

A
SABBATICAL
IN
LEIPZIG

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For review

I'VE BEEN WAKING EARLY these last few days. The mornings here in Bilbao are airy and light, and I find myself rising well before six and standing in the kitchen of my apartment, looking out the window and into the courtyard below.

My window faces west, and sometimes at this hour the morning light reflects off one of the east-facing windows a few storeys further up on the building across the courtyard from me. The light is not so strong that I can't look into it; I can look into it for a few moments longer than if I were attempting to look directly into the sun. I sometimes think, if I could arrange the windows on the east-facing façade and the corresponding windows that share my west-facing

façade in such a way that for a few moments each morning I could re-direct the sun a couple of times over and back across the courtyard and into my window, then, while standing here in my kitchen, I could peer into the light for a few moments longer.

The delicacy of this arrangement of angles would mean that the sun's alignment with them would be more fleeting than if I were relying on just one window to redirect the sun towards me. The windows receiving light from each other in this way would slide more quickly out of their coalescence, but I believe the closer this complicated arrangement of windows would bring the chances of me seeing the light, and the length of time I might witness this light, to zero, then, I believe, the more beautiful I would consider this light – light I consider to be already quite lovely. I don't know my neighbours, but I am sure if I asked them they might collaborate with me and we could achieve the various angles of incidence required for me to stand for those few moments longer in my kitchen looking into the rising sun. If my neighbours on both the west and east side of the courtyard agreed on this arrangement of windows, and all of us were agreed to rise at the appointed time on a clear morning to witness our lines-of-light experiment, we could then convene down in the courtyard after the sun had disappeared and listen to how each person's

experience of this light had made them feel. Their responses, though, would surely only suggest to me further questions. I then would find myself considering the quality of the glass in each person's kitchen window. I would ask myself: Were some windows double-glazed? Some single-glazed? Some recently replaced? Recently cleaned, both inside and out? What might the iron content in the glass be? How was each pane of glass cast? And what were the conditions of the casting and cooling? How might all of these factors have affected the zig-zagging channel of light over and back across our courtyard? And what sorts of losses might have occurred in this transmission? But more so, I might then learn something about my neighbours' characters by virtue of the care they show to and the knowledge they have of their kitchen windows.

A few instances ago I took up the same spot I'd assumed the last few mornings at this time, but the window across the way that usually reflects the whitened sunlight into my eyes was itself not hosting the sun. It sat instead on the edge of some unearthly luminescence. I stepped a couple of feet to my left and the reflected sun slid into view. Last night was warm and I realized this neighbour across the way must have wedged open their kitchen window to allow cooler air to circulate through their apartment as they slept.

Then, a few leaves belonging to the expansive chestnut tree in our courtyard bobbed down into view, interrupting the light reflecting off my neighbour's window, and this protected my eyes from the pain of slight overexposure I usually feel when I look for too long directly into the reflected light. The shadows of these bobbing leaves were being cast onto the dust on the outer face of my windowpane. I looked at the shadows a while as the bright flicker of the sun in the near and not-so-near distance came and went. I could not tell if I was looking at the movement of these many phenomena landing onto the dusty glass or if I was looking at the stillness of the sheet of glass itself as it partly received and admitted this movement.

This morning I woke suddenly with a pain in my knee. This happens often when I sleep on my stomach. I rolled onto my back to relieve the pain, and as I lay there a flow of mental particles depicting elements of buildings from my past appeared before me. After some time I decided that it is high time for these constructions of mine to be compiled and surveyed. I am too old, though, to do this survey. I cannot travel to these places, and if I could, I would not be able to access the nooks and crannies of each building and bridge I would need to access to carry out a survey thorough enough to ease my worries. As

this thought unspooled, the name of the last place I lived in, the city of Leipzig, came to mind, especially the dot over the letter ‘i’ near the centre of the word, and either I moved towards it or it expanded concentrically towards me, until it filled my field of vision. Then, realizing the pain in my knee was unlikely to abate, I rose.

During the last few years of my career I mentored a young Danish engineer. I think of him often in the morning before I have my coffee and while I comb my hair. I think of the exemplary way that he could see. I do not know if he is alive or where he is now or what he might look like, but I am sure he is the only person I would trust with carrying out a survey of this kind for me.

I take a sip from my coffee and look back out the kitchen window. I can see the whole courtyard darken menacingly, then brighten again. A bird flies overhead. Its shadow runs up the rippling tree like a small dark animal fleeing the ground.

YESTERDAY I RECEIVED delivery of a second record player, a second amp and a second set of speakers I’d bought by postal order some weeks previously. Each morning, after a coffee and before I spend time honing my German-to-English translation of a set of

short stories I've owned for years and that were written by a Robert Walser, I sit and listen to some Schubert. I am no expert of classical music; I barely ever listen to music – outside of the two records I own of Schubert's work. And from these records I have only ever listened closely to the first movement of his *Trout Quintet* played *allegro vivace*. I first heard this piece of music when I was a young boy working as a clerk in my father's office on the main street of my medium-sized hometown, B——, in the Midlands of Ireland. My father was a salt and turf merchant, and before I decided that engineering would be a suitable course of study I spent the winters of my mid- to late-teens working in my father's office under the tutelage of the senior clerk, Gerald, a man with a short moustache he dyed the same jet-black as the thick wiry hair that sprouted from his head. Gerald smoked often and played the transistor in his office quietly. One day, when I called into his office to run a certain set of numbers for a certain account past him, I heard the last few bars of what I learned a few moments later from the radio presenter's soothing voice was the first movement of Schubert's *Trout Quintet* played *allegro vivace*. *Franz Schubert's first movement of the Trout Quintet there, played allegro vivace*. But by the time I left the office, having received instruction from Gerald on

how to finish out my work, I had forgotten about the feeling from when I first entered the office, the feeling that insisted I find this piece of music by this Schubert and play it in its entirety to myself some day. It was not until a number of years later – on the day after we buried my mother, and we, my younger brother and my three older sisters, were gathered in the sitting room of our home in the second floor of our three-storey townhouse and my father, a few rooms over, played a record of classical music – that I thought again of this Schubert. It was not the first movement of Schubert's *Trout Quintet* my father played that time, but whatever the music was it reminded me of that moment years before when I entered Gerald's office, it directly below where my siblings and I were then sitting. Despite, on the day after my mother's funeral, being reminded of this piece of music by Schubert, I didn't act upon it until another day over two decades later when Catherine found this piece of music in a record shop called da Capo, a narrow ground-floor property halfway down Sternwartenstrasse in central Leipzig. Da Capo was the sort of shop where a person could potter around for hours undisturbed listening to records while sipping a beer or smoking a cigarette. Neither Catherine nor I smoked or drank, but we would potter around for hours in this new city, in this new, to us, record

shop, looking at the various vinyls, second-hand and unused. It was here during our first week in Leipzig that we came upon this album of Schubert's work. I still listen to it each morning before I get on with my day. It's one of those handsome East-German Eterna Edition records from the early 1970s with a white sleeve. This one holds an image of a snow-covered mountaintop with conifer trees dotted in amidst swirls of eddying sleet, a reproduction of a painting by a Casper David Friedrich called *Morgennebel im Gebirge (Morning Mist in the Mountains)*. It is an album of experimental symphonies, expanded versions of the music known as the *Trout Quintet* – and the first movement played *allegro vivace*, listed on side A, was the track I had been long seeking.

Some years after finding the first record, I came upon my second, again on a quiet Saturday evening with Catherine, sifting through the inclined planes of records organized in dense rows of elevated timber boxes to the rear of da Capo. It was also the *Trout Quintet*, but in this case played by a traditional quintet: Walter Olbertz (piano), Karl Suske (violin), Karl-Heinz Dommus (viola), Matthias Pfaender (cello) and Walter Klier (double bass), with the first movement in *allegro vivace* again listed on side A. I fell into the habit soon after of sitting in our spacious and bright living room in Leipzig, playing one version of

the first movement after the other – the experimental symphony first, then the quintet: symphony, quintet, symphony, quintet, symphony. What I enjoyed most was that the melody in both sounded at the same time similar and different, and the difference I enjoyed most was that I could discern the elements of the quintet version with a clarity that satisfied me to the point of almost replacing the pleasure I had taken minutes previously from the surging experimental symphony. Not only could I visualize each musical element of the melody being generated by the quintet, but I could also discern the sliding, complicated, explicit interconnecting and releasing that went on between each instrument, and I began my imaginings then of the five East-German musicians who comprised this quintet. Even these days in Bilbao, as I listen, I often still visualize the musicians placed in a V, stemming out either side of a black centrally placed grand piano – an arrangement that is: viola, violin, piano, cello, double bass. I rarely see any distinctive features in these musicians other than their sawing and plucking and gliding hands, but more recently I picture the cellist, Pfaender, towards the middle of the arrangement, he a thin man with a mass of greying locks bouncing on his head each time he straightens from his otherwise pensive crouch around his instrument, and I see too those mere phantoms around him

involved in hidden acknowledgments of each other. Pfaender seems to stand apart, though, almost as if he is soon to leave the quintet.

One morning a few months back it occurred to me, while I was refitting the slim rubber belt connecting the turntable of my record player to the motor inside, that I should play both pieces of music simultaneously on two separate record players. They are two pieces of music I love unevenly, like a daughter (quintet) and a stepson (experimental symphony); they are two pieces of music that when I hear them separately I still think sometimes of my brother seated and crying quietly in my father's living room on the morning after my mother's burial, as my father put a needle to a record of, to me, unknown music in a dusty room a corridor away on the first floor of his townhouse on the main street of our busy but composed medium-sized Midlands town. When I first listened to these records, in the spacious apartment Catherine and I shared in Leipzig, I used then only to think back to Gerald and his smoke-filled clerk's office, but over time this memory has morphed and risen up one floor into my father's sitting room, where my brother still quietly cries, his arms across his chest, his dark hair dishevelled – and he sunken into my father's armchair, his shoulders bobbing.

My hope is, in playing both records simultaneously in my sitting room today, to push these images up a further storey of my father's townhouse into what was once a bedroom with a single window, which the three youngest of our family – my brother, Allen, my sister Louise and I – used to peer out of when we were children.

I PUT MY COFFEE CUP and saucer down on the table. I rub my knee. It's trembling under my weight. Some dust has swirled down from the roofs above and disappeared onto the leaves of the chestnut tree.

When I sleep on my stomach, and if my toes do not fall down over the end of the bed, the twist in my foot passes up into my body and over the hours of sleep this torsion leads to a great stiffness in my hips and knees. I sometimes think that sleep does me more harm than good.

I shift my weight and take one more sip from my coffee. I see in the courtyard below a young woman wearing a red bicycle helmet. She unlocks her bicycle from a timber railing; the chain swings to and fro as she drops it into her deep wicker basket. She checks her phone, then rolls her bicycle away. Across the top of the building opposite sweeps the shadow belonging to a tower crane I noticed yesterday evening being

erected at the top of my street – the steep and narrow Solokoetxe. The shadow of the boom of the crane slides to a halt halfway up the roof across the way and the shadow of something square appears, in the process of being lowered. The sharp scent of seared bitumen and roof-felt passes and I breathe it in.