

# Turn Around

ERICA IVERSON

It is not in the least likely that any life has ever been lived which was not a failure in the secret judgment of the person who lived it.

—*Mark Twain's Notebook*

**W**hen I was little, I used to read Dr. Seuss books. Just for fun, I would memorize the stories, drinking in the rhyme schemes and patterns. I have always enjoyed patterns, so orderly and perfect. One of my favorite Dr. Seuss delights was about a little boy who, one day, refused to get up and go to school. He simply, silently, and stoically lay in bed, despite the numerous and oftentimes desperate attempts (toe tickling, buckets of ice water, a marching band) to awaken him. Secretly, I used to dream of emulating the little boy, just to see what would happen. In the mornings, my mother or father would call me out of bed, and I would shut my eyes tightly, pretending not to hear them, wondering how long I could keep up my childish charade. In the end, though, I always woke up. Now, all grown up and substituting an alarm clock for a parent, I wonder why I never acted on my silly childhood impulse. Why didn't I just stay, firmly and silently, in bed?

Plato's prisoners sit in their cave, backs helplessly turned against reality. Doomed, we might say, for all eternity to watch shadows dance across the walls in front of them, never able to view the objects making those shadows, never even knowing that the shadows aren't real objects. And when they give names to what they see, they aren't naming the actual things; they're merely naming the shadows of things. The Cave is perfection, a perfect allegory for our lives. The shadows are all we know in this world, and we never stop to consider that perhaps we should think in greater terms than silhouettes. We think they are perfect and real, but they are simply shadows. Behind us, secretly snickering at us, are the actual, perfect objects, only we are too igno-

rant to turn our heads and look; we are content with our incomplete knowledge. Perfection is elusive, the perfect note, the perfect word, the perfect truth, the perfect state of being... each more unattainable than the last. But we keep straining our eyes, our ears, and our minds, trying to touch perfection.

In the Metropolitan Museum of Art, there is a section devoted entirely to musical instruments. The first few sub-sections of the exhibit consist of various tribal instruments from places around the world such as Africa, Asia, India, and Latin America. Finely crafted, hand-painted, and sometimes decorated with pieces of bone or inlaid with gold, these instruments tell silent tales of tribal ceremonies, dances for the gods, and celebrations of life, love, and nature. There is also a room dedicated to Western instruments. Baroque harpsichords and clavichords (decorated so lavishly that it is difficult to remember that I am looking at keyboards) morph into pianos; horns, flutes, trumpets, and clarinets line the walls, each more impressive than the last. What I am most struck by, though, as I wander through the exhibit is not the breathtaking beauty of the instruments, but rather the deep silence that echoes from them. A potential cacophony fills these holding cells, a Wagnerian orchestra's worth of sound, yet all is still. The instruments cannot be played without human air, human touch, human feeling. The most they can hope for is to have people like me look at them through the glass and let our imaginations bring them to life. It seems to me the height of irony that these carefully crafted music-makers should be doomed to silence. The only piece they will ever be able to play is John Cage's *4'33"* (four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence). Again and again they will play this piece for museumgoers such as myself. Still it will fall on deaf ears.

Sometimes I wonder why I embraced modern art and modern music before I embraced Greek sculpture, Bach, and Mozart. I love dissonance—the perfect imperfection. I love Mondrian, Pollock, Picasso, and Dadaism. Modern art strives to break free of form and structure. It abandons the traditional view of “perfection” in favor of the avant garde, the unusual, the intriguing, the different. Some people look at modern art and see something hideous and distorted. Others see something asinine or ridiculous. A white canvas, perplexing in its plainness... how can that be art? Similarly, modern music embraces dissonance, embraces the breaking out of aabb, abaa, abab, abcabc forms, the fugue process, the sonata form, bar form, ritornello form, and seeks to find new sounds, textures, and colors. A piece of music without

notes, without sound? How can that be music? Some concertgoers try to listen to modern music, try to appreciate it, but they cannot. During Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, they will squirm uncomfortably in their seats, slaves to their sensitive ears. The hair on the backs of their necks bristles; their very bodies are affronted. Something in the dissonance is imperfect and impure, and even the most musically uneducated pick up on this. Yet that is what I love and admire: the attempt of these composers and artists to leave the Cave, to not care about perceived perfection.

Some critics might say that I am a flawed perfectionist, because I can respect that search for imperfection. Those doubters would use my room to exemplify their point. "A pigsty," my parents call it. "Creative chaos," I retort. It is my feeble attempt at empathy, my wobbly first step out of the Cave. And I *do* empathize with the modernists and with the boy who would not wake up. They longingly search for the perfect shadow, but can still only see a shadow of that shadow. They claim to want to abandon traditional form, but look what they have created: patterns! Patterns abound in Pollock and Mondrian. Patterns: the epitome of order and perfection, the basis of structure. The patterns can be harder to find in modern music, as they are aural, not visual, yet certainly they exist. They are different patterns, patterns of seconds and sevenths, diminished and augmented scales and chords, chromaticism, and atonality, but patterns nonetheless. So they have not created their perfect imperfection, because it has merely morphed into an imperfect perfection! They try to leave the Cave, but cannot see that they are trapped, as we all are, within it.

I describe my parents as pianists. I suppose they are. My mom is, after all, a piano teacher. She played at Carnegie Hall when she was ten. The Paganini Variations. She could have been a concert pianist, but she went to SUNY, not Juilliard, and then she moved to Seattle where she went to "music school" and then she married and then she got a job doing something else and then... well now she's fifty and a piano teacher. I suppose it's not exactly failure ... it's just not where she originally wanted to be. And my father... my father has the technique and the musicality and the ability to practice for hours each day. But he is not a concert pianist either. At some point in his journey along the road of life, he decided that sight-reading and listening were more important than competing and performing. He chose to know more than I could ever dare to know about music history; he chose to compose; he chose to be my accompanist. He doesn't relish performing. He gets nervous and sweaty. He makes mistakes, but is not adept at hiding them. He knows he does not have

the drive or ambition to become a professional musician. And he has accepted his fate. Perhaps once, long ago, he dreamt of becoming a great composer or pianist or conductor... perhaps he longed for it with all his heart. But it was not to be. It's as though he failed to receive that vital gene that could have driven him to become a renowned performer. So he isn't a pianist; he's a computer programmer. Yet he plays on, in quiet deference to his forgotten dream. His drive may be lacking, and his desire may have faded, but his simple love for the art of playing will remain forever.

I feel, at times, as though we are all like Gatsby, faking our way through life for our Daisy... who isn't really worth it anyway. Boats beating ceaselessly against the current, we strive for the unattainable, but in the end we wind up as lonely failures.

It's nine-thirty on a Saturday night and I could be out with friends. I woke at five in the morning to take a six o'clock train into New York, where I spent all day at Manhattan School of Music. I'm in the Preparatory Division, so every Saturday I attend music classes. I take ear training, theory, conducting, chamber music, private lessons, and, of course, orchestra. I catch a seven o'clock train back to New Haven, and if I'm lucky, I'm home by nine-fifteen. My body aches from being on edge the whole day; it is, after all, a constant performance. Some people think that rehearsal is the time to make mistakes, but that isn't true. Rehearsal is just a thinly disguised performance. So now I am practicing to ensure that I will never make a mistake. My fingers itch to play my orchestral music, so I jump right into Stravinsky, Dvorak, and Mahler. I am lost in a world of my own, deep in concentration. It's not just about technical facility anymore. It's about musicality and sound. Each note is unique, even if it is part of a larger phrase. Each note conveys its own color and expression. The audience must be captivated, thrust into the world the composer created and that I am recreating. The audience must feel my pain, longing, struggle, and yearning. The audience must be transported to a new level of being. Even in practicing, the idea of performing lurks below the surface. When I am finished, I put my flute away, dissatisfied, hoping that my next practice session will yield better results.

I long to leave the Cave, though I often wonder if it is even possible. How much effort would it take to turn around and see perfection, and then strive to go beyond even that, to leave the Cave? It would take far more than we could ever fathom, because we are scared of what we will actually find if we

stop looking at the shadows and finally turn our heads. So instead of facing our fears and risking failure, we make excuses. We resign ourselves to the fact that we will never witness perfection. We accept that shadows are all we will ever see, and we claim to be liberating ourselves by giving up the search. But it is not liberation. It is only defeat. After all, isn't that why we created God? The concept of God allows us to be flawed, because we can never be as perfect, as almighty, as He is. God is an excuse to not need to strive for perfection. We cannot stand to be imperfect, yet we decide that we cannot achieve perfection. What a guilty burden that decision creates. And only God can ease it.

How could I have known that I wouldn't get into music school? How could I have known that my auditions would be good, but not quite good enough? Would I have stopped practicing? Would I have given up on music? Would I have silenced myself, slashed the drive within myself?

I still practice. I still take my flute out and play for hours at a time, following, like the good daughter I am, in my father's failed footsteps. Maybe I am too stubborn to give up. Or maybe I just cannot accept the fact that those hours, days, years of practicing meant nothing.

Life is a sitcom; a cruel series of jokes and "just kiddings." Only in life there are no re-runs, no happy endings, no neat little thirty-minute timeslots. There is just the invisible director, pushing and pulling you in every direction, the fake audience, laughing at your mistakes, and, of course, the imminent possibility of cancellation. And still I choose to wake up.

Listening to Bach's organ music, I can understand why people believe in God. If, every time I went to church, I heard Bach, I wouldn't just believe in God, I would become a nun. (But what is god? A name? A word? After all, one trivial switching of letters and we'd be breeding gods!) When I listen to classical music, I feel as though the god I don't believe in has reached down and instilled in me an overwhelming understanding, a sudden and total comprehension of life, love, happiness, and perfection. Each note blends seamlessly into the next. The music reverberates through my imagined church, creating a sound only God could critique. The music haunts me (this unknown god's hand following me everywhere?), and I wonder if maybe I am experiencing more than a shadow. It is like the tingling, nervous excitement that overcomes me at the start of any performance. In that eternal moment before the music begins, I suddenly wish I believed in God. I yearn for the force that will allow

me to have a flawless performance. It is something truly divine, bringing me one step closer to Enlightenment and perfection. I have never had that perfect performance, nor do I think I ever will have one, but such knowledge cannot stop me from trying. My mother has a friend who left Juilliard in her senior year because she realized she could never achieve perfection in her playing. She knew she would never be as good as Rubinstein or Horowitz or Ashkenazy. She chose to accept defeat and cease struggling against the current. That was thirty years ago. Her nine-foot Steinway grand still sits in her living room, collecting dust, touched only by visiting musicians. People like that scare me, not because I disagree with their reasoning, but because I understand it perfectly.

Every now and then, I open my eyes in the morning and briefly consider staying in bed. But I quickly realize that I don't need to refuse to get up; I don't need to emulate the boy. I was blinded by his heroic attempt to go against the grain. It seemed as though he had not only managed to turn his head and see perfection, but defy perfection itself and leave the Cave. I was wrong, though. Perfection is unattainable, but as we created the notion of it ourselves, we can never truly believe that it is unattainable. So we search and struggle and create God. We try to leave the Cave, but we are really still in the never-ending process of turning our heads. We simply choose to turn in different directions; the boy, perhaps, to the right and I to the left. Certainly God would never dare to assert which way is more correct, so why should I?