

LINDSAY CUFF

On Atrocity and Grace: A Contrapuntal Vision

*Philosophy, practiced as a setting of things side by side
until the similarity dawns, is a form of ontological appreciation.*
—Jan Zwicky, *Wisdom & Metaphor*

“O

K, I’M READY. Press record,” my
cousin commands.

I press the button and point at her like I imagine they do in radio.

My cousin announces: “This is your host, reporting live for CLJR. Halifax radio.” We giggle. “Today’s guest is Lindsay C., all the way from Winnipeg. Lindsay, what are you going to sing for us?” Her braces gleam as she looks at me.

My face turns red. I am seven and she is twelve—I know I have to impress her. “I’m um. Going to sing. A song from a musical I saw with my mom. On Rainbow Stage. That’s in Winnipeg.”

My uncle, her dad, pokes his head in the door, but instead of smiling, my cousin narrows her eyes and closes the door. “Well, what song are you going to sing?”

2

Twenty years later, I’m lying in bed with the *Well-Tempered Clavier* in my head—Bach at the height of his fugue-writing. When I say it’s in

my head, I'm not claiming to be able to hear all the parts, but merely an internal harpsichord hammering out the main theme. On my favourite recording of this piece, you can hear Glenn Gould humming in the background, adding his own voice to Bach's original composition. He is careful to make sure each part is heard clearly—letting us know when the theme is passing from his right hand to his left. It suddenly dawns on us that the composition is not merely two hands taking turns accompanying each other, but two hands side by side—playing the same thing in different forms.

3

I found out yesterday, through the family grapevine, that my cousin—whom I haven't seen or spoken to in almost twenty years has moved to Vancouver. Her name is not often mentioned, the family opting for guilt or judgment. I wonder if she still has long hair, if her braces have been removed. The last time I saw her was right before she told her brother, and later the court, about what her father had done.

I don't remember exactly how I responded to it at the time except for one thought: I stayed at that house during the years it was happening. The time we made the radio show was right around the time it was ending. Why didn't I see it? I was so impressed with my cousin's new breasts, her knowledge of sexual phrases. "I know, she is such a slut," I parroted, thinking slut meant the same thing as jerk or snob. I didn't notice that she avoided her dad, that she made us leave the house and go for bike rides whenever he was home. Such things only existed in my world as skits done by puppets at the front of my grade three classroom. My body's no body's body but mine.

I recall a lot of hushed phone conversations. My mother's sadness, her guilt for not protecting her niece. The look on her face when she told us the news—the look that makes you cry. She took my dad's hand, called us over to the kitchen table. "Your uncle's going to jail."

I didn't even need to ask which uncle. I was eleven, but already had a sense of who in our family was capable of atrocity. "What? Why?"

She spoke quietly, hoping we would hear the words without really hearing them. "He's been doing sexual things. With your cousin."

I had so many questions but the only question I could ask was "What?" What. What. It contained all the other questions an eleven year old doesn't think to ask: for how long, when did it start, who did she eventually tell, what do we do now?

“He’s really sick, Linds.”

My uncle, my mom’s brother. Sickness a tiny thread we could hold onto as the ground was taken out.

4

The interesting thing about a fugue is that it’s not a fixed form, like a sonata or a concerto, but more a philosophical idea. At its most fundamental, the fugue consists of two or more voices—the form exists in the interplay of the theme between these voices. They pass the theme back and forth, inverting it, diminishing it, exalting it, each relying on the other’s momentary silence in order to be heard. In his essay “Art of the Fugue,” Glenn Gould says that it is “... rather an invitation to invent a form relevant to the idiosyncratic demands of the composition. Success in fugue-writing depends upon the degree to which a composer can relinquish formulae in the interests of creating form and for that reason fugue can be the most routine or the most challenging of tonal enterprises.”

It is a musical form I regard highly, one I try to imitate but fall short.

5

A few months after my uncle is sentenced, my dad begins his new position as the Protestant chaplain at a maximum-security prison. For his training, he is sent to New Brunswick—to the same jail where my uncle is incarcerated. When it’s time for lunch, the chaplains must file past a line of inmates on the way to the dining room. My dad sees my uncle in his orange pajama-like clothes and isn’t sure how to respond. Does he ignore him? Condemn him? Unsure of the rules, my dad waves to his wife’s brother. A small gesture. I know what you’ve done but we are family. The warden, the other chaplains become suspicious of my dad—he is associated with an inmate. He walks through the prison after lunch to visit my uncle in his cell, but is told that this is not appropriate and they must have a formal visit in the visitor’s hall. No physical contact is allowed; they must be supervised at all times. My uncle breaks down and tells my dad that he fell in love with his own daughter. My dad thinks that there is nothing worse in this world than what my uncle has done. He offers to come back and visit him before he leaves New Brunswick.

What I want to know is this: how can I remember atrocity while still finding room for grace? How do I move from one and into the other—knowing what has happened but allowing room for some sort of compassion, even beauty? How is there space in my memory, in my life, in writing, in song for both of these voices?

The poet and philosopher Jan Zwicky, in her essay “Lyric, Narrative, Memory,” says, “Lyric attempts to listen—to remember—without constructing, without imposing a logic or temporal order on experience. This, it says. And this. And this.” The living present and the dark past, happening over and over, separate, together, backwards, forwards, circles and spirals.

But is it possible to simply witness atrocity without trying to explain it? Neitzche thought it was a matter of forgetting. He said the past “returns as a ghost and disturbs the peace of a later moment.” We must actively and willfully forget certain aspects of the past if we want to live with any sort of happiness.

My mother and I visit Halifax—I haven’t seen my uncle for almost ten years. The last time I saw him I was sixteen. His son was visiting and so were we. We all went out in the boat, happy to engage in an activity. I didn’t speak much with my uncle at that time, unsure how. Now, we eat brunch together and I realize that this is the first time I’m sitting across from him as an adult. He takes medication for a condition that makes his face look wide and round, like a moon. It softens him. He gives me a hug and I feel the old apprehensions coming back. He’s my uncle. It’s been a long time. He’s done time.

He asks me if I still play the violin. I nod and point to it in the corner.

“I remember when you were up to my knee and you played us concerts in the living room.”

“Well, I hope I play a little better now.” I walk over to my violin, more for comfort than anything else. “It must have been so painful to listen to me when I was that age.”

“You were pretty good.” He re-invents history—I know I was terrible. I’ve seen it on video.

“Tell Lindsay about your new guitar!” My grandma yells from the kitchen. My uncle looks at me to see if I’m interested.

“What kind did you get?” I offer.

He clears his throat. “I bought a Martin. D-28. Got her from an old fisherman buddy.”

“Nice.” I’m genuinely impressed. We talk about the wood it’s made of, the top, the back, the sides. The abalone inlay. The balance between the low and high strings. Our conversation is easy. Just a niece talking to her uncle. He asks me if I would like to come out and jam with him and some of his buddies. They have some sound equipment, we could set up in his friend’s basement. The guys would be thrilled.

I agree. Of course I’ll come.

8

I’m sitting on stage with my fiddle, there’s another fiddler to my right, my uncle and his Martin D-28 to the right of him, a bass player and another guitar player at the end. My grandparents and mother sit on chairs by the snack table. We play through a bunch of country songs I’ve never heard, all in the key of G, the other fiddle player and I taking turns on the solos. Whenever I play something well, my uncle’s pride visibly swells. He videos the whole thing and keeps yelling, “That’s my niece!” My mother watches him with a hawk-eye.

At the end of the night, I’m asked for a song. “Sing us a song, Linds. Put down your fiddle, grab my Martin and sing us a song.”

I pick up my uncle’s guitar and sit on a chair. “Do you want something sad or something fast?” I feel more vulnerable now.

“Whichever one you want, sweetheart.”

I think of all the songs I know, but don’t know which one to sing.

9

What I fear is that if I subscribe to Nietzsche’s “active forgetting” I will live in a world with just one voice—all grace and no atrocity. I fear that the desire to say *I know what happened, I remember what happened, I will not forget* will be lost in the *We have moved on from what happened; this is what’s happening now*. Something so messy becoming so manicured. My grandparents, in their support of my uncle, blame my cousin. They blame her for saying, “This is what happened.” If she hadn’t spoken, it wouldn’t have existed. So how do I hold on to remembering without becoming paralyzed by it? Covered under a perpetual cloth of grief?

I travel to New Orleans five months after Hurricane Katrina. Our hotel is in the French Quarter, an area on higher ground, an area saved when the levees broke and drowned the poorer districts. Bourbon Street is full of people—smiling, drinking beer out of plastic cups, throwing beads, flashing their breasts from balconies. I can't decide if the festivities are a facade put up to turn tourists' eyes away from the devastation that took place, or a way of rebuilding, of saying *we can go on*. The security guard outside the hotel tells me, "Some people just disappeared." The woman in the falafel shop says, "If someone saw you looting or destroying something, you'd have been shot on the spot." A tarot-card reader in Jackson Square looks through me. "I haven't slept since Katrina."

I struggle with how to be a traveller in this place of devastation—what to do once my eyes have been knocked open, how to bear witness to what has happened. I wander into junk shops, record stores, and everything that I pick up displays an unmistakable water mark. I buy an old Stephane Grappelli record—the cardboard sleeve damp in my hands.

I go into a few bars on Frenchman Street. In one bar, there's a scene that invokes something between the movie *Blade Runner* and Paris of the 1920s. Since the hurricane, there has been a major influx of street kids from other states, come to squat in the ruins. They are dressed in suspenders, torn pants, gloves, top hats, and anarchist patches. Most of the instruments look like they were found in the flood. The music is like a steady buzz through a broken radiator.

Near the end of the night I end up in a small place where the smoke is so thick I can't see my friend across the room. The music is the best I've heard all night—gypsy swing—but my eyes are burning. I pick up an abandoned glass of white wine, drink it, and go outside to get some air. My friend comes out a few minutes later and says, "Linds, you've got to come inside and see this."

An old man, not much taller than five feet, is standing on the stage. He's wearing a black bowler hat, a suit, and there's a small suitcase beside him. He says a few words to the band and the music starts. Everyone is quiet, the smoke travels around the room in waves. He raises the microphone to his lips and starts to sing in a deep, gravelly voice, *I'm crazy. Crazy for feeling so lonely. I'm crazy. Crazy for being blue*. The clarinet takes a verse and the old man does a shuffling two-step.

People dance, looking at each other through the smoke. *I'm crazy for crying, crazy for trying, crazy for lovin' you.*

If atrocity is the falling, then maybe grace is what dances between. It is the space that makes atrocity not pure atrocity. It is not its opposite, nor its explanation. The silence in one creates space for the other. This has happened. But this is happening too.