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Lyric Essays

Listening to Bach on Summer Nights

Listening to Bach on summer nights: a flock of ten thousand sheep—
toothpaste flavors still lingering between their teeth—strolling and
grazing on the grassland.

Our hearts being fretful, Papa Bach has sent his shepherd to herd
sheep outside our window. A labyrinth designer, who had worked
as a blacksmith, sold icy Aiyu Jelly, stolen a jeweler's door curtains,
and made replica Starlight lighters. Playing music right outside our
window. A monotheist, who plays with a Rubik's Cube, eats glass
marbles, and worships the plural form and the progressive tense. One
tune chasing after another, flowing into an interwoven motif.

A moderate, who habitually carries the same color, the same senti-
ment to the pinnacle.

Yet it's also pure. A clean, bright, solid, and sublime musical church.
Our only God, Baroque.

The flock of sheep eats up our angst, eats up our exhaustion of the
day—trepidation over the grades on our kids' report cards, over the
humidity in the basement of the library across the street; jealousy
that drives us to circle seventy-eight times around the opera house
frequented by our love rivals.

We can't fall asleep on summer nights, and scuttle across every high
street and back lane looking for the license plate of our love.

We sing on summer nights, for worldly yokes, for earthly love.

The flock of sheep eats up our angst, leaving a shallow stream behind wherever they go. Even just a little chorale cantata—forgoing a soup spoon—out it flows from the piano keys:

Jesus remains my joy,
my heart's comfort and vigor,
Jesus wards off all suffering,
He is the strength of my life,
the desire and sun of my eyes,
the treasure and bliss of my soul;
So will I not let Jesus
out of my heart and my sight.

Papa Bach and his shepherd. Our only God on summer nights, Baroque.

Torpid Delivery of Love

At a time when speed becomes a virtue hotly pursued in the mundane world, I choose to deliver my love in an unhurried, circuitous manner.

I write my letters to you on the leaves of every tree, known and unknown. Time enriches and nourishes their contents.

In the spring, flimsily they fly to your desk, light as the newly printed scenery postcards, with beautiful insect stamps glued on. You turn on the desk lamp, and they turn into the specimens pressed between the pages of your book.

In the summer, they stand on the street in front of your room, jiggling the shadows into your window. You look up and see the blue sky and the green leaves quivering every now and then in the golden sunlight—their bodies once gave sanctuary to the look in my eyes that was lingering and meandering over and over due to your absence. The wind blows, and only then can love's presence be felt. Please remember their glyphs, their meanings, because when autumn comes around, they will change color, and talk to you in different speech sounds; besides, they will cover the entire balcony facing the sea and urge you to make out my longing on your palm.

My longing for you is the torrential downpour at midnight, and what I send you is merely one or two raindrops dripping from the eaves after it clears up. To put it more elegantly and subtly: In the morning light, the smooth façade of a full pond of troubled water is ringed by spreading nonchalant-appearing ripples caused by a breeze. You must be in the mood for velvet fine cotton paper to feel its dampness.

Or when you open the newspaper and see that complex, rare character in my name; or when you leaf through the old newspapers in the library, and find this page of verdurous words in the yellowed papers.

My love is frondescent.

A Fairy Tale within a Fairy Tale

They live inside the scenery that is as neat and simple as a pencil drawing. A pentagonal log cabin, a lawn, scattered birch trees along the river bank. Mom is doing laundry on the bank. Dad is writing poetry on a wooden desk. A cat—a tuxedo cat—is lazily rolling and wiggling under the table. The two little sisters are playing jump rope with a cow under a nearby tree. At times the elder sister and the cow hold each end of the rope for the younger sister; other times the younger sister and the cow hold each end of the rope for the elder sister; when neither of the sisters would give in, the cow and the birch tree hold each end of the rope for both sisters.

From time to time the indolent cat jumps onto the desk and looks philosophically at Dad who's lost in deep thought. The wind blows from the opposite bank; a stack of writing paper drifts off like light snowflakes.

"Mickey, Mickey, give your brother's bassinet a gentle push!"

The elder sister who's at play puts down the rope in her hand with irritation. The uncle next door (next door here is actually tantamount to from across a long slope), who sometimes dries his fishing net on this side of the bank, walks over from the river's edge, carrying the fish he has just caught. The cat yawns. The sight of the fish sets it in motion; bird droppings fall on its head just in time. The two sisters continue to play jump rope with the cow. More jumbo fish are swimming plumply in the river.

Dad is writing a fairy tale that has something to do with war and with love. A long long train carries dancing grooms away, one by one, in the slanting rain. The train whirls in the rain like a black vinyl record. The grooms, holding their brides in their arms, disappear one after another with each crackle like that of the needle drop on the record. The wedding gowns turn from white to black. Snow falls; snow falls down, down in the park of the city. A woman wearing tall leather boots, long gloves, and a thick overcoat quarrels with her drunken husband in a fit of pique. Their son, with a face as red as the apple in the tree, plays on the swing. After the squabble, the man throws the

liquor bottle next to the park bench and leaves, holding his wife's and son's hands on each side. Apples fall down on the snowy white snow, unmindful of the warfare and the romance far away. The long long train runs aslant through the slanting rain.

While composing the tale in his head, Dad takes a look at the cat and at the fish. His spotlessly white, thirsty paper is like a sponge ready to get wet.

It gets totally dark only after the river darkens and a few stars rise. Mom asks the younger sister to put away her baby brother's paper flowers. Dad writes poetry on the dining table after supper. The lamp-light shines on the paper and on the elder sister's freshly washed face. Mom exposes her left breast to feed the baby boy. Mom coaxes him to sleep with a lullaby:

Sleep, sleep, my darling baby.
The stars in the sky are looking at you.
Baby swallows and little piglets are already in slumber.
Even impish calves have retired for the night.

Sleep, sleep, my darling baby.
Sleep in Mummy's soothing arms.
Listen, the jackal is howling in the mountain.
If you don't go to sleep, it'll come get you . . .

The younger sister listens with a skeptical pout. She thinks to herself: That's a lie! How can there be any jackals? I used to be lulled to sleep with the same song!

Who says there's no jackal? There's actually one right outside the door under the thatched hut, who's staring through the window at the baby and Mom attentively. Initially it got hungry and came down to dig up some potatoes or maize. Then it saw the flame; it saw Mom build a fire and cook behind the cabin, so it drew close. It liked the fire, the warmth. It hid itself in the woods peeping, itching to toss the potato it's biting into the fire to roast it. It watched Mom cook dinner, boil water, bathe herself, and bathe the baby. It watched Mom breastfeed the baby with a big, white boob. It liked the baby's non-stop sucks. Behind the windowpane, its mouth watered. It liked that warmth. Time and again, it listened to Mom sing the lullaby to the baby. Several times, it fell asleep wearily and happily before the baby

did. Thereafter, on lonely nights, once it thinks of the fire, it would come down the mountain.

On this night it finally sees everyone fall asleep—Dad, Mom, elder sister, younger sister, and the baby. The finished manuscript is gleaming in the light. The baby is sound asleep. The jackal stealthily pushes open the wooden door, and approaches the light on tiptoe. It picks up the baby, and looks back at the desk on which lies Dad's fairy tale: Red apples fall down on snowy white snow.

It hurries out of the door, and runs like crazy. While hurtling through the woods, it seems to hear the baby's cries inside the cabin. It looks down, only to find the baby being held upside down: his feet upward and head downward. It hastily reverses him. Loping through a row of jumbled white and black keys and chased by the shadows of quivering leaves, it arrives at an open space in the mountain. The moonlight flows like poetry. The jackal puts the baby in the wooden crib he himself has made and rocks it gently. Yet the baby bursts out crying. Frantic and at its wits' end, it rocks the crib faster and faster. It even resorts to humming that lullaby:

Sleep, sleep, my darling baby.
Sleep in Mummy's soothing arms.
Listen, the jackal is howling in the mountain.
If you don't go to sleep, it'll come get you . . .

The baby quiets down after listening to the first few lines. But soon he starts crying again.

The moonlight flows like poetry. The fire is sleeping soundly in the log cabin at the foot of the mountain.

Translated from the Chinese by Ting Wang