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Marianne Boruch

WORLDS OLD AND NEW

Indianapolis, early summer. We're somewhere in the middle of Dvořák's Symphony #9—"from the new world" he said, as an afterthought—finished over a century ago. They're rehearsing all four movements but now it's the slow sad center where rising woodwinds, brass, and timpani give way to the muted strings, a melody, a counter-melody, weave upon weave of a thing past sound and far into longing. These 100 or so musicians are young, mostly in high school, a few in junior high and a very few even younger than that—a youth orchestra then, the New World Youth Symphony Orchestra, aptly enough. And the sound is amazing really, full and rich and so much larger than this room. But now their conductor, Susan Kitterman, holds up her hand, gesturing *stop stop*, and the held notes fall like rain, the moment awkward, disorienting, the way one wakes from dream. Everyone looks up. Did you hear that? she says to them. Did you hear how beautiful that is? She looks down at the score for a second then back to her young players. That's why we play music, she tells them.

I'm in the doorway, back behind the brass and percussion, nearly deafened sometimes by their sound. Yet the sound carries me. It helps that somewhere in the cello section, my son is part of all this. But I can't think past my joy. I can't put it into words.

* * *

This particular symphony, Dvořák's ninth, old warhorse that it is, was a stunning accident in 1893, brand new and dumb luck, the result of unabashed enthusiasm one minute, a darker second guessing the next. The Czech composer had been lured to New York for a couple of years to direct the National Conservatory of Music, an experiment established, in part, by the U.S. Congress, the first tuition-free music school open to all with talent, the first to recruit African-Americans and women. Under Dvořák's influence, its democratic mission was never routine but

charged with a deeper fever, *American* underscored. As a nationalist composer himself, mindful of Czech uneasiness in the all-encompassing Austrian Empire, he readily fell in with the school's founding principles though he seemed, at first, somewhat awed by the responsibility. "The Americans expect great things of me," Dvořák wrote home his second month here, "and the main thing is, so they say, to show them to the promised land of new and independent art, in short to create a national music. If the small Czech nation can have such musicians, they say, why could not they, too, when their country is so immense." The fact is that he, too, wanted young composers to take up fragments of song from *this* place, *this* time though in this country—given our colonial past—the cultural influence to be thrown off was all of Europe, an idea that had seized American writers for some time, Whitman, for instance, calling many years earlier for literary rebellion, celebrating American life in his new long, rambling lines, the frenzy and calm of that life, day and night, city and country. Though Dvořák's intent was for the moment pedagogical—"I came to America to discover what young Americans had in them, and to help them to express it"—he got immediately to work on his own version of what might reflect the American heart, or at least his own energy translated by an American experience.

His symphony evolved quickly. Begun in January 1893, it was scored by the end of May, all except the trombone burst at the end which Dvořák forgot to include until the first rehearsal some months later. It's often said that the raucous beginning echoes the chaotic streets and dockyards of New York. Or perhaps his fascination with trains triggered it, his listening at the railroad bridge over the Harlem River, or from the Bronx hillside he liked early in the day, a particularly fine place to gaze down at his favorite, the express to Chicago, its movement west embodying America to him, that cold-water leap into the new, the spirit dream most loved, oddly, by Europeans who would never leave home, or would return, as he did, keeping faith with the old cities, the forests older than the cities, or the ancient villages with names like Cermna and Zverkovice. Whether or not he had heard of Whitman's poem on the subject—"To a Locomotive in Winter"—I don't know though it seems unlikely. But the two men were one mind on the matter, both smitten with this surreal and powerful bit of 19th century

technology. “Fierce-throated beauty,” Whitman wrote almost twenty years earlier,

Roll through my chant with all thy lawless music, thy swinging
lamps at night,
Thy madly-whistled laughter, echoing, rumbling like an
earthquake, rousing all,
Law of thyself complete, thine own track firmly holding . . .
Launch'd o'er the prairies wide, across the lakes,
To the free skies unpent and glad and strong.

But for Dvořák, watching the trains at the very start of such a journey those mornings in New York, it was all diesel smoke, great clouds of it rising as he listened, the massive wheels beginning to turn, their wheezing and clanging deranged as a bell made, then broken in anger on the forge, the arm raised then coming down until the pitch grew hard and steady as the train got smaller and gave itself to distance, one sound now unless you count the cello sobbing faintly underneath.

* * *

2:45 at the Athenaeum, any Sunday afternoon. It's break time for the young musicians of the New World Orchestra. Nearly two hours of rehearsal so far, about an hour and a half to go. *I want those eighth notes absolutely staccato*, their director, Susan Kitterman, insists once, twice, three times over. It's been at least five runs through the passage in the last twenty minutes, gruelingly difficult because this is no dumbed-down version for kids. The orchestra plays—always—only the complete thing, exactly what each composer has scored. But now it's break, and the instruments are abruptly silenced in their cases or lowered carefully—cellos and string basses—onto their sides to rest on the floor.

Musicians get hungry. At the back of the room is a cornucopia-in-waiting: cookies and carrot cake, vegetables and dip, chips of all persuasion, fruit drinks and soda provided by parents who have signed up for their turn months ago. There's a rush to the tables, paper plates piled high, drinks juggled. The kids wander off in small groups or in couples; individuals find a corner to themselves, pulling out a paper-

back, the plate balanced on their knees. Two violists, a clarinetist, someone on French horn remain behind for a few minutes, continuing work on a particularly hard measure until they too, put down their instruments and head for the tables. The principal bassoonist is still discussing something with Kitterman, both poised intently over the score.

After a while, the co-principals of the cello section are back at their instruments and it's a kind of quick, joyful pickup Vivaldi business that starts between them, just for the hell of it. In the corner, a few younger boys at their card game half laugh, half groan over a bad joke that's been making the rounds all afternoon. There are questions for Susan Bever, the orchestra manager, about the rehearsal schedule or a broken music stand or a slipping endpin. Many have ducked out for a moment—quick trips to the restrooms or outside where a small circle of the oldest kids talk softly over their glowing cigarettes. Back inside, near the drinking fountain, two girls show another a letter and watch expectantly as she reads. *Do you believe it?* says one, and they all roll their eyes to the ceiling. But by 3:05, nearly all are back in their seats running through their scales, checking their reeds, tightening their bows and drumheads, working their valves. Like great evil whose mechanics are notoriously banal, this great good is profoundly matter-of-fact. These kids are serious musicians who love to play. And they play. The beauty they make—dark and shining—comes measure by measure. What's extraordinary is how ordinary it all seems.

* * *

It's probably impossible to figure when Dvořák's New World Symphony was first performed in Indianapolis but it's surprising how early it could have been. Though records are spotty, depending on programs saved by concert-goers and given to various archives around the city, it's clear that all manner of musical groups were wildly active throughout the 19th century. One, in fact, played at the Athenaeum where the New World Youth Orchestra rehearses, an impressive solid wedding cake of a building willed into being in the 1890s by the rebellious Turners, German immigrants whose culture was mind *and* body, a passionate mix of music, art and athletics. Then called the *Deutsche Haus*—before anti-German feeling of the First World War forced a name change—it

hosted that early orchestra, the *Musikverein*, forerunner of the group that still plays. Their music from the period includes Dvořák's *Carnival*, an unruly overture with clashing brass and lovely string work. In 1911, the group changed its name to the Indianapolis Symphony, a move that may have increased its ambition because in 1916 its sixty members did perform and possibly premiere the *New World Symphony* in the city. On the religion page, below an article breathlessly headlined "New Serum to Bring Dead Back to Life," the reviewer at the *Indianapolis Star* was almost as enthusiastic about Dvořák's work, calling it "the most enjoyable feature of the afternoon," though adding—how does one read this?—"but almost an hour was needed to play it."

Other orchestras may have attempted the symphony earlier. By 1895, Karl Schneider had founded his Indianapolis Philharmonic and certainly many visiting groups—the Cincinnati Orchestra, the Chicago Symphony, the Cleveland Orchestra—could have played the work. In 1921 Toscanini managed it, bringing his La Scala Orchestra from Milan for the occasion, one Sunday afternoon in February. The city's major orchestra—the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra—came to life much later, in 1930, first playing at the Athenaeum, and though the initial seven years of programs are lost, it's certain that Dvořák's piece was performed in 1937 and often after that, a great favorite. By then the ISO was housed at the Murat Theatre, courtesy of the Shriners whose outrageous taste in architecture was as far away from Dvořák's beloved Bohemia as could be thought or dreamt, their temple modeled after an Islamic mosque, tower and minaret rising up, the whole place cut with terra cotta trim, brown and yellow brick banding, windows of stained glass. And buried within was the Egyptian Room, its motifs drawn from the tombs of the upper Nile, a design planned well before Carter's 1922 discovery of King Tutankhamen's glittering chambers, the image of that glamorous, spooky find raging through the popular imagination of the period. But longing makes for more longing. Perhaps the surreal displacement of Dvořák's music in such a place only deepened the Largo's "beautiful pliant of sorrow confided to the English horn" or so the program note for the earlier 1916 performance put it.

* * *

My first year out of college I signed on as a full-time *searcher of lost books* at the University of Chicago's Regenstein Library; a more perfect job I'll never have, mythic and practical all at once. I remember my co-workers: Peter, a tall, quiet kid, a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War, inexplicably assigned to work out his alternative service as a clerk with us. Or mad Sharon, so intent on collecting fines, she'd drive at night on her own time to the addresses on the handwritten bookslips, armed with reading glasses and flashlight to figure out the illegible names and thus—at last, those bastards, she'd gleefully tell us—know whom to bill. *Searcher of lost deadbeats*, we called her.

But it's someone else who most comes back to me at odd moments, a fellow searcher slightly older than I was, who talked only of opera. The world stinks and people are rotten, he'd say. But I go home and put on records and hear truth in that singing. And passion. And real feeling. I loved his saying that though he troubled me. I'd go home to my tiny one-room apartment and read and try to write until my friends would come by—I didn't have a phone and the foyer doorbell never worked—annoyed because they had to shout up from the street to find me. I thought the opera guy sad and melodramatic and sweet. He dreamed of going to live in Italy—Milan probably—where everyone, he said, was wild for opera, not like here. I used to stare at him when he wasn't looking, watch him as he stood momentarily shuffling through the small cards we searchers carried. It's just that he could so easily step from this world into another. For all that singing, there was a kind of silence around him as he worked at the monster card catalog or walked the stacks.

* * *

1892—the year Dvořák arrived in New York—was the year Whitman's life ended, at 73, about a hundred miles south and west, in Camden, New Jersey. There are other possibly pointless though interesting counterbalances. In the years following the height of Whitman's powers, when he was both ignored and oddly lionized for *Leaves of Grass*, his outrageous, eccentric and brilliant book, years where he nevertheless rewrote it again and again from the mid-1860s, well into the '70s, Dvořák, quite a bit younger, was deepening his already impressive un-

derstanding of musical form. During that decade, he composed two symphonies, his first opera, a song cycle, all the while playing viola in the Czech National Orchestra, conducted those years by the great Smetana whose greatness Dvořák never doubted though the friendship that would really change his life would begin a few years later when he met Brahms.

But one can go back even further. Dvořák was only six in 1847, already learning his father's multiple trades—butterer, innkeeper, village musician—and barely begun on the violin, getting his ears boxed for each wrong note when Whitman underwent his famous conversion to music that would so alter his own sense of how a poem could be made. By his own account, it was opera in particular that seized him. Perhaps its graceful, emphatic patchwork of sound moving through dramatic time drew him but I suspect he loved how opera resists time too, aria as a way to stop time and deepen it, then the recitative moving everything forward, all caught against a pure orchestral sound which presses, releases, presses moment after moment. "A new world—," he wrote, "a liquid world—rushes like a torrent through you." Later he would claim outright the influences on his book: the Bible, Emerson, and opera, though this last, in its romantic frenzy, its often violent shifts in tone—now tender, now raucous, now tragic, now ecstatic—must have been the most immediate of the three, spilling over into his sense of line and reach, to make him question the old narrative way of longer poems. He worked fast and straight instead, without the slow motion buffer of looking back, taking everything by present tense flashes of image, casting them quiet, then into more expansive metaphor. "I hear the violoncello," he writes somewhere in the middle of "Song of Myself,"

('tis a young man's heart's complaint,
I hear the key'd cornet, it glides quickly in through my ears,
It shakes mad-sweet pangs through my belly and breast.
I hear the chorus, it is a grand opera,
Ah this indeed is music—this suits me.

A tenor large and fresh as the creation fills me,
The orbic flex of his mouth is pouring and filling me full.

I hear the train'd soprano (what work with hers is this?)
The orchestra whirls me wider than Uranus flies,
It wrenches such ardors from me I did not know I possess'd
 them,
It sails me, I dab with bare feet, they are lick'd by the
 indolent waves,
I am cut by bitter and angry hail, I lose my breath,
Steep'd amid honey'd morphine, my windpipe throttled in
 fakes of death,
At length let up again to feel the puzzle of puzzles,
And that we call Being.

Later, in another poem, "A Song of Occupations," the pace is calmer, the command more distant, philosophical; the section's closure opens even as it understates itself. "All music is what awakens from you when you are reminded by the instruments," Whitman tells us,

It is not the violins and the cornets, it is not the oboe
 nor the beating drums, nor the score of the baritone
 singer singing his sweet romanza, nor that of the
 men's chorus, nor that of the women's chorus,
It is nearer and farther than they.

I love that notion—that the instruments simply *remind* us of what has been there, in the silence or in ourselves, all along. Nearer *and* farther, Whitman insists. But where exactly? There's no map for it.

* * *

"You just came off this really sentimental violin line," Susan Kitterman is telling the clarinets at rehearsal, "and now you're the voice of reason." It's a playful, no-nonsense moment, just when everyone was dreaming off, caught in the flight of Dvořák's crescendo. Some of the kids nod, others lean forward and scribble something on their music, a few half smile at her remark. It's an astonishing new thought to me, the notion that this music isn't just a wash of lovely, compelling sound but as complicated, as unpredictable as conversation, that one instrument

answers another, one might even parody itself. Two might argue, one sober, one drunk; one is forgiving, one refuses; one knows only the simplest things, one loves the shadow world and won't give up its sad delirium, ever.

It slowly occurs to me that this isn't just some romantic reading foisted on a play of notes; I've actually begun to hear differently, not *music* at a distance but close up, how it's made, how it rises and falls, cuts itself off, stubbornly repeats itself, goes inward turning a minor key, bursting out again with a shift back to major, into the bright world. And I wonder if what I'm beginning to hear in music is close to what I'm always wanting in poems, a way inward but at the same time, a way to love the world's complexity. Not to understand it really—is that ever possible?—but to co-exist with it.

Except to invite more of music's complication into poems—how exactly to do that? One varies syntax; one moves in and out of memory; one whispers or one's emphatic. *But what does it sound like?* I want to say about any poem I read now, any poem I try to write. Because that's where the secret reveals itself. It takes such patience, this spirit life; Dvořák's saying once that art is simply an elaboration on the smallest things we notice.

But what does it mean, in fact, to notice something? I think about Whitman noticing everything, his "Song of Myself" moving frame by frame, nearly cinematic, an unwieldy human kaleidoscope of detail about the machinist, the dockworker, the prostitute, the senator, the slave at auction, the farmer, the lunatic, the child baptized, the boy in the attic listening to rain. But Whitman's notice is itself half listening. "Now I will do nothing but listen" he writes,

I hear bravuras of birds, bustle of growing wheat, gossip of
flames, clack of sticks cooking my meals.
I hear the sound I love, the sound of the human voice,
I hear all sounds running together, combined, fused or
following,
Sounds of the city and sounds out of the city, sounds of the
day and night. . . .

On and on go the loping rangy lines Whitman invented by ear and eye, constructing this vast thing as if hoisting board upon board like the carpenter he was trained by his father to be. Everything, it seems, floods in but the particular and memorable sound of the poem—that comes of his saying whatever he’s saying over and over, bringing it up as if one long breath could really do it, aiming toward a form more musical than literary, the score’s cherished repeats, the tenor ringing it out, the complexities of *voice* alone shading every human particular. Whitman worked from voluminous notes—hurried bits of comment, vignette, dream—hammering his prose down to its poetry, his ear to it, endlessly revising, second guessing, exhausting himself. “To have a lovely thought is nothing remarkable,” Dvořák told his students years later at the National Conservatory. “But to carry out a thought well and make something great of that . . . that is, in fact—art! How often a thing seems simple at first sight but in carrying it out such difficulties arise—I call them ‘knots’—and you can’t untie them, not if you were to do I don’t know what. . . .”

Back in Indianapolis, Susan Kitterman is hard on the kids in this orchestra, exacting. “Bite the strings!” she calls out to the second violins. Then, waving everyone to stop, “You know what? I think you ought to practice this at home.”

“A low blow,” Susan Bever, the orchestra manager, whispers next to me.

But she begins again, working the passage over and over. “This is very, very tricky” she tells them. “You want that feeling of reaching farther than you really can.”

* * *

All that American winter of 1893, while he worked on his famous symphony, Dvořák was obsessed with going home for the summer to his country place in Vysoka, far from Prague. Slowly though, as spring came with all green things stirring, he was caught by another idea. Inviting his whole family to join him in America, he would make the trip from New York to rural Spillville, Iowa, a Czech immigrant community, where, he was promised, his language was spoken right on the street. He had, just a couple of weeks earlier, put the finishing touches

on his symphony “from the new world.” Now he was speeding west through part of that world—Pennsylvania, then Ohio, then Indiana—on the very train he loved to watch from a distance in New York. There was a brief stop at Fort Wayne. Maybe Dvořák stepped out on to the platform to buy sandwiches because someone decided everyone was hungry. About a hundred and forty miles south, in Indianapolis, no doubt there were kids just being kids who would grow up to become string, woodwind, and brass players, and, since the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra at first recruited locally, it would be their fortunate lot to perform this piece so recently put to paper, the one still running through Dvořák’s head, waking him up at night.

It’s perhaps too easy to go omniscient and follow this movie back quickly, like one of those time-lapsed films that rush the seed into flower and then, in reverse, play its flourishing back to the merest speck. This isn’t thought, of course. It’s reverie. 1893, and Dvořák continues nevertheless on to Spillville and its facts, to a summer spent discovering the scarlet tanager, inviting its song into his music; or listening to his six children at play, or taking over the organ at St. Wenceslaus for early mass, working afternoons on an amazing quartet, later dubbed his most “American,” and thus its name. “Three months,” he wrote home, “which will remain a happy memory for the rest of our lives.” But part of the real dream is its specifically American darkness. “Few people and a great deal of empty space,” he wrote back to a friend in Bohemia, “. . . and it is very ‘wild’ here and sometimes very sad—sad to despair. But habit is everything. . . .”

Meanwhile, I think past Dvořák’s part in the movie to these *imagined* facts: 1893, and of those kids in Indianapolis, say one will play—how many years from now?—the difficult English horn solo in the Largo which dips and turns and opens into the brain’s most secret part which remembers odd detail and feels its chill. She’s twelve; it’s beginning to rain. From the porch, she notices that back in the house her brother’s voice is changing. It’s funny, cracking on the word *crocus*. Or she hears how rain floods the wooden gutters, a pulse in that somehow, a low heartbeat. And what about this?—that downtown, three young violinists who will someday press and rage and release themselves to pure flight in Dvořák’s third movement are now sitting cross-legged in the dirt at the edge of Michigan Street, under the rough lean-to that car-

penters have slapped together, watching the new *Deutsche Haus* go up. One's bored out of his mind. But one kid loves how the canvas tarp billows out, the workmen shouting and whistling and reaching hard to pull it over the enormous hoard of brick and lumber because of the rain, because the wind's so fierce, the whole business blurring, like Whitman's flashing present tense—Dvořák's Iowa to Indiana to right now, this moment. Why not? Everything's so all at once finally. And is it music or poetry that such confusion isn't chaos but some vast complexity I can barely begin to grasp?

In my old Catholic neighborhood in Chicago, we used to hear about the contemplatives, certain orders of nuns we never saw, cloistered away somewhere. The idea seemed scary and attractive and weird but what good did they do? Then we heard about the holy rumble, their job only to pray, words rushed like music, something near chant. And one of our teachers told us—Sister Norbertus or Sister Mary Hubertine?—that this sacred hum, exactly this, kept the earth turning on its axis, not merely this day or this minute, but for all worlds of the past and the future because life is linked and there are no divisions in time. It's plain fact, she told us with nary a blink, like science is fact.

For proof, she instructed us to close our eyes and listen hard. And she was right. We could hear them. The world *was* linked. That low grade roar locked in our heads, steady undercurrent of rushing blood and flashing nerve—was it only that? Maybe it was those women after all, pulling from the world its oldest sound, every dark and light in the universe subdued, backdrop to thought, to words, to every sorrow coming up slowly, inevitably, a forewarning or a reminder, the way Whitman's instruments remind. Certain moments, if I become very still, even now I hear it. And I think about Dvořák, falling asleep those nights in Spillville, haunted by the symphony he's finished and set aside, its last ghost notes settling back to their first nothing. But it isn't nothing.

* * *

Sometimes I wander around the Athenaeum while the kids in the New World rehearse. I can sit easily enough in the back of the small auditorium where they play, dragging in a folding chair. Or I can join the handful of parents not from Indianapolis, who, like me, come long

distances to get here, waiting out the afternoon in the lobby on the plush benches which circle the large pillars keeping the high ceiling at bay. Gone are the original Turners who came long ago from Germany, but down the hall are old photographs, little doors to elsewhere, turn-of-the-century water-stained shots of a singing class, of the lower school, of the kindergarten whose tiny charges have lowered their hands into a table of sand while their teacher stares blankly out into the future.

It's dark in that hallway but I'm always surprised at the next photograph, how enormous and busy it is, blown up and hand-colored to make an August night stay forever. *Ox-Barbecue*, the caption says, 1952, two years after I was born. Table after table set up in the Athenaeum's biergarten out back, the waiters in white jackets, it's way past dusk, little lights hanging from the trees, castor plants and four o'clocks lining the dance floor, the band half blurring, instruments mid-air. These are the children and grandchildren of those who built this place and so many are dancing, so many still at the tables, leaning this way and that over their plates to catch something said under the music, the end of a joke, a crucial bit of story. I always figure that if I counted the dancers, then the vacant chairs, I'd come out even. But if I move abruptly, to the opposite wall, there's a more curious juxtaposition—another photograph, same place, the biergarten blown up huge and hand-colored again, this time with nothing in it at all, the band shell empty, the bare expanse of the dance floor oddly, suddenly austere. Only the big-fisted castor plants remain, rows of four o'clocks languid, and zinnia straight up in the planters set along the walk. And I like to think that if I squinted hard at the crowded version, then turned quick and stared, I could call up those dancers, superimpose them, bring them back, flushed and expectant, out of that stilled August air.

* * *

Dvořák's visit to Iowa that summer, however brief, participated in a much larger dream, of course, the 19th century immigrant movement over the Atlantic to America, and, for many, more westward still, into the heartland and beyond, to yet another ocean. Certainly the Turners fleeing Germany in the 1840s, coming to unlikely places like Indianapolis, shared in this restlessness, a curiosity, really, of epic propor-

tions that for good and ill, captured much of the world's imagination. Whitman, too, is said to have been changed by his own version of such a journey, taking his fourteen-year-old brother Jeff with him in 1848, west from Brooklyn and then south to spend three months working as a journalist for the *Crescent*, a recently established newspaper in New Orleans. But it wasn't so much that exotic, diverse city that altered Whitman's take on things; it was the work of getting there—about three weeks of hard travel by stage and riverboat, a trip that eventually, in the poet's view, itself assumed mythic scale as he got older, turning into weeks, months, even years of wandering in the retelling.

It was the vast loneliness of the country west that must have struck Whitman, the land's seeming endlessness, its desolation which would gradually deepen and darken his vision, making a crucial counterbalance to his expansive jingoistic piety, his hail-fellow-well-met bluster. Taking the Ohio River, then turning south in Illinois to pick up the Mississippi, Whitman and his brother had little to do but watch mile after mile as bleak forest on both sides of the river unfolded, with only occasional cabins and hardly a soul in sight. Paul Zweig, in his biography of Whitman, mentions a similar trip taken by Charles Dickens during his famous visit to America whose notes include a poignant scene no doubt enacted over and over since riverboats carried settlers as well as those, like Whitman, intent on less permanent adventures. "The men get out first," Dickens wrote of new homesteaders in Ohio,

(they) help out the women; take out the bag, the chest, the chair; bid the rowers "goodby"; and shove the boat off for them. At the first plash of the oars in the water, the oldest woman of the party sits down in the old chair, close to the water's edge, without speaking a word. None of the others sit down, though the chest is large enough for many seats. They all stand where they landed as if stricken into stone; and look after the boat. . . . There they stand yet, without the motion of a hand. I can see them through my glass, when, in the distance and increasing darkness, they are mere specks to the eye.

It's tempting to imagine Whitman, too, haunted by such a moment. "Few people and a great deal of empty space," Dvořák had written home from Iowa, ". . . very sad, sad unto despair. . . ." And what depths open in us when we are so reminded?

* * *

Everything written about Dvořák's Ninth Symphony—his new world—eventually comes back to a kind of ache in the piece, human and inevitable, coming up most profoundly in the Largo, its famous second movement. And the origin of that sorrow? Some call up African-American spirituals or Native-American rhythms, both of which Dvořák praised and even suggested as heavily influencing the music before turning back on the notion, to claim his homeland—Bohemian melodies—once again as his real spiritual source. But finally, if we believe his letters or his friends' reminiscences, it's a long, abiding homesickness that floods this work written in New York that winter and spring of 1893, too far from his garden in Vysoka, his pigeons there, his favorite card game, *danka*, his walks with family and friends. Elements in folksong of whatever cultural stripe might call up the feel of a lost time and place. Certainly the Largo in particular, its simple, plaintive lines of melody in spite of the elaborate and careful orchestration, moves in ways that awaken melancholy in us. Maybe that's the poetry in Dvořák's method, his use of the folksong's pentatonic scale with its odd minor seventh, a half step up or down, a private hesitation where one might expect only the major's full step, self-assured public sound; or the habit of returning over and over to a note, tonic or dominant, the sense of the elegiac in that lyric repetition, a looking back which weighs heavier and heavier.

"Goin' Home," of course, is the shorthand name of the Largo's memorable theme, an actual song culled from the symphony by William Arms Fisher, one of Dvořák's former students from the National Conservatory, after the composer's death in 1904. Endlessly popular in the first third of this century, it was a staple in the piano repertoire of most middle-class homes though in my family, where irreverence was almost a hobby, the piece, at least in my mother's childhood, had a more practical use. So thoroughly recognized was "Goin' Home" by friends and acquaintances in the '20s that if an afternoon visitor began to overstay

her welcome, a sign from my grandmother—maybe her little finger touched her eyebrow—would send my mother to the piano to launch a small performance. “Some took the hint,” my grandmother remarked dryly to me years later, “some didn’t.”

Not that this story ever altered the melody’s power for her. Though it became a family tale I loved, I think in fact my grandmother told it as personal camouflage, a way to balance, maybe even deny, the embarrassingly deep effect the piece had on her. Those summers I stayed with her as a child, I listened as she played the song sometimes, late afternoon, though occasionally she’d stop, overcome for a moment, before picking up the next measure, a slip neither she nor I ever spoke of. I wonder now what lost time or place the piece recalled for her, what moment she had buried which, because of some delicious, minor turn of sound, came up quick to stop her.

So music rewards us with its abundant sorrow, a curious form of happiness, or poetry does, or any art which stills and darkens even as it gives us the shining world. That Dvořák’s piece continues to move us is perhaps not a large miracle but a small one, this music so threatened by familiarity, an orchestral cliché by now, certainly one of the greatest hits, this crowd pleaser from its first performance in Carnegie Hall where even that sophisticated audience willfully misbehaved, interrupting with wild applause after the second movement, shouting *Dvořák! Dvořák!* until he shyly rose from the back shadows of his box.

The symphony’s continuing pull might be its peculiarly American feel, written as it was in the uneasy half light between cultures. Dvořák as outsider, as immigrant—for the duration of its writing at least—plays out a universal American experience we’ll probably never really shake, all those deeply solitary elements in us that don’t quite fit no matter how long our families have been here, or what our circumstance. This is the secret and desolate heart of Whitman’s poems, too, for all their talkative energy bringing everything together. This double vision makes our connection to place, to most things probably, a spiritual act, which is to say, an act of will and imagination, not mere accident of biology or history. It’s true that the Athenaeum, with its biergarten and rathskeller so lovingly reproduced, went up as a kind of wish to bring the old world here, a Bavarian castle grafted solidly on new world swamp and prairie. And for that, its longing is the longing

of Dvořák's Largo, a homesickness. But that dramatic juxtaposition moves the imagination forward as well as back, an heroic nerve in that, as if one could really live there, in the future, as if there was a plan, howbeit close to dream.

* * *

It's the long drive home to West Lafayette that I dread, especially after the occasional late rehearsals that stretch into evening. Everyone is tired. Going over Dvořák's lively scherzo, Susan Kitterman calls out "I don't want it beautiful, I want it feverish," and there's one last fierce electric upping of energy in the room. "Good," she says, "good. We're doing wonderfully." But now the kids are packing up, putting away their music stands. Some still joke and talk, the brass players especially refusing to give up, giddy with exhaustion, launching impromptu into "Ain't Misbehavin'." "Go home already!" a violinist yells over to them, laughing. My son is worn out, I can tell; the cello case takes both arms now. It seems enormous, bigger than before; he's listing to one side as he steers it through the crowd of parents come to pick up their kids.

I may dread the drive but I look forward to my son's stories of who said what outrageous thing or his delight at certain parts of the music—did you hear that neat place in the Dvořák, he asks, where it's just a string quartet playing? He's flipping the dial on our radio until something stops him. We argue about it—is it Mozart or Haydn? I'm sure it's Mozart, he says.

It's late but because of that, it's cooler now and we decide to take back roads, not I-65 but 421, then over on 28. We'll avoid the construction that way, and driving a little slower, we can open the windows, the fields giving off their sweetness—something's just been cut. One of Beethoven's late quartets comes on, one he wrote after he'd gone totally deaf. I turn to tell my son this, but he's fallen asleep. It's dark by now, the fields black but wild with fireflies doing their slow blink off and on.

There's a bit near the end of Dvořák's Largo—maybe my favorite part—where everything drops down to nothing for a few measures, not even one violin or the small whistling of a flute keeps the momentum. It's startling, this happening once. But it happens again not much later,

and then a third time, long enough that each pause deepens to a genuine absence—eerie, this widening hole in the music. I never know quite what to make of it, or of the pleasure it brings. Everything held back suddenly, the world beyond—a rich, grave silence—offering itself like that.

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