

# NO MUSIC BUT THE WIND

Jay Simons

Willem Maris, *Winter Landscape*, c. 1875

IT HASN'T ESCAPED MY NOTICE THAT THE SMALL ROOM IS OUTFITTED much like a prison cell. A sink of yellow-stained porcelain juts out below a square mirror with a crack separating the top half from the bottom. To the left, a plain wooden bench rides low against the off-white wall. On the bench is a thin volume of Romantic poetry—Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley—beside which my blouse and blue jeans are folded in neat rectangles. Not that I needed to go to the trouble. Any minute now, my bridesmaids will be crawling over one another to make sure nothing is amiss, that nothing can possibly go wrong.

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Otto Miller-Diflo, *Winter Landscape*, c. 1925

I partially zip up my makeup case and place the hard blackshell on the edge of the sink, where it strikes a trembling balance. I glance to the left of the mirror. Above the bench, a narrow window halfway up the wall looks out on a winter landscape veiled by the bare white branches of birch trees. I shiver as I lean forward to apply eyeliner. The furnace is out, and the freezing outside air continues to seep into the small church.

Of course, I'm the one who insisted on a December wedding. I thought it would be crisp and clean and beautiful. Somehow, though, this day hasn't quite lived up to

my memory of childhood winters. It's cold, to be sure, but in a hard, unfamiliar way. It doesn't evoke sprawling holiday revelry; it feels like the hands of a stranger pressed against my face and neck.

I flip my veil down to protect myself from this cold intruder. Maybe, though, the veil is the problem. Not the one in the cracked mirror, the one behind which my forehead blurs and bulges in a fractured reflection and seems to separate from the rest of my face. No. A less tangible veil, composed of the accumulation of years, built up, layer by layer, to obscure my view into the inner wonder of the world.

I sigh. The sudden puff of air pushes the champagne-colored lace away from my face for a moment before it again hangs motionless. Not long enough, a moment, to show one where or when she began to change. As a child, I found joy in so many things. Not least of which, I tell myself, was my name. And now, I'm about to lose it forever, to let it fall from me and fade into my past. Serasso. Such a mellifluous name. Sara Serasso. A name like the whisper of the wind. Or the wings of a lone tern skimming the surface of the sea at sunset. Not the rough chunk of stone crashing into the ocean that is *Ungkersch*.

Why did I agree to change it? Because I knew that's what he wanted, what they all expected. There's a soft knock on the door behind me. I ignore it. If I were younger, I would have put up some resistance. Not that I'm old—I just turned thirty—but half a lifetime ago I would have quailed at the obliteration of such delicate beauty.

I look out the window at branches bending in the wind. Amid this gentle motion, my eyes are drawn to something affixed to a low-hanging limb—an icicle, isolated in its fragile rigidity.

Meanwhile, the knocking continues and is soon accompanied by a chorus of concerned voices.

"Sara, how's it going in there?"

"Honey, the string quartet isn't here yet. What do you want to do?"

"Can I come in?"

But I am transfixed. The icicle flashes in the filtered light of the

afternoon sun, and conscious thought falls away like the last of the leaves in late autumn. I am stripped bare. I allow myself to be absorbed into the mute tranquility of glittering memory, to be transported back . . .



I am fifteen years old. Though long and gangling, my body feels heavy, and my steps are slow as I follow a winding sidewalk toward the woods. Between steamy exhalations, the frigid air aches in my lungs, a frosty echo of the loneliness in my heart. My family has just moved, and I'm at a new school in a new town with no friends. I don't play sports, nor do I wear makeup and go to dances. I rarely speak in class, and when I do there's silence for several seconds afterward. I can tell that even my teachers think I'm strange.

It's late afternoon, and the wind is picking up. I thrust my hands deeper into the pockets of my dark-pink parka. Band practice ran long because Mr. Burke made us practice basic scales until the bell rang. Then he wouldn't let us leave until we'd tidied up the room. That's typical—rote scales and busywork. I've been thinking about quitting. I'm the only oboe, but they got along fine without one before I came along. If it weren't for the clarinet player at the end of the row, I would have quit weeks ago. His name is Derrick, and he's the only boy in the woodwind section. He's in my English lit class too.

He's never spoken to me, but in band I sometimes catch him stealing a glance in my direction. Though I'm half a head taller than all the girls between us, he leans forward to look down the aisle. I like to think that he's looking at me. Anytime I work up the courage to lean forward to meet his gaze, though, I pull back before my eyes have found his and nervously flutter my fingers over the keys of my instrument.

As I pass the first pair of trees split by the path, two tall oaks, the scene becomes muted. The woods are quiet. The sense of physical isolation is not absolute; there is ample space between the surrounding trunks, and light filters through the tree-branch lattice overhead. On the other side of this woody stretch, the path links up with the cul-de-sac leading to my house.

I have taken only a few steps past the oaken sentries when my eyes are drawn to a reflective glint in the scanty canopy above. Something flashes, and I wonder if it wasn't just a piece of ice catching the light of the lowering sun. But then, scanning the branches stretched across the sky, my eyes meet with the object.

It's a column of burnished brass dangling by an invisible length of string from a branch above me. A wind chime. Like everything else, it's thinly dusted with frost, and I can see ice crystals clinging to the long metallic tube. A gust of wind pushes it one way, then the other, and as it silently sways, a sadness sweeps

through me, gradually sweetening into a sense of companionship.

Like the chime, I'm suspended . . . somewhere . . . and make no sound. The cold condensed in the cylinder's silent center is the same frigid air compressed in my lungs. Its metallic tinge tempers my palate as the soundless rhythm of respiration fills the space between us. A slow breath in followed by a long exhalation. Slow breath, long exhalation. Over and over.

From that day forward, I would endure the confinement of school to partake twice daily in this communion. To revel in the lightness of the bright chime unsounded and in its depth. Whenever I passed through those woods, the world expanded, and the fresh affection of winter would fall like snowflakes on my upturned face.

Every time I see the chime, I feel less alone. In the morning, its mute beauty aches in my imagination. It's in the afternoons, though, that it captivates me most, when the sun hangs just above the horizon, and the chill of the evening has yet to set in. There are sounds, mysterious sounds that herald darkness. But none will come from the chime. As I pass through the woods in the afternoon, no thought rings through my head, unless it's the notion that night is a still wilderness. Overgrown with dark weeds, covered in a colorless blanket of cold air, it pulses with the longing to be smaller without diminishing. The seat of this stark ache is the silent chime. Knowing it can hold no



Desire Thomassin, *Deer in a Winter Landscape*, 1933

more of emptiness, it communicates the dormancy of desire in my own breast.

One day after school, I'm waiting in the bone-colored box of a band room for practice to begin. A literature anthology lies open in my lap. I've begun reading the poems assigned as homework for my English lit class, beginning with "The Eolian Harp" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. By the time I silently mouth the final line, my fellow woodwinds have fallen into place, and Mr. Burke, the band director, has raised his arms. When I look up at him through tear-bleared eyes, he's glaring down at me. I scramble to set the book aside and bring the end of the oboe to my lips. No one asks if I'm okay. Out of

the corner of my eye, I see Derrick leaning into the aisle, clarinet plastered to his face like an inflexible elephant trunk.

All through practice, my thoughts keep wandering back to the poem I've just read. It's with relief that I finally place my oboe in its case and rush out the door before anyone else. If Mr. Burke wants to yell at me, he'll have to wait until tomorrow.

Once outside, I walk slowly as I reread the poem. I hold the book in both hands, my oboe case tucked under one arm. I try to imagine the "soft-floating witchery of sound" of an eolian harp, but I'm adrift in abstraction, wafted along by one evocative description after another. I





Valerius de Saedeleer, *View of Tiegem in Winter*, 1935

decide that I don't like the final stanza, in which the speaker's wife—named Sara, a coincidence that incited an initial thrill—calls him away from his inspired, ever-expanding reflections with her narrow-minded religiosity. I can't identify with "pensive Sara." I would never reprove my spouse for such uplifting, lyrical musings, and I hope that he would likewise allow me the music of my soul.

These thoughts have brought me into the woods, and I look up from the book to behold my beloved chime. The late-afternoon sunlight ricochets off the slender metal column and into my heart. With none of the randomness

of the eolian harp but all of its mystery, it hangs alone while the invisible hand of the musician caresses the strings stretched tight across my soul. I thrill to the touch, swaying in unseen arms. The same wind engendering the music of the eolian harp now pushes the suspended chime impotently through space. No glittering swells. No melodic drops commingling into tinkling cataracts of sound. No music but the wind.

I am disappointed when, the next day in class, we run out of time before getting to "The Eolian Harp." It's Friday, so I pin my hopes of a discussion of the poem on the other side of the weekend.

I feel compelled to talk about it, to praise the sentiments of the speaker and denounce the chastening glare of Sara. No matter if everyone is silent afterward. In fact, I hope they will be.

After band practice, as usual, I leave the school alone. My oboe case hangs at my side; within it lies a mere stick of metal-studded wood with no memory of the melody blown through it. The silent wind leaves a vacant ache within, and I think ahead to the quiet encounter awaiting me in the woods. I'm in such a deep meditative state that I jump and nearly drop my oboe case when I hear my name ring out.

Before I can compose myself, Derrick is beside me, complimenting my musicianship. He is empty handed and, for a while, his arms remain anchored to his sides as he walks, pressed against his sleek black puff of a coat. I blush when he begins asking me about myself. I am hesitant at first, halting—we both are—but soon I have grown comfortable enough to mention my desire to quit band. To my surprise, he reveals that he shares this desire, as his parents have pressured him to follow in their musical footsteps when he would rather be tearing up the turf with a football under his arm. As we talk, his arms gradually loosen until they are swinging freely with each slow step. After a few minutes of conversation, there's a lull, and I'm emboldened to share my thoughts on "The Eolian Harp," glad to get out the feelings I thought would remain clogged

in my breast the whole weekend. Derrick listens quietly. As I'm announcing my disdain for "pensive Sara," insisting that I would never treat my spouse in such a way, I realize that we're approaching the mouth of the woods. In that instant, I decide to tell Derrick about the chime.

We enter the woods, and in the sudden semidarkness, I stop and stare up at it. Derrick follows my gaze. As I reach for the right words to convey the depth of my feeling, the boy beside me reaches for a rock embedded in the hard ground by the sidewalk. Before I can speak, he informs me that he hasn't read the poem; then he straightens up, pulls back his arm, and hurls the rock toward the tree-branch canopy.

I look on in mute horror as the rock misses the chime by mere inches. It strikes the supporting branch with a heavy thunk, causing its scraggly offshoots to shake as though frightened. My breath catches in my throat. The chime is jostled but remains chaste, silently pleading with me. The next stone, though, could be the one to shatter the silence, to demolish illusion. Derrick has pried another free and is walking forward, arm half-cocked. He stops almost directly beneath the chime.

My chest tightens, and my vocal cords seize up. Unable to yell, I rush forward and dive toward Derrick. I hit him before he releases the rock, right as his arm starts moving forward. Parka and puffy coat collide. The muted contact feels dull and subdued, and he makes an



ugly sound as we tumble to the ground. I roll off him. At first, he's too surprised to do anything. Then he starts shouting and pounding his fists in the dirt, shouting and pounding, shouting and pounding . . .



A cacophony of muffled voices and pounding fists pushes me back to the present. I struggle to bring my breathing into a regular rhythm, eyes still fixed on the icicle outside. I have, from time to time, brought to mind this memory of the chime, but no real emotion ever accompanied the recollection. Until now. I suddenly understand why I shiver at the sight of a chandelier, why I breathlessly listen for the sound a swinging earring makes. This icicle has rekindled feeling. It has brought these events back to me in the full splendor of their original complexion. I have relived them for the first time.

"She won't open the door."

The muffled rumblings rise and fall again behind me, and a single voice rings out. At first, it serves up a singsong plea. "Sa-ra. Saa-ra." Then it becomes more insistent.

"Sara, it's Derrick. Open up, will you? Sara!"

My fiancé's voice crashes through the door and begins flooding the room. As the volume increases, my breathing again becomes irregular. I'm drowning.

I fling my arms outward, a swimmer desperate to reach the surface. My right arm pushes the makeup case off the sink, and it clatters to the floor. I step out of

my pumps and clamber onto the bench. My fingers find the latch at the top of the window. A moment later, I'm moving through the glass and into a dream (all of animated nature . . . organic harps diversely framed . . . tremble into thought). I'm being guided by the arms of winter toward the chime-like icicle, silent and waiting. Something brushes against my face and ears. I reach up and throw off the veil and thrill to the cold thickening in my bones.

I look up at the icicle, watching as the ice sloughs away to reveal a single hollow cylinder swinging freely in the wind. I feel my spirit rising to it, borne aloft an aura of reflected light on a late afternoon in winter.

Through the white noise of memory, out of amorous imagination, the music comes. The long-distance lovers interlock their limbs at last, clanging and clinging together, jangling in a wild, violent release of suppressed sound. Newlyweds intertwining in the wind, we ring out across the woods of winter, over the years, pushing outward against the bounds of space and time.

But my spirit cannot remain aloft forever. Eventually, exhausted, I return to the frozen ground, a reluctant snowflake floating down alone. Part and parcel of the winter, I look back at myself and smile. In my reflection, the resonance lingers long after the last syllable of sound has faded away. Outside, there is nothing but the whisper of the wind. ❧



László Mednyánszky, *Rimy Forest (Windy Daybreak)*, c. 1890

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