

Daffodil

By Anthony Smith

To be performed with piano.

I.

The note that eats its next recipient
learns to mask its malintent
behind a calligraphic flourish
lest it return to me unsent.

That epistolary belly
dyspeptic as the common writer
knows vinegar will fail to honey
but neither can outcatch the spider.

Dulcet songs all prey on listeners.
A parlor trick. Old. Come inside.
I've been trapped in here so hungry
ever since the day I died.

Music aims at something holy.
Lyric resurrects the dead.
But what if every note he plays
is liberating me instead?

Sit back, relax, enjoy our show.
Know that music set me free —
and if, perhaps, you think it shouldn't
register it silently.

II.

As I wandered south of no-where
after weeks upon the sea
I came upon a hamlet sleeping
soundly; inn with vacancy.

Not a light was on in there
nor would I see light again
till light was lit from keeper, jostled
regarding me not foe, nor friend.

“The bar is closed, the drunks have left,”
The keeper sheepishly began.
“But board is yours for six gold pieces —
a bargain in these parts, good man.”

Good man, he said. Good. It’s all working.
He sees no terror in my face.
I have no quarrel with the keeper
keeps his distance, knows his place.

“How did you find this town, my friend?
And don’t confuse these words for cold.
We haven’t had a traveler here since—
Ah, well. Me, I’m old...”

The keeper had a knack for going on.
I didn’t mind it.
His inn, this town, exactly where
her letter said I’d find it.

“Do not come look for me,” she wrote.
So why would she provide
the secret way to find the secret place
where lost things hide?

I didn’t notice it at first:
The waves of crossless t’s.
My love had smuggled me a map
through her calligraphy.

The sea of t’s, the isle, the town —
a mile in every dot —

And then two x's on two i's
that must have marked her spot.

“Do not come look for me,” she wrote.
And this was cause for fright:
my lover could do many things —
not one of them was write.

Whose penmanship has sailed to me?
Whose words are these? I do not know
why men like me will scour the earth
in search of a shadow.

“...that's why you won't find roses here —
and outsiders don't like this —
but we the people of this town
prefer our flowers fightless.”

I interrupted, gestured slightly,
asked him, “Friend, where's this?”
I pointed at the map. He whispered
softer than her kiss:

“If I am reading this correctly
and someone's pointed you to town
then these two x's represent
my basement. Come on down.”

III.

Intermission. Kidding. Basement.
Descent into the ground.
Expecting simply just to find her —
not what I actually found.

I did not recognize it silent
but I knew its shape.
Eight and eighty keys and yet

she still could not escape

the cruelty of common proles
who know not what they keep
in prisons underneath their houses
while they shit and sleep.

“A piano?” “Yes, a piano.” “Why?”
I didn’t mask my rage.
“She belongs in concert halls
and I with her on stage!”

“Do you play, sir?” “Yes I do.”
“Are you good?” “I was.”
“What happened to you? Was it scandal?”
“No. I stopped because—”

A so-so virtuoso is
no young woman’s reward:
with little more than food on table
she was getting bored.

Or so I thought. That’s why I stopped.
And why I worked full time
to sail the world in search of riches —
returning home, I’d find

no love to tell I’d failed, though I
would find some small delight
in thinking she’d have left a note
if she knew how to write.

I woke years later, couldn’t breathe.
The sorrow that had lingered
disappeared. I felt her die.
“— because I broke my finger.”

A bad excuse, but there it is.

And here I am today.

“Well, if her map has brought you here
she wanted you to play.”

IV.

Two i's in pianist. I see.
And then a shuffling sound
as basement room began to fill
with figures from the town.

“This is the place where lost things go
and lost is what we be.
But second only to unfound
is, my friend, hungry.

Whatever letter sent you here
whoever was its writer
knew you'd look upon a beast
and long to be inside her.”

I should've fled the scene right there —
never mind my pence
spent on a room I'd never sleep in —
But oh, an audience!

“Play for us. She wanted it.
She knew we'd be good friends.”
One final cucking. Only right
that this is how it ends.

I played. I stopped. The room grew silent.
The keeper looked quite shaken.
For just as sure I'd felt her die.
I felt something awaken.

The town, the keeper disappeared.
No onlookers to gawk.

“I sent them all back to their beds
so you and I could talk.

I've been trapped down here for ages
locked between the piano's notes
waiting for a fool to play me
thinking that a map she wrote

led the way into a future
of eternal bliss.
Clever men can't help be clever.
Clever men all die like this.

I wonder where I'll go tonight
when I escape this place.
But one thing's sure: I'm going there
while I wear your face.”

My knife is sharp. The pianist screamed.
How I remember screams!
It is too bad the living never
feel pain in their dreams.

You wouldn't struggle so against
my blade if only you
could pretend you were sound asleep
with her right next to you.

Why are you fighting?
Why are you fighting this?
Why are you fighting? Skin.
Why are you fighting this?

Why are you fighting?
Why are you fighting this?
Why are you fighting? Blood.
Why are you fighting this?

Why are you fighting?
Why are you fighting this?
Why are you fighting? Flesh.
Why are you fighting this?

Why are you fighting?
Why are you fighting this?
Why are you fighting? Soul.
Why are you fighting this?

V.

Daffodil, you make life harder
clawing for celestial heat.
Why does the sting of thornless flower
ever puncture metered feet?

Why does the soil that leaves its pot
ever rage against its fate
when all accept the gardener's succor?
Check your watch. It's getting late.

And open up your mouth for water
and don't forget to smile and thank
the hand that prunes the common flower—
the hand that always had the power
to morph the rhyme at any hour
to sap the honey from A-B
iamb, dactyl, clawing free.
Does the terror, scaped the book,
reside beside you? Take a look.
Everything you cannot see
a rhyme that binds you e'er to me —

AA's for drunks who never will
admit they haven't had their fill.
Death is top shelf. Life is swill.
The fish would trade away a gill

to walk upon the soil as man
and run till he no longer can
and then fall flat. You'll never be
a redwood towering over trees
who spits on birds and just for fun
casts its pall on everyone.

The poem is done. So ends the song.
And aren't the pianist's fingers long
and his voice good for this narration
and your town such a perfect station?

And what are we all doing later?
My night freed up. I'll see you there.