Practising the Dark

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I have always practised in the dark. Everything from those first pieces in John Thompson's "Teaching Little Fingers to Play," to a repertoire of Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Debussy and the melody of that concerto for huge hands, the Rachmaninoff Third. My hands are small. Therefore it has always been necessary, before falling asleep, to practise the scales, major and minor, separated by a third, sixth and tenth, and all the arpeggios, major, minor, dominant and diminished. I no longer play the piano for real, but I still find myself practising in the air, and lately, driving Montana, I am tapping the rhythms of remembered passages on the steering wheel while Cripple Creek Road disappears into the past, and I am feeling my way over that Canyon Road known as Highway 37.

Thirty-five miles an hour around every curve and I vomit as the road straightens at the door of the Big Sky Motel. In bed I am practising again. The entire repertoire. It's always worse if I'm ill. And I realize I've been doing this since I was five. I would play the violin with two curtain rods, humming my own tunes in my softest voice. That way I could avoid the terrible squeaky phase of the beginning student of strings. Father taught violin and cello by refined methods of torture. He never allowed a moment's rest, but rather, by attaching the left hand to his left hand, he had what might be known as a finger stretching rack, and then, by taking hold of the right elbow with his right hand, he had a continuous-motion machine. It was intolerably boring. Thus I opted for piano, taught by Mother, even though she shouted and cracked knuckles with her thin, white, willowlike baton. By practising in the dark, I acquired such skill that I could reduce her to silence, holding her in rapture so that she'd forget that wretched stick. Father was my lover, which was not so boring. Mother was deranged. Not at all boring. And the music held us together, the bond of sound mixing itself with some absurd dream of greatness.
Yesterday, caught in the middle of the highway behind St. Regis High School Marching Band, I remembered Sylvia Zaremba. The band, led by a high-stepping majorette wrapped in furs, marched in perfect order, their knees knocking their chins. So many child prodigies stopping, for one hour of the day, the entire world. Even the cows came running across the field to see what was going on. Sylvia Zaremba was a seventeen-year-old concert pianist who came to town when I was eleven. Mother went crazy. Surely I could learn Mendelssohn’s “Rondo Capriccioso” when Sylvia, a child prodigy, had played Mozart’s “A Major Concerto” with a symphony orchestra at age six. She made me my first long dress, and there in the living room, before all her students’ parents, I played the Mendelssohn. But there were signs with which she was not at all pleased. I had spent the entire hour before the performance giggling hysterically in the bedroom, and the week afterwards, vomiting. The house stood silent. Mother always gave everyone a vacation after the annual recital. Then she would sleep, waking occasionally to eat, or measure the depth of her grief. I lay in the dark, the piece playing itself over and over, there at the side of the bed, or in the toilet, my spirit heaving itself upon its own invented waves of purgation.

Waking to wind and rain coming through a hole in the window at the Big Sky Motel I realize that for hours I have not been practising, and though my tongue looks like the majorette’s fur hat, I have recovered from my car sickness. I am grateful that I no longer play a real piano, and I recall how it was I lost my music. After Mother died, I began to see shapes. The notes became dots to follow. During practice hours the emerging forms would haunt me until I could not play two measures. Technique began to deteriorate. Practice hours disappeared in the wake of magnificent fantasies as language aligned itself with the shapes. I sat there weeping that I could no longer see the music. And so it was that the ethereal, abstract, virginal muse of pure sound was seduced by an earth-bound growling lover, who boomed his words from a thicket for all the world to miss.

All the shy children peer from behind the playground fence. They stand, like deer or antelope, knee-deep in grass. I ask my lover not to startle them. To go gently lest they hallucinate. They draw beautiful
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shapes and I feel the second movement of the Beethoven Pathétique in my fingers. I want to tell them about the long line, how they must learn not to breathe until the cadence and how the third, fourth and fifth fingers must sing. They must lean towards their wrists, all the fragile bones moving together, their gestures, a language for the deaf and dumb.

I am lying in a Johns-Mansville insulated attic. The silence is absolute. Even the children, their breathing rapid as animals', have fallen still. I see shapes in the aluminum foil. This morning there is an African man lying on his left arm. The right shoulder looms, cavernous, as in a Henry Moore sculpture. It is the thinness of those who have been forced not to grow. It is not a flabby thinness, or the thinness of the old. It is the thinness of bone.

November and driving the edge of a leaf. Suddenly I am in a huge wasteland. Outside the C-Bar-J Motel, six deer, thoroughly gutted, hang by their heels. I search the map for the schools, shown as dark squares with flags on top. There is a church. A dark square with a cross on top. Ten motels circle Rattlebone Lake.

“They are too poor here for fancy poetry,” Miss Collins says. And winter comes down. The ragged clouds. Snow.

Miss Collins was my first grade teacher. She was a spindly woman. Forever ill. Something bilious, we thought, given the grey, slightly jaundiced complexion. Each week she had someone perform for the class at the Red Cross Meeting.

“Ann played well this morning,” she wrote Mother. “The class especially liked ‘Witches’ Dance.’ However, Ann was sick. We gave her soda crackers but it didn’t seem to help. Therefore we have found it necessary to send her home with the school nurse. Perhaps she has been practising too hard. She continues to be unsatisfactory in Arithmetic.”
Numbers disturbed me. Undoing themselves, hanging there in the air or flowing into each other, giant amoebae ingesting my entire world, extending every part of themselves, then turning into letters, 3 becoming M, 2 . . .Z, and 10 . . .to. Upside down and sideways, floating there before me, then descending, spreading themselves across the page, random pieces of a giant puzzle.

At the Ten Spot Truck Stop, veal cutlets come with washed-out peas. I am given a real dish of lemon custard. No reason now not to make it through the storm. I am reminded of Amparo Iturbi. She came to town with the first snow. I can see her now. The long black dress. Mantilla. Circles under her eyes. In the dining room at the Crown Point Hotel she rapped on the table for service. I imagine the waitress swallowing her chewing gum. We were, after all, just a small mining town. Amparo floated on stage that night, circling and bowing, then sitting before the keys in long silence, her hands folded on her lap until she'd set the muscles in her jaw exactly right. She played de Falla's “Ritual Fire Dance,’ on bone, curling her fingers with all the pressure placed on the first knuckle above the fingernail. It was the Spanish way.

Mother bought the de Falla the next day. She began to concentrate on muscle building. There had been moments when Amparo's muscles bulged from wrist to elbow as she struck those great fortes. Lessons became exercises in weight lifting. Mother, slicing the air with her baton, raising her arm. . .count to ten. . .then dropping it. . .another count to ten. It was as bad as the motion machine. One day I slipped a disc. Mother was heartbroken; the doctor, amused, suggesting I try the controlled clarity of the youthful Mozart.

I have bought a blizzard candle and a sleeping bag for protection from the storm. I am told that if I stay in the car I'll be found. In all this space there is nothing that would harm. I note the finely strung sound of the wind. It will be hours before it breaks.

I like it when I go into a motel and there are no pictures. Right now I am happy, the walls a stark white. Clinically sterile. No ugly
lampshades, flowered drapes. Just terry towels over the windows. I sit here counting the holes in the tiled ceiling, the million tiny dots a backwards running film, the children, pushing into the wind, biting their scarves, and Mr. Morgan, the club-footed principal, tapping his way home from school.

I'm on the worst highway in America. In twenty-five miles there are seventeen crosses leading to the Weatherford Funeral Home. I pull over to the side of the road for some coffee from my thermos. A black car stops beside me. The faces leer and one looks perilously like the devil. I wonder what I'm doing out in the dark. Perhaps it's a dream. At night, I wake in any number of places. I am at the Stardust Motel but it could be the Midtown or El Centro. I walk into the closet as I try to find the bathroom. I feel my way back to bed on my hands and knees. Any second I expect to fall down a long staircase. I am not managing the dark at all well.

For weeks I have not seen a single shape. I stare into the dark, waiting. Who's this in the mirror, the bird-claw hands, terrible beak? Why does she show herself, then disappear? I must lose her from the spine, the left knee. I sit hours in the tub. The waters of forgiveness.

I am standing in a phone booth just off the highway. I have come here with my blizzard candle. Speak a little louder, please. There seems to have been an avalanche. Yes, just yesterday I saw the ghost of myself banging her fists together. A grave development, the rhythm slowly metronomic, as when Father used to play "Air on a G String" by Bach.
Father was a magician. At the annual recital he performed for Mother's audience. He would come in like an orchestra conductor, waving his baton, causing things to disappear. There were only a few tricks. Mostly with money and cards. He tried to teach them to me but it was the fingerstretching rack again. In magic you need huge hands for hiding things. He wore a tuxedo, tails and bowtie. It was the only time of the year his sleeves were rolled down, the shirt collar starched and stiff cuffs with gold cuff-links. He never looked more handsome. He was my lover.

The storm has become worse, the edges of the road meeting at the center. I am in the middle of the ocean, or a desert, everything the wind ever lifted whirling about me. The land heaves and I feel myself pulled to the left, spinning backwards, then forwards and towards the right. The whole earth opens before me as I plunge towards its heart.

I have found shelter in a library. On the map it is shown simply as a dark square. My eyes burn. I would like to devour the books. I think of the desert man who ate the scrolls, and another, who, after he had been drinking nine days, began to speak. In the middle of the night, so as not to be alone, words for the dark.

I am travelling west now. I have put on glasses for snowblindness. There is a fire on the horizon. Something more than the sun, and it startles, as if from the center, there might be voices and singing. I would like to go closer but I'm afraid, the flames ominous against the snow.

Friday, and I have settled myself at the center of the world. I am at the Shanty Motel, in Havre, Montana. To the right of my cabin, a bar, lounge, cafe and pool table. To the left, Ginger's Hairport. Up the street, the Citizens' Bank, and a block from there, a church and the hospital. The hospital looms like a medieval monastery, its cross lighting the whole scene. All night the pipeliners have been coming and going, spilling out of the bar and roaring down the alley behind me. I am content, muttering alone here in the dark.
This morning the whole world shines. Sun on the frozen reservoir, the grain bins. That’s all. The sky and lines of the hills like Pacific waves or the patterns we see on a heart screen, the rise and fall of a good beat. This is a strong heart. No abnormal thickness or thinness along the wall, the blood running clear, running hard.