

Measures of Music

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IT CAME THEN THAT SARA DREAMED of the flood. It had been the news for weeks, cities all along the Front sandbagging streets, sidewalks, driveways, window wells, a mudslide that made a lake over a town. She had gone to sleep several nights thinking of those houses under water, full of water. But their cul de sac was well above the nearest flood zone; nothing to fear.

She woke shaking, to Ryan sitting up peering at her, his eyes dark hollows in the dark, saying, "What is it?" and that she was kicking and making odd little yips in her throat, like a pup.

Out of breath, off balance, "Did I?" She still shook. "It was the water," she told him, water coming at the house in a stream as from a hose to push through the wall.

He put his arm around her, joked, mock-analyzed, comforted till she leaned against his neck.

But still hearing the water thunder coming fainter, far yet steady, no flashback, "Wait," she said; she was hearing it. "Listen."

After a stillness he explained it was the catch basin, it was coming in there, they were controlling the outflow, part of it going down past the temple into storm drains on Ninth East. "Nothing to worry about," he murmured and hugged her. "Lie down, sleep," and lay back and pulled her. She yielded her head to the hollow of his shoulder.

She didn't sleep a long time wondering if he did, hearing the flood louder than breath or heart, her mind breached by the dream, a ram of water breaching a wall. This was Sunday morning.

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After church, after dinner, the table cleared and children dispersed, she asked Ryan to come with her. He was at the piano laboring out a bass part: "And the glory, the glory of the Lord shall be re-veal-ed," finishing the phrase before answering that he still had to pack, and she ought to practice, too, get her cello out. "Fastest packer around, fastest out of town," she chided him, and urged, "Come on."

"Where?" he asked.

"Anywhere," she said. "Up to the catch basin."

"Ah—" and wagging a finger he analyzed her ulterior motive, her dreamwork.

"I want," she told him, "your company."

They bicycled as near as they could and left the bikes chained to a street sign to climb the weedy, truck-rutted lot sloping to the basin, the high bank with stones half unearthed by rain. People were there, some walking up, others down, others standing or walking along the bare crest of the dam. She couldn't see what they looked at but the dam only, the wide notch of the spillway with its gray square-scored concrete face, above that the canyon mouth and the rough escarpment, and then lint-colored sky.

She'd worn sandals, so Ryan had to take her wrist and pull to help her up the steep bank. They stood on the dam. She wasn't as impressed as she'd thought to be: the water still six or eight feet below the spillway, four or five below the screened mouth of a big corrugated pipe standing up several yards out. Just a glorified chuckhole, she told him. He pointed. "Over there."

She looked, then heard as she should have been hearing all along, the noise that tracked her dream. Several thousand gallons a minute, he was saying, and they were letting it out as fast as they dared, but it was gaining, had been twelve feet down yesterday.

Across the wide basin like a big gravel pit, she saw a deep-cut gully, a wash bending out of sight into the canyon, and coming through it a brown torrent tumbling on itself, flinging barrelsful into the air high as the banks with that noise, wind-like, rattling, and rock-like. She was safe she knew; she could see it tamed when it spread into the basin, the water at her feet appearing still as sleep. But everything could move. She watched the stream, incessant and ferocious.

Ryan was talking again, as if to a freshman earth science class, of how this was made thousands of years ago, all the area below a fan delta, rocks and silt carried out of the canyon. "Alluvial," he said. He turned his head toward her. "Our house is built on the same kind of stuff. The old lake terraces."

Bonneville. But she watched the stream. She saw it toss small boulders into the air, heard it mumble. She thought of the empty houses under Thistle Lake and the stripped rooms with water gliding through windows and doors, secret along halls, up stairwells on obscure errands; thought of the ancient lake filling the whole valley, centuries gone before anyone settled on its deep benches. The voice of water and silt and stones fluttering on her skin, strumming her tendons, jarring the beat of her blood.

Ryan packed after the children were in bed, and Sara more anxious than angry did not pick her usual farewell fight with him but sat in her nightgown crosslegged with covers to her waist and watched him meticulously lay into his carry-on bag his necessities—three changes of garments, three pair of dark socks, two extra shirts, an extra pair of cords, his shaving kit, his tank top, shorts, and running shoes, his leather-bound scriptures. His thin briefcase had been packed since Friday with the paper he would present, copies of the papers he would respond to and his notes on them, the text for his one spring term class, a folder of problems he'd grade on the plane and return when he got back Thursday. He was trying to fit half a dozen books into the bag—physics, novels, biography, she wasn't sure what; reading was his main extravagance, or a vice so regular as to seem governed by natural law. He liked, he said, to have choices. Amused, she watched his oblivious mummery. The books weren't all going to fit.

"Amazing," she said.

"Intellectuals travel light."

"Not light enough," she said and bet he wouldn't open half.

"The point is I could," he said and set three thinner books aside, then took out the thickest to put the thin ones back in, then zipped the bag.

"Tell the kids goodbye?" she asked.

"Oh no. I'm sorry." His usual.

They might not notice, she told him. "It was a couple days last summer before anybody said where's Dad."

"The incredible disposable man," he said.

When he set the bag onto the floor by the bed, she felt the absence of the weight keener than the thought of his going while she would be sleeping.

"Not yet," she said. "Astrophysical clown. Come here." She rocked a wave toward him.

He looked up and signed a T: time out to brush his teeth and gargle?

"Penalty," she warned.

He stepped into the unlit bathroom.

When she heard him tap his rinsed toothbrush against the sink, she switched off the bedroom lights.

"Hey," he said. "What?"

"Touch system," she said. "Find me."

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Later they sat up to watch random lightning shift along the horizon south to north to west to northwest with low, almost continuous, thunder.

It was like that, he told her, where she touched him: "Little flashes out at the edges and then closer."

"Will it hit here?" she asked. She laid the backs of her fingers against the slope of his side.

"Probably," he said. "It will be a while."

It was with them a long time, the erratic flaring and the thunder never surely assignable to any one flash. It drew close enough to light the yard, the walls of the room, yet never all the way to them, moving always in stealth and sudden leaps on the clouded rim of the valley.

Later still, before Sara slept, she was thinking how each trip now left her more alone, more at risk of losing him to hazards of machinery or flesh or feeling. When she did sleep, she had been looking at the still erratically lit parallelogram of sky out the north window, thinking how rain would mist in through the screens and mix its cool after-lightning breath with the tang of dusty wire. Tonight they had slid the windows wide the first time this season.

When Ryan got up in the morning to meet the limousine, he kissed her awake long enough to hear him say, "Goodbye, Stormgirl. Kiss the kids for me."

But she overslept and, barely seeing them bathed and dressed and combed and breakfasted and launched toward school, she forgot.

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And she felt listless half the morning, left dishes on the table, didn't run, could not think where or what to begin. She took her cello out of the back of the closet and unlocked it from its case, then leaned it against the piano and laid the bow along the keyboard. It was time to start spring cleaning in earnest. But it was the late wet weather, winter dragging on in cold heavy rains, prolonging the confinement she had waited for in the fall, but now felt oppressed by.

She missed Ryan. Absurd since, if he were home, he would be at work, and she should be used to his conference trips. But his absence this morning was the palpable vacancy of the house and she drifted in it till she caught herself staring at the family-room window, seeing only glass.

She started cleaning then and didn't stop till near noon when she walked out of the house and down to the end of the cul de sac for the mail. The day was clear and the air warming.

Mrs. Francis, leaning on the mailboxes, greeted her with the fine day, and Sara asked how she was getting around.

"This—thing!" She lifted her walker, shook it. "You get old, you get spare parts."

Sara opened her mailbox.

Where had her husband gone so early, Mrs. Francis was asking, and Sara said to New York to give a paper: "Something to do with event horizons."

"Beyond me."

"Sometimes he says it's a little beyond him." Sara shuffled her envelopes: bills and coupons.

Not a thing for her, Mrs. Francis said, but she expected a letter from her daughter any day. Sara hoped it would come, she said, and said she needed to get back to cleaning. Mrs. Francis set her walker a step in the direction of her house. "You have a good time now."

Passing the Morisons' on her way back, Sara saw across the low board fence Darrell Morison hunched in the garden, setting out tomato plants. Off this term, as she was, he stayed home while Jan, his wife, ran endless statistical correlations toward her thesis. Sara admired them both, and recited the phrases Darrell once had told her from his specialty, Boethius: *Naturae rationalis individua substantia*, the philosopher's definition of a person that seemed to omit something; and then as consolation, Darrell had said, for what that might lack, *Interminabilis vitae tota simul perfecta possessio*, eternity as the mind of God knows it, a perfect possession altogether of endless life. Boethius also, he told her, had said temporality imitated eternity by binding itself to the fleeting moment, which bore a faint semblance of timelessness.

She couldn't decide whether that was profound or sad. She returned to the house and made an omelet. Ryan would saute alfalfa sprouts and mushroom slices in bacon fat, toss in avocado when the eggs were half done, sprinkle on lemon pepper and grated cheese, make it all up as he went along. Like the quantum universe, he would say, might be one way, might be another; you play it by ear, you look and see. He had invented this while he was gone last summer, sleeping in an attic and cooking for himself in the kitchen of a house belonging to some church members in Ithaca while he worked on radiotelescope data. Sara had tried but could not make it quite right, and not today either. The one thing Ryan could do and did was cook.

She sat at the breakfast bar chewing rubbery eggs and remembering the awful summer. She had burned the bottom out of a cold-pack canner, burned up a stovetop unit, the hood on the Rabbit had flipped up while she was doing forty-five on the Parkway and the insurance would not pay because she admitted she had checked the oil that morning and that made it probable she had been negligent. Put that in your endless life. She had written Ryan long letters with all the grim details and told him, "If you were my boyfriend, I'd drop you like that." But she got used to his being gone—it was simpler. "It's quieter here," she wrote him, "more orderly with you gone. Not that we don't miss you." She had almost dreaded the disruption of routine when he came back, the weight of another personality in the fine-strung web of amenity she had woven with Sharon and Alicia and Brendan. She had even come to like sleeping alone, the restful depths.

Last night, this morning, when they made love, she had felt him go out of himself or farther in, seen his face blind and abstract over her, felt herself lift, delicate and seeking, felt and heard each breath hum in her throat. They had turned and turned, the bed, the room, she wanted never to stop, she had no words, they poured force and grace back and forth, emptying and filling, wider and wider. In live remembrance, warm light sang from her shoulders to her belly.

You married a man, lived with him eighteen years and made children with him, made the love you could, which was harder, and it became daily bread and clear cold water too plain to notice though it fed your life. Then something like this, some good time out of nowhere and lighting the whole sky one moment and gone to memory the next morning, so you feared to cherish or wish it to come again. Put that into your endless life. Sara felt like a glass bowl, brimful and floating roses. She stood and felt blown apart like a dandelion.

She went back to cleaning. Mid-afternoon, not long before the girls and Brendan would be coming from school, she went to her cello again. For years since graduate school, she had played only occasionally and had not played now since last Easter in a string quartet to accompany the ward choir singing Faure's *Requiem*. Ryan had sung bass in that. Now they had begun learning the first part of *Messiah* for Christmas.

The instrument had still gleamed dustless inside its case. She sat on the piano bench, wiped the strings and tuned them, tightened the bow and snapped off a few loose hairs, stroked rosin on it, positioned the cello in the grip of her knees, arched her fingers over the neck and set the bow to the C string.

The first note struck her like a shockwave and sounded her and she stopped. Not knowing if it was joy or desolation, she wept.

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That night she turned the thermostat down to fifty-five and again left the bedroom windows open. A few days there might be, possibly a couple of weeks, the interval between furnace and air-conditioning, when the house could be open, airing.

She had told the girls and Brendan they could watch television if they kept the sound low and left no unnecessary lights on and went to bed immediately after and did not spill popcorn, and they had promised. She was so tired she probably would not wake at two or three and track down their glaring bulbs. She hugged them and asked them to remember Dad in their prayers and went up to brush her teeth and undress.

She knelt for her own prayers and began with habitual words, thanks for what she had, petitions for health, safety, guidance, peace. And broke off, unable to think what to say. It was all true and insuffi-

cient. Everything, she thought, everything I have, everything. And: I want, I want, I want I don't know what. She was a long time not saying or thinking anything, and she was not to remember getting into bed or waiting for sleep, but the dream.

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Of a room high-ceilinged with a tall, transomed door and walls bare as an abandoned schoolroom, in which she sat in a wide, too-soft bed, hugging a heavy quilted comforter around her knees, wearing a sheer nightgown, deep burgundy. In the room in profile to her, a man stood, suitably tall and dark-haired but slightly stoop-shouldered, wearing a brocaded robe, dark velvet lapels. "Alluvial" one of their voices said. His long fingers let drop a glass and it broke, and he bent to begin picking up the pieces.

How like Ryan, she thought: stopping to pick up, clean up. And she woke then still thinking how he kept everything neat but the desk in his study, which was unredeemably messy; how when the children were younger and even more disorderly, he histrionically cursed them as junior anarchists and minions of entropy.

She remembered how he had wakened her the morning before and called her Stormgirl, sappy as something inside a card, a pop song title. But she took it as a name, herself newly named.

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And slept again. And again in the morning when the children had left for school and she had cleaned the kitchen, made the bed, and vacuumed the bedroom and upstairs hall and stairs, she didn't run, and wondered where to begin. She bathed in the tub rather than showering, but without lingering, and put on snug jeans and a cotton shirt cool and almost weightless.

She walked in the still rooms and heard herself humming the phrase Ryan had picked out on the piano: the glory, the glory of the Lord.

She stopped to curl her fingers on the neck of the cello and lift the bow thinking of runs, arpeggios, double stops, measures of music, but she did not play.

Out the family-room window she could see into Morisons' yard, the bared broken earth of the garden, the tomato plants standing upright, their leaves lifted. Light warmed the ground and the day. Sashes on this side of the house had been raised. The air was moving and she thought of it moving through and between the houses, finding its own ways.

"In her study and sewing room, she went to the window and slid the sashes from both ends toward the center. The curtains stood inward with the air.

She turned to her desk where the month's accumulating bills waited to be opened and totaled and paid as far as the money would go. She should begin. She stood with the fingertips of both hands touching the cool polished wood. She felt the air move and looked toward the window. The curtain bellied into the room; its corner stroked her forearm.

She stood watching the slow wave of gauze.