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Motif^{VI}

WRITING BY EAR

an anthology of writings about music

Aria on the Boulevard

I concluded my last conference call of the day and peeked out my home office window. At five o'clock, just a stubborn scrap of light clung to the bleak November afternoon. I'd been running every other day. If I ignored the blinking instant messages on my computer, I could get my miles in before dark.

I live near a superb running trail—Cherokee Boulevard in Knoxville, Tennessee. The graveled path is nestled in the Boulevard's tree-lined median, with stately old homes to the north and a riverside park on the south. Walkers and joggers from all over the city bask in the natural beauty and patrician elegance of the area.

I hit the Boulevard and broke into a run, but the frantic pace of my day oppressed me. My heart rate climbed, but instead of exhilaration I felt exhaustion. The brittle coolness of late fall exacerbated the jostling of my body. I felt dissonance, not an endorphin rush, but plodded on.

After a mile, my legs ignored my robotic, schedule-oriented brain and slowed to a walk. I was frustrated with myself, but the energy to resume even a modest trot eluded me. That demanding computer, with its incessant trickle of beeps and alerts, had eroded my stamina. My body wanted to walk, and I acquiesced.

I often spoke of my good fortune to live around the corner from this scenic route, yet my praise was rote. I seldom truly noticed my surroundings. Now, instead of gasping shallow breaths, I inhaled deeply of the crisp air, and the coolness tickled my lungs. The sun faded as if the horizon were sipping it, and I watched the cliffs on the far side of the river reflect the rose-colored hues of ebbing rays. Bare tree branches proliferated into delicate tributaries that emptied into the deepening purple-blue sky.

Other joggers and dog walkers faded away with the light, but I wasn't nervous, not in this part of town, not even when I heard faint footsteps crunching behind me, and certainly not when a passionate, off-key rendition of *Don Giovanni* wafted through the twilight.

*Mi trada quell'alma ingrata,
Infelice, o Dio!, mi fa.
Ma tradita e abbandonata,
Provo ancor per lui pietà.
Quando sento il mio tormento,*

*Di vendetta il cor favella;
Ma, se guardo il suo cimento,
Palpitando il cor mi va.*

I turned. An older gentleman in a leather jacket and jaunty wool scarf trucked along at a spirited pace, singing a duet. His partner, an opera only he could hear, piped through earphones clamped over an Einstein-like nest of long gray hair. His shoulders were broad and unbowed by the evening chill; his palms stretched out with the yearning of the aria.

I kept walking, smiling now. This vision of pure, unselfconscious immersion branded me, as if I'd stared at the sun a second too long. Arriving at my corner and turning toward home, I stopped beneath a shadowy maple and leaned my cheek against its scabby bark. My wild-haired Southern Pavarotti serenaded himself down the Boulevard, dissolving into darkness, his crescendos fading shortly after. Pinpricks of stars twinkled their applause, and leaves shuffled around my feet as if roused for intermission.

I smiled and continued my leisurely walk home.