

QUONDAM

by Steve Mobia

The stale air of the marble lined corridor had a thickness to it like an unwashed hardened old pillow, something I'd toss into a corner on a sleepless night. For assurance I re-examined the creased paper. Office 203 must be nearby. My formal shoes on the veined marble echoed as I continued down the hall to a frosted glass door: "Anacusic Press."

There was no answer to my knock so I tried the corroded gold knob. Creaking hinges announced an office unaltered in many decades; the metal shelves overburdened with sheaves of paper and bound volumes. At a wooden desk splattered with open envelopes, Clara Troubinger looked up.

Because she was dressed in loose faded floral patterns, worn black frame glasses and with hair tied back over dried, almost yellow skin, I estimated her age to be in her late seventies—but I'm often wrong about such things.

Careful not to disturb the stalagmites of books and papers on the floor, I swallowed and approached the burdened desk. "My name's Randall Heast. I called last week about my piece, *Quondam*, remember? It's for accordion."

The woman smiled bitterly, squinting eyes gazing over her glasses. "...to publish, yes?"

"You didn't get my email? I forwarded a copy of the score after we talked."

Clara recoiled in disgust. "I don't use email." She stroked a heavy black rotary phone on her desk as if a faithful pet while I wondered if it still functioned.

"But you have an email address." I was puzzled.

Clara abruptly nodded as if broken from a reverie. "Right. Of course. A friend set that up a few years ago to try to help my business. Didn't see your score though."

"But...you did tell me to come here today." I looked in vain for a chair not laden with papers.

"Yes, that's right." Clara gestured to a curved wooden seat near her desk. "Just put that stuff on the floor. It's okay. That chair's for junk anyway."

After transferring the pile of magazines to the stained linoleum, I opened my briefcase on the chair. "The piece is something that took a long time to realize...ah to come up with...and I think it has value." From a folder filled with loose music paper I pulled out the score.

Troubinger glanced back to the open envelopes on her desk and added a stapled paper to a stack that threatened to topple. "To whom?"

I was suddenly puzzled, not knowing what to do with the manuscript in my hands, as if a lost animal had wandered carelessly into my possession. "I don't think that's for me to say."

She smiled, faintly nodded, then seemed extremely tired as she massaged her closed eyes with long spindly fingers. "Might I ask what you do for a living?"

I placed the folder on Clara Troubinger's desk and took a deep breath but the dusty room choked it off and against my will, I coughed. "I play music, ah, the accordion on cruise ships. In fact I've got a gig tomorrow."

Troubinger pulled the score from the folder and, not bothering to clear a spot, spread out the music on top of the piles of bills.

As she studied the music, I looked away and walked quietly to the wood paneled walls where small paintings of anatomical drawings were displayed. Extending from the drawings on tiny springs were internal organs in the illustrative style of a Victorian engraving. It was like some kind of collage. When I touched a large intestine, it responded by quivering which was oddly startling. Troubinger didn't notice but was concentrating on the notation. She braced her forehead with the palm of her left hand. "This isn't the kind of thing you'd hear on a cruise ship."

I smiled to myself "Yes I know." Near the bouncing intestine was another illustration of a brain with eyes and ears extended on springs. "Where did you get these...drawings?" I asked.

"Oh," laughed Troubinger. "They belonged to a neighbor down the hall who published medical books. Went out of business two years ago. Noreen Falcrow. Guess she saw the future. She's the one who set up the website for me, but I never learned how to get there."

Wanting an instant appraisal, I walked over to Clara expectantly. "So, what do you think?"

Clara gathered up the loose music pages and put down her glasses. "I can appreciate your ambition, but you know there isn't a market for this kind of piece anymore. Who's going to play it, and on accordion no less? ... But the biggest thing is.... how can I say this?" Troubinger slid her seat back. "This piece has been written already." She stood and made her way to a corner shelf holding stacks of bound music.

I backed up suddenly as if from impact with an invisible object. The old woman strained as she picked a slim volume from the shelf and blew the dust off.

"We published this about 15 years ago. Sold maybe 10 copies in all that time. Some of the notes and meters are a bit different but..." She opened the music book and laid it down on the desk "...essentially it's the same. Written by a Herald Aslant."

"Aslant," I muttered. "Never heard of him. Is this for accordion?"

Clara shook her head in subtle disbelief and closed the manuscript, revealing the cover. "*Templative* - for accordion solo."

Suddenly my chronic asthma kicked in. I clutched my pocket inhaler and inelegantly cupped it to my mouth while bracing myself on Clara's desk. The walls around the room seemed to press forward, exuding a gust of mildew. The inhaler was empty. An old panic of suffocation took hold.

"Sorry, I've got to go. Can we talk about this later?" Quickly scooping up my music and briefcase, I groped for the door and hurried out, knowing I had failed miserably to impress my potential publisher.

A gauzy mist of medication swathed my face as I huffed on the antique nebulizer, usually kept in a suitcase next to my accordion. I had the "Bird machine Mark 7" from childhood: an air compressor joined to a regulated valve and long corrugated plastic hose terminating with a mouthpiece and green transparent cup that bubbled with saline and Albuterol—a drug meant to open air passages in the lungs. I didn't use it everyday, but the asthma attack at the publishers was a glaring reminder of my chronic condition. My brother Jacque paced the living room, clearly upset at the direction of a basketball game displayed on his wall sized monitor. Jacque's home team, the Corti Trappers, were in a tight contest with the Memphis Mumps.

As my deep breathing returned, through the mist a laptop displayed the search results for "Herald Aslant."

"55 year-old composer. Professor at Juilliard who recently moved to Corti. Author of the book *Musical Knots: Time and Structure in Modern Composition*."

I took another deep inhalation while contemplating all the composers I had not heard or whose pieces were on some long-forgotten program thrown into a box years ago. Music fascinated me for its evanescence, how some pieces lingered for decades while others dissolved the instant of their hearing. And what compelled some composers to wrestle with concepts bordering on obsession would leave other listeners groping and lost. Why did moving airwaves of abstract patterns ignite such fierce passions, dividing or uniting friends, spawning torrents of words, opinions, and declamations?

"That thing is too fucking noisy!" Jacque broke my reverie. "I think you'd better move into that old cottage you were looking at. I can't handle that machine any longer, bro."

I removed the clouded mouthpiece to speak. "I don't use this to piss you off."

"Shit!" Jacque kicked his easy chair as the Mumps made a basket. He turned back to me with a smirk. "I thought most people outgrow asthma when they become adults."

This hurt. Even though my brother was seven years younger, he had all the trappings of an adult—a modest though decent sized ranch home, a wife and two boys. "You're not an adult

until you own real estate” was my late father’s subtle deference to Jacque’s achievements. My winning of serious accordion competitions was no match for Jacque’s solid business sense—a building contractor owning an office with the bronzed name “Heast” firmly mounted over the entrance.

Looking back to search results, I ticked off the list of Aslant’s many commissions and awards. He had written for large orchestra, for chorus, a string of piano pieces, an especially large body of organ pieces, forty or more recent eclectic chamber works. Here was my ideal composer; successful, influential, recognized—an adult.

Screams of young voices shot through the room as Jacque’s two sons bolted in. Tarvin, thick boned and wielding an outsized red plastic baseball bat, chased the year-younger Rodney, whose torn clothing revealed a previous scuffle. Jacque tried his best to ignore them while fixated on a player for the Trappers penalized for “double dribbling” and surrendering his team’s possession of the ball.

Tarvin swung the bat while Rodney nimbly hopped a sofa. Frustrated, Tarvin turned but his bat caught the electric cord connected to an end-table lamp, yanking it off its perch. Jacque, reflexively and without even glancing from his screen, grabbed the fixture in mid-fall, preventing yet another distraction. The boys’ surging energy spilled into the next room then out into the back yard.

I was astonished at the lack of discipline and the boys’ seeming control over the household. Tarvin, who frequently bullied his brother, was scarcely scolded while Rodney was admonished for not holding his own. Together they formed the terminals of a battery, powering an unstoppable chaotic toy that shook and bounced off walls every day of my stay.

Getting away from all this was appealing. But meager income defeated pride and I needed shelter from the chilly gusts of the season. At first Jacque was only too happy to take me in again, but after one year and the quiet disdain of his wife Hervella, it was becoming more awkward. Not that I was freeloading; I usually paid my brother rent on a small guestroom, but lately I had to stretch out payments as calls for on-board accordionists were on the wane. So I was thrilled finally to hear from Carnival Cruise Lines that the *Après Coup* ship to Florida by way of the Panama Canal would be providing over a full month of employment. The stress of debt to my brother would be lifted and so, I hoped, would Hervella’s bitterness.

Clicking on the heading “Upcoming Performances,” I was thrilled to see a local concert that very night: “Among other choice works by the composer, the evening is capped by the world premiere of Aslant’s *Duality* for Theremin and Musical Saw. Composer in attendance.”

Jacque was clearly displeased at the direction of the basketball game. He paced the floor nervously and took a gulp of beer. “Come on Trappers. Wake up, there’s a game happening!”

Suddenly a series of explosions from the back yard overpowered the noise of televised crowds and the Bird machine. I put down the mouthpiece and joined Jacque at the back window.

Out in the blossomed yard, under an olive tree, Rodney was sitting on the ground, hands behind his back and a dirty rag in his mouth. Tarvin was circling the tree, lighting firecrackers and tossing them at his hapless brother. Rodney's eyes would clamp shut as the loud bangs were inches away, their flashes followed by wafting sulfur.

"Okay Tar, that's enough," Jacque yelled out, releasing his pent up frustration. "Your mom's going to be home soon and your room is still a mess! Rodney, I'm tired of seeing you wimping out! Next time fight back."

Tears welled up in Rodney's eyes as he spat out the rag.

"A knot in music is where a linear theme comes back upon itself repeatedly so that the superimposition produces a new design, strong and unyielding" read the opening lines of *Musical Knots*, Aslant's thick hardcover book. I was at a bookstore on my way to the concert and thought I might meet the composer by getting him to sign his tome. On the cover was a curious drawing of a knot that resembled a ball, its ends tucked away in the design, producing a self-sealed beauty. The inside jacket indicated that the drawing was of a "Turk's Head knot—sometimes used to illustrate the story of the Gordian Knot."

This left me groping to remember the old story and the common use of the term "Gordian Knot" to indicate an intractable problem that can only be solved by taking drastic action—"cutting the Gordian Knot." But why would you want to compose a knot? Was music something to be untied, or sliced open?

Pondering these questions, I made my way through the sparsely populated store to the cashier, a young bearded man in a purple vest, who examined the volume. "Hey, another musician. Glad we kept our theory books around. Manager wanted to clear them out. I told him, we're right down the street from the concert hall. We need to tap into that crowd."

I smiled. "You have quite a few music books back there. Congratulations."

The cashier leaned toward me and spoke in a hushed tone. "See, I'm a composer and push this stuff to the buyer. But, you know, people really don't know how to listen anymore. Every one's listening to dreck and they think dragging pre-made loops around in a computer program is composing."

"So where is your stuff played?" I asked

"Saturn, it's in high demand on Saturn," the cashier joked, then turned away to the register. "It's not played. Just sits in my drawer," he said softly, half muttering.

My smile faded as I recognized myself in this young man's plight. Just nodding knowingly, I lifted the bagged book from the counter.

Feederhaus Hall was an elaborate leftover from the nineteen twenties, its baroque plaster ornamentation betraying a certain cheapness of execution in the city's hurried attempt to transplant European culture. Now noticeable cracks crossed the golden leafy curlicues and the stage drapes were a bit sagging and torn. Still, major works had their premieres here and I preferred the quaintness of the decay to the icy glass-boxed theaters downtown. The acoustics were still superb and my ears were pleased by the many sonorous adventures I attended. Surviving members of the Feederhaus family occasionally made their appearance for some of the fundraising "war horse" concerts featuring the likes of Mozart, Bach and Beethoven. Certainly they would not be seen tonight in the midst of modernism.

My thoughts drifted to Via, the souvenir seller I looked forward to seeing again on the upcoming cruise. Despite my encouragements, Via always found these modern music concerts too formal and intimidating. I could imagine her cringing at the hall's threshold. The one time she did enter was during a two-day layover while her ship's generator was being repaired. Quartets number 4, 5 and 6 by Bela Bartok were lined up for the evening and I thought Via might be swayed by their intensity, particularly since the Dudeler Quartet, four powerhouse female players, were tackling these classics. Via only made it through intermission and though I pleaded, we walked to a nearby bar where an over-amped blues band washed away potential conversation. Before that, however, she did sincerely apologize for not being able to follow the "mush" as she called it. That was the last time I invited her here.

The nearby music school provided Feederhaus with a ready crowd, out on assignment to take in the latest assemblage of composers that director Torrence McClaine would schedule for the season. I may have scanned Aslant's name in programs past, but it didn't hold in my memory. McClaine crossed the entrance hall, greeting guests but he was uncharacteristically glum. I hadn't formally met the man but admired his line-up of new music pieces that graced the old place.

Alone, as usual, I made my way to a center seat. One advantage of going alone to shows was my ability to nearly always get a good seat amid the throng of couples. And here it was again, a perfect listening spot in the center section, flanked by fresh-faced young women from the music school. I just hoped they wouldn't be a distraction as they giggled when I squirmed my way to the beckoning empty cushion, clutching both the program and Aslant's hefty text.

“Hey, we had to read that,” said a flaxen-haired beauty as I squeezed past her bare knees. “It’s hard to get through, pretty tough.”

“Did you understand it?” I asked.

“As much as most modern theory books. All this over-thinking can get in the way of your ears I think. Do you like the book?” the girl earnestly inquired.

“Just bought it. Don’t know.” I took my seat and settled in.

“Don’t expect it to be easy. Like, it’s the kind of book I read to take the test and then forget right away.” She smiled with a hint of shame. “Guess it’s over my head.”

“Well you know, some of these modern composers can be obsessive to the point where no one else can follow them.” I sought to ease the girl’s self-doubts. “Believe me, I struggle with a lot of this myself.”

“Are you a composer?” the girl queried until her female friend sitting adjacent nudged her playfully.

I started to respond but at that moment, the lights dimmed.

The performance featured late works of Herald Aslant, concluded by the *Duality* piece. Compared to most modern classical concerts, here was a confusing theatricality. For instance in the first piece, several people, men and women in long trench coats, appeared blind, stumbling onto the stage from all sides holding white canes. They tapped the floor methodically as they circled each other. It appeared the rhythms were thought-out and quite complex. After awhile, two of the men collided and their canes got crossed. The others suddenly backed away as the two whacked each other, violently and repeatedly. The others then tapped frantically and the rhythm became chaotic. Finally the two fighting hit each other with such force that their canes broke. At this point the stage lights went out and the piece ended. Though I hated much of this piece and thought it willfully obscure, I was also bothered intensely by my knee-jerk rejection. Something had spurred Aslant to delve into seeming absurdity. After all, he had a huge pedigree as a composer of merit.

There was scattered applause throughout the theater. Even I began to clap on social reflex but then stopped myself, my hands paralyzed by indecision. All appeared suspended, hanging by an unraveling thread. This was more a psychiatric symptom than a piece of music. Did madness deserve an ovation?

Another piece was started by a lone female violinist in a long formal dress who entered playing an intricate melody, quite beautiful, resembling something by Bach—lovely but rigid despite the sweetness of the sound. Then, a closed full-sized grand piano was wheeled out by two men; one dressed in white with an oversized, extremely tall chef’s hat. The other man, in a tuxedo, sat at the piano and commenced pounding out loud and abrasive chords, completely ignoring the violinist and her melody. Others, male and female, in formal clothes then walked

out, some sipping from champagne glasses. With cultivated smiles, they seemed unaffected by either musician and appeared to converse among themselves without words. The chef re-entered and gestured toward the piano. The “guests” gathered around the instrument as the chef proudly lifted the lid. Steam arose from inside while the pianist kept pounding. The chef removed a silver tray topped by an ornate dome with handle. He sat it on a nearby table which was set with utensils and napkins. The formal guests readied themselves with knives and forks. The chef lifted up the dome. Beneath it, on the platter was a large steaming knot, seemingly made of thick fibrous sisal rope. Ravenous, the guests tried carving it while the chef walked behind the piano and turned away. The knives and forks of the guests broke as the knot could not be carved. All the while the pianist pounded, steam rising from inside the piano as the violin played sweet but disciplined melodies. The dinner guests seemed to conspire as they whispered and pointed to the chef. Then, suddenly, they charged around behind the piano and grabbed the chef. Once ambushed, the chef struggled while the guests pulled him away and off stage. For a few seconds, the mismatched music of the piano and violin continued but then there was a loud scream. Both musicians stopped as a slide projection behind them displayed a silhouette of a man in a chef’s hat hanging by his neck from a knotted rope. At this point the piano joined the violinist as they played for the first time a slow lyrical tune together but as soon as it started the lights suddenly went dark and *Dinner Music* was over.

Again, there was sporadic applause. This last one was more interesting than the first so I joined in with a few claps, if mainly for the staging and visual impact. The notion that this strange composer had written the same accordion piece I did was unnerving. I suddenly felt detached from my entire life, my body and surroundings alien as if viewed through inverted binoculars. But then, the audience lights went up and seeing the familiar concert hall brought me back.

At intermission I tried again to continue a conversation with the young woman who had sat next to me, giggling softly throughout, but wasn’t able to distract her from a group of friends that she ran to immediately after rising for the break.

It struck me how familiar yet foreign many of the adults in the crowd were. I must’ve seen them here countless times, yet did not really know a single one. It was a sub-sub-group of the mainstream music scene—much smaller than the classical lovers and infinitesimal compared to those who frequented amplified clubs for their musical nourishment.

Since Herald Aslant was said to be in attendance, I wondered which of those gathered might be the celebrated composer himself. Remembering the photo from the laptop search, I could not see Aslant’s face among them. Or was it a photo from years before, as many use for press releases?

I often skirted the question “do you play an instrument?” with “yes, a keyboard.” In fact, the accordion is a wind instrument; its phrasing and accents much more at one with a clarinet or oboe than a piano. An organ came close but aside from the grand sound-swells of a full pipe organ, the accordion had an advantage in being able to accent each note using the bellows and was much more portable. I was possessed the first time the bellows opened across my chest. It breathed against my body. This was MY instrument. It became a part of me—a powerful lung without the asthmatic limitations of my own. But others just saw an accordion. “Hey, play *Lady of Spain!*” they continued to plead.

In the United States, the accordion had been relegated to folk tradition with many sophisticated ears unable to hear its steel reeds apart from the dance hall or street corner buskers. So I politely smiled at these concerts, occasionally commenting on one of the works as I meandered from group to group, always feeling a gulf between myself and the familiar phantoms. Yes, I had grown old with them yet had never shared anything more than the span of time when our ears were massaged by sound. It was alarming that the crowd was aging and the only younger ones were the music students. Even in this technical world of instant access to any musical expression, the expanse of contemporary “classical” was often not included in a list of genres. Sure, there was classical—but that usually meant music written from the early 1600s through Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*. If you looked over most schedules for the downtown orchestras, only a token smattering of “new music” pieces would be included. So, it was only in places such as Feederhaus that a truly active composer venue existed at all. It was here that a non-commercial pursuit of sound for its own sake could flourish in all its cryptic glory.

Back in my seat after another walk around the lobby, I saw an excited girl to my other side gaze longingly at her smartly dressed companion, who had played piano during the last piece. The girl to my left was nowhere to be seen, her program having slid onto the floor. I picked it up and carefully replaced it upon the empty seat cushion. The lights dimmed as did the hopes that I could continue our conversation.

The opener for the second part was another odd theatrical experience titled *Push Over*. An oboe player wearing a blindfold strolled tentatively onto the stage playing a slow lyrical passage, followed by a group of seven pre-teen boys who began to tease the player, tugging at his dress clothes. As the musician struggled to phrase his melody smoothly, the children with their pushing and pulling caused wavers and weird syncopations. I wondered how much of this was rehearsed or if the musician was completely taken by surprise. The children’s play became crueler and more insistent as the oboe’s melody struggled to retain its integrity. Finally, one of the boys went offstage and brought back a wheelchair. Two others dropped to their hands and knees directly behind the oboeist. Finally, the others charged at the seemingly unsuspecting player, knocking him over the arched backs of the kids on all fours and into the waiting

wheelchair. Shocked, the player stopped and removed his blindfold which actually reminded me of my own sleep mask. He looked up from the mask directly and somberly into the audience as if searching for someone and extending the mask as if offering to return it. The seven boys lined up behind the one holding the handles of the wheelchair and, arms to shoulders in a line, they all pushed the musician off stage as he turned his head to continue searching the seated crowd until concealed by the side curtains.

After all the quasi-performance art, *Duality* was a downright traditional piece with two performers reading sheet music. The saw player wore a broad-brimmed ragged straw hat and coveralls. Instead of a chair, she sat on an upturned wooden crate. Then from stage right, a spaceman decked out in silver mylar topped by a wrap-around bubble helmet emerged. He approached a device that resembled an antique wooden-cased radio receiver with two antennae prominently extending—one vertical, the other in a loop, right angled to the wooden box. He raised his arms near the antennae, his right hand curved, poised like a cobra ready to strike. The saw player bent the tool between her knees and readied a handmade bow to the non-serrated side.

I knew a bit about the strange electronic instrument. The Theremin was named after its inventor, Leon Theremin, back in the 1920s. It was a historic breakthrough in sound—an entirely new instrument whose fame was enhanced by the notion that the player executes music by not touching the apparatus but instead moving the hands near the antenna. One hand controlled the pitch and the other the volume. By skillful movements, the player could create a vibrato in approximation of a singer. Critics of the instrument suggested that the result was like “an operatic mosquito.” Because of its use in science fiction movie soundtracks, the Theremin often evoked otherworldly associations.

Though the saw appeared to be a common shed tool re-appropriated for music, most these days were especially made for use as an instrument—their shape widened for greater range and various thicknesses for richer tones. However, according to the program notes, this particular “sawist” used a traditional wood cutting tool.

Aslant’s piece began softly with both players on the same pitch, emphasizing their similar timbre, but then launched into contrasting passages, the saw quoting barnyard tunes while the Theremin doing its eerie swooping glissandos. Both instruments however, were more alike than different. I felt the piece could’ve been written for two saws or two Theremins with essentially the same sonic effect. With my eyes open however, the visual associations of the two performers completely colored how I heard the sound.

The piece was in one long movement and provided each player a chance to solo against gentle support from the other. It ended with a densely packed canon, the two weaving against each other with the same material at different times. Was this climactic effect what Aslant meant by a musical knot?

A bigger question that haunted me throughout was whether I would've written the same piece. I appreciated the themes and the lively interchange between the players, but the general effect was too ironic, too impersonal. And the notion of writing for these odd instruments would've never occurred to me. The accordion was paramount, my solid anchor in a sea of aural possibilities. I was on a mission to legitimize the accordion, to make it more than a vehicle for nostalgia.

After a final descending glissando with both the Theremin and the saw, the players froze in position then nodded to each other. The audience knew the piece was over and applauded vigorously. As the lights came up, I looked expectantly around the room.

Head bowed, Torrence McClaine walked out onto the stage and motioned the audience to silence.

"Thank you." McClaine waited for the crowd to quiet. "I have an announcement that I've been putting off but feel you deserve to know. Your program indicated Harrold Aslant would be here, but I have some bad news. The composer could not attend." Torrence stopped awkwardly and cleared his throat as he scanned the puzzled faces. "In fact, Mr. Aslant has passed away today."

There was audible gasping from the audience. I was struck by the grief that crossed McClaine's face as he slowly continued. "We are grateful that he has left us so many masterful works for so many unique instruments and we hope to have many future performances of his music but today is indeed a time for mourning one of our great modern masters." Torrence turned abruptly and swiftly left the stage.

The jubilant bubble created by the curious pieces was punctured, leaving only awkward glances. Some got up to leave, others sat with eyes closed. I made my way to the center aisle and up toward the stage. From the corner of my eye, I caught Torrence pushing out through the side exit and followed before the door completely closed.

It was an oddly humid night. The grass surrounding the concert hall promenade was lit in pools of orange light from ornate lampposts. Behind me, the crowd exited the hall slowly as if in a trance. Only Torrence was rushing ahead to the street and I ran to catch up.

"I'm so sorry to hear about the death." I spoke as Torrence suddenly stopped and turned. "What happened?" I continued, "He wasn't that old."

Torrence eyed me through a veil of half recognition. We had only exchanged pleasantries before at the many shows he hosted. A quiet but tense anxiety pressed in as he swallowed then bowed his head. "I didn't want to tell the crowd because I personally knew Herald." He looked up into my eyes. "In fact he supervised the rehearsals of these pieces. I just saw him last night."

I tucked the program into Aslant's book. "So, what happened, an accident? Heart attack?" I felt suddenly apologetic for my insistence.

Torrence nervously ran a hand through his hair and clutched the back of his neck. “Herald had...periods of depression. Very successful guy; lots of good press, students and commissions.” His hand dropped while he shook his head, obviously puzzled. “but, that didn’t save him.”

Startled, I stepped back. “Suicide?”

Torrence nodded. “Prescription meds. An overdose. That’s what I was told tonight.”

I reached out to Torrence and touched his shoulder but at that same moment he turned abruptly to leave. “I can’t talk anymore. Sorry.”

McClaine again headed toward the street. I was stunned but continued to run after Torrence. “Wait,” I called. “You’re familiar with Aslant’s works?”

Torrence turned back, eyes reddened. “Many of them.”

“Do you remember a piece titled *Templative*?”

Torrence looked away thoughtfully. “That was a solo piece, right?”

“Yes, for accordion.”

Torrence reflected. “Right. Yeah, Herald used to play accordion as a kid and decided to write for it. I don’t think I ever heard that one. It was another of his ‘outsider’ pieces. He mentioned something about the main theme coming to him in a dream. I’m not certain it was ever performed.”

“But it was published?” I queried with bated breath.

“Probably,” Torrence shrugged his shoulders. “Most of his works were. You’re a musician then?” He quizzically stared at me as I nodded. Torrence continued, “I’ll be working on the organ at Ascension Cathedral at noon tomorrow. Drop by. We can talk then.” He turned away again without looking back. “Thanks for attending,” he spoke offhandedly, leaving me stupefied.

Suddenly I felt the heaviness of Aslant’s text and lifted the unsigned copy to my eyes, the cover drawing of the knot barely visible in the dim orange light.

A product of early 1960s modernism, the Basilica of the Ascension stretched upward in a stark white enveloping spiral rising to a slender abstract cross. Theoretically the spiral would continue on a molecular level and the cross was just a convenient exclamation point to the ascent. Though I had admired the stunning building from the outside, I had never ventured in, as had been the case with most churches since my childhood. Though controversial to the locals, the Basilica always struck me as an inspired gesture, even if the beckoning heavens proved to be merely an exit from consciousness.

The entrance resembled rolled pages of a scroll, parting to either side. Once within, I was struck by the futuristic embellishments—like those conceptions of humanity’s role in the space age. Entry columns suggesting upturned rocket fuselages pointed high into the spiral pattern that was outlined by stained glass portholes along the side. Gone were the gothic encroachments from the past. This was an untainted, purified, optimistic future world with God as the supreme pilot. Even the traditional wooden pews were replaced by individual white plastic seats arranged as semi-circular radiant rows from the central altar in the nave that extended out into the congregation like a sleek pier. But even with this welcoming abundance of space, not a single human was visible.

“Mr. McClaine?” I called out, only to be answered with my own voice reverberating. I walked slowly toward the altar. Though originally built as a Roman Catholic cathedral, it had since become Unitarian. Even now, not many attended the Sunday services and upkeep of the colossal structure was in jeopardy.

A sharp knocking was heard up in the ranks of organ pipes that swirled along with the spiral design. I again called out “Torrence?”

From behind vertical louvered wooden slats fronted by tall shining pipes, Torrence McClaine’s head, barely visible, bent down. “Yes?”

“Remember me from last night?” I responded, careful not to yell in the church. “You suggested we might talk about Herald.”

There was an extended silence, then Torrence responded, “My assistant just ducked out for a moment, could you play a slow chromatic scale on the second manual from the bottom? It would be a big help. The console is to the left of the altar.”

Making my way past the curved altar to the organ controls, I placed my right hand on the second of four terraced keyboards and slowly played each note to the top key. The tone was of a sweet flute-like sound, mellower than my accordion.

“Hold the second B flat please,” commanded the unseen Torrence.

I held the requested note. From within the forest of pipes, a tapping joined in and the pitch rose slightly. “Okay,” shouted Torrence and I removed pressure from the key. “That one just needed a little adjustment. Come up here if you’d like.”

Glancing around, I saw a tiny open door in the wall. The opening was about a foot off the floor. I walked toward it and craned my head through. A series of wooden platforms and ladders extended upward. “Ever been inside one of these before?” asked Torrence. “It’s a fantastic world.”

I pulled myself through the doorway. “Never. I had no idea there were so many more pipes hidden away.”

“Be careful, but come on up. I’m just doing some small adjustments until my assistant gets back from lunch.”

A garden of pipes spread out and up on all sides. Some were tiny, others like trumpets, some like elongated wooden boxes set on end. Torrence, dressed in a work apron, was cross-legged on a platform two levels above. He held a solid bar with which he tapped on a curled bit of metal on the side of a medium sized pipe. “I’m a voicer,” he said.

I climbed up the ladder and onto the platform next to Torrence. “Voicer? You mean a tuner?”

“Well, yes some tuning but also adapting the sound to the room. It can get pretty finicky, especially with over three thousand pipes.” Torrence looked into my eyes. “You like organ music?”

“Well, I play the accordion.”

Torrence grinned “The instrument of the devil, huh?” He paused. “You’d know that joke if you’re an accordionist.”

I nodded. “I think I’ve heard them all.”

“Well,” Torrence looked around the chamber. “These pipe organs are supposed to be heavenly voices but they still need work. It’s just acoustic plumbing. The pipes get bent, misaligned or go out when the temperature changes. Like all of us, it’s very physical.” Torrence suddenly glanced away as if overtaken. He sat silent.

I placed my hand on McClaine’s right shoulder. “Are you okay?”

Torrence sniffed and closed his eyes. “This organ developed an air leak. After weeks of searching, I finally found the problem. Did you notice when you entered that there were individual seats instead of regular church pews? Those seats were modeled on Disneyland’s Flight to the Moon, which opened in the late 50s, a couple of years before this church was built. In that ride, to simulate weightlessness on a moon voyage, the center of the seats would push up, making you feel lighter as if you were floating. Well, the seats in this place do the same thing when the priest gives a dramatic sermon. He has a control at his altar that will push air under the seats to create that uplifting feeling. Well, the air comes from the same blower that powers the organ and gaskets under the seats were old and leaking. So instead of those magnificent organ chords with all the stops pulled out, the loss of air made the whole thing go out of tune the longer you held a chord, and the parishioners would feel a sinking sensation.” Torrence forced a chuckle.

I wanted to steer the conversation toward Herald Aslant but was aware of McClaine’s sensitivity at the moment. Finally, after another awkward silence, Torrence spoke as if reading my mind. “Sorry, it’s just hard to deal with Herald not being here” It was clear that Torrence had been crying through his closed eyelids. “We were close.”

I pulled back, reflexively removing my hand from McClaine's shoulder.

"He was a mentor and more." Torrence looked at me with red swollen eyes. "Wish I could've helped him. I could see him physically deteriorating. Just wish I'd said something that day."

"What happened?" I asked.

"Well, he was at the rehearsals for the pieces you saw. He kept mumbling that he felt more of a musical clown than a real composer. He for some time had been tagged by the press as a prankster."

"A prankster?" I was puzzled. "Not the piece for accordion—the one I asked about."

"Well, that was one in a series for "outsider" instruments, like the saw and theremin. The critics felt the only reason he was writing those was to get attention."

"What did YOU think?"

Torrence paused and looked away. "Truthfully, I had mixed feelings. The outsider pieces weren't my favorites and I felt the theatrics were distracting from the music. But still, Herald was always a great composer and managed to work wonders—even with wind machines and jews harps. I always treated those pieces with respect. When we met, he was a very earnest composer and wrote some very accomplished pieces. He grew more jaded over the years—more emotional ups and downs. I still loved him, though he was drifting away, to some other world. Maybe it was drugs, maybe just bitterness. He often joked about giving up serious music and becoming a DJ."

"So what happened during rehearsal?" I was still perplexed.

"I don't know. It didn't seem out of the ordinary." McClaine's voice dropped to a whisper. "I mean ... Mike the theremin player arrived late and was making some lewd comments about having to wear the spacesuit and I had to say "It's in the score, fuckhead!" I was annoyed he was so late. I don't know if that exchange threw Herald over the edge. Who would guess?"

"You can't blame yourself for that." I shook my head.

"He always laughed at criticism so I just let it slide off." Torrence took a gulp of air. "I didn't even call later. And ... that's when it happened."

A shocking piercing chord erupted from the surrounding pipes. Torrence and I put our hands to our ears in pain. Dissonant chords and a rumbling deep bass punctuated a fast run.

"Jay must've gotten back from lunch," called Torrence over the din. "Bastard! He should know better."

We made our way down the ladders while still trying to plug our ears. "Normally you wouldn't hear it this loud out in the church," yelled Torrence.

Near ground level the sound suddenly ceased. Torrence jumped down the remaining few steps and made for the tiny door to the chancel. "Jay, you could've deafened us!"

An extremely slender formal young man in his early twenties, strode up the aisle holding a bag. “Hey, brought you some take-out.”

“Cut the shenanigans,” scolded McClaine. “You know how loud it can get in there with the stops out.”

I pulled myself back inside the church and shut the hatch. Jay, handing Torrence the bag, appeared puzzled. “What are you saying? I did ask if anyone was inside.”

“Under your breath maybe.” Angrily, Torrence returned the bag to Jay and swiftly faced the organ console. “Let’s finish this thing.” He pressed a calling card into my palm as he moved past toward the keyboards. “Call me some other time.”

I pocketed the card and glanced back at Jay. “What were you two doing in there?” asked Jay with a hint of a smirk as he extended his hand. “Jay Falcrow.”

My ears still ringing, I shook Jay’s hand. “Randall Heast.” Jay’s grip was barely noticeable as he pulled his long fingers away through my palm like a squid jetting from an enemy.

“I remember you,” said Jay, cocking his head like a curious dog. “That cruise I took with my mom a year ago. You’re a decent player. Accordion, right?”

“Thanks” I nodded, a bit embarrassed to be recognized. “It’s a living you know.”

Jay grinned knowingly. “How do you know Torrence?”

“The Feederhaus concerts,” I stated.

Jay erupted with an exaggerated smile that levitated his pencil thin mustache. “Good. Glad to hear it.” He glanced quizzically at Torrence. “Even getting accordion players in these days, huh.”

Jay’s pressed beige suit seemed overly formal for the task of a laborer, a backstage “voicer.” It certainly was in contrast to Torrence, who wore a faded denim apron with tools in its pleated pockets. I assumed Jay never set foot inside the organ’s interior.

McClaine, with a sour expression, glanced back at Jay from the organ console. “Remember what we’re here for.”

Jay shrugged and snickered, then walked away to join Torrence.

Another round of *O Sole Mio* swelled from my accordion as I worked on the climactic chorus. My “fake book” of Italian standards was opened and marked and though I yawned with eyes half closed, I plowed ahead, milking the song for all its sentimental power. Then, right before the concluding four bars, a sharp knock on the bedroom door derailed the tune.

“You realize it’s one in the morning,” Jacque reminded from behind the door.

“Oh, sorry.” I let the box slide off my shoulders onto the nearby bed. Abruptly Jacque opened the door and I attempted an apology. “The ship leaves tomorrow and I had to get my luggage to the dock. I hate practicing this stuff so I put it off until the last moment.”

“Hervella wanted me to tell you that...” Jacque sat near me on the soft mattress. “I’m afraid you can’t stay with us anymore.”

I lifted the accordion into its open case, not looking at Jacque. “Maybe you can give me another chance. When I get back...”

Jacque slapped me on the back playfully. “Hey, I’ve heard that before. Bro, you know I love to help you...but you’re the older one. You should’ve had it together by now. Staying here isn’t helping matters. You’ve got to find some way to get by without leaning on my family. I’m sorry.”

Looking at my own hands closing the accordion case, I noticed they appeared withered and dry as fragile old leaves. Jacque quietly exited as I pulled the case off the bed. Hervella should’ve told me, I mused, if she’d only been more forward—but then I pulled back, realizing the sensitivity of the predicament. Here I was for the third time needing a refuge between steady pay, expecting my reliable brother to extend family ties yet again.

Has it come to this? A once ambitious music student, I just assumed my compositional talents would be recognized by the time I turned 50. It was obvious, just keep working, it’s only a matter of time. But time did matter, and as the accordion fell from stature in the pop world, so too its fleeting forays into jazz and chamber music. And here I was, practicing the very thing that I sought to elevate myself from.

I collapsed on the narrow bed; waves of self-pity threatening like a crosscurrent riptide. Pulling my velveteen sleep mask, like a diver’s goggles, down over my eyes, I drifted into that half-conscious state before sleep, my restless mind churning. Images of the run-down shack I’d been eyeing earlier in the week, its rotting windows creaking in the breeze, beckoned with a crumbling call. It was cheap and quiet. It was here I could work on future pieces. Reasonable enough. Never mind the sagging roof, the omnipresent smell of decay. And night set in, darkening this already dark apparition.

I was jostled awake—thrown against the inside door of the cab by its sudden shaking. Lack of quality sleep meant frequent micro-naps at inopportune moments. Not watching the road under the dominion of a taxi driver was one of these times. A blaring car horn from behind startled me to even more alertness.

“Sorry about the bump” apologized the cabbie whose swollen body occupied most of the front bench seat. “...but I couldn’t stand that jam anymore. I’m going to try a short cut.”

Straining to recognize something familiar, I studied the alley street. It seemed we must be close to the docks, what with all the life preserver and fish motifs on the buildings. In front of a souvenir shop, a bedraggled man around my age pulled a scraped-up button accordion over his shoulders, a sailor’s cap upturned on the sidewalk for coins. He caught my gaze and knowingly saluted—a gesture that shocked. I pulled back and turned toward the cabbie, wondering if the salute was for him. The driver’s eyes were only on the road ahead. A placard of numbers was displayed on the dash—apparently the driver’s license. A photograph on the card depicted the back of the driver’s head instead of the face.

I turned back toward the side window as we approached a stop sign. Standing on the curb, a homeless man raised a brown cardboard placard, which read in scrawled felt marker: “I have a cardboard allergy. Please help.”

How long had I been dozing? On the front dash, the meter’s red LEDs displayed \$130. I tapped the driver’s shoulder. “Hey, there must be something wrong with the fare. The dock isn’t that far from where you picked me up.”

The driver didn’t turn. “We had a rate increase last week.”

“But that is ridiculous.” My shoes seemed stuck to the floorboard. Glancing down, I tried lifting my left foot, only to find a black tar-like substance on the floorboard creating a stringy adhesion to my polished leather oxfords. Didn’t they ever clean these cabs?

“We should be there in a moment,” stated the driver with a resigned monotone.

A tiredness mingled with nervous anxiety as the cab emerged from the shaded alley and darted toward the waterfront. The colossal terraced wall of the “Après Coup” loomed over the arched buildings on the pier, upper decks bursting with excited faces. Among them, my thoughts went out to Via who was surely among the throng. She carried a souvenir tray in the old manner of classic cigarette girls, her wares of trinkets and post cards as if on a stage framing her willowy physique. We had flirted for years though I was resigned that any intimate interaction would only exist in ruminated fantasy. I guessed Via to be at least 20 years younger, her camaraderie more a result of youthful exuberance than serious romance. Still I always looked forward to that teasing banter when we happened to share the same ship. And now after 3 months of layovers and missed opportunities, that time had come.

The taxi tires squealed to the curb and I struggled with my accordion case that shared the backseat. Pulling the heavy case behind, I exited and heard the ship’s horn sounding. The front passenger window rolled down with the portly driver awaiting his pay. My wallet was lost. Earlier, I had transferred the billfold to my coat pocket in order to make it easily accessible but now all I touched within were cheap souvenirs of varying destinations. I pulled out plastic ships,

figurines of sailors, collapsible drinking cups—all trinkets I had purchased from Via on various occasions to lighten her tray. They overwhelmed my ability to hold them all and in frustration, I tossed them to the pavement. Another air horn blast from the ship caused a panic to skewer my nerves. The cab driver, in serene detachment, was playing solitaire with dog-eared cards on the front seat. Finally, reaching into the inner eyeglass pocket of my jacket, I found my wallet and quickly ejected the credit card—nearly flicking it at the driver.

While the cabbie processed the plastic, I studied the empty dock. The hulk of the liner began to move. I hoped it was merely a large wave heaving the vessel. After signing the receipt, I lugged my accordion toward the gangway. It was clear now that the ship was underway as the gleaming white gangway was pulled from the hull.

Setting down the accordion case, I ran to the employee ticket booth where a tall gaunt man in a sweat-stained sailor's cap was closing cabinets. Hearing my approach, the man looked back through the thick window and pressed a button.

"Hey Heast, you're late," the man gave a snide grin as his raspy voice was amplified by the tinny speaker over the window. "Guess accordion players have so many gigs they can't pull themselves away."

I was frantic. "Can't you stop the ship? Radio them? Take me out on a motorboat?"

"You know this business. Once she's underway, there's no turning back. Sorry. The man locked a cash drawer and grabbed his jacket. "The Après Coup won't be back for another month. Plenty of time to practice."

"But my luggage was loaded yesterday."

"You know these cruises. They always return." The man shrugged and turned from the window. "See you then."

It was as if a rotting hole formed on the pier, swallowing me into the cold depths below. I stumbled back to my accordion with a jagged hesitance, my eyes fixed vacantly on the withdrawing ship, searching the tiny faces for a glimpse of Via. From a balcony over the bow, I may have glimpsed her and her souvenir sign, but was too far away to be certain. The mammoth floating city was now clearly underway.

There wasn't a back-up plan. After a year of playing cruise ships, I had gotten used to the mediocre repertoire and regular pay check from the affluent elderly who heard a distant beguiling charm in reedy tones from my nicely tuned box, its bellows breathing life into the old standards. I had learned two hundred or so requests and perfected a self-deprecating patter of the modern accordionist.

"Hey what did people say when the ship loaded with accordions sank in the ocean?" I'd ask, taking a mock concerned glance around the interior of the ship's restaurant. "Well, it's a start."

Of course I knew that the accordion held immense power that couldn't be reined in by kitsch

and sentimentality. I struggled to harness this intensity, and over the last year had written a piece in which every subtle and overt expression the accordion could make was timed and introduced within a dramatic context. I felt this work to be so original, so revolutionary but was stumped for a title. Being in a “quandary” about what to call it, I thought about similar-sounding words that suggested a vanished world, a path not taken. For me the music evoked something in the past that was impossible to find in the present—a ghost of past potential. With the found title *Quondam* in place, the work was ready to show. But now what? I’m told it’s a copy? Yeah, it’s just a rip off of this guy, Herald Aslant.

The new territory of time and poverty before me seemed a tidal wave of unease as I thought about facing my brother. I looked around the docks for a diversion, anything. It seemed at the moment that I felt the butt of all the jokes I told.

On an adjacent older dock was what looked to be a penny arcade; clowns with peeling paint beckoned to a dark interior where I could make out the silhouettes of pinball machines and other garish contraptions. And, from deep within the building, a thumping bass rhythm.

Lifting my burden, I approached the arcade. Carnival attractions always held a fascination as an awkward artificial mask of dreams. How the sublime intrusions into routine every night could only be realized as blinking lights behind absurd fantasies of the waking world. It was obviously counterfeit but celebrated its unreal dimension through the tacky charm of painted faces, costume and calculated trickery.

From a hundred feet away, it was clearly not a standard penny arcade but the entryway to a club—more specifically the “Sheep Club” as the twinkling marquee lights announced. In a moment I became not only a tourist but also an attraction, as I felt oddly self-conscious walking through the entrance.

An assortment of antique arcade machines were crowded just inside. A young pubescent girl, preening her deliberate sexuality and wearing tight denim shorts, played pinball by pushing in on the table as her rear bounced from side to side, like the silver ball ricocheting off thumper bumpers. She took her intense gaze from the machine and latched on to me with a cool pout. Did she see me as a threat or a target? I was exceedingly uncomfortable.

There was a nearby door with a sign “Freaks of Nature,” and I quickly went through it. On the other side was a small dimly lit corridor lined with distortion mirrors like those in a funhouse. The bass beat was obviously coming from the other end.

“I know what’s in there,” said a man who pointed to my accordion case. I hadn’t noticed him until then, a slender man in a purple suit behind a counter at the end of the mirrored corridor. He wore a white half mask covered in curly sheep wool. “I’ll keep it here for you if you want to take a look at the club. You’re in luck, the Sheep Suit Serenader is spinning today.”

“Spinning?” I pondered the word.

“DJ talk you know,” The man clarified. “No cover this time of day. A good time to go in.” He raised a rubber stamp. “Wrist please.”

The curved mirrors on both sides of my field of view amplified my distorted reflection into an unrecognizable infinity. I walked to the counter and extended my hand, palm up. “Is this a club or a sideshow?”

The stamp came down on the inside of my wrist. The mark was of a cartoonish semblance of a sheep with puffed-out fleece ending in sharp points as if the creature was being electrocuted.

The man in fleece gestured into the glossy black painted hall that funneled out the processed sound like a factory making widgets.

I recoiled. “So you’ll keep my accordion safe?”

“We’ll take good care of it. It will be waiting right here. Besides, no one inside would want to be seen dead with an accordion,” the masked man smirked.

Taking a resigned breath, I felt my way along as the passage turned a few corners and grew narrower. Then the room opened out, though how far was hard to tell as the colored swirling light show in the dark disoriented.

A thumping beat pounded on my chest, its metronomic precision decorated with high-pitch cymbals and wailing synthetic pulses. I was not alone here, there were shadowy forms occasionally illuminated by the constant movement of rotating lights. Over against the far wall, a manic fellow, lit pale blue by a computer screen, bobbed and swayed while ceaselessly pressing buttons and sliding levers on several consoles before him. I made my way over, while brushing up against soft wool and puffy furry outfits worn by the bobbing dancers.

“Hey, it’s my break.” The DJ threw a switch and his system reverted to autopilot without missing a beat. Closer now, I could make out the identical fleece-covered half mask that the DJ wore as he ducked back into another room behind him. I followed. With the door closed, walls muffled the high-powered speakers, providing some sonic relief.

“A lot of lambs out there today” muttered the DJ, half-recognizing that he shared the room with me. “Too young I think but hard to tell in those sparkles. Are you their chaperone?”

“Not me,” I replied.

The DJ flung himself onto a cushioned booth-like chair such as would be found in some restaurants and threw his booted feet up onto a low coffee table in the dim dingy room. Though slender to the point of skinniness, the man was hardly a youth—the creases and folds beneath his chin indicated a person well past middle age. He sweated profusely and his open vest of sheep fleece revealed a clearly defined ribcage through his loose thin skin.

“Wonder how those lambs got in. Now, that’s some young stuff.” He pointed at me in a quick impulsive gesture. All his movements were jumpy. “You’re here to bust me—right?”

“Not me.” I brushed off the pointing with a dismissive wave.

The DJ leaned forward and fumbled on the table for a glass pipe amid an assortment of dirty paper plates, half-empty beer bottles and potato chips spilling from a bag's gaping split.

"What were you playing out there?" I asked while slowly wandering the room. Old chrome-trimmed round tables were stacked in one corner. It seemed the place was a diner at one time.

"Owing to the joint, it was mainly Darkcore sprinkled with Acid Trance," the DJ responded, while gesturing with the unlit pipe. "You like music?"

I was bemused. "Well, actually I..."

The DJ interrupted, his relentless nervous rumble like a headlong train. "It's Dub maybe but less is being done that way today."

"Do you compose it?"

The DJ laughed "Compose? That's such an old school word—music school lingo. Why, I mix it of course—produce it. Everything's already out there. There's so much out there." He extended quivering fingers. "Like, my hands work the magic. All it takes is a little twist here and there—suddenly it's a new thing. There's already fucking too much music in the world—like, you know what I mean? We need to recycle it."

The DJ smiled, "Hey sorry to brush you off but old Sheep Suit needs a break—know what I mean?" He walked to a cabinet and pulled out a small pipe and a tin wrapped in rubber bands. "Time for you to go, sir." He indicated the door and I nodded to leave, upset at my inability to argue his point.

Back in the dance room with my eyes now adjusted to the dim light, it was clear that among the crowd, actual live sheep were grazing. Like the rest, they were festooned in blinking LED lights and fluorescent accessories as they slowly roamed through the crowd, chewing their cud while completely ignoring the dancers. I presumed this to be a marketing gimmick for the club and pondered the cost of maintaining these animals.

A faintly glowing EXIT sign had been crudely altered to read EXIST—the "s" sandwiched in but it was clear this alteration was an intentional attempt at cleverness—like car license-plate frames at a gift shop. I made my way toward that feeble glow.

The entrance was carelessly unattended. "No wonder young kids were getting in," I thought. Looking at my wrist, I studied the electrocuted sheep. A coterie of kids dressed in day-glo fur hurried past me, excited by the lack of a gatekeeper. They each used the stamp to mark their wrists before going inside. My accordion case was stashed behind the unattended counter.

"Where's the restroom?" I asked a teenage girl in a fur fringed mini skirt who was running to follow her friends into the club.

"Well there's one in the club or there's another one back there." She pointed to the other end of the mirrored corridor.

Outside the “Freaks of Nature” hallway and next to a line of antique kinetoscopes, I found the Men’s room. Inside, at the sink, I hurriedly stuck my right hand under hot running water, trying to wash off the sheep picture, which suddenly felt vulgar and repulsive—as if I were a branded animal being led to the slaughter.

Pulling my sleep mask off with a panic I saw that I had overslept. Jacque and his wife had already left for work and sent the boys to school. The large home was silent. A quick call to the dock confirmed my suspicion—the liner had departed an hour before. Somehow in the confused conversation with my brother the alarm hadn’t been set.

And now with no chance of paying my way, I had to leave before Jacque’s return. As I struggled to quickly pack, the strange dream of the cab ride and the club crept back. With some trepidation, I raised my hand. The wrist was still marked but the sheep stamp design was now smeared and unclear.

I pulled up to the overgrown front patch of land walling the cottage from the potholed road, across the street from the shuttered “Adult Playland” bookstore with its rows of broken marquee lights. My overpacked Mitsubishi Mirage was filled to the brim and I dug into my pocket for the front door key. Even in this area of town, the notion of renting a separate unit was a nearly impossible task. This had been a cliffhanger of last minute haggling and heavy compromise on my part as I no longer had the luxury of time. But even though not knowing how I’d make the second payment, I took the lease.

Finding the key, I walked over cracked concrete through the brambly hedge and into the tiny cottage. Peeling paint was more obvious now than the late dusk of first survey. The door creaked as expected but now a smell of mold greeted me from the long entry hall. During my first visit, the realtor had the windows open but the place had been sitting closed up since then. They called it “furnished” though the word was stretched to mean, “some old furniture included.” I walked slowly along the creaking floor past a beat up desk to the bed—its paltry mattress lumpy even at a distance. I sat on its edge, resting before the big unload.

My life was now a bitter game of “catch up.” I needed money and fast. Going through my wallet for calling cards, the one from Torrence McClaine took center stage. The word “Voicer” was integrated into a stylized depiction of symmetrically arranged organ pipes. I considered

McClaine vaguely sympathetic if only to assuage his own grief. But first, after unpacking, I must again visit Anacasis Press. Arming myself with a full asthma inhaler, I was prepared.

The door was wide open, its lit interior spilling out into the hall with an effulgent fog of dust. I entered cautiously, my lungs and airways tightening, so I pulled an inhaler from my pocket.

Even more piles than before pillared the old office. Lit from sunlight through bent venetian blinds, Clara Troubinger was packing boxes, moving intently with full hands among the open containers, parsing her lifelong business into categories while whispering to herself. So caught up in the sorting, she nearly toppled when a sideward glance revealed me. She lunged for the rotary phone.

“I’m so sorry,” yelled Clara, picking up the heavy receiver and fumbling with the dial. “I had no idea things would get this serious. Poor Herald.”

“Relax, relax,” I put my inhaler away. “It’s not a gun.”

Clara had dialed a wrong number and only received an incessant beeping.

“I see you’re moving.” I forced an upbeat attempt at small talk while gesturing with open arms.

Clara was frozen, her trembling hands cupping the black receiver to her pallored face. She murmured “so sorry” recurrently as if a mantra.

I shook my head. “Hey, I knew it was a long shot. But the piece meant so much to me, I thought I’d give it a try.”

As I moved toward Clara, my right foot cracked a pencil, spurring her to redial. But I could hear a “disconnection” notice from the tinny speaker.

Tears began to well up in Clara’s eyes. “It was just meant to be a joke, that publication.” Her phone seemed more now a pacifier than a tool of communication.

I was utterly confused. “I just wanted to see *Templative* again. That’s why I’m here.”

Clara kept her nervous distance while slowly lowering the phone. “Sure.” answered Clara with suspicious reserve. “The real one or the phony one?”

Clara, heard no reply from me as I was dumbfounded. “Phony one?”

There was a moment of supreme confusion on Clara’s face, as if let down by her own assumptions. We held an awkward stare for an uncomfortable time.

Then she suddenly and decisively went to an open box marked “garbage” and pulled out the manuscript I had looked at last time. “There’s really only one copy. We made it up a day before your visit.” She passed it to me.

“How?” I asked.

Clara slumped into her wooden swivel chair and looked out through the parted window blinds behind her. “Look, I’m not internet savvy. And my friend’s son contacted me saying Aslant wanted to trick another composer for a change. He gave me your emailed score and asked me to pretend that we had published it. Years ago, Herald did actually write an accordion solo called *Templative* and we had a limited run—never sold a copy but it was in the catalog. So I went along because I knew Herald had a reputation as a prankster. It didn’t matter at the time because we hadn’t put out any new music in over a year. As you can see, I’m calling it quits. Should have retired when Noreen did.”

“So you were pretending? What the hell?”

“I know, it’s embarrassing isn’t it? We have published other legitimate Aslant works in the past and my ex-husband knew him well. So I felt an obligation to play along.” Clara, turned toward me, tears now clearly visible. “But I had no idea Herald was going to die.”

I studied the forged score and noticed that a mistake I made in notating a sharp on the second page was carried through here. It had been printed on different paper in another style of notation but the error was virtually unchanged from my own work.

“Did you talk to Herald personally about this?” I asked, while leafing through more pages.

“No. Just Jay, my friend’s son.” Clara stared at her overflowing desk with a vacant gaze.

“I’m taking this with me. Okay.” Without waiting for permission, I hurried from the room, score in hand.

What a buzzing hive was the Floriesta district that night. The June heat had given way to a warm calm dusk and much street exhibitionism was at hand. Leather chaps, bare bottoms and fishnet pullovers graced the honed male bodies in front of “The White Swallow.” I tried to picture Torrence in my mind and assumed he’d look very different here though I couldn’t reconcile the formal concert promoter with the cuddling muscular forms around me. Carrying a closed portfolio, I pushed my way past into the dark interior, my plain plaid sweater catching the curious eyes of those lining the entry. But Torrence had been waiting and walked to greet me, dressed in a common casual shirt though unbuttoned more than expected.

“Hey. Good to see you.” Torrence patted me on the shoulder. “Let’s go into the back room. Quieter there.”

I had never hung out in the Floriesta district and was clearly nervous following this man through a narrow black-carpeted tunnel, with lights alternating red and blue, into a far recess of an openly gay bar.

The back room was noticeably quieter, its padded walls apparently designed to insulate the establishment from its neighbors. A musky odor was apparent but the room was scantily populated.

“It’s fine in here this time of day,” remarked Torrence. “After nine, you probably wouldn’t want to see what happens in this place—but who knows.” Torrence winked while escorting me to a couple of chairs. On a small round table between them, rubber prophylactics were arranged in a vase like a bouquet of orchids.

“Torrence, Mister McClaine; I need to find some answers.” I crossed my arms.

“Yes, we all need answers?” Torrence lifted his eyebrows and forced a smile though his face showed clear anguish.

“Did you know anything about the fake score?” I had thought out my inquisition and watched Torrence closely.

“What?” Torrence seemed sincerely puzzled.

“You said that Aslant was a prankster.”

“Now, come on. Aslant was an artist of the highest caliber.” Torrence recoiled, his smile dissolved. “I said critics often called him a prankster. I sure didn’t.”

I opened my portfolio and removed the score to *Templative*. “You know; the worst thing you can tell a composer is, that was just like this other piece I’ve heard. Even if you’re being kind, it’s devastating. But this,” I tossed the manuscript to the table, “...is completely my work. It’s my accordion piece. But look at the cover.”

Torrence read the name “Herald Aslant” under the title.

“I was told by the publisher that Herald wanted to prank a composer this time.”

Torrence shook his head in disbelief. “Can’t be true. He wasn’t mean spirited, except toward himself. Look, none of this makes sense. Why would Herald do this and then kill himself?”

I leaned forward. “You tell me.”

“Herald, I knew him very well. We were lovers, so I can speak with some authority. He would ramble on about things. Stopped respecting the modern music scene, sometimes mocked my running the concerts at Feederhaus. He would walk around his bedroom ranting that we didn’t need any more music. Composition was dead.”

I pulled back and repeated the assertion as a whispered question, “Composition is dead? What about Herald—are you sure Herald Aslant is dead?”

Stunned, Torrence sat back in his chair, his eyes suddenly aimless and wandering. “I know his cousin,” Torrence mused slack-jawed. “He wouldn’t kid about something like that. And my assistant Jay Falcrow, he knew Herald pretty well and confirmed his death. It was clear Herald

had taken an overdose of pharmaceuticals. He had a history of depression and self-medication. Oh and there's a memorial in two weeks. You're invited, of course."

"Who is Jay? I met him at the cathedral, right?"

"Yes, briefly. Jay is my associate ... and sometimes lover. You know, he's young and—real enthusiastic about music."

"And about you?" The question rolled out unrefined and obtrusive.

"Yeah, well...you know. I was seeing Herald. Herald and I go back a long time. Jay respected that. We were all...doing okay together." Torrence was agitated. He moved to stand up.

I caught a wave of thought and rode it. "The publisher said Jay was Herald's contact. Jay helped the publisher make up this false score. Suppose Jay wanted a fall guy..."

Torrence interrupted. "You're crazy. Sorry. I'm going to have to break off this conversation. Jay is a nice guy. Overly emotional sure, but he wouldn't kill Herald. No way. I'm sorry to have invited you here." Pushing the table toward me, Torrence abruptly left the room as I caught the toppling rubber orchids.

I stumbled into bed that night, completely exhausted, my head swimming with unfocused anger. I couldn't blame Torrence and Herald was no longer alive. Just needed to let it all go—dwelling on the ruse wouldn't lift the burden. Again, I felt short of breath. The two closed suitcases sat on the floor at the foot of the bed—one containing the asthma nebulizer and the other my accordion. Music had sustained me in years past as did the inhaled medication. I refrained from both tonight, opting instead for an asthma treatment pill that combined Epinephrine with a sedative. The uneasy side effect of this is being both ready to fight and sleep with equal measure. The tug of war between these opposites often resulted in a plunge into an abyss like a boxer beaten to the mat.

That night I had a vivid dream. It was almost a replay about missing the cruise ship but now I was on a rotting old pier—alone and sitting on my accordion case. The lengthening shadows on the deck's uneven surface exposed years of degradation. The pier had been slowly collapsing and large sections of it already had—leaving gaping holes punctuated by bare stunted pilings below. Close to my left, a wide extension had succumbed to fire; only blackened serrated edges remained. Even fishermen had abandoned this outpost to its dismal destiny. But I was on a more solid section or at least it seemed so at the time. In the distance, a mammoth gleaming cruise ship moved slowly away toward the bay entrance where the Pacific Ocean beckoned with possibilities. The water's still surface in the bay was curiously unbroken by other boats and

seagulls circled above, sometimes swooping to perch on the pilings—the upper sections whitened with droppings from the birds.

Behind me, the pier's deck was buckled and disconnected from the land, its splintered boards curving down into the froth. About one hundred feet separated my pier from the rock, grass and sand of the nearby beach. Mine was an island, perilous and uninviting with an acrid smell of salt-soaked wood that triggered an asthmatic tightness in my lungs. I had forgotten how I came to be here, it seemed I had been waiting forever. Would I wait until another ship arrived? The thought had a brief bright light that immediately fell to darkness. The pier was too dangerous, too prone to collapse, too guarded by splintered pilings to warrant a docking.

On the beach, table rounds were being rolled onto the sandy grass, arranged by uniformed attendants in double breasted jackets and archaic white pillbox hats. Then chairs were wagoned into position, their folded forms being opened and passed to the tables. But I could not return to the beach, the pier was twelve feet or so above the surf. Any passage down would involve jumping and abandoning my accordion.

I walked to the burned section and peered into the water where the broken pilings encrusted with barnacles ringed a vacant area directly below. Several bottles of unknown medicines floated, their labels faded by water and sun. They still contained unused pills and capsules, the contents protected by the closed caps. I assumed they had been discarded by someone in the nearby nursing home whose roofline peeked over the sloping hills on the shore. How did I know this? Somehow, the place was very familiar. The lazy waters of the bay beneath me, the small rocks lining the sandy shore and the distant waiting rooms housing the infirm—abiding until the exit door opened.

The burnt splintered planking bent under my weight and I backed away from the blackened hole, while taking a puff from my asthma inhaler. I walked to the buckled edge where the connection to land collapsed. It was as if the pier had pulled itself away from shore, ripping its tether to human purpose, making itself an inaccessible outpost, like a stage in the abyss.

Onshore, more activity commenced. Several elderly folks, many with canes and walkers, hobbled slowly into view; sometimes assisted by the young caterers who had set up earlier. These seniors settled cautiously into the folding chairs and were served drinks at the tables. It was some grand occasion for these people. I presumed they had come from the nursing homes or nearby retirement communities. Then, it was clear, Clara Troubinger was among them, taking a luxuriant seat on a padded chaise longue next to a small circular table below an umbrella. She was chatting with another lady, slightly taller, chubbier and dressed more gaudily than Clara with an orange Hawaiian print muumuu. She pulled up a chair next to Clara.

I waved but Clara hadn't looked my way, being deep in conversation with the other woman. And then a familiar tone rang out—the cutting sound of a steel reed. Among the assembled

casual crowd strolled an accordionist. I didn't recognize the player although there was a familiar manner about him, as if I'd seen him on the street. Despite his being of similar age, the man had a bounce in his step as he skimmed through the popular repertoire I knew only too well. The marches, waltzes and polkas glided effortlessly one to another while the man grinned broadly, whirling his small red rhinestoned box around as if a dancing partner. Smiles lit up the crowd as the accordion passed through, with some flinging their arms about in a wild parody of conducting. Though I thought Clara above this kind of thing, she was bobbing her head with the rest and even bestowed a tip when the player glided by.

I studied the scene, and then returned to my accordion case. My own instrument was quite heavy as it was full sized and "serious"—equipped with all the reed banks needed for complex phrasing and shades of intensity. It was an effort to play standing with such a model. On ships I stayed sitting, balancing the left hand side with my knee to give the bellows full extension when needed. World virtuosos played this way as it afforded more subtle control

I lifted my black glossy instrument from its case and, with a grunt, threw the straps over my shoulders as I stood. It had been years since attempting to play while standing and it felt awkward. The bass side sagged when I extended the bellows, making it harder to make certain chord jumps. Still, I was determined to join in. I knew *Beer Barrel Polka* very well as it was such a standard accordion tune. Facing the beach, I started an accompaniment figure to the melody as it wafted by, creating an echo effect due to the lag in sound over the distance. Clara looked toward me and cocked her head as if puzzled. Energy surged through me as the volume increased and I even started to dance, lifting legs to the beat—a pretty silly sight I'm sure but didn't care. The asthma medicine had given me an adrenaline boost and, encouraged by my rival at the party, I sprang higher off the old deck as if animated by a younger, brash vitality. I had never learned the proper dances for this music and so my wanton display of enthusiasm was decidedly graceless. Nearly tripping on a sprung plank, I had to recover my balance with an awkward reflex, throwing me a few steps back. The thirty-two pounds of wood, celluloid and steel was more like a wrestling partner than a dancer and I marveled at how the strolling player onshore so melded with his box. I tried some of the moves but was clearly off equilibrium. With an almost angry determination to claim my command over the clichéd repertoire I had slaved for years reproducing, I jumped high as the second theme returned to "we'll have a barrel of fun". The wood gave way as my feet touched the deck. A splintering crack prevailed over the steel reeds and I broke through, the aged burned boards refusing support.

Beneath the pier, before hitting the water in the broken ring of pilings, I saw a woman waiting, her head and shoulders just breaking the surface. She was enshrouded in barnacles. Upon her head was an ornate structure, a spiral headdress—its tightening curves also encrusted with barnacles and moss. She was keeping vigil and welcomed this plummeting musician. The

many pill bottles bobbed around her like tiny buoys. Time had slowed but I finally and inevitably hit—close enough to feel her rough embrace.

Two weeks passed quickly and I nearly pushed Herald's memorial from my mind due to a new nightly restaurant gig at *Mangiare il Vertice* which had provided a meager but daily income for the last week. My usual round of Italian standards furnished the proper atmosphere for plush red furnishings and murals of gondolas barely visible in the darkened interior. I had sat on a stylized stage ringed by a gold baroque proscenium in the main room. Very few actually listened intently so at times my laziness would creep in, my attention stalled in a trance while the plates of steak and pasta circulated before me.

The night before, Torrence called to remind me of today's ceremony—a performance actually. Jay Falcrow had promised a premiere of an as yet unperformed Aslant piece for pipe organ and had learned to play it. Torrence would speak as would other colleagues. It would take place at the Basilica of the Ascension where the organ was made available at no cost as long as the occasion took place on a weekday.

I began to put on the formal attire I'd habitually wear on a cruise but decided against it. In the spirit of this quixotic composer being honored, I went to a chest of shut-away costumes not worn in years—some never. I had acquired them from a sale at the local opera house, but arriving late, I found that many of the complete costumes had been claimed so only remnants remained. For a tiny fee, I made off with whatever struck my fancy, an improvised grab bag—thrown together as the back doors of the theater were closing.

I had no desire to upstage the dead, but still smarting from the publisher's trick, I wanted to give a sly gesture. I would wear black, of course, but surround it with bright clashing colors.

Suddenly guilty with my attitude of mockery and deceit, I dropped my smile and slumped to a chair. The assembled would be grieving and most likely not in the mood for ironic commentary. After all, Aslant had been a tortured soul, the essence of his misery missed by hoards of admirers, devoted students and critics. Or perhaps slavish admiration itself placed Aslant in the snare of reputation—a hallway of double-edged swords. Even after completing his text, *Musical Knots: Time and Structure in Modern Composition*, I was left with only the bare and lifeless rudiments of a system pretending to be absolute—a sham of commitment to no obvious ends. The knot was extoled, cherished for its tightness, its lack of breathing room. Pitches, rhythms and harmonies connected, overlapped, entwined—nothing more, nothing less—tied up and correct with no loose ends.

But, in practice, I could hear none of it. Aslant's music and its theatrics appeared to lampoon those lofty aspirations. Perhaps the book was a smokescreen to blind the critics to his inspired mischievous whim. Confused, I took off the opera jacket and dressed down to conservative subdued coloring—an inoffensive shadow.

It had been overcast earlier but now streaming light paraded color along the spiralled windows in the crowded Basilica. It would seem all the cultural movers and shakers of Corti had come out for this. I recognized a few notable composers and performers in the assembly and there were a surprising number of video cameras lined up on risers that gave the occasion the air of a sports cast or political rally. The subdued conversation of hundreds formed a hushed murmured river that ebbed and flowed as I searched for a seat.

Torrence McClaine waved his hands to catch my eye. He had a seat near the altar and it looked as though he had saved a place for me.

“Good to see you,” greeted Torrence. “I’m supposed to give the main eulogy and it’s really been an ordeal to get this together even though Jay’s been doing most of the planning. He wanted you to sit here.”

I sat on the firm white seat, one of the original built into the structure, and wondered if any air “levitations” were planned.

“Guess Herald was as popular as his press made him out to be,” I commented.

“Well you know, yes for a contemporary composer he was well known but so many here are just putting in their obligatory appearance. These things have a social function.”

“You’re more cynical than I imagined.”

“It was Herald actually. He had a bad influence on me in that regard. It seemed, toward the end, that he had lost any respect for social ritual.”

I nodded and scanned the chamber. Clara Troubinger, dressed in a loose multi-hued chiffon gown, utterly unlike her business attire, was talking with another woman her age. Clara gestured to me and the other woman followed the gesture in my direction. Jay Falcrow, scurrying attentively around the altar, walked over to the woman and whispered. Clara stood and approached me.

“Hey there. I hope you don’t have any bad feelings about the other day. I was so embarrassed.” The other woman joined her. “This is Noreen, my good friend and Jay is her son.”

“Ah, the publisher of medical texts.” I recalled. “The one who retired.”

“Right. She’s the one who convinced me to give up the business and enjoy life. We’ve been hanging around a lot together.”

Noreen broadly smiled but I didn’t trust her. I assumed she was in on Aslant’s trick along with her son Jay.

“So happy you’re enjoying life.” I spoke with mock sincerity.

Noreen pointed to my gut. “There’s so much to life that escapes us—so much below the surface. For example; your anatomy. Do you really know what’s happening in there?”

Suddenly I felt a rumble in my bowels and recalled the illustrations on Clara’s wall with those bouncing intestines on springs. Noreen nodded knowingly.

“Let us begin.” Jay Falcrow was standing at the altar. The turbulent sea of muttering quieted in anticipation. He paused and studied the crowd as the lights dimmed.

“I’m sure each of us has been touched by Herald Aslant in a different way—some musically, some as friends, some closer. Herald was often an enigma. As student I saw him as a kindly sage who gave me a fresh way of hearing. A quick wit underlined all our exchanges. In a little while I will play a piece that he started when I was a new pupil and as we stayed in touch, the piece grew and began to introduce new themes. And just before his death, he sent me the finished score. But, before you hear it, I’d like to bring up Herald’s closest companion, well known for hosting many concert programs of new music; Torrence McClaine.”

Torrence looked back at me, swallowed and made his way up the shallow polished steps to the pulpit. For someone who had spoken before countless audiences he looked nervous and unsure, his previous striding gait now hesitant, as if testing his balance. Jay patted McClaine’s back, then took a seat to the left of the pulpit. Torrence breathed in deeply but refused to look up as he unfolded a written eulogy.

“The life of a modern composer isn’t easy,” Torrence began reading from his prepared paper. “It is often a solitary pursuit with little reward. I’m sure many in this room understand the heroic pleasures of this pursuit, some as listeners, some as writers. At some point in our lives we discovered this rich vein of art and heedless of others with more mainstream tastes, continued to seek out uniqueness in the world of sound. Herald Aslant was as unique as they come. Over many years, I’ve had the supreme pleasure of ushering his works to the stage and the experience on collaborating with Herald, bringing such music to life was utterly...utterly...”

Torrence faltered as tears welled up and an anger surfaced. His speech changed track, spurred on by a deep irritation, and he looked away from the written text: “Some might say we saw this coming, that Herald’s penchant for irony at all costs was a cover for an insecure man, a man who craved attention for its own sake, someone who had lost his spark years before. Well, I’m here to tell you: Herald was genuine, a loving human being.” Torrence held back crying as he clutched the pulpit. “And every expression he made, every musical gesture, was done with

the craft and sincerity of true commitment!” He paused and eyed the crowd for the first time. Then, his voiced dropped back into the familiar commanding tone of a practiced announcer. “I’m sure this will be abundantly evident now in this piece that Jay will perform, titled *Rousation*. Torrence turned away abruptly and took his seat next to me. I held back a sudden urge to squeeze his arm. But by this time Torrence was stolid and raised folded arms across his chest, waiting for the music.

Jay nodded and approached the organ console. He stopped before sitting at it and turned back toward the crowd. “Herald wasn’t sure about the title actually. For the longest time, it didn’t have one or it was a stupid one like *That’s Life* or something silly like that. But when the final score arrived, it had the title *Rousation* which apparently is a word he made up. Anyway, so now it has an official title. Here goes.”

Sitting at the organ console with its battery of knobs and keyboards, Jay bowed his head and there was an extended pause. Then suddenly the church was shaken with earsplitting chords. I sprang alert, watching Jay’s hands and feet furiously moving like those of an epileptic or possessed voodoo priest. Then, as suddenly as the sonic storm hit, it dissipated, leaving traces of mysterious muted colors as a different bank of pipes sounded. Jay’s hands gracefully floated over the lower keyboard, their watery movement reminded me of squid jetting between undersea rocks. But the reflective pause was short-lived and another series of crashing percussive chords shattered through the temple—as if the deep bass were rockets at liftoff, the Basilica literally ascending off its launching pad into the mighty vacuum of space.

Then, there was only a faint deep rumble, pedals leading only the longest of pipes through a weightless condition. The seats throughout the church began to receive air from hidden channels and the multitudes were pushed upward. I myself felt the lightness, my burdened body lessened from gravity. Of course, I was wise to the trick, yet even in this context the gimmick felt profound as the music carried me up. Then into the empty frame conjured from this extravagant apparatus came a tone so familiar, so intimate as to bring a blush to my face. But where was this coming from? Due to the curved spiral building, sound direction was deceptive. Unmistakably an accordion, the slender reedy tone played a halting melody, like a tune filtered through graceless stuttering recollection. But then, having regained its footing, the melody became groomed and colored, dressed in exotic harmonies. Throughout this passage, Jay Falcrow only pedaled faint low accompaniment. He craned his neck toward the distant radiant ceiling, listening as the accordion tones wafted, held aloft over the rumbling base.

I was as impressed at this duet as I was puzzled. The exchanges between the organ and accordion became animated and capricious—even teasing and mocking at times. Was this a somber serious piece or a rollicking carnival? Then a propulsive rhythm joined both toward a frantic finale—the accordion doing its best cliché, a *bellows shake*, over chromatically

descending thunderous blasts in the organ. And then abruptly, the piece was over, leaving only a faint echo in the cavernous space.

Jay quickly stood as if expecting thunderous applause but was instead greeted with hushed bafflement. I instantly clapped, as it was an impressive performance, but then realized I was alone and stopped. Jay wasn't fazed as he strode toward the altar. He had a broad smile, utterly at odds with the occasion.

"This piece, *Rousation*, originally written as an organ solo for me, was amended to become a duet. And what a lovely duet it is wouldn't you say?"

Puzzled, I turned to Torrence who was clenching his jaw.

Jay continued: "It's almost a celebration, a rowdy party wouldn't you say? Well yes, because I have an announcement for all of you. Our guest of honor is very much alive. It is my rapturous pleasure to introduce my fiancé Herald Aslant!"

Still strapped to his accordion, Herald emerged from behind a side curtain, the creases in his gaunt cheeks distended by a broad grin. He slid his instrument off and onto the altar between two electric candelabras before approaching Jay at the pulpit. Without concealment by the accordion, his scraggy skeletal form was pronounced, despite the formal jacket with padded lapels.

There was a flurried disturbance in the crowd, some expressing open disgust while others motioning for silence. Having been tricked once before, I had an intense resentment watching Herald and Jay embrace. I looked over to Torrence, whose face was pale and utterly in shock. If Aslant were truly a ghost it wouldn't have had more impact as Torrence looked intensely at Herald but seemed incapable of words.

Herald, now alone at the pulpit, raised his arms as if blessing the crowd as he leaned toward the microphone to be heard over the increasing commotion. "I've long wondered if music, serious music, is dead." Herald's booming words hushed the crowd. "After all, look at concert attendance, record sales, etcetera. You've heard the statistics. And look at each other—we're getting old. How many young people do you see at modern music concerts who aren't music students? How many new music composers are interviewed on cultural radio programs? Rock musicians, rap musicians, yes. But experimental music or modern classical—nothing." Herald paced the floor a bit before returning to the pulpit. "Hey, I played the game all my life. I wrote a highly regarded book about knots. Yes sir; that sure greased those intellectual wheels. All that somber talk about tight structure." Herald spread a wide grin. "Hey, bet I fooled you. Actually, hold on." Herald waved his hands. "There are a few out there who are dedicated and sincere and who aren't out to storm the academy. We have one in our presence right now. And though so many of you are disappointed this isn't a funeral, perhaps some might understand that this is the first "Herald Aslant Award for Composition Excellence." Now, some of you know that my very

first instrument was the accordion and that the bellowed beast is very close to my heart. And so, the award goes to accordionist Randall Heast for his solo *Quondam!* Randall, come on up.”

It was a swirl of confusion as I stood reluctantly but could go no further. I was rooted in the spot, paralyzed by conflicting feelings. Jay Falcrow grabbed my arm and nearly pulled me to join Herald at the pulpit.

From a concealed shelf within the pulpit, Herald removed a trophy—a bronze-colored “Turk’s Head” knot mounted on a polished walnut base with an engraved plaque spelling “Randall Heast” and followed by “Aslant Award for Composition Excellence.” Compelled by ceremonial obligation, I took the prize and looked out dazed over the turbulent din. Here I was, recognized yet only part of a hoax. Speechless and deeply embarrassed, I nervously clutched the award.

“Hey there fans!” Herald hogged the microphone. “We can love composers for working against all odds, poring over every little pitch and getting the inflections perfect—and Randall Heast typifies this earnest pursuit. By day he’s sleepwalking through the standards to make a living but by night he’s carefully constructing serious new music for a mostly unthankful world. I honor that pursuit and hope it brings him a tiny bit of satisfaction. But for me, I wanted out of that world—but every strategy I tried was met with acceptance. Some critics saw through it but many in the academic world just embraced me even more. So out of desperation, I decided to die as Herald Aslant, to give someone else a chance who still has a sincere drive, who feels there is something new worth saying. From where I’ve come to stand, there’s just too much damn music out there. We just need to remix what we have—give it a beat and have fun.” Herald pulled a fleece half mask from his pocket. “This is *au revoir* to serious music, hello to the Sheep Suit Serenader! After our honeymoon, Jay and I might catch you on the dance floor!” Herald slid the mask over his face and, startled by recognition of the DJ seen in the club, I awkwardly fumbled his prize. Falling from my fingers, the knot trophy crashed to the white marble floor and shattered—revealing itself to be made of cheap painted plaster.

Torrence McClaine could not contain himself any longer. He stood defiantly, his anger belching forth like an indigestible appetizer. “SCREW YOU!”

The crowd turned toward Torrence who seemed as caught off guard by his outburst as any. He snapped back: “You are insulting and demeaning to all your friends and those who championed your achievements! This was a sincere occasion of genuine mourning. You exploited our grief. How dare you!”

Torrence’s words seemed to stir the assembled. My anger at being tricked twice began to surface and I violently kicked the shattered trophy.

Jay and Herald had already moved back from the pulpit, waving to the congregation, and, as if boarding a bus or airliner, disappeared through the organ loft hatch in the side wall. In pursuit,

Torrence lunged forward and flung open the closed hatch. Spurred on by Torrence's righteous wrath, I followed into the interior of the organ.

By the time I made it through the hatch, Herald and Jay were pulling up a secreted aluminum ladder, blocking Torrence from easy pursuit. They had obviously prepared to make a speedy escape, curiously pulled earplugs from their pockets and inserted them.

Torrence, who knew the massive organ well, ran to a permanent wooden ladder on the wall to his left. Following behind, I could see that Torrence wanted to make the catwalk leading to where Herald and Jay had climbed. The dense forest of pipes camouflaged their escape path.

"They're headed to the fire escape," shouted Torrence as he pulled himself from the ladder onto the metal catwalk.

When I was about 20 feet up the ladder, a shrieking dissonant chord cut through the chamber from the highest pitch of nearby conical bell shaped trumpet pipes. It was indubitably planned, this sudden deafening onslaught. In pain, I clamped hands to my ears and, forfeiting my grasp, fell to the boards below.

Randall was putting the final chapter into his diary. A generous interest from a major magazine that had never before paid the slightest attention to "Modern Classical" had offered a handsome advance for his memoir and he had tried to be as descriptive as possible, even to including concurrent dreams and visions. They had told him to be honest and include any ideas and images that related to Aslant. So he laid it out, even with the confusion he felt. He thought long and hard about why his life and Herald's became entwined, now feeling that it was Jay Falcrow's influence that brought out the worst of Herald's cynicism with the "new music" world. His friends of long before, as was Torrence McClaine, were callously discarded as shackles from a former restrained life. I massaged my wrist where the sheep stamp from my dream still seemed traceable in smudged discolorations.

Tinnitus was now a constant presence since Randall's fall in the organ loft—a piercing shrill wail over the muffled outside world. His doctors felt there was an encroaching deafness. Still, he managed to hear his phone ring.

"You'll have to speak up and maybe repeat yourself. My hearing isn't too good anymore." Randall warned the caller. It was a woman's voice on the phone. He turned up the volume to maximum. His third week in a shoulder sling was still riddled with random painful shocks but he managed to cup the phone solidly to his ears.

"I said the *Après Coup* is back. I got in yesterday. Missed you."

Randall heard enough to recognize the voice “Missed you too, Via.” “Could you repeat the rest of what you said?”

The voice repeated, louder: “The cruise ship is back in port.”

“Oh, okay. Great.” He struggled for comfort on the lumpy mattress. “Glad you made it back safe.”

“Of course. Why would you think otherwise?”

“A vivid dream. That’s all.”

“On board, I actually got a few questions about the missing accordionist.”

“Missing? You said missing?” Randall wasn’t sure he heard correctly. “So, what’s this about a murder?” Via inquired. “At the dock, I heard your name mentioned and last night read some news reports.”

The word shot through Randall’s stifled ears. “No, no. I didn’t murder anyone. There was a guy I knew who fell off a catwalk inside a pipe organ. He landed on a conical pipe and was impaled through his heart. I don’t think he was pushed, I don’t know. I was there too but got lucky on landing—just a broken collarbone. Hurt like hell though and my ears paid the price. Didn’t see the man fall.”

“So what were you doing inside a pipe organ?”

Randall halted and wondered that himself. After the lengthy spate of writing, he wanted a break from rehash. He knew Via had her own stories to tell about the voyage, the passengers, the scenery, the weather. He needed her and her stories more than she needed his travails, so he withheld the details of how Herald and Jay were released after being captured escaping the cathedral. Randall had some luck too, what with his part in the scandal, which had been video documented by several at the cathedral and made international news. His *Quondam* piece was set for several performances with the world’s leading accordionists. Advance income from these performances and the magazine meant he could take a break from the restaurant and cruise liner gigs. He could even pay back his brother.

And yet, a deep isolation gripped Randall—that he had been merely a passive pawn in the deadly hoax and that these fleeting attentions were unwarranted. The late Torrence McClaine’s grief-stricken face continued to haunt him. McClaine’s trust and commitment was his downfall. Aslant had become something deceitful and foul. He and Jay were now underground celebrities of course, their all-night dance parties were packed with stoned rollers who now had an intellectual excuse for their pastime. After all, Aslant had been a highly regarded academic who now spurned his scholarly past. What better person to lead the trance addicts into swaddled oblivion. But all this was just too much for a phone conversation. She could read all about it later if she hadn’t already.

“You know, I felt rejected when you didn’t come aboard, and no calls.” Via feigned anger. “I had been counting on some banter to pass the time, and some good accordion music of course.”

“Ah, that sappy stuff I played. You’re kidding.”

“Well, I liked it. You must’ve known—come on.” Via was effusive. “You always played with panache. In fact, I called to invite you to a club in town where the musicians play the old standards. My treat, okay? There’s even an accordionist I met on the street who gigs there regularly. It’s the least you could do for standing me up.”

“Okay, sure. Sounds like fun.” Randall reluctantly acknowledged her admiration. After all, he did practice for years on that material.

“Now what’s this about a dream? Was I in it?”

There was a pause. Did Randall imagine her voice having more affection than ever before, that the expanding pause was actually an intimate approach? He had never expected anything more than a kind flirtatious smile from her. After a moment, Randall decided to break the awkward spell and report the vision that woke him in a cold sweat.

“I had this sense that the cruise ship had sunk because last night I dreamt it. It was dark and there was the hulk of the ship, listing a bit in jet black water, its lights shimmering on the surface. It had hit some massive sunken object. There were many lifeboats of different sizes floating silently. The water was pretty still and oddly calm. The boats were small and there was just one person in each boat—very peculiar. Some of the boats were like inflatable pool toys—you know—completely ridiculous in the open ocean. I was also in a lifeboat alone, but a real wooden boat, but still small.”

“Was I there?” asked Via, then more loudly “What about me?”

“I was searching for you but it was so dark and most in the boats appeared as shadows or silhouettes. I knew you were there too. We were all...we were all there. Intuitively, it seemed I knew many of the people; my brother, my parents, close friends. But everyone was quiet and expectant though it didn’t seem anyone was coming to rescue us. There was this composer, Herald Aslant, who was also by himself floating nearby in another small dinghy. In the dream, it didn’t occur to me that Herald and I were not on that voyage but somehow we and everyone else had got caught up in the shipwreck. There were these women, or female beings anyway, who emerged from the water with barnacle-covered faces and odd headdresses like spiral shells festooned with candles that burned even when wet. These barnacle entities, their heads peering from the water, were studying the boats. They noticed me and silently came over. Then my dinghy started rocking with a repeated and lulling motion. I still remember the insistent rhythm of the lapping water against the hull as they rocked my boat—it put me into a trance. But some

of the water splashed inside and I then realized I was naked as the icy cold stung my skin. They silently and without warning tipped the boat over and I fell into the chilly deep.”

A loud pause ensued. “And that’s when you woke up?” asked Via. “And that’s when you woke up?” she slowly repeated, louder and clearer—unanswered.

Randall had put down the phone because of two loud knocks at his front door, followed by it slowly opening. There, in silhouette, stood a man wearing a dark cloak. He spoke in a low and cracked voice: “I’m so sorry about Torrence. That wasn’t supposed to happen. It was meant to be an escape, not a killing. At first it seemed like so much fun but…”

Randall clicked on the light in the hall. The man was Herald Aslant. Tears were streaming down his rueful face with an expression that aged his deep-etched features in shadow from the overhead light. “You have every right to hate me. It must feel horrible to be played with in someone else’s game.” Aslant began to enter the hall but stopped short. He extended an object. “You deserve this for all you went through.” And, after a sustained pause, “I love the accordion.”

The object was the award presented at the memorial, the one Randall had dropped to the ground. Now fastidiously restored with glue, the plaster knot was whole again, though its cracks still obvious.