

Movements

Matthew Baker

Movements

I. Allegro

(or, Fanatically Obsessed with Trivial Arguments)

I became trapped on the roof around midnight, wearing only an undershirt, heart-pattern boxers, cloth slippers, and a terry bathrobe embroidered with the logo of the hotel. I was exhausted, had wanted only to sleep, but after stripping off my button-up and chinos—staring at that empty bed—a feeling of despair had taken ahold of me, the wallpaper seemed unbearable, the carpeting seemed intolerable, the air in the room suddenly seemed both too thick and too thin, yes, both, simultaneously, which may be difficult to imagine, but the point is that the air was stifling—I felt as if, without fresh air, I would suffocate, I would die. At my age, sudden bodily emergencies like that had become remarkably common. Knotting the sash of my bathrobe, I fled the room, hurrying down the hallway, where discarded platters smeared with streaks of pesto and ketchup lay waiting for housekeeping, and the wallpaper and carpeting were just as oppressive. Thumbing, repeatedly, the button to summon the elevator from the lobby—already dreading having to pass the shrill wails of the apparently never-ending singer-songwriter gig underway in the hotel lounge in order to reach the revolving door that separated the lobby from the street—I happened to glance further along the hallway, and noticed a doorway that led to

the stairwell, labeled, “Roof.” Aha! What luck! I’d avoid the singer-songwriters after all! I slipped into the stairwell, and climbed quickly, steadying myself at intervals with the railing. The door at the top of the steps was admittedly plastered with what may have been a warning, but in the land of lawsuits, where warning signs seemed to have become as rife as billboards, who ever bothered to read such things? I stepped out onto the rooftop, the door shutting behind me with a hollow thunk *{forte}*. I found myself in a moonlit landscape of spinning vents and steaming pipes. The sky, flecked here and there with stars, had a violet glow. Brisk autumnal nighttime air rushed over me, sweeping away every trace of despair, leaving me with a sense of calm. I breathed, deeply, fully, gratefully. For those wishing to picture me, imagine a lofty, rather svelte man, dignified by wrinkles, eyes accented by horn-rimmed glasses with a mottled frame. My jawline was chiseled. My cheekbones were prominent. My hair, luxuriant, textured, a bright glossy silver, remained streaked with darker strands. I was, frankly, a handsome creature. But hark! Within this charming body lay a dreadful soul. I soon recovered, breathing that rooftop air. I would sleep. I would sleep. I felt wonderful—I strolled back to the door with a skip in my step—I felt suddenly quite wonderful—until twisting the doorknob, and discovering that this side of the door was locked. Discovering that, I didn’t feel wonderful at all. I was shocked; I twisted the knob again, giving the door a shake, forcefully; yes, truly, this side of the door was locked. Whose fool policy was this? Was it a security measure? To keep out intruders? What sort of far-fetched break-ins was the hotel expecting? Burglars scaling the building wearing face masks and suction cups? Thieves strapped to parachutes pitching out the cargo bay of an airplane? The hotel stood twelve stories, a chromatic scale of modern architecture! None of the adjacent buildings stood anywhere near as high! A cursory search revealed the rooftop had no other doors. That door was the only door, and the door was shut fast. I cursed *{fortissimo}*. I cursed *{sforzando}* again. I redid the sash of my bathrobe,

which at some point had come undone. At the edge of the roof, I sprawled across the tar, peeking over the ledge, heart beating at a dizzying tempo—I'd always been a coward about heights—and was reminded that none of the rooms had balconies. There was nothing to drop down to, aside from the pavement twelve stories below. I was trapped. Beneath the hotel, tourists and townies strolled the sidewalk in colorful apparel, traversing the grooves between slabs as if crossing the bars between measures. At the stoplight, a taxi was honking {*mezzo-piano*} at a pickup that was honking {*mezzo-piano*} at a trio of apparently wasted pedestrians who had abruptly halted halfway across the crosswalk, blocking traffic. Across the street, bass thumped {*piano*} monotonously from honky-tonk bars with neon signage. A one-man band hunched under the crisscrossing straps of an accordion, a banjo, a harmonica, a bugle, a tambourine, a whistle, a pair of cymbals, a range of drums, and an outrageously patriotic display of flags, was perched on a crate, yelling {*pianissimo*} something through a megaphone. The winds muffled everything. I lay there trying to decide whether tossing a slipper would be a sensible way to signal my distress to the people below, or if from this altitude a falling slipper might strike some passerby dead.

Beau, my husband, had died the week earlier, felled by a stroke at our kitchen counter; at breakfast, he'd nudged aside his plate of omelette and spinach, lowered himself meekly to the countertop, whimpered {*piano*} once, sleepily, shut his eyes, and never woke again. Beau had been a shy, kind, somewhat chubby man, whose idea of paradise had been a wool sweater, a warm patch of sunlight, and a battered paperback; he'd liked his books so aged the pages were as brittle as the peel on a bulb of garlic, and as fragrant as the cloves. He'd been trained as a sculptor, but never found success, and been content working odd jobs, collecting tolls and bagging groceries. When we'd met, he'd had a head of lush, dark, wavy hair, although soon his hair had begun to thin, and he'd been bald ever after, topped by a shiny dome with slight ridges and faint dimples. We had lived together nearly half a

century, which had given us ample time to become fanatically obsessed with trivial arguments; among our various disputes, we'd had an ongoing quarrel about traveling. Beau, homebody that he was, nevertheless had a streak of adventurer, and delighted in experiencing new places. At the time we met, we had both spent exactly a year overseas. Beau had spent his year backpacking with college friends, roving without plan from country to country—Portugal, Spain, France, Belgium, Germany, Denmark, Morocco, Algeria, Nepal, India, Bhutan, China—rarely staying in any given city for longer than a smattering of nights. As for me, I had spent my year studying in Vienna, and had never left Austria. That illustrated the difference between us perfectly. Our motives were identical: Beau had been prompted to embark on the backpacking excursion by a desire to “get to know somewhere new”; I had chosen to study abroad because I had fallen in love with Vienna, from afar, through its music, and had wanted to get closer to it, to understand it intimately. Neither of us had been sightseers; we'd had no interest in snapping photos of landmarks and monuments; we'd craved an experience with meaning, depth, authenticity. On that we agreed wholeheartedly. Where we clashed was in our methods. I didn't believe anybody could come to “know” a place after a mere night bunked down in some hostel. I had spent a year in Vienna; I had devoted my weekends to exploring its districts, had availed myself of every parade, every ball, every festival, had frequented the museum courtyards and palace gardens, had immersed myself in the operas and ballets; I had seen the city in its autumn finery, its winter cloak, its spring frippery, its summer rags, had seen it through both windstorms and rainstorms, had seen its darkened alleys lit suddenly by fireworks, had seen its streetlights suddenly extinguished by blackouts; even then, I felt that I'd barely even begun to understand the place. On the spectrum from “unknown” to “known,” to me the city had still seemed very foreign. Beau, however, didn't believe in such spectrums. “It's not, either you know it, or you don't know it,” he'd once argued *{legato}*, propped up naked

in bed, his face awash with moonlight, his body in shadows, as steam rose from his mug of chai. “Everybody knows it. Just, differently. That’s what makes traveling so meaningful. There are things about a place an outsider sees that a local just can’t.” He’d had a timid, reedy, lilting voice, and always smiled while arguing, patient but insistent; I’d had a temper, and interrupted him constantly, drowning him out with my brassy timbre. Throughout our relationship, Beau had periodically taken spontaneous trips to random places around the country—his last had been to Smyrna, in Delaware—and in conversation often referenced his experiences in these locations. To me, weekend getaways like that seemed futile, a waste of time. If forced to travel, visiting somewhere for the debut performance of a new symphony—Atlanta, Boston, Houston, Cleveland—I’d never bothered to venture out into the city, just shuttled to and fro between hotel room and concert hall. Beau had never given up trying to sway me. The weekend before he’d died—that was when he’d taken that trip to Smyrna. I remembered him lumbering out of our apartment, carrying his usual floral-pattern duffel bag, with a tomato sandwich packed for the bus. As always, he’d invited me to come. I’d stayed home to compose.

I’d spent decades tormenting him with counterpoints, assailing him with arguments, disputing his every opinion out of principle; now that he was gone, I wanted only to please him. Was that human nature, or a failing specific to me? Regardless, the evening after the funeral, slumped on our bathroom linoleum, drunk on cocoa and marshmallows—at my age sugar was as intoxicating as alcohol—I’d resolved to take a journey: a spontaneous trip someplace I’d never been. After some deliberation, I’d chosen Nashville, Tennessee. Why there exactly? Nashville was our Vienna: the American “Music City” to the European “City of Music.” Beau, I thought, would have liked that touch. I was ready to give his theory a chance, finally: to test for myself whether you really could come to know a place in a single night, the way he’d always claimed was possible. Honestly, I was probably also

embarking on the trip in order to postpone having to mourn him—I frantically needed something to distract me—at the time, grieving him seemed an unimaginable task, just impossible.

I arrived in Nashville at dawn, with a ticket to depart the following morning. I dropped off my suitcase at the hotel, ate some waffles and bacon in the hotel lounge, and hailed a taxi. My spirits were soaring—I was determined to give my all to this!—and from there the day was a disaster, although not from lack of trying. I saw about every sight the city offered. I rode a flatboat through the meandering canals in Opryland, jammed onto a bench across from triplet toddlers in souvenir ballcaps who competed at kicking me. I rode a carriage through the dusty thoroughfare on Broadway, getting struck in the face by a plastic bag that was blowing about like tumbleweed. I took a stroll along Music Row, which proved to be just a neighborhood, only a neighborhood, recording studios in converted bungalows, with nothing to do or hear. I examined the Ryman, inspected the Schermerhorn, unexpectedly saw a Parthenon. I didn't stop there; I was searching for some authentic insight into the inner workings of the city; I was prepared to trespass if necessary. I peeked into a yoga studio, observing, with some bewilderment, the inhales {*piano*} and exhales {*forte*} of the contorted yogis, before being ejected by their pigtailed guru. I scoped out a bridal shop, gawking, with utter horror, at dressmakers sewing {*tremolo*} sequins to a gown in a paisley motif, until getting shooed by their bejeweled overseer. I paid a cover charge to enter a billiard hall, watched drunken nurses in hospital scrubs nail {*staccato*} darts into a bullseye with sober accuracy, and then had a pint of beer spilled onto, into, my loafers. I intruded upon a laundromat, a pawnbroker, a florist, the waiting room of an accountant. I perused historical plaques, nihilist leaflets, sentimental graffiti. I stumbled onto a concert in a park, listened to off-key cover bands crooning {*falsetto*} the opuses and opuscula of folk and country, cringed through every last ditty

and ballad, felt out of place, and tripped over a picnic basket on my way out. By dusk, I'd gotten nowhere. In a last-gasp attempt, I turned my attention to the culinary scene. What sort of fare was eaten here? I tried the sushi. Horrible! I tried the paletas. Terrible! I tried the coffee. What kind of coffee did this city brew? Abominable, that's what kind! Gourmet, with subtle notes of pecan and toffee! A masterpiece of java! Without any warning, I found myself becoming teary, moved by the flavor! I hadn't asked for this! From coffee, I wanted caffeine and caffeine alone! I'd never ordered emotions! Admittedly, the tears were probably somewhat due to my frustration over how poorly the trip had gone. The barista had claimed the cafe was housed in what had once been a pet shop; seated in my booth, thumbing tears from the creases at the corners of my eyes, I listened carefully to the clamor *{fortissimo}* there, hoping to detect, somewhere in the midst of the chattering *{forte}* humans and clattering *{forte}* dishes, the ghostly echoes of woofing dogs and mewling cats. Alas, even with hearing as trained as mine, I heard only the lone chirp *{glissando}* of a ghost parakeet—which ultimately proved to be neither ghost nor parakeet, but rather a living warbler, which must have hopped through the swinging door with a customer, and now, trapped indoors, was hiding beneath a vacant table, peeking out at me from behind a trampled napkin. The taxi back to my hotel ran over a screw, a nail, something sharp, and got a flat; I had to walk the last few blocks.

In summary, trapping myself on the roof of the hotel was a fitting conclusion to my trip. Sitting cross-legged on the tar, draped in that ill-fitting bathrobe, staring out over the glittering neon lightscape of downtown, I was struck by a thought that had visited me periodically throughout the day: what the hell was I doing here?

I knew now what I'd known all along: I was always right; Beau was always wrong.

That thought was interrupted by a sudden creak *{mezzo-piano}* as the door to the roof was thrown open. I whirled. A rescuer! Some champion! Come to save me! A youngish

hipster, vibrantly tattooed, clad in plaid and denim, and biting a cigarette—who not only shoved the door open, but stepped through, letting it slam *{mezzo-forte}* back shut.

“Howdy,” she grunted *{forte}*.

“Do you have a key to that door?” I said *{forte}*.

“A what?” she said *{forte}*.

“The door can’t be opened from this side,” I said *{forte}*.

The stranger squinted, frowned, turned, and gave the knob a twist.

“Well, fuck!” she said *{piano}*.

II. Adagio

(or, Secretly in Possession of Chocolate)

She smoked her cigarette, a series of long, deep, measured drags, and then set about trying to attract the attention of somebody in the hotel. She had a stringy build—looked underfed—hair bundled into a topknot, ears pegged with piercings, a spindly neck, a narrow torso set onto broad hips. Her tattoos ranged from the whimsical to the belligerent. She’d offered, by way of introduction, only the name Mel—perhaps a diminutive for Melody?—Melanie, Melinda, Melisande?—and was, considering our difference in stature, remarkably intimidating. I was given the sense she probably was capable of murder. She spent an incredible amount of time pounding *{mezzo-forte}* on the door—I’d given up on knocking fairly quickly—eventually quit pounding, swore at the door *{piano}*, stalked off, paced around the vents and pipes, kicked at something, muttered *{pianissimo}* to herself, plucked a nearly empty package of tobacco from her shirt pocket as if intending to roll another cigarette, hesitated, scowled, glared at the door, stuffed the tobacco back into her shirt pocket, and, having apparently caught some second wind, marched back over to the door

to beat on it some more *{forte}*—until finally admitting defeat, and shuffling over to me, pouting, and whining *{mezzo-piano}*, “Nobody takes the fucking stairs.”

On some prescient impulse, I’d stuffed a handful of miniature chocolate bars into my bathrobe before leaving the room. I sat very still, now, to prevent the wrappers from crinkling. I didn’t want her to know about the chocolates, in case we ended up trapped here indefinitely. In a skirmish over resources, I’d have the advantage in height and weight; I’d always been somewhat of a wimp about such confrontations, however, whereas, despite her dainty look, she had the aura of a scrappy veteran.

“This is why, usually, I just don’t do responsible things,” Mel said *{mezzo-forte}*, tossing the package of tobacco onto the rooftop, and squatting to roll a cigarette. “I was just going to smoke inside, blow the smoke out a window or something, but my brother said hey, this room’s non-smoking, this hotel’s non-smoking, this whole fucking building is a non-smoking fucking place, would you show some respect? So fine, I did, I came outside to smoke, I did the responsible thing, and look where it got me! Stuck on a roof. I should have known this would happen. The universe always punishes you for doing responsible things. I actually know some responsible people—they always have ugly babies. Have you ever noticed this? You know any responsible people? Their babies are ugly, right? Yep, it’s hard for some people to accept, but we’re living in a universe that’s opposed to all forms of responsibility. I should have just gone down to the street, but the roof sounded so much closer, and besides, I hate having to stand outside of somewhere to smoke, being huddled there all alone, with everybody inside watching you through the windows, it makes me feel like, like an outcast, like a reject, like in those video rental stores, how the porn’s always kept in a back room with a curtain that never totally covers the doorway, so that people can peek through at all the pervs—I feel just like that, like some creep in the back room of a video store, with everybody watching me thinking, just look at that loser!”

Her speech appeared to have been meant as an overture to a lengthier conversation, to my dismay. If there was anything worse than being trapped, it was being trapped with someone chatty. Her voice had a twangy quality, upbeat, mellow. She bent to lick the paper, sealing the cigarette shut, then bit it, then lit it, and stood back up. Her phone, apparently, had been dead for days.

“You’re a composer? Have you ever conducted? Hey, we’re kind of the same! I’m a deejay. Okay, not a deejay, but a deejay. I mean, deejaying isn’t my job. For money, I work at a record store. We sell vinyl, cassettes, whatever, everything. If you’re ever in Alabama, you should swing by. You’ll need to wear pants. Hey, maybe we’ve even got some of your albums! Probably not though. Anyway, that’s just my job. It’s sad, but these days there’s a difference between your ‘job’ and your ‘purpose.’ All my friends have this. Our jobs have no purpose. I just stand at a counter—my job is, when somebody wants to buy something, I ring it up, tell them what they owe, and put the money in the register. Pointless! There are machines that can do that now! Besides, we get like a customer an hour! Tops! Basically, I spend my workdays sitting on a stool, staring at the floor in a daze. I might as well have dementia. My brother, his job’s at this company designing layouts for junk mail. Pointless! Nobody wants that shit! You might as well address the stuff straight to the landfill! He himself, my brother, gets pissed off when he gets junk mail! Can you even imagine how depressing it is to have to spend all day making things whose very existence pisses you off? Well, that’s his job. At night, though, he’s got this letterpress printer, and he makes his own greeting cards—they’re so cute, so funny, so weird, everybody loves them! That’s his purpose, why he’s alive. He just can’t make a living doing it. My friends, we all get paid to do these pointless things, and get paid next to nothing for doing the stuff that people really love. That’s fucked up, huh? Who came up with this system, anyway? I really want to contribute something to the world though. I mean that. I don’t want my life to be, just,

meaningless. Nobody does, right? Right. Well that's what deejaying is for me," Mel said {*mezzo-piano*}, nodding, and then tapped ashes from the cigarette.

She turned away, toward the city, gazing in the direction of the bridge, puffing on the cigarette with marked caesuras between inhale and exhale. She had a brooding look: her eyebrows had furrowed; her nostrils had pinched; her lips were pursed around the cigarette. She seemed to have exhausted her reserves of pluck. I considered excusing myself, hoping to retreat to the opposite end of the roof, to set about avoiding her.

Abruptly, her face lit, and she turned back toward me, looking curious.

"Hey maestro, during a performance, have you ever had that moment?" Mel said {*mezzo-forte*}, giving another tap to the cigarette. "You probably think any idiot can deejay, right? Well, you actually need a lot of talent! You've got to know everything! Key, tempo, all that stuff really matters! It's just like being a composer—except, instead of arranging notes into a song, you're arranging songs into a, like, much bigger thing. And you're the conductor, too, you've got your instruments, and you're directing everything, adjusting your turntables, cueing your mixer, monitoring your speakers, triggering your sequencer. What makes all this even trickier is that there's an element of improv, because you can actually see the effect the music is having on the crowd, like, beat to beat, and if something's off, sometimes you've gotta ditch your entire lineup, throw something else together on the spot! Beforehand I always get so nervous I shake so bad that I can hardly walk. You have been to a club before, haven't you? It's a lot like a concert hall, except the audience is dancing instead of sitting, and wearing glow sticks instead of tuxes. Oh, and maybe high. Anyway, have you ever had this moment? Do you know it? You've worked so hard, you're trying so hard, to give the audience a certain feeling—and this person over here sorta feels it, but then loses it, and that person over there almost feels it, but then loses it, there's just these clusters of the feeling, coming and going around the room—mostly, really, nobody's

feeling it at all—people are feeling something, maybe, but not the thing you came here dying to give them, that exact specific feeling, no, they're stuck feeling totally separate totally different totally random things, on their own, by themselves, alone—but then, everything shifts just barely, and suddenly there's this unimaginably perfect intersection of volume and rhythm and frequency and the feeling just explodes across the room, and everybody has it—suddenly every fucking person in the whole fucking room has it all at once—there's this moment where they're all feeling exactly what you wanted them to, they actually understand that language your music is speaking, they get it, and feel it, everybody, together, they're outside of their bodies, they're the same body, they're yours, and what you're feeling, you, is so powerful and so vulnerable at the same time that you can hardly breathe?”

I was about to deny having experienced anything of the sort—and moreover dispute any likeness between the orchestra and deejaying—but then was struck by the realization that I actually knew what she was talking about. I wouldn't have described it that way, exactly, ever, but I had felt it. As it dawned on me, a grin slowly broke out across my face.

“You do know it!” Mel said *{portato}*, looking pleased. “Hmmm, you really must be pretty good. I've still only ever had that moment just once.” She frowned. “Ever since then, I've been trying to get back to that place somehow, but just can't seem to.”

She flicked what remained of the cigarette onto the rooftop, ground out the embers, and then rested her hands on her hips.

“Alright, maestro. We've gotta get down from here, toss a message down, a note or something. I'll donate some rolling paper to the cause. You have any pens? ” Mel said *{mezzo-forte}*.

“Not a one,” I said *{mezzo-piano}*.

“Then we're really fucked,” Mel said *{mezzo-forte}*.

“I thought about throwing my slippers, but I was worried I might hit someone,” I said {*mezzo-piano*}.

She bent forward, squinting at me.

“Worried? This is an emergency! Who cares if we hit someone? In fact, we should aim for them, that’d really get their attention!” Mel said {*crescendo*}.

In one deft movement, she plucked the slippers from my feet, and without any further ado—such as looking to see who or what might happen to be below at the moment—flung the slippers over the edge.

Together, we peered over the ledge, watching as the slippers tumbled down past the twelve flights of windows, getting struck at points by gusts of wind. Below, a bearded fellow in a cowboy hat and an athletic jersey was navigating the sidewalk in a motorized wheelchair. At the curb, a duo of cabdrivers rested against parked taxis, facing the street, waiting for fares. The slippers landed in the street—which was empty—flopping to either side of the center line.

The bearded fellow hit the brakes, his wheelchair lurching to a halt. He stared at the slippers; he glanced at the hotel; he stared at the slippers; he glanced at the hotel; he stared at the slippers. He activated his wheelchair, and continued on toward the stoplight without looking back. The cabdrivers hadn’t reacted to the slippers in the slightest.

“Well, fuck, you really do have to hit these people!” Mel said {*forte*}, sounding almost impressed.

“Should we try again?” I said {*forte*}.

She gazed down at her shoes, beaded leather moccasins.

“I need these or my feet will get cold,” Mel said {*forte*}, and then glanced at me, as if daring me to challenge her.

“I was actually just thinking the same thing about my slippers,” I said {*forte*}.

“Too late now,” Mel said *{forte}*.

She plopped down onto the rooftop, wrapped her arms around her legs in a sort of hug, and rested her chin on her knees.

“Maybe my brother will come looking for me,” Mel murmured *{piano}*. “Probably not though. The truth is, maestro, I’m kind of a fuck-up. He’ll probably assume I just took off without telling him. I’ve been known to do that sort of thing.”

Just then, my innards gurgled *{glissando}*, ravenously.

“Ditto,” Mel grunted *{piano}*, at my organs.

I’d have to wait until she wasn’t looking, and eat the chocolates then.

III. Minuet

(or, Dance of the Invisible Thingies)

We’d met, Beau and I, at a housewarming party for a mutual friend, shortly after returning from our respective trips overseas. I’d been a grave, downbeat, mute of a lad, overdressed in a navy blazer and pastel polo. Crossing the threshold from the porch into the house, I’d ducked into a haze of incense and hashish, pressed through the crowd of gabbers *{forte}*, already regretting coming—and there had found Beau. A somewhat chubby stranger, dancing atop a coffee table—not drunk, not even drinking, just dancing for the pleasure of dancing, spinning around solo, as jazz howled *{fortissimo}* from the jukebox in the corner. He’d still had his hair then, wavy, dark, lush. He’d been clad all in black—black jacket, black tee, black jeans, black tennies. He’d been spotlit by the sole lightbulb in the ceiling fan that wasn’t burned out. I’d almost pushed on through the crowd. I loathed, had always loathed, polite chitchat, idle chatter; I never engaged with cashiers and servers; I avoided conversations with classmates and neighbors; I never, ever, spoke to strangers. What point

lay in exchanging pleasantries with somebody you would never see again? But something about him had intrigued me. I'd felt an urge to know everything about him—I'd yanked his sleeve, demanding his name—I'd critiqued his dancing, criticized his outfit, cornered him against the jukebox, and then begun asking questions, endless questions, a barrage of questions about where he was from and how he voted and what he dreamed about and why he always frowned before sneezing, trying to get a sense of who, exactly, this person was. I'd never lost that urge. The questions hadn't stopped until his heart had.

By now the lit windows of the adjacent buildings had nearly all winked out. Even the honky-tonks had closed. Aside from the occasional warble *{piano}* of distant car alarms, the streets were hushed. Mel had given me her lighter, with the task of trying to signal our distress to anybody who might happen to glance up our way. I sat at the edge of the roof, waving the lighter back and forth through the air, in a steady rhythm, like some dreadlocked hippie at a music festival. Mel rolled cigarettes until her tobacco was gone, tucked the cigarettes into her shirt pocket, and then, with the last of the rolling paper, turned to folding miniature airplanes. The wind had died, letting odors gather again. At moments, I caught whiffs of my sweat, a bitter vinegary tang. Mel smelled faintly of liquor, with notes of detergent and gasoline, a surprisingly pleasant chord. From the roof, which perhaps had been recently recoated, arose a scent of paint. Even without wind, the temperature was chilly. Below, somebody dressed in a bright vest, tramping along the sidewalk hunched under a backpack, possibly homeless, paused, glanced in both directions—the street was deserted—crept into the street, grabbed the slippers, and then hurried off into an alley.

“Do you want to know something funny about me, maestro?” Mel said *{mezzo-forte}*. “I always feel the exact opposite of what you're supposed to. Seriously. The exact opposite feeling. Like once, back in like kindergarten or something, I begged my dad for months to

get me a puppy. Begged and begged and begged, nonstop, like, would not shut up. My voice back then was so high-pitched, it'd cut straight through solid walls. My dad would be locked in his bedroom getting dressed for work, and I'd be standing at the door, shouting through, like, facts about puppies. People with puppies have lower cholesterol! Stuff like that. Totally made up. Anyway, one day, I get home from school, and my dad's sitting on our steps holding the cutest puppy on the planet. There wasn't any special occasion. It was just, he'd been setting aside some money from each paycheck, and finally saved enough to buy it. The exact kind I'd been begging for—breed, color, the brindle marks and everything. And I stopped, and I looked at the puppy, and I burst into tears. Tears! I wasn't, like, overjoyed, or just overwhelmed, or something. I was actually upset. I didn't want to hold it. I couldn't even look at it. My dad couldn't figure out what was wrong. Can you imagine, being stuck having a kid like me, who bursts into tears when you get her exactly what she's always wanted? Well, it was confusing for me, too! Another time, I was in this singing competition, I was really into choir, I practiced for this thing day and night. I was older, like a teenager then. I wish you could have seen me on this stage. I was pretty ugly as a kid. I had no sense of style. Not having a mom or sister, I missed out on a lot of the basics, which didn't help either. You wouldn't believe how lopsided my braids were. As far as eyebrows, or unibrows, are concerned, let's just say nobody had ever taught me how to use a pair of tweezers. Anyway, my dream was to become a musician, and this competition really meant a lot to me, and pretty much the entire town was there. Well, I got last place. Dead last. I should have been crushed. Instead, though, I felt really inspired. Like the crowd had giving me a standing ovation or something. I remember thinking, I want to be a musician the rest of my life. In the pictures of everyone on stage, I look even happier than the girl who won, who by the way ended up eloping with this middle-aged realtor and now lives in a cabin in the desert with their like eleven children. My dad went out of

his way to be extra nice to me the next week, cooked all my favorite suppers, brought me to the movies, hardly had me do any chores, but he didn't have to, because my feelings hadn't been hurt at all. Really the only thing I didn't feel totally good about was how backward my feelings were. I've never gotten used to it. Of course, it doesn't happen to me with everything. Minor stuff, like parking tickets, or sunny weather, I feel how anyone would. If my flight's delayed, I'm pissed! If a kitten yawns, I squeal! I'm normal about the minor stuff. But the major stuff—well, for major stuff, I always feel the exact opposite of what people are supposed to. And that makes me feel like a freak. I wonder, am I even human, if I feel like this? I think about that kind of a lot, actually. Funny, huh?"

She bent over the rolling paper, biting her tongue, with just the tip sticking out, as if concentrating very intently on the airplane she was folding.

"You want to know why I'm here?" Mel said *{mezzo-forte}*, still bent over the airplane, making a crease. "Maybe you already know this, but this city's got one of the top hospitals in the country. For cancer especially. So, my dad moved here, a few years ago, to get these very intense cancer treatments. Alabama's got hospitals, of course, but my dad wanted the best care that money could buy. Nashville was kinda perfect, because he wanted to stay close to us too. The drive's really not that far. And, after his cancer went into remission, he decided to keep living here. He'd made all these friends—he's very cute like that—other cancer patients, these old guys, who he'd gotten kinda close to. They, like, go out bowling together, or whatever. Take outings to football games, wearing matching shirts. Me and my brother, we drive up every so often, to visit with him for the weekend. His place is really tiny, so we always stay at a hotel. Tomorrow we're taking him out for pancakes. Anyway, he actually wasn't supposed to survive, originally. His diagnosis was pretty bleak. Stage four cancer, super advanced, the doctors gave him maybe a month to live, and that's if he was lucky. He was supposed to die. He was going to die. He called me, to tell me,

soon as he knew. I remember, I'd just gotten home, I'm standing there in the doorway with one shoe on and one shoe off, and he calls me, and he tells me. And when I heard the news, do you know how I felt? Devastated? Afraid? Like inconsolable, or something? No. Not at all. Relieved. I felt relieved. I'd actually been having a pretty terrible day, somebody keyed my car, my schedule at work was all messed up, the pharmacy wouldn't give me my prescription—I was feeling very, very, very bad about life—and then my dad called to tell me that he was dying, and suddenly I felt, like, euphoric. I've actually never taken ecstasy, drugs like that really scare me, but based on the things my friends have told me, I felt kind of like somebody who'd just dropped pure ecstasy: very, very, very, very, very, very happy. After I hung up, I kept thinking, what the fuck is wrong with me? I had to move, I needed to do something, I wasn't paying attention to anything I was doing, I went to the sink and started washing dishes, I went to the counter and started going through mail, I went to the cupboard and started organizing all the boxes of cereal, I stopped, I looked around, I realized, I'd left the sink full with all the dirty dishes still somewhere underwater, I couldn't remember anything about even a single piece of mail, and why was I organizing cereal? I was in shock, I guess. Even after the shock wore off, though, I still had that happy feeling. Like, glad. Why did I feel that? I didn't want to, I love my dad, I've never known anybody as caring, as thoughtful, as him, he's always supported me, and tried his best to understand me, he's like the most important person in my life, honestly. I'm closer with him than anybody. And I found out he was going to die, and, emotionally, for some reason my response was to feel glad. Oh, I hated myself for that! It's the worst thing I've ever done, it was just a feeling, it's not like you make a decision to feel something, you can't help how you feel, there's no choice, you just feel it suddenly, but, still, how do you forgive yourself for something that terrible? Even after his cancer went into remission, even after he was totally fine, I couldn't stop thinking about that feeling I'd had. I still really can't."

I lowered the lighter; a breeze had blown the flame out.

“Do you think that I’m a bad person?” Mel said *{diminuendo}*.

Her tone had changed—hoarse now, suddenly gruff. Glancing over, I saw she had that curious expression again, that genuine earnest look of wanting an answer to a question, but with a strange glint to her eyes; she blinked, and a pair of tears streaked down her cheeks, as abruptly as if just then rain had begun to fall, and simply had struck her before me. She wiped the tears off, making quick swipes at her cheeks with the cuffs of her shirt.

“Sorry,” Mel said *{piano}*.

She gestured vaguely, her hands still balled within her cuffs.

“I’m just really tired, and sick of being stuck, and want to go back inside,” Mel said *{piano}*.

“I spent nearly half a century torturing the love of my life day in and day out by disputing every opinion he had and constantly attacking his every flaw and refusing to pardon even the most trivial mistakes that he’d made and making demands that were obviously contradictory, like insisting that he not wake me up with his cold feet but then also that he never wear socks in bed, completely irrational demands, torturing him, day in and day out, because he loved me, and thus had to put up with my every whim,” I said *{mezzo-forte}*.

She squinted, as if trying to decide what to make of that.

“So you’re a bad person too?” Mel said *{piano}*.

“Well, I hadn’t really planned on going that far,” I said *{mezzo-forte}*.

Mel turned toward the city, cupped her hands around her mouth, and screamed *{fortissimo}*, “A couple of terrible people are up on this roof!” A gust of wind slammed the rooftop, whistling *{piano}* through the pipes and vents, scattering the paper airplanes. Mel

shuddered, wrapping her arms around her legs again. I shuddered too, clutching the bathrobe against my frame. Mel plucked a pair of cigarettes from her shirt pocket.

“Here,” Mel said *{mezzo-forte}*.

“I don’t smoke,” I said *{mezzo-piano}*.

“It’ll help warm you up,” Mel said *{mezzo-forte}*.

“There’s a relatively high chance that smoking that would send me straight into cardiac arrest,” I said *{mezzo-piano}*.

“Maestro, you’re going to smoke with me, there just isn’t any choice,” Mel said *{mezzo-forte}*.

Mel smoked her cigarette with panache, her movements as graceful as those of a prima donna, or dancer of ballet. I smoked mine warily, taking quick nervous puffs. I did not fear death, but did at least hope to die with dignity, which in that bathrobe would be impossible. What Mel had said reminded me of an incident at the funeral parlor a few days before. The incident had occurred before the funeral, at the viewing, in a room with tasteful wallpaper and subtle carpeting. The casket had been open then; Beau had lain there, atop the velvet padding, in a new suit and his floral-pattern tie. In the lighting, a medley of ceiling fixtures and floor lamps, the uneven terrain of his scalp had gleamed. His features had been arranged, by the funeral director, into an expression of calm, the exact look of contentment he’d often had during naps. Outdoors, raindrops had ticked *{pianississimo}* against the windows, then streaked down. Our marriage had been an intimate affair—with the exception of his travels, we’d been inseparable—we hadn’t even liked to make trips to the grocery store without bringing along the other. Checkups at the doctor’s, checkups at the dentist’s, we’d even coordinated those, gossiping together about other patients in the waiting room. His friends had been my friends; my friends had been his friends; neither of us had very been close to our families, but after nearly half a century together, we’d each

encountered the whole gamut of in-law kin. I'd expected to know everybody at the viewing. And I had—every last person—with an exception. Standing there alongside the casket, somehow managing to accept the sympathies and regrets of the mourners without going to pieces, I was approached by a squat burly woman I had never seen before. She was garbed in a frumpy tweed jacket, a frumpy tweed skirt, and brogues in dire need of a shining; she had a bob cut, sensationally bushy eyebrows, and a belly like a drum. Panting *{piano}*, she hobbled toward me, hunched over a cane—she seemed to be in quite poor health—the cane was capped with an amber ball, like the head on a mallet, which she gripped as if without the cane she might simply tip over. She introducing herself, a retired lawyer with a forgettable name, and then explained who she was. Although she'd since moved here, she'd been born and bred in urban Idaho—I was shocked to learn there was such a thing—and, either despite of or due to her inner-city upbringing, in college had developed a fondness for the wilderness. She had met Beau, she said, at the base of a mountain in Oregon, just across state lines. Beau had been alone; she had too; they had both come to hike a trail to the summit. “I still remember, he had these neon sunglasses! The frames were neon! We met at the trailhead, happened to get to talking, ended up hiking to the overlook together! Well, we sat there awhile, then made our way back down, shook hands, and that was that!” She spoke *{mezzo-piano}* in pealing tones—rising and falling in pitch, syllable to syllable, like struck chimes—in stark contrast to the monotone whispering *{pianissimo}* that permeated the reception. I hadn't wanted to like her; I found myself liking her nonetheless. “You stayed in contact after that?” I said *{mezzo-piano}*, trying to be polite. “Nope!” she said *{mezzo-forte}*, sweat beginning to bead on her face now, apparently just from the strain of having to stand. “Never saw him again! Well, until the obituary! As soon as I saw that picture though, I thought, that's my friend from the mountain!” She paused, wiping sweat from her face with an embroidered handkerchief. Just

then, I was startled by the sound of Beau speaking *{fortepiano}*; somebody at the reception was playing a recording of him, probably over a phone. I was drawn to the sound, and was about to excuse myself, to go search for the source, when she said something that confused me. “I’ll never forget when he told me about the dance of invisible thingies!” she exclaimed *{mezzo-forte}*. I frowned. “Pardon?” I said *{forte}*. She tucked her handkerchief away, took a firm hold on her cane, and then cried *{marcato}*, “The dance! The invisible thingies! What he liked to do when his eyes were shut!” I craned forward, frown deepening; what the hell was this woman talking about? “He must have told you about the dance of the invisible thingies!” she laughed *{forte}*. “Somehow we got onto the subject of sleeping. He was a lover of naps, he said. Told me he aimed for a nap a day. According to him, though, sometimes when he lay down to take a nap he’d get distracted by the invisible thingies. There’s probably some medical term for the stuff. You know those flimsy clear things that float around your vision? Dots, squiggles, bars, flags, all kinds of shapes, overlapping? If your eyes are still, they just barely drift around, but if you move your eyes, that really gets them whirling. Everybody’s got the things. Usually we just look straight through them, don’t even notice they’re there. Once you remember they’re there, though, it’s impossible not to see them. Anyway, Beau really liked that he could make the stuff whirl around, just by moving his eyes. As much as he loved naps, sometimes he’d end up skipping his nap altogether, and just lay there with his eyes shut, watching invisible thingies. He said, I remember this distinctly, he said that what he really loved was that by moving your eyes you could prompt them to move, but the exact way they’d respond to your cue was unpredictable—you had some control, but they were independent—their dances would always surprise you. He told me that he thought that was really beautiful. And, well, I just loved that, when he said it. I never forgot it. To this day, whenever I remember they’re there, I’ll shut my eyes and make them dance awhile. I never did that before I met

him,” she said *{mezzo-forte}*, and then smiled, as if simultaneously both proud and embarrassed. “A great man,” she concluded *{mezzo-piano}* abruptly; with that, she excused herself, hobbling over to the casket. I stood there, stunned. Beau had never, ever, told me any of this. I’d spent my life with him—I’d devoted nearly half a century to exploring his psyche conversationally—I’d known his every passion, every quirk, every habit, every doubt and conviction, every preference and aversion, the landmark moments and humdrum routines of his childhood, the particulars of his relationships with former acquaintances and distant relatives, the specific duties involved with every job he’d ever worked, his elaborate theories about laundry and taxes and spices and karma, the location and dimensions of every impact crater in his psychological topography, the meaning of the faintest shift in his stance or the slightest twitch in his countenance, the secret places he’d hidden sweets to cheat on diets, where he had and hadn’t been ticklish, the subtle variations in his signature, the exact cadence of his footsteps, everything, everything, everything, everything. How many times had he seemed to be napping when he’d actually been watching dancing shapes? How could he have had something like that without my knowing? How could this woman, this stranger, have discovered it in the course of a brief hike—an experience she’d found so meaningful she’d later come to help bury him?

Only now did I connect the incident with what Beau had said about cities: that there were things about a place an outsider saw that a local just couldn’t.

I came out of a trance, some caesura. Mel had smoked her cigarette down to a nub.

“Have you told anybody else about that deejaying moment?” I said *{mezzo-piano}*.

“Basically anybody who will listen,” Mel said *{piano}*.

Leaning forward, she tamped her cigarette out.

“What about the cancer diagnosis thing?” I said *{mezzo-piano}*.

Mel laughed *{piano}*, somewhat bitterly, and then stuck another cigarette between her lips, grunting *{mezzo-forte}*, “No. Never. You can’t tell people stuff like that, maestro!”

I stared at her profile, a darkened silhouette—heaped hair, flat brow, sloping nose, sharp chin, features that were suddenly illuminated as after a number of clicks *{staccato}* she managed to light the lighter to light her cigarette—thinking, with some awe, I know something about this stranger that nobody else does.

My cigarette had burned down only partly, halfway, but its glow had died long ago, its flame had gone out. I ground it out anyway—thoroughly pulverizing it, in case there were still some spark, somewhat paranoid about fires—and then turned back toward the city, wondering about Beau.

Where had he gone?

Who, or what, was he with there?

IV. Rondo

(or, Simple, Flat, Almost Childish)

It wasn’t dawn that woke us, it was the birds that came just before, a flock of songbirds that had alighted on the rooftop, and were perched now scattered across the vents and pipes, preening feathers, cheeping *{piano}* and trilling *{forte}*, on a layover for some migration, the temperature had eventually grown so frigid during the night that we’d been forced to huddle together for warmth, alternating at intervals who was wrapped around who, concluding, ultimately, with my body nestled into hers, her body draped over mine, a hand tucked under my chin, a hand clutching at my shirt, she awoke with a phlegmy sniff *{pianoforte}*, a pudgy bird with jerky movements had been hopping toward us, curiously, and when we stirred the bird was startled, shrieked *{glissando}* in alarm and beating

{*pianissimo*} both wings soared off into the sky, and the other birds followed, rising in a fluttering {*fortississimo*} mass and circling above the hotel in looping arcs before dropping back to the rooftop and settling onto the vents and pipes again, jabbering now {*sforzando*}. We sat up. Mel yawned {*fermata*}, rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands, blinked wearily, strands of hair were matted against her cheeks, her bangs were plastered sideways to her forehead. I scratched my face awhile. Clouds streaked the dawn, the colors were muted, a wash of indigo, with notes of pink and saffron along the horizon, casting a soft muffled light across the buildings, the sun still hadn't risen yet, but the city too was stirring again, motorcycles sputtered {*piano*} through the stoplight, a janitor in coveralls dragged rattling {*pianissimo*} trash cans into an alley, a shopkeeper in cowboy boots heaved a security shutter up with a crash {*piano*}, somewhere a jackhammer was slugging {*mezzo-forte*} pavement, a sheet of metal covering a pothole in the street clapped {*pianissimo*} when run over by a taxi, somebody was periodically flinging objects made of glass, maybe bottles, into an empty dumpster, where the glass would shatter {*staccato*}, a bus blared {*mezzo-piano*} a horn at a swerving commuter cranking at the pedals of a bicycle, a semi reversing at a loading dock down the block had begun beeping {*staccatissimo*}, the siren on an ambulance or cruiser suddenly caterwauled {*mezzo-piano*} and cut out, a quartet of musicians, possibly buskers, lugged, respectively, a jug, a saw, a pair of washboards, and a washtub bass past the hotel, cackling over some joke {*smorzando*}, the birds on the vents and pipes behind us twittered {*forte*}, as we sat there together, at the edge of the roof, chewing blearily, sharing the chocolates.

"It's kinda pretty in the morning," Mel croaked {*piano*}, and then laughed {*forte*}, surprised by her rasp.

Once, with Beau, lying in a shady nook in a park, stuffed with crab cakes and ice cream, I had heard a song playing {*piano*} from some stereo—I'd raised myself from the grass,

scanning the buildings beyond the fence, graystones, brownstones, looking for the stereo, but instead the song had gone silent, silenced abruptly by a shutting window or closing door, Beau had yanked me back down to the grass to show me something, some toadstool, some caterpillar—I'd never heard the song again, I'd heard only a snatch to begin with, the tune had been simple, flat, almost childish, but something about the melody had captivated me, haunted me to this day. I'd begun studying music in kindergarten, a uniformed stripling in a private school; I'd devoted my life to studying certain symphonies, analyzing the nuances of the dynamics, scrutinizing every slur and accent, memorizing every note and rest and accidental, trying to comprehend the essence of the composition; and that work had not been wasted. Now, though, so late in life, I realized there also had been songs like the song in the park, there had been others, strains caught through the parted doors of a stopped train, airs caught through the open window of a turning car, brief truncated snatches I'd had some insight into as intimate as any I'd ever had with those symphonies.

From our vantage on the rooftop, overlooking that random section of the city at that exact moment, I'd caught one of those snatches. Now that there was daylight, with my bathrobe for a flag to wave, our rescue seemed only a matter of time. But, me, I was content just to sit there—I could have listened to that noise forever—I didn't give a damn if we ever got back down.

About The Author

Matthew Baker is the author of the graphic novel *The Sentence*, the story collections *Why Visit America* and *Hybrid Creatures*, and the children's novel *Key Of X*. Digital experiments include the temporal fiction "Ephemeral," the interlinked novel *Untold*, the randomized novel *Verses*, and the intentionally posthumous *Afterthought*.

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