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Robert Olmstead

THE HAMMOND ORGAN

HAMMOND LOVED her new office, even though it shared the plumbing wall with a men's lavatory. The office was in the oldest building on campus, spacious and high-ceiled with a lovely view of the campus and further off, the city in daylight and when she worked late, the city in moonlight. But through the wall she shared, she could hear everything. Everything. The sound of every flush. The splash of water in the sinks, the gurgling sound of the drains entering through her wall into the soil pipe and draining below. Especially that—the hollow tail-end sound of water disappearing below. But more than just water and she was not a delicate woman, she was a creative writer, but really, it was all too much.

To make matters worse, her desk, her computer and her work station were up against that same wall and nothing could be done about it because to her right was the view she loved and on the wall behind her were built-in cabinets and wooden bookcases and to her left was her office door and more bookcases. The wood was walnut, black and lustrous and now scarce and impossibly expensive to replace in a public institution.

She thought about complaining, but to whom? She'd just received tenure and the nice raise that accompanies such a promotion. With a favorable tenure decision came a new burden of responsibilities. She was expected to make critical decisions on the inner workings of the University—Planning and Budget, Personnel, Curriculum. She didn't want to be perceived as a complainer. Many of the buildings on campus were old and in need of renovation, not just hers. The allocation of resources was a constant battle, and even if the resources were available there was a coalition of alumni and faculty who were scrupulous preservationists and advocated against any change whatsoever. Tear ing out a wall and sound-proofing for the sake of noisy pipes would be an abomination. Besides, the lavatories had only recently been updated with new siphon-jet toilet bowls and to open the walls again would be an unthinkable expense. But mostly, she just couldn't bring herself to say publicly that she could hear the men going to the bathroom and would rather not. She didn't think of herself as being precious and certainly didn't want oth-
ers to think it either. She'd worked hard to gain the respect she had and in no way was she going to put that in jeopardy.

But it was becoming unbearable. As each day went by her aural acuity was intensifying. As her mind learned over and over again what it was hearing, it seemed to gain in its ability to take on more detail, seemed to reach further back along the track of time, taking on sound earlier and earlier. So it came to be that in late September she actually heard a sigh and before that, the sound of male effort.

James, her lover, was in town that weekend and she told him what was happening and he thought it was no big deal. She wouldn't have thought to say anything at all, but he seemed to be preoccupied. He was a program director where he taught and something was always near to boil. Friday night had been lovely, sad and tender and the next morning the same, but by noon their being together had not delivered him of himself and a certain melancholy had come over him.

James had been one of her outside evaluators in her search for tenure. She put him down as someone in her field she didn't know who could comment objectively on her work. In his letter he told how she was a prolific writer, as curious about the making of narrative as she was about displaying its very limitations. He told how her first novel *Misfire*, though slender, struck him as the sowing of the seeds that were coming to fruition in the as yet untitled manuscript she was working on. He wrote how for a fiction writer, she had taken on the ultimate challenge. In the most recent manuscript, she bared the structures of the form she sought to accomplish, creating fiction and dismantling fiction at the same time. She left the workings of the machinery to the outside, akin to the way architects are adorning their structures with the very pipework, ductwork and wiring that sustains them. He compared what she was doing to writers like Robert Coover on the one hand and Simon Schama on the other and William Gass wherever he was. He declared the prose to be self-conscious, but not. It was narrative, but not. It was of the mind, but not. It was about art, but not. He deemed her work to be courageous and the danger was, it might collapse, but he didn't think so because there seemed to be a strong heart at work informed by a smart brain, rigorous and with insight. The new manuscript seemed to be talking out of his own head as it trav-
eled between the sane and the afflicted, from art to science, experience to imagination, framing each in the language of letter, interview, diary and journal—private voice and public voice, voice with audience and voice without audience and audience itself often in flux. Audience was sometimes the self and audience was sometimes the self through someone else. Whatever faults he saw were faults of ambition. She demanded as much of the reader as she demanded of herself. The new work was not so cozy a read as *Misfire*. One could have said the same of the early work of William Vollman and his literary response was to begin writing a history of the western world in however many volumes James could not remember. He concluded that whatever faults he saw were born of one reading in some few days. Maybe after another reading or two, they will still be there, but his guts told him not.

...So it becomes simple for me. Advancement in the arts and sciences comes by way of new science or intuitive leap, inspired moments often borne of pure necessity. The flying buttress, the theory of relativity, free verse. Hammond is finding ways to cast what she sees. Her vita documents the range of sources she is compelled to tap, the variety of genres she wants to experience to inform her prose. This is risky business. As an artist, you have to have faith and it is clear to me that she does. In my mind, this is the kind of writer the academy needs and should support.

James also wasn’t supposed to know her the way he did because he was married. Hammond knew this and accepted it as best she could.

"Are you going to tell me what’s up or not? It’s apparent something is bothering you."

Hammond reclined on the bed in her new apartment. She’d made the move during her sabbatical year that followed tenure. James had been away much of that year, a Fulbright to Spain. They regretted the bad timing, her with a year off and him with a year abroad.

“I am fine,” he said. “Really. Just a mood.”

Hammond surely knew his moods. They could be very dark, borderline suicidal. He worshipped Hemingway and much like how clergymen reference their lives with the ages of Christ, he had a habit of saying things like, do you know what Hemingway was doing at my age? Do you know where Hemingway was right now? Recently, he’d spoken to her about a new guilt he was feel-
ing. He'd avoided the draft by going to college. He played basketball while others were being killed. It wasn't something Hemingway would have approved of. Hammond knew her way into him, though. She'd call him Baby Tuckoo. She'd say, Baby Tuckoo is discouraged by department politics. Baby Tuckoo has been battling the theorists. She'd say, Baby Tuckoo is the nicest boy and she'd take his hands in hers and travel her body.

"I know," he said. "It's stupid to even think about."

"Baby Tuckoo isn't stupid. He's a genius."

"That's nice," he said, closing his eyes and letting her take his hands between her legs. She sighed for him as she closed herself around his hand.

"Baby Tuckoo," she said. "Why haven't you kissed me, you know, down there in a long time?"

James took in his breath, held it and gave off with a long sigh of his own.

"On the Hammond organ?"

"Funny," she said throwing him back his hands. "Fine. Be that way."

James got out of bed and fished around in his trousers until he came up with cigarettes and a book of matches. That was new. The kind of thing you'd think he'd have mentioned, smoking cigarettes.

"You didn't answer my question," she said.

"I don't know. I just haven't. It's not something I ever did very much. It wasn't intentional, me not doing it, and now I guess it's just not something I do."

"I think you've talked enough and besides, you're talking in circles."

"I know."

"Do you want to tell me or not?"

"I guess not."

"But you do want to tell me. Please."

James lit a cigarette and smoked off it, something he wasn't very good at. If it was a habit, it was a new one. He kept waving at the smoke with the back of his hand, told her a silly story about a graduate student mistaking the Book of Lamentations for the Book of Laminations.

"James. What the hell is it? Tell me or go."

He stood and she thought for a moment he was going to go.
He crossed the room and opened a window, apologized for the smoke and told her, okay, he’d try to say what it was he did not understand about himself.

“It started when I killed the snake,” he said, sitting on the bed and crossing his long thin legs. “I was on a picnic one afternoon with my mother. We were going to have a cookout. We were at a state park. I was hiking about, pretending I was a cowboy. I had six-guns and a cowboy hat and a rubber knife.”

“Oh, I like that. Do you still have them?”

“No, but I say, there on the edge of the woods that day was a copperhead. It was curled up on a rock in the sun. I backed away and returned to the pavilion where my mother was cooking, but I couldn’t get it out of my head, sharing the park with a copperhead, so I went back looking for it and couldn’t find it. I had a heavy stick and suddenly I looked down and found it crawling between my legs. That really freaked me out so I killed it, but I didn’t just kill it, I went wild and hacked it up. Afterwards I had such regret. I felt like I’d lost a member of my own family. It was a strange feeling and I can’t explain it, but my mother was a very beautiful woman. I know it’s common for boys to have feelings, but my feelings, these went beyond Oedipal.”

“How far beyond?”

“I don’t know. Memory being however kind or unkind it is.”

Hammond confessed she hated her mother, hated the way she ate, the way she opened her lips like an angel fish to avoid messing her lipstick, her face like a week old cadaver, but it didn’t work. He told her to forget about it. This was all his fault and he stayed in his funk the whole weekend long and slept on the floor and when she drove him to the airport, as politely as he could he told her they were through and that’s what he’d been trying to tell her all weekend long.

“Through?” Hammond said. “What the hell is that? Here I was feeling sorry for you.”

“It’s just not there anymore. I’m sorry.”

“Great. Fine. Cool.”

“Hammond, it’s different now. It’s not the same.”

“I know what it is.”

“What.”

“It’s because now we are equals. I don’t need you like I used to. I’m not dependent. You fucker. You just can’t take it.”
“Don’t push it.”
“You’re a shit.”

“Okay. Fine. Here it is. You didn’t tell me your own university published Misfire. Jesus, Hammond, your own university publishes you and you have the balls to ask me to rubber stamp it. Were you that desperate to get tenure? How do you think I feel? My name might not be much and I know I ain’t no saint, but how do you think that looks?”

“You knew that. I told you. I sent you a copy of the damn book. Why didn’t you say something then?”

“Say something? Say what?”

“That manuscript had to be accepted just like any other publisher. What’s wrong with that?”

“Yeah right, and I got a bridge I’d like to sell them. The answer to your question is, because it’s ugly Hammond. It stinks.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Draw your own conclusions.”

In October came the sound of trousers dropping, buckles unbuckling, buttons unbuttoning, and zippers unzipping. By then Hammond had stopped crying hot angry tears and now cried because she was sad. At Thanksgiving her mother warned her about gaining the world and losing her soul. Warned her also about gaining weight. She jotted what he said into her journal and when she returned for the last weeks of the semester she could hear the pivot and latch of the stall doors and by semester’s end she could hear footsteps, the swish of door closing, the sproing of the closer being loaded with compression, and even back to the footsteps in the hall.

Outside was cold with the confection of an early snow. It was late in the day, almost dark. Hammond tapped at her front tooth with a #2 pencil, the phone receiver pressed between her shoulder and the side of her face. She was on hold. She had cropped her hair and started painting her fingernails. She was planning on making herself available again. James had taken away a part of her, but she was strong. On her desk was her journal and a yellow legal pad. She was writing again too, starting with the words of her mother.

“Yes. This is Professor Hammond. I am still here.”

“You said you want maintenance to come listen to your wall.”
The young woman on the other end, her voice was so very loud it almost hurt. Hammond could hear papers being shuffled, could hear another faint whispery conversation on the line overlapping her own. The young woman then yelled to someone named Jimmy, telling him, yes, that was the message, and told Hammond someone would be over to listen to her wall.

"About time," Hammond said, setting the receiver in its cradle, doodling Jimmy on her legal pad, rewriting it to be James, sketching a heart and an arrow. She smiled. It didn’t hurt. She encouraged her students to doodle. They even did a doodle exercise together in class. James, she thought, tsk, tsk, tsk.

Within an hour there was a knock at her door. She’d heard him coming and was already up and turning the knob. He was young and tall, the cuffs of his shirt falling above his bony wrists, a tool belt slung over his shoulder. His name was stitched over his breast pocket. He was uncomfortable. Jimmy, she thought, like a little James. He told her he was sort of new and not sure of what she wanted.

"The message was kind of strange," he said.

Hammond told him she simply wanted him to sit at her desk and listen quietly and it would be crystal clear. He shrugged and sat down. As classes were over and it was late in the day, it would be a little while, so they waited, Jimmy at the desk and Hammond staring out the window, her arms crossed as the office went quiet.

"We’re not supposed to talk to professors," Jimmy whispered, "but can I ask you a question?"

"Not supposed to talk to professors?" she said, still looking out the window.

"No."

"What’s your question?"

"What do you teach?"

"Fiction," Hammond whispered. "I’m a fiction writer."

A darkness was coming early to the campus, bad weather that’d been predicted and was now coming to be.

"You write stories that aren’t true?"

"Yes," she hissed, as her window clattered in its frame and went silent.

"What’s the other one? I forget."

"Non-fiction," she said, her head cocked to the side. "Listen, now."
"I hear the wind," he said.

Hammond kept looking out the window. Sure enough, a strong wind was passing by, making swoops of ghostly noise. It was the kind of wind that hollowed out the air behind it, leaving places where there was nothing to breathe. Trees began to bend and hold to their bend and then snap upright as if come to attention. The window clattered again in its frame. It was a quick and furious storm, a finality with every gust. Loving storms was something Hammond felt she was supposed to do, but this one was scaring her. In a distant part of town, she could see blocks of light flicker and extinguish.

"I knew you were a writer. I write too," Jimmy said. "I read your book. I really liked it and I have wanted to meet you. I'm a poet, myself."

A janitor who has read my book. A janitor who writes poetry. Hammond's nerves were going into a tangle. She couldn't tell if she belonged in this life. She could say back every smart thing she'd ever heard or read about being a writer. She could tell her classes what Flannery O'Connor said and Willa Cather and Emily Dickinson, but she couldn't think of a single thing she'd ever said that was hers and hers alone. At that moment she wondered if she were the real thing, if she, Hammond, had anything to say to this poet. He meant me, Hammond thought. It's ugly and it stinks. He meant me.

Jimmy's beeper sounded and without asking, he picked up the phone and called Physical Plant. He said he'd be right over and explained to Hammond they were experiencing power surges, but Hammond was hearing footsteps and that stirred her. She crossed the room to where he sat and put her hand on his shoulder, so he would not rise up from her chair.

"Listen," she said and he did.

"Oh, I see what you mean. Guy's taking a whiz and you can hear it."

"It's as if he is urinating on my wall," she said, her voice thin and plaintive. Her hand moved higher on his shoulder and she leaned into her extended arm.

"Well, I don't know if I'd go that far. It is his wall too."

Then the lights went out all over and in the darkness the sound became intense, like a faucet or a hose. It was all so stupid.
She hadn't written a decent story since she was tenured and here she was in darkness at the breaking point with a janitor who wrote poetry listening to a man pee. She gripped at Jimmy's shoulder, thought of him reading her book and she began to cry.

"Hey, it's okay. I'll fix it," he said, standing to her, comforting her, closing her up in his arms as she leaned to his chest.

"I will help you," she whispered into his shirt.

As he held her, as she let him, she wondered what he must be thinking. She thought to stand erect, to apologize, to make a strange off-hand comment, to be thought of as a little crazy rather than in need, but she didn’t want to move, wanted to stay just so forever. She wondered if his poetry might be any good. It was he who broke the hold, he who put his hands on her shoulders and sat her down in her chair.

"There now," he said, wheeling her forward and taking a flashlight from his tool belt. "You sit right here and I'll go have a look at what the big problem is."

She wanted to say, no, don't leave me alone in the dark. I am afraid. I want your arms around me again, like we are strangers and you have asked me to dance, like in a smoky bar or a harvest festival on main street, like a wedding. Like we have a mutual acquaintance and that is all. Like we had just read the same book. But she didn't. She wiped at her tears and smiled up at him in the darkness and listened to him walk out her door and down the hall. Like a bedroom, she thought, and he has gone for a glass of milk or the sound of an intruder, something in the night and he is between me and whatever it is. She picked up her pencil.

She heard the door closer absorb energy, heard his footsteps on the tiles as the energy released and the door swept shut, heard the button on the flashlight being pushed and heard the sound that light makes when it crosses darkness and suddenly she felt her body under her desk to be bathed in light.

She gasped at how warm and white and spectral. It was steady. It filtered through the material of her skirt and flared around her hips. She didn’t move as the light poured into her body from under her desk, until it seemed to be like hands gently parting her knees and slowly spreading her legs. The light flared higher, but suddenly she was patient. In her fingers, she found her pencil.
She looked down again to see the light coming off her right hip and her left hip, looked down and saw it glowing inside her red skirt. It is elementary, she thought, without light there is no color. Without instrument there is no symbol. Without the artist there is no accord.

She reached down and touched at the material, felt its heat and slowly spread her legs until she couldn’t spread them any further. Her heart seemed to pause between beats. She wrote, *like a diver, like a suicide*. She rolled back in her chair, her legs sliding along the inside walls of her desk and inside those walls were drawers and drawers of manuscript. When far enough to do such a thing, she reached down and began to ease the material up her thighs until it was tucked to her waist and there was the glow of her thin underpants and she did not recognize them as her own.

“Jimmy,” she whispered.

“Yes,” he called back, the breath of his words carried on the light to between her legs and she thought, so what is written might return to what was carried on the breath. She leaned forward, marked an ellipsis and wrote …*Back into the dark. Back to coolness. Back to heat. Back to a time when darkness was first painted with light*. She set down her pencil.

“Jimmy,” she said, hooking her thumbs in the waist of her underpants, raising in a moment and sliding them to her knees where they slid down her shins. She spread her legs again, spread them wide and whispered his name.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes.”

She held onto the edge of her desk and began pulling herself deep into the light. She let her knees out to slide along inside as she pulled herself forward.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes.”

She could feel the heat inside, could feel the light to be holy and descended, but knew it wasn’t, knew it was just a light, a beautiful light between her legs. She pulled to where the sharp edge of her desk touched below her ribs. She wanted to get to him, wanted to be where he was.

“Jimmy,” she said.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes. I am here.”

“I’m coming,” she said. “I’m coming.”