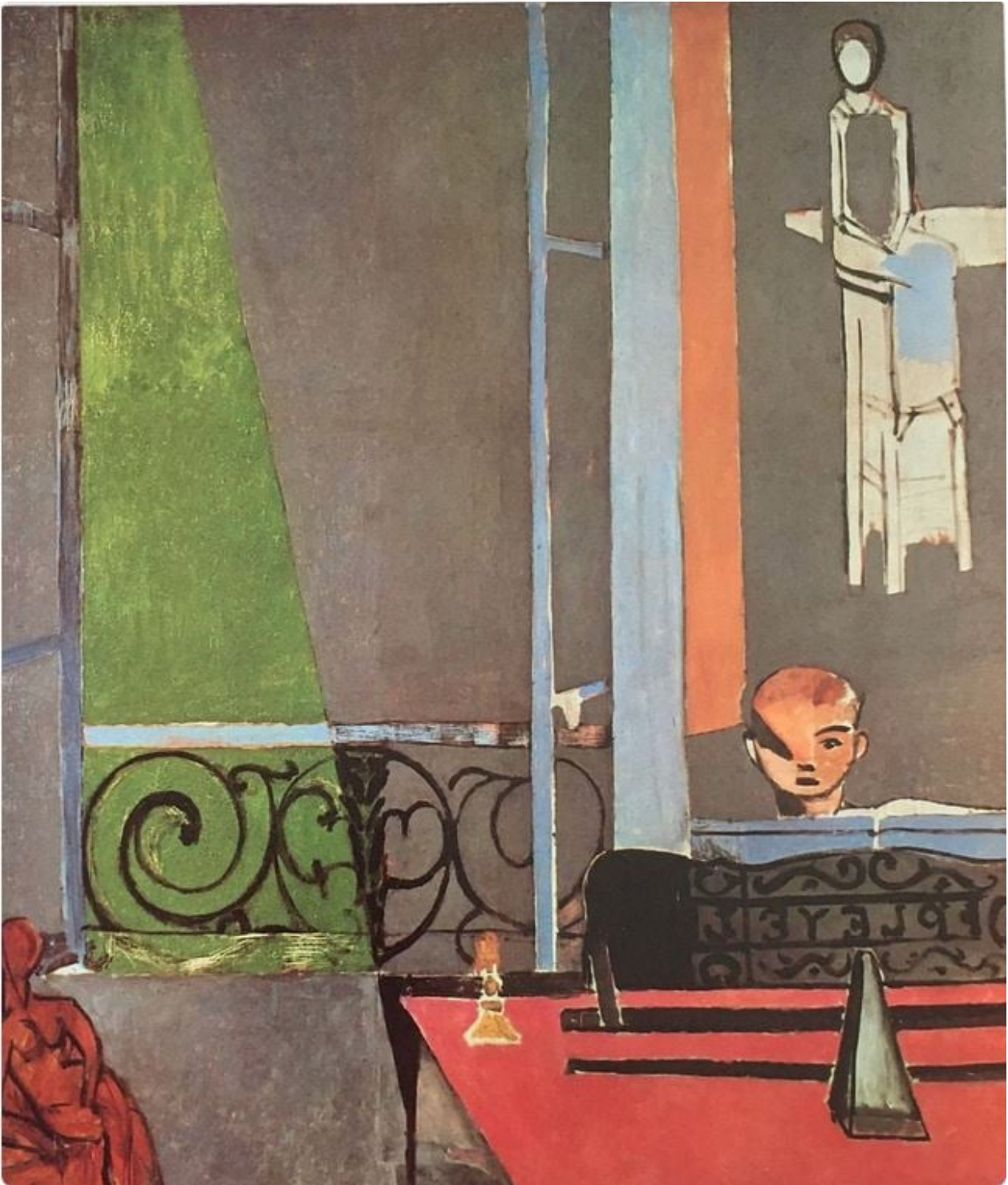


An Urge to Sway



The Piano Lesson, Henri Matisse, 1912

It was late; morning was only a few hours off. A young man was on the docks, motionless but not at rest, sitting on an oversized throne—a two-year-old public art installation already showing signs of age: patches of faux gilding had flaked off, revealing a black base-layer. In the river, the

lights of the buildings opposite the docks were reflected in the water, which was punctuated by buoys, moored yachts, and the mammoth concrete legs of a bridge.

He did not know exactly how long he had been sitting there. He was thinking about a piece of music he was working on, looking to the scene ahead of him for inspiration. He tried to lose himself in the water. But he continually marked things that took him back to himself; the way a lit window's reflection would lie on the water, the hue of the distant mountains, the opaque immensities of shadow beneath the bridge, and so on summoned rushes of disjointed memories. And as they came upon him, he would exercise the entirety of his wherewithal to hurl himself back into the present, into the water as it was. For a moment, he thought he would have an easier time in this if he were drunk. But then he reminded himself that that was neither necessary nor ideal. No, he resolved to dam up his stream of consciousness and work it with all his peculiar innermost forces and fires till he succeeded in brewing something so strong and pure that it would utterly overcome his congenital sobriety. And he tried and failed, going on in that way for a while.

He saw a little boat: not a private pleasure craft, but something manifestly business-oriented, on which were two individuals dressed in heavy uniforms. He looked intently at them, assuming they would not notice. (He was in a relatively unlit section of the docks.) Certainly, they did not seem to notice as they weaved between the legs of the bridge pulling up or perhaps putting down what seemed to him to be an industrial cable. And he did not know why, but the pair seemed incredibly comical—on par with the likes of Laurel and Hardy, and Abbott and Costello.

And this novel element gripped him so entirely that the rush of memories erstwhile intruding upon him lost their hold on his attention. At length, he watched the boat move through the shadows and shimmering flakes of electric light. (The city's

light pollution, for better or worse, admitted no starlight.) But then his focus was distracted by a glint darting from the near-water to his immediate area of the docks and by force of habit he checked his watch (which was generally dull and weathered, having once belonged to his grandfather) and he realized the glint was reflecting off of its still-shiny face. This—the intrusion of his own person into the scene—disgusted and alarmed him. He contemplated for a moment pushing the watch up his sleeve. But it was too late; he knew he did not have the wherewithal to recover his previous frame of mind. And glancing ahead as he rose to walk home, he noted the boat was gone.

Walking through the brightening streets, listening to the various workaday noises of urban dawn, his thoughts turned to the last time he had sat on that throne—about a year and a half ago, in summer. He had been with a friend of his, Heidi, who had since moved to Boston. She had been indulging in her favorite vein of harangue. “Other people,” she had said with practiced ruefulness, “wanted things,” and yet she did not “want anything”—however, she desperately wanted “to want” something. To wit, she thought other people—unlike her—lived blessedly in the thrall of all sorts of aspirations and that if she simply had some, or even just one, her worst problems would be solved. Notably, she only indulged thusly when others talked about their own aspirations and certainly, the young man had just talked about his at great length.

About a month prior to that summer day, he had abandoned his career as an up-and-coming soloist to focus on composing, subsisting frugally on the income from a handful of weekly lessons he gave to the children of wealthy superfans. And as he and Heidi had made their way to the throne along the docks in the thick of the city’s inexpungable humidity, he had told her about how he wanted to write symphonies, operas, masses, waltzes, and the like in order to “give voice to and refine the metal constituting his innermost self.” Drowsily, he

recalled that as the aspirations he fancifully enumerated and elaborated upon floated to increasingly rarified heights, her countenance had drooped in tandem. However, he had not been put off; he knew it was just those aspirations (or perhaps more precisely his capacity for entertaining them) that kindled her friendliness towards him in the first place—that is, he knew that though she was drooping, she was drooping towards him. But suddenly he found himself at his doorstep and crossing the threshold set aside these remembrances, determining to sleep.

Around noon, our young man awoke. The weather was unseasonably warm and feeling the warmth from his open window, he decided to have his 'morning' coffee in the backyard, whereat he saw, stepping outside, his friend and housemate, Abraxas, bent over a laptop. (Notably, His parents had given him that strange name on the basis of an unaccountable whim and because of its strangeness he assiduously maintained to everyone but his closest friends—sometimes to the point of outright denial—that his name was 'Abe.')

Glancing upward, he asked our young man, in a carefully restrained tone, "Have you heard the big news?"

Abraxas indulged in both tasting and dishing out the world's gossip and to that end maintained close relations with busybodies in about a dozen cities, calling each individually on a remarkably regular basis. He relayed his latest tidbit: Heidi had just broken off her engagement with Matthew, a mutual friend of theirs. (Notably, our young man was not then aware that Matthew had even been in a relationship with Heidi in the first place.) Apparently, on the prior day, Matthew had proposed with a big, beautiful ring, just the sort Heidi had always wanted, and she quickly accepted. But then she brought it to a jeweler, because the band was a bit too big, and the jeweler informed her it was fake. So, she left Matthew a torrent of messages and broke off the engagement. At hearing of all this, our young man said to Abraxas confusedly, "But

Matthew is loaded!" And delightedly, Abraxas explained that the ring was an heirloom "from the non-loaded side of the family." "But then why isn't the engagement back on?" our young man asked. And then Abraxas lifted his sparse brows in a studied expression that seemed intended to convey a mixture of resignation and bemused acceptance of the world's riddles, and said—while evidently suppressing a smile—"Oh, she said, 'It just didn't feel right.'"

"Wild," our young man replied, though in a tone not denoting real bewilderment; he knew Heidi had a mercurial manner in romance and that this sort of thing was par for the course. He then thought to mention that he had just been thinking of her the night before, but realized that if he did, that Heidi would be sure to hear of it and he said nothing. Nevertheless, he perhaps betrayed himself in his countenance.

Abraxas looked down at his laptop, seeming to type away at something, and said to our young man, "Anyways, you'll probably hear all about it from Matthew." And our young man asked what he meant. (Matthew, as far as he knew, was in Boston, and given that they were not particularly close, it seemed unlikely that he would be hearing from him anytime soon). But Abraxas said, "Well, it's winter break: he'll be here in a bit. I was just talking with him. He wants to get seafood later." And hearing this, our young man briefly considered the situation, at length pronouncing casually, "That's nice," to which Abraxas replied, "Good—good," adding after a pause, "I told him we'd come. I'll confirm with him now—don't worry, he'll probably get the check."

Before dinner, our young man resolved to work on his composition. Typically, once he had an idea of a melody or two and the general shape of a piece in mind, he would shift from working at his piano to working at his desk, continuing his composition graphically. When he had first started composing,

he had clung to strict forms—fugues, canons, motets, madrigals, and so on—and the work he would do at the desk-stage of his compositional process essentially involved little more than fleshing out notions using standard techniques, leaning heavily on canonic pieces he thought were relevant as models. However, he gradually found that his best compositions, which were relatively informal (pointedly owing whatever formality they had to laborious editing) came to him largely in bursts of ecstatic insight.

He suspected that his capability for recognizing and appreciating these bursts was principally accountable to the pains he had taken to acquire various compositional techniques (to the point that many were now second-nature). But he suspected that the bursts themselves were more accountable to some fundamental change that had begun to occur within the “metal constituting his innermost self.” However, there was a trouble with these bursts: whereas our young man could easily think up musical ideas, these bursts only came in the absence of reflective deliberation. If, as one was coming, he so much as espied it for the briefest moment with the faculty of his inward gaze, it would dissipate into a quiescent snarl. But that did not mean that he never consciously worked to facilitate them. No, he simply relied on supra-reflective methods.

Supposing the presence of kindred beauty might lure a burst from the depths, our young man would at times throw himself into music, paintings, and poetry. And supposing further that it was in the nature of bursts to be impeded by the solidity of reflective consciousness, when he would throw himself thusly, he would sometimes do so under the influence of alcohol, fatigue, and even dizziness from whirling dervish-like. However, as it happens, the burst supplying our young man with the basis of his new piece had come to him while walking home in the rain—by another means.

In rare instances, musically inclined individuals report that

some dim part of their mind unwittingly works the prosaic noises of the world into a sort of pseudo-music. (Famously, for instance, Shostakovich and Schumann: the former experiencing the phenomenon after some shrapnel was extricated from his skull, and the latter throughout his short life, at first with marvelous richness, but later—and distressingly—only as an incessant A-note.) Our young man found his mind to sometimes work in this way and further, he found that by a sort of willful mental indulgence, he could sometimes swell his unwitting workings into a welter just large enough to permit the passage of bursts up from his depths. And it was by just such means that during that rainy walk he had come by the material he hoped to shape into his piece.

He thought it was remarkably beautiful, having far more potential and enigmatic subtlety in it than anything he had worked with in his whole life. At first, when he let it reign over his imagination, determining the flow of his inward fancy, he imagined only a sort of imposing and sovereign melancholy that after a period of prolonged hopelessness melted into a bright and deserved peace. But at length, repeated efforts of imagining yielded the material a more definite character.

Taking up the substance of the material inwardly, he would see vainglorious Coriolanus: not Plutarch's, Shakespeare's, nor even Heinrich Joseph von Collin's—in connection with whom Beethoven wrote his immortal "Coriolan Overture"—but another whose peculiarity derived from a negotiation between the world as our young man knew it with its traditional accounting of the lives of great men, and his inward world which, though it lacked the latter's solidity unaccountably felt truer. That is, this Coriolanus was the truest our young man could practicably fathom. And he would fathom him in his afterlife silhouetted against twilight with the whole substance of his narrative implicit in the contours of his figure: how he had

been wronged by his native Rome and adopted Corioli, how he had been scorned for a trait that in another age would have made him as celebrated as Achilles, and lastly how after death he had traversed the purpled waters and mounted the shores of Elysium into the embrace of Rhadamanthys. And fathoming this, seeing this scene—this amalgamation of the world's history and myth transmogrified by the forces of his peculiar nature—he would turn his inward ear to the whisper of the westerly wind bending there in that scene all the blazing flowers of the fortunate isle. And it was his music.

But every time he tried to work it out into neat sheet music that could be dependably played for an audience of strangers, he found that his drafts, while by no means technically sloppy or unpleasant (some, indeed, were sickeningly pleasant), all seemed untrue—too ginned up. Certainly, in the past, he had worked melodies into compositions that he felt were true, but now in retrospect, in the light of his current compositional difficulties, he felt that those previous efforts were only possible because the truths he had expressed were not particularly profound.

Even the principal melody he had in mind gave him great difficulty whenever he attempted to write, play, or even hum it. Such attempts seemed to him to yield at best variations that might ring true were they contextualized in a decent draft, but which standing alone rang hollow. Consequently, owing to such frustrations, he had the impression he was dealing with a work that might never come to fruition, that would only lollygag him out of a month or two, or perhaps even four—which disconcerted him deeply.

As a soloist, his success had been partly undergirded by his youthful looks. But now he was a composer. And he was getting older: he saw in mirrors that the limbal rings of his eyes, which had looked so striking in his early headshots, were fading. And he was aware that the composers he most admired had begun composing earlier than him and had achieved greater

things by his age. And this awareness was painful. And for him to pass a month with nothing to show for it further deepened this pain. Nevertheless, months would pass just so. And he felt that these empty measures distanced him from his own idea of himself. Sometimes, in fits of melancholy reverie he would think of his situation as analogous to that of those individuals who flee their homes into voluntary exile because they cannot face what is there, holding out a forlorn hope to find something somewhere in the far distance strong enough to wipe away some slight mark of shame from their brows. And thusly regarding the state of his life, he felt he had no time to lose: that he had lost enough and was in danger of losing himself. But something deep down within him rang out like a bell through the mist of his melancholy. And when he felt this ringing rise up, he knew the piece he was working on warranted more of his time and that if he did not give it the months, or even the years, it demanded he would spend the rest of his life regretting it, even if it came to nothing—perhaps especially if it came to nothing.

By force of habit, he checked his watch. But on his wrist was a broken watch he sometimes wore while composing: a watch he hoped would simultaneously keep him from counting the passing minutes while reminding him that it was time to work. It was a sort of idealistic compromise watch—though it did not have particularly idealistic origins: about a year prior its battery had died, or perhaps the mechanism had broken (he did not know), and instead of taking it to be repaired—the notion of which our financially constrained young man did not relish—he thought up this neat little justification. In the desk drawer, however, was a working watch (his grandfather's). He pulled it out—as he often did in spite of his idealistic scheme—and saw he was late for dinner.

The restaurant was a favorite of Matthew's—and he insisted on treating the table to an immense seafood platter in addition

to two bottles of prosecco. By the time our young man arrived, Abraxas, as was evident by a pile of thoroughly excavated lobster claws beside him, had made progress. Matthew, however, had only had two oysters: his character was such that he derived more pleasure from watching others eat than doing so himself. (Notably, the two had already begun without our young man because they knew he was habitually—and hopelessly—unpunctual and, at any rate, would not mind.) Our young man sat down and began to exchange pleasantries. But somehow, as if compelled by an unseen dramatic force, the tide of the conversation abruptly turned to the subject of Matthew's broken engagement.

He said, "I told her that the ring was real, that everything it symbolized was real—that it had not only the form, and the look, but also the function, and that, anyways, I could buy another." Then he paused and looked around the table (his eyes while delivering the latter statement had rested on a jumbo shrimp). His eyes met those of Abraxas and then those of our friend.

He saw that they saw what he had already seen inwardly: that his explanation did not go over well. So, resignedly, he added, "It's probably for the best." Then, after a silence, our young man, playing the fool, drew the group's attention downward to the seafood platter, saying, "Well, what they always say is there are more fish in the sea," and incredibly, the joke went over. His friends chuckled, or at least pretended to.

Generously, to steer the conversation into less fraught waters, Matthew said to our young man, "So, Abraxas tells me you're working on a big new piece," and enthusiastically, our young man responded in the affirmative and quickly began detailing his many convoluted thoughts and difficulties. And Matthew listened with polite, if not real interest. However, Abraxas, who had heard our friend's spiel before and to that end could not meaningfully distinguish it from ones associated

with his past pieces busied himself with a series of oysters. At length, our young man's voice swelled passionately. Abraxas looked up, an emptied half-shell in either hand. Our young man was posing a general question to the table (though looking toward Matthew): "What do you think is foremost in making a good piece of music, its underlying premise—its basic idea—or its general architecture—or perhaps another way of putting it is inspiration versus perspiration, but that's not quite right." Our young man was quiet for a moment, trying to formulate himself clearly. He spoke again, "Is it the heart or the soul, if you would—of a piece, or its body, the dream or the dreamer?"

Matthew's position was that generally, though the initial stuff of inspiration someone had at the start of composing a piece was undoubtably important, that it had little hope of finding great expression without adequate musical architecture to serve as a context bringing its truth to light. He cited Bach's 'Musical Offering,' the theme for which had been given to the latter as a sort of challenge by Friedrich the Great. He said, "The theme itself is little better than an ice cream truck jingle, maybe worse. But in Bach's setting, particularly in 'ricecar six,' it rises to such sublime heights that, I think, there's reason to believe that if musical architecture is not necessarily foremost, it can be—and, for that matter, usually is in good pieces of music."

Characteristically, our young man (who actually sympathized with Matthew's position) was contrary, arguing that what is foremost in a piece of music is always the stuff of inspiration underlying it: without it nothing of substance could follow. At length, he said: "Without light, there's no point in the sun." Then, turning towards the sun for dramatic effect (albeit in the wrong direction at first), he said, "I think, people often wonder that God made light and then made the sun. But it makes sense—what's the point of the sun if there's no light?" He proceeded, badly imitating Matthew:

“‘But,’ you say, ‘the sun would have produced light given that it is a star and that is what stars do, among other things’ and yet, if you think about it, imagine the sun had come first, if it could. I think it wouldn’t work—how could it? There’d be no show. It’d be a big joke, or horror—or something like that. It’s only with light first that the sun makes sense as it is. It’s the same with a piece of music.”

The two loved this sort of conversation. So, it continued, each’s examples and explanations becoming more involved and high-flown, and just as the group was apportioning the last drops of the last bottle of prosecco, Matthew insisted that our young man hum, as best he could, the principal melody of his new piece. And after a bit of mental preparation, which it seemed to his friends he took great pains to indicate by unnecessarily fabulous contortions of his upper facial muscles—he obliged, drawing the attention of people at nearby tables. When he finished, he turned to Abraxas, who for a long a while had not spoken, asking, “Well?” But with an expression equal parts weariness and friendliness Abraxas replied, “I am tone-deaf.” And before our young man could respond, and while Matthew was still stifling a chortle, two young women who had just finished their meal and were walking towards the door, stopped by the table, recognizing Matthew.

One was a cousin of Heidi’s, whom Matthew quickly remembered he had met in Boston, and the other was her friend, whom the cousin quickly reminded Matthew he had also met in Boston. Duly, Matthew introduced them to our young man and ‘Abe,’ and the five very briefly exchanged pleasantries. As they were saying their goodbyes, the young women invited the young men to join them later at a club, which they expressly recommended with reference to it being better than the club where they had both first met Matthew. To this invitation, Matthew proffered a very loose ‘maybe.’ But the young women did not want to leave with so little assurance. For some reason, they wanted them for company. They cast their gazes imploringly towards

'Abe.' And he said nothing, but smiled the smile of a sphinx whose face endures the weathering of centuries without taking much notice. At length, the young women turned towards our young man and—perhaps owing to a weakness of character derived from his days as a soloist—he gave them a 'maybe' that was so very firm that it would have been seemlier to have simply said 'yes.' Their aim thus secured, the young women departed in evident, though mute, delight.

Later, at home, our young man was sitting at his piano, noodling through an arrangement of the adagietto from Mahler's fifth symphony he had written the prior summer. Halfway through a particularly well-handled (at least in his own estimation) swelling, cathartic passage, he heard his phone buzz. But he ignored it and played on, throwing his focus deeper into the mechanics of his playing. But his phone kept on buzzing, steadily dispelling his focus. So, at length, he gave in and checked his phone and on the screen was a torrent of messages from Heidi formulated in the sort of stupefyingly indirect prose that only English majors from the very best universities can produce. The gist of the torrent was that Heidi had "remembered" her friendship with our young man "fondly," was "truly upset" that he was not "checking-in," was interested in "more deeply exploring their relationship," and would be in the city on New Year's Eve aboard a friend's boat.

He read the messages carefully and knew what he was reading. However, he did not know how to respond—and pointedly, he wondered whether it would not be too impolite to simply not respond. But beyond such vexations, he chiefly felt at that moment that he was already quite busy with his music and in view of that business—which seemed to him to encompass and require for its execution his whole self—had neither any need nor eagerness for this new distraction. And just as this silvery feeling was coagulating into a state of near-solidity, he received a message from Abraxas: "are we going?" He checked

the time. It was already 11 p.m. He figured he had nothing better to do. Moreover, he reasoned with an artsy zeal that the club—with its music, dancing, general ambience, and so on—might yield some relief by way of further inspiration to his compositional difficulties.

The three young men were about a block away from the club when they recognized its neon sign—as well as a spate of densely packed twenty-somethings winding close beside it. “We’re not getting in if that’s the line,” said Abraxas in a tone that seemed hopeful for disappointment. But then the three spotted the two young women waving at them from near the club’s door. They joined them, and over the muffled clamor from inside the club, they each played at identifying what friends and institutional affiliations they had in common till the bouncer signaled that a group of their size could be admitted.

As they entered, waves of sweat and reverberations washed over them. The young men had not been to this club before, or at least had no memory of it. But the young women knew it well, leading the group confidently upward via a narrow staircase populated by young men and women precariously holding rail drinks. And though each level they ascended seemed more crowded than the last, the two young women flew ahead with ease. At last, the group arrived at the uppermost level, which relative to the others was sparsely occupied. On one side of it was a balcony offering a view of the central dance floor and on the other, a bar.

Immediately, as if it were a matter of propriety, the young women ordered the club’s signature drink: a giant plastic Phrygian cap filled with a mélange of spirits, syrups, and soda served with glow-in-the-dark twisty straws. The group drank eagerly; in a span of less than three minutes the cap was drained. Blithely, the cousin’s friend, seizing the opportunity, placed it on ‘Abe’s’ head and took a selfie with

him. As her camera flashed, 'Abe' resumed his Sphinx-like smile, though in the space's strobe lighting it seemed less graven than it did earlier—as if at any moment it could falter and reveal a fleeting glimpse of upper teeth.

Now, there are many reasons to be in such a club, especially for individuals with overly reflective dispositions (such as our young man), and chief among them is that in the darkness, the dancing, and the blast range of giant decades-old speakers, consciousness tends to yield itself a little. The music, which everyone already knows, suggests an easy rhythm of movement. And one moves, is moved, and moves others. And one feels this profoundly. It is the feeling of communal life—or perhaps more precisely: natural life. When a school of fish, a flock of birds, or even a pack of wolves moves together that is how they move (albeit, to different music). Yes, modernity's autochthons so moving to the bop of top-forty pop remixes may not be as refined a means of communing with the life of the world compared to the mystical rites of yore. But we have no access, for instance, to the Eleusinian Mysteries. Persephone, Demeter, the sacral experience of agrarian life—whatever it is that compelled throngs of Hellenes into great gatherings and greater reverence, is their own and is buried with them; Nestor's Cup is as heavy as it is beautiful: we cannot lift it. Would Alcibiades have found Taylor Swift and tequila too vulgar for his purposes? Perhaps. But kykeon has its analogues; we make do with dixie cups just fine.

And so, our young man descended with the group into the pandemonium of the central dance floor and danced—or at least tried to. His friends seemed to be moving quite naturally (particularly Abraxas whose ecstatic, if inelegant, contortions drew the approbation of onlookers), but our young man felt he was not quite getting into it. Perhaps the music was, as Matthew had put it at one point, "not as bopping as it could be"; perhaps the crowd was not dense enough; or perhaps

our young man was simply in too worked-up a frame of mind. Assuming something in line with the latter, he broke off from his friends to return to the bar.

But minutes later, the cousin's friend—who, as it happens, had her sights set more or less on our young man ever since she had a chance to size him up at the restaurant—recognized his absence and reckoned it was her time to strike. So, she went in search of him. But what did she see?

She saw our young man—and Heidi! There she was, right there, though she was by all accounts supposed to be in Boston. At first the cousin's friend was confused. But as she watched, her confusion gave way to an indignant jealousy: the two were dancing, and not merely in a manner befitting friends having a good time. (They were really going at it.) At length, however, having had her fill of this strange sight, the cousin's friend returned to the group and by means of discrete shouts relayed her observations.

Directly, her account was challenged. The other members of the group by turns agreed that it was impossible, noting evidentially that Heidi was in Boston, that our young man did not like her like that, that Heidi did not care much for clubbing, and so on. But the cousin's friend protested, after all, she had seen them with her own eyes. But then the cousin, thinking quickly, mentioned, with the hastily feigned air of someone who is simply concerned for their dear friend's wellbeing that her dear friend, as it happened, had had a lot to drink earlier that evening. Instantaneously, the other members of the group exchanged knowing glances. And seeing this, the cousin's friend was crestfallen. However, the others, sensitive to her feelings—or at least how her feelings would affect the course of the night—assured her that they all certainly believed that she had seen “something.” And seeing this, the cousin's friend in turn feigned a lighthearted and agreeable air, hoping our young man would soon return to corroborate her account.

Meanwhile, our young man, having paid a visit to the bar, was now tipsily making his way back to the group. But as he neared the thick of the central dance floor, he paused. A great deal of confetti was in the air, fluttering lazily in the brilliance of the quavering lights. Sober waitresses were weaving methodically through the crush with saucer shaped trays of colorful shots, distributing them free-of-charge (albeit selectively). Individuals were here and there breaking in and out of the crowd, though somehow always in such perfect proportions that the crowd never seemed to change size. And at all this, our young man wondered.

And in the midst of his wondering, it occurred to him that with each new song, a new rhythm seemed to dominate: each successively endowing the crowd with a novel personality. And from personality to personality, he detected no overlap—no lingering; each would come unheralded and leave unmourned. But he wondered whether any of these rhythmic personalities could outlive their dependent songs—could take hold deep within the dancers and find its way into the streets. Appositely, he reflected on the medieval dancing manias: how an outbreak in the summer of 1374 in Aachen had enthralled thousands in a slew of cities across the Holy Roman Empire, how during one outbreak in Schaffhausen a lone monk had danced to his death, and how these manic outbreaks—which were suspected to be caused by the curses of great saints—abruptly tapered off, ceasing in the middle of the 17th century. At length, he even wondered whether the monk who had danced in Schaffhausen could so dance in the club. He wondered what his face would look like. And then, some deep part of him sung upward into his consciousness, and he yearned a little for the club he was in to become the birthplace of—after so long—another dancing mania: to see how such things got their start.

And just as this flight of fancy was giving way to an urge to sway, Heidi—or rather, a young woman who seemed to be Heidi—grabbed hold of him, asking him if they were going to

head out. He was dumbfounded, feeling that he was not at all competent to deal with the situation. He thought Heidi was in Boston, that he still had time to respond to her messages—and more than that, he was confused at how she had known he was there. So, plainly, he asked her what was going on. Quickly, it became evident that she was under the impression that they were just dancing. But he was quite sure that that was not so, and he told her, with great certainty that she was wrong. Confused and somewhat incensed, she told him that he must be drunk, or an idiot. Nevertheless, he insisted that it must have been someone else. So, they shouted at each other until, at length, each realized the other was not who they thought they were and they agreed that they were perfect strangers. But it was late, and the young woman, whoever she was, had an eminently practical personality. Put simply, she knew she had a type and our young man was it. So, she asked him again whether they were going to head out, giving him to understand that though she understood that he was not the young man she was just with, that—and the following is not quite the phrasing she used—he might well reap the bounty of goodwill his doppelganger had sowed.

He was too incredulous to be tempted and declined her offer, telling her clumsily he hoped she would find “the other me.” Abruptly, she assumed an air of magnificent indifference and walked away, her auburn hair spangled with sweaty bits of confetti.

And just as our young man was readying himself to return to the group, he noticed Matthew and Abraxas breaking off from the crush near the door. He went to them. They said they were heading out. In the street, Matthew asked him, “Were you dancing with a girl earlier?” and the friends exchanged accounts. They all started walking off. But as they did, our young man looked back to the club, asking after the two young women. But Abraxas muttered something our young man could not quite make out, though the gist of it seemed to be that

Matthew and him had definitively parted ways with the two at some point earlier in the evening. And before they all themselves parted ways, Matthew reminded Abraxas and our young man that both were welcome as always "to swing by" his family's annual New Year's Eve party the following night.

Our young man woke very late the next day. After showering and dressing, he reckoned he did not even have time for coffee. The party had started and Abraxas was already there. But—given that the weather was still unseasonably warm, that a ride would be expensive, and that on the way to Matthew's parents there was a particular bridge he liked (the one he had been sitting by two nights earlier), he decided to walk, and set off. However, it was a long walk; Matthew's parents lived in the penthouse of a tower just across the river, overlooking the city.

And later, while crossing the bridge, he by force of habit glanced down at his watch to see how late he was. But it was dark and he could not quite make out the hands. It was possible, he figured, that he had mistakenly put on his work-watch. He was not sure.

Now, notably—though he had only been to it a few times and only ever twice in a row—our young man had a special appreciation for Matthew's family's annual New Year's Eve party; it was no mere house party on the conventional scale; it regularly brought together disparate generations, bloodlines, and individuals figuring into all of the city's substantial causes under the aegis of an informal and wholly personal force. To wit, it was a nexus between our young man's life and life at large that (as opposed to, for instance, many commercial, civic, political, and religious events) did not declare itself as such and thereby—as far as he was concerned—kept its charm; life at large, he thought, seldom seemed spirited at full tilt in ambits governed by definite

forces.

But for all his (perhaps misplaced) appreciation for this annual party, it—or rather, its hosts—did not particularly appreciate him: Matthew's parents thought of him at best as an eccentric and at worst, according to Matthew, as "an unctuously coiffed leech of Levantine extraction." Nonetheless, they had an expansively practical sense of tolerance; they liked to see their parties well attended and regularly gave their guests (particularly the ones they disliked) ample signs of hospitality.

So, as our young man stepped into Matthew's parents' apartment, throwing his coat over the banister, the flutter of the fabric caught the attention of Matthew's father, who—though he was two rooms deep and ensconced in a crowd—immediately chirruped, "Well, well, well, it's Mr. Heimind! The Heim-meister has come!" And in response our young man smiled and raised a hand before darting to the drinks table through a throng of middle-aged staffers, journalists, and consultants, whereat a man whose face he dimly remembered as being connected with campaign fraud poured him some mulled wine, filling his cup far higher than propriety dictated. And he accepted, and went off in search of Abraxas.

But as he was gladhanding his way through the parlor, Matthew and his mother caught him. "Oh, Charles!" she said with a calculated air of excitement (unaccountably pronouncing the first two letters of his name in the French way). His face went pale; he suspected what was to come. She continued, "Matthew tells me you're working on a new piece! You'll have to play a bit of it for us!" And our young man knew he had no choice. He turned momentarily towards Matthew, whose broadening brow evinced sympathy. But in Matthew's matte, greyish eyes he detected a certain look, the same that earlier in the restaurant had rested upon the jumbo shrimp.

Gleefully, Matthew's mother flipped up the keylid and pointed towards the piano bench. He sat down and played a scale. The piano—a massive ornate, dusty full-size upright—had not been tuned for months. But that was no matter. He had to play something. Matthew's mother was already herding together gaggles of tipsy guests, luring them toward the piano with progressively fantastical promises regarding our young man and his impending performance. And as he was thinking about what he would play, he overheard Matthew's steadily approaching father from an adjacent room, saying, "Oh, Mr. Heimind is going to play some music for us?" in a shrill, rising tone that implied that our young man was perhaps being awfully inconsiderate—selfish, even.

Morosely, he settled on a draft of his piece he had finished a few weeks ago that he did not like at all, but which was at least coherent, figuring he would do what he had usually done as a soloist: play theatrically and feign conviction. So, he played—with assorted flourishes of his hand, subtle contortions of the muscles between his lower eyelids and upper cheeks (which most soloists neglect), and calculated flopping of his dark brown, nearly shoulder-length hair—varying his effects in accordance with the crowd's heartbeat, which he judged by their inhalations and exhalations. Eventually, after too long, the piece arrived at a restatement of its central theme, which concluded in a trembling, imperfect coda he had once thought was clever, but which he now felt—especially just as he was playing it—to be thoroughly insipid.

The crowd ate it up. They clapped and made other sounds of approval. And good naturedly, our young man made a little show of his appreciation before excusing himself in the direction of the drinks table. However, while working through the crowd, he checked his phone, and found that he had received another torrent of messages from Heidi, this time taking issue with his never getting in touch with her, alleging that his not doing so was indicative of a "negative personality trait," and

mentioning that she was at that moment in the city. However, at a certain point in the torrent, she noted that she felt compelled to interrupt herself to tell him "The most extraordinary thing." Apparently, earlier that night, she was by the docks and encountered "someone who looked just like" him and when she first saw him, she had excitedly called out to him by our young man's name and when he did not answer, she ran over. But she found it was not him "at all" and yet—he insisted that he remembered her from the night before, when she was definitely on the water—and "fondly." Our young man flicked towards the next message, but his phone died.

He thought this all was a wonderful coincidence and he looked around for Abraxas to tell him about it. And after making a few inquiries, a pale consultant hunched jealously over a tray of hors d'oeuvres informed him that 'Abe' had stepped outside. So, he went to the balcony, and though he was sure he had seen a dark lanky figure through the glass door, as he stepped outside, he realized that it must have been a mangled reflection from within. The balcony was vacant. But he stood there for a while and thought about Heidi's story, and all that had happened besides.

Chiefly, he thought about how it all would take shape—and how much of that shape would genuinely be accountable to anything or anyone who could actually be held accountable. Chance, ambivalence, and indecision, he thought, too often seemed to connive the contours of action: soon enough the story of the past few days would crystallize. Doubtless, Heidi would verbalize it first in her famously indirect way. Then Abraxas would repeat it a hundred times, each time reworking it with his own peculiar sense for color and character. Eventually, perhaps, our young man would hear it from a stranger and it would possess an archetypal quality that never seems to exist in the present, but always in the past or the future—or myth. Perhaps it would be a narrative of disdainful refusal. (He hoped it would be a comedy of errors.) In any case, he knew it

would somehow be wrong and that he would accept it anyways. To change a story once it has got a definite shape is a titanic effort, far harder than being the stuff of one.

Thus thinking, he felt his reflective appraisal of the entire situation weigh down upon the reality of things. He looked up for relief to the night sky, but it was starless and hazy. He felt anything was possible, that the past and future had no hold on what was there unless he facilitated that holding. And yet he felt he could not but do just that. With his every thought he crystallized some reach of the present, breaking it off an arc of infinite possibility.

But suddenly this stream of thought, gushing in from every direction, dissipated; he heard loud noises from inside: the party was counting down the seconds till midnight. Glancing backward through the glass door, he contemplated going in. Briefly, he made eye contact with Matthew's mother, who was distributing flutes of champagne. And just as he was on the point of resolving to step toward the door, he heard humming. It was the principal melody from his piece, but whomever was humming, it seemed, had really got it: it sounded just as it did in our young man's innermost depths. He figured someone on the balcony below must have heard his performance earlier, and at this prospect he warmed himself. Here, he thought, was finally a fellow soul who understood the object of all his fuss—or at least someone constitutionally sympathetic. So, full of hope, and ready to extend his goodwill, he peered over the railing. However, the balcony below was empty and the lights of the apartment to which it was attached were off.

But looking down he saw the river and on it were two boats: one larger, full of revelers, and the other much smaller, with a crew of one, whom our young man unaccountably suspected was one of the strangely comedic figures he had seen a few nights earlier. And he looked closer: he thought he saw a glint. By force of habit, he checked his watch—it was probably not responsible: the band was somewhat loose and its face was up

his sleeve. He looked down again. Yes, he had been wrong. It was not quite a glint. The face of the lone boatman, though largely in shadow, was split with a toothy smile.