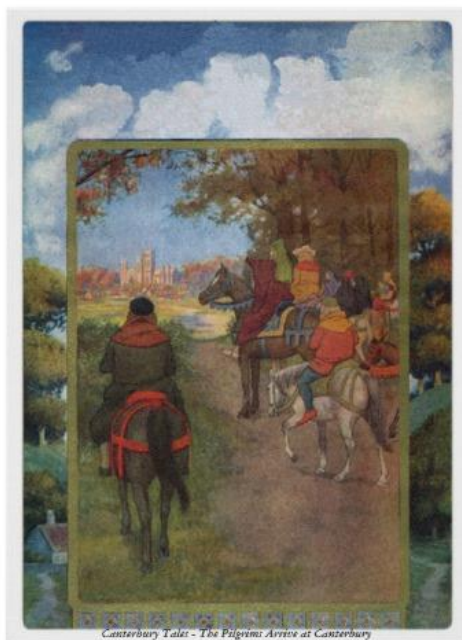


QUARTERLY PRESS REVIEW

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Thoreau Goes Digital

by *Tracy Fullerton*

In April the director of the Game Innovation Lab at the University of Southern California submitted a grant proposal to the National Endowment for the Arts. The NEA announced that the project had been awarded \$40,000.

USC's Game Innovation Lab aims to build a game that simulates the experiment made by Thoreau at Walden Pond in 1845–47: to live as simply and wisely as he might, as a part of nature and not apart from it. Walden, a game will take place in a digital environment but will embody Thoreau's message of simplicity and self-reliance in nature, setting as a goal for the player to subsist in the virtual woods but not to become a slave to the work of subsistence.

The world of Walden, a game will consist of the area bordering the pond where Thoreau built his home, grew a bean field, gathered berries, studied, and lived. The player will be able to do all these things, learning about the various plants and animals that Thoreau himself made reference to in Walden and in his journals. While the player's clock will be compressed for game time, the passing hours and changing seasons will all be reflected in the landscape of the game.

The types of resources that are in the game are derived from the system Thoreau lays out in chapter one, "Economy": "The necessities of life for man in this climate may, accurately enough, be distributed under the several heads of Food, Shelter, Clothing,

and Fuel; for not till we have secured these are we prepared to entertain the true problems of life with freedom and a prospect of success."

Following Thoreau, we have called the four basic resources of the game Food, Fuel, Shelter, and Clothing. The player must work to keep these basic resources viable by finding, making, catching, or purchasing them. Failing that, he will faint from lack of "vital heat."

The other chapters of Thoreau's book, however, deal not with basic resources of survival but with the "true problems" and the "adventure" of life, and we have named our other, less practical resources after several of these chapters: Reading, Sounds, Solitude, and Visitors. While the basic resources must be fulfilled, players will truly advance in the game only by realizing that balance is the key to this particular system.

For example, players will not be greatly rewarded for growing more beans or catching more fish than necessary – the goal here is to provide only enough sustenance for one's survival and to spend the rest of one's time in active contemplation and appreciation of the virtual environment. Reading, walking in the woods, enjoying the solitude, listening to the sounds of both nature and encroaching civilization – the wood choppers, the whistle of the railroad – will all increase the player's relationship to "nature" and allow him to locate the special opportunities that will fill his journal, not his pocketbook, and become the basis for his own version of the Walden manuscript.

Finding or cultivating ideas is the heart of the game. Unlike basic needs, which can be actively found, made, or purchased, or even natural specimens, which can be discovered, ideas are linked to the player's overall balance with nature.

When the player is in balance, the woods themselves seem rich with ideas, sparkling like the native artifacts that Thoreau was so

good at finding. These “arrowhead moments,” as the development team calls them, are key thoughts culled from the text of *Walden* that are the highlights and the narrative thread of the game. Like the arrowheads of a long-past civilization that Thoreau found while digging his cellar at Walden, his writings will be embedded in this virtual landscape as “durable relics” of another life, one that may point the way for the player’s own meandering philosophical sojourn. ♦

Worried Sisters

by *Sigrid Nunez*

Our sister has always caused us grief. A dyspeptic baby; a nervous, accident-prone little girl, abnormally (so we, at least, thought, even if the doctor pooh-poohed this) sensitive to germs. Sneezing and hacking through every winter. (And where we lived winters were long.) Everything went into her mouth. Take your eyes off her one instant and she’d surely hang or choke or poison herself. Twice it ended in the emergency room. It was all we could do to pull her through childhood. Not a lovable child, but we loved her, of course: she was our sister.

As she grew bigger her problems grew too. She might have been a difficult, clumsy little girl, but at least she was happy. In her teens, she was never happy. The beauty of the family, to her own eyes she was grotesque. She tortured her hair till it began to fall out, tortured her blemishes so that they left tiny scars. She ate too much, and then too little. Grew fat, grew thin, but of course never thin enough. Once, she punched a mirror into shards. Tears at the drop of a hat. Rage at the merest suggestion of criticism. Countless absences from school. Not normal: this time, the doctor agreed. Now there would always be doctors in her life, and medications, new kinds of which kept coming on the market but none of which seemed to help.

She wanted to be an artist – but why put it that way? Were we out to destroy her? She didn’t want to be an artist, she was an artist. And it was true that she won a full scholarship to art school, that soon after graduation she was awarded a prestigious young-artist’s prize. But after this, encouraging signs were few. We could see for ourselves what a hard life it was, especially for one as

sensitive to rejection and failure as she was. How would our baby ever survive?

We tried to be supportive, turning the other cheek when she lashed out. We, with our ordinary lives and concerns – we who listened to the wrong bands and read the wrong books and made the mistake of calling paintings pictures – we could hardly be expected to understand her: nothing to do with blood. She often seemed just one long nose of disapproval. We confess that at times she scared us. In those days she affected a drastic look, always in black, her dyed-black hair stiffened into porcupinelike quills that said back off, or we'll shoot. She accused us of not caring whether she became a famous artist or not – and what could we say, since it was true?

Nobody was more selfish or narcissistic than the male artist, she always said. But that was the only kind of man she went for, and always so recklessly that when the relationship fell apart she fell apart too. And then it was just as it had been when she was a child: she had to be watched every minute.

When she turned forty she kept a promise she had made to herself at thirty: she gave up her studio and stopped making art. She took a job as a fund-raiser for a small local museum. Though we would never have told her so, this change gave us hope. For the first time, she began dating someone who was not an egotistical young buck of an artist but a soft-spoken man a few years older than she, who worked for a company that sold office furniture. We could see how much our sister wanted things to work out. She tried not to compare her new boyfriend too much with the other more exciting men she had been with, and to temper her disdain for his job. But the thought that she had settled for this man out of fear that she couldn't do better tormented her. He had no conversation, and certain personal habits that had always annoyed her turned out to be more than

she could bear. One day she found a nail clipper and a pile of dirty toenails on the coffee table.

Although she was sure she had made the right decision, the man was no sooner out of her life than she fell into her worst depression ever. Yet another new drug had recently become available, and her doctor urged her to try it. To everyone's surprise, it worked. Before our eyes, our sister passed from frantic despair to ordinary sadness. She got up every day and went to work, she ate, she slept, she went out with friends, like any normal unhappy person.

A year passed, during which we caught up on our sleep and our reading, finished various projects, and played with our grandchildren, and then one day our sister ran into her old boyfriend on her way home from work. Now they are back together again. In fact, she says, they have never gotten along so well. The things that bothered her the first time around? Those habits that took such a toll on her nerves? They now roll right off her back. He is no longer a man who never has anything to say; he is the strong silent type.

We see. We knew that this was one of the effects of the miracle drug: a mellowing effect, enabling the depressive for the first time in her life to take daily annoyances and simple frustrations in stride. Not till now, however, did we understand that another effect of the drug was to protect the depressive from this very knowledge. Not being medicated ourselves, and knowing our sister as we do, we can see clearly that if she were not taking the drug her feelings for this man would be the same as they were before. We know it's the pills talking when she tells us how much she wants to get married.

We have discussed the matter between ourselves, but never with our sister. We don't want her to be alone, but we are troubled by the thought of her marrying someone that she would never

agree to marry if she were not on the medication. We don't like to think what might happen if, for some reason, she were to stop taking it. We are relieved that at least she is past having children. No children will suffer, whatever happens. But the man in question is a fine, decent human being whom we have always liked, and we are uncomfortable with the idea of his making such a life-changing decision when he is lacking all the information.

Together we compose a letter to the columnist for our local newspaper who answers questions from readers in various moral quandaries. We explain that the doctor has said there is no reason our sister shouldn't be able to stay on the medication for the rest of her life. But we have also heard of studies that say this might not be possible; the medication could lose its effect over time, or staying on it for too long might turn out to be in some way harmful. This, now, has become our new worry. We take our responsibilities seriously, but we don't know what is the right thing to do, whether to speak now or forever hold our peace. We do not sign our real names, of course, but rather, Her Loving Sisters. ♦

Our Place in the Universe

by *Alan Lightman*

My most vivid encounter with the vastness of nature occurred years ago on the Aegean Sea. My wife and I had chartered a sailboat for a two-week holiday in the Greek islands. After setting out from Piraeus, we headed south and hugged the coast, which we held three or four miles to our port. In the thick summer air, the distant shore appeared as a hazy beige ribbon – not entirely solid, but a reassuring line of reference. With binoculars, we could just make out the glinting of houses, fragments of buildings.

Then we passed the tip of Cape Sounion and turned west toward Hydra. Within a couple of hours, both the land and all other boats had disappeared. Looking around in a full circle, all we could see was water, extending out and out in all directions until it joined with the sky. I felt insignificant, misplaced, a tiny odd trinket in a cavern of ocean and air.

Naturalists, biologists, philosophers, painters, and poets have labored to express the qualities of this strange world that we find ourselves in. Some things are prickly, others are smooth. Some are round, some jagged. Luminescent or dim. Mauve colored. Pitter-patter in rhythm. Of all these aspects of things, none seems more immediate or vital than *size*. Large versus small. Consciously and unconsciously, we measure our physical size against the dimensions of other people, against animals, trees, oceans, mountains. As brainy as we think ourselves to be, our bodily size, our bigness, our simple volume and bulk are what we first present

to the world. Somewhere in our fathoming of the cosmos, we must keep a mental inventory of plain size and scale, going from atoms to microbes to humans to oceans to planets to stars. And some of the most impressive additions to that inventory have occurred at the high end. Simply put, the cosmos has gotten larger and larger. At each new level of distance and scale, we have had to contend with a different conception of the world that we live in.

The prize for exploring the greatest distance in space goes to a man named Garth Illingworth, who works in a ten-by-fifteen-foot office at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Illingworth studies galaxies so distant that their light has traveled through space for more than 13 billion years to get here. His office is packed with tables and chairs, bookshelves, computers, scattered papers, issues of *Nature*, and a small refrigerator and a microwave to fuel research that can extend into the wee hours of the morning.

Like most professional astronomers these days, Illingworth does not look directly through a telescope. He gets his images by remote control – in his case, quite remote. He uses the Hubble Space Telescope, which orbits Earth once every ninety-seven minutes, high above the distorting effects of Earth's atmosphere. Hubble takes digital photographs of galaxies and sends the images to other orbiting satellites, which relay them to a network of earthbound antennae; these, in turn, pass the signals on to the Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Maryland. From there the data is uploaded to a secure website that Illingworth can access from a computer in his office.

The most distant galaxy Illingworth has seen so far goes by the name UDFj-39546284 and was documented in early 2011. This galaxy is about 100,000,000,000,000,000,000 miles away from Earth, give or take. It appears as a faint red blob against the speckled night of the distant universe – red because the light has

been stretched to longer and longer wavelengths as the galaxy has made its lonely journey through space for billions of years. The actual color of the galaxy is blue, the color of young, hot stars, and it is twenty times smaller than our galaxy, the Milky Way. UDFj-39546284 was one of the first galaxies to form in the universe.

“That little red dot is hellishly far away,” Illingworth told me recently. At sixty-five, he is a friendly bear of a man, with a ruddy complexion, thick strawberry-blond hair, wire-rimmed glasses, and a broad smile. “I sometimes think to myself: What would it be like to be out there, looking around?”

One measure of the progress of human civilization is the increasing scale of our maps. A clay tablet dating from about the twenty-fifth century B.C. found near what is now the Iraqi city of Kirkuk depicts a river valley with a plot of land labeled as being 354 *iku* (about thirty acres) in size. In the earliest recorded cosmologies, such as the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, from around 1500 B.C., the oceans, the continents, and the heavens were considered finite, but there were no scientific estimates of their dimensions. The early Greeks, including Homer, viewed Earth as a circular plane with the ocean enveloping it and Greece at the center, but there was no understanding of scale. In the early sixth century B.C., the Greek philosopher Anaximander, whom historians consider the first mapmaker, and his student Anaximenes proposed that the stars were attached to a giant crystalline sphere. But again there was no estimate of its size.

The first large object ever accurately measured was Earth, accomplished in the third century B.C. by Eratosthenes, a geographer who ran the Library of Alexandria. From travelers, Eratosthenes had heard the intriguing report that at noon on the summer solstice, in the town of Syene, due south of Alexandria, the sun casts no shadow at the bottom of a deep well. Evidently

the sun is directly overhead at that time and place. (Before the invention of the clock, noon could be defined at each place as the moment when the sun was highest in the sky, whether that was exactly vertical or not.) Eratosthenes knew that the sun was not overhead at noon in Alexandria. In fact, it was tipped 7.2 degrees from the vertical, or about one fiftieth of a circle – a fact he could determine by measuring the length of the shadow cast by a stick planted in the ground. That the sun could be directly overhead in one place and not another was due to the curvature of Earth. Eratosthenes reasoned that if he knew the distance from Alexandria to Syene, the full circumference of the planet must be about fifty times that distance. Traders passing through Alexandria told him that camels could make the trip to Syene in about fifty days, and it was known that a camel could cover one hundred stadia (almost eleven and a half miles) in a day. So the ancient geographer estimated that Syene and Alexandria were about 570 miles apart. Consequently, the complete circumference of Earth he figured to be about 50×570 miles, or 28,500 miles. This number was within 15 percent of the modern measurement, amazingly accurate considering the imprecision of using camels as odometers.

As ingenious as they were, the ancient Greeks were not able to calculate the size of our solar system. That discovery had to wait for the invention of the telescope, nearly two thousand years later. In 1672, the French astronomer Jean Richer determined the distance from Earth to Mars by measuring how much the position of the latter shifted against the background of stars from two different observation points on Earth. The two points were Paris (of course) and Cayenne, French Guiana. Using the distance to Mars, astronomers were also able to compute the distance from Earth to the sun, approximately 100 million miles.

A few years later, Isaac Newton managed to estimate the

distance to the nearest stars. (Only someone as accomplished as Newton could have been the first to perform such a calculation and have it go almost unnoticed among his other achievements.) If one assumes that the stars are similar objects to our sun, equal in intrinsic luminosity, Newton asked, how far away would our sun have to be in order to appear as faint as nearby stars? Writing his computations in a spidery script, with a quill dipped in the ink of oak galls, Newton correctly concluded that the nearest stars are about 100,000 times the distance from Earth to the sun, about 10 trillion miles away. Newton's calculation is contained in a short section of his *Principia* titled simply "On the distance of the stars."

Newton's estimate of the distance to nearby stars was larger than any distance imagined before in human history. Even today, nothing in our experience allows us to relate to it. The fastest most of us have traveled is about 500 miles per hour, the cruising speed of a jet. If we set out for the nearest star beyond our solar system at that speed, it would take us about 5 million years to reach our destination. If we traveled in the fastest rocket ship ever manufactured on Earth, the trip would last 100,000 years, at least a thousand human life spans.

But even the distance to the nearest star is dwarfed by the measurements made in the early twentieth century by Henrietta Leavitt, an astronomer at the Harvard College Observatory. In 1912, she devised a new method for determining the distances to faraway stars. Certain stars, called Cepheid variables, were known to oscillate in brightness. Leavitt discovered that the cycle times of such stars are closely related to their intrinsic luminosities. More luminous stars have longer cycles. Measure the cycle time of such a star and you know its intrinsic luminosity. Then, by comparing its intrinsic luminosity with how bright it appears in the sky, you can infer its distance, just as you could gauge the distance to an approaching car at night if you knew the wattage of its headlights.

Cepheid variables are scattered throughout the cosmos. They serve as cosmic distance signs in the highway of space.

Using Leavitt's method, astronomers were able to determine the size of the Milky Way, a giant congregation of about 200 billion stars. To express such mind-boggling sizes and distances, twentieth-century astronomers adopted a new unit called the light-year, the distance that light travels in a year – about 6 trillion miles. The nearest stars are several light-years away. The diameter of the Milky Way has been measured at about 100,000 light-years. In other words, it takes a ray of light 100,000 years to travel from one side of the Milky Way to the other.

There are galaxies beyond our own. They have names like Andromeda (one of the nearest), Sculptor, Messier 87, Malin 1, IC 1101. The average distance between galaxies, again determined by Leavitt's method, is about twenty galactic diameters, or 2 million light-years. To a giant cosmic being leisurely strolling through the universe and not limited by distance or time, galaxies would appear as illuminated mansions scattered about the dark countryside of space. As far as we know, galaxies are the largest objects in the cosmos. If we sorted the long inventory of material objects in nature by size, we would start with subatomic particles like electrons and end up with galaxies.

Over the past century, astronomers have been able to probe deeper and deeper into space, looking out to distances of hundreds of millions of light-years and farther. A question naturally arises: Could the physical universe be unending in size? That is, as we build bigger and bigger telescopes sensitive to fainter and fainter light, will we continue to see objects farther and farther away – like the third emperor of the Ming Dynasty, Yongle, who surveyed his new palace in the Forbidden City and walked from room to room to room, never reaching the end?

Here we must take into account a curious relationship between

distance and time. Because light travels at a fast (186,000 miles per second) but not infinite speed, when we look at a distant object in space we must remember that a significant amount of time has passed between the emission of the light and the reception at our end. The image we see is what the object looked like when it emitted that light. If we look at an object 186,000 miles away, we see it as it appeared one second earlier; at 1,860,000 miles away, we see it as it appeared ten seconds earlier; and so on. For extremely distant objects, we see them as they were millions or billions of years in the past.

Now the second curiosity. Since the late 1920s we have known that the universe is expanding, and that as it does so it is thinning out and cooling. By measuring the current rate of expansion, we can make good estimates of the moment in the past when the expansion began – the Big Bang – which was about 13.7 billion years ago, a time when no planets or stars or galaxies existed and the entire universe consisted of a fantastically dense nugget of pure energy. No matter how big our telescopes, we cannot see beyond the distance light has traveled since the Big Bang. Farther than that, and there simply hasn't been enough time since the birth of the universe for light to get from there to here. This giant sphere, the maximum distance we can see, is only the *observable* universe. But the universe could extend far beyond that.

In his office in Santa Cruz, Garth Illingworth and his colleagues have mapped out and measured the cosmos to the edge of the observable universe. They have reached out almost as far as the laws of physics allow. All that exists in the knowable universe – oceans and sky; planets and stars; pulsars, quasars, and dark matter; distant galaxies and clusters of galaxies; and great clouds of star-forming gas – has been gathered within the cosmic sensorium gauged and observed by human beings.

“Every once in a while,” says Illingworth, “I think: By God, we

are studying things that we can never physically touch. We sit on this miserable little planet in a midsize galaxy and we can characterize most of the universe. It is astonishing to me, the immensity of the situation, and how to relate to it in terms we can understand.”

The idea of Mother Nature has been represented in every culture on Earth. But to what extent is the new universe, vastly larger than anything conceived of in the past, part of *nature*? One wonders how connected Illingworth feels to this astoundingly large cosmic terrain, to the galaxies and stars so distant that their images have taken billions of years to reach our eyes. Are the little red dots on his maps part of the same landscape that Wordsworth and Thoreau described, part of the same environment of mountains and trees, part of the same cycle of birth and death that orders our lives, part of our physical and emotional conception of the world we live in? Or are such things instead digitized abstractions, silent and untouchable, akin to us only in their (hypothesized) makeup of atoms and molecules? And to what extent are we human beings, living on a small planet orbiting one star among billions of stars, part of that same nature?

The heavenly bodies were once considered divine, made of entirely different stuff than objects on Earth. Aristotle argued that all matter was constituted from four elements: earth, fire, water, and air. A fifth element, ether, he reserved for the heavenly bodies, which he considered immortal, perfect, and indestructible. It wasn't until the birth of modern science, in the seventeenth century, that we began to understand the similarity of heaven and Earth. In 1610, using his new telescope, Galileo noted that the sun had dark patches and blemishes, suggesting that the heavenly bodies are not perfect. In 1687, Newton proposed a universal law of gravity that would apply equally to the fall of an apple from a tree and to the orbits of planets around the sun. Newton then

went further, suggesting that all the laws of nature apply to phenomena in the heavens as well as on Earth. In later centuries, scientists used our understanding of terrestrial chemistry and physics to estimate how long the sun could continue shining before depleting its resources of energy; to determine the chemical composition of stars; to map out the formation of galaxies.

Yet even after Galileo and Newton, there remained another question: Were living things somehow different from rocks and water and stars? Did animate and inanimate matter differ in some fundamental way? The “vitalists” claimed that animate matter had some special essence, an intangible spirit or soul, while the “mechanists” argued that living things were elaborate machines and obeyed precisely the same laws of physics and chemistry as did inanimate material. In the late nineteenth century, two German physiologists, Adolf Eugen Fick and Max Rubner, each began testing the mechanistic hypothesis by painstakingly tabulating the energies required for muscle contraction, body heat, and other physical activities and comparing these energies against the chemical energy stored in food. Each gram of fat, carbohydrate, and protein had its energy equivalent. Rubner concluded that the amount of energy used by a living creature was exactly equal to the energy it consumed in its food. Living things were to be viewed as complex arrangements of biological pulleys and levers, electric currents, and chemical impulses. Our bodies are made of the same atoms and molecules as stones, water, and air.

And yet many had a lingering feeling that human beings were somehow separate from the rest of nature. Such a view is nowhere better illustrated than in the painting *Tallulah Falls* (1841), by George Cooke, an artist associated with the Hudson River School. Although this group of painters celebrated nature, they

also believed that human beings were set apart from the natural world. Cooke's painting depicts tiny human figures standing on a small promontory above a deep canyon. The people are dwarfed by tree-covered mountains, massive rocky ledges, and a waterfall pouring down to the canyon below. Not only insignificant in size compared with their surroundings, the human beings are mere witnesses to a scene they are not part of and never could be. Just a few years earlier, Ralph Waldo Emerson had published his famous essay "Nature," an appreciation of the natural world that nonetheless held humans separate from nature, at the very least in the moral and spiritual domain: "Man is fallen; nature is erect."

Today, with various back-to-nature movements attempting to resist the dislocations brought about by modernity, and with our awareness of Earth's precarious environmental state ever increasing, many people feel a new sympathy with the natural world on this planet. But the gargantuan cosmos beyond remains remote. We might understand at some level that those tiny points of light in the night sky are similar to our sun, made of atoms identical to those in our bodies, and that the cavern of outer space extends from our galaxy of stars to other galaxies of stars, to distances that would take billions of light years to traverse. We might understand these discoveries in intellectual terms, but they are baffling abstractions, even disturbing, like the notion that each of us once was the size of a dot, without mind or thought. Science has vastly expanded the scale of our cosmos, but our emotional reality is still limited by what we can touch with our bodies in the time span of our lives. George Berkeley, the eighteenth-century Irish philosopher, argued that the entire cosmos is a construct of our minds, that there is no material reality outside our thoughts. As a scientist, I cannot accept that belief. At the emotional and psychological level, however, I can have some sympathy with Berkeley's views. Modern science has

revealed a world as far removed from our bodies as colors are from the blind.

Very recent scientific findings have added yet another dimension to the question of our place in the cosmos. For the first time in the history of science, we are able to make plausible estimates of the rate of occurrence of life in the universe. In March 2009, NASA launched a spacecraft called *Kepler* whose mission was to search for planets orbiting in the "habitable zone" of other stars. The habitable zone is the region in which a planet's surface temperature is not so cold as to freeze water and not so hot as to boil it. For many reasons, biologists and chemists believe that liquid water is required for the emergence of life, even if that life may be very different from life on Earth. Dozens of candidates for such planets have been found, and we can make a rough preliminary calculation that something like 3 percent of all stars are accompanied by a potentially life-sustaining planet. The totality of living matter on Earth – humans and animals, plants, bacteria, and pond scum – makes up 0.00000001 percent of the mass of the planet. Combining this figure with the results from the *Kepler* mission, and assuming that all potentially life-sustaining planets do indeed have life, we can estimate that the fraction of stuff in the visible universe that exists in living form is something like 0.0000000000000001 percent, or one millionth of one billionth of 1 percent. If some cosmic intelligence created the universe, life would seem to have been only an afterthought. And if life emerges by random processes, vast amounts of lifeless material are needed for each particle of life. Such numbers cannot help but bear upon the question of our significance in the universe.

Decades ago, when I was sailing with my wife in the Aegean Sea, in the midst of unending water and sky, I had a slight inkling of infinity. It was a sensation I had not experienced before, accompanied by feelings of awe, fear, sublimity, disorientation,

alienation, and disbelief. I set a course for 255°, trusting in my compass – a tiny disk of painted numbers with a sliver of rotating metal – and hoped for the best. In a few hours, as if by magic, a pale ocher smidgen of land appeared dead ahead, a thing that drew closer and closer, a place with houses and beds and other human beings. ♦

War Dogs

by *Aleksandar Hemon*

My family's first and only dog arrived in the spring of 1991. That April, my sister drove with her new boyfriend to Novi Sad, a town in northern Serbia more than a hundred miles from Sarajevo, where there was an Irish-setter breeder she'd somehow tracked down. In her early twenties, my sister was still living with our parents, but she'd long asserted her unimpeachable right to do whatever she felt like. Thus, without even consulting Mama and Tata, with the money she'd saved from her modeling gigs, she bought a gorgeous, blazingly auburn Irish setter puppy. Tata was shocked – city dogs were self-evidently useless, a resplendent Irish setter even more so – and unconvincingly demanded that she return him immediately. Mama offered some predictable rhetorical resistance to yet another creature she would care about, after a couple of cats she'd had to mourn, but it was clear she fell in love with the dog on the spot. We named him Mek.

In a small city like Sarajevo, where people are tightly interconnected and no one can live in isolation, all experiences ended up shared. Just as Mek joined our family, my best friend, Veba, who lived across the street from us, acquired a dog himself, a German shepherd named Don. Veba's father, a low-ranking officer of the Yugoslav People's Army, was working at a military warehouse near Sarajevo where a guard dog had given birth to a litter of puppies. Veba drove over and picked the slowest, clumsiest puppy, as he knew that, if they were to be destroyed,

that one would be the first to go.

Veba had been my sister's first boyfriend and the only one I'd ever really liked. We became inseparable, particularly after we started a band together. I was no longer living with my parents but often came home for food and family time. Veba and I would walk with Mek and Don by the river, or sit on a bench and watch them roll in the grass, smoking and talking about music and books, girls and movies, while our dogs gnawed playfully at each other's throats. I don't know how dogs really become friends, but Mek and Don were as close friends as Veba and I were.

Much of the summer of 1991 I spent in Kiev, where I managed to be present for the demise of the Soviet Union and Ukraine's declaration of independence. That same summer, the war in Croatia progressed rapidly from skirmishes to massacres, with the Yugoslav People's Army's completely destroying a town called Vukovar. When I returned from Ukraine at the end of August, there was no fighting yet in Sarajevo – the siege would commence the following spring – but the war had already settled into people's minds: fear, confusion, and drugs reigned. I had no money, so a friend of mine offered me hack work on a porn magazine (he thought that people would want distraction from the oncoming disaster), but I declined, because I didn't want bad sex writing (as though there were any other kind) to be the last thing I'd done if I were to be killed in the war. I packed a carful of books and moved up to our cabin on a mountain called Jahorina to read as many thick classical novels as possible (and write a slim volume of muddled stories) before the war consigned everything and all to death and oblivion. If I was going down, I was going down reading (and writing).

I stayed in the mountains from September to December. I read *War and Peace* and Kafka's letters; I wrote stuff full of madness, death, and wordplay; I listened to music while staring at the

embers in our fireplace; I chopped wood. At night, I could hear the tree branches over our cabin scratching the roof in the wind; the wooden frame creaked, and, occasionally, the bell of a lost cow echoed through the dense night. When my parents and sister gave Mek leave to keep me company, his steady breathing would calm me, distracting me from the cacophony of night sounds. During the day, I'd go out hiking with him by my side, the thoughts generated by what I'd been reading racing in my head as Mek raced up and down the mountain slopes. When Veba came to visit, we hiked together with Mek and Don, and we fantasized that, when the war came to Sarajevo, we could always retreat with our dogs to Jahorina and stay up here until it was all over.

The last time we went up to the mountains was to mark the arrival of 1992 – we didn't know then that the week we spent together would amount to a farewell party to our common Sarajevo life. Apart from my sister and me and our friends – ten humans in total – there were also three dogs: Mek, Don, and our friend Gusa's Laki, an energetic dog of indeterminate breed (Gusa called him a cocktail spaniel). In the restricted space of a smallish mountain cabin, the humans would trip over the dogs, who'd often get into canine arguments and have to be pulled apart. One night, playing cards into the wee hours, Gusa and I got into a chestthumping disagreement, which made the dogs crazy – there was enough barking and screaming to blow the roof off, but I recall that moment with warmth, for all the intense intimacy of our previous shared life was in it.

A couple of weeks later, I departed for the United States, never to return to our mountain cabin.

My sister and Veba remember the last time they took Mek and Don for a walk before the war started. It was April 1992, and there was shooting up in the hills around Sarajevo; a Yugoslav People's Army plane menacingly broke the sound barrier above

the city. They said “See you later!” as they parted, but they would not see each other for five years.

Soon thereafter, my sister followed her latest boyfriend to Belgrade. My parents stayed behind for a couple of weeks, during which time sporadic gunfire and shelling increased daily. I’d call from Chicago and ask how things were and my mother would say, “They’re already shooting less than yesterday.” More and more, they spent time with their neighbors in the improvised basement shelter. On May 2, 1992, with Mek in tow, Mama and Tata took a train out of Sarajevo before the siege became relentless. The station was soon subjected to a rocket attack; no other train would leave the city for several years.

My parents were heading to the village in northern Bosnia where my father was born, a few miles from the town of Prnjavor, which came under Serb control. My dead grandparents’ house still stood on a hill called Vucijak (translatable as “Wolfhill”). My father had been keeping beehives on my grandparents’ homestead and had insisted on leaving Sarajevo largely because it was time to attend to the bees and prepare them for the summer. In willful denial of the possibility that they might not return for a long time, they brought no warm clothes or passports, just a small bag of summer clothes. All they had was left in Sarajevo.

They spent the first few months of the war on Vucijak, their chief means of sustenance my father’s beekeeping and my mother’s vegetable garden. Convoys of drunken Serbian soldiers passed by the house on their way to ethniccleansing operations or returning from the front lines where they fought Bosnian forces, singing songs of slaughter or angrily shooting in the air. My parents, cowering inside, secretly listened to the news from besieged Sarajevo. Mek would sometimes happily chase after the military trucks, and my parents desperately ran after him, calling

out, terrified that the soldiers might shoot him for malicious fun.

Sometime that summer, Mek fell ill. He could not get up on his feet; he refused food and water; there was blood in his urine. My parents called the vet, but the vet station had only one car at its disposal, which was continuously on the road with the vet on call attending to all the sick animals in the area. It took a couple of days before a vet finally came by. He instantly saw that Mek was riddled with deer ticks, all of them bloated with his blood, poisoning him. The prognosis was not good, he said, but at the vet station he could give Mek a shot that might help. My father borrowed my uncle’s tractor and cart, in which pigs were normally transported to market or slaughter. He put the limp Mek in the cart and drove down the hill, all the way to Prnjavor, to get the shot that could save his life. On his way, he was passed by Serb army trucks, the soldiers looking down on the panting Mek.

The magic injection worked and Mek lived, recovering after a few days. But then it was my mother’s turn to get terribly sick. Her gallbladder was infected, as it was full of stones – back in Sarajevo, she’d been advised to undergo surgery to remove them, but she’d kept postponing her decision and then the war broke out. Now her brother, my uncle Milisav, drove down from Subotica, a town at the Serbian-Hungarian border, and took her back with him for urgent surgical treatment. My father had to wait for his friend Dragan to come and get Mek and him. While my father prepared his beehives for his long absence, Mek would lie nearby, stretched in the grass, keeping him company.

A few days after Mama’s departure, Tata’s friend Dragan arrived. On the way to get my father, he was stopped at the checkpoint at the top of Vucijak. The men at the checkpoint were drunk and impatient. They asked Dragan where he was heading, and when he told them my father was waiting for him, they informed him that they’d been watching my father closely for a

while, that they knew all about him (my father's family was ethnically Ukrainian – that year the Ukrainian church in Prnjavor had been blown up by the Serbs), and that they were well aware of his son (of me, that is) who had written against the Serbs and was now in America. They were just about ready to take care of my father once and for all, they told Dragan. The men belonged to a paramilitary unit that called itself Vukovi (“the Wolves”) and was led by one Veljko, whom a few years earlier my father had thrown out of a meeting he'd organized to discuss bringing in running water from a nearby mountain well. Veljko went on to Austria to pursue a rewarding criminal career, only to return right before the war to put his paramilitary unit together. “You let Hemon know we're coming,” the Wolves told Dragan as they let him through.

When Dragan reported the incident, my father thought it would be better to try to get out as soon as possible than to wait for the Wolves to come at night and slit his throat. When they drove up the road to the checkpoint, the guards had just changed shifts and the new men were not drunk or churlish enough to care, so my father and Dragan were waved through. The Wolves at the checkpoint failed to sniff out or see Mek, because Tata kept him down on the floor. On their way toward the Serbian border, Tata and Dragan passed many checkpoints. Mek never produced a sound, never insisted on standing up, and, miraculously, no one at the checkpoints noticed him. My father and Dragan made it out across the border and on to Subotica.

Meanwhile, in Sarajevo, Veba was a conscript in the Bosnian Army, defending the city from the units of the former Yugoslav People's Army, now transformed overnight into the genocidal Bosnian Serb Army. Though my family was scattered all over, Veba's still lived across the street from our home. He was sharing a small apartment with his girlfriend, mother, brother, and Don.

Very quickly, food became scarce – a good dinner under siege was a slice of bread sprinkled with oil; rice was all that was available for most people, meal after meal, day after day. People had nothing to feed a dog, so packs of abandoned dogs roamed the city, sometimes attacking humans or tearing up fresh corpses. To have and feed a dog was a suspicious luxury, yet Veba's family shared with Don whatever they had. Frequently there was nothing to share, and Don somehow understood the difficulty of the situation and never begged. Within weeks, Don developed an uncanny ability to sense an imminent mortar attack: he'd bark and move anxiously in circles; bristling, he'd jump up on Veba's mother's shoulders and push her until she and everyone else rushed back into the building. A moment later shells would start exploding nearby.

My father and Mek eventually joined my mother in Subotica. When she had sufficiently recovered from her gallbladder surgery, my parents moved to Novi Sad, not far from Subotica, where Mama's other brother owned a little one-bedroom apartment. They spent a year or so there, trying all along to get the papers to emigrate to Canada. During that time, Tata was often gone for weeks, working in Hungary with Dragan's construction company. Mama longed for Sarajevo, was devastated by what was happening in Bosnia, insulted by the relentless Serbian propaganda pouring out of TV and radio. She spent days crying, and Mek would put his head in her lap and look up at her with his moist setter look, and my mother talked to him as to her only friend. She had a hard time confronting the fact that they had lost everything they'd worked for their whole lives; the only remnant of their old life was the gorgeous Irish setter.

Young male that he was, Mek would often brawl with other dogs. Once, when my mother took him out, he got into a confrontation with a mean Rottweiler. She tried to separate them

– unwisely, as they were about to go at each other’s throats – and the Rottweiler tore my mother’s hand apart. My sister Tina was there at the time, and she took Mama to the emergency room, where they had absolutely nothing needed to treat the injury but gave her the address of a doctor who could sell them the bandages and a tetanus shot. They spent all the money they had to pay the doctor and then took a cab home. In fact, they didn’t have enough to pay for the cab, and the driver said he’d come the next day to get the rest of the money. My sister bluntly told him that there was no reason for him to come back, for they’d have no money tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow, or anytime soon. (The cabbie didn’t insist: the monthly inflation in Serbia at that time was about 300 percent, and the money would have soon been worthless anyway.) For years afterward, Mama could not move her hand properly or grip anything with it. Mek would go crazy if he but smelled a Rottweiler on the same block.

In the fall of 1993, my parents and sister finally got all the papers and the plane tickets for Canada. Family and friends came over to bid them farewell. Mek figured out that something was up; he never let my mother or father out of his sight, as if worried they might leave him; he became especially cuddly, putting his head into their laps whenever he could, leaning against their shins when lying down. Touched though my father may have been by Mek’s love, he didn’t want to take him along to Canada. He couldn’t know what was waiting for them there – where they’d live, whether they’d be able to take care of themselves, let alone a dog. My mother could not bring herself to discuss the possibility of moving to Canada without him; she wept at the very thought of abandoning him with people who were strangers to him.

I received only intermittent news from Veba’s family – a letter mailed by a foreign friend who could go in and out of the Bosnian war zone, or a sudden, late-night call from a satellite

phone, arranged by a friend who worked for a foreign journalists’ pool. During the siege the regular phone lines were most often down, but every once in a while they would inexplicably work, so I’d randomly try to reach Veba. One late night in 1994, I called Veba’s family from Chicago on a whim. It was very early morning in Sarajevo, but Veba’s mother picked up the phone after one ring. She was sobbing, so my first thought was that Veba was dead. She composed herself enough to tell me that he was fine, but that someone had poisoned their dog. Don had been in horrible pain all night, retching and vomiting yellow slime, she said; he’d died just a moment before I called. Veba was there too; upon hearing the news, he’d biked from his new place in the middle of the night, the curfew still on, risking his life. He’d made it in time to hold Don as he expired, and was crying on the phone with me. I could find no words for him, as I could never provide any consolation for any of my friends under siege. Veba wrapped Don in a blanket, carried him down the fifteen flights of stairs, and buried him with his favorite tennis ball in the long-abandoned construction site behind the high-rise.

My father finally surrendered. In December 1993, my parents, sister, and Mek drove to Budapest. At the airport, my sister negotiated a cheap ticket and a place in the cargo hold for Mek. After they arrived in Canada, I rushed over from Chicago to see them for the first time in two very rough years. As soon as I walked in the door of their barely furnished fifteenth-floor apartment in Hamilton, Ontario, Mek ran toward me, wagging his tail. I was astonished that he remembered me. I’d felt that large parts of my Sarajevo self had vanished, but when Mek put his head in my lap, some of me came back.

Mek had a happy life in Hamilton. My mother always said that he was a “lucky boy.” He died in 2007, at the age of seventeen. My parents would never consider having a dog again. My mother

confides in a parakeet these days, and she cries whenever Mek is mentioned.

Veba moved to Canada in 1998. He lives in Montreal with his wife and children. After years of resisting the thought of another dog, he recently adopted a lovely mutt named Kahlua. My sister lives in London. She has not had a dog since Mek. I married a woman who has never lived without a dog and now we have a Rhodesian ridgeback named Billie. ♦



To Be a Pilgrim

by *Henry Eliot*

Pilgrimage is in vogue at the moment. The numbers of pilgrims arriving at Mecca and Santiago de Compostela grow every year. Robert Macfarlane, intellectual pilgrim par excellence, recently published *The Old Ways*, an inspiring celebration of pilgrim paths around the world. In an article about the growing popularity of pilgrimage he quotes Rowan Williams acclaiming ‘a whole generation of new pilgrims’.

Why is pilgrimage still attractive? The image of the pilgrim with staff and badge is surely a medieval hangover. How can it belong in our high-speed internet world of non-religion, physical comfort and instant gratification? For me it started in 1387. On Wednesday 17 April that year, once darkness had fallen at about 8pm and the gates of the walled City of London were locked, a company of sundry folk sat down together in a Southwark hostelry to eat good food and drink strong wine. The next day the host of the inn led them out of the yard and off on a pilgrimage to Canterbury Cathedral, to pray at the shrine of St. Thomas à Becket. Along the way they told stories. These pilgrims were, of course, the creation of Geoffrey Chaucer, and the stories they told form one of the greatest works of literature in the English language: *The Canterbury Tales*.

On 17 April 2012, exactly six hundred and twenty-five years after those fictional forebears, I found myself with another *compaignye*, eating good food and drinking strong wine in a

Southwark hostelry. We were a group of modern pilgrims, planning to recreate the *Canterbury Tales*: walking from London to Canterbury, staying in medieval pilgrim towns, telling Chaucer’s tales along the way and raising money for the National Literacy Trust.

The idea had come from wanting to hear all the stories in one go. The poem only really comes alive when the tales fit together: the stories and their narrators jostle for attention; themes are picked up, twisted and dropped. When the stories are read in isolation the sense of a multi-voiced, rambunctious group can be lost, and so the idea followed to place the tales geographically along the road to Canterbury.

Chaucer’s pilgrims stayed in the Tabard, which was a real inn in Southwark, although it changed its name to the Talbot in 1669 and was sadly demolished in 1873. Just next door, however, the hauntingly atmospheric George still stands. London’s last remaining galleried coaching inn put on a medieval meal for us in a low-ceilinged room overlooking Talbot Yard. Twenty-four of us sat down to become of one another’s *felaweshipe*, dressed according to the sartorial notes in the General Prologue.

Among the group were teachers, actors, academics, journalists, civil servants, theatre directors and even a trainee doctor of physic. Everyone had a character and was assigned the appropriate tale. As Harry Bailly, the host of the event, I was organising accommodation and *vitaille* along the route.

We drank *ypocras*, a medieval spiced wine that had been steeping for several weeks; it tasted like mulled cough medicine and the high nutmeg content gave people hallucinations. The guest of honour was Professor Helen Cooper, the country’s foremost Chaucerian scholar. She addressed the company with a beautifully crafted preface to our walk, bridging the gap expertly between those who knew the poem well and those who were still ‘in outer

darkness’.

Inspired by Professor Cooper, and perhaps the nutmeg, we met the next morning below the blue plaque in Talbot Yard at the very spot where Chaucer’s pilgrims would have gathered. As far as we knew, such an exploit had never been attempted before. It was raining, but that seemed appropriate for a poem that opens with April’s *shoures soote*. Undaunted, we set out with anoraks and sprung walking poles, through the throng of damp commuters, heading south-east out of London on the sixty-five-mile walk to Canterbury.

The first stop was Thomas à Watering, an ancient stream, where Chaucer’s pilgrims drew cuts to select their first storyteller. The Thomas à Watering is now under the Thomas à Becket pub on the Old Kent Road, which is famous for the boxing ring where Henry Cooper fought and trained. Appropriately, the battle-weary Knight was up first and we went inside the historic watering hole to hear his story of the Theban love triangle between Arcite, Palamon and Emily.

The first day was a sixteen-mile trudge out of London, along the bleak Old Kent Road. There were moments of relief, however. Greenwich Park was a welcome break and we stopped for a picnic lunch and the Miller’s Tale, hearing how Absolon kissed Alison’s naked *ers ful savourly* as we tucked into flapjacks and brownies.

Most of the country between London and Canterbury was thickly forested in the 1380s. Pilgrims would have followed Watling Street, paved by the Romans in a straight line from Dover to London, but Watling Street is now the A2 and mostly very unpleasant walking. Luckily for us the Roman paving had become so dilapidated by the late fourteenth century, and the highway so dangerous, that pilgrims frequently adopted parallel routes. We therefore felt justified in avoiding exhaust fumes whenever we

could.

The Reeve told his tale in front of Severndroog Castle in the heart of the ancient Oxleas woodland, and the Cook scratched his ulcerous *mormal* in Danson Park.

Any walk throws up serendipitous encounters but our unusual endeavour seemed to unlock even more than normal. We were merely passing William Morris’s Red House in Bexleyheath when we got into conversation with the curator and were immediately treated to an impromptu after-hours tour. Morris was obsessed with Chaucer and built the Red House as near the pilgrimage route as he could. His design for the 1896 Kelmscott edition of Chaucer was a masterwork, and references recurred throughout the building. Apparently he even swore in Chaucerian expletives.

Dartford was our first overnight stop. That evening the Wife of Bath disclosed what women love *moost*. The next morning we crossed the M25 and threw off the last of the London sprawl.

We walked between Kentish villages along field-side paths, and stopped for the Shipman’s Tale in the garden of The Ship pub. One of our most unusual stopping points was the extraordinary Darnley Mausoleum, a huge white-stone pyramid tomb in the heart of Cobham Woods, which appears through the trees as you approach like a mirage. The Prioress told her brutal tale of a murdered schoolboy with the aid of a specially prepared sock puppet, using a zip to *kitte* his *throte*.

Shortly afterwards we arrived in Rochester, the Castle and Cathedral looming like monoliths as we bridged the Medway. Chaucer wrote himself into his pilgrimage and that evening we heard his tales. When his character begins a *rym dogerel* about a knight called Sir Thopas, Chaucer the author, with self-deprecating wit, has the Host cut him off mid-verse: ‘Thy *drasty rymyng* is *nat* worth a *toord*!’ As a palliative, Chaucer then tells the long-winded prose tale of Melibee, which is hardly better.

On Friday morning, after hearing the Monk's Tale beneath Rochester Castle, we set off along the shore of the Kentish marshes. The path passed right through a massive brood of chickens, which was the only place to hear the story of Chanticleer, the *gentil cok*. The Nun's Priest got through the farmyard fable despite a deafening chorus of purling hens, who, growing bolder, began to peck inquisitively at our legs.

Wending past St. Mary's Newington and over the railway line we heard the Doctor of Physic's Tale in the car park of a Sittingbourne General Practice and pushed on to Bapchild, where there was once a holy well dedicated to St. Thomas. We looked for the well but it is now a South East Water pump.

Helen Cooper described the Pardoner as 'perhaps the pilgrim who comes closest to being evil'. He delivered his sinister story in an intimate and atmospheric circle on the grass, with the remains of Tonge Castle *motte* behind him, doubling as the hill where his three thieves seek Death. The Host condemns the Pardoner at the end of his tale because he has the gall to ask the assembled company for money. In contrast, our real-life sponsors had been extremely generous: we had by then raised over seven thousand pounds for the National Literacy Trust. Of course, we were supporting a charity whereas the Pardoner was pocketing cash for a kiss of his bogus relics.

The third day was the longest walk – twenty-one miles – and the final push to Faversham was tough. After dinner in the Sun Inn the Merchant told the tale of January and May, with a full-cast dumbshow involving cross-dressing, rude balloons and shenanigans behind a sheet.

In the morning we visited Ospringe, next to Faversham, where the Maison Dieu, a medieval wayside hospital, still stands on Watling Street. Pilgrims stopped here in the Middle Ages, and Chaucer himself would almost certainly have stayed there as a

senior international diplomat on business to Dover. In these resonant surroundings the Second Nun gave us the life of St. Cecilia.

Leaving Faversham behind we made our way to the village of Boughton under Blean and The White Horse pub, where the pilgrims are overtaken in the poem by a Canon and his Yeoman. The Canon soon disappears when the Yeoman exposes him as a crook and a swindler, and the servant is left behind to tell a tale in his place. We were joined by the Canon's Yeoman, who told the tale as a news report with a cardboard television over her head.

The end was in sight now. The final day was just twelve miles' walking. We heard the Manciple's Tale outside St. Nicholas Harbledown, a medieval leper hospital, and then descended to the main Canterbury road. There we were greeted with a sight that must have stirred pilgrims' hearts for the last eight hundred years: the cathedral, scene of St. Thomas's martyrdom, heart of the Church of England, rising shimmering and white from the city.

When Henry II made his pilgrimage of penance to Canterbury in 1174 to atone for the murder of Thomas à Becket he stopped at St. Dunstan's Church and 'put of his Shooes and Stockins, and went bare-foot to Becket's Tomb' (Burton, *Wonderful Prodigies*, 1685). In memory of the King we also stopped at St. Dunstan's Church, sat on a low wall and – to the surprise of passers by – eased off our boots, exposing blisters and aching feet to the cool pavement stones. Then we too walked barefoot into Canterbury.

'*Lordynges everichoon,*' says the Host, 'now *laketh* us no tales mo than *oon*.' And he invites the Parson to tell the very last story, which we heard beneath the towers of Westgate, on the boundary line of the medieval walled city. The Westgate is a thoroughfare and the Parson gathered a small crowd, accusing the citizens of Canterbury of lechery and foul language.

The final walk down the High Street was momentous. Our feet

felt every 60 municipal brick; shoppers parted for us; we bunched together, a barefoot, mud-splattered band of walkers, unused to crowds. We turned left down narrow Mercery Lane and finally, exhausted, perceived the extraordinary Cathedral Gate, with a massive bronze Christ bending to greet us with open palms.

We were borne by Cathedral staff into the precincts – ‘Canon Clare is expecting you’ – and, boots back on, were taken into the Cathedral. We passed through the nave, the size of which was truly awesome after days of paths and hedgerows, and down into an intimate space in the undercroft, where we were welcomed as pilgrims. It had not been a religious pilgrimage but Canon Clare’s prayers of thanks in the Chapel of Our Lady marked its conclusion in an unexpectedly spiritual way.

At dinner in the Pilgrim’s Hotel that night we voted on which tale had had best sentence and *moost* solace. A hush settled as the results came in. In a dramatic turn of events there was a dead heat between Chaucer and The Knight, who shared the prize.

Our course was almost run but there was one last thing to do. Back in our hotel, on a roof terrace below the glowing flank of the illuminated cathedral, we gathered to hear Chaucer’s Retraction, which concludes both the poem and Chaucer’s career. It was a memorable moment under the stars, very quiet and moving, which brought the project to a still and thoughtful close.

Standing there in the dark, having taken part in something significant, the enduring attraction of pilgrimage was understandable. Meditative passage through a physical landscape allows a reconnection with nature as well as the self. As Will Self puts it, ‘thought [can] unspool from my arachnid mind and silkily entwine with the places I go’. The desire for that experience is as prevalent now as ever. As Rowan Williams says: ‘Place works on the pilgrim ... that is what pilgrimage is for.’ Even as an unfinished work, The Canterbury Tales reflects this process of

self-discovery.

When we set out from London the enterprise seemed like a literary escapade, infused with the riotous fun and bawdy humour of the first tales. Arriving in Canterbury, however, was sobering, and the poem reflected this in its change of tone. When the Parson tries to preach at one point the Shipman decrees ‘he *schal* no gospel *glosen*’. Yet at the end the whole company hears the Parson’s sermon *wol* gladly, as if realising that their journey has not only been to Canterbury but also towards the Heavenly Jerusalem. One could almost imagine Chaucer deliberately leaving his masterpiece unfinished as an open invitation to future pilgrims and storytellers. I like to think we took up the offer. ♦

Side by...

An Equal Music

by *Vikram Seth*

THE BRANCHES ARE BARE, the sky tonight a milky violet. It is not quiet here, but it is peaceful. The wind ruffles the black water towards me.

There is no one about. The birds are still. The traffic slashes through Hyde Park. It comes to my ears as white noise.

I test the bench but do not sit down. As yesterday, as the day before, I stand until I have lost my thoughts. I look at the water of the Serpentine.

Yesterday as I walked back across the park I paused at a fork in the footpath. I had the sense that someone had paused behind me. I walked on. The sound of footsteps followed along the gravel. They were unhurried; they appeared to keep pace with me. Then they suddenly made up their mind, speeded up, and overtook me. They belonged to a man in a thick black overcoat, quite tall – about my height – a young man from his gait and attitude, though I did not see his face. His sense of hurry was now evident. After a while, unwilling so soon to cross the blinding Bayswater Road, I paused again, this time by the bridle path.

Now I heard the faint sound of hooves. This time, however, they were not embodied. I looked to left, to right. There was nothing.

As I approach Archangel Court I am conscious of being watched. I enter the hallway. There are flowers here, a concoction

...by side

Vonósnégyesre hangszerelve

fordította *Tárnok Attila*

AZ ÁGAK CSUPASZOK, az ég tejszerű ibolyaszín ma este. Nincs csönd, de nyugalom vesz körül. A fekete víztükröt felém fodrozza a szél.

Senki sem jár erre. A madarak mozdulatlanok. A Hyde Parkot átszelő forgalom hangja fehér zajként ér a fülemig.

Megvizsgálom a padot, de nem ülök le. Ahogy tegnap vagy tegnapelőtt, gondolataimba merülve ácsorgok. A tó vizét szemlélem.

Tegnap a visszaúton a parkon át, egy útelágazásnál megálltam. Az volt az érzésem, hogy valaki követ. Továbbindultam. Lépések hangja kísért a murvás úton. Ráérősen, úgy tűnt, hozzám igazodva. Aztán hirtelen meggondolta magát, felgyorsított és megelőzött. Egy vastag fekete kabátos férfi volt, elég magas, hozzám hasonló, járásából és magatartásából ítélve fiatal, bár az arcát nem láttam. Nyilván sietett. Egy kis idő múlva újra megálltam, ezúttal a lovaglót mellett: vonakodtam még a Bayswater street vakító fényeibe kilépni. Patkók lehetőfinom nesztét véltem hallani. Ám a hangok nem öltöttek testet. Néztem balra, jobbra. Seholy senki.

Az Archangel Court felé közeledve tudatában vagyok, hogy valaki figyel. Belépek az előtérbe. Virágok vannak itt, gerberacsokrok, megszokott növényzet. Biztonsági kamera pásztázza az előteret. Az őrzött épületek biztonságosak. Ha biztonságosak – a lakók boldogok.

of gerberas and general foliage. A camera surveys the hall. A watched building is a secure building, a secure building a happy one.

A few days ago I was told I was happy by the young woman behind the counter at Etienne's. I ordered seven croissants. As she gave me my change she said: "You are a happy man."

I stared at her with such incredulity that she looked down.

"You're always humming," she said in a much quieter voice, feeling perhaps that she had to explain.

"It's my work," I said, ashamed of my bitterness. Another customer entered the shop, and I left.

As I put my week's croissants – all except one – in the freezer, I noticed I was humming the same half-tuneless tune of one of Schubert's last songs:

*I see a man who stares upwards
And wrings his hands from the force of his pain.
I shudder when I see his face.
The moon reveals myself to me.*

I put the water on for coffee, and look out of the window. From the eighth floor I can see as far as St Paul's, Croydon, Highgate. I can look across the brown-branched park to spires and towers and chimneys beyond. London unsettles me – even from such a height there is no clear countryside to view.

But it is not Vienna. It is not Venice. It is not, for that matter, my hometown in the North, in clear reach of the moors.

It wasn't my work, though, that made me hum that song. I have not played Schubert for more than a month. My violin misses him more than I do. I tune it, and we enter my soundproof cell. No light, no sound comes in from the world. Electrons along copper, horsehair across acrylic create my

Néhány napja egy fiatal eladónő az Etienne-ben boldognak látott. Hét croissantot vettem. Ahogy visszaadta az aprót, azt mondta:

– Ön boldog ember.

Olyan kétkedően tekintettem rá, hogy lesütötte a szemét.

– Mindig dúdol valamit – mondta sokkal halkabban. Mintha magyarázattal tartozna.

– Ez a munkám – mondtam, és szégyenkeztem rosszkedvem miatt. Egy vevő lépett az üzletbe. Elköszöntem.

A croissantokat egy kivételével a fagyasztóba tettem, és észrevettem, hogy ugyanazt a Schubert-dalt dúdoló dallamtalanul, a zeneszerző egyik utolsó dalát:

*Ott áll most egy ember s néz a magasba,
tördeli kezét a vad fájdalom;
elborzadok, amint föltűnik arca –
a hold megmutatja saját alakom.*

Odateszem a kávévizet és kinézek a nyolcadik emeleti ablakon. Idelátszik a Szent Pál katedrális, Croydon, Highgate. A bar-na ágú parkon túl templomtornyok, épületek, kémények láthatók. London nyugtalanít: még ebből a magasságból sem látni a városhatáron túl.

Nem Bécs. Nem Velence. Még észak-angliai szülővárosom lópvidéke is messze van.

Nem a munkámból adódott, hogy azt a dalt dúdoltam. Több mint egy hónapja nem játszottam Schubertet. A hegedűmnek jobban hiányzik, mint nekem. Hangolok és belépünk hangszigetelt szobámba. Se fény, se hang nem ér el ide a külvilágból. A húrok mentén végigfutó elektronok, az akril testre merőleges lószőr vonó áll csak rendelkezésemre, hogy benyomásokat érzékeljek.

impressions of sense.

I will play nothing of what we have played in our quartet, nothing that reminds me of my recent music-making with any human being. I will play his songs.

The Tononi seems to purr at the suggestion. Something happy, something happy, surely:

*In a clear brook
With joyful haste
The whimsical trout
Shot past me like an arrow.*

I play the line of the song, I play the leaps and plunges of the right hand of the piano, I am the trout, the angler, the brook, the observer. I sing the words, bobbing my constricted chin. The Tononi does not object; it resounds. I play it in B, in A, in E flat. Schubert does not object. I am not transposing his string quartets.

Where a piano note is too low for the violin, it leaps into a higher octave. As it is, it is playing the songline an octave above its script. Now, if it were a viola ... but it has been years since I played the viola.

The last time was when I was a student in Vienna ten years ago. I return there again and again and think: was I in error? Was I unseeing? Where was the balance of pain between the two of us? What I lost there I have never come near to retrieving.

What happened to me so many years ago? Love or no love, I could not continue in that city. I stumbled, my mind jammed, I felt the pressure of every breath. I told her I was going, and went. For two months I could do nothing, not even write to her. I came to London. The smog dispersed but too late. Where are you now, Julia, and am I not forgiven?

Nem játszom a vonósnégyes repertoárjából, nem játszom semmit, ami az utóbbi idők zenekari darabjaira emlékeztethet. Schubertet fogok játszani.

Szándékomat a Tononi dorombolva fogadja. Valami örömtelít, valami felemelőt mindenképpen:

*A csermely halkán zúgott,
Hol útja völgyre nyílt,
Hús mélyén pisztráng úszott,
Úgy surrant, mint a nyíl.*

Eljátszom a dal sorait, eljátszom a zongorista jobb kezének ugrásait és aláereszkedését; én vagyok a pisztráng, a horgász, a patak és a szemlélődő férfi. A hegedű testének támasztott államat mozdítva éneklek is a szöveget. A Tononi nem áll ellen; rezonál. Játsszom H-ban, A-ban és Esz-ben. Schubert sem bánna. Nem a vonósnégyest transzponálom.

Ahol a zongora hangja túl mély, a hegedű ugrik egy oktávot. Az ének dallamát is egy oktávval magasabban játssza. Ha mélyhegedű lenne... Évek óta nem játszottam mélyhegedűn.

Utoljára tíz éve, bécsi diákként. Időről időre visszatérek Bécshez, és eltöprengek: hol hibáztam. Vak voltam? Hova lett a fájdalom egyensúlya kettőnk közt? Amit ott elvesztettem, soha nem kaphatom meg újra, még megközelítőleg sem.

Mi történt velem annyi évvel ezelőtt? Szerelem vagy sem, nem maradhattam tovább abban a városban. Elbotlottam, képtelen voltam gondolkozni, minden lélegzetvételnél éreztem a súlyát. Mondtam neki, hogy elmegyek, és megtettem. Két hónapig képtelen voltam bármibe kezdeni, még levelet sem tudtam írni. Londonba jöttem. Felszállt a köd, de későn. Merre vagy, Julia? Nincs megbocsátás?

Virginie nem akar gyakorolni, mégis igényli az órákat. Vannak

Virginie will not practise, yet demands these lessons. I have worse students – more cavalier, that is – but none so frustrating.

I walk across the park to her flat. It is over-heated and there is a great deal of pink. This used not to unnerve me. Now when I step into the bathroom I recoil.

Pink bath, pink basin, pink toilet, pink bidet, pink tiles, pink wallpaper, pink rug. Brushes, soap, toothbrush, silk flowers, toilet paper: all pink. Even the little foot-operated waste-bin is pale pink. I know this little waste-bin well. Every time I sleep here I wonder what I am doing with my time and hers. She is sixteen years younger than I am. She is not the woman with whom I want to share my life. But, having begun, what we have continues. She wants it to, and I go along with it, through lust and loneliness, I suppose; and laziness, and lack of focus.

Our lessons are a clear space. Today it is a partita by Bach: the E major. I ask her to play it all the way through, but after the Gavotte I tell her to stop.

“Don’t you want to know how it ends?” she asks cheerfully.

“You haven’t practised much.”

She achieves an expression of guilt.

“Go back to the beginning,” I suggest.

“Of the Gavotte?”

“Of the Prelude.”

“You mean bar seventeen? I know, I know, I should use always my wrist for the E string.”

“I mean bar one.”

Virginie looks sulky. She sets her bow down on a pale pink silk cushion. “Virginie, it’s not that you can’t do it, it’s just that you aren’t doing it.”

“Doing what?”

“Thinking about the music. Sing the first phrase, just sing it.” She picks up the bow.

rosszabb tanítványaim is, úgy értem, még lezserebbek, de egyiküktől sem megy el ennyire a kedvem.

A parkon át megyek a lakására. Túl meleg van nála és rengeteg a rózsaszín. Régebben ez nagyon zavart. A fürdőszobájába lépve elborzadtam.

Rózsaszín fürdőkád, rózsaszín mosdó, rózsaszín wc, rózsaszín bidé, rózsaszín csempe, rózsaszín tapéta, rózsaszín szőnyeg. Hajkefék, fogkefe, szappan, művirág, toalettpapír: minden rózsaszín. A szemetes vödört jól ismerem. Mikor nála alszom, mindig nyomaszt, miért pazaroljuk egymás idejét. Tizenhat évvel fiatalabb nálam. Nem az a fajta nő, akivel szeretném megosztani az életemet. De amibe egyszer belefogtunk, folytatni kell. Ő ragaszkodik hozzá, én pedig elfogadom, bár jobbára csak a lustaság, a magány és az érzékiség tart együtt minket. És az összeszedettség hiánya.

Az órák kötetlenek. Ma Bach E-dúr partitáját gyakoroljuk. Megkérem, játssza végig, de a Gavotte után leállítom.

– Nem akarod hallani, a vége hogy megy? – kérdezi vidám mosollyal.

– Nem nagyon gyakoroltad.

Sikerül büntudatot erőltetnie az arcára.

– Kezdjük az elejétől – indítványozom.

– A Gavotte elejétől?

– A Prelude elejétől.

– A 17. ütemre gondolsz? Tudom, tudom, az E-húrhoz kéne mozdítanom a csuklómat.

– Az első ütemtől.

Virginie megbántódik. A vonóját egy halvány rózsaszín se-lyempárnára fekteti.

– Virginie, nem arról van szó, hogy nem tudod megcsinálni. Egyszerűen nem vagy ott.

– Hol nem vagyok?

“I meant, with your voice.”

Virginie sighs. In tune, and with exactitude, she goes: “Mi-re-mi si sol si mi-fa-mi-re-mi ...”

“Can’t you ever sing without those nonsense syllables?”

“That’s how I was taught.” Her eyes flash.

Virginie comes from Nyons, about which I know nothing other than that it is somewhere near Avignon. She asked me twice to go there with her, then stopped asking.

“Virginie, it’s not just one damn note after another. That second mire-mi should carry some memory of the first. Like this.” I pick up my fiddle and demonstrate. “Or like this. Or in some way of your own.”

She plays it again, and plays it well, and goes on. I close my eyes. A huge howl of pot-pourri assails my senses. It is getting dark. Winter is upon us. How young she is, how little she works. She is only twenty-one. My mind wanders to another city, to the memory of another woman, who was as young then.

“Should I go on?”

“Yes.”

I tell Virginie to keep her wrist free, to watch her intonation here, to mind her dynamics there, to keep her *détaché* even – but she knows all this. Next week there will be some progress, very little. She is talented, yet she will not apply herself. Though she is supposedly a full-time student, music for her is only one of many things. She is anxious about the college competition for which she will perform this partita. She is thinking of selling her Miremont, and getting her father – who supports her unstudentlike standard of living – to buy her something early and Italian. She has a grand circle of acquaintance here, scores of friends from all over France who descend on her in every season, vast linked clans of relatives, and three ex-boyfriends with whom she is on good terms. She and I have been together for more than

– Nem a zenére gondolsz. Énekeld el az első frázist! Csak énekeld!

Felveszi a vonót.

– Úgy értem, a saját hangodon.

Mélyet sóhajt. Tisztán, pontosan intonálja: „*mi-ré-mi szj szó mi-fá-mi-ré-mi...*”

– Szolmizációs hangok nélkül nem tudsz énekelni?

– Így tanítottak – mondja pislogva.

Virginie Nyons-ba való. A településről csak annyit tudok, hogy Avignon mellett van valahol. Kétszer invitált, hogy menjek vele, aztán többet nem kért rá.

– Virginie, ne csak az elkülönült hangokat figyeld! A második *mi-ré-mi* az elsőre kell emlékeztessen. Valahogy így – felveszem a hegedűmet és illusztrálok. – Vagy így. Vagy ahogy akarsz, a magad módján.

Újra eljártssza, elég jól, és folytatja. Behunyom a szemem. Egy nagy adag hidegtől lebeg előttem. Sötétedik. Közeleg a tél. Milyen fiatal ez a lány. Milyen keveset gyakorol. Huszonegy éves csupán. A gondolataim elkalandoznak. Egy másik városban járok, egy másik lányra emlékezem, aki ugyanennyi idős volt akkor.

– Folytassam?

– Igen.

Néha rászólok, hogy lazítsa el a csuklóját, néha, hogy figyeljen az intonációra, néha a dinamikára. A *détaché* legyen egyenletes. De ezt mind tudja magától is. Jövő hétre fejlődik egy nagyon keveset. Tehetséges lenne, de nem teszi oda magát. Egész nap a zenével kéne foglalkoznia, de számára az csupán egy a sok más elfoglaltság közül. Ez a partita a vizsgadarabja, aggódik is miatta. Azt tervezi, hogy eladja a Miremont-t és rábeszéli az apját, aki ezt az egész nem diákos életvitelt pénzeli, hogy vegyen neki egy korai olasz hegedűt. Kiterjedt baráti köre van Londonban; Fran-

a year now.

As for the one I remember, I see her with her eyes closed, playing Bach to herself: an English suite. Gently her fingers travel among the keys. Perhaps I move too suddenly. The beloved eyes turn towards me. There are so many beings here, occupied, pre-occupied. Let me believe that she breathes, that she still exists, somewhere on this chance sphere.

The Maggiore Quartet is gathering for a rehearsal at our standard venue, Helen's little two-storey mews house.

Helen is preparing coffee. Only she and I are here. The afternoon sunlight slants in. A woman's velvety voice sings Cole Porter. Four dark blue armless chairs are arranged in an arc beneath a minimalist pine bookshelf. A viola case and a couple of music stands rest in the corner of the open-plan kitchen-living-dining room.

"One? Two?" asks Helen. "I keep forgetting. I wonder why. It's not the sort of thing one forgets when one is, well, used to someone's coffee habits. But you don't have a habit with sugar, do you? Sometimes you don't have any at all. Oh, I met someone yesterday who was asking after you. Nicholas Spare. Such an awful man, but the more waspish he gets the more they read him. Get him to review us, Michael. He has a crush on you, I'm sure he does. He frowns whenever I mention you."

"Thanks, Helen. That's all I need."

"So do I, of course."

"No crushes on colleagues."

"You're not all that gorgeous."

"What's new on the gardening front?"

"It's November, Michael," says Helen. "Besides, I'm off gardening. Here's your coffee. What do you think of my hair?"

Helen has red hair, and her hairstyle changes annually. This year it is ringleted with careless care. I nod approval and

ciaországból érkezett barátok tucatjai, akik minden évszakban rátelepszene; a rokonok szerteágazó serege; három fiú, akikkel korábban járt, és akikkel még most is jó viszonyban van.

Ami azt a másik lányt illeti – az emlékeimben élőt –, látom magam előtt, amint behunyt szemmel Bach Angol szvitjét játsza. Az ujjai gyengéden érintik a billentyűket. Talán túl hirtelen váltok ritmust. Imádott szemei felém fordulnak. Megszállottként, belefeledkezve ülünk, milliónyi sugárnyaláb vesz körül. Hadd higgyem, hogy még él és lélegzik. Valahol ezen a kiszámíthatatlan égitesten.

Szokásos helyünkre, Helen sikátorbeli, kétszintes apró lakásába próbára érkezik a Maggiore vonósnégyes.

Helen kávéfőz. Még csak ketten vagyunk, bevág a délutáni nap fénye. Egy bársonyos női hang Cole Porter dalokat énekel. Négy sötétkék szék félkör alakban áll egy minimalista fenyő könyvespolc mögött. Az egybenyitott konyha-étkező-nappali sarkában egy mélyhegedű tokja és két kottaállvány.

– Egyet vagy kettőt? – kérdezi Helen. – Fogalmam sincs, miért, de mindig elfelejtem. Ilyesmit nem szokás elfelejteni, ha az ember megszokja valakinek az ízlését. De te hol így iszod, hol úgy, nem? Van, hogy egyáltalán nem kérsz cukrot. Képzeld, tegnap valaki érdeklődött felőled. Nicholas Spare. Borzasztó ember, de minél szúrósabb lesz, annál többen olvassák. Beszéld rá, hogy írjon rólunk egy kritikát, Michael. Téged kedvel, ebben biztos vagyok. Elmosolyodik, ha csak megemlítem a neved.

– Kösz, Helen. Nincs elég bajom?

– Én sem szeretem.

– Házi nyúlra nem lövünk.

– Amúgy sem vagy az a fajta.

– Mi újság a kertészkedéssel?

– Michael, november van. Egyébként fölhagytam vele. Itt a kávéd. Mit szólsz a hajamhoz?

concentrate on my coffee.

The doorbell rings. It is Piers, her elder brother, our first violinist.

He enters, ducking his head slightly. He kisses his sister – who is only a couple of inches shorter – says hello to me, takes off his elegant- shabby greatcoat, gets out his violin and mutters, “Could you turn that off? I’m trying to tune up.”

“Oh, just till the end of this track,” says Helen.

Piers turns the player off himself. Helen says nothing. Piers is used to getting his way.

“Where the fuck is Billy?” he asks. “He’s always late for rehearsal. Has he called?”

Helen shakes her head. “That’s what happens, I suppose, if you live in Loughton or Leyton or wherever.”

“Leytonstone,” I say.

“Of course,” says Helen, feigning enlightenment. London for her means Zone j. All of us except Billy live quite centrally, in or near Bayswater, within walking distance of Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens, though in very different conditions. Piers is quite often irritable, even resentful, for a few minutes after arriving at Helen’s. He lives in a basement studio.

After a while Helen quietly asks him how he enjoyed last night. Piers went to listen to the Steif Quartet, whom he has admired for many years, play an all-Beethoven concert.

“Oh, OK,” grumbles Piers. “But you can never tell with the Steif. Last night they were going in heavily for beauty of tone – pretty narcissistic. And I’m beginning to dislike the first violinist’s face: it looks more and more pinched every year. And after they finished playing the Grosse Fuge, they leapt up as if they had just killed a lion. Of course the audience went mad... Has Erica called?”

“No ... So you didn’t like the concert.”

Vörös haja van, évente változtat a frizuráján. Idén spontán benyomást keltő fodrokat csavar bele. Dicsérőleg bólintok és a kávéra figyelek.

Csöngetnek. Piers az, Helen bátyja, az első hegedűsünk.

Alig észrevehetően fejet hajtva lép be. Megcsókolja a húgát, aki alig alacsonyabb nála, nekem is köszön, leveti divatosan viseltes télikabátját, és előveszi a hegedűjét.

– Kikapcsolnád a zenét? Szeretnék hangolni.

– Várjuk meg a szám végét – mondja Helen.

Piers saját maga állítja le a lemezjátszót. Helen nem szól egy szót sem. Piers megszokta, hogy az akaratát érvényesítenie kell.

– Hol a fenében van Billy? – kérdezi. – Mindig késik a próbáról. Telefonált?

Helen a fejét rázza: – Gondolom, így jár az, aki Loughtonban vagy Leytonban vagy hol lakik.

– Leytonstone-ban – javítom ki.

– Hogyne – mondja Helen, megvilágosodást mímelve. London számára csupán csak a belváros. Billy kivételével mindannyian a városközpontban lakunk, a Bayswater street környékén, sétányira a Hyde Parktól és a Kensington Gardentől – jóllehet nagyon különböző körülmények között. Megérkezésükor néhány percig Piers mindig zaklatott, sőt bosszús. Egy alagsori garzonban lakik.

Egy kis idő múlva Helen megkérdezi, milyen volt a tegnapi koncert. Piers a Steif vonósnegyes Beethoven-estjét hallgatta meg, évek óta nagyon kedveli őket.

– Elment – morogja Piers. – De a Steif mindig meglepetést okoz. Tegnap erősen a tonalitás szépségére mentek rá. Csupa öntetszelgés. És egyre kevésbé tetszik az első hegedűs arckifejezése. Évről évre egyre nyúzottabbnak tűnik. A Nagy fuga után úgy ugrottak fel, mintha megölték volna az oroszlánt. Persze a közönség meg volt babonázva... Erica telefonált?

“I didn’t say that,” says Piers. “Where is bloody Billy? We should fine him a chocolate biscuit for every minute he’s late.” Having tuned up, he plays a rapid figure in pizzicato quartertones.

“What was that?” asks Helen, almost spilling her coffee. “No, no, no, don’t play it again.”

“An attempt at composition a la Billy.”

“That’s not fair,” says Helen.

Piers smiles a sort of left-handed smile. “Billy’s only a fledgling. One day twenty years from now, he’ll grow into the full monster, write something gratingly awful for Covent Garden – if it’s still there – and wake up as Sir William Cutler.”

Helen laughs, then pulls herself up. “Now, now, no talking behind each other’s backs,” she says.

“I’m a bit worried,” continues Piers. “Billy’s been talking far too much about what he’s working on.” He turns to me for a reaction.

“Has he actually suggested we play something he’s written?” I ask.

“No. Not actually. Not yet. It’s just a pricking of my thumbs.”

“Why don’t we wait and see if he does?” I suggest.

“I’m not for it,” says Helen slowly. “It would be dreadful if we didn’t like it – I mean if it really sounded like your effusion.”

Piers smiles again, not very pleasantly.

“Well, I don’t see the harm in reading it through once,” I say.

“What if some of us like it and some don’t?” asks Helen. “A quartet is a quartet. This could lead to all sorts of tensions. But surely it would be worse if Billy’s grumpy the whole time. So there it is.”

“Helenic logic,” says Piers.

“But I like Billy–” begins Helen.

“So do we all,” Piers interrupts. “We all love each other, that goes without saying. But in this matter, the three of us should

– Nem... Szóval nem tetszett a koncert.

– Azt nem mondtam – válszolja Piers. – Hol a halálban van Billy? Büntetésből minden perc késésért egy csokis kekszet kéne fizetnie.

Behangolás után pizzicato negyedhangokból álló gyors variációt játszik.

– Mi volt ez? – kérdezi Helen. Majdnem kiönti a kávéját. – Nem, nem. Ne játszd újra.

– Saját kísérlet. Billy után szabadon.

– Igazságtalan vagy – mondja Helen.

Piers elereszt egy amolyan balkezes mosolyt: – Billy még zöldfülű, de húsz éven belül szörnyeteggé nőheti ki magát. Ír majd valami elkészerítően borzasztót a Covent Gardennek, ha lesz még Covent Garden, és egyszer arra ébred, hogy lovaggá ütötték: Sir William Cutler.

Helen elneveti magát, aztán elkomolyodik. – Ne beszéljük róla a háta mögött – mondja.

– Nyugtalanít egy kissé – folytatja Piers –, hogy Billy túl sokat fecseg mostanában a saját darabjáról.

Felém fordul, mintegy a reakciómat lesve.

– Tett rá célzást valaha, hogy a saját kompozícióját játsszuk? – kérdezem.

– Valóban nem. Még nem. De viszket tőle a tenyerem.

– Várjuk ki, mi a terve – javaslom.

– Én nem megyek bele – mondja Helen vontatottan. – Szörnyű lenne olyasmit játszani, ami nem tetszik. Mi van, ha csupa ömlengés.

Piers kényszeredetten elmosolyodik.

– Nem tudom, mi kárunk származna belőle, ha átolvasszunk egyszer – jegyzem meg.

– És ha valamelyikünknek tetszik, míg a másiknak nem? – kérdezi Helen. – Vonósnegyes vagyunk. Ki tudja, milyen feszült-

think out our position – our joint position – clearly, before Billy presents us with a fourth Razumovsky.”

Before we can speak further, Billy arrives. He lugs his cello in exhaustedly, apologises, looks cheerful when he sees the chocolate biscuits that Helen knows are his favourites, gobbles down a few, receives his coffee gratefully, apologises again, and begins tuning.

“Lydia took the car – dentist. Mad rush – almost forgot the music for the Brahms. Central Line – terrible.” Sweat shines on his forehead and he is breathing heavily. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’ll never be late again. Never ever.”

“Have another biscuit, Billy,” says Helen affectionately.

“Get a mobile phone, Billy,” says Piers in a lazy-peremptory prefect-like tone.

“Why?” asks Billy. “Why should I? Why should I get a mobile phone? I’m not a pimp or a plumber.”

Piers shakes his head and lets it go. Billy is far too fat, and always will be. He will always be distracted by family and money worries, car insurance and composition. For all our frustration and rebuke, he will never be on time. But the moment his bow comes down on the strings he is transfigured. He is a wonderful cellist, light and profound: the base of our harmony, the rock on which we rest.

Every rehearsal of the Maggiore Quartet begins with a very plain, very slow three-octave scale on all four instruments in unison: sometimes major, as in our name, sometimes minor, depending on the key of the first piece we are to play. No matter how fraught our lives have been over the last couple of days, no matter how abrasive our disputes about people or politics, or how visceral our differences about what we are to play and how we are to play it, it reminds us that we are, when it comes to it, one. We try not to look at each other when we play this scale; no

ségek születnének, de ha Billy megsértődik, az még rosszabb lenne. Ez az igazság.

– Sajátos Helen-féle logika – értékkel Piers.

– Semmi bajom Billyvel... – mondja Helen.

– Egyikünknek sincs vele baja – vág közbe Piers. – Mindannyian szeretjük egymást, ez magától értetődik. De ez esetben hármunknak tisztáznunk kell az álláspontunkat, egyetértésre kéne jutnunk, mielőtt Billy leteszi elénk a negyedik „Razumovszki” vonósnégystä.

Mielőtt egyezsége jutnánk, megérkezik Billy. Fáradtan vonszolja a csellóját, mentegetőzik, de felderül az arca, amikor meglátja a csokis kekszet – Helen tudja, hogy ez a kedvence –, befal néhányat, hálás köszönettel fogadja a kávéját, újra mentegetőzik, és hangolni kezd.

– Lydia elvitte az autót. Fogorvoshoz ment. Őrült rohanásban voltam, majdnem elfelejtettem a Brahms-kottákat. A metrő meg egy katasztrófa – verejtek csillog a homlokán és nehezen veszi a levegőt. – Sajnálom. Bocsánat. Bocs. Soha nem fogok késni többet. Soha.

– Vegyél még egy kekszet, Billy – mondja Helen szeretetteljesen.

– Mi lenne, ha vennél egy mobiltelefont, Billy – mondja Piers lustán, de ellentmondást nem tűrő hangon, mint egy prefektus.

– Miért? – kérdezi Billy. – Miért kéne vennem mobiltelefont? Nem vagyok sem strici, sem vízszelő.

Piers a fejét rázza, de elengedi a megjegyzést a füle mellett. Billy túl kövér. Mindig is az lesz. Mindig el fogja terelni a figyelmét a család, a pénzügyi gondok, az autó biztosítása, a komponálás. Bármennyire bosszantó és bármennyit szidjuk, mindig késni fog. De abban a pillanatban, amikor a vonója a húrokra ereszkedik, átszellemül. Csodálatos csellista: könnyed és mély. Nyugalmunk alapja, a szikla, amely támaszunk.

one appears to lead. Even the first upbeat is merely breathed by Piers, not indicated by any movement of his head. When I play this I release myself into the spirit of the quartet. I become the music of the scale. I mute my will, I free my self.

After Alex Foley left five years ago and I was being considered as a possible second violinist by Piers, Helen and Billy, we tried out various bits of music together, rehearsed together, in fact played several concerts together, but never played the scale. I did not even know that for them it existed. Our last concert was in Sheffield. At midnight, two hours after it was over, Piers phoned me in my hotel room to say that they all wanted me to join.

“It was good, Michael,” he said. “Helen insists you belong to us.” Despite this little barb, aimed at his sister, doubtless present at the other end, he sounded almost elated – quite something for Piers. Two days later, back in London, we met for a rehearsal and began, this time, with the scale. As it rose, calm and almost without vibrato, I felt my happiness build. When it paused at the top before descending, I glanced at my new colleagues, to left and to right. Piers had slightly averted his face. It astonished me. Piers is hardly the sort of musician who weeps soundlessly at the beauty of scales. I had no idea at the time what was going through his mind. Perhaps, in playing the scale again, he was in some sense letting Alex go.

Today we are running through a couple of Haydn quartets and a Brahms. The Haydns are glorious; they give us joy. Where there are difficulties, we can understand them – and therefore come to an understanding among ourselves. We love Haydn, and he makes us love each other. Not so Brahms. He has always been a cross for our quartet.

I feel no affinity for Brahms, Piers can't stand him, Helen adores him, Billy finds him “deeply interesting”, whatever that means. We were asked to include some Brahms in a programme

Minden próbát egy nagyon egyszerű, nagyon lassú, három ok-távnyi skálával kezdünk, unisono a négy hangszeren. Néha dúrban, amire a nevünk is utal, néha mollban, attól függően, mi lesz az első darab, amit próbálunk. Bármi történt is velünk az elmúlt egy-két napban, bármennyire eltérőek is a nézeteink a politikát és bizonyos embereket illetően, vagy zsigeriek a különbségek abban a tekintetben, hogy mit és hogyan adjunk elő, a bemelegítő skálázás emlékeztet minket rá, hogy egyek vagyunk. Igyekszünk nem nézni egymásra, és senki sem irányít. Még a felütést is inkább csak leheli Piers, mintsem akár egy apró bólintással jelezné. A skála közben a vonósnégyes szellemiségébe engedem át magam. A skála hangjaivá válok. Elnémítom az akaratom, és lényem felszabadul.

Amikor öt évvel ezelőtt Alex Foley kilépett, és a többiek kiszemeltek mint lehetséges másodhegedűst, a legkülönbözőbb darabokat próbáltuk, még néhány koncertet is adtunk, de soha nem játszottuk az unisono skálát. Tudomásom sem volt róla, hogy így hangolódna össze. Sheffieldben volt az utolsó fellépésünk. Ejjélfelkor, két órával a koncert után Piers áttelefonált a hotelezszobámba, hogy megkérjen, csatlakozzam hozzájuk.

– Jó voltál, Michael – mondta. – Helen ragaszkodik hozzá, hogy befogadjunk.

A húga felé – aki nyilván ott volt velem a vonal túlsó végén – irányuló kis tüske ellenére szinte ünnepélyes volt a hangja. Pierstől ez nem kevés. Két nappal később Londonban a következő próbát a skálával kezdtük. A szinte minden vibrato nélkül megszólaltatott, nyugodt, emelkedő hangsor alatt éreztem, hogy betölt a boldogság. A legmagasabb hang utáni pillanatnyi szünetben, az ereszkedő skála előtt, körbepillantottam új társaimra. Piers félig elfordította az arcát. Ez meglepett. Piers abszolút nem az a fajta muzsikusként, aki hangtalanul sírni képes egy egyszerű skála gyönyörűsége fölött. Fogalmam sem volt akkor, mi játszódhat

we are due to perform in Edinburgh, and Piers, as our programmer, accepted the inevitable and chose the first string quartet, the C minor.

We saw valiantly away through the first movement without stopping.

“Good tempo,” says Helen tentatively, looking at the music rather than at any of us.

“A bit turgid, I thought. We aren’t the Busch Quartet,” I say.

“You’d better not say anything against the Busch,” says Helen.

“I’m not. But they were them and we are us.”

“Talk of arrogance,” says Helen.

“Well, should we go on? Or clean up?” I ask.

“Clean up,” snaps Piers. “It’s a total mess.”

“Precision’s the key,” says Billy, half to himself. “Like with the Schoenberg.”

Helen sighs. We begin playing again. Piers stops us. He looks directly at me.

“It’s you, Michael. You’re sort of suddenly intense without any reason. You’re not supposed to be saying anything special.”

“Well, he tells me to express.”

“Where?” asks Piers, as if to an idiot-child. “Just precisely where?”

“Bar fifteen.”

“I don’t have anything there.”

“Bad luck,” I say shortly. Piers looks over at my part in disbelief. “Rebecca’s getting married to Stuart,” says Helen.

“What?” says Piers, jogged out of his concentration. “You’re kidding.”

“No, I’m not. I heard it from Sally. And Sally heard it directly from Rebecca’s mother.”

“Stuart!” says Piers. “Oh God. All her babies will be born brain-dead.” Billy and I exchange glances. There is something

le benne. Talán, hogy velem játszotta a skálát, ezzel a gesztussal engedte el magától Alexet.

Ma két Haydn vonósnégyesen és egy Brahms futunk végig. Haydn csodálatos, örömet okoz. Ha néhol nehézségek akadnak, képesek vagyunk értelmezni, és hamar egyetértésre jutunk egymással. Szeretjük Haydn muzsikáját, rajta keresztül megszeretjük egymást. Brahms nem ennyire ideális. Az ő darabjai mindig nézeteltéréseket szülnek közöttünk.

Nem érzek affinitást Brahms-hoz, Piers ki nem állhatja, Helen imádja, Billy azt mondja, mélyen érdekes – bármit is ért ez alatt. Az edinburgh-i koncert kapcsán felkértek, hogy valamit Brahms-tól is adjunk elő, és Piers mint programfelelős, elfogadva az elkerülhetetlent, az első, C-dúr vonósnégyest választotta.

Megállás nélkül, hősiezen keresztülfűrészeljük magunkat az első tételén.

– Jó ütemben játszottuk – jegyzi meg Helen várakozón, de nem néz fel ránk a kottából.

– Én kicsit dagályosnak éreztem. Nem kéne úgy játszani, mint a Busch vonósnégyes – mondom.

– Ne szidd őket – mondja Helen.

– Nem szidom, de mi mások vagyunk.

– Az arrogancia beszél belőled – mondja Helen.

– Folytassuk? Vagy hagyjuk legközelebbre? – kérdem.

– Hagyjuk – sziszegi Piers. – Nagyon gáz.

– A pontos ütemezés a lényeg – mondja Billy, félig magának. – Mint Schönbergnél.

Helen sóhajtozik. Újra játszani kezdünk, de Piers leállít. Rám mered.

– Te rontod el, Michael. Valahogy minden ok nélkül hirtelen nyomatékosítasz. Nem kéne hangsúlyt kifejeznünk ezen a ponton.

– A kotta jelzi így.

jerky, abrasive, irrelevant about many of our conversations during rehearsals which sits oddly with the exactitude and expressivity we are seeking to create. Helen, for instance, usually says the first thing that comes into her head. Sometimes her thoughts run ahead of her words; sometimes it's the other way around.

“Let's go on,” suggests Billy.

We play for a few minutes. There is a series of false starts, no sense of flow.

“I'm just not coming out,” says Billy. “I feel like such a wimp four bars before B.”

“And Piers comes in like a gobbling turkey at forty-one,” says Helen.

“Don't be nasty, Helen,” says her brother.

Finally we come to Piers's high crescendo.

“Oh no, oh no, oh no,” cries Billy, taking his hand off the strings and gesticulating.

“We're all a bit loud here,” says Helen, aiming for tact.

“It's too hysterical,” I say.

“Who's too hysterical?” asks Piers.

“You.” The others nod.

Piers's rather large ears go red.

“You've got to cool that vibrato,” says Billy. “It's like heavy breathing on the phone.”

“OK,” says Piers grimly. “And can you be a bit darker at one-oh-eight, Billy?”

It isn't usually like this. Most of our rehearsals are much more convivial. I blame it on what we're playing.

“We're not getting anywhere as a whole,” says Billy with a kind of innocent agitation in his eyes. “That was terribly organised.”

“As in organised terribly?” I ask.

“Yes. We've got to get it together somehow. It's just a sort of noise.”

– Hol? – kérdezi Piers olyan hangon, mintha egy idióta gyerekekhez szólna. – Egész pontosan, hol látsz ilyen utasítást?

– A tizenötödik ütemnél.

– Nálam semmit nem jelez.

– Nincs szerencséd – mondom ingerülten. Piers hitetlenkedve böngészi a kottámat.

– Rebecca és Stuart összeházasodnak – mondja Helen.

– Micsoda? – kérdi Piers kizökkentve a koncentrációból. – Hülyéskedsz?

– Nem. Komolyan. Sally mondta. És Sally közvetlenül Rebecca anyukájától hallotta.

– Stuart! – nyögi Piers. – Te jóisten! Az összes gyerekük agykárosult lesz.

A pillantásom találkozik Billyével. Van valami zökkenőkkel és súrlódásokkal teli irrelevancia a próbák alatt folytatott párbeszédünkben, amely érdekes módon együtt jár az ideális, precíz, zenei kifejezőképességgel. Helen például rögtön kimondja, ami eszébe jut. Néha a gondolatai a szavai előtt járnak, néha megfordítva.

– Folytassuk – javasolja Billy.

Néhány percig próbálkozunk. Többször rosszul indítunk, nem vagyunk együtt.

– Valahogy nem hallatszom – mondja Billy. – Négy ütemmel a B előtt olyan vagyok, mint egy hulla.

– Piers meg úgy jön be a negyvenediknél, mint egy hurukkoló pulyka – mondja Helen.

– Ne légy közönséges – mondja a bátyja.

Végül elérkezünk Piers magas crescendo futamához.

– Nem. Jaj, nem – kiáltja Billy grimaszolva, és elengedi a húrokat.

– Mindannyian túl hangosak vagyunk – mondja Helen tapintatosan.

“It’s called Brahms, Billy,” says Piers.

“You’re just prejudiced,” says Helen. “You’ll come around to him.”

“In my dotage.”

“Why don’t we plan a structure around the tunes?” Billy suggests.

“Well, it sort of lacks tunes,” I say. “Not melody exactly, but melodicity. Do I mean that? What’s the right word?”

“Melodiousness,” says Helen. “And, incidentally, it doesn’t lack tunes.”

“But what do you mean by that?” says Piers to me. “It’s all tune. I mean, I’m not saying I like it, but.

I point my bow at Piers’s music. “Is that tune? I doubt even Brahms would claim that was tune.”

“Well, it’s not arpeggio, it’s not scale, it’s not ornament, so ... oh, I don’t know. It’s all mad and clogged up. Bloody Edinburgh...”

“Stop ranting, Piers,” says Helen. “You played that last bit really well. I loved that slide. It was quite a shock, but it’s great. You’ve got to keep it.”

Piers is startled by the praise, but soon recovers. “But Billy now sounds completely unvibrato’d,” he says.

“That was me trying to get a darker colour,” counters Billy.

“Well, it sounds gravelly.”

“Shall I get a new cello?” asks Billy. “After I’ve bought my mobile phone?”

Piers grunts. Why don’t you just go up the C-string?”

“It’s too woofy.”

“Once more, then? From ninety-two?” I suggest.

“No, from the double-bar,” says Helen.

“No, from seventy-five,” says Billy.

“OK,” says Piers.

– És hisztérikusak – teszem hozzá.

– Ki hisztérikus? – kérdezi Piers.

– Te.

A többiek bólogatnak. Piers nagy füle elvörösödik.

– Finomabban a vibratóval – mondja Billy. – Így olyan, mint a lihegés a telefonban.

– Jó – böki ki Piers. – Te meg legyél egy kicsit borúsabb a száznyolcnál, Billy.

Nem mindig vitatkozunk ennyit. A legtöbb próba sokkal de-rűsebb. Én Brahmsot hibáztatom.

– Nem érünk el semmit zenekarként – mondja Billy, ártatlan nyugtalansággal a szemében. – Az egész rosszul lett szervezve.

– Úgy érted, elszervezték? – viccelődöm.

– Igen. De össze kell kalapáljuk valahogy. Ez így csak zajkeltés.

– Ezért hívják Brahmsnak, Billy – mondja Piers.

– Előítélettel közelítetek hozzá – mondja Helen. – Majd rá-éreztek.

– Majd ha megvénülök.

– Találjuk meg a dallamok szerkezetét – javasolja Billy.

– Éppen ez az. Hogy nincs dallama – mondom. – Melódia helyett melódikum vagy mi a szósz. Ez a helyes kifejezés?

– Melodicitás – javít ki Helen. – És ami azt illeti, nincs dallamban hiány.

– Mit akarsz ezzel mondani? – fordul felém Piers. – Az egész csupa dallam. Nem mondom, hogy tetszik, de mégis.

A vonómmal Piers kottája felé bökök: – Ez neked dallam? Ezt még Brahms sem hívná dallamnak.

– Szóval ... annyi igaz, hogy nincs skála, nincs arpeggio, nincs díszítés. Mit tudom én? Örület! Az egész egybefolyik. Rohadjon meg Edinburgh!

– Csillapodj le, Piers – mondja Helen. – Az utolsó részt na-

After a few more minutes we pause again.

“This is just so exhausting to play,” says Helen. “To get these notes to work you have to dig each one out. It’s not like the violin...”

“Poor Helen,” I say, smiling at her. “Why don’t you swap instruments with me?”

“Cope, Helen,” says Piers. “Brahms is your baby.”

Helen sighs. “Say something nice, Billy.”

But Billy is now concentrating on a little yellow score that he has brought along.

“My deodorant experiment isn’t a success,” says Helen suddenly, raising one creamy arm.

“We’d better get on with it or we’ll never get through it,” says Billy.

Finally, after an hour and a half we arrive at the second movement. It is dark outside, and we are exhausted, as much with one another’s temperaments as with the music. But ours is an odd quadripartite marriage with six relationships, any of which, at any given time, could be cordial or neutral or strained. The audiences who listen to us cannot imagine how earnest, how petulant, how accommodating, how wilful is our quest for something beyond ourselves that we imagine with our separate spirits but are compelled to embody together. Where is the harmony of spirit in all this, let alone sublimity? How are such mechanics, such stops and starts, such facile irreverence transmuted, in spite of our bickering selves, into musical gold? And yet often enough it is from such trivial beginnings that we arrive at an understanding of a work that seems to us both true and original, and an expression of it which displaces from our minds – and perhaps, at least for a while, from the minds of those who hear us – any versions, however true, however original, played by other hands.

gyon jól játszottad. Tetszett az a hajlítás. Megdöböntő, de jól hangzik. Azt tartsd meg!

Pierst meglepi a dicséret, de hamar visszazökken a régi kerékvágásba.

– Billy játéka már teljesen nélkülözi a vibratót – mondja.

– Nálam ilyen a borúsabb kifejezés – felel Billy.

– Ez inkább érdesnek hangzik.

– Vegyek egy új csellót? – kérdezi Billy. – Miután megvettem a mobiltelefont?

– Miért nem a C-húron játszol? – morog Piers.

– Túl mély tónust nyújtana.

– Megpróbáljuk még egyszer? – nézek körül. – A kilencvenkettőtől.

– Nem. A záróvonaltól – mondja Helen.

– Ne. A hetvenöttől – javasolja Billy.

– Rendben – mondja Piers.

Néhány perc múlva újra szünetet tartunk.

– Kimerítő ezt a darabot játszani – mondja Helen. – Hogy működjön, minden hangért ásni kell. Egyáltalán nem hegedűszerű.

– Drága Helen – mosolygok felé – cseréljünk hangszer?

– Kıtartás, Helen – mondja Piers –, Brahms a te kedvenced.

– Billy, mondj valami kedveset – sóhajt Helen. De Billy már egy magával hozott sárga kottalapra koncentrálnak.

– Ez a dezodor nem válik be – mondja Helen hirtelen, felémelve a karját.

– Jobb, ha folytatjuk, különben sohasem végzünk – mondja Billy.

Másfél óra elteltével elérkezünk a második tételhez. Kint már sötét van, kimerültek vagyunk, legalább annyira egymás személységétől, mint magától a zenétől. Furcsa poligám kapcsolatunk hat különböző viszonyulást takar, amelyek mindegyike bármikor

My flat is cold, owing to the perennial heating problems here on the top floor. The ancient radiators of Archangel Court, tepid now, will scald me in the spring. Each winter I promise myself double glazing, and each spring, when prices are discounted, decide against it. Last year the money I'd set aside was soaked up by some primordial pipework that had rusted, almost rotted, into the concrete, and was dripping onto my seventh-floor neighbour's head. But this year I must do my bedroom at least.

I lie in bed, I muse, I doze. The brass flap is lifted; letters shuffle onto the wooden floor. The lift door slams. I get up, put on my dressing gown, and walk to the front door: a phone bill, a postcard from one of the students I give lessons to, a travel brochure, a letter.

I open my post with the silver letter-opener that Julia gave me a year to the day that we first met. The bill goes into the guilt-pile, where it will sit for a week or two. The brochure goes into the waste-paper basket. I enter the kitchen, shivering a bit, fill the kettle, switch it on and take the letter back to bed.

It is from my old teacher, Carl Käll – pronounced, with typical contrariness, “Shell”. We haven't been in touch for years. The stamp is Swedish. Professor Käll's handwriting on the envelope looks cramped. It is a short note, astonishingly unabrasive.

He is no longer teaching in Vienna. He retired last year, and returned to his small hometown in Sweden. He says that he happened to be in Stockholm when we played there. He was in the audience, but chose not to come backstage after the concert. We played well. In particular, he has this to say: he had always told me to “sustain”, and sustain I did. He has not been in the best of health lately, and has been thinking of some of his old students. Perhaps he was a bit rough on some of them, but the past is the past, and he can't make amends, only hope that the gain will outlast the damage. (In Professor Käll's German this last

lehet udvarias, semleges és feszült. A minket hallgató közönség elképzelni sem tudja, mennyi komoly veszekedés, csökönyösködés és alkalmazkodás árán sikerül meghaladni önmagunkat, és elkülönülő lelkületünket eggyé gyúrni. Hova tűnik a lélek harmóniája? Az emelkedettségről már ne is beszéljünk. Miképpen transzmutálódik minden megtorpanás, újrakezdés, könnyelmű tiszteletlenség – pörlekedő egyéniségünk ellenére – a muzsika aranyává? Mégis, gyakran éppen a Brahms próbáihoz hasonló triviális kezdésből érkezünk meg később a műértés talajára, ahonnan a darab igaznak és eredetinek látszik, és amely kitöröl az agyunkból – és talán a bennünket hallgató közönség emlékezetéből is – minden korábbi értelmezést, bármennyire igaznak és eredetinek tűnhetett egykor más kezek játéka.

Az állandó fűtési gondok következtében a lakásom, itt e legfelső emeleten, hideg. Az Archangel Court ódon radiátorai jelenleg langyosak, ám tavasszal tűzforróak lesznek. Minden télen elhatározom, hogy lecseréltetem az ablakokat, de tavasszal, amikor csökkennek a számlák, elállok tőle. Tavaly a félretett pénzemet felemésztette az Őskorból itt maradt rozsdás vízvezeték cseréje, ami már annyira elrohadt a falban, hogy a hetedikben a lakók nyakába csöpögött a víz. Idén legalább a hálószoba ablakát meg kellene csináltatnom.

Ágyban fekszem, töpregek, elszenderedem. Az ajtó réz leveányításán át leveleket dobnak be. Valaki becsapja a liftajtót. Felkelek, magamra öltöm a fürdőköpenyt, és a leveleimért indulok: telefonszámla, képeslap egy tanítványomtól, utazási reklám és egyetlen levél.

Azzal az ezüst pengével vágom fel a borítékokat, amit Juliától kaptam megismerkedésünk első évfordulójára. A számla a bűnkupac tetején találja magát, egy-két hétig ott csücsül. A reklám szórólap a szemetesvödörben. Kissé dideregve a konyhába lépek, vizet teszek fel forrni, és a levéllel visszamászok az ágyba.

sentence sounds odd, as if he were translating from Martian.) Anyway, he wishes me well, and hopes that if I ever teach, I will have learned something from him of how not to. He has no plans to visit England.

The kettle clicked itself off a few minutes ago. I go to the kitchen and find myself unable to remember where the teabags are. There is something troubling in the letter. Carl Käll is dying; I feel sure of it.

Someone is hammering slates onto a roof. A few sharp taps, a pause, a few sharp taps. I roll up my blinds and the light floats in. It is a clear, cold, blue-skied day.

I can smell the professor on a day like this. He is standing in a grey classroom and staring at five edgy students. He has come back from lunch at Mnozil's and his charcoal overcoat exudes an aura of garlic and tobacco. "Und jetzt, meine Herren he says, ignoring Yuko, "our colleague from the morning-land", as he sometimes calls her. He taps his bow on the piano.

I stay behind after the class for my own session with him. As soon as they have left, he rounds on me.

"If I have you here as a Gasthorer it is because certain things are understood."

"I understand, Professor Käll."

"I wanted the Kreutzer Sonata, and you prepare this instead!"

"I happened to get hold of a facsimile of this manuscript, and Beethoven's handwriting for once was so clear, I was amazed. I thought you wouldn't mind ..."

"Amazed. Excited, also, no doubt."

"Yes."

"Amazed and excited." The great Carl Käll savours the words, rich alien growths on the corpus of music. Yet it was not his fame but the excitement in his playing that first drew me to him, and it is this excitement that his playing retains – and transmits to

Egykori tanáromtól, Carl Källtől jött. Ellentmondásos módján „Shell”-nek ejti a nevét. A kapcsolatunk évekkel ezelőtt megszakadt. A borítékon svéd bélyeg van, a professzor kézírása görcsös. Rövid üzenete, meglepő módon, nem nyers.

Nem tanít már Bécsben. Nyugdíjba vonult és visszatért Svédországba, szülővárosába. Azt írja, véletlenül Stockholmban járt, amikor ott léptünk fel. A közönség soraiban ült, de úgy döntött, nem keres fel a koncert után az öltözőben. Jól játszottunk. El szeretné mondani, hogy miként mindig tanácsolta: megfelelő volt a hangképzésem. Az utóbbi időben nem a legjobb egészségnek örvend, és sokat gondol egykori növendékeire. Meglehet, sajnos kissé nyersen bánt némelyikünkkel, ám mindez már a múltba vész, nem visszafordítható, de reménykedik benne, hogy a siker jutalma túléli az okozott kárt. (Käll professzor németiségével az utolsó mondat furcsán hangzik, mintha hottentotából fordította volna.) Egyébként minden jót kíván, és reméli, ha tanítok, nem követem el azokat a hibákat, amelyeket ő elkövetett. Nem szerepel a tervei között, hogy Angliába látogasson.

Percek óta forr a víz. A konyhában egyszerűen nem emlékszem, hol tartom a teát. Valami zavar a levélben. Carl Käll halloklik. Biztos vagyok benne.

Valahol a palát szögelik a tetőn. Néhány kalapácsütés, szünet, újabb éles kalapácshangok. Felengedem a rolettát, beúszik a fény. Tiszta, hideg, kék az ég.

Ilyen napokon szinte érzem a professzor szagát. Egy szürke teremben áll, és öt nyugtalan növendékét bámulja. A Mnozilban ebédelt, szénfekete kabátjából árad a fokhagyma és a dohányfüst szaga.

– Und jetzt, meine Herren – szólal meg, figyelmen kívül hagyva Yukót, „kollégánkat a felkelő nap országából”, ahogy néha körülírja a lányt. A zongorához üti a pálcaját.

Az óra végeztével én még maradok, egyéni foglalkozásom

those happy enough to hear him. But how many concerts does he choose to give these days? Five a year? Six?

“I thought that another sonata ... the one just before the Kreutzer ...”

Carl Käll shakes his head. “Don’t think, I do not recommend it.”

“Julia McNicholl and I have spent two weeks practising it. I’ve asked her to join us in half an hour.”

“What is today?”

“Friday.”

Professor Käll appears to be pondering something.

“That silly Yuko goes to the Zentralfriedhof to lay flowers on Beethoven’s grave on Fridays,” he says.

Despite myself, I smile. I am not surprised, Yuko does all the things that young Japanese women students are expected to do: practise obediently, suffer terribly, and visit all the Beethoven and Schubert houses they can locate. But Yuko also does what I know I should do – would, indeed, if I knew how to. She ignores the fact that Carl ignores her, annuls his insults by not rising to them, and sifts out a musician’s message from his playing, not his speech.

“I want the Kreutzer by Monday,” continues Carl Käll.

“But, Professor ...” I protest.

“By Monday.”

“Professor, there is no way I can – or even if I could, that a pianist could...”

“I am sure Fräulein McNicholl will assist you.”

“Our trio had set aside this weekend for rehearsing. We have a concert coming up.”

“Your trio manages with not much apparent practice.” I say nothing for a few seconds. Carl Käll coughs. “When are you playing next?”

lesz vele. Amint elmennek a többiek, nekem támad.

– Mivel Ön itt mint Gasthörer tanul, bizonyos dolgok magától értetődnek.

– Természetesen, Professzor úr.

– A Kreutzer szonátát kértem, Ön pedig ebből készült.

– Véletlenül akadtam erre a fakszimile kottára, és kivételesen Beethoven kézírása megdöbbenően világos volt. Gondoltam nem bánja, ha...

– Megdöbbenő. Egyben izgalmas is, nemde?

– Igen.

– Megdöbbenő és izgalmas – morzsolgatja a szavakat a híres Carl Käll. A szavak gazdag, idegen hajtások a zene testén. Mégsem a híre, hanem izgalmas játéka okán vonzódtam először hozzá, és éppen ez a megőrzött izgalmasság árad belőle a szerencsés hallgatóság felé. De hány fellépést vállal manapság? Ötöt vagy hatot egy évben.

– Gondoltam egy másik szonáta... közvetlenül a Kreutzer előtt...

– Ne gondolja, hogy nem ajánlanám – rázza a fejét.

– Julia McNichollal két hétig gyakoroltuk. Megkértem rá, hogy fél órára csatlakozzon hozzánk.

– Milyen nap van ma?

– Péntek.

Úgy tűnik, a professzor töpreng valamin.

– Az a buta Yuko péntekenként virágot visz Beethoven sírjához a Zentralfriedhofban – mondja.

Akaratom ellenére elmosolyodom. A dolog nem lep meg. Yuko tipikusan olyan, mint minden fiatal japán zeneakadémista: engedelmesen gyakorol, szörnyen szenved, és felkeres minden házat, ahol Beethoven vagy Schubert valaha megfordult. De Yuko abban is ügyes, amit nekem is gyakorolnom kellene, csak tudnám hogyan: nem vesz tudomást róla, hogy a professzor ke-

“In a couple of weeks – at the Bosendorfer Saal.”

“And what?”

“We’re beginning with an early Beethoven ...”

“Are you being deliberately unspecific?”

“No, Professor.”

“Which?”

“Opus 1 number 3. In C minor.”

“Yes, yes, yes, yes,” says Carl Käll, provoked by my mentioning the key. “Why?”

“Why?”

“Yes, why?”

“Because our cellist loves it.”

“Why? Why?” Carl looks almost demented.

“Because she finds it amazing and exciting.”

Carl Käll looks carefully at me, as if wondering which of my cervical vertebrae it will cause him least trouble to snap. He turns away. I used to be one of his favourite students. It was at a masterclass in my last year at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester that we briefly met, and it was he who suggested, to my disbelieving joy, that I should come to study with him in Vienna as an older student outside the regular curriculum. He thought that I was capable of – and that I would want – a solo career. Now he is perhaps as disillusioned with me as I with him.

“You spend too much of your time on chamber music,” he says. “You could have a better career.”

“I suppose so,” I say, bothered by his assumption of what “better” is, but not disputing it.

“You should be guided by me. That is why you are here, is it not? You are very self-willed. Too much so.”

Carl’s voice is temporarily gentle. I say nothing. He hums a phrase from the Kreutzer, reaches his hand out for the facsimile

resztül néz rajta, sértő megjegyzéseit elengedi a füle mellett, és a mester üzenetét a játékból szűri le, nem a szavaiból.

– Hétfőre akarom a Kreutzer-t – folytatja Carl Käll.

– De Professzor úr... – védekezem.

– Hétfőre.

– Professzor úr, kizárt dolog, hogy én... De az hagyján, hanem a zongoraszólam...

– Biztos vagyok benne, hogy Fräulin McNicholl a segítségére siet.

– A hétvégén a trióval próbálunk a közelgő koncertre.

– Az Ön triója abszurdan kevés gyakorlással is kész fellépni.

Néhány pillanatig nem szólok meg. Carl Käll köhéccsel.

– Mikor lesz az előadás?

– Két hét múlva, a Bösendorfer Saalban.

– A műsor?

– Egy korai Beethovennel kezdünk...

– Szándékosan nem mondja meg konkrétan?

– Professzor úr...

– Melyikkel?

– Opus 1, numero 3. C-mollban.

– Igen, igen, igen – mondja Carl Käll, de bosszantja, hogy a darab hangnemét is hozzátettem. – Miért?

– Miért?

– Igen. Miért?

– Mert a csellistánk nagyon szereti.

– De miért? Miért? – Carl szinte hibbantnak tűnik.

– Mert a csellista izgalmasnak találja.

Carl Käll óvatosan pillant fel rám, de mintha azt mérlegelné, hol lenne a legegyszerűbb elvágni a nyaki ütőeremet. Hátat fordít. Valamikor a kedvenc növendéke voltam. Manchesterben, a Royal Northern College of Music mesterkurzusán találkoztunk először. Meglepetésemre és örömömmre felvetette, hogy tanulhat-

manuscript, looks at it with fascination for a few minutes, but won't relent.

“Till Monday, then.”

My tea has overbrewed: it is bitter, but still drinkable. I turn on the television and return to the present. Four plump humanoid creatures, red, yellow, green and purple, are frolicking on a grassy hill. Rabbits nibble the grass. The creatures hug each other. A periscope emerges from a knoll and tells them they must say goodbye. After a little protest, they do, jumping one by one into a hole in the ground.

Carl Käll, that old man, that stubborn magician, brutal and full of suffocating energy, did not, unaided, drive me from Vienna. It was as much my younger self, unyielding, unwilling to exchange a mentor for a dictator, or to sidle past a collision.

If I had not met him I would not have brought to life the voice in my hands. I would not have gone to the Musikhochschule to study. I would not have met Julia. I would not have lost Julia. I would not be adrift. How can I hate Carl any more? After so many years, surely everything is subject to the agents of change: rain, spores, webs, darkness. Maybe I could have learned more from him if I had swallowed my sense of self. Julia must have been right, she must have been right. But now I think: let him die, his time has come, I cannot reply. Why should he foist on me this responsibility for absolution?

I could not have learned more from him. She thought I could, or hoped I could, or hoped at least that for her sake I would remain for a while in Vienna. But I was not learning, I was unlearning, I was unravelling. When I came apart at the concert, it was not because I had been ill, or because I had not prepared what I was playing. It was because he had said I would fail, and I could see him in the audience and knew he willed me to.

nék nála Bécsben mint egyéni tanrendes, idősebb hallgató. Úgy érezte, képes lehetek rá, és igény is van bennem, hogy szóló karriert fussak be. Mostanra talán ő is ugyanúgy csalódott egykori növendékében, mint én benne.

– Túl sok időt szentel a kamarazenének – mondja. – Jobb eredményeket is elérhetne.

– Gondolom, igen – mondom elkerülve a vitát, de zavar, hogy másként értelmezzük, mi a jobb számomra.

– Ön az én irányításomra szánta el magát. Ezért van itt, nem igaz? De Ön túlságosan öntörvényű.

Carl hangja átmenetileg gyengéd. Nem válaszolok. A Kreutzer egy részletét dűnnyögi, a fakszimile kéziratért nyúl, percekig elbűvölten tanulmányozza, de nem adja meg magát.

– Akkor hétfőre.

A teát túlforraltam, keserű, de meg lehet inni. Bekapcsolom a tévét, és visszatérek a jelenbe. Négy kövér, emberszabású lény – egy piros, egy sárga, egy zöld és egy lila – füves domboldalon hancúroznak. Nyulak rágcsálják a fűvet. A lények összeölelkeznek. Az egyik dombtetőn kiemelkedik egy periszkóp, és onnan szólnak nekik, hogy el kell búcsúzniuk egymástól. Némi elégedetlenkedés után szót fogadnak, és külön-külön eltűnnek egy-egy lyukban.

Nem Carl Käll, ez a brutális és fojtogató energiákkal teli öregember, a konok varázsló űzött el Bécsből. Sokkal inkább fiatal, meg nem alkuvó lényem volt az ok, amely képtelen volt rá, hogy mentorát diktátorra cserélje, vagy hogy elkerülje az összeütközést.

Ha nem találkoztunk volna, soha nem kelt volna életre a kezemben hordozott hang. Nem is lettem volna a Musikhochschule hallgatója. Nem találkoztam volna Juliával. Nem vesztettem volna el őt. Nem tévelyegtem volna. Milyen gyűlölködtem mégis még mindig Carl-t? Ennyi év után mindent át-

A NAGYVILÁG JÚNIUSI SZÁMÁBAN:

JAMES BOSWELL

Napló, 1764 – Grand Tour: Találkozása Rousseau-val.

Találkozása Voltaire-rel

Napló [1784] – Ebéd Kant professzornál

YEKTA KOPAN

Portobello 22 –

(Elhallgattam, és az anyanyelvem a csend lett)

KRZYSZTOF LISOWSKI

Fekete noteszok

Vonzódások –

Albert Zsuzsa Vargyas Lajossal beszélget

MEZEI BALÁZS

Otthon Európában – Móser Zoltán képei elé

LUKÁCS LAURA

Houellebecq tájai

ROBERT ZARETSKY

Grand Tour: James Boswell jutalomútja

jár a változás: esőt, csírákat, pókhálót, sötétséget. Többet is kaphattam volna tőle, ha visszanyelem saját egyéniségem. Juliának igaza volt, biztos igaza volt. De most azt gondolom: haljon meg, itt az ideje. Nem válaszolhatok a levelére. Miért terheli rám a feloldozás felelősségét?

Nem volt már mit tanulnom tőle. Julia úgy érezte, igen. Vagy remélte, hogy talán igen, és remélte, hogy az ő kedvéért még egy darabig Bécsben maradok. De nem tanultam már semmit. Sőt: felejtettem, kioldódtam. Nem a betegségem miatt estem szét az előadáson, vagy mert nem próbáltam volna eleget. Azért volt minden, mert Carl kudarcot jószolt, és láttam a közönség sorai-
ban: rámerőszakolta az akaratát, a kívánságát.

A versbetétek Vidor Miklós és Závodszy Zoltán fordításai

