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Special Focus

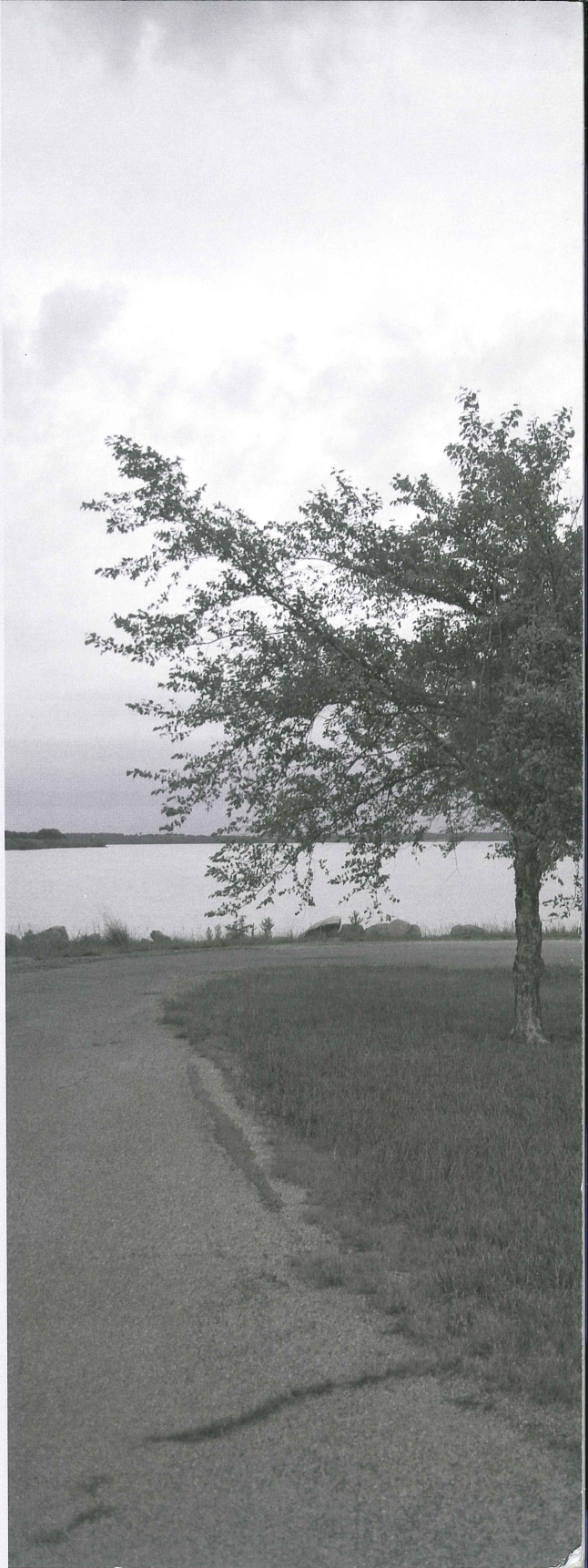
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2009 LAMAR YORK PRIZE FOR NONFICTION

Nancy M. Williams

DESERTING THE PIANO

—For Elizabeth Foreman

I am at East Coast Piano, a boxy, windowless warehouse store on New Jersey's Route 46, because my husband, David, has insisted. In the store's entranceway, I snap at my two children to stop jumping on the coiled rubber doormat. I wrest wrapped mints from their fists to deposit back into the candy bowl. When we file past the front showroom's grand pianos—gaudy with waxed veneers, ostentatious with open flaps and propped lids—I scoff.

Ever since David and our preschooler son, Charlie, began lessons a few months before, my husband has been determined to buy a piano. I am against the purchase. During our discussions, I rain down practical objections: a piano would consume our vacation fund, engulf our living room, and demand costly tunings. Why so great an expense for a four-year-old too young to have discovered his passions? Not to mention (which, thankfully, I do not) a 41-year-old who barely kept time to our wedding waltz, despite the band's exaggerated downbeat.

I suggest we start with an economical keyboard.

"A keyboard doesn't sound right," David says.

"What about the practice rooms?" I ask. David and Charlie take lessons at the local university.

David shakes his head. "That's too far. It will never happen."

Whenever I imagine a piano in our living room, I sense a malignant presence. The piano morphs from an inanimate wooden box with keys, strings, and hammers to a sulking, poisonous guest. Simply by virtue of its constant presence, its wan white keys glowing in our living room, the piano would reproach me.

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To David, I have voiced none of these fantastic fears.

I scuff my boots on East Coast's thin industrial carpet. I expect to feel nothing save more impatience when our salesperson, Tom, opens a hidden, rear door. We step from carpet to concrete, the front showroom's false luxury yielding to a vast warehouse. I draw in a such a large gulp of surprised air that my ribs ache. Crowded in uneven rows, like conversing cocktail guests, are hundreds of pianos, in ebony, ivory, mahogany. Uprights work the scene while, on the periphery, stolid grands mingle. From the 50-foot corrugated tin ceiling, streams of dust motes drift.

My son gasps. "Look at all of these pianos!"

Yes, look at all of these pianos. A desire to stroll the rows and trail my fingers along the keys glimmers inside me. Charlie sprints down the nearest aisle while my toddler, Gracie, ambles in pursuit. Yet I cannot bring myself to follow.

David motions to me. He and Tom stand next to a squat upright in a wine-colored finish, gussied with an ornate music holder. Out of all the grandeur in this room, I wonder why David has chosen this one.

"Hallet, Davis, and Company?" I ask.

David nods. "It's from China. Most pianos are made there now."

"Helps keep the price down," Tom adds.

I cup my fingers in the familiar half-sphere, poised to play. The wrinkled faces on my knuckles stare back at me, confused and alarmed. I press middle-C, followed, one at a time, by the remaining three notes of the C-major chord. The keys submit too readily, producing a bright hollowness.

If I am forced to greet a piano and usher it into my home, then the instrument must have the right sound. Certainly this Hallet-Davis, a cheap starter model for beginners deciding whether to stick with their practice, will never do.

I turn to Tom. "What else do you have?"

David jerks back his head. I have hurt his feelings.

"I just want to see the alternatives," I say. "Didn't you ask for my opinion?"

"Tom and I already spent a lot of time casing this out."

"Give me fifteen minutes."

For the next hour and a half, I shadow Tom, testing twenty different pianos with my truncated C-major arpeggio. With each polite demurrer, Tom recommends a more expensive model. I am enjoying myself, listening keenly as notes reverberate in the dust-twinkling air. David hustles by in pursuit of Charlie and Gracie, who have been pounding their palms on piano keys.

“Almost done?” David asks.

Tom leads me to a large upright in black satin lacquer, a used Yamaha Professional. He unfolds the flat lid. I peek inside at the exposed innards—gold-painted iron plate, wound copper bass strings, steel tuning pins, felt-covered hammers—aligned in comforting precision.

“This gives you some of a grand’s reach without the price,” he says.

I press the keys. The notes sing out, mellow and full-bodied, soaring towards the tin rafters. This is the resonance I have been seeking, the remembered sound of a lost grand.

I stand at Mrs. Foreman’s front door. During the warm Arizona winters, she leaves the door ajar for her piano students. I ring the doorbell, then peer inside the darkened house, the wire-mesh screen prickly against my forehead. Just beyond the short entrance hallway, I can make out the fallboard corner and a carved front leg of the grand piano.

A smile lights Mrs. Foreman’s face as she opens the screen door. I like the way she looks—tall, high forehead smooth, blond hair laced with gray. At twelve years old, I am a late beginner. Just three months before, I started lessons with Mrs. Foreman. A classmate’s mother, she lives on the opposite side of our neighborhood’s cactus-lined golf course. As I greet her, I can hear the enthusiasm in my voice. All week during school, I look forward to my lesson.

I take my place on the bench. Floor-length, pleated, pale-blue drapes, drawn against the dazzling afternoon sunlight, give the living room the feeling of a sanctuary. While I play, Mrs. Foreman listens from a low chair nearby. She compliments me in a quiet voice after I finish. Fleeshy skin under her arm swinging, she makes light pencil notations on the sheet music, then demonstrates a few bars. Her fingers are long and slender, her nails trim.

“Musicians never have long nails,” she declared during my first lesson.

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When I returned home that day, I cut my nails short.

After a year of plinking through beginner books, I graduate to accessible works by Mozart, Bach, and Beethoven, the classical repertoire Mrs. Foreman favors. My daily, hour-long practice after school begins with the twelve major scales, fingers rippling keys in quick succession. Then onto my principal piece, the challenge of decoding intricate passages, the reward of chords' harmony.

In middle school, I hover on the edge of a popular girls' clique headed by my grade-school friend, Kerri. Halfway through eighth grade, we all embark on a chaperoned, overnight camping trip in the Sonoran desert. When we spread our sleeping bags under the ramada, our positions mimic our school cafeteria seating arrangement: Kerri in the center, the other girls aligned on either side, like fence poles fashioned from an ocotillo cactus skeleton. I am one of the end posts.

I break down crying. "I never feel included," I wail.

Lisa hugs me. "Here, you sleep next to Kerri," she says.

The group shuffles the sleeping bags, moving mine to Kerri's right, but I know on Monday, I will regress to my usual cafeteria spot.

I arrive home, gaze bleary from a restless night on the ramada's concrete floor. At the sight of the piano patiently waiting, I fling down my sleeping bag. The wooden bench feels cool against my bare legs. As I roam among the music, sadness sloughs off my shoulders, back, and arms. The notes reverberate in the air, glistening like tiny crystal drops.

All of that happened a long time ago. I close the Yamaha Professional's fall board. I tell Tom I need some time. For the rest of the afternoon, what trickles inside is a hope released by the pianos. That evening, I scoot to my attic home office to research pianos on the Internet. Soon, I hear David's footsteps on the steep stairs.

"I don't get this," he says. "First you say you don't want to help buy the piano. I do all the work. Then you change your mind. Now we're thinking about spending twice as much money but we still don't have a piano."

"This is a long term purchase," I say.

He sighs. "How much longer? Charlie and I need to practice."

“Just give me a week. Two max.”

David throws up his hands, then retreats.

From the Yamaha website, I learn that pianos built for humid Japanese homes often dry out in American houses desiccated from central air and furnaces. Before purchasing a used Yamaha, the company recommends, check the serial number to make sure the instrument is designated for the United States. I call Tom. He waits on the line while I type the serial number into the online form. I stare at the screen's hourglass, blood thrumming against my temples, hoping I might own this piano that sounds like Mrs. Foreman's grand. The result: not good. The piano was manufactured for Japan. Tom clears his throat, as though stymied.

He rallies. “I'm going to find you a good piano,” he says.

For the next three weeks, I click through scores of thumbnail photographs on piano purveyors' websites. David agrees I need more time to find a piano, then buys a Casio electronic keyboard. That night I overhear him telling Charlie and Gracie a new bedtime story: Tom single-handedly quenches an East Coast warehouse fire, saving the Hallet-Davis.

I wander downstairs to the playroom, the keyboard's new home. Leafing through its green songbook, I find a rendition of Pachelbel's Canon, a popular classical piece. With no trills or rapid sixteenth notes common to the Grieg, Beethoven, and Chopin pieces I learned under Mrs. Foreman, the score looks accessible. I center the book on the stand. There's no bench, so I grab a cracked stool.

Already in the first measure, the notes stymie me: is that a high C or an A in the treble clef? And in the third measure, in the bass clef, is the note on the third line a D? The grand staff, which I once knew as fluidly as my multiplication tables, the alphabet even, has practically vanished from my memory. I stumble through the Canon, stopping often to count out a note, then relearn it. My fanny feels stiff on the stool, my left foot has gone numb, and my mind throbs with the painstaking effort. But I do not give up.

Within a week, I play a halting rendition of the Canon. The notes twang on the keyboard, yet Pachelbel's famous yearning melody is unmistakable. Mrs. Foreman used to praise my ability to shimmer the melody in a passage dense with notes. She exalted over my large palms and long fingers. Right thumb on

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middle C, pinky over an octave higher on D, my hand spans nine notes, useful for big chords in the classical repertoire. These piano hands I have inherited from my father, a tacit, involuntary gift from his genes, one of the few badges of approval he ever gave my passion.

I continue practicing the Pachelbel. Late one night, the playroom's doors creak. Startled, my arms rattle and my fingers trip into wrong notes. I cringe at the sight of David. I am afraid he will criticize me for disturbing the family.

Standing next to the French doors, David gives me a nod of encouragement. "That was beautiful," he says.

It takes me a moment to come back to the present. My husband isn't the person who would complain about my playing.

I miss the sound of my father's key twisting the front door lock. Fourteen, two years into my lessons, I am memorizing Debussy's *Rêverie* for the spring recital. The *Rêverie*'s high notes chime the melody. Accompanying arpeggios swirl in the bass. The music fills me so completely that whenever I pass the piano in our living room, I crave its sounds.

My father forbids me to practice when he is at home. A widely published professor, he coddles his graduate students but rarely compliments my playing. Now that I am in high school, I squeeze in my practice shortly after disembarking the school bus. My mother often greets me at the door. Why don't you sit down at the piano right now? she suggests. Underneath her forced cheeriness trembles a layer of nervousness.

Today, even as my father creaks open the front door, I continue playing. My left hand streams up and down the keyboard while my father charges through the hallway. Sparks of irritation fly from the points of his swinging elbows. In one hand he grips his briefcase, crammed no doubt with his students' papers, while from the other hand dangle, from their plastic ribbon, five cans of Miller Lite beer.

I hear his briefcase clatter on the kitchen counter, then a deadening thump from the freezer door. He has just deposited his room-temperature six-pack, bereft of the beer he gulped during his drive home from the university, into the freezer to chill. His deep, complaining voice churns over Debussy's pealing melody. My throat constricts, my right foot quivers on the damper pedal, but

I persist with the *Rêverie*.

My mother rushes into the living room. "Your father is tired after a long day." Her voice is mechanical. "He asked that you stop."

I still my fingers but remain on the bench. Debussy's peaceful white whole notes, undulating eighth notes, and jaunty triplets gaze at me, hopeful and waiting. I have a right to practice. It is not as though I lounge on the freak wall after school like some kids, puffing a joint. This time the *Rêverie*'s melody tolls like a lamenting church bell.

My father blows into the room, a hurricane with his right hand raised. His eyes bulge. "Stop that goddamned music!" he roars.

"Okay!" I scream.

He slams the fall board, just missing my fingers. I duck, scramble off the bench before his stinging palm slaps my head, and careen to my room.

Now I have regressed from whirling Debussy's arpeggios to pulsing out the Pachelbel. The Casio's electric keys bounce like cheap mattress springs. Yet I am free to play whenever I wish, for as long as I like. Sliding into old habits, I spend an hour every night at the keyboard. Alone in the playroom, concentrating on the music, I feel time slow, each moment suspended. Soon, I memorize the Canon.

Six weeks after our family expedition to East Coast Piano, Tom calls about a new shipment, a barely used Yamaha Professional manufactured for the American market. The next day in the warehouse, Tom leads me to a large upright, its shellacked black finish unmarred. The piano is only five years old. Tom flicks open the fall board as though presenting a game show prize.

"Go ahead. Play it," he says.

I hesitate. Why not the Pachelbel? But what if I forget the music or pound the keys because I am used to the spongy keyboard? What if my playing sounds dislocated in this warehouse cavern? My fingers stiffen. I resort to rippling the C-major arpeggio.

Tom beams, the ends of his white mustache smiling along with his lips. "What do you think?"

The sound is a tad bright but nonetheless vibrant and sonorous. The keys feel pleasantly weighted. Fear drums inside me, echoing in my chest cavity,

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until it threatens to muffle my voice.

“Sounds okay,” I manage to say.

“This piano is in mint condition. Here—”

Tom’s stubby fingers graze the keys, picking a barely audible, although vaguely familiar tune. I can tell by his doughy fingers that he has learned this one song for demonstrating pianos. He must think I cannot play. I want to cry out *No! I studied the piano for four intense years! I was on the verge of becoming an accomplished classical pianist.*

It sickens me that I would consider blurting this. I cannot look at Tom after he finishes.

“Shall I draw up the paperwork?” he asks.

“No.”

Tom folds his arms across his chest. “The price I’m offering is good for two weeks.” His voice is stern. “Then this piano goes out on the floor.”

On the drive home, my fingers clench the steering wheel while my stomach heaves up and down from dread and also anticipation. I plan to have a licensed technician examine this Yamaha Professional. What if it passes the inspection? The piano will lodge in my living room, next to the bay window. Whenever I pass by, the stalwart form and shiny black finish will attract me. The expanse of white keys, crowned with slender black flats, will beckon. I will slide onto the bench and, with a sense of quiet belonging, will play.

How to account for my twenty-five years of musical silence? An eerie quiet, that, as the years went by, meant the disintegration and waste of my passion. Once in my twenties, I tried to reclaim the piano. David and I, newly married and searching for jobs, lived in a residence hotel. Waiting for recruiters’ calls, I played the hotel’s piano in a small room off the lobby. Change split apart the seams of my routine to reveal my desire. But after a few months of practice, excuses like my new work schedule flared. I repaired the rent seams, needle puncturing fabric, the temporary openings stitched more tightly than before.

After my father exploded at me for rehearsing the *Rêverie*, I wonder whether he finds my playing jarring or even ugly. But I take the nicks of hurt and continue my practice. I perform the Debussy at Mrs. Foreman’s spring recital.

My father also carries on with his routine, managing his professor job despite consuming every night a six-pack of beer, three glasses of cheap red wine, and mint liqueur spooned over ice cream. He is an alcoholic: this my mother has explained to me and my three younger sisters. Saturdays present the most danger, for once every few months my father will kick start the weekend with his first drink after breakfast. Despite our family's attempted distractions, he guzzles twice his daily helping, until in the middle of the night, he tips into a drunken rage. Rousing the entire family, he lines us up, sleepy and afraid, to listen to his litany of problems, a perverted lecture that can grind on for hours. None of us, he asserts over and over, love him.

I find refuge in my piano practice and weekly lessons. Shortly before my sixteenth birthday, Mrs. Foreman bestows on me the final program spot for the spring recital, an honor she reserves for her most advanced student. In the air-conditioned church hall, the folding chair's icy-cold metal rim sears my bare arms. I repeatedly ball then unravel a tissue. One by one, students ascend the stairs to the grand piano, elevated on a carpeted dais.

I am to perform Edvard Grieg's concert work, *Wedding Day* at Trolldhaugen. For half a year, I labored over the *Wedding Day*. Wading through the music's unfamiliar passages felt like trudging through an Arizona wash's fine, silted sand. I have memorized the piece for tonight's recital.

Dropping my shredded tissue, I head for the stage, conscious of a hundred pairs of watching eyes, my parents and sisters among them. My taut fingers brush the opening notes' hopeful staccato. I spring into a nineteenth-century, Norwegian country wedding march. Then a brief passage of little trills, like wedding guests whispering with anticipation, flows into stately chords. In these majestic notes, I imagine, the Trolldhaugen couple speaks their vows.

When I reach the *poco tranquillo*, the slow, songlike jewel in the piece's center, my wrists and fingers roll glissando chords with reverence. The betrothed couple, I imagine, slips away from their guests and gazes with wonder down the long path of their life together. They are already nostalgic for their joys and sorrows.

The music rollicks towards the final passage. Up and down the octaves my hands climb with complex chords, which gradually diminish to *pianissimo*'s whisper. My fingers hang suspended over the keys. I pounce a two-handed,

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D-major, explosive fortissimo chord of clipped staccato. It is the wedding party's final whoop of celebration.

As I stand and bow, relieved and yet happy, it is as though my sphere of being has expanded, sheltered by the played Wedding Day notes. No longer billowing with sound, but still lingering in the air, the notes form around me an protective orb. The applause continues. The notes flush a deep gold, then glitter their congratulations.

Mrs. Foreman hurries over and grasps my hands. "How wonderful that was," she says.

Parents weave between rows of folding chairs. I find my father next to the buffet table.

"Dad, did you like it?"

He swallows hard, as though ridding his throat of little pebbles of disgust. "That was a little dramatic, now, wasn't it?"

A little dramatic? Confusion churns inside me. Did I rock my body to the beat? Maybe I closed my eyes during the poco tranquillo? At home, my father often stresses being calm and cool in public. Perhaps I embarrassed him when I exposed my secret desire for the music. He must have cringed when, in a flamboyant way, I thundered the final chord.

"Dad, that's how the music was written. To play that last chord loud, I had to lift my hands, you know?" I arc my fingers in the shape of D-major.

My father scans the crowd, as though about to begin a graduate lecture. "As I said, it was a bit dramatic."

His eyes shellacked, his cheeks drooping, his lips so full they appear numb, he is clearly drunk. The two cherry tomatoes he plucks from the vegetable tray roll around the rim of his flimsy paper plate like roulette balls. He turns away and moves down the buffet line.

A hot shame burns my cheeks. How many in the audience snickered at my swaying body or quietly guffawed after the final chord? Something inside of me, the part of myself that has resisted for the past four years my father berating me for practicing, collapses.

Over the next few days, I realize that during those long months when I learned the Wedding Day, as though plodding through a desert wash's soft sand, that I was not alone. My father walked behind me. He was not there

to chart my progress with pride, nor to whisper encouragement if I faltered, certainly not to catch me if I fell. Instead, with a rake he erased my footsteps. Now when I turn around to look at the expanse of wash floor behind me, I see I have left behind nothing.

I do not desert the piano right away. At my next lesson, Mrs. Foreman suggests I learn the first movement of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*, haunting in C-sharp minor. I tack on five more pieces, including a Chopin nocturne and some Joplin ragtime music. At first Mrs. Foreman looks startled. Then she shakes her head, as though recollecting herself.

"You have such wonderful ambition," she says.

School lets out for the summer. I turn sixteen. The sun insinuating hot rays through the blinds and baking the living room, I cannot summon my usual vigor for practice. I have piled on too many pieces, a desert mule weighed by an unreasonable burden, slowing its pace until it falters. I am making it possible to unload the piano.

After Mrs. Foreman leaves for her August vacation, I clamor to my mother: I want to quit. Resigned, she phones Mrs. Foreman in early September. A month later, I spin from my hallway locker to face Mrs. Foreman's daughter, Becky. We are both juniors at the high school. Thin ribbons of worry crease Becky's forehead above her wire-rimmed eyeglasses.

"You're not taking lessons anymore?" she asks.

"Me? I don't have time to practice."

"Please," Becky says. "Think about it. My mother is so sad to lose you."

She walks away, holding against her leg her matte-black flute case, lined I know with a deep-blue crushed velvet, the color of the Arizona sky at nightfall as it blackens into darkness, the color of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*.

If I had learned the *Moonlight Sonata*, if I had continued lessons with Mrs. Foreman, what might I have become? Would I have studied the piano in college? Would I have considered performing? I am afraid to consider these questions.

Three days after Tom shows me the barely-used Yamaha Professional, I arrange for a licensed technician to inspect the instrument. I doubt the technician will uncover any problems. I have exhausted all possible reasons

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not to buy a piano.

Later that evening, my children asleep, David traveling, the house is still with a concentrated listening. I have begun work on a new piece in the green songbook, a simple arrangement of Gounod's Ave Maria. But even accounting for the springy keyboard, the lyrical melody sounds rigid. And no wonder: arms clamped against ribcage, shoulders thrust high, insides taut like a spool wound tightly with thread, I am holding my body stiffly. It is as though I am protecting myself from an amorphous threat.

I remove my fingers from the keyboard.

I have not lived in the same house with my father since my college freshman year, when he divorced my mother. Nowadays, every few months, our conversations bump along telephone wires between Arizona, where he has become professor emeritus, to my home in New Jersey. We keep in touch by virtue of his reluctant, brief apology for some of his drunken sprees during my childhood. I am resigned that he is the only father I will ever have, and that time for this aging man may be running short. As an adult, I have grown to understand how his alcoholism only served to puddle over his own pain, not relieve it. Yet somehow all of these years, I have kept my struggle with him over the piano tamped down, hidden even from myself.

Lurking in the playroom corner is the disapproving ghost of my father's younger self. Skulking there is the man who raged when I practiced and who humiliated me the night of my Wedding Day recital. I have allowed memories of my father—his face, heavy with drink and sneering with disdain, and his looming hand, poised to strike—to bar me from the piano.

On the sheet music propped in front of me, black and white notes glisten with possibility. Pivoting on the stool, I glare at my father's shadow in the playroom corner. For the first time in my life, I command him: *Get Out*.