
Intermission

Brianna Richardson

An Orchestra of Pain

Give me that anatomy. I'm tired
of not knowing what's working,
what's hurting, what's killing me
straight into the bone with every
motion of my arm.

I'm tired of being alone
in an orchestra so ignorant
of the parts that make it sound,
so ignorant of its components
that it doesn't even stop

or notice

that half of its members
are crying, wincing as they stretch
between the bars of notes that blur
upon the many pages that they play,
trying, forcefully, to make it work
despite their pain, unaware
of the wreckage left behind
in their broken bodies.

It can't go on.
But the conductor pushes forward,
demanding louder for more pressure,
greater bow speed, more intensity—

until all grows black. numb.
arms unfeeling, released into the floor
with pure exhaustion,
unable to go on.

It's over: that piece, their career,
strength in their body. Gone.

This set of poems, "Assorted Poetry on Musician Health," was written from both my own experience as an injured violist and my exposure to other injured musicians through the injury prevention program that I am involved in at the University of Puget Sound. I hope they will help physicians and other health professionals understand some of the psychological difficulties that may impede the recovery process of their patients from the performing arts field.

Additional poems from this series will appear in a subsequent issue.

Ms. Richardson is a music student at the University of Puget Sound, Tacoma, WA. She has been studying violin for 10 years and plans to pursue her interest in musicians' health through graduate students in occupational or physical therapy.

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New Viola

My left arm throbs
while leaden jaw
pulses hard—compressed—
against the inches thick
of modern viol, the larger hick
of lover's bite¹ and this old innocence
from Portugal rubbed close
'til raw and blistering.

This Capela,² my lovely,
why, she can't help
that she's well rounded with a bit
of extra weight, built larger
round than my past lover's hold.
Her neck's just not
as slight, the varnish orange
for brightened tone, speaking loud
and clear her melodies, the wails
of dying messages long gone.

But it is not to be borne,
this pain, this sobbing wrenching out
all energy and joy once kept
between my cradled arms—
this snarling child, leaping once
twice high to scratch and bite
the feeder of her music by the hand.

No, just let my shriveled,
aching limbs from fighting rest—
'til madness creeps from brittle
heart—unspoken fear
kept hidden, far
too close to keep
for safety.

¹ a musician's nickname for the mark created from grasping a violin or viola (too firmly, perhaps) beneath the chin.

² an instrument constructed by Domingas F. Capela, a Portuguese maker of fine violins and violas from the 1900s.