

No Title

by Brianne Baxtali

The most important sound in the universe was the strings vibrating against the wood, and not the notes they produced: the snap and twitch as they cut the air, the faint creak of the neck, the scraping of all the fingertips that had been cut and scarred and calloused through the generations. She spilled her neurons across the dissecting board of the violin, breathed deep and forced herself outward with every exhalation. Her molecules mixed with wax and horsehair, and her heart valves arched in unison.

The songs would slumber safely within cocoons of bone and skin, incubated by dried flowers and ladybugs; anxiety and yellowing Polaroid photographs; quibbling and the smell of asphalt at August High Noon. Set to their own timelines dictated by unique internal landscapes, they were unexpectedly born by their own automatic c-sections, tearing open their silken resurrection machines with teeth of steel, motivated by the solely by the need to be heard: shrill, or muted, or bleached, or candied — but always louder than a nuclear blast.

It made no sense that they drew her here so often — crumbling masonwork and decapitated statues against a backdrop she could not place. That part did not matter — it was where they chose to be delivered, breaking their own water and inducing their own labor, and she could not argue. It felt better to get them out, and she knew better than to fight with the laws of her own nature. In the end, as she had repeatedly learned, she would be in perpetual last place.

But nothing mattered when she held her violin — or, more accurately, nothing existed; when she played, time would lapse into a coma and gravity found itself needing a living organ donor. Einstein would be furious, but even he could appreciate her talent and skill, boiled and smelted and spit upon since she was old enough to stand.

When she found herself in this familiar haunt, the sun was fading through the absent roof, and the violin — the scratches traced by

her fingers, her great-great uncle's fingers, possibly by God's fingers with the fury it could withstand — balanced on a pile of rubble to her immediate left. The panic that had welled up in her chest would part and subside upon locating the object that she had carried with her since memory had formed in her toddler mind, and before that from the Old Country, wherever exactly that was. She had not lost it after all; the daunting responsibility that had been bestowed upon her had not come to an end. And, picking it up and cradling it carefully, she turned on her heel with the best of intentions: To find her way home from this place, and though she did not know which direction to choose, at least the violin was safe.

Against her better judgment, the songs would jerk and stir, and she would respond "It wouldn't hurt to just get *one* out of my system." And her Better Judgment would reply "I don't like this, but you don't have a choice, now do you?"

The strings would stir, and she would smile — and the world would come to an end, as it always did when she played. Her fingers danced and the bow threatened to saw the instrument in two neat halves. This was how that particular violin had been engineered to be used.

A part of her remembered the rest of the story before it occurred, and familiarity washed over her. She had seen this place before, and she would return her for all the inexplicable reasons in the universe. But it could be different this time. The song was new; it was unlike its older siblings, and it had the power to change every outcome, every supersting of destiny.

The literature could not be reformatted. The corners of reality crumpled, and she heard a mindless howl. Nearly silent at its genesis, it soon overwhelmed her music, bouncing around the stones and landing solidly in her cochlea.

A tangible chill pooled in the back of her head and fled to her sacrum. Her eyes shifted their focus, but her hands continued to produce music. Legs anxiously spasming, the breath stuck in her throat in anticipation of her reaction.

Automated and fueled by adrenaline, her left arm swung the violin underneath her right, and she ran. She did not have time to weigh her decision as her limbic brain awoke and took charge of the parts of her body like a general. She was not an athlete, but fear provided the speed she typically lacked.

Stumbling and unable to find stable footing, she propelled herself in every forward direction. At times her path was blocked, and she would scale ruined walls, jump over deconstructed staircases. Repeatedly looking over her shoulder just long enough as a reminder that her life was in real danger.

It wore the cheap disguise of a man, one that was so transparent it almost seemed like a waste of time. Within the wrappings of pseudo skin and hair was a cloud of black energy, a wailing collection of buzzing electrons that gleamed as they orbited a core that shone with shadow. It spoke its own language, one of a continuous and sinister hum, balking like a malfunctioning lawnmower played through the hissing static of a broken amplifier from 1964. It was that sound that awoke the unfettered and inescapable terror within her, the sounds of brains boiling with fever and the dead being reanimated.

