



Music from the Window

by Rhet Lickliter

We moved through October. Each day, each night, turned together like well-greased gears, turning the mornings and afternoons, through a thousand shades of grey. Shadows stretched across evening sidewalks, they moved. We moved, like the hands of a clock, slowly climbing, coming back down, moving around the circle of each day. We straightened the calendar on the kitchen wall. We locked the doors and heard the sound of children in the park, below our balcony. We moved through October. Through 31 segments of 24 hours, we moved. And we sang, we sang about strangers — “look at their shoes” — and we moved. Together, we watched our hair fall into the sink while outside it rained, and the music from a car radio rose 20 floors. The furnace came on smelling of electricity. We went to the window and watched steam rush from the sewers, watched the October darkness, like time-lapse, surround the city and remove the light from our faces.

We moved through October. We rode the elevator with our neighbors who never said hello, with neighbors who looked up, paying attention to lights, making note of each floor we passed. We rode the elevator for the evening paper. We descended below the earth's surface into the laundry room for a soda pop. We moved. I painted. I painted about differences — a mistake made one weekend. We bought a car. We paid top dollar for a parking space. We paid top dollar for a bag of potato chips. I heard a woman's voice ask, “Why must things be so expensive in the city?” I made coffee on the stove in an open pot as we moved. High-rise windows allowed us to watch the world like a drive-in. We drank the coffee, and watched. We watched the traffic flow like blood around the curves, over and under each other on asphalt veins that reach and separate and travel in all directions. Stopping in towns and cities, connecting, reaching, joining driveways to highways, crossing rivers and railroad tracks, rising with mountains, and enduring the long, flat, farmlands. The traffic moved. We moved. I began a conversation with a musician upstairs, we talked as we moved, using only jungle shadows, using only the sounds of 106 drums, the interruption of a screaming lover. I called the elevator.

We moved through October, as honeymooners, newlyweds should move. And for some of us there would be no more long vacations, for some they had left, for others they had been exchanged for responsibility. We looked down at the trees as they changed colour and looked like carpeting. We reminded ourselves of several years ago, when this was a time not of death but of birth, not of death but of love. We took the garbage into the hall and dropped it through the floors,

237 ft. to the bottom, to the basement below the earth's surface. We called the time and set all clocks and watches. We awaited evening, as streetlights came on and the night traffic looked like a slow moving string of pearls in one direction, rubies in the other. We moved through the darkness like cats. We sank into the night.

We lie in the dark. We whisper and touch. To the sound of the dishwasher, a speeding car, rainwater dripping from a downspout, we lie. We watch faint glowing shapes move across the walls and ceiling. We hear the voices of radioghosts come drifting from latenight talk-shows. And in the dark we rediscover the shape of a neck, the contour of a shoulder, a back, a hip, the sensitivity of our own fingertips. We talk. We talk of how the time has passed. We make plans.

I tell you how some nights I sneak into bed well after you've fallen asleep. You take strange shapes this late, but I don't wake you. I try not to move. I let you sleep while I look for room among the bed clothes and bent limbs. Some nights you make quiet noises in your sleep, as I climb into bed like a cat. Some nights are silent for you, dark, and in strange shapes.

We talk of a girl we once knew. We've heard she's unhappy, we've heard she's been hurt. Now she's seeing a doctor and we wonder if she will be alright, if she can make it through this. You tell me this happened before, it nearly killed her. She doesn't take things easily. We worry. We feel the breeze through the curtains in the dark. You tell me, you say, "I could never, I could never be married to a traveling salesman." We hear the sound of a truck passing, we hear it brake a block away — a mechanical whisper. Your skin is smooth like a night sea. The curtain lifts like the sail of a boat. We lie in the dark, we whisper and touch. You say, "Isn't it sad about Rene?"

Through hours of darkness we moved. Through the nights of October, we turned and traveled. The moon was an amputee's hook, hanging among constellations. The moon was a dinner plate — white china in the autumn sky. Through hours of darkness we moved, and we dreamed. We dreamed of destinations.

In our sleep, we watched him, like he was a T.V. program, like we had waited in line for tickets and we were the studio audience. It was a silent program. It was a silent dream. He seemed unaware of us, our presence. We were there to watch him work. He made frames. Out of wood and stain and varnish, using tools to measure and cut and carve and glue, he made beautifully ornate frames — frames on a stick. And we dreamed of frame assemblage.

We followed him like cameras, like our heads were on pivots and our bodies on dollies. We watched him travel after packing each frame carefully into the back of a truck. He drove into the country. He drove on the highways. He drove back to the city. He drove down alleys. He drove to the suburbs. He drove, while we tossed in our sleep.

He came upon a cemetery surrounded by black wrought iron fences and stone posts. The graveyard rolled like the ocean. Thousands of carved tombstones, marble crosses, granite angels rode acres of grassy waves. A large hill rose with gravesites clustered on all sides and a small drive winding up and around the hill. He climbed and circled in his little truck filled with frames. He climbed to the top. He parked, and we watched in our sleep. He removed a frame from the bed. It was large and made of dark wood. It was covered with intricate scroll work. He held the frame by its stick and began walking about the top of the hill, holding it out in front of him, looking through the empty frame. We saw the city to the south. From the hill the buildings looked small and far off. Through the frame they appeared two-dimensional. To the north we saw trees and hills, open land — an aerial photograph. He began looking quickly through the frame, first at the city, then spinning, looking back towards the trees, pivoting on a single point, holding the frame in front of him like a compass. He searched for the perfect spot, a magnetic spot, like a witcher tracking water, spinning on a single point, just the right angle, just the right spot, just the right view. He took a breath. With a single thrust he stabbed the stick into the ground. It stood straight, up, empty, so you could put your arm through it.

In our sleep we saw the city, architecture in the distance. We saw open land and expansive skies. We watched day turn into night, the sun descend behind buildings. We watched the wind move through the trees, and received the gift of new season — a gift that turns — a gift that returns, then leaves once it's been taken for granted.

And when we dreamed, we dreamed remembering.

From the front yard we heard music. In the late afternoon, near dinner time we would play together, Lisa and Kelly and Bethanne and me. Sometimes near the house on the swings or near the side fence where raspberries grew. But we heard the music when we played out in the front yard under the shade of maple and oak trees where little grass grew. As it began to get dark and we knew that soon we would be called in to eat, we would hear it. Sometimes a flute. Sometimes a violin. Smooth and beautiful music would come. We would go to the fence and I would rest my hands and my chin on the top wire. We would listen. The music came from an old farmhouse across the street. From a third story window propped open with curtains that seemed to be floating out with the music. Kelly said, "That's the Pasvar's, they're from Russia. They escaped on a boat a long time ago and came here to live." "What do they do?" I would ask. "The father reads books and the boy and the girl go to school to study music, the mother died some time ago." "The father reads books, that's all?" "As far as I know," Kelly would say.

I would nearly fall asleep listening while the fence held my weight and I pictured a little grey haired man sitting in an arm chair reading in near darkness, one floorlamp next to him creating a frayed circle of light. I looked across the street, up through maple and oak branches at a third story window, open while curtains seemed to struggle, wanting to ride the music off, away. I listened to the music from the window, wondering, hoping that it might travel all the way to Russia, and once there someone might answer back with notes a beautiful as these, notes we would understand — answer back, before I was called to dinner.

September was gone. Like a note struck on a piano soon fades. Like a short fuse. Like so many Sunday afternoons spent in mother's kitchen, visiting, talking and passing the time.

Another week had passed. Seven more summer days had gone by. Standing in the kitchen, listening, looking out the window, watching a ball being tossed, watching a young child pet a kitten. Thinking, this day, this time together, is another moment, another hour passing, uneventfully, unknowingly. I hear the talking, the voices are like several clocks marking the time, marking the moments and hours that pass, that travel through the room, that leave through the doors and windows. They pass through the walls like ghosts. They direct themselves. They ride a straight line. They ride it out, between the houses, over the roofs and through the treetops, passing through clouds like passengers on airplanes, able to say, "Look. That's the sky below us, and way down there, those are clouds, long giant clouds, thick white fumes, drifting like a herd of grazing animals, magnificent clouds." The moments leave. They leave the atmosphere like well directed rockets, and begin an eternity of floating in an endless black sea of white lights and coloured gasses.

It was gone. Afternoon breezes reminded us that vacations would soon end. They reminded us of change, of the coming cold weather. The homeless searched out the dry warm places. They were gone, like the late summer days called September. The shopping carts were off the streets and sidewalks. The big green trash bags slung over an aging shoulder half full of food scraps and aluminum cans, eaten and redeemed, gone. September was a prayer.

In the mirror I saw a beautiful woman pass by like a blur, like a movie out of focus, in slow motion. I blinked my eyes like a projector, allowing the light to illuminate each image, viewing our history in fragments, as it was made, storing it away like books in a library, this section titled Late Summer / Early Autumn. Every day before was now a film.

Yesterday I made a movie, in the rain, while a deaf man stood with arthritic posture in a long brown jacket and untied boots. He spoke with his hands to another, while the water lightly fell into puddles on the ground like stolen kisses. I made a movie, while reflections bent and moved in the water, as if the stationary things, houses, trees, cars and trucks had been liberated from their rigid forms, now able to twist and contort — a strange dance. It was yesterday, and with my camera I captured the stolen kisses, the secret dances, in the rain.

September was gone. Like the summer, so September had left. Like old people sitting all day in the park watching and feeding birds, listening to the fountains. They would soon rise and walk, and wait for the bus. They would stand like trees planted far enough apart to allow for air and sun and rain, for growth. And then they would leave, one or two at a time, looking not at each other, only leaning out, looking down the street, waiting for their bus to break, with the sound of escaping breath, and pull over to the curb, for the bus driver to fold open the door and impatiently await their slow-motion entry, their careful coming aboard, their old-age ascent up the stairs.

September was gone like a letter in the mail, dropped in the box and now out of reach. Like a letter on its way, September was traveling.