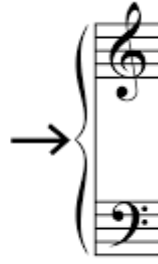


J ohnso N



And

Beethoven

(play it again, Wolfie!)

By

Dirk van Nouhuys

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...Dirk van Nouhuys', "Johnson and Beethoven," is a story that is able to languish in loss and creativity. My knowledge of musical lore is quite limited, so I will do my best to compound the littleout the a lot that could pull from the depths. Our author may very well correct me, but I'm going to go out on a limb. Our, "Johnson," is New Orleans native Alonzo "Lonnie" Johnson and Beethoven is, well, Beethoven. Somewhereat the Waiting for Godot version of The Crossroads, infamous for where one can make a deal with the Devil, those two interact with their shared experiences through loss, love, and music. What I think stands about this piece the most for me is the way in which van Nouhuys takes an emotional control of these musical heroes of our musical history and humanizes them. Talented men that they are, they are still just men. The expression of their lives through music is what draws audience members then and still does now. Their humanity, although at times they may never have been seen as a human, make them the rich characters that van Nouhuys has crafted here for you to read. There is lyricism in this prose. There is good work to be read within. Enjoy.*

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language...)

Dimly visible is a boxy piano, with a small keyboard recessed in it, a rough wood floor, windows with small panes revealing only the night, a few chairs, and a stove. The scent of a coal fire hangs in this room, but no fire shows. Without making any kind of light the child tiptoes to the piano, lifts the keyboard cover, and begins to play very quietly. The soft notes penetrate the darkness. They are not a song, but spiky motifs successively exploring time.

Johnson and Beethoven

A crossroad waited in moonless darkness. Starlight faintly exposed the dirt roads but quickly failed in the surrounding woods. The still music of night owned the air. A figure slumped on a stump where the two roads met. He could hear leaves drop. Creatures feeding, or hiding from the soundless flight of owls, rustled in the moist debris at the base of the trees. A lone mockingbird's occasional song told tales of daytime birds. It was timeless, not without duration, with duration, but without the distinction between past and future.

From time to time he shifted and made a scratching sound in the sandy soil at his feet. He was hunched, fearful. The moon had not risen, but the horizon was beginning to lighten. Something was lying across his lap. He was waiting for midnight but did not know the time.

The jerky cry of a nightjar shrilled through the warm air. A distant, muffled, periodic sound approached. Some one was coming up the road, someone short and bulky who crunched on the sandy road and hummed, half howling, off key. The figure on the stump straightened anxiously and glanced longingly toward the sound. In the lightening night you could see he was a thin black man in a suit jacket, a white shirt, and a snap-brim hat. It was a guitar lying across his thighs. The approaching figure wore a battered Abe Lincoln hat and a voluminous, old-fashioned overcoat that reached almost to his ankles from which baggy pants emerged. He strode forward with his hands clenched behind his back. The collar of the overcoat was turned up despite the warm night, and from the gap between hat brim and collar a large nose and mistrustful eyes spied out the path. When he reached the crossroads the slight man rose from the stump and held out the guitar; he was trembling. The bulky man ceased his humming and opened his collar to disclose a large head and wild, bushy gray hair. He was a white man. He gestured aside the guitar with his left hand and embraced the slight man in a bear hug. The slight man felt his strength and moaned plaintively like a baby. The bulky stranger grunted sharply.

The slight man felt the strength of the stranger's mind settle into his own. He saw the late afternoon of a yellow-light day in a small town. In the picture he saw himself as if a friend were telling him a story about himself. *He is dressed in tattered work clothes*

and stands on a sidewalk playing his guitar. The sidewalk is worn planks about 6 inches above a dusty street. Wads of gray cloud wrinkle the yellowish sky and gusts of wind from one direction and then another blow up the dust. He hunches his shoulders, keeps his eyes on the ground while his fingers fumble impatiently at the strings. He remembered how the music frustrated him, alternatively bombastic and plaintive, always awkward, never the music he could hear in his head. Nevertheless four nappy-headed boys, a twisted old man who seems carved out of a dark wood and two girls in plain cotton dresses, one with a red rag across her forehead, are gathered to listen. They are healthy girls, with sturdy legs and upstanding bosoms, the kind that might find a way to take him in. The one with the red rag on her head is gazing at the musician with her jaw hanging open and her arms slack at her sides, more in surprise than invitation, while the other one has her weight on one leg like him and is tapping her free foot. A few coins he has scattered for bait lie still on the worn plank sidewalk.

A second guitarist walks up to the group and listens with stooped thoughtfulness. The watcher at the crossroads remembered him, that's Sunnyboy; he had never met him then but now they rode the rails together sometimes. He is taller, more meals on his bones, more color endures in his overalls, and has a studious face. More folks drift in from the fields looking so tired their fingers seem to drag on the dust, but still coming to see what people are doing, to listen to what they're hearing. People begin to yell out loud "Play it!" and "All right!" He feels better. Some of the girls begin to move their feet and attract boys to dance with them. Coins begin to hit the ground like the first rain on a dry morning. After waiting a decent interval, the second guitar player crosses to the other side of the street and begins to play over there. His

music is mellower, simpler, the beat more even. Many of the people drift to his side of the street as if to escape the struggles of the first guitarist.

After a while maybe 30 folks have scattered on both sides of the street bouncing gently, calling out, humming, a few dancing, and money is collecting in an old coffee can, when a white man as big as two men with a belly and an evil leer and a five-gallon hat is suddenly among them as if, despite his bulk, he had dropped from somewhere like a cat. The smell of his cologne dampens the dust. The folks draw away from him and look at one another in distress and consternation wondering how he could have loomed up so quick. He wears tight, blue cotton pants and a cotton shirt with ornamental metal snaps down the front. A green patch of skin like a map of France sprawls across his left cheek. He carries a billy club and wears a big pistol in a holster on a belt ornamented with shells like a wide, toothy grin. He begins shouting and throws the billy club on the wooden sidewalk so it rattles and clatters on the slats. The girls scream, and the black people fall and pile on one another on the sidewalk. The second guitar player tumbles off the sidewalk into the street falling to shield his guitar. The man with the green scar takes out his pistol and begins to fire at waist level up and down the street, but not into the buildings. One of the watchers at the crossroads saw himself hiding behind a barrel in front of the store. The man with the green scar walks over and grabs him by the back of his collar. He slumps in his shirt, his good eye taking care to stare beyond the dirt road while his bad one must be searching an ambiguous infinity. His hands, his knees, his lips sag – he could remember being afraid the cloth would rip, but holding onto the guitar. The white man with the scar drags him to where the other guitar player lies in the dust, taps his head with his boot, and speaks sharply to him. The other gets to his feet slumping in every movement. The man with the scar drags them down

the street to a store-front barber shop, through the barber shop where two white men getting shaves chuckle at them, and into a room in the back about eight feet square with no furniture except a bucket full of smelly shit. He takes their guitars and their can of money from their compliant fingers and puts them out the door while holding the men in place with the billy club. He leaves and closes behind him the heavy door, which has a small, barred window.

The taller guitar player stretches out diagonally, leaning on his elbow, staring at the floor as if he were staring at the ground. One of the watchers at the crossroad could remember creeping to the corner of the room, where the three angles meet, feeling his back against the angle, bringing his knees to his chest, wrapping his arms around them and laying his cheek upon his knee as if it were his mama's breast. He could remember the comfort it had given him. The taller guitar player says quietly, "You ain't got no kinda money does you?" The slighter man shakes his head so hard his cheeks make a flapping noise, but does not speak.

The tall guitarist rises and peeps cautiously through the little window in the door. "He's done put'm 'gainst the wall under some coats on a hook," he says.

He remembered moaning: "ohh, momma, year. Teach, yaaaaahhhh" Ohhh momma" he moans and then croons a long, high note of anguish.

At the sound, the man with the green scar, who is chewing on a nail as other men might chew on a toothpick, stops chatting in the barbershop and raises his head. The taller black man in the cell tries to shush the moaning.

The man with the scar opens the cell door and speaks to the taller black man, who, although he is sitting on the floor, seems to be stooping obsequiously.

"Fits," he explains, "He got these fits bad He's had'm bad since he was a chil'."

His head hangs down and his lips hang loose as he talks. The slight guitar player moans, "Ohhh, momma!" and sways from side to side as if rubbing against something soft. The man with the scar slaps the moaning man in the face so hard he rolls across what little floor there is. That was the last thing he could remember. Now the man at the crossroads showed him things he did not recall. He saw himself jump up to a crouch and scramble back to his corner. The man with the scar hits him again, but now he has braced himself so he remains folded into the corner, moaning. The scarred man speaks sharply to the other guitar player, and he answers with his shoulders hunched up to his ears. The scarred man clenches his fist and punches the crouching man so hard his head jerks back and his eyes roll in his head. He slides down on his side and continues to moan, "Ohhhh, momma, yeah. Yeah." A sweet smile traverses his beaten face.

"He might die," says the taller guitar player.

The man with the green scar says sharply, "Get him outta here," turns, and goes back out to his companions. The tall guitarist helps the beaten man up and half drags him through the barbershop, still moaning, to the street where he props him against the wall. He turns back to the barbershop, enters, picks up the guitars and slings them around his neck. He eyes the money can, but lets it be and returns to the street. The slight guitar player has disappeared.

At the crossroads the bulky stranger let go of the slight man and paced around briefly, grumbling. The nightjar pierced the air. The lightening night revealed one cast eye on the black man and a pockmarked face and a cleft chin on the white man. He strode back, his footsteps

suddenly sounding sharply, and embraced the other again cheek to cheek, putting his lips next to his ear.

They saw darkness lit faintly by a small window open to the night. *A white child is tiptoeing fearfully along a hall. He is barefoot and wears a long white smock like an angel. The smell of stale meals floats in the air. He has small, round, dark, eyes, a dimpled chin and resembles the bulky man, but his hair is curly and his skin is smooth and tender. He pushes open a door and enters a dark room.*

Dimly visible is a boxy piano, with a small keyboard recessed in it, a rough wood floor, windows with small panes revealing only the night, a few chairs, and a stove. The scent of a coal fire hangs in this room, but no fire shows. Without making any kind of light the child tiptoes to the piano, lifts the keyboard cover, and begins to play very quietly. The soft notes penetrate the darkness. They are not a song, but spiky motifs successively exploring time.

Time passes note by note, then the child pauses. He has heard fumbling at a distant door. He quickly closes the keyboard cover, slides off the bench, tiptoes on winged feet out the door back through the hall, and into another room. There are three small beds; each child has his own. He slips into one of the beds, pulls up the covers, and lies on his back, staring into the dark, listening. Stumbling footsteps and jerky conversation approach. It is two men, one voice languid, whiney, the other dryer, staccato. The door opens. A white man walks to the child's bed. He smells of wine. He grabs the child by the shoulders and, when he feigns the limpness of sleep, slaps him. The other children do not move, hiding behind closed eyes. The wine-stinker hassles the child out of bed and, with two fingers and his thumb clamping his neck, guides him back

through the hall to the piano and pushes him down on the bench. The second man has followed them into the dark room and seats himself beside the boy on the bench. The man who had thrust the child before him lights a candle, sets it beside the music stand, and speaks. He is slender with a small, neat potbelly, and dressed in clothes like the figure that came to the crossroads. He has long lank hair and round, dark eyes. The man on the bench, who has a narrow, ratty face and sandy hair about ear-length around his head, searches fumblingly through the sheets on the music stand, finds one, sets it to the front, and taps it peremptorily with his finger.

As the child begins to play stiff, pretty music, the man with lank hair sprawls on a chair, falls off it, picks himself up awkwardly, and sprawls again. The guitar player thought they must play music like that in New Orleans; he must be seeing New Orleans. The music was for white ladies. From time to time the man on the bench corrects the child gruffly. The black man at the crossroads could not understand, did not recognize the language. The man sprawled on the chair falls asleep and slides without disturbing himself to the floor.

The melodies go on. The man on the piano bench listens to the student with sleepy, surly attention, hunching over him, nodding slightly. The man with the lank hair hiccups, wakens, gropes his way to his feet, and begins a discussion with the teacher.

"Sie sind ein DumbScheißekopf. Er erlernt nie, wie Mozart von Ihnen zu spielen."

"Wenn Sie Ihr Kind Sie befolgen lassen konnten, würde er erlernen, was ich ihm erkläre."

The teacher replies

The child keeps playing. The discussion develops into an argument; the lank-haired man and the teacher are both standing now, gesticulating. The child slips from the stiff, pretty music to the motivic improvisation, not softly now but loudly. The argument stops. The man with the lank hair yells at the child who stops playing; he walks over to the bench and slaps the child. The child sits rigid without cringing, puts his fingers to the keys and strikes a few loud notes. The man with the lank hair pushes him off the bench and kicks him as he lies curled on the floor.

The nightjar had ceased, and the stranger had fallen to the ground where he lay as the child lay. The slight man drew back, afraid. What could drive The Devil to the ground? The stranger picked himself up, brushed sandy soil off his coat, muttering irritably to himself, and then sat on the stump where the slight man had been waiting for him. The slight man picked up his guitar and thrust it toward him.

*It is night on a paved street. A frosted globe with a green cross on it illuminates a door marked "**WHITE**" on a dusty, side street of one-story buildings. Near is an unlit door marked "**COLORED**". The stranger didn't know what these words meant. No windows interrupt the walls. The sound of singing comes up the road; it is desperate, mixed with weeping. A large black man appears carrying a black young woman in a thin, tattered dress and no shoes, a girl really. She is pregnant and writhing in his arms. Then the black man at the crossroads saw himself; this was not a memory, he did not know the girl, but it seemed some ghastly portent. He shuffles beside them singing, crooning a love song, tears glittering on his face. They stop at the **COLORED** door and the slight black man presses the bell. The door opens and a black woman in a nurse's cap looks out. She sizes up the situation and, chattering anxiously, guides them into a small room where she turns on the light to reveal a bench and another door where*

she leaves. The sharp smell of disinfectant brightens the air. The walls are bare and gray-green. The big man sits on the bench still holding the pregnant girl tightly to contain her writhing. She whimpers and screams, whimpers and screams. The slight man leans over her face crooning and weeping. The inner door opens and a black orderly in a uniform like green pajamas pushes in a gurney and a white nurse follows him. The nurse says, "put her there, boy," and the big man rises and lays the suffering girl on the gurney. At a gesture from the nurse, the orderly straps her down. Without being told, the two black men sit down on the bench while the orderly wheels the gurney out.

A different white nurse enters with a clipboard, briefly questions the big man, then questions the slight man, who rises and stands before her deferentially. She leaves.

The slight man crouches in a corner of the room, as he had done in the jail, and continues to sing quietly. The big man spreads his knees, puts his elbows on them, and lowers his head listening and not listening. Time passes in breaths.

The nurse with the clipboard appears and orders the crouching man, "Stand up!" and when he is standing says, more gently, "Come on with me."

She leads him down a dimly lit hall, gestures to a door, turns and walks briskly away. The slight man cautiously opens the door, slips in, and softly closes it behind him. A window opposite pours moonlight into the dark, cluttered room. It smells dusty. He looks about curiously but deferentially. Two gurneys bear loads covered with sheets. Buckets and mops occupy corners of the room, and a balance scale spreads its arms against the wall between them. He wanders to

the first gurney and peeks under the sheet, then he carefully recovers what he has seen. The sickly sweet smell of death stirs in the room

He looks about, glances briefly at the second gurney then gazes out the window into the night. Finally he returns to the second gurney and runs his hand over the sheeted body. His hand stops at a melon-size lump between the knees. He pulls his hand back and speaks inquiringly. Silence. In the hush he stalks nervously around the room. Finally he lifts the sheet, to reveal the face of the young black woman. He speaks to it in a cheerful tone. Awaits an answer, then covers it again. He crouches wearily, as if listening for footfalls. When the silence endures, he stands and lifts the sheet again and speaks to the face winningly. When it does not respond a flood of urgent chatter flows from him. At last he pauses, then draws the sheet back to expose her still body and the still body of his child between her legs. He cringes, doubling up with his hands beside his knees, dragging the sheet onto the floor. He rocks back and for on his feet moaning, still holding the corner of the sheet clutched in one hand.

At the crossroads the stranger stood from where he had been sitting on the stump, letting the guitar fall to the ground. The slight man knelt beside it quietly moaning. The stranger took an ear trumpet from his coat and stalked around listening to the night as if he were surveying a battlefield with a spyglass. Somewhere the mockingbird sang its own song once, plaintively.

Morning light washes a green world of soft hills, knee-length moist green grass, clumps of big, dark trees maybe 50 feet high, most thickly branching from the base of the trunk with small thick new leaves. Small white flowers are scattered in the dewy grass. The smell of new grass

and a lush whiff of manure freshen the breeze. An unpleasant buzzing clogs the air, like a thousand distant hornets. Two men in their early thirties are following a cow path up a rounded hill, their heads together. One is the stocky man in his younger days; his hair is uncovered, loose and flowing. He is wearing a vest but not a coat, his shirt loosely open like a white version of his hair, tight britches, muddy shoes and stockings. The man with him is dressed similarly; he has straight hair combed mostly flat around his head, a round face, round, dark eyes with arched brows, and a round full mouth. They seem to be in animated conversation; the stocky man stabbing the air with wide gestures as if cutting at the nature of the world, the thinner gesturing broadly as if both smoothing the world and drawing it to them, but the only sound is the buzzing, made more shrill by occasional rings, like the sound of distant metal sheets grating against one another. The hill they are climbing has small groves of tall trees. A nearby hill is bare; sheep are grazing on it, and a shepherd sitting against a rock works with his hands something too small to be seen from this distance.

The stocky man suddenly throws himself down in the dewy grass under the outspread branches of a tree standing a little apart from the others. It and some of the others that stand apart from the clumps show the trunk lopped free of limbs to eight or ten feet. The trunk has smooth gray bark with the faint, round scars of lopping. The new leaves are bursting out from every twig like flat spear points, with a rumpled surface and little saw teeth, lustrous dark green above and pale green below, so the trees look bright from lying on your back. Thumb-sized clumps of tiny white-yellow flowers are appearing on the sunny side. The burst, spiny coats of last years burs remain among the roots of the new grass.

The man with the round, soft eyes at first lies down beside the stocky man, and the two stare together up into the yellow underleaves each pillowing his head in the basket of his laced fingers. The hornet buzzing continues and the stocky man shifts restlessly. The man with round eyes is speaking, but the words are incomprehensible; only shrill sounds that drag across his sentences. The prone man with wild hair rolls over onto his stomach, props himself on his elbow, and bends his ear to the speaker.

The man with the round face gestures toward the hill where the shepherd has taken out a little flute and appears to be playing it. The stocky man strains to hear it, but hears only the buzzing. He pounds his ears and buries his face in his knees. The round-headed man shouts at him. He raises his head and embraces him, then jumps to his feet and strides off alone.

The day has passed; the slanting light of late afternoon highlights the branches. The stout man is making his way cautiously through an orchard toward a large, stone house. Three young women in sundresses and parasols are chatting on a lawn beside the houses. Flowerbeds show brightly around the foundations. A fountain splashes. The stocky man circles around and approaches them from behind head-high shrubbery, which conceals him. He works his way furtively to within a few yards of them, but still concealed. He stares at the chatting girls attentively; he stretches his upper body toward them; he cups his hands to his ears; he strains forward. Only the buzzing continues. He turns, and, without heeding breaking branches, rushes away. He runs storming through the orchard, pressing his hands to his ears and alternately taking them away, shaking his fists in the air - so he runs through the woods to a stream side where he throws himself on the ground and weeps bitterly.

His older self lay motionless on the dusty crossroads as he had lain by the stream. Hesitantly the guitarist leaned over and touched his shoulder. He rose to his hands and knees and then to his feet, dusted off his bulky garments a second time. The nightjar cried. He picked up the guitar, which was still lying on the ground. He held it as if to play and began to tune it in an unfamiliar chord.

As the notes worked out, the slight man began to see himself carrying his guitar through a run down part of town, or rather a part of town never run up. *It is a district of one- or two-story ill-rigged buildings informally arranged along an unlit cart road weedy at the edges, some buildings flush to the street, others with small yards. Flickering light shows through cracks here and there. He is heading for a one-story building that spreads a bit more than the rest. It needs no light or icon; the sound of music and the hubbub of people attract fellowship. The black man from the crossroads approaches it briskly but stealthily. He lopes over a low picket fence swinging his guitar for balance. A man is lying on his back in the yard; you can just make out in the dim light a splash of scarlet on his chest.*

Now he can hear a man singing in a rough voice to repeating guitar chords:

Every day seem like murder here

(spoken: My God, I'm no sheriff)

Every day seem like murder here

I'm gonna leave tomorrow, I know you don't bid my care.

The slim black man steps over the wounded figure, opens the door, and enters. The room is crowded with dancers, but the antics of the guitar player have cleared a space around him. He is

a middle-aged, light-skinned black man with a narrow face, a large, aquiline nose and straight, black hair. Watching at the crossroads knew it must be Charlie Patton. He had never seen Charlie Patton, but he had heard him on records and on the radio.

A bandage around his neck shows traces of blood. The slim black man pauses to watch him prance in his space. He goes to his knees playing and singing, then stands and plays with the guitar behind his back, always a cycle of repeated chords, then flashes it front and drums loudly on the sound box with his fingers.

The slim black man slides over to the drinks table and reaches for a pint bottle. The woman in charge of the table stops his hand, but he points to his guitar and smiles winningly. After a moment she shakes her shoulders and lets him take the bottle, which he immediately uncorks and begins to sip. He edges through the crowd to a corner where he finds a chair and turns it so he can sit down with his back to the singer, half facing the crowd. "Yes", the man watching from the crossroads and listening to the white man tune his strings asserted to himself, "I will have a secret, I will have a secret; then Charlie Patton will know who I am." His fingers stroke the strings and his bottleneck glides against them, but are inaudible in the general din. Charlie Patton sees him and sings loudly and roughly:

Well I didn't come here to steal nobody's brown.

Just stopt by here to keep you from stealin' mine!

The slim black man opens his voice and sings as piercingly as he can:

"Hello, Central, what the matter with your line?

Come a storm last night an' tore the wire down?

The older singer answers:

Vicksburg on a high hill, an' Three Forks down below,

An' I feel so welcome, mama, no matter where I go.

Some of the dancers are toiling harder; others stop to watch the contest. People shout out to encourage the older singer.

The younger singer throws off his hat to reveal wavy black hair, and answers with his piercing voice and plaintive, intricate guitar picking:

Vicksburg on a high hill, mama, Three Forks far below,

Goin' on home, mama, to the Gulf of Mexico.

The crowd throws coins to the prancing man and hands reach out with bottles. The older singer prances around to put himself between the slim man and the crowd, blocking him from the dancers. The slim man smiles and turns toward the wall the better to conceal his fingering.

The prancing man sings:

Ain't got no job, mama, rolling through this world;

An' if I get back here ain't never be bad no more.

The seated man sings back:

Said when I leave here, mama, going further down the road,

When I leave now, mama, goin further down the road.

The prancing man is clutching his throat and gagging, but struggles to go on. The seated man speaks to him softly. "Yes," his watching self thought, "I would give him my respect." The

prancing man begins to sing: "My baby got..." and chokes. The seated man speaks to him softly again.

The prancing man stands and sings:

I got a heart of railroad steel,

An' if I leave here this morning, don't say 'Daddy how do you feel?'

He chokes and gags again. The seated man sings:

You better come on in my kitchen; it's goin' to be rainin' outdoors.

When a woman gets in trouble, everybody throws her down.

Lookin' for yo' good friend, none can be found.

You better come on in my kitchen; it's goin' to be rainin' outdoors

The standing singer stops, picks the coins off the floor, and hurriedly leaves the room. The seated man renews his song and the dancing continue.

The guitarist exulted: he had seen his way. In the outer dark the mocking bird ran though a speedy jewel case of collected songs. The guitarist reached to take his instrument, but the white man held it away and blocked his reach with a palm to his shoulder.

The bulky man is striding on a wide gravel path in a beautiful park with big trees, little lawns and flowerbeds everywhere, and low, neat-cut hedges. Big houses with lavish, sparkling windows made of many tiny frames like summer jewels surround the park in the distance. The bulky man is wearing a long, new overcoat, white ruffs at his neck, a new stovepipe hat, and shiny, pointed shoes. He is with another white man, a little taller, dressed the same way, with long wavy white hair and a white beard. The two bend toward one another in conversation, the

bulky man seems both deferential and proud. Other fancy dress people are promenading in the park. As the pair proceeds, thoughtfully, taking turns listening and speaking, a gala group approaches them coming the other way. They saunter with the idle assurance of great privilege, like rich white ladies coming from church, very rich. A tall, middle-aged man with a straight back, a horseman with a beefy chin, who looks down his large nose, on his arm a lady in a low-cut ball gown with flounces and a floppy hat. Slightly behind them young man with dark curly hair, a thin moustache, and the same heavy chin struts indifferently.

The man with white hair and a white beard separates himself from his companion and steps aside to let the others pass and as they do lifts off his stovepipe hat with a sweeping gesture and bows slightly to the gala group, but the bulky man strides slowly through them, as if he were a post and they were passing water, holding a stormy smile, though the splendid young man smiles deferentially at him. He is as upright as he was down cast when he threw himself on the ground.

The bearded man remains standing for a moment, then hastens to catch up to the bulky man and speaks to him:

"Sie sind leider eine ganz ungebändigte Persönlichkeit, die zwar gar nicht unrecht hat, wenn sie die Welt detestabel findet, aber sie freilich dadurch weder für sich noch für andere genußreicher macht."

The black man cannot understand - he has never heard a foreign language except Creole before.

The bulky man storms at him: "Könige und Fürsten können wohl Professoren machen und Titel und Ordensbänder umhängen, aber große Menschen können sie nicht machen," and walks on with his hands clenched behind his back.

That scene in the wonderful park faded and the slight man saw a street in a town such as he had never seen before: *The street is cobbled; small stone houses with no yards stand wall to wall and their doorsteps edge the street. The houses are wooden with carved doors and thatched roofs. There is a familiar sound of foot and cart traffic, and above that a desperate, raucous, keening shrills from one open door.*

The bulky man with the long hair paces through the people on the street, again a post in water. He seems younger, his back straighter. He pauses at the open door; he steps over the threshold into a room the width of the house. In one corner is a fireplace with cooking gear. There are three chairs, a piano, and a bed. In the bed a child lies motionless, dead. Medical smells drift in the air. The screaming woman is kneeling by the bed, her forehead crushed against the frame, her hand convulsively gripping and ungrasping the bedclothes. About a dozen people in fantastic, old-fashioned clothes, like old time New Orleans clothes, are standing or sitting, some crying.

The bulky man brushes through them as if he were another kind of being, the way he had brushed through the gala people. He goes straight to the piano, lifts the keyboard cover, gestures someone off the bench imperiously, seats himself with a flip of the hand to brush the tails of his long coat over the bench. He begins to play. The music begins in spiky motives like the music the child played, grows slow, dark, thoughtful. He plays with a grimace of concentration

as if he were reading music on the stand with great difficulty, but the stand is empty. He heaves his shoulders almost as if sobbing himself. But the music goes on and gradually engulfs the sobbing. The woman's hands still as he plays and the pressure of her forehead against the bed frame gradually diminishes as her mind turns inward. He continues to play, the sonorous progression now dominating the room. The people who were crying pause one by one. Some turn to watch the figure at the piano, some lower their eyes and fold their hands and look into themselves as if they were in church. He seems to be wrestling with the music as if it were a specter in the air. As he struggles they stand gradually more at ease. The woman by the bed falls silent, looks into herself, then turns to look at the piano. The music pursues its line to the end. The slight man knew it must end there but not why. The bulky man stands. The woman who was keening goes up to him hesitantly and says something in that ugly language. She wrings his hand. A glass of wine was left untasted beside a wine bottle on a table, and the bulky man drinks off the glass. Others step forward to shake hands. Finally he makes a little half bow, steps briskly to the door, and leaves. He paces on down the busy street. The air is fresh.

At the crossroads the first uncolored dawn light has subtly silhouetted treetops in the east.

"What did they give you?" asked the slight man.

The stranger drew the ear trumpet from his waistcoat, put it to his ear, and leaned it close to the mouth of the man who had waited by the crossroad.

"Did you get their souls?" he shouted tensely.

"Souls?" The bulky man scoffed, "they have no souls." He laughed. His laugh began like a cough and ended in a shriek like the cry of the nightjar. In the rising light the slight man saw now he was tacky, a little grimy, the white ruff at his neck unclean, his cuffs frayed.

The bulky man now handed back the guitar, almost contemptuously. With both their hands on it they saw a shambling building by a country roadside at dusk. *The road is a dusty dirt track with weeds growing in the middle; fields with bushy plants surround it and down the road curves a line of trees crowning a levee. There is a warm scent of earth and manure. The walls are low and like the flat roof are made of boards and tarpaper. The boards seem to have been added one by one without deliberation, only approximately at right angles, some painted, others bare and weathered. An alluring wick burns kerosene in a soda bottle, which lights the doorway and sparkles off a quart jar that hangs above it as a sign. The slight black man enters carrying his guitar. A kerosene lamp hangs from a wire in the middle of the room and another stands on a counter by the door. The ceiling is painted several dark colors irregularly, and scattered dabs of light paint simulate stars. The moon has ragged edges. Small tables with misaligned legs and spare wooden chairs hug the walls; no two alike. A fat, black woman in a thin cotton print dress that stretches over her big calves and shoulders is sitting by the counter near the door with a metal box. The guitar player goes to her. She hands him a bottle - it must be distilled sprits - from under the counter, and he sidles to a table in the middle of the back wall. The saturated night air mixes with the odor of stale beer. The floor is hard packed dirt; around the wall and by the chairs and tables peanut shells litter the floor, but in the center they have been stomped into a hard surface.*

Black people in worn and tattered clothes begin to drift in from the days work. The bulky man had seen black men and a few women before, but these looked different. The ones he had seen seemed to him noble creatures unsullied by civilization; they had seemed proud of their unblemished humanity. These men and women were burdened. The language of their shoulders passing through the door stoops. Even when they are standing straight, their shoulders crouch, their necks bow, as if they were accustomed to carrying a heavy weight. The weight is not with them now but it is always with them. They buy liquor from the woman by the door. The bulky man remembered with fear and contempt his drunken father. They talk to each other in the unknown tongue and drift to the tables and chairs. As they talk some look at one another in the eye. Eyeing one another lifts a little of the weight, or in scolding pairs transforms one into a spiteful master and the other into a sly servant.

The guitar player takes up his instrument and begins a song. Some of the people get up and begin to dance. Others stop talking and lean attentively, somehow gladly and sadly at the same time, lean into listening. More people come in; more begin to dance, in couples and apart. The guitar player sings in a raucous, whining voice and his fingers wring a burning tangle of notes from his instrument. The stranger had heard English but he did not recognize the words as English. The dancing seemed to him chaotic, twitchy, crude. The way the dancers wiggled and bumped and couples fondled each other as they danced reminded him of certain house he was ashamed to think of. The guitar player throws his head back and howls like a dog. The howling and the fondling excite and disgust the bulky man, but something tempers his disgust: he sees the burden lift from some of the dancers. The guitar player picks piercing chords and executes swift, engaging trills. A lean woman in a dress that is like a flowered shift slides over to him and

puts her hand inside his shirt. He rubs his head against her arm like a cat, then turns it to put his ear to his instrument above the sound hole and sings in falsetto growls, then lifts his head and bays plaintively. As they begin to dance one by one and by two, the beat makes the dancers look at their feet, at one another's feet. But the singing lifts their faces; they eye one another; they prance, scrubbing their souls with the harsh cleanser of their common gaze. The smell of sweat salts the air. Men and women shuck the burden, straighten, move with agile exhilaration. The singer begins another tune with a sly, wild invitation in his voice, "Come into my kitchen." Gradually most people are dancing, others standing by the walls moving their bodies; they have become proud; it seems to the bulky man they have drunk a draft of glorious Freedom.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I happened to see Abel Gance's movie about Beethoven, which includes a scene, probably apocryphal, in which Beethoven walks by a house where people are in deep and sudden mourning because a child has just died. Beethoven goes into the house plays, the piano, and the people feel better. At the same time, I was thinking about the 1930's Mississippi blues man Robert Johnson because I like him. It seemed to me that somehow among the things their music did, though its forms are very different, among those things was something the same, something that solaced, even uplifted their audiences. Besides listening to them, I read up on them some including Maynard Solomon's biography of Beethoven, where I learned his father was a drunk who beat him for improvising, and Allen Greenberg's unfilmed movie script of Johnson. There also is a story about Johnson, as about several musicians going back at least to Tartini and probably to Paleolithic times, that he sold his soul to the devil to get his musical power. I tried to think of how to express what was noble and united in these two musicians and began to imagine that Beethoven was the devil, that they met at the crossroads at midnight and held a Vulcan mind meld.*

AUTHOR BIO: I write short stories, some experimental forms, and occasionally verse, but mostly novels, four of which have been published in excerpts or serially. About 100 items of fiction and a few poems have appeared in literary or general magazines. I occasionally publish translations and photography. I'm a native of Berkeley with a BA from Stanford in creative writing and an MA from Columbia in contemporary literature. I worked for decades as a tech writer and manager in Silicon Valley. In the 21st century, I devoted full time to fiction. You can learn more about me at my web site, www.wandd.com and see an out of date list of publications at: <http://www.wandd.com/Site/Publications.html>.

