

Grace Notes and Pocket Oratory



Orchestra Seat, Honore Daumier, 1856

Grace Notes

i

She strains her untrained voice to join the choir.
They hit each note proportioned on the staff
and keep the tempo, singing bar to bar,

(except for a loose sneeze or hacking cough).

But gradually her haphazard cacophony—
that wild, ignorant wail of the tone-deaf—

unwits the pitch perfect with its tone-deafening
crash and rattle.

Beware that wrecking ball
that swings out at eight-toned, harmonic euphony!

It tangles the pendulum, tips the scale
into a chromatic, headlong key change
down all twelve half-steps, leveling the whole.

I turn my head (and stomach), wince and cringe,
infected with a sound so unmelodic,
which only one prescription will expunge:

hush.

Silence is a far too harsh emetic
to purge another's errors from the ensemble,
for no one sings a part that's not erratic.

ii

All creatures born with embouchure to babble—
flat tongue, sharp teeth, a natural, open hatch
where trembling lips embrace the bass and treble—

all things that draw their breath, quiver, and stretch
a vibrant larynx and a diaphragm,
the secret instruments of tonal speech—

like you, they ply that restive, thumbless limb
and through the upright body's sway and tilt,
its hidden machinations, wrest a hum.

As coral moves with ease when it is wet,
but, touched with air, will harden to a rock,
your pipes, though flexible, make song with spite.

You bear that yoke, a stiff and fretless neck—
you know the stubbornness of things that bend,
which have no keys to press or strings to pluck

by 1's and 0's of digital command,
no gear-spun tuning-peg or ligature
to fix the pole and axis of their sound.

The vast, inexhaustible repertoire
of man himself—his freedom and his choice—
he blindly charts on dark, ingathered air
raised by no lock-gates, lowered by no sluice.
He is a ghostly cove where songs conspire,
huddled in waves of unruly release;

to every wave another wave draws near,
as open vowels seek their consonants,
or words kiss other words in metaphor.

These are no man-made musical machines
with each note mapped in their anatomy,
obedient to the touch of practiced hands.

Blood-swollen, spittle-slick, high-strung, and raw,
these spasmodic muscles mocking mastery
attain a crystalline arpeggio

as vaulted keystones rise in apogee:
through balance, through the arch cooperation
of voussoirs falling down in harmony.

The heart of song is pure gesticulation:
a slurred rubato playing at control.
So sing! and sing with feckless ululation
the fey solfege that flickers in your soul.

Pocket Oratory

I took it with me on those business trips.
It folded up and buttoned in a square—
and traveled well when I slept in those crypts
where blue chips click their tongues and red lights glare:
they call and raise their own through smoke-filled air
to open-handed worship, slots and craps—
to build this temple to their own collapse.

Each night at the Grand Casino Hotel,
the day's work done, its wagers won and lost,
I, too, would seek out smoke and clarion bell
and find it in my room with arms uncrossed
in cruciform tableau, each limb embossed
with figures peeking from its cloth arcade
of homespun gold, where beauty lies handmade.

- *Madonna and Child (Glykophilousia)*

She holds beginnings, touches heaven's ends;
in Her the shadows and the stars keep tryst.
She is a fulcrum: Her left hand suspends
a Child whose cheek is turning to be kissed,
a Man whose neck is breaking with a twist;
His bloodied palms have stained Her blue dress red.
Regard Her lap: his cradle and deathbed.

What is a kiss, if not glykophilousia?
to part with what you love but cannot carry?
This rupture ends in rapturous Parousia,
an open tomb, a gorgeous ossuary
of living bones the angels would not bury—
one figure of the universe at rest:
both *fiat mihi, consummatum est*.

- *The Sudarium*

Show me a face, I'll show you its reverse—
(that pieta that lurks in Bethlehem);
but here is one I've only seen obverse.
In Oviedo and Jerusalem
the same two eyes in each Sudarium
confront me through foreshadowed negative,
dilated and exposed—dying to live.

Veronika has permanently sewn
in this fouled winding sheet, reality,
vera eikon: man's image as it's known

in manifold yet seamless symmetry,
unwarped within a cruel cartography—
a pain-staked palimpsest, a souvenir
of his tear streaks, his wan, creaturely smear.

- *The Sacred Heart*

Far from the center, close to where I knelt,
it shouldered past the crooked text I prayed
to have the last word. I doubt the heartfelt;
I doubt the zealot's emblem, his crusade,
his outrageous passion to be scorched and flayed.
I cautiously regard the crude allures
of all breast-beating, sleeve-worn Sacre Coeurs.

As bitten fruit—taut-skinned and overripe—
cracks on the tooth and shoots a pungent spray,
this organ bursts with blood at every pipe
in broken chords of threnody that play
on pedals of gold flame forcing their way
from swelling bellows, untorn as they expand,
revealing auricles I understand.

Where would I hang this bare-laid ornament,
this clamorous present wrapped in thorny sash?
The loving heart is tender struck with flint;
the man it touches goes up in a flash.
He burns and burns—but never down to ash—
an ever-hissing spark of fierce desire
razing himself down on a smokeless pyre.