After Music by Joel Gardner

**IT WAS NIGHT,** the Sage City concert had just let out, and we all—seven of us—made our way to the hole in the fence around Lake Paran, a pond really, right in the heart of North Bennington. The night was warm. It was summer. Tchaikovsky’s Sixth (the *Pathétique*) was still surging in my head, a mud-caked monster of cellos and violins I had managed to pierce with my French horn, a few bright, clear notes still ringing in my chest as we walked. I had just turned seventeen and this summer moved up to first chair. The opening of the program had been a concerto for woodwinds, some of the parts hand-inked, just for the night’s performance.

The composer of the new piece walked with his wife behind me as I led the way through the fence. I glanced back every so often, held back a branch, or warned of a root or stone one of them might trip on. I tried not to look back too often—tried not to get caught looking—but I couldn’t help myself. I had never seen a more beautiful woman. The slightest of creases formed on her forehead as she gazed down at the ground, thinking or remembering: present, yet in a dream. Nia had a small blade of a nose and a smile not easy to read, red lips from a Sargent painting. She swept away a lock of hair, ink dark, as she stepped over a root. She may have been thirty. She carried herself across the ground in a floating gait, a subtle difference to her movement I ascribed to the idea—ridiculous, I knew—that possibly she didn’t need to touch the earth like the rest of us, but in making a show of attention to the ground, hoped to hide her gift of subtle levitation.

Once through the fence, now stepping out onto close-cropped grass, we approached the concession stand, shuttered, smelling faintly of rank grease, of moldy bread, of scorched cotton candy. My father, the famed (Tanglewood, Berlin) Maestro Thompsen, strode in the lead, a bottle of wine in one hand, pipe in the other, belting out a stanza of a poem in German. My sister, following some distance behind the rest of us, called to her two friends, kids from town who didn’t play anything, “Smoke ’em if you got ’em!” She’d slipped a ratty army jacket over her white concert blouse, the sleeves hanging down to her fingertips. Her blond shock of hair, somehow already a tangle, fell over the collar of the coat. The three paused to light up at the bleacher seats set in concrete ranks overlooking Lake Paran. Below, a dented aluminum rowboat nosed into the dock, ringing against it from time to time, moving on an unseen breeze.

**I turned** to see Nia look back at her husband, Jimmy, ten years older, a musical genius with a kind face, acne ravaged. The way she slowed for him was elegant, hardly perceptible, but I could see his face relax, as if some secret signal passed between them.

I struggled to find something good I might say about his piece. I had not liked the horn part; it was almost a chamber work, too intimate for my taste. Little puffs of notes when what I wanted was to soar. My girlfriend—another horn player—was supposed to meet us at the dock. I felt a twinge of relief she hadn’t shown up yet, a sting of guilt knowing I hoped this meant she wouldn’t.

Ahead, down the slope, his shoes kicked off, his pants rolled up to his knees already—I hadn’t seen him put down the wine or his pipe—my father turned to us, his arms outstretched, and he sang in his beautiful voice, a ringing tenor, tripping into falsetto, the first lines of “Im Abendrot” from Strauss’s *Four Last Songs.* He broke off to implore Jimmy to sit on the dock with him. “Let your wife swim. My son is strong. He’ll save her if she starts to drown.” Jimmy briskly walked down to him, with an apologetic bow to Nia, his lips pursed.

I looked over at my sister, who rolled her eyes and forced a tornado of smoke above the heads of the two boys vying for her affection. The smaller one sat turned partially away from her, playing the silent type, while the other, who’d loaned her the army coat and wouldn’t get it back, made great arcs with both arms, trying to capture her with a story. I heard *Jeep,* and *deer,* and *couldn’t get off a shot.* She rolled her eyes again and tipped her ash, tossing her head dismissively as she grimly watched him collapse in laughter at his own joke.

“Guys,” she said, “let’s go find something to drink.” They finished their cigarettes and went back the way we’d all come, disappearing into the woods.

It was then I felt rather than saw Nia move by me, my face turning to follow the drift of her perfume. She’d moved off into the dark several yards to the right by the time my eyes found her. As she walked, her two hands met behind her back, under her blouse, and unclasped her bra. I continued as I had been going, following the path behind the concession stand ahead, went around it, and stripped off my own clothes, wondering what I was doing, folding them with a fussiness that wasn’t like me. I stacked them on a picnic table. My mind was in flight; I felt as though I were watching myself from a distance as I did these things. Though nearsighted without them, I chose to leave my glasses tucked into one of my shoes.

Standing nude in the shadow of the metal awning over the picnic area, I could make out my father sitting on the edge of the dock, below, tamping tobacco into the bowl of his pipe, legs dangling in the water. He spoke with Jimmy in low tones, pitching him on his idea for an opera, one I’d heard a thousand times, about a Southern detective, an alcoholic prone to visions. My father’s tuxedo shirt shimmered. His bare calves and feet, visible just under the dark surface of the lake, glowed by some trick of the light, seeming in their nakedness as though they might belong to someone else.

I went down the slope to the blurred edge of the water and slipped in quietly, just at the margin where sand beach gave way to grass. The water was cool, a shock to my skin. Mud pushed between my toes, and I crouched in the shallow water, once it was above my knees, working my way into the lake. I drew a sharp breath and launched forward as soon as I could swim. Silence pressed against my ears, my head underwater, and weeds growing from the bottom, floating just below the surface, invisible, grazed my arms and legs, thrilling and repelling me at the same time. I swam out far beyond the end of the dock, toward the middle of the small lake. I felt foolish, out there alone. I misunderstood, now I was sure. I couldn’t see any great distance without my glasses, especially in this dark. Once well out, I turned in the water to look back toward the beach, and then I saw Nia, luminous, yet distinct, a dozen yards away. She let go of the edge of the rowboat by the dock and disappeared under the still surface. I panicked, but soon she came up much closer to me than I would have thought possible.

She swam with an easy grace, her hair wet and slicked back after a few powerful strokes of a crawl. Then slowing, rolling out of the crawl, she closed the gap between us with a breast stroke, her bare chest pale and cresting the water ahead as she came within a few feet of me and slowed to a stop, treading water. She smiled. Nia floated in water as she did over ground. I felt like a stone beside a beautiful cloud. Nia’s shoulders were the perfect shape that bone and muscle, skin and, yes, fat could make. I wanted to cup them in my hands. Instead, I listened to my heart beat in my throat. The dark surface of the lake around her head, elegant neck, and shoulders hardly stirred, only an occasional riffle to hint at the movement of her body underwater.

I was a good swimmer, but treading water had forever eluded me. I had no patience for waiting, only going. I’d move my arms too fast, or didn’t trust enough in my body’s ability to float. I was doing the wrong thing with my hands. Occasional violent splashes erupted around me, though I tried to match Nia’s calm.

“You have a beautiful tone,” she said. My mind raced to think what she meant, still trying to figure out why I worked so hard when she didn’t. “Have you been playing many years?”

Jimmy and my father were now singing in two-part harmony, or not quite, their words slurred, a mangled version of the duet in the moonlight from *La Bohème,* my father taking the part of the young woman who has lost her key, their Italian sprinkled with *something-somethings* when they didn’t know the words.

“Thank you,” I said. “About four years, seriously.” I let myself sink under to my forehead, blinked my eyes briefly underwater, then came up again for air. “Do you play?” I asked. A blur of her shape, a glimpse a fraction of a second long, formed an afterimage Venus on the movie screen inside my head, and I felt myself blush, realizing she must know I had looked.

Her smile forgave me, even if she suspected. “Not so much anymore,” she said. “Flute. I was Jimmy’s student.” I realized he was perhaps a few years older, even, than I had thought. She tipped her head to the side. There was hardly any light, but what there was, a gibbous moon, now coming out from behind clouds, caught the planes of Nia’s temple and cheekbone, delicate, blue-white as in an unfinished painting. I could see almost nothing of her face, in shadow, but we were close enough I could hear when she smiled, and I could sense the row of her teeth, a soft glow. Her eyes sparkled in the darkness among soft shadows suggesting nose, lips, brow. The moon painted the line of her chin. I could feel the shape of her movement below the water, waves of pressure passing from her body to mine and mine to hers. I was aware—tried again not to look—of the blur of her nipples, dark against her blue breasts floating and rapidly changing shape as if reflected in a funhouse mirror.

I knew that if we touched—if I were to reach and place my palm on her shoulder, or she to touch my cheek—I would never recover. And I knew it was impossible, a fantasy in my own mind. She was swimming, I was swimming, and that was all this could be. She was a woman, after all, and I wasn’t yet real.

I asked, “Did he write what we played tonight for you?” I thought back on the music, let it come to me, without forcing it. All the good phrases had gone to the flute, I thought. Melodies. A kind of voicing like language may have sounded to me as a child, so young I didn’t have words.

She shook her head. “For someone else.” She turned, swam away a few strokes, then turned to face me, her face impassive, a sadness just flickering in her expression, now that I could see her in the moonlight. I could feel her gaze like a hand, touching my face, the steadiness of the act of her truly seeing me. With a move of her head, she invited me to follow her farther out into the lake. She tilted into her crawl. Though her feet never broke the surface, the curve of her hips rotated out of the water, tantalizing, her hips and thighs powerful. In the dark, Lake Paran grew larger, more mysterious, a world giving way to another world.

I held on to her words, *someone else.* I wondered what they meant for me.

**I paused** to catch my breath and looked back toward the dock. My father stood, his bright shirt and broad chest—his movement—enough for me to know him, to separate him from the formless dark. He cupped his hands around his mouth. “We’re going to find a piano!” he shouted, then left us with a wave of his arm as he turned away. Jimmy looked but didn’t wave. Then he turned away also and walked beside my father. They had disappeared, next I looked, into the woods.

Something white at the end of the dock caught my attention when I looked that second time, and for a moment my heart raced. But it was not my girlfriend, waiting on the dock for me. We had not slept together. I didn’t know why I thought of her as my girlfriend. My anger at this thought surprised me. I turned it to churning the water, racing to catch Nia. When I came close, the small vertical crease in her forehead gave away that she was thinking, perhaps deciding.

“Do you have a girlfriend?” she asked.

I was startled, and it must have shown, because she laughed. Kindly. A sweet waterfall of forgiveness.

“No,” I lied. I could feel the work of treading water, my arms warm, growing heavier. “Well, kind of,” I admitted.

Nia smiled fully, showing all her teeth, her mouth slightly too large for the rest of her features, but pleasantly so. I could see her clearly now, rivulets of water streaking her cheek, maybe tears, but I dismissed that thought.

She said, “She is very lucky. I wonder if she knows.” She drifted in close now. What passed between us then was pure presence. I could hear her tongue inside her mouth as she spoke the words, a pleasant clicking sound as it touched and pulled away from her teeth. “You have only kissed.” There was nothing I could say.

She touched my cheek then brushed a lock of my hair aside—I wore it long back then—and she held it a moment, waiting, her eyes on my forehead. Her fingertips were cool, but her breath was warm on my face. She kissed me lightly, first, then looked me in the eye for a full second before kissing me again. Longer, a kiss I fell into like a falling star.

I was embarrassed. I had an erection and was afraid it might graze her leg, or worse. I let my legs drift back, my arms looping, gathering water to my chest to keep my head up. “That was nice,” I said.

“I’m torturing you,” she said. “It isn’t fair.” Now I saw there were tears.

*Someone else* echoed again. We swam back toward the dock. I followed her at first, ashamed, in a thrill that was also panic, then caught up to her, drew alongside, matching her stroke for stroke. I knew that I was in love. Also that I was completely ridiculous, that truly I would never get over her, even if this was all there ever was.

**We swam** side by side, not racing, not slow. When we reached the dock—everyone gone—we each put a hand up and hung from the deck. Nia reached for my free hand, laced her fingers into mine, and drew me slowly so close her breasts touched my chest. I felt like she was teaching me to dance, after the music. We kissed again, still floating, but now my feet could nearly touch down. Her lips were warm, yielding—nothing like my girlfriend’s brusque, manlike kisses, lips rigid.

From wherever she’d shed them, her husband had brought Nia’s clothes and left them neatly folded at the edge of the dock. I felt a sting of remorse, regret for what I hadn’t even done, but wanted. Beside her skirt, her bra, her blouse, and folded panties stood a perfect sculpture of a female foot gleaming in the moonlight. The ankle, the calf, then a tapering to disappearance of the rest of a woman’s form into the night air. I must have looked at it for some time before understanding flooded in.

“Mine,” Nia said. “I was born without it.”

I turned to look at her again, to take her in, exactly as she was. This close I could see in the moonlight every detail of her face, every pore in her skin, the tiny dimples at the top of each cheek, just below her eyes. A few light freckles ran over the bridge of her nose. A small, star-shaped scar marked one cheek above the corner of her lip. Water pooled in the hollows above her collarbone as she pulled herself up with the hand on the dock, lifting herself a few inches out of the lake, then sinking back.

“Come with me,” I said. “I know a place.”

She watched me for some time, squeezing my fingers, still clasped in hers, but didn’t answer.

Yet she followed. I climbed the ladder, then turned to help her out of the lake. She slipped on her leg, and I carried her clothes to where I’d left mine. At the picnic table, we dressed each other, frank now in our nakedness, she and I of this earth and forever incomplete, before going on to where we could unclothe each other, lie together in wordless hunger for such short, sweet, sorrowful time as we could steal, and give.