

Death of a duck

Reuben Thomas

5th December 2009–1st January 2013, 16th July 2024

*O dear white children casual as birds,
Playing among the ruined languages,
So small beside their large confusing words,
So gay against the greater silences
Of dreadful things you did: O hang the head,
Impetuous child with the tremendous brain,
O weep, child, weep, O weep away the stain,
Lost innocence who wished your lover dead,
Weep for the lives your wishes never led.*

W. H. Auden, *A Hymn to St Cecilia*

The reason Miss H was my favourite teacher when I was eight was not just that she was the only one I didn't see at school, though that must have helped: she wouldn't have been allowed to wear jeans at school. It was her air of youth, beauty and freedom that placed her somewhere between my mother and my big sister, without either the terrors of the former or the weaknesses of the latter, that made her inspire such a mixture of awe and delight. She reminded me of what I wanted to be. In fact, she must have been older than my Year 4 teacher, Mrs Pringle, and without a picture I can't prove she really was beautiful, and as for freedom, well, it was a pretty miserable time to be a school teacher with all the paperwork and rules that kept changing. Of course, that was something I didn't understand until a few years later, and all I knew was that music lessons were a delight, to affirm which I regularly invoked the wrath of my less fortunate friends, and even now when a phrase of piano music catches me unprepared it throws me back once more, regretting that I gave up the 'mysterious mix of maths and magic', as Miss H used to say, with a wryness that was her way of telling me that she knew it was an inadequate description, but that she couldn't put it better for an eight-year-old.

She didn't just teach me piano; she was really a singer, but I think most parents felt vaguely short-changed if there wasn't an instrument involved, so she taught beginners' piano too, turning a weakness into a strength by combining piano, singing and theory: three for the price of one. My mother was always a sucker for multi-buy offers, though

she'd always claim to see through such 'gimmickry' but to have 'analysed this one on its merits'.

The lessons started routinely; comparing notes with friends I seemed to be learning much the same things, and the jealousy of those who only did piano or other instruments soon turned to indifference when they discovered I wasn't singing the sort of thing that would get me on TV. Indeed, for months I found it pretty dull, all breathing, scales and a few folk songs; I preferred the exercises I had to do for piano, like singing back a tune Miss H played, or picking the middle note of three: at least that made me think. It was piano I enjoyed the most, though, because of the rapidly growing sensation that I was developing a whole new brain, but one that worked through my fingers instead of my mouth. Wonderfully, this feeling immediately made practice a necessity for me rather than a chore, and my mother, for whom giving her daughters music lessons was primarily a social obligation, was delighted to be getting such an unexpected dividend on her investment. So for a long time it was the piano I found exciting; Miss H's aura simply made lessons more agreeable. I couldn't even boast about her being pretty or cool, because as she didn't teach any of my friends, they wouldn't believe me, and my sister Anna, even if she condescended to competing despite the three years separating us, was having extra maths lessons with Mr Malik, who won by being male and wearing a nose stud, as well as several earrings.

In mid-January, half-way through a lesson, with the joys of piano already behind me, I was shrugging and sighing my way through the singing warm-ups with a degree of resentment exceeding my usual indifference, owing to a stinking cold, when Miss H suddenly stopped in the middle of a scale, lowered the piano lid, paused for a moment, and said:

"Let's go for a walk, V."

"Okay," I replied automatically.

Miss H was the only person who called me 'V'; everyone else used at least one syllable of my name, and my mother affected all three except when she was tired, nostalgic or tipsy. I always thought it an odd if somewhat just coincidence, as only I called her 'Miss H', and never to her face. I didn't call her anything to her face; as our lessons were one-to-one, I didn't need to.

"I'd better check with your mother."

It was the first time I'd ever heard a hint of uncertainty in Miss H's voice; normally our lessons were clearly mapped out in advance from beginning to end. The element of uncertainty should have been exciting, but I was obscurely disturbed. Miss H got up and went out of the room. I heard her talking to my mother in the kitchen, but I couldn't hear what they said. A moment later she returned, with my coat and its mortifying mittens-on-a-string in one hand and my bobble hat in the other.

"Come on," she said, smiling.

Outside it was bitingly rather than bitterly cold, and the snow that had fallen two days earlier looked a little too tight, as though it had shrunk in the wash rather than actually having melted. Still somewhat taken aback by this diversion from the normal course of things, I didn't ask where we were going, but soon there was no need, as when we got to the corner Miss H, instead of following the road round, took the path

to the right that led down to the nature walk along the river. I'd never walked along it in winter, and my mouth, which had opened to protest the depredation of the mud on my sandals, closed when I realised that the mud was frozen like everything else. Almost at once we were walled in by the trees, though I noticed immediately that leafless they didn't roof out the sky as they did in summer.

The path was mostly wide enough for us to walk side by side, but sometimes the mud was deep at the edges, and though it couldn't steal shoes frozen, it had solidified into awkward ruts, so Miss H would have to hang back to let me skip in front for a few yards. Thus when after a minute she spoke, her voice surprised me from behind.

"You know, V, not many people get playing the piano the way you do."

I thought for a moment. Miss H's compliments were never flattery, and always had a point.

"It's like tennis:" I said, "you have to practise, but then your brain can talk to your hands all by itself, and they just know what to do. And when it's good, it's like I'm just watching myself; I'm not even doing it myself. But with the piano there's something else too: I mean, the music just comes out almost like it's an accident. I mean, of course it's on purpose, I'm playing the right notes. Or trying. But with tennis you're playing against someone, you have to hit the ball back, and with the piano you don't choose the music, it's just there. Well, you do choose it, but. Um."

I stopped, confused, but excited. I was not yet familiar with the sensation of unwittingly being made to extemporise an unfamiliar line of thinking.

"And what about improvising?" Miss H asked with a smile. I shrugged; I couldn't even begin to imagine how one could possibly just make up music.

"But you're quite right. It's like a game, and you need discipline to play a game well. And yet there's something more than a game in music. But you don't like singing much, do you V?"

"Not with a cold. Hurts."

"But not just today. Is it because it doesn't feel like a game? Just standing there?"

"Well, it doesn't feel like playing." I waited, then realised that Miss H, as usual, wanted more than agreement or disagreement. "And it's boring. Well, not boring exactly. I mean, it's just...normal. Like if I had walking lessons, or eating lessons. Singing's just something you do."

I looked up at Miss H, at that moment walking next to me. She looked back, thoughtfully, and I suddenly noticed it was the way that she looked just before giving me a new piece to learn.

"You're not going to understand what I tell you now," she began. "You'll think you do, despite my saying this, but you won't. It doesn't matter, though. And you'll remember what I said, and one day your understanding will change, and later it'll change again, and maybe you'll end up understanding what I meant, or maybe not. Maybe something better. Words don't contain ideas, you know: minds do. My words are just a climbing frame for your brain to play its ideas on."

I grimaced, momentarily distracted by the off-target metaphor.

"Learn to play the piano and you learn your mind and train your hands. Learn to sing and you learn and train your mind and your whole body, together. Singing is the

simplest thing the body is not born to learn, so it's the hardest to master: the more you do, the less you achieve. To succeed, you have to do almost nothing, but you have to be completely involved. You have to see without looking, hear without listening. If you can sing well, you can live well."

Miss H was silent. As I was still trying to fix what she had just said, as one chews mightily an overlarge mouthful of tough steak before it can be swallowed, we finally emerged from the trees and crossed the short concrete bridge to the common. The snow was patchy here, and quacking from the pond a hundred yards away suggested that it hadn't frozen. As we started towards it, I no longer felt that Miss H was leading the way. She had an uncertain look, I wasn't sure whether because of the slippery snow-slicked grass underfoot or because she was trying to work out how to finish. We reached the pond, and stood watching the ducks gliding morosely about. I felt embarrassed for wishing we had brought bread. Miss H coughed.

"V," she said, "next week I think we should..."

A loud quack that was more of a squawk sounded from the pond, accompanied by violent splashing. Disturbed by Miss H's unwonted uncertainty, it took me a moment to find the source of the noise. It was only after I looked all around the pond that I spotted the mallard drake thrashing in the water directly in front of us. Instinctively I took a step back. The duck was flapping wildly, but apart from the first quack it was silent. It didn't seem to be trapped, and I couldn't see anything attacking it. The other ducks seemed to be paying no attention. For about a minute the duck continued to struggle, its flapping gradually getting weaker, until it was just lying, wings spread, in the water. Another minute, and it was dead: it was close enough that I could see it had stopped breathing. I felt entirely unaffected. Unsure, I turned to Miss H. I wasn't shocked or upset, or even empty, and that was odd, and made me feel uncomfortable. She was staring fixedly, almost determinedly, at her feet. Her face had a hard, set look.

"Um," I said.

She took a deep breath without turning her head, and let it out. Finally she looked at me. Her eyes were glistening and her lips clenched: she was obviously trying not to cry.

"Let's go," she said in a thin voice that entirely lacked its usual ring.

We walked home in silence, my head a blank. At the door she didn't even come in, but just said, "see you next week."

A map of the walk can be found online at <http://goo.gl/maps/0YLNi>