

## The Devil in Music

“I’m not attracted to good-looking men,” says my friend’s wife,  
and as I glance at my friend, who is, let’s face it, not good-looking,  
I think *If music be the food of love, look out* because in the Renaissance  
music had only one purpose, which was to be beautiful and express  
the majesty of God, and that’s why the church forbade the tritone  
or “the devil in music” that consists of three whole steps between notes

because the tritone is ambiguous and unresolved and thus expresses  
all sorts of tension, such as that between a woman who thinks  
her husband is homely and a man who’s sure he’s just about  
the best-looking thing that ever came down the pike. Another friend  
of mine stayed single well into middle age, which is when he began  
to court a mother of four known only to the rest of us as Mrs. Posey.

After a while, even he began to call her that: “Want to go bowling,  
Rick?” we’d say, and he’d say, “Thanks, but I’m going to take  
Mrs. Posey and the kids to the Golden Corral—it’s all-you-  
can-eat shrimp night” or “What is it, Wednesday? Sure!  
Mrs. Posey has choir practice.” What is love anyway but a back  
that needs scratching and someone to scratch it? Death comes

soon enough to each of us. Just ask Gustav Mahler, who lost  
lost eight siblings in his childhood and his parents and one sister  
in the space of a year; hence the scherzo second movement  
in Mahler’s Fourth Symphony which features a solo violin  
playing, that’s right, the tritone. Why, it gives you the creeps  
just to think about it, much less hear it. That second movement

is also called a Totentanz or “death dance” played in such a way  
by Death himself that to hear it makes us want to follow him  
out of this world. Why is Death always shown playing the violin  
in Western art? Okay, he’s not always shown playing the violin,  
but if Death is shown playing any instrument, it’s going to be  
the violin. There are two reasons for that: one is that the violin

as we know it evolved in the 1500s and, as it was light  
and therefore portable, it became a folk instrument played  
at your hoedowns, shindigs, hullabalos, clambakes, fish fries,  
jamborees, revels, carnivals, saturnalias, wassails, wakes,  
bonfires, and fêtes champêtres. Play, fiddler, play! The people  
will dance to the tune you call, even though or perhaps especially

because dancing is frowned upon by both the Protestant Reformation  
and the Catholic Counter-Reformation, dancing being “the work

of the devil” and the violin the devil’s instrument by association. The second reason Death is depicted as playing the violin as opposed to the clavichord, oboe, flugelhorn, or bassoon is that the seemingly superhuman skill required to play the violin

at a virtuosic level led to the concept of having made a pact with the devil, a famous case in point being that of Niccolò Paganini (1782-1840), musician extraordinaire as well as a legendary enchanter of impressionable females. Rumors abounded that Paganini had sold his soul to the Devil or indeed was Satan incarnate, even that he used the guts of his romantic conquests

to string his violin, which is taking love or whatever you want to call it too far by half. There is no evidence that Paganini started these rumors, but he seems to have done very little to dispel them. By the way, Paganini wasn’t at all good-looking. There are photographs said to be of him, so if you don’t believe me, check it out. The devil isn’t good-looking, either. Then again, he’s the devil.

## The Dermatologist's Assistant Notices My Frankenstein Ring

As I wait to see the dermatologist, I read that, in 1835,  
*The New York Sun* ran the first of six articles claiming  
there was life on the moon as seen through a new type  
of telescope, the operators of which powerful instrument

had verified the existence there of unicorns, two-legged  
beavers, and bat-human hybrids living among caves filled  
with amethysts, jewel-encrusted temples, and jungle  
vegetation of a lushness you wouldn't normally associate

with the arid appearance, at least to the eye of those of us  
who did not have access to this new telescope, which,  
it should be noted with some skepticism, was located,  
according to the *Sun* article, in Cape Town, South Africa,

even today a city so distant as to impede on-site  
fact-checking and certainly one much more distant in 1835—  
the arid and, as I say, all but featureless appearance  
of Earth's only natural satellite, that is, the very moon

which was reportedly the home to these and many  
additional wonders. Fun! My dermatologist knows  
that I am a poet, and today she tells me her son took  
a poetry class and wrote one poem his professor really

liked, and when I say *Tell me about it*, she says there  
was this tree her son played in when he was  
a little boy, and his dad cut it down when her son  
was away at college, and when the son came home,

he noticed the tree'd been cut down. *Thing is*,  
says my dermatologist, *it was several weeks before*  
*my son realized that the tree wasn't there any more.*  
Sometimes it takes a while for the truth to out itself:

the *Sun* articles about life on the moon were said to be  
reprinted from a science journal in Edinburgh,  
yet another distant city—are you starting to see  
a pattern here? I am—and were intended as satire,

yet readers believed them, as did a team of Yale  
University science professors who, being less  
discouraged by the difficulty of the task as perhaps  
you or I might have been, especially in 1835,

actually traveled to the city said to be the source  
of the story only to find that the Edinburgh journal  
had ceased publication a number of years earlier.  
Having checked every square inch of my epidermis

with the sedulousness, diligence, and assiduity  
of an entire lab of Yale University scientists  
and given me a clean bill of health—no rosacea!  
No hives! No seborrheic dermatitis! Not a blister,

even, or carbuncle!—my dermo whips off  
to take an equally thorough look at the hide of,  
I hope, some equally lucky patient and leaves me  
alone with the assistant who will complete

the paperwork and schedule my next visit,  
during the course of which she pauses to admire  
my Frankenstein ring and ask *Is that James Brown?*  
and I say *No, it's Frankenstein, though your remark*

*is quite the coincidence in that one of the poems  
in my new book is about a guy whose girlfriend killed  
James Brown.* She wants to know more, so I tell her  
the story behind the poem—guy on a plane realizes

he's sitting next to the Godfather of Soul, so he switches  
places with his girlfriend to let her have the honor,  
only she's got the flu, and three weeks later  
JB is dead—and the assistant says *That's terrible!*

And I say *Yeah, but in the poem James Brown  
and the girlfriend end up in heaven, talking to  
Luciano Pavarotti and Janis Joplin and other  
musical geniuses and having dinner with the girlfriend's*

*dead parents.* The assistant looks at me for  
a second and says *Can you do that?* and I say  
*Sure, you can—people don't care whether something  
is true or not; they just want to be entertained,*

which is certainly what happened in 1835: readers  
believed all those tall tales about life on the moon,  
and the paper's sales figures shot through the roof,  
and even when those killjoy Yale University scientists

revealed the hoax, the public greeted the news

with good humor, and sales of the paper continued  
to soar. Another way to put it is that there's  
truth-truth and then there's poetry truth, which is

something I think the dermatologist got as well,  
because as I was walking out, she passed me  
in the hall looking as intent as ever, and when I said  
*See you next year, doctor*, she seemed surprised,

as though she hadn't just spent the last quarter  
of an hour looking at me through a pair of those  
medical-grade magnifying lenses doctors clip onto  
their regular glasses in order to examine our myriad

imperfections, though after she'd told me that her son  
only wrote his poem after he realized that he hadn't noticed  
that his boyhood tree had been cut down the minute  
he got home from college, I said *If he'd noticed it*

*immediately, that wouldn't have been a poem. But after  
several weeks? That's a poem, doctor*, at which  
she flipped up her magnifying lenses and looked at me  
for a second herself and said *I think I see what you mean.*

## Ode to Jessica K. Sorenson's Concussion

Oh, oh! It's July in Tallahassee, and Jessica K. Sorenson has fallen off her bicycle and has a concussion! What must it be like? I hope it's like Alice seeing the looking glass melt away, then jumping through and finding herself at the mouth of a cave that leads to a land of marvels. The other students in Jessica K.

Sorenson's workshop have made a card for her that depicts Jessica K. Sorenson falling from her bicycle but in a cartoonish way, that is, a way that suggests trauma yet quick recovery, since cartoon characters always recover quickly from their mishaps. But a concussion! Of all the bad luck that might befall one,

surely a concussion is among the least desirable. It's so much worse than jalapeño eyedrops or capri pants for men.

Some mishaps can't be foreseen at all, of course, like the fire that broke out in our garage last week. Then there are the mishaps that we see coming as clearly as a slow-moving train: when I was

Jessica K. Sorenson's age, I walked into a bar in Baltimore, and a guy said, "Are you looking at my girl?" and I said, "No," and he said, "So you're calling me a liar?" and I said, "Not at all. I just wasn't looking at her," and he said, "What, is she ugly or something?" I don't remember what happened after that.

There are decades in which nothing happens, says Lenin, and then weeks in which decades happen. Jessica K. Sorenson, I know you are an English major, but have you ever taken a class in statistics? If so, you may have learned about Edward Lorenz, a pioneer in chaos theory who discovered that small

actions within a complex system could trigger vast and unexpected changes, an effect he discovered while entering values into a weather prediction program and saving time by rounding numbers off to three decimal places instead of the usual six, which had the effect of predicting not only

completely different weather patterns but also ones that were totally inaccurate. John Berryman says the best thing that can happen to an author is the worst thing that doesn't kill them. I certainly hope that's true for you, Jessica K. Sorenson!

That garage fire had been caused by a little plastic bag

with a chemical in it, some fertilizer, maybe: the firefighters weren't sure. Not that it matters, because I sprayed the flame

with the extinguisher we keep in the kitchen, and the firefighters  
hosed down the wood and the rags that still smoldered.

In the course of the next few days, I threw away everything

in that garage that even looked flammable: paint, motor oil,  
bug spray, gas. There won't be another fire in this garage,

I'm thinking, because there's nothing left to burn. But that's  
what I thought before the fire: that we were safe, that nothing  
would happen because nothing could. I didn't know that

the ammonium nitrate or whatever it was biding its time,  
just waiting for the right moment to spark to life and murder us  
in our sleep. Now that you're recovered, Jessica K. Sorenson,  
may your concussion open your eyes wider than they ever were.

"I don't study to know more but to ignore less," says Sor Juana

de la Cruz. Don't worry about anything, Jessica. Just keep peddling.  
Wear a helmet! When I was your age, I was like Agnes DeMille.

I mean, I was a guy, but I was like the not-yet-celebrated  
choreographer who confessed to the by-then-very-celebrated  
Martha Graham that she had a burning desire to be excellent

but no faith that she could be, that she took for granted  
in her work things other people thought were marvelous,  
but Martha Graham told her that there was a vitality in her,  
a life force, an energy, a quickening into action, and that's all  
Agnes DeMille or any artist needs to know, and DeMille says

yes, but all I see in my work is ineptitude and flaws and crudity  
and I am never pleased or satisfied with it or with myself,  
and Graham says no artist is pleased, and Demille says  
well then what about satisfaction? and Graham says forget it,  
there is no satisfaction whatsoever at any time, only

a queer divine dissatisfaction, a "blessed unrest" that keeps us  
marching and makes us more alive. Blessed unrest:

I like that, Jessica K. Sorenson. Don't you? When you woke  
from your concussion, your eyes were still closed.

Did you half believe yourself in wonderland? As the doctors

bent over you, I'd like to think you pictured yourself as  
a grown woman and then an old one who gathered other young  
women around her and brightened their eyes with many a tale  
and felt their sorrows and found pleasure in their joys  
and remembered her own life and the happy summer days.



## It Just Gets Better

I'm grateful for coffee, naps, red wine, true-crime books, oysters, for escalators because when they break they become stairs, for fruit, long walks, yoga. I am grateful when there is nothing to be grateful for. Scientists say when there is nothing to be grateful for, you should look for something, anything. Did you know that the search for gratitude produces serotonin, the neurotransmitter that maintains mood balance and prevents depression? Scientists say you don't even have to find anything, you just have to search. Right now I am grateful for those stupid birds squawking outside my window. I am grateful for grates, which keep me from falling into drains, sewers, and manholes. I am grateful for graters, which keep me from eating a whole block of cheese at one time. My new year's resolution next year will be to be grateful. I'm going to be as grateful as all get-out next year. I'm going to be aerobically grateful, tackle-and-wrap-up grateful, somebody-call-911 grateful. I'll be grateful beyond compare, beyond measure, beyond all bounds. Next year my plan is to be singularly, uncommonly, unusually, notably, signally, strikingly, pointedly, famously, egregiously, prominently, and glaringly grateful. I will be grateful for dissatisfaction, for that blessed unrest that makes me feel more alive than anything else, and as I am a poet, I'll be grateful as I watch for the erosion of my body and spirit by time as if I were in a corner watching a thief twirling the knobs of a safe, knowing that it is empty, my treasure being elsewhere. I am grateful for babies, for while others may turn away from me, babies are prepared to smile at anything even roughly in human form. I am grateful for Chuck Berry, for judge's wives, district attorneys, for a brown-eyed handsome man, deserts, Bombay, history, a beautiful daughter who can't make up her mind between a doctor and a lawyer man, for DeMilo's Venus and wrestling matches and baseball and two-three counts and high flies into the stand. I am grateful when those I love leave town and even more grateful when they die and think how lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard. I am grateful for tears, for they are rain upon the blinding dust of earth. I like the way people say "sherbert" instead of "sherbet," and I like as well "sorbet," the word from which both are derived, though not as much as I like "sherbert" and "sherbet." I like mispronunciations of every kind, including the word "mispronunciation." I like phrases like "pick-me-up," which is something to brighten your day or give you an energy boost, especially useful when you can't spare time for a lunch break during a long work session. Also, chemical mood enhancers such as alcoholic beverages. "Let's go for coffee, I could sure use a pick-me-up." I like expressions for déclassé or outmoded structures: dive bar, motor lodge, gas station trading post,

abandoned amusement park. I like collective nouns: a smack of jellyfish, an ostentation of peacocks, an incredulity of cuckolds, an altcommandcontrolshift of techies, a rave of DJs, a hedge of investment bankers, a ring of opera goers, a pan of critics. I like expressions that mean something other than what they seem to, like finger sandwiches and baby oil. If corn oil is made of corn and olive oil is made of olives, what is baby oil made of? I am grateful for arias in languages I cannot understand, for I figure the singers are singing about something so beautiful it can't be expressed in my language, and that makes my heart hurt. I am grateful for epiphanies because they are always just below the surface, waiting for the right conditions to reveal them. I am grateful for stories, to my friend who said he was sitting next to a nun on a plane who says she's nervous because she'd never flown before, so he says he always finds that a couple of scotches calm his nerves, so she orders a scotch, but then the plane encounters some turbulence, and the frightened nun grabs my friend's hand and orders another scotch, and for the rest of the flight, anybody who uses the forward lavatory comes out to see my friend holding hands with a nun who's throwing down drinks like there's no tomorrow. I am grateful to Allen Garganus, who said "Stories only happen to people who can tell them." I am grateful to Ernest Shackleton, because when the *Endurance* became trapped in Antarctic pack ice, he orders his men to take no more than two pounds of personal items each as they abandon ship, though he makes exceptions for photographer Frank Hurley's photographic plates and crew member Leonard Hussey's banjo. Just you wait: next year my gratitude will be Cyclopean, Brobdingnagian, Bunyanesque, Herculean, Gargantuan. Next year I'm going to be so grateful it'll be bad for me. Right now I'm grateful for a newspaper you can still hold in your hand, for stories like this one that has a Fernandina Beach dateline and reads in its entirety: "Authorities say a man and a woman who were stopped for drunken bicycling in a Florida beach town had sex in a deputy's patrol car before one of them fled naked." Which one, I wonder. When I read this to my wife, she says "Which one?" and then "That sentence just gets better and better."