

Zoltán PÉK
Two stories

The Sound That Climbs Up Walls

I hold the line. Your voice, the echo of your voice receding, tiny pale sails fluttering away to oblivion. My exasperation is in full swing, I want to hold on to that voice, to grab it with both hands, push it to the wall that had seen too much, and make it mine. You mine. But I cannot hold you, only the line.

“Scuze me.” I ambushed her after school. Then she still could go to classes. I waited for her to pass by me, then called after her. “You dropped this.”

A small blue scarf.

“Me? No, it’s not mine.”

“No, not now, but it was yours. In a previous life.”

That made her look up. She was already so thin you could almost see through her, which gave her a shimmering quality. She was a mirage on its day out.

“And you’re only bringing it to me now? What took you so long?”

“Sorry, I was delayed,” I said, holding out my hand. “It turns out that Einstein’s theorem about curved space does not quite entirely hold up.”

She reached out, slowly, her eyes fixed on the scarf, as if we were two astronauts in space and each movement needed to be carefully proportionate to the universe because the smallest mistake could send her spinning into the void.

With two fingers, she plucked it from my hand. The silence of the space-suit suddenly cracked and the street-noise rushed at us.

“Mm,” she pursed her lips, looking up at me with black-hole eyes, “wasn’t it red then?”

You’re pretending it’s nothing but I know better. You’ve covered the mouthpiece yet I can still hear something. There’s a soft buzz in the line. It creeps in to fill the lack, the imprint of your voice. A low continuous tone, a soothing breeze of electricity rattling the tree of my consciousness.

She was most curious about the music, of course I had known that, but what I had no inkling of was her intensity. Like at a crash course, she ran through the styles in fast forward, seemed to absorb everything; the music poured into her, splashing and rumbling and roaring, and still she wanted more. Lived off it. She liked jazz best of all, and when I understood that this was a genuine interest, I gladly took on the role of the guide

taking her to clubs

listening to music that strived to charm her with obscene polyrhythms and augmented chords

letting her pump herself full of smoke, beer-smell and husky laughter

watching her as she dove into stale pools of late-night gigs and first-night kisses

studying her fingers, the unreadable palm of a clay empress fluttering around the rhythm in an exasperated chase

(I took that hand on the third date. So light and smooth. Like a glove, half-inflated, the air slowly escaping.

She laughed as I cradled her hand, and her laughter was alive, a band of white mice scurrying away under the seats.

“What?” I said, embarrassed like hell.

“I don’t bruise so easily.”)

What was more shocking was that she fell for free jazz. Me, I could hardly stand it even after a decade of listening. Niki was born to be free. It was no pretension, she didn’t try to

impress me – the other way around, if anything; her body simply sponged up the maelstrom of sound; the shrieking of sax lit up her smile, the atonal chords of the piano passed on over her face like lumbering shadows, monsters of grace.

“Actually, free jazz is a misnomer. All jazz is free to some extent, since this is what fills it with life. Or, looking at it from the other side, free jazz has its rules too.”

“Please continue, Maestro Atonal.”

“I’m glad you’ve brought it up, it’s a good example. Usually free jazz has a tonality, at least in the beginning...”

“Um, tonality? You lost me.”

“Tonality, a certain key, you know, like G major.”

“Oh, you found me again.”

“So there’s this key since you can’t just jump into nothing. First you lay down the foundation, a key, and you start circling around it. Like this.”

“Oh, this feels good. I’m all ears, Professor Noteworthy.”

“Beside the key, the rhythm is also of utmost importance.”

“Can we make it faster?”

“Of course. The rhythm should always be considered another factor”

“Oh yes...”

Her lips tasted like medicine. The ultimate cure for life.

I hold the line. Hear a drum rolling some distance away, my mimetic execution. Life at stake. My life is burning at the stake, while you, Princess Aneurism, My Lady of Infected Needles, are watching from your window, behind the curtain of ripped-out hearts.

“You’re a fucking pervert, are you aware of that?”

This was a woman’s voice. It had the unmistakable, harsh ring of parenthood, the smell of vigilant nights and morning sicknesses, the undertone of compromises and defeats. You could hear in it the attitude of a young mother who, blinded by the miracle of birth, thought the world was a possible candidate for salvation. A woman’s voice. Lilla’s voice.

I know Lilla from [university] school. She told me about Niki and the cancer. The little time she had. The family on the brink of disintegration. The parents who had given up and Niki who had accepted. There’s a world of difference there.

Truth be told, I expected this call sooner.

“You’re a fucking pervert, are you aware of that?”

“Why?”

“Why? Why?! She’s dying that’s why!”

“I don’t care. She doesn’t care. Why do you care?”

“Of course I care. She’s my cousin. She’s family. What do you want from her?”

“Want? Are you enquiring about my intentions?”

“Don’t smart-ass me. Does she know that you know?”

“No.”

“Jesus.”

“It feels good to be with her. And it makes her forget... you know.”

“How could she forget?”

“Would it be better for her to stay at home and brood? To listen to her parents who are already mourning? She’s very strong and curious and...”

“Do you love her?”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“If you don’t love her...”

“Then what? I can fake it in the short run. It’s not like she’s going to live long enough to find it out.”

“You fucking bastard.”

“Because I am not lamenting over her? 'Cause I'm not burying her in advance?”

“You can't keep her alive!”

“Who says I want to? Maybe I want to die with her.”

We both know this might be true. She was my confidante on previous occasions, knows my tendency to depression and stuff. Now she was crying.

“Why do you do this to me?”

“Sorry but it's not about you.”

Her past tense fury is wiped out by the noise that gets louder and louder, sucking up the meaning, your voice, drowning her voice in my head. Now I hear the rattling of the waste-bins you made music on one night. Coming from the movies or a club. The night hanging between the houses in shreds like winter-coats on rows of gallows.

“Wish I had learned music,” she said.

“Which instrument?”

“Any. Doesn't matter. Just to be able to play. Making noise in this world.”

“You can make noise.”

“Yeah?... Oh no, real noise. Music-noise.”

“According to ancient Greek philosophers, the universe itself is music. It permeates everything, it's the matrix of the universe. Thus we can say that everything is an instrument of music... Come with me.”

I dragged her into a doorway. The heavy, battered wooden door was ajar, but it required a good deal of strength to push it a little further, and I laid my body against it like a pagan lover.

We found an inner courtyard there with a big tree darkening one corner, and a broken-up cement circle beneath it. And yes, by the wall there stood three trashcans. Not the modern plastic ones, but the old kind made of tin. They were born to clamor. The closest had its lid askew, mouthing a dark and smelly scream.

“Go,” I said.

“What?”

Her eyes: two fish of amazement in the pool of her face.

“Do it. Make noise.”

The fish jumped with joy, water rippled.

“Want help? Should I start?”

But she was already moving. Went to the bin. Halted, waiting, hands in mid-air. A snapshot of a somersault into curiosity.

Then she broke the spell, grabbed the lid, raised it above her head and brought it down. Series of straight, small vectors; connect the lines, and you got the figure: nebula Blow Me in the constellation Go Fuck Yourself.

The tin bin crashed with a mighty sound that ran high up the walls. The night seemed to be caving in, the building tumbling down, shadows torn asunder. We should've fled but didn't. At least I think we didn't. Honestly have no recollection.

I remember being there in the middle of something that must have been an apocalyptic din but felt like that half-step in C minor seven.

I remember surrendering to the sound.

I remember her, an apparition of a conductor, slamming the lid again and again, and all the while the world was turning to noise.

I hold the line. The receiver is white as white as the room that was all movement, tubes pumping, liquids dripping, screens flickering with numbers, water circulating in the heater, only

you lay motionless, as if trying to outdo inanimate things. A modern installation: dying-in-progress, a slow letting-go of life.

“Hey.”

“You’re a darling to do this for me.”

“Hm?”

“You know,” I went to her and said confidentially, “I’ll steal a nurse’s uniform for you. I always had this fantasy about a nurse and a patient...”

She sort of smiled. Like a wound opening, a bled-out gap.

“I didn’t want you to see me like this.”

“Like what? In your pajamas? To tell you the dirty truth, it sort of lingered in my head all along.”

“You pig.”

“Mm. Yesterday I was a pigeon. But that’s OK, I don’t mind, I can be any animal you like.”

“Then be my dragon...and take me away...”

“OK. But first let me be the doctor and you the patient, and I’ve come to examine you from head to toe. Role-playing is an important tool in terms of getting to know thyself better...”

She drifted away. It was the medicine, or else she was so spaced out. The smile froze over her lips, tentative ice on a shallow brook.

And then I heard that uncanny, creaky sound. There was a golden crucifix on the bedside table. I looked at it closely. It was Jesus, he made that horrid sound, fidgeting on the cross, squirming this way and that. But he couldn’t get free, the bastard. The nails held. Then he looked up at me, and gave me the finger.

You never got better. A tube was implanted in your brain to drain the liquid that was trying to squash it. Had to quit school, abandon going out altogether. Me. They said you needed to rest. To get used to it. They didn’t know you had gotten used to it a long time ago.

So we talk on the phone. At first I called but she slept quite a lot and randomly, so then she called me when – in all senses – felt like it. I didn’t want to miss any calls, so I took leave of absence from school. I hung around the phone, turned up the volume, and jumped whenever it rang. Told my friends that I’d be out of town so they wouldn’t call. I lived for the sound of the phone ringing. And while waiting, I tried to collect topics, thoughts and memories I wanted to share with her, to store up as many things as possible. I had to cram thirty-odd years in these intervals of existence.

Sometimes just about nothing.

“I don’t hear music.”

“I’m not listening to anything.”

“How’s that possible?”

“You’re the only sound I ever need to hear.”

And she is getting worse and worse. Her voice has congealed to a blob of sound, I can hardly make it out; the pauses grew longer. This was killing me even more. We were in touch and at the same time we weren’t. Her speech became all the more incoherent, forgot words, phonemes and sounds disappeared, crashed. No mitigating circumstances now. My lust was decomposing us. This was what I had orchestrated, my sin-phony. As in a cartoon when the cat breaks into a thousand pieces, she was disintegrating, and I desperately tried to catch the ricocheting pieces.

Her mother called to ask the ultimate favor. The one I couldn’t provide.

“Please don’t call her.”

I could picture her sitting by the phone, her body bent into one big question mark pertaining not the why or how but the when only.

“She calls me.”

“Tell her that you don’t want to talk to her. That you can’t bear...”

“I’ll tell her no such thing. I need her.”

“You’re as obstinate as she is...” Her voice was frayed by fatigue, hopelessness and certainty. “Please understand. She’s got so little strength left. And she practically doesn’t talk to us anymore, she’s saving her voice for you.”

“Do you think it is better for her if I push her away now? Would that make her turn to you?”

“She doesn’t even pray.”

So that was what it was all about. She not only turned away from her family, but God as well. I recalled the crucifix in the white room, and now I gave Him the finger. Cause He is supposed to see it anywhere, isn’t He?

And what else does He see?

You losing weight.

You losing consciousness.

You fumbling for the opium button.

You groping for meaning.

You gasping for air. Through the line, through hundreds of meters of earth and dirt, through listless brick-walls, through your translucent skin, your disintegrating bones and vaporizing blood, through the sweet distance from your hand to your mouth—I can hear the rasping sound, the friction of air in your throat. Spasmodic waves whoosh out, a fallout of existence, and I don’t run for cover, just breath in what you can give, basking in the psychic pollution.

I hold the line.

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Nine Beautiful Things

For Krisztina

Although the Krishna guy didn’t actually say anything when she turned him down, his eyes, pale and cold like a Pepsi bottle label bleached by rain, promised a karmic mudslide worse than eternal damnation. She didn’t take it to heart. She had been down that road many times before. The familiar path that lay in front of her like a blind but faithful dog.

She was on her way to work, crammed on the bus among the commuters-in-misfortune, shutting down her mind as always so as to fan away the something smelling of bad breath and just-awakened armpits but was, really, the cologne of desperation and tiredness. Eyes closed, hands holding on to the pole damp with somebody else’s sleepiness, she tried hard to keep her mind vacuum--sealed.

Then she felt the cell-phone vibrate in her purse. She fished it out. Then message was a number only: 9. Sender unknown. Her first reaction was to look around to see if somebody was joking but she saw no one familiar. Of course, given her height she could hardly see anything in the mass of backs and shoulders.

Again, she looked at the message, must be a wrong number, and put the phone back. As she raised her head, her ear, like that of a swimmer, got plugged and bobbed up into the flow of a strong, husky voice immediately behind her:

“...Very simple. I’ll tell you. Nine beautiful things. That’s it. You only have to find nine beautiful things and stick to them for one month. But you have to be careful picking those nine things. You have to believe in them. This is crucial. First you choose nine beautiful things, then, say from the following morning, you keep them in mind whatever you do and wherever you go. They shouldn’t distract you, though, can’t be obstacles. You should just make them part of your

daily routine. Be alert for the nine beautiful things, and little by little they elevate you, lift you to a new and higher state of awareness. You'll be happier, more content with the world. If you follow this method, you can achieve whatever you want."

At the next stop she let the crowd push her off, and then she needed to grab a lamppost because her legs trembled and there was a faint but definitely sick feeling in her stomach. For a moment she thought she was pregnant but that just wasn't possible. Because. Biological reasons. Must be something else.

She looked at herself in the window of the travel agency. Her blouse was a blur, a monstrous black-eye, her skirt a faded flag of some uninviting country. Deliberately she ignored her face and instead looked beyond the glass, past the posters for last minute trips to Greece, her favorite-favorite place, and could make out--or so she thought--her colleagues; shapes moving, ghosts of pure malice, products of genetic cross-breeding between the mean and the meaningless. They themselves did not have the strength to be cruel with her; it came to them naturally and continuously, making each of her days an eternity in Hell.

She just had to go in. One two three steps, that was

the plan

it wasn't much of a plan, she just started walking. Couldn't sit, needed to keep going as if the sense of motion, the constant vibration, the shifting of space would somehow make it -- this state of hers -- momentary, illusory even and, most of all, pregnant with possibilities. Anything could happen since this was the moment in the making. Her thoughts fluttered, unwilling to settle down on their perch, giving themselves over to excitement and expectation; pigeons clamoring in an empty square.

This wasn't a state, because it was not stationary. This wasn't a mood, in the sense of good or bad humor; on the contrary, this was moodlessness, or more properly, the middle phase in the arc of a mood-swing which would never reach the outer points. In this way, that is, being on the way, she was granted an interval of freedom; freedom from worry, anxiety and guilt. There would be time for all that, but not now--now she was just a drifting body, an area of consciousness, floating on and pushed by gentle gusts of coincidence and whim.

In this game of self-effacement, turning corners was critical. The edges could hurt you and the unforeseeable lurked behind them. From her experience she figured that people tended to take the middle course so she could easily avoid them. The outer orbit was a lot safer, as it were only the distracted who hurried at the curb. The space of velocity. Turning corners alongside a wall was, however, a question of inner strength. You could literally bump into others, make physical contact, which was most of the time embarrassing, though she had also had some electrifying experiences. For example, she had once collided with an older man and felt her self dissolve into a shower of sparks as their auras clashed.

What she found was that there were laws; the moment you abandoned one set of rules was the moment you drifted into another. She didn't mind that, after a time. It was interesting to experiment with the different pulls of these force-fields.

Meanwhile, her senses remained operational, receiving, decoding and recording the signals of the world on their own. These pictures and sensations were imprinted on her, and she remembered them only later on. No, it was not that she recalled them--rather they re-called her, or called upon her at the most inconvenient moments. They came in flashes, tiny pinpricks that made her freeze in mid-step; memory injections with an immediate but evanescent effect. So, the pictures: three dogs around a fountain, not your usual stray uglies but really beautiful creatures with stately postures in front of the baroque backdrop of the bubbling water. A man at the traffic lights speaking into the air, "I'm broken, don't break me". Her ex-boyfriend, coming out of a shop with a crying baby. In one neighborhood she ran into the sound of a woman wailing, and the cry stuck to her like gossamer until

the next corner

she ran into a compact, murmuring mob. In the middle of the human circle a man was lying on the sidewalk. He looked all right, at a cursory glance at least; neat clothes, no sign of injury at all. He lay sideways with his right arm under his head, his eyes open looking at the forest of feet around him. He seemed calm and composed, which in turn frustrated the crowd even more.

“What’s he doing down there?”

“I don’t know, just got here myself.”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? What do you mean, nothing?”

“He’s just lying down. I saw the whole thing. I was shopping across the street at that new store, there’s a sale you know, I bought this blouse there yesterday and came back...”

“Nice blouse.”

“Thank you. That’s why I wanted to come back. So there I was, and I looked up and saw...”

“Yes? Yes?”

“He just stood here. People were rushing all around, well, it’s Thursday morning after all, and he was in the way. And then he simply lay down.”

“Did someone push him?”

“No.”

“Sick?”

“No, he just lay down. As if taking a nap or something.”

A policeman appeared. The mob hushed, all attention focused on The Man.

“Sir?”

“Yes.”

“Sir, why are you lying there? Are you hurt?”

“No.”

“So you are not hurt. Not sick? Nothing wrong?”

“Not really, no.”

“Then would you get up, please?”

“Why?”

“You cannot lie here.”

“Why not?”

“You are bothering people.”

“I didn’t ask them to stand around.”

“I have to ask you to get up, sir. We don’t want any trouble, sir, so—”

He didn’t look distraught, just sad. Or preoccupied, rather; maybe searching for his beautiful thing, while the mob stood around and watched him groping for

the truth

was she was tired of being continuously out of place. This day, this year had been a mess, a series of blind turns into all the wrong alleys. Needing something to hold on to, she realized that, yet struggled against it. To have something meant to depend on it, and the thought itself suffocated her. She wanted to have somebody, of course, but on her own terms, and looking at the man next to the puddle she understood that she didn’t know what these terms were.

The man was sitting on the just-watered lawn, next to a small puddle. Obviously, he didn’t mind the grass being wet and cold. Didn’t even notice it, he was so immersed in what he was doing, and what he was doing was making mudballs. Scooped up a good handful of mud from out of the puddle, and kneaded it with both hands into a ball the size of a child’s fist. It was slow and scrupulous work, craftsmanship really; he rolled the mud over and over between his palms, clockwise and back, smoothing its creases into spherical immaculateness, holding up the ball into

the light over and over again so as to check it, as God must have done with Earth before hurdling it off.

After an eternity, after endless polishing and re-polishing, he carefully put down the mudball beside him. She could see... nine mudballs! Truth be told, there were only eight, but she saw what she wanted to see. So much for signs.

What amazed her was his composure. A homeless could have—should have—done a hundred other, saner things but he was making mudballs. Enjoying it. She wondered what he'd do with them. Throw them at a target? Crush them underfoot? But that was the point. For him, it didn't matter. He was in the moment, completely and unashamedly in the flesh.

His time clocked in a different rhythm, or even in a different direction, as if this urban pre-historic pottery was not robbing him of time; on the contrary, each new ball contained more time, was a globe of moments to be shaken up at will, like one can do with those glass paperweights.

And while he was gaining time, she ate up hers, losing in one day her job and all the confidence she had carefully shelved away since the break-up. And the worst was still before her: she had to tell her mom, who would take it as a confirmation of her conviction that her daughter's life had inevitably and ultimately derailed. Isn't that a kind of balance, though, this creating and losing of time? What if it was her role to maintain the balance? Somebody had to lose, after all.

She had to get out. Out of this day, out of this city. Go somewhere, begin again. But how? She remembered the message: 9. Some sort of a guidance Nine lives? Nine horsemen of the apocalypse? Nine lovers with trampled hearts? Nine fine rhymes? She fished out her cell-phone and started to go through the names. God, this was one long list. She never thought she'd need so many people. All the tall and short, blond and brown people; people with attitude and malice; people with good hearts. She dialed the ninth number.

"Tell me a beautiful thing."

"Hi. A what?"

She could see that the deterioration of friendships was going to be inevitable. Ildikó and she had been close friends for some thirty years now, and though they both considered their connection important, at least she hoped so, new people and new relationships slowly but inexorably pried them apart.

"A beautiful thing."

"What's this about? Listen, I got loads of work here..."

"I quit."

"What? How?"

"I just didn't go in. I quit."

"But why?"

"Why? Didn't I tell you yesterday?"

"And didn't I tell you to try to hold on? A little longer at least."

"Well I couldn't."

"But you have no money. No plan. You need this job."

"You know this isn't the kind of stuff I can take right now. I'll get it soon enough from everyone."

"What do you expect from me then? To pat you on the back and say, 'What a great decision, girl?' I can't do that. I'm your friend. I tell you the truth."

"And what if I don't want the truth?"

"You don't, do you? Then what do you want?"

Nine beautiful things, she thought but did not say. Hung up.

The man on the grass was working on a new mudball, attending to the furrows of the world

with aching care

the bus lumbered away,
and the few people left dispersed right away, as if feeling something in the air.

She had known the street to be flat but now it seemed to be slanting. No, it wasn't the street; it was the sky, it pushed down, pressed on her like an over-weight yet tender lover.

She could see the overpass, the critical part of the journey. Not that anything ever happened, but her father used to scare her with it, trying to make her not to stay out late. The streetlights couldn't penetrate the mass of concrete and blackness, and sometimes the homeless took shelter there. Now it looked all right.

She was aware of being alone, and she didn't care. Yes, this used to drive Dad mad. A girl who wasn't afraid.

The sound of her steps fell away, with an absent undertone.

And then she saw him.

A man stood in the shadow by the wall. Something about him. He was waiting. Not a homeless, though she couldn't see him clearly. For a moment she recalled the Krishna guy, but this one wasn't a man of belief. A figure of darkness and cold.

Her heart leapt up in her throat, her ears shut dead. Just don't look at him. Go ahead. He doesn't move. He's waiting.

I was waiting.

He's not waiting for you.

I wasn't waiting for her.

She stared ahead into the overpass, straining her eyes not to move. The edges of her field of vision began to waver, the houses blurred shapes in a drizzle of neon-pollen.

He was looking at you.

I was looking at her. Instead of doing what I had to. I was there to grab the child and take him to the place with no windows, and to do this with speed and without words. But there I stood, looking at her, me, a brute struck down by wonder, one who let the child go because of the fleeting sight of this girl who already disappeared under the overpass, dissolving
in the darkness

the columns
looked distorted, curved as if seen through a fish-eye lens, pillars of a colonnade leading to an *agora*, where the public gathers and debates, and where, for the first time in her life, she was ready to stand up and speak, like the others, the confident ones, to speak for her vision of life, for the choosing of paths, for loss, despair and guilt, and about the Nine Beautiful Things.
