

Reason Exhausted, Concerns Forgotten  
Notes on a Life of Art and Dharma

*Sean Feit, 2011*

A small, shingled cabin  
up the coast, not on a cliff overlooking the surf, but close—  
a serious afternoon's walk would get you there.  
It's in a patch of woods, surrounded by the usual trees:  
Monterey Cypress, forever windblown, tenacious  
Live Oak, steady, sharp-edged  
Bay Laurel, smelling like sauce  
Doug Fir and Bishop Pine, simple, acidic,  
and a few third-growth Redwoods in clusters, their mythic  
fecund undergrowth long gone—  
some dusty ferns and sorrel, peppery.

It's autumn  
sunset or just past.  
Leaving the car at the last good spot, I'm walking up the path—  
Some scat by the trail—bobcat? I like that they're, we're, here—  
Alone and not.

The cabin shuttered  
a layer of forest junk on the deck  
bird's nest on a beam over the door.  
Open it, lights—warm amber fills the room.  
Pour water, find matches, light the stove, put the kettle on.  
steam  
putting down bags, looking around.  
Now hot water, a few leaves from the tin, wiping down a cup and chair  
and sit.  
home.  
exhale.

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Those of us who claim the name “artist” live in a landscape reached through intention and defined, at least in part, by product. We are not creatures of the market—even those of us who make our whole living by selling our product—not completely. *Is this true?* In saying it I'm claiming a separation of one kind of person from another, as if market activity defines a type of person? Untenable. But the boundary that surrounds the word is charged by something that I can't define. Maybe that something lives in the realm of action rather than that

of identity. What makes a person an Artist? A bricklayer lays bricks. A stockbroker brokers stocks. A baker bakes. An artist [makes? is?] art. But there's no verb. An artist arts.

What does it mean to art? Something happens, clearly. People make things. Sometimes things you use—like a desk, a computer, paper, a house, a coat, soup stock. All these can be beautiful, moving, “artistic” if their shape, function, and graceful design rise to a certain level. (There is an Apple PowerBook in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.) So then it's about the amount of a certain quality—art-fullness (cousin of artifice and artificial?)—in a thing, as if anything with sufficient grace crosses over a mysterious border into a new identity? My Oxford American Dictionary defines art as “works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power”. So there's a built-in impracticality at the center of the “art”-ness of a thing? If use is primary and beauty is secondary a thing is excluded from the Art club.

So dances  
 Words that don't tell  
 Images that don't explain  
 useless.

*Ikkyū says, “Nobody knows why we do what we do. This cup of sake does.”<sup>1</sup>*

Of course, people make things that aren't task-oriented, or at least not oriented toward the same kinds of tasks, and those things might lean toward beauty or affectivity as their primary purpose. Even there, identity accretes in the object rather than its creator. What is the action that artists *do*? Objects (gestures, images, actions, sounds) shine with an inner light, they live in perception and appreciation. But the one who makes also shines, and that shining is a side effect of the activity, the doing, of art. As if art is an energy in whose presence beings and objects both shine. Cultures tend to dream into this energy as female—the one who possesses the power of creation. The Greeks called the energy *Musae*, embodied as the nine goddesses of the arts and learning, which has become the “museum”, where chosen shining objects are collected and prevented from use, available only for their affectivity. When the Divine is praised, when creative force is flowing, the *Musae* are present. The social mythology of the arts privileges contact with these *Musae*, their presence one of the coveted experiences of human life. An energy that comes and goes unexpectedly, ravishing the artist with inspiration—it sounds like what mystics in every religion report in the course of their prayers. The Kashmiri devotional poet-saint Mirabai longs for “the Energy That Lifts Mountains”—*Giridhara*, one of the names of Krishna, her midnight love—singing,

“Something has reached out and taken in the beams of my eyes.  
 ...All I was doing was being, the Dancing Energy came by my house.”<sup>2</sup>  
 and  
 “My Beloved has come home with the rains,  
 And the fire of longing is doused.

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<sup>1</sup> Ikkyū, trans. Stephen Berg, *Crow With No Mouth* (Copper Canyon Press, 1989)

<sup>2</sup> *Mirabai—ecstatic poems*. Versions by Robert Bly and Jane Hirshfield. (Beacon: Boston, 2004.) p. 3.

Giridhara is in my courtyard, and my wandering heart has returned.”<sup>3</sup>

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*“There is a vitality, a life force, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique, and if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium; and be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is, not how it compares with other expression. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open. You do not even have to believe in yourself or your work. You have to keep open and aware directly to the urges that motivate you. Keep the channel open. No artist is pleased. There is no satisfaction whatever at any time. There is only a queer, divine dissatisfaction, a blessed unrest that keeps us marching and makes us more alive than the others.”<sup>4</sup>*

Nowadays we hear, “everybody’s an artist.” I think Graham got it wrong in her famous rant—that saw about “us” and “the Others” (my capital), and how we’re “more alive”.<sup>5</sup> We don’t do that “more... than the others” thing anymore. Everybody’s painting goes on the fridge, no exceptions. I’m American, raised in a myth of Great Equality. My generation heard “if you want to be me, be me, and if you want to be you, be you. There’s a million things to do, you know that there are.”<sup>6</sup> But that’s me talking now, grown up and invested in kindness. How did I get here? As a young musician in love with the Great Composers, I fully got on the “blessed unrest” train—the Path of the Artist. I drank in the stories of those men and their brilliance, intensity, beauty, madness, bitterness, pain. So many of us did. And rode that train a long way, staring out the window at the prairie going by, heading for the City, a car full of Artists, each of us so very special, inspired, unhappy, and alone.

So many unhappy Artists! But something was happening there, even though we were terribly self-conscious, something that is still here. I feel it sometimes—maybe it’s the Energy That Lifts Mountains. Is this what a Life Path feels like? It’s not the same as Graham’s vitality, “quickenings”, and not the same as the old guys’ muse that I loved so dearly. But those stories are a doozy. They stick around: The discipline that leads to creation... The discipline of creation... The wizening nobility of failure... Suffering and brilliance. The myth crumbles even as it inspires. Somehow I absorb both the myth of the brilliant, *rare* Artist, and at the same time a democratic story that everyone is creative and can make “art”. “You already have it.” “It comes from inside.”<sup>7</sup> If everybody has it—the quickening—if it’s a universal human quality, what’s so special about the Artists?

I don’t know what Artist means, but want to trace a Path that winds from that which is clearly inherited to that which arises from an unknown source, and how that which arises folds back into manifestation and creative product. In my life and art-making, this Path manifests an encounter between Asian contemplative practices

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 50.

<sup>4</sup> Martha Graham, in a conversation with Agnes De Mille. Quoted in de Mille, Agnes, *Martha: The Life and Work of Martha Graham*. (NYC: Random House, 1991.) pp. 264. [Via Wikipedia.]

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Cat Stevens, 1971. On *Footsteps in the Dark: Greatest Hits*, vol. 2 (A&M Records, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> *Wild Mind*, Natalie Goldberg. (Bantam, NY, 1990). p. 12

and Western performance/art, an encounter centuries old but only recently widespread, the conversation between them only minimally charted. I know this Path in my body and immediate community, and tell one version of one thread of that encounter.

### *Self*

Age 15, at home alone. I'm wandering around the house alone, on a rare night when everyone else is out, and I'm newly old enough to be left alone. (Have I said "alone" enough times?) I'm indescribably relieved to be alone. The house is dark, all the lights out, no TV or radio. It's a still suburban evening, probably summer, warm air outside, no plans. I'm bored and lost, just in the low-level way that never left me in those days, but might have used the word "content" if I had any idea what that could mean. With all the lights out, the street is clear through the window, a pool of streetlamp, the silhouette of a plum tree, cars like sleeping elephants, all lined up. I don't know what to do, but sit at the piano. Open the lid. Play a little. Nothing in particular, but hold the pedal down and let some chords ring. The feel of the keys, smooth and square, with the little lip on the front of the white ones, and the tiny trapezoid of the blacks, so symmetrical and slightly tapered.

Now I'm brushing and stroking the keys, playing with my whole hand, not the fingers. It starts chordy, like Debussy, all water and spray, then I'm swimming, hands like swirling water themselves, chord shapes gone, and cascades of notes fill the room, my body, my ears, my mind. Roar of bass. Treble like bright raindrops, then crashing down fast. Painting the air with big gestures. A lifetime of line drawings, landscapes, figure drawing and dramatic illustration dissolves into color, curve, big brush abstraction, and splatter. After a lifetime of musical training that never took me past 1910, it took me five minutes in a dark room to find 1965. I had taken Jesus as my Lord and Savior at nine, but this was way better. I was inside a music that was freer than any music I had ever known—making, inside of, and in devotion to, all at once—and something inside me woke up.

"A love supreme. A love supreme. A love supreme. A love supreme.  
A love supreme. A love supreme. A love supreme. A love supreme."<sup>8</sup>

What awoke? A perception is opened in me, and something light and joy/full and kind pours in. I wasn't "praying", but later I will wonder if prayer is like this. Listening and creating, not separate from each other, hands moving faster than my intent can control, I drop back into the... sound itself? Can I say that? What would it mean? Or is it not sound as such but that the sound means—implies?—something greater than what we call "music"? "The Dancing Energy came by my house."

In the most well-known version of the Judeo-Christian creation story, a sound is the first Divine action: "God said..." Centuries later in the same book a variant appears: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."<sup>9</sup> The "Word" is not separate from God, not Other than God. In one of the many Hindu creation myths, it is the sound "Om" that wakes Vishnu from his endless sleep on the infinite ocean, impelling the creation of the world. Long before our eyes open to the world, we feel vibration, and

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<sup>8</sup> "A love supreme", Pharaoh Sanders.

<sup>9</sup> John 1.1, [King James Bible](#).

research tells us that reactive hearing in infants develops several weeks before vision.<sup>10</sup> Sound starts us off, and music appears at the heart of the manifold collections of activity and mutuality we call cultures, central to prayer and ritual all over the world, and to so many of the private and public experiences, oriented toward the numinous, that could be called “spiritual”. And of course, the word itself: a “Spiritual” is a *song*, rooted in the hymns and communal songs of the Black Church and the African and American slave experience.

Why was the “Music of the Spheres” music, as opposed to, say, the “Dance of the Spheres”? Why do we so often use the language of church to talk about music? Maybe because it’s where we find some of the best words the language has to describe these hard-to-describe feelings that music induces. Exalted. Transcendent. Luminous. All the words describe not the music *itself*, but the state of mind of the listener. People hear vibrations, combinations of frequencies (that’s all, acoustically, that music is), and sometimes experience the world very differently than they had before, and express that experience using the biggest words they know. Maybe we hear something in the tones, in chords, rhythm and pure vibration that we can’t call anything besides Divine. It just feels like it. Feels like God, for lack of a better word. We turn out the lights and bang away.

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The earliest definitions of *yoga* in the Indian literature come in the Upanishads, about 3000 years ago. In those ancient texts, *yoga* is most often the restraint of the senses, the ascetic practice of drawing in the attention from the things of the “world”, and into an inner landscape. The *yogi* is practicing *tapas*, the cultivation of Inner Fire, and stoking it largely through austerities: eating only one meal a day, wearing only one set of clothes, living in the open air, or in cemeteries, or forests. Never lying down, not sleeping very much. Physical privation breaks down the Superego. The desperate everywhere know this as lived experience, as hell on earth, but the *yogis* do it by choice. A young hermit in the desert goes to his preceptor filled with doubt: How do I practice? How can I know God? Should I pray, work, sing, walk, study? The preceptor, seeing restlessness blowing through the youth, scattering leaves and dispersing the topsoil, responds. “Sit in your cell. Your cell will teach you everything.”<sup>11</sup>

The encouragements on the Path of Art ring a similar chord. “Keep your hand moving.”<sup>12</sup> Each art has its own ethos and method, but every discipline also repeats variations of the same inspirational tropes that seem to serve the creative heart best, and that work to speed the plow of artistic production. Just keep writing. Painting. Playing. The coaching that really works—that actually helps “artists” make more, and better, “art”—reads like standard-issue pop psychology, and leans into the socially leveling version of the Artist story. “The pen/brush/clay/notes will teach you everything”. The studio will teach you everything. Like the desert monk in his cell, it happens when contained. The room itself teaches. (Of course that implies that you have one: a room of your own, or some version of the mythical corner café in the small town, where you comment on the man with his toast and the woman with her lipstick. So there’s privilege here as well. Who has time to sit around in cafés anymore, journaling about random customers?) There’s the American Artist: solitary,

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<sup>10</sup> [The Multilingual Mind](#), Tracey Tokuhama-Espinosa, Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003

<sup>11</sup> Abba Moses, in John Chryssavgis, *In the heart of the desert: the spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (World Wisdom, 2003), p. 41.

<sup>12</sup> *Writing Down the Bones*, Natalie Goldberg. (Shambhala, Boston, 1986). p. 8

melancholy, observant, rural or an ascetic in the city, always available for the cast-offs of society. The old newspaper on a park bench that gets glued into a collage, the music heard from a distance, not intended for the artists' ears but appropriated, repurposed. The American Artist as scavenger, pack-rat.

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I'm home for winter break from grad school, Christmas is over, and the wilted ritual our small family had performed was thankfully short. It's getting shorter every year. I have a week before heading back east, and a huge storm is blowing in. I'm grumpy and antisocial, with nothing to say. Evening comes, with its hours of sitcoms and news, and soon it's eleven, and everyone goes to sleep. The house is dark and quiet. I put on the kettle and feel my body begin to soften, let down. A steady rain is pouring, and hasn't stopped all day. I make strong black tea and go to my borrowed room, taking out paper and pens. I lay out a score. String Quartet. Four soft, reedy voices. I begin to write. Pianissimo, slow, shimmering chords. Single notes that float in midair, no beat to hold them. Repetition, long pauses. I draw the score in ink, loving the expanse of white paper, wanting to put barely anything on it. The music flows out, one note at a time, not fast but steady, fuelled by Darjeeling and cheap honey. It rains nonstop, pouring, thunder and lightning. I go to sleep around 5 and sleep past noon. Spend the day eating junk food, watching TV. At eleven I make tea and sit down again. Whole bars, whole pages of rests, of silence, rain. I write a thread of melody so slender that it barely holds together. Maybe it doesn't. I finish the quartet in a week and fly back to school. They didn't even notice.

### Space

It's a big country. Lots of open space. I'm a Westerner, most of my life in California, always living within an easy drive of the ocean. A city rat, but I know my ancestors, or claim them—Kerouac, Thoreau, Whitman, Partch, Ives, Snyder, and so get out. Big sky echoes through each. And even the New Yorkers, Cage, Feldman, Rauschenberg, have a kind of large view in them. There's that long arc past the Jersey horizon, all of it America now, through forests gone to field and massive prairie more praised than visited, over impossible mountains to the sea. And the music goes there, Big American Music, even from the heart of the East Village. Steve Reich's *Different Trains*<sup>13</sup>, rocking in a steady pulse that reassures my heart, over which roll the rhythms of spoken text. LaMonte Young's *The Second Dream of the High-tension Line Step-down Transformer*<sup>14</sup>, inspired by the hum of electricity past his childhood house out on the Montana plains, long oscillator tones humming through unbroken space—Young himself a devotee of Pandit Pran Nath, the most esoteric of Indian classical singers. The minimalists mined the expansive West for a consciousness that couldn't arise in dense, history-layered Europe. Space: repetition as signal of expanse.

In the Classical music I grew up with, the grand melody, the Romantic line, the story arc and dramatic resolution were all pressed into service to describe the immensity of Nature, and by extension the immensity of the life of the heart. The drama! But it feels so small to me now. All that *stürm und drang*, for what? Holst's *Planets*, banging away—we always liked militant *Mars* the best; *La Mer*, swelling, cresting and crashing; all the heartbreak operas, the emotive concertos. What was it all for? The orchestra feels so small now. All those

<sup>13</sup> Steve Reich, *Different Trains*, 1988.

<sup>14</sup> LaMonte Young, from *The Four Dreams of China*, 1962.

incredible players collaborating, and I barely know what they're expressing. A theme that has some emotive resonance, then contrast, development to stir the pot, *then ah, the triumphal return. SO satisfying. Come home, theme, back to the well-lit house, back to the realm of the known! That development sure was wild! Isn't it good to be back where things are familiar?* It is good. But where have we been? Why did we go there? Do I think my life is actually this dramatic? Would I ever want it to be? Mostly I don't want the Hero's Journey, just like I no longer want "blessed unrest". Give me a quiet hearth, with water nearby, and I'll let the music come on its own, steady, without strain, kind.

In the music of open space, of expanse, there's no storm. Only pulse, sustained through some chords that are both familiar and not. Hints of melody, but nothing you would walk away humming. Something in me relaxes. Though it claims "Trains", and does chug along purposefully, listening to Reich I don't feel like I'm going anywhere, even though his trains are specific: Pullmans in America before the war, and German during, bearing the Jews to their end. Those trains rolling through the dark German night definitely went somewhere, and the arc of their six million stories is clear, but still *the music doesn't go*. There's no great dark chord painting the gates of Auschwitz clanging shut. How vulgar would that be? Voices speak a few memories, the trains roll on. How ordinary. How real.

In American music after the war, the old simple story arcs disappear for a while, replaced by these open-hearted songs. Nobody's dying of tuberculosis and a broken heart, or jumping from the parapet surrounded by a vengeful crowd. There's no portrait of a bubbling river flowing through towns and woods, nor even extended meditations on a mutable melodic fragment, pure as sunlight through incense smoke and colored glass, "To God alone the glory"<sup>15</sup> signed, dust motes swirling through the prayer. Something is happening, but it's not a story, not a sermon, not an argument. I feel held in space, suspended in time, lifted up, sustained.

### *Becoming*

*At the evening gathering the Master addressed the assembly, saying: "Sometimes I take away man and do not take away the surroundings; sometimes I take away the surroundings and do not take away man; sometimes I take away both man and the surroundings; sometimes I take away neither man nor the surroundings."*<sup>16</sup>

A pair of stories:

The last ride I got on the morning of August 7, 1993 was with a retired US Marine, heading north into the Jemez Mountains of New Mexico. We rode in his tan Oldsmobile mostly in silence through the reddening canyons, high striated walls narrowing as the two-lane highway wound deeper into a wooded gorge.

"Where you headed?" he asked.

"Zen monastery, up in Jemez Springs."

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<sup>15</sup> (*Soli Deo Gloria*, written by J.S. Bach at the end of many scores.)

<sup>16</sup> [Rinzai Roku – The Record of Zen Master Rinzai](#), trans. Ruth Fuller Sasaki, ch. 10.

“I knew that’s what you were gonna say. With that haircut you have to be either a monk or a Marine, and you don’t look much like a Marine.”

That’s for sure. Fading paisley button-down shirt, fading overalls, hiking boots. I had left my long hair tied to a branch near the creek in Santa Fé, hoping birds would use it for nests. Two nights before, I had decided to cut it off, and made up a ceremony to let go of whatever no longer served me. A guy I had met on the road, Eric, agreed to help. We set up on the porch of the house I was staying in, out under the big pink sky, cottonwood still dripping from the afternoon rain. I made an altar with some branches, a candle, and a Zen book I had. I sat in a chair and got as serious as I knew how. I would say something I wanted to let go of, and he would cut a lock of hair off. I asked for the biggest things I could think of. May I let go of fear. May I be free from hesitation, doubt, insecurity. Big chunks of hair falling on the porch; the little tug as the scissor blades slid together near my scalp. I didn’t feel any great weight lifting from my shoulders, but something—I didn’t know what—was changing, ending. Beginning.

I could have done anything, really, at this moment in my life. The future felt like a wide flat road, where I could run hard with my eyes closed. Nothing seemed a limit except money. I had hardly any, but even that felt fluid. I’d been traveling for months now and gotten by just fine. I was hanging out a lot that summer at Blue Moon Books, this New Agey store I had found, in between shifts slinging green chile at a trendy cantina up on Canyon Road and seeing this girl Jenny I met at a café. I must have been searching for something, but mostly I went there because it was familiar. I had worked in a bookstore in high school, and books had always been my refuge. After weeks of hitching across the desert, with all the crazy characters and old-school dangers that mythic travel always involves, Blue Moon was the safest place I had landed in a while.

The owner was a friendly, flamboyant woman who wore flowing silks, big necklaces, and had several old cats, which roamed the store freely. She lived in a small room behind the store, and spent most days perched behind the desk, comfortably swamped by piles of books and papers, having long, warm conversations with anyone who came in. I wandered into one of those conversations when I first got to town, and she soon took me under her wing, setting me up with a room in a friend of hers’ house, and giving me a few bucks to stay at the store and take care of the cats when she was out of town. One day she pulled a book of poems out from a pile and gave it to me. “This one wants to go with you.” Dylan Thomas.

“...Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,  
Time held me green and dying  
Though I sang in my chains like the sea.”<sup>17</sup>

I find my home in the Buddhist section of the store, and began to read, sitting on a stool in the corner of the shop. *Zen Mind, Beginners Mind, Three Pillars of Zen, Zen Bones*. Green tea becomes my drink of choice. Austerity, consistency, radical emptiness all begin to shine like a vision of a very different life. These old monks were doing something very different than anyone I knew, living in or with some very wild, clear mind. I light a candle in my room, crossed my legs and try to sit Zazen. “Just sit.” “Drop away body and mind.” I only try a couple times—does anything happen besides just thinking about things? But I am drawn to something. I love the poets. Han-shan, the hermit of Cold Mountain, his brush recording the seasons and years, poems empty

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<sup>17</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Fern Hill*, from *Deaths and Entrances*, 1945. (Via Wikipedia.)

like open air, with barely a hint of human presence, palpable in the loneliness that soaks the page. Tu-fu, Issa, Ryokan, and the Zen instructions themselves, little poems of indecipherable clarity: “think not thinking”, “just sitting”, “drop off body and mind”. I find a poem I like, by Fa-yen, founder of the last Chinese Ch’an (Zen) school, and memorize it.

Reason exhausted, concerns forgotten—  
 how could this be adequately expressed?  
 Wherever I go, the icy moonlight’s there,  
 falling just as it does on the valley ahead.  
 The fruit is ripe, trees heavy with monkeys,  
 mountains so endless I seem to have lost the way.  
 When I lift my head, some light still remains—  
 I see that I’m west of the place I call home.<sup>18</sup>

I got into long conversations with the guy I was staying with, a kinesiologist and Reiki master. He had done some Zen several years before, so when summer was ending, I asked him for some leads. I was ready to move on. All in one week at the end of July, Jenny and I broke up, I quit the cantina, and the kinesiologist got in a tiff with his landlord and suddenly needed to move. I was back where I started, 3 months before: homeless, jobless, untethered. I asked my friend about nearby Zen centers. There were two. I asked which to choose. He said they were both fine, and that he didn’t want to influence my path by suggesting one over the other.

“What’s the difference between them?”

“Well, not much. But at one they only hit you if you ask for it, and at the other they hit you whether you ask for it or not.”

My choice was made. Real thing, here I come. I called and a woman answered. She was the abbess, Hōsen, and said I was welcome to come. “When should we expect you?” That was it. No interview, no application forms, just the minimum logistics. I’m not used to doors being open to the touch. I’m used to having to knock hard and shoulder them open, or sit on the stoop and wait. I was shocked. I wasn’t ready. “Tomorrow.” I packed that night, said goodbye in the morning, and walked out to the highway.

High red walls, white bark  
                   aspen, leaves gold. Put down your  
                   pack, pilgrim, and stay.

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Rewind.

As a music student and composer at Calarts right out of high school, I had gone through a long, awkward transition, which—maybe predictably for a 19 year old—didn’t feel like one at all. I thought I was solidly

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<sup>18</sup> from *A New Zen Reader*, ed. Nelson Foster and Jack Shoemaker. (Ecco: 1996.) 147.

established in the Noble Lineage of Old Bach and grew up steeped in classical music, loving especially the big 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic stuff, the so-called “warhorses”. I listened again and again to the great concertos, a heroic soloist buttressed in their oratory by the roaring orchestra, six stone strong. The operas of Puccini, Donizetti, and Verdi—the more tragic the better: Mimi and Violetta fading away just as love finally appears, Lucia mad, raving on the stairs in her nightgown over the shocked dinner guests, Tosca leaping from the parapet of St. Angelo into the Tiber, her last high note ringing in the air as she falls.

At my Very Postmodern Art School, surrounded by the wedge-tip of the classical avant-garde, I ignored it completely, along with everything written after 1930. I spent my time writing my own tragic opera, based on Schroedinger’s Cat, the famous quantum mechanics thought experiment. I wrote a story with my favorite stock characters: the Mad Scientist, willing to sacrifice his assistant, the Beautiful Girl, to perform the famous experiment that will leave her in a quantum state: both alive and dead at the same time, stoppable only by the Earnest Young Man who loves her. The Earnest Young Man fails, of course, to save her, though he kills the Mad Scientist, and devastated by her death—which he unavoidably causes by opening the experiment chamber, thus resolving the quantum ambiguity—kills himself. The whole Shakespearean carnage is watched over by the Mad Scientist’s son, the Idiot, who is mute and a dunce. I worked happily at this thing for two years, writing arias and leitmotifs, sketching a vast opus, while my peers were writing tidy movements for chamber ensemble, found objects and electronics.

In October of 1992, I sat through my graduation review, expecting the faculty to applaud my scope of vision and recommend that I graduate early, which is what I wanted. Instead, they leafed through piles of unfinished sketches and a libretto they didn’t even read, and told me that it didn’t seem like I had produced much, and so couldn’t recommend my early graduation. I was stunned, then furious, and stormed out of the office, ears and cheeks burning. I hate not getting what I want, and being judged by people in authority! The combination of the two was infuriating, and for a few moments, nearly unbearable. By the time I reached the dorm and my room, I had resolved to show them. I began a wild month of composing, sleeping only every other night, and fueled by black tea and Snickers bars dove into writing *The Most Ambitious Chamber Orchestra Piece Ever Attempted By An Undergraduate*. And somehow, in this anger-fuelled blaze, I took my first step toward a music concerned more with spirit than human drama. I set aside the opera and began sketching a multi-movement piece based on the five sections of the ancient Latin Mass. I would set the Latin words to music, but have no singers. I wrote a jagged cello line that night, setting the words *Credo in Unum Deum*, “I believe in One God”, and tore ahead from there.

The text was embedded in a sharp atonal instrumental language, and I structured the harmony to match the favored “pitch-class” ethos of the day. As I worked, I began to see (hallucinate?) a buried story in the Latin text, and found that I could overlay the myth of Lucifer’s fall from heaven onto the Mass. I assigned each of the instruments a character—God, Michael, Rafael, Lucifer, The Holy Ghost—and began to write their lines with the story in mind. The clarinet was Lucifer. I worked feverishly, and within 6 weeks, had drawn the double bar at the end of a 28 minute epic that included Lutoslawskian aleatory (clouds of fast notes unsynchronized with each other), a free-jazz-sounding jam by Eb clarinet at the Fall (after which the clarinetist gets up and leaves the stage), a climax with the whole remaining ensemble chugging away in Balinese interlocking rhythms, and a sweet ending, *Agnus Dei*, “Lamb of God”, where the whole thing dissolves into chiming major chords, isolated notes like droplets in the air, and the Lucifer theme heard from offstage as a mournful bass clarinet, distant and forever apart.

*Agnus Dei,*

Lamb of God, quiet young man,  
 why you? Not Daniel's lion, or Abram's ram—  
 but you're the one to take this on  
 this sharp crown broken tree?

*qui tollis peccata mundi*

Did you ask for this? To take the worlds eyes  
 and fears into your own  
 and thread your cells with others words  
 and walk always alone?

*miserere nobis.*

What if you did step aside, and lay it down  
 as Nikos wrote, and you and M  
 can love and float for hours on the salty sea  
 taking nothing, needing nothing  
 giving nothing of yourself  
 for me?

I arranged a concert for the end of the fall term, got players for the big piece, called *Apocrypha* (“forbidden words”), and for all the opera fragments. Undergraduates at Calarts in those days almost never put on a whole recital—just a piece in a small group show—and the faculty were impressed. After the show, a professor clapped me on the shoulder warmly, “You did it!” I wasn’t willing to share my joy, though I was proud as hell. “Thanks.” I graduated early, and didn’t go back for the ceremony. Within a month I was on the road, hitching across the endless prairie, academic life and music filed as history. I played fiddle tunes—Orange Blossom Special—on a street corner in Albuquerque, and again in Lincoln, and again in Buffalo. I didn’t tell anyone I was a “composer”. No one out there asks.

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*A monk asked: “What about ‘to take away man and not take away the surroundings?’” The Master said: “The spring sun comes forth covering the earth with brocade; a child’s hair hangs down, white as silken strands.”*

The first few weeks at the Zen Center weren’t fun, but not hard. The schedule is tight. Wake up at 4, and just follow the clappers and bells all day. Chant. Sit. Walk. Sit. Breakfast. Clean up. Tiny break. Work. Lunch. Break. Work. Chant. Dinner. Tiny break. Sit. Walk. Sit. Sleep. Repeat. No real instructions, just a black robe, and some tips on sitting up straight. I would just sit there, spine as straight as I could, trying not to doze off, and otherwise just think about things. Somehow I got into the habit of designing the perfect house—the ideal meditation cabin. It would be in the woods near a cliff, or in a meadow near a creek. Tiny. Efficient. Spartan. Zen. I sat there figuring out carpentry problems, placing and adjusting the windows, planing the floorboards smooth, and eliminating unnecessary comforts until it was the perfect space to shelter a quiet, solitary life.

Deer would come close to a Zen practitioner meditating on the porch at dawn, their damp noses inquisitive, their ears soft, unafraid. The practitioner has disappeared from the world, unafraid of disappearing, unafraid of effacement. Unafraid.

The river was a dozen yards behind the zendo, and I could hear it from my seat. One morning while sitting, I realized that if I chose, I never had to go anywhere other than this, never had to make another choice. I could stay until I became staff (a few months), then practice till they'd let me be a monk (about a year), endure the monk's training (10 years), then stay as long as made sense to me, before heading out—if I wanted—to start a small center (or be a hermit). There was no failure in the Zen world, or at least failure was fine, enlightened even. What fails, anyway? The ego fails. I was here to fail. I sat and listened to the river. One day, I saw an ancient fear I didn't even know I carried fall away: that I could end up homeless in the San Francisco gutter, unable to make it in the world. Before I fell that far, I would come back here instead. A security net appeared in my mind where before there had been a subtle inner chasm. The sound of the river rushed through my ears, in and out of awareness. It never stops, the sound of the river. In the spaces between thoughts, there it is, same as ever, or infinitesimally changed, the water always different, the rocks slowly wearing away, sloughing molecules, becoming smooth, rounder, becoming silt, washing down river, alluvium.

I began to imagine music. Soft. Repetitive. Small gestures. Steady. Long. I wrote short poems, *waka*-style. Left my violin under the bed. Over a few days off I read *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, sitting in an old stuffed chair, yellow, flowery upholstery, on the long desert porch of the residence, humming softly. The sorrow of a beautiful people destroyed by the greed and fear of others. Months passed. Winter came. Soft snow falling into the steaming hot springs, gathering on the branches of the tall cottonwood. In the desert, cottonwoods always grow by creeks, and are one of the ways to find water when you're in the backcountry: look for yellow leaves rising out of the gullies. One legend tells that a man was lost in the desert, thirsty, searching for water, and died at midnight next to a creek, not knowing his succor was only a few feet away. His ghost entered the cottonwood tree, and that's why the bark is grey.

*A monk asked: "What about 'to take away the surroundings and not take away man?'" The Master said: "Mandates of the Sovereign are spread throughout the world; The General has laid the dust of battle beyond the frontiers."*

When Arnold Schoenberg invented the 12-tone (or "serial") system of music composition in 1913, he wasn't thinking about erasing the composer from the composition process, but in some ways his system was the beginning of a deep, slow effacement, starting from Nietzsche's "God is Dead", and moving forward from there toward the void. He had been concerned for some time with the end of tonality—the Classical system of harmonic movement in which one note exerts a gravitational pull on all the others, setting up a hierarchy that makes possible tension and resolution, and by extension, dramatic curve. The history of Western music up till this point had always assumed the primacy of a single note, or "tonal center", and even in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as harmonic language extended deeper into dissonance and harmonic ambiguity, the tonal center sustained. It is an acoustical reality with enough undeniable force and cultural momentum that even composers who wanted to abandon it found it hard to avoid.

The solution that Schoenberg—"beautiful mountain"—invented was a simple rule that became the guiding process of 50 years of composition in the European and American classical avant-garde. The rule was prosaic: to not repeat any tone (note) until all 12 standard tones had sounded. The composer would submit to a self-

imposed ordering of tones—called the “row”—that by its egalitarian intent would defeat the hierarchy of the tonal center and the cliché of acoustical resonance. Formalizing and enunciating this process, Schoenberg famously crowed in a letter that he had invented something that would ensure the dominance of German music for the next thousand years.

By the 50’s, most major composers were using Schoenberg’s method. “There could be no tonality after Auschwitz” seemed the consensus, paraphrasing Adorno. The music that came out of Europe after the war was fierce, angular, opaque. Pierre Boulez’s *Le Marteau sans Maître*, “Hammer without Master”, solidified the aesthetic. Dissonant, ghostly chords met sharp, angular melody, in an environment bereft of all the comforts of tonal familiarity. Schoenberg’s method ensured that echoes of idyllic pre-modern harmony were completely absent. Music in Europe after the war leaped into uncharted territory, leaving much of the listening public in the dust. The force of the music was undeniable, and as it found its small audience beyond Europe, the 12-tone method spread along with it. American academics took to the method with ferocity, and within a decade after the war it had become *de rigueur* throughout the modern classical world.

When I entered music school in 1989, the Serial Method still reigned, though not with the same monopoly of power and resources it had once enjoyed. We studied it as seriously as we had studied traditional harmony, if not for as long. The star faculty composer at the school, Mel Powell, wrote dense, complex, deeply serialized pieces. Even though the hegemony of serialism had faded in the 60’s as Fluxus, John Cage, minimalism and pop had begun a long exhale into post-modern freedom, the pillars of the classical lineage still stood. Schoenberg ruled the academy, and official avant-garde music was atonal, hard-edged, fierce. When I made my own big angry piece, I gave each instrument/character a set of pitches, specifically assembled to escape tonal gravity and establish a high modern surface texture. I was hurt and angry, and wanted to curse the academy in its own language. It sufficed as both catharsis and exit ticket, and they did let me go.

*A monk asked: “What about ‘to take away both man and the surroundings?’” The Master said: “No news from Ping and Fen, isolated away from everywhere.”*

John Cage, as a young composer in the 1940’s, studied for a short time with Schoenberg in Los Angeles. Schoenberg had emigrated during the war like so many European Jewish artists. He taught uncompromising classes at UCLA, holding students to the strict standards he expected from their European counterparts. Cage describes a conversation with Schoenberg where the old master told Cage that he had “no instinct for harmony”. Cage wrote later that Schoenberg may have been right, but at least he was “congenial”. Cage, a young, gay American, turned away from the wounded European aesthetic and became the father of a new modern aesthetic.

An interesting development had started to happen around the fringes of Schoenberg’s method. Composers started to use fixed series’, not only of notes, but of other parameters of music, like rhythm, volume and timbre. Soon, experiments started to appear in which as many aspects of the piece as possible were serialized, more and more attenuating the composer’s creative intuition. The ego of the composer began to be suspect, and implied by the serial method, the desire arose to remove that deciding ego even more and make compositional decisions completely by chance. Cage began writing tiny fragments of music and ordering them using chance procedures—often by casting coins to find an I Ching hexagram and using whichever came up of 64 musical possibilities he had previously composed. He began to use chance to determine more and more aspects of the

piece, like the Total Serialists' rhythm, durations, volume, timbre, till composing was more about determining the rules of a very specific process and then just letting the process play out.

Cage had discovered the Zen scholar and teacher D.T. Suzuki, who was giving lectures at the YMCA in New York, and began to see his compositional process as a kind of Zen practice. Letting go of ideas about the proper or aesthetic ordering of sounds led to freedom from choosing sounds at all. All sounds became possible musical material, including "silence", and the natural result was the 1952 [?] piece, 4'33", where a solo performer takes the stage and plays nothing for the allotted time. One reading of the piece suggests that the "music" appears in the shuffling and ambient sounds of the audience. Another reading sees the piece as a simple expression of the basic structure of a piece of music: a stretch of time bounded on either side by the perception of "beginning" and "end". Now that any sounds—moments of hearing—could be offered in any order, silence was as good a moment's content as anything else. Silence had arrived, not as the pauses between notes or the bookends of the music, but as the music itself, and the composer was allowed to nearly disappear, becoming translucent, a name attached to a situation that created itself new each time.

*A monk asked: "What about 'to take away neither man nor the surroundings?'" The Master said: "The Sovereign ascends his throne in the jeweled palace. Aged rustics are singing."*

One evening in the early 50's, the New York Philharmonic was performing a piece by Anton Webern, and the piece was programmed to be right before intermission on a concert that included other more classical pieces. Webern was one of Schoenberg's two closest students, along with Alban Berg, and the three of them together were known as the Second Viennese School. (Haydn, Mozart, & Beethoven were the First.) Webern had taken the serial method and made delicate, pointillist miniatures—single notes ringing in open arrhythmic space, slow, quiet, abstract. The piece was short, but still some classically-disposed patrons in NY walked out. At intermission, one young man approached Cage, who was standing thoughtfully in the lobby. "Wasn't that beautiful?" "Yes." They left without staying for the Beethoven. Morton Feldman became one of Cage's best friends, and they soon became the heart of a group of composers that would be called the New York School, linked in name and sympathy with the visual artists that were their close friends: Robert Rauschenberg and his lover Jasper Johns, Jackson Pollock, Phillip Guston, and Willem DeKooning, presiding over the younger men like a benevolent grandfather. Feldman began writing gorgeous quiet pieces, crystalline & sere, empty of momentum, almost transparent.

I first heard a piece by Morton Feldman in a music theory class, my freshman year of college. I was a tentative piano and bass major. The class was taught by a kind, supportive composer, and I had been enjoying the first few exercises he had given us: write a piece in ABA form, a piece with an ostinato, a piece that quoted Haydn. One day in class he brought in a recording—I don't remember what the theory lesson was about, but the piece became a touchstone for me. It was Feldman's *The Viola in my Life*, and I think it may have been the least dramatic piece of music I had ever heard. There was just this shimmering strange chord, and the viola cool, slow, and soaring, heading steadily, beautifully nowhere.

Where was there to go? What's left in a music that goes nowhere? Cage's sounds, noises and words, unmoored from each other, unmoored from "music" and "not music"; Feldman's static, chiming prisms, the same few notes ringing, floating in space by themselves, alone. I want to say that when narrative stops, the Divine appears. That when sounds are left to roll for themselves without parallel steel tracks and certain destination

that they touch the end of history, the end of time. And what is outside of time but the Source itself? Cage speaks to the lineage of Zen—wide, self-less space, the end of the composer, his chance method effacing personal choice until little remains—and traces the end of time in the rock garden at *Ryoanji*. Feldman gives himself to an improvisatory composition, writing small patterns that revolve for a while, then disappear never to return, and chords that admit no relation to their neighbors. Asked about his Jewish background, he admits the presence of the Holocaust in his music, something mournful, elegiac. The myth that Europe would ascend is gone; the trains have bleached the crystal cities of their joy—the Joy of Brotherhood, Beethoven/Schiller’s great humanist hymn of peace, gone. In its place? Open space. Things as they are. Wind that is not the force of history and progress, just wind. The viola, life.

### *Bridge*

Once on retreat, many days into the monotonous bliss of an unwavering schedule, standing in the coat room, a thought comes to me: *what would it be like without any stories?* I don’t mean without books or movies or symphonies, I mean without the story of *ME*. What would *I* be like, without my stories—musician, son, lover, failure, sincere, Californian, human—all of them. It’s an obvious question in Buddhist meditation, inevitable, taught all the time. But I really ask it. Or, it asks itself. And as soon as I hear the words in my head, a grey space opens up in front of me and I’m falling. Backward. Like through a door, only there’s nothing in front or behind me, falling in slow motion, the sky far away, everything I know receding into grey space. For one long moment, everything is going, going, going.

...

And I snap to, lurching forward, back into the coat room. Rows of shoes. Heart pounding. Slats of wood floor. I look around—nobody. The wide oak outside rustles in an afternoon wind. I’m here. Startled but safe, body ringing, a struck bell, echoes dispersing, as I look around. Everything’s here. I’m here.

### *Return*

Out most of the day  
to the beach and back through the trees, over  
a stretch of hillside—grassy, cuts around the poison oak gullies  
a dull brick red this time of year.  
Through a bleak stand of Eucalyptus, lonesome Blue Gum—  
nothing grows in your understory, here it’s  
shadowy, monotone, dry  
the floor a toxic carpet, sloughed papery  
bark and long thin leaves—are there even any birds in here?  
The sky feels far away, beyond the high, closed canopy.  
All you feel  
from the outside world here is wind  
muted by the dense, hard trunks, tendrils slipping through—  
salty, sea-smell, meaningless wind.  
Walk in the grain of the wind: east.

\*

Ryokan, soft-hearted, playful, warmest of the Japanese Zen poets, writes about his hut a lot. He found a little “four-mat hut” abandoned outside of a village, moved in. Squatter. Tatami mats, tightly woven straw with fabric borders, each one a precise three by six, define the space. It’s long and thin, six by twelve if a rectangle. He doesn’t own much. Tea kettle, one pot, little brazier. Brushes, some paper, ink. A few books. “One robe, one bowl”. How little can a person live on? What is essential?

“A lonely four-mat hut.  
All day no one in sight.  
Alone, sitting beneath a window,  
Only the continual sound of falling leaves.”<sup>19</sup>

Sometimes I get literal and think it’s all about the house. Not house, as in Metaphor for the Soul or Body, but really just the house. Wood, cement, glass. Space, warmth, light. My dream of coming home after a long time away has two flavors: one has the house closed up, quiet, and the homecoming reawakens the cold hearth; and the other is all about seeing amber light through windows on a dark night, walking up to a space that is already cozy, lit, inhabited. In the first house, I’m a recluse, moving among the accoutrements of daily life with a steady, sere presence. Seer. In the second, I’m part of. Family, friends, the dinner already made, the covers turned back, ready for me. I’m welcome.

But both dreams are snapshots, fragments of a reel, fragments of real, neither a grounded image. In neither dream do I really make it past the threshold. It’s all about the approach. The walk up. Seeing light through windows, the life inside. I don’t dream about family life, but my heart longs for the amber light, and the hum of conversation. I don’t want the severe hermitage, really, but the thought of such quiet simplicity draws me in. I do want it. But I wouldn’t thrive there. Not yet.

“The wind blows through my tiny hermitage,  
Not one thing is in the room.  
Outside, a thousand cedars;  
On the wall, several poems are written.  
Now the kettle is covered with dust,  
And no smoke rises from the rice steamer.  
Who is pounding at my moonlit gate?  
Only an old man from East Village.”<sup>20</sup>

My teacher Jack chides me about ambition. Says I don’t have much, and should work on it, if I want. He always puts the “if I want” on the end. Everything is a suggestion, not an order. But I’ll do anything he says, pretty much. He says, “Ok, maybe you’ll live like Ryokan, but it looks like you want more than that.” I’m married, teaching, interested in some sweet luxuries: soft cheese, overflowing bookshelves, sex of course, travel, music. Ok, my four-mat hut has a piano. And wireless. Oh, and recording gear. And Sara.

<sup>19</sup> One Robe, One Bowl, Ryokan, trans. John Stevens, (Weatherhill, NY, 1977), p. 41.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

