

Wild Instrument

the woman with red hair
demon lover hair
walks from the fall woods of Cornwall
red leaves, brown leaves
purple oak leaves falling
honey mushroom in her hair
tucked there behind her ear
carrying the wild instrument in her hands

she found it somewhere
in the spring beneath the elm
she dug it up from the strong ground
freed it from the rotting coffin
beneath the pile of dreams
where the Muse buried it

she puts it to her cheek
plucks a string
and I hear a harrowing scream
as Macbeth drives the knife through Duncan's chest
she will take it to Harvard
play it
a nightmare tarantella
 until the neuropsychologists remember the murder of sleep

she sits on a rock
beneath a poplar
plucks
Bartok dream sounds
so the psychiatrists and theologians hear
 "mental illness"
creeping like T. S. Eliot fog
into Saul's ear in his sleep

then the grin on her face goes feral
foam flecks her lips
 the instrument's a body part
the rotting hip of Orpheus
she plays
into the literary magazines
where is your grief?
where is your rage, editors?
teachers who rape us with Dante
instead of teaching us

how to be makers?

For Beethoven

Beethoven, you ugly, horny lout
you rubbed salt in the Holy Wounds because there was music in it.
You knocked off the Emperor's crown
just to compose the precise sound of shattering gems for the fortepiano.
Beethoven, joyous pornographer,
you transcribed the vibrato of the consummated angels for cello.

With his threat posture at the piano
Beethoven established a new musical territory --
half blue faced baboon with sharped canines,
half rough beast of the divine;
you claimed the top of Parnassus
and the bottom of Musical Hell for us.

Beethoven, scowling like a pug-nosed shark
shedding the tempi of fish swimming in classical schools,
the first unhallowed thing
to climb out on the new world's shore
you made imperative what we had only dreamed before --
that we must be Prometheans.

Beethoven discovered a hunger we didn't know we had,
made a necessary step we didn't know we could take,
composed concerti for instruments still not invented
performed a miraculous
on our crying place
making it the place where we thrill the most.

Rachmaninoff's Hands

(Sergei Rachmaninoff, 1873-1943, Russian composer considered by many the greatest pianist of all time.)

Lying in his lap the hands looked like
they belonged to some great Raphael angel,
not him,
sallow, gaunt
chronically depressed him, sometime composer and pianist.
He didn't, he couldn't own them, have them --
even though he'd insured them for a million dollars --
they didn't belong to him
or the music that somehow came through them.

The hands would have told him many things if they could --
that they possessed the I. Qs. of flowers,
the flight of bounding deer,
the absolute confidence of hawks circling in the updrafts.
If the hawk thought about gliding,
if the deer thought about bounding,
if the flower thought about the infinity of steps
from seed to bloom...

Rachmaninoff thought about
the concerto he had to compose for his next tour
and his hands couldn't get beyond the first few bars
before the dread block filled him
and he wanted to chop them off and clog the instrument's keys with blood.

Desperate, Rachmaninoff went to see Dr. Dahl.
Dahl instantly saw the way Rachmaninoff's hands
fluttered like caged birds,
crashed his despair with sharped minor chords,
trilled in frustration
while Rachmaninoff mourned his sad lack of ideas for his concerto.

Dr. Dahl put Rachmaninoff to sleep
and there in the armchair the hands were free to play
without the drone of depression from the great sad head.
Hypnotized, Rachmaninoff saw his hands before him as if in a dream;
saw them playing the entire piece he claimed he could not compose,
and it did not frighten him
to have hands with the I. Qs of the flowers
that bloomed on their own;
all he had to do was let them.

Rachmaninoff woke
in Dr. Dahl's office;
went home and composed the concerto that was already written and great.

Six Instruments

for my dream orchestra

1. trumpets

notes coiled
to clarion chrome
Judgment
in Protestant pews

Sing! Sing! Sing!
triumphal noise
catch the under jazz
on the A Train

in the entrance of Pharaoh
Satchmo
cheeks pumped to plums
of sovereign sound

2. Timpani

dread punctuation
heart of the sacrifice
exploded
blackouts on the way to the coda's noose

jiggle on the taut
membrane
of ancestry
the hollow log tom tom

treader
bumper
thunder egger
dark accident.

3. French Horns

conch harnessed
to call forth eternity

off stage
in the left rear of evermore

the call of the dream time
curled in the coil
sounds from the base of Ayer's rock
fern unfolding

walkabout
in the gold coil of eternity

4. Basses

seismic sound
infrasound
how deity dies
blue-black night quake

dance of the large animals
joy of whales
down current canals
a breathing always larger than ours

tattooed into love
it's fault zone
how we shake down
the walls of Olympus

5. Flutes

flight of the silver sound
platinum shaman
precious delight
of Mozart's laugh

bamboo flutes
over a wishing well
feathers of sound
children leaving their curses

feathers of praise
of raise
touch down in the deep wish
the notes call silence glory

6. Cello

aged wood
curved to the shape
of love's body

space warped
to spirit
a real woman, her grief

on the plaintive plains of Russia
her lover lost in war
always lost in war

amber leaves of loss and time
the cello grieves
feeling nude

Musical Hell

like Heifetz
squared
the Muse of Mental Illness
plays a cadenza descending
into your ear
to hibernate there
until you're ready to hear it
ready to obey it
the command voices
telling you to kill your son
wade out into the Mississippi River
like Abraham
and drown him
kill the six nurses
because
Born to be Bad
is tattooed in your genes
like a Bach Toccata and Fugue
in cold blood
because
an invisible oboe
hell,
an invisible orchestra
is playing the Ted Bundy Concerto
the Jeffrey Dahmer Symphony
the Frankenstein's Monster Variations
the irresistible five note school shooter theme
the Magnificat for Hitler's Mother
the stick your head in the oven
up your ass
in Musical Hell