the crackle of static and the nasal twanging of country ballads, so I guess it wasn’t too bad. The night was warm, so the front door was open. I could hear the chirping of crickets and see the flashes of lightning bugs through the screen door. Frank toddled over and stuck his slobbery head in my lap, so I gave him a pat, even though it was all his fault I was stuck there, anyway.

In the living room, the music changed to the soft thrill of violins. I heard my dad rumble something and my mom laughed. I watched their shadows cast on the far wall. My dad stood and my mom waved him away again.

“You know I have two left feet, I can’t!”

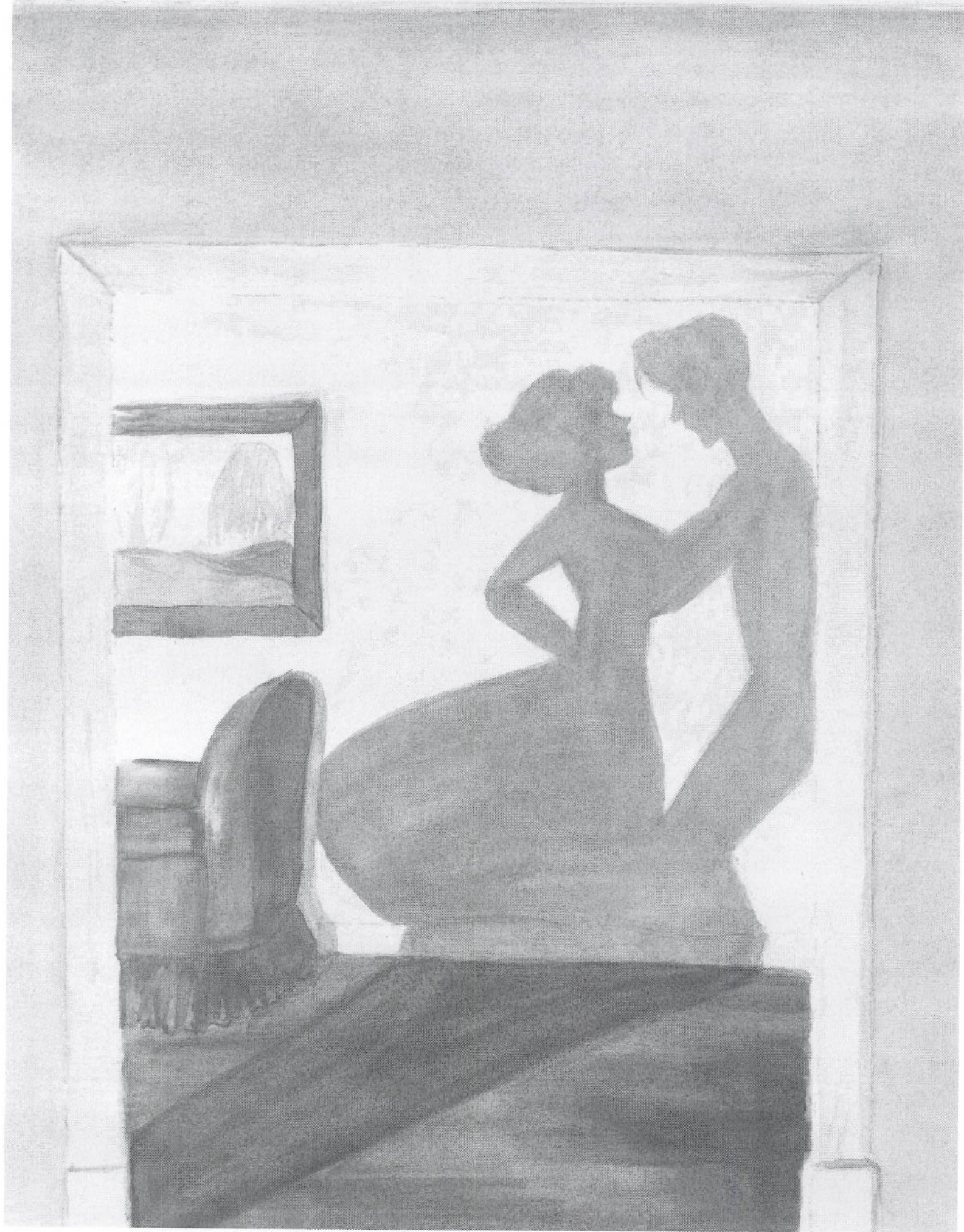
“Come on, Dee, dance with me!”

“... Oh, alright.”

With a laugh, my dad swept my mom up right off her feet and twirled her around, her skirts flying around her knees. The radio static crackled, but the soft melody sung by Mabel Mercer still made it through the speakers.

“Once in a blue moon / you will meet the right one / Once in a blue moon / find your dear, delight one / And with a thrill / you’ll know that love is true...”

Their shadows swayed together as the song swelled; forehead-to-forehead, they danced. Violin and piano tangoed, plinking and sawing their way through the tune as Miss Mercer crooned. I hugged Frank’s droopy neck and watched as my mom accidentally stepped on my dad’s foot, but he just chuckled and kissed her anyway.



Finger Picks

As I grew older, it became easier to make and keep friends. I learned how to ride a bike, then drive a car, and we even got our own phone line, so I could call them up whenever I wanted. I was still pretty much a homebody, preferring to stay in and practice violin or saxophone. I started violin when I was in first grade because my mom wanted me to be “cultured” or something, and it was alright. I reluctantly agreed, but had a hard time keeping up with the lessons after the noises came out screechy and not smooth, like I had expected.

Saxophone was my own choice, but at the time, I had been told not to pick it up for several weeks. I had been practicing too much and it caused my lung to collapse, so anything too strenuous was not allowed. I missed it, but remembering the pain and sheer panic I felt when it collapsed in the middle of marching practice was enough to get me to follow doctor’s orders for the time being. In its absence, I picked up guitar. Back then, Peter, Paul and Mary were still popular, and I really enjoyed their sound, so I started getting lessons from a boy in my grade, Tommy Mulligan.

He was a tall, gangly boy with freckles and a crooked smile. Mom didn’t like him because his hair was down to his shoulders, but it never bothered me. He was teaching me how to play the guitar in exchange for me tutoring him in chemistry, so he was more than alright in my book. Every Thursday afternoon, he and I would bike to my place after school. We’d spend an hour on chemistry and then we’d play guitar until just before dinner, when Tom would head home. It was a nice arrangement and I was happy to have a friend to hang out with, instead of doing chores.

It was spring, heading into summer, and the days had taken on that soft, hazy quality that makes people just want to laze around in the sun. The school year was wrapping up and everyone

was buzzing with excitement for vacation. Tommy and I had given up on chemistry that day. The waters of the creek were calling, drowning out the voices in the back of our heads that told us to get our homework done. Instead of throwing our bikes down at the edge of my driveway, we veered into my backyard, our tires bumping over the uneven ground and our instrument cases thudding against our backs.

At the edge of the woods, we abandoned our bikes and set out on foot, slowly peeling off our socks and sneakers on the way. The moss underfoot was bright and spongy from a recent rain and water swelled between our toes as we wove our way through the trees. The land sloped downwards as we neared the creek. Our footsteps grew heavy as gravity pulled at us, but we managed.

The stream was swollen, its waters chilled and bubbly from the spring rains. It babbled softly at us as it tumbled over stones hidden in its path. We pulled up to its edge and took a seat on an outcropping of rocks, careful to keep our instrument cases up and out of the way as we settled down.

I pulled out my guitar first and set it in my lap. I tuned it a bit before absentmindedly strumming out a little nonsense tune, just letting my fingers play on the strings. Tom nodded appreciatively.

"You're sounding good; you've gotten a lot better."

I only smiled and shrugged nonchalantly, but inside I was bursting with pride. I had wanted to learn guitar for a while now and had spent hours of my own time practicing. I was glad it was finally paying off.

Then I noticed that his case was different. I jutted my chin at it, never lifting my hands from the guitar.

"What's in the case?"

He smiled and snapped it open, revealing a tattered banjo. Its metal strings gleamed in the light and its face had been painted a soft blue, but the wood on the neck was scuffed and unpolished.

"My uncle gave it to me," he said, pulling the banjo free and setting it on his lap. "I've been borrowing it forever, but he finally got a new one, so it's mine now."

I watched as he slipped on the sharp finger picks, one by one. He looped the strap around his neck and played a quick scale, his fingers flying over the strings. The sharp, tinny pluck of the banjo rang out and he smiled in satisfaction.

"That doesn't sound half-bad... if you like banjo, that is," I joked.

He rolled his eyes and shifted around, sitting crisscross on the rock with the banjo across his chest.

"Well, I do happen to like banjo, so thanks," he strummed a couple of strings. "Any requests?"

I shook my head and he shrugged.

"Alright."

And then he began to play.

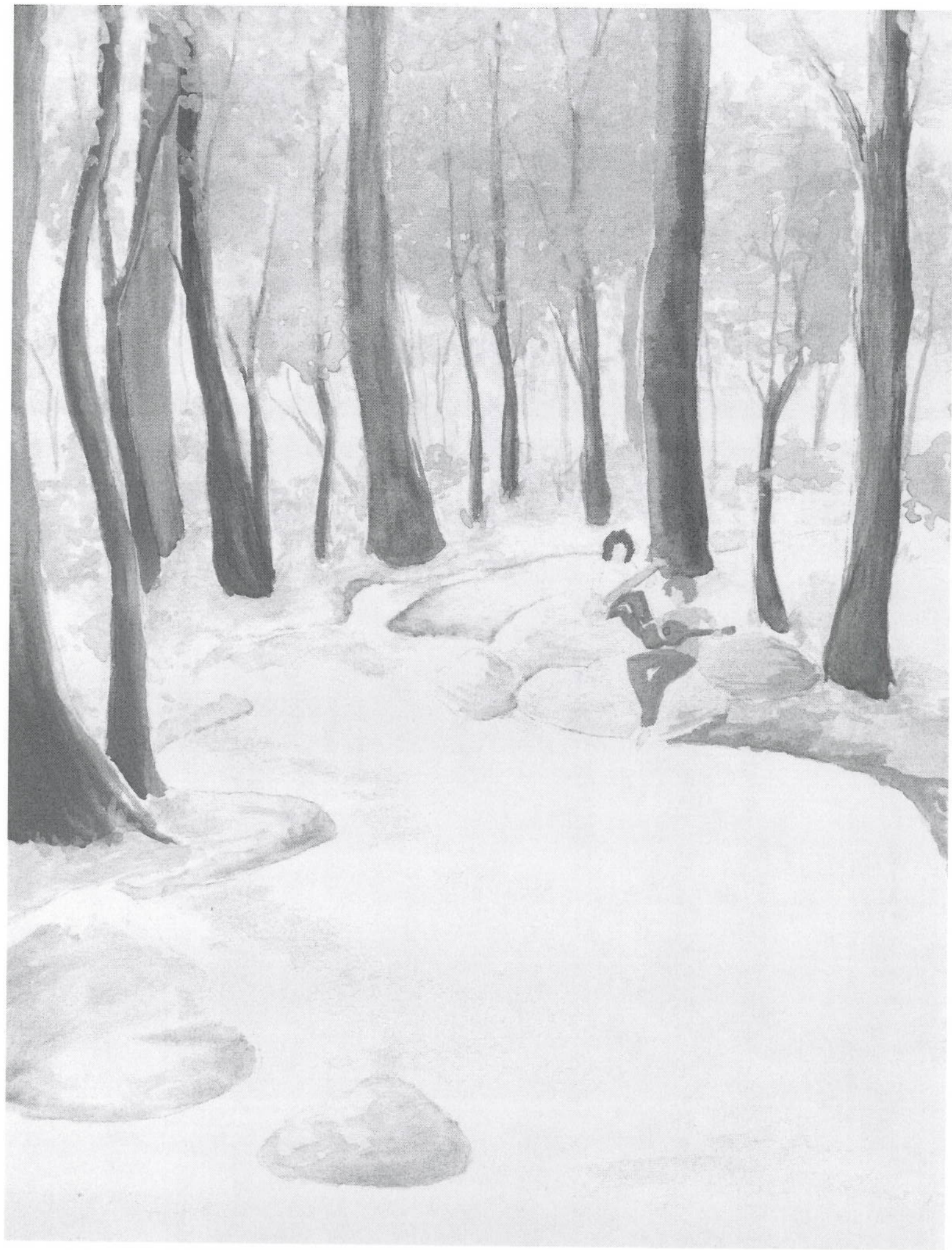
It was like the scene out of a painting. The afternoon sun hung low and warm in the sky, illuminating the swarms of mayflies as they whizzed over the water. The wind made the leaves whisper and a robin whistled somewhere in the treetops. It felt like we were the only two people on the planet; our world was this little bubble with a creek, the woods, and a banjo.

The melody filled the air and echoed in the trees, and I closed my eyes, content to just soak it all in. I opened them again when he began to sing. It was soft at first, under his breath, but it grew louder as the song went on.

"I hear her voice / In the mornin' hour she calls me / The radio reminds me of my home far away / And drivin' down the road I get a feelin' / That I should have been home yesterday, yesterday..."

I shifted and stuck my bare feet in the water as he neared the chorus. His voice was deep and warm and honey-sweet, weaving deftly through the banjo's twang. I traced a toe through the ripples and strummed along. I glanced over my shoulder to see him smiling through his curtain of long hair. The sunlight sparking off the brook illuminated his freckled cheeks and glinted off his banjo. I couldn't help but smile back.

We sat at the edge of the creek and played until the sun went down. Country songs and folk songs alike filled the air and drifted across the water, swelling between the trees and the land and the sun.



Hole-in-the-Wall

I was in college when I traveled out of the country for the first time. I was studying for a degree in music composition and was able to get into the study abroad program at my university. For six weeks in the summer of my sophomore year, I was in Lisbon, studying by day and soaking in the city by night. I loved it. The very air had this weight to it; everything was so old and close together. You could feel the history there, and yet, it was still very much alive. There was a pulse, a heartbeat, that would zing up through my feet as I walked.

The dorm I was staying in was atop one of Lisbon's many, many hills. Every time I looked out my window, I was struck with how beautiful the city was. Red rooftops as far as the eye could see, a castle off in the distance and the Tagus River sparkling in the warm, summer sun. Everywhere I went, there were people. It wasn't as crowded as New York City, where the people are packed together like sardines in a can, no, but the city was lived-in and well-loved. I'd walk down the street and have a passing conversation with an old lady hanging her sheets out to dry, three stories up. I could turn into a shop, a bakery, or restaurant and there'd be people sitting, talking, laughing... simply enjoying each other's company. It was warm and it was probably the happiest, most relaxed that I've ever been in my life.

Each venture out of the dorms held a surprise. I found myself simply wandering around aimlessly and always liking where I ended up. I visited art museums crammed with gorgeous paintings and precious treasures from ancient times. If I didn't feel like looking at art in a museum, I would wander around and take in the graffiti. The murals were beautiful and vibrant; my particular favorite was a woman dancing, her skirts and her hair flying free as she moved to an unheard tune.

I was surprised once, when I opened an unassuming wooden door, only to find an entire restaurant crammed into a space barely bigger than my parents' living room. I chatted with the waiter there for a bit, and that's where I first heard the name *A ervilha*. The Pea. I asked for a cup of coffee and when he brought it back, he struck up a conversation. My Portuguese had improved vastly over the last few weeks, and I was quite proud to carry it as long as I did.

"Your accent – American?"

I nodded as I blew gently on the coffee and took a sip. The bitter, earthy taste washed over my tongue and I sighed happily.

"What brings you to Lisbon?" he asked, genuinely curious.

I smiled and set down the mug. "I'm a college student. I'm over here in a study abroad program."

"A student! Wonderful! What do you study? How are you liking it here in the city?"

"Oh, I love it here; everything's gorgeous. And I study music."

"A musician... have you been to *A ervilha*?"

"Ah... no. I've never heard of it. What is it?"

"It's a jazz club! You *have* to go before you return to America!" He clasped his hands together in front of his chest in his enthusiasm.

"Wow. That good, huh?" I raised an eyebrow and smiled.

He nodded. "Absolutely!"

"Alright, so tell me about *A ervilha*."

The Friday before I left for home, I found myself walking the streets of Lisbon at night, looking for *A ervilha*. It was a beautiful evening; the air was warm with a gentle wind blowing in from the water. It was sticky with humidity, but not unbearably so. Around me, the white of the

buildings glowed blue under the moon, illuminated with gold from the streetlamps. I glanced down at the directions the waiter had given me, hastily scribbled on my paper napkin. I squinted at the writing. Was I supposed to turn left here? Or up at the next corner...? I shrugged and chanced it, walking down a narrow alleyway strung with round, incandescent bulbs. At the end stood a door, coated in bright green paint. Above it hung a wooden sign, carved in a perfect circle, with the name *A ervilha*.

I smiled and jogged ahead, careful of the old cobblestones under my sandals. I pushed down on the handle and opened the door with a soft creak. The mummer of many voices reached my ears, accompanied by the tentative clinking of a piano getting warmed up. My eyes adjusted quickly to the gloom and I glanced around the space, taking it all in.

In the very center of the far wall was a small stage, standing a few feet higher than the crowd. Mismatched tables and chairs were strewn around the room, each with its own candle. The tiny flickers illuminated smiling faces; people on dates, with friends, sharing a night of wine and food and music. More bulbs on thin wires were strung around the ceiling, but they did little to dispel the darkness. The whole place stank of cigarettes, wine, and fresh bread. I wove my way around tables and took a seat at the bar across the room. I plopped down on a stool and ordered *Ginjinha*. I smiled when the bartender slid the glass over to me and then took a sip of the sour, fruity drink. I would miss it when I went back to the States.

A hush fell over the room as the lights above the stage turned on. I spun around on the stool, careful not to spill, and leaned back against the bar. Onstage, a small ensemble of musicians had gathered; a tenor sax, a piano, a snare drum, a trumpet and an upright bass were huddled together on the small platform. In the front stood a microphone, waiting for someone to come up and sing.

That's when *she* stepped up into the stage. I still don't know her name, but to this day, I have never heard a voice like hers. She was a little slip of a thing, completely unassuming in every way. Her warm, brown skin shone under the stage lights and her chestnut hair was pulled back with a scarf knotted at the base of her neck. She smiled broadly at all of us and gave a little wave, her eyes crinkling at the corners. There was some polite applause from the room as she got comfortable. When it was quiet, she nodded at the drummer and he set the beat. Then the sax and the piano came in. *Dun-dun-dundundun-dun*. Repeat. She swayed and tapped the beat against her thigh, sending her pale, pink skirts swishing in time.

She began to sing Etta James's "I Just Want to Make Love to You," and I was mesmerized. Out of this tiny woman came this massive voice; it was unbelievable. She gripped the mic and *growled* into it, and it was the greatest thing I had ever heard in my life. A jolt of electricity whizzed up my spine as she sang, sending my brain spinning. It was like someone raked their nails down under the skin of my ribs. I felt the sax's melody and the drum beat pound in my bones. Her voice burrowed deep into my chest and *tugged*. My mouth fell open and I didn't blink, too afraid that I would miss something.

As she sang, she shimmied downwards, with the mic pulled close to her lips, bending her knees as she twisted her feet in time.

"I don't want you sad and blue / I just wanna make love to you..."

She jumped back up with a little twirl and the crowd went nuts. She beamed, stomped her foot in time with the drum, and just kept crooning into that mic. The tenor sax whaled out its brief solo, the player bending and swaying with the melody. Then she slipped back in like smoke and finished the song, repeating that refrain and holding the last note until it faded. The music stopped and I remembered how to breathe again. Everyone was applauding and she was soaking

it all in. I set my forgotten drink back on that sticky bar top and clapped until my hands stung. I had stars in my eyes as I watched her smile on that stage.

I stayed at that bar until the early hours of the morning, listening to old jazz songs and loving every second of it. There's music that just *does* something to you; it connects with you on more than just an emotional level. I *felt* those blues that night. I felt them in my bones, in my blood, and to this day, listening to a recording of "I Just Want to Make Love to You" just doesn't feel the same.



Violin Concerto

It was on a winter's night, much like this one, where I truly learned to appreciate classical music. I had my degree in music composition, so in college, I was expected to listen to and play classical music, which I did without much complaint. However, I viewed much of it simply as coursework I had to get through in order to move on to more interesting genres of music. It was work; it wasn't fun or interesting. It wasn't what I willingly chose to do with my time, but it was what had to be done. For a few years after college, I held a slight disdain for classical music. Just the fact that I *had* to study classical music put me off it.

I had just moved to Boston and was living on my own, now several hours away from home by car. It wasn't quite like Lisbon, where I felt warm and safe out on the streets. Boston had its own history, to be sure, but it was harder to pin down. The city was constantly shifting and growing and I hadn't quite found my place in it yet. After a few weeks of being holed up in my apartment, I grew bored enough to brave the harsh, New England winter. It was a bitter February that year. The city was in a constant flux of thawing and freezing, leaving the streets and sidewalks alike under a thin sheet of ice. There was a generous heaping of snow over everything, but with the salt and sand from the plows, it just looked dirty. There were few patches of snow that had not been trampled over, and I was very much looking forward to spring melting the slush away.

I donned my thick winter coat and gloves, shoved my feet into my boots, and off I went. I simply meandered through the streets, like in Portugal, albeit this time with more teeth-chattering. I eventually came across a coffee vendor and happily parted with five dollars for a chance to warm my hands. I wanted to turn back often, to go home and get out of the cold, but for some reason I kept trundling on.

I turned a corner and came across a line of people standing outside a theater. Many of them looked as miserable as I did, huffing loudly into their mittens and stomping their feet to keep the cold at bay. I considered the line for a moment before tossing my empty coffee cup into a garbage can and heading over. The theater hall looked small and unassuming enough; it was one of those old-fashioned places with the bright, flashing marquees out front. The black block lettering read "One Night Only: Boston's Philharmonic Presents Tchaikovsky, a Collective." I stepped into the back of the line and tapped the shoulder of a man in front of me.

"How long have you been waiting out here?"

"A-about twenty minutes or so, I think," he bit out through chattering teeth. "But it'll be w-worth it, I know it."

"Is it something special?" I asked.

"Oh yeah! It's part of this b-big promotion to try and get the public m-more interested in c-c-classical music. D-discounted tickets and everything!"

I nodded in understanding. "Huh. Thanks. For your sake, I hope we get inside soon."

"You and me b-both!" he chuckled before turning back around.

It was a good half an hour after the line started moving before I was able to reach the ticket booth. I paid and headed inside, sighing in relief when warm air washed over me. If anything, it would at least be a good way to warm up before heading back home.

"May I direct you to your seat?" an usher walked up to me and gestured for my ticket.

I handed it to him. He read it quickly and returned it.

"Eighth row from the back, in the middle. Theater's in right through those doors." He pointed needlessly at the double doors at the back of the lobby.

"Alright, thank you."

I stepped through the bright crimson doors and looked for my row. I made my way to my seat, weaving through the crowds and whispering “pardon me” a dozen times before plonking down in the fold-down seat. The cushioning had long since gone flat and the navy polyester was soft and worn with use. Most people had already settled in, shucked their coats and were now making idle chit-chat before the show. The room wasn’t overly large, but still was a decently-sized concert hall. The walls were covered in faded, beige wallpaper and held a number of sconces that glowed amber. It was warm in the room with all the bodies, so I followed everyone’s example and peeled off my jacket.

Just as I started wishing that I had grabbed a program to read to pass the time, the curtains began rustling. I could hear the awkward shuffling of people trying to arrange themselves around bulky instruments and was reminded of my days in my high school’s band. I chuckled softly to myself as the curtains finally stopped swaying. The lights dimmed and the velvet curtains parted, revealing the orchestra. The conductor walked onstage and the musicians all stood as she bowed to the audience. She smiled and bobbed her head as she looked around the room, then she turned and stepped up onto her podium. The orchestra sat and the percussion section held their mallets and sticks at the ready. Flutes, trumpets, trombones and French horns glinted under the bright lights. The conductor opened her score, raised her baton, and with a flick, the music began.

It began slow and *piano*, but quickly gained volume and momentum before fading. Then, a female violinist stood, and began to play her concerto. Her solo leapt and dove, building and building until the orchestra rejoined her. It was a dance. At times, the group would play as one, harmonious, with the violin singing above them, and at others, they would dart away like startled sunfish, leaving the violinist alone. I watched as the woman’s fingers skipped up and down the

neck of her violin, how her bow sawed back and forth, coaxing the melody from the strings. Her head was bent as she read her sheet music and her body swayed in time. She was simply a channel through which music flowed, her body unable to contain it all before it was released through her violin.

She dropped quickly into a minor key, gaining momentum until, with a *boom* from the timpani, the orchestra rejoined her. I pictured waves crashing around her, the water swelling and rising, her dress soaked in the foam. The strings section sang as one and I felt tears welling in my eyes. I understood now, what I had been missing. What I had failed to hear when I was in college. No... not hear... *Feel*.

With each push and pull of her bow, I felt the music. I had never been moved by classical music before, and was very glad I had taken the chance that night. I sat, stiff and transfixed, unable to tear my eyes away from the stage. Back and forth, back and forth, the violin played alone, only for the orchestra to surge upwards and they all played as one. As they made their way through the piece, the other musicians cut off, leaving her completely without accompaniment, and she *shone*.

A flute came in, its melody gentle and sweet, before backing away again. A soft rumble of strings hummed under the violinist's melody, raising her, supporting her, before leaving her again. On and on it went, her part unwavering and constant, with other sections darting in and out around her. The music built and built into a mighty crescendo, until they all played as one. I couldn't look away as the music filled the room, I couldn't breathe. It was too much, too much. Just as it was getting to be too overwhelming, near unbearable, they played their final notes. With a flourish, the violinist pulled down her bow. The music faded, and I felt its loss. The salty

waves of music receded and I broke the surface, sucking in a great gasp of air when the echo finally ended.

It was quiet for a heartbeat, two... then the room filled with applause. I still couldn't move. People around me were standing and clapping and whistling, and yet I sat, my fingers digging into the armrests, my eyes still fixed on the stage. The curtains shut with a dramatic swoop, the old, blue velvet shining in the dim light. The sconces grew brighter and people began to gather their things. Robotically, I pulled on my jacket and stood, but shot the curtains one last look before I left.

That night, I couldn't sleep. The music still rang in my ears, the melody echoing in my mind until the early hours of the morning. The next day, I dug out the old classical recordings from college and played through them all, finally appreciating the complexity of it all. Mozart, Tchaikovsky, Beethoven, Vivaldi, Brahms, Bach... they all found their way into my home that winter, and they haven't left since.

So the old man is wrong. Music isn't this strange entity that is completely infallible, untouchable and indescribable. Music is so much more than little black notes on a page, or the strum of a guitar, or the lilt of a soprano's voice as she belts out an aria on stage. Music is in your body's visceral reaction. That switch that's flipped in your brain that makes you smile or cry, or that tug in your chest that makes you want to leap and fly and dance. It's what your ears tell your heart and your mind, what pours into your soul until it's full and bursting and bright. It's the whole experience, from the first note to the last, all in the moment as you lived it. That's *music*.

