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Symphony

Bethany Frankel

Gettysburg College, franbe02@gettysburg.edu

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Symphony

Author Bio

Bethany Frankel is a sophomore English major with a Writing Concentration with a double minor in Educational and Peace & Justice Studies. When not writing her novel and drinking copious amounts of coffee, she can be found working on her music or petting dogs. She was born and raised in Delaware, which is, in fact, a state.

Symphony

i. concerto

The first time he smiled at me, I thought he looked nice. It was the dawning of summer--sophomore year, untamed hair and train track teeth, and the beginning of being defined. The air in the music hallway was sticky with humidity and strained notes. My hair streamed down my back, a layer of sweat between the strands and my skin, and my new sneakers made no sound on the tile floor. The room stopped talking, stopped moving, stopped everything when I opened the door--all eyes turning to me, the only girl in the entire brass section. Time seemed to stay still as I hovered uncertainly between my past and future, but then I was surrounded by boys tripping over each other to introduce themselves and stand next to me. From the first moment they laid eyes on me, I was already at a disadvantage. Already being separate, *other* because of my gender.

The band director made a big show of my arrival, clapping my shoulder and telling the group all about me--"she's crossing over from choir, been playing trumpet since the fourth grade, involved with theater, a real musical talent"--already bragging about me like a foster father, already weaving the strands of my legacy. A musical prodigy at age fifteen. I watched the eyes of the semi-circle alight, the words sparking something different in each boy who eagerly trailed their gaze over the hint of swaying hips--a dozen degrees of want, of making me into something more than I was.

He was the only one that looked at me with any sense of normalcy. His smile held nothing more than friendliness, no trace of desire or flame flickering behind irises. Maybe that was why I was drawn to him. I wondered what it would take for him to look at me like all the others, if desire could darken his almond eyes. But he just gave me music to learn for the next week's rehearsal, and I waited for the day when his smile would share a secret. Two months later, when his hand brushed mine for the first time, we both knew that he was more than just my section leader and there was more between us than three years.

We began to mirror each other, our lives running on perpendicular tracks that met every time we could communicate without ever saying a word. He was a symphony of sound, never able to keep quiet; it came in tapping his foot against the band room floor, pressing trumpet valves, cracking the bones at his neck back hands. I turned the habit into a release: intertwining my fingers like I imagined his hand sliding in mine, and twisting until the crack satisfied my pining.

There were so many reasons why we couldn't be together--he was graduating in nine months, he had just gotten out of a serious relationship, the age gap could not be bridged, and no one could know about it. About us. The whole thing had to remain a secret. The smiles he tossed to me from across the room were only small tokens, sentiments that kept me believing one day could be exchanged in public. I got so accustomed to it that I never noticed his flash of teeth were like thorns and the notes he created made me bleed without realizing. To this day, I still place my fingers together and pull. Wait for the crack. It's unconscious, something I don't even realize until the sound drifts to my ears. It

makes me feel like he's still waiting for me to return his smile.

ii. legato

The earliest parties I can remember all occurred at Dave's house. He was an old college friend of my dad, someone who shared his passion for fishing trips and the sweet intoxicating scent of wine right after the cork popped. My friends and I were too small to reach the hors d'oeuvres on the table, but we slid perfectly beneath the legs of strangers draped in dark lipstick and polished shoes. My mom always slipped us a few deviled eggs before ushering us upstairs, through the wooden suffocating steps that led to the attic. We settled onto the moss green couch, and she popped in a movie to keep us occupied when she returned to the glamorous haze of tinkling glasses and laughter. My attention was only half-focused on the television, always partially drawn to the window that led to the street three stories below, the streetlight pooling over undeniable concrete. Sometimes, I would get so daring as to rest my knees on the windowsill and press my fingertips against the cold glass. I looked down and imagined what it would be like to jump. I only wondered what the fall would be like--I never thought about what the end would be. The pain of collision and the deadly impact upon arrival.

Falling in love with him made me realize how fatal the crash could be.

It seemed so harmless from the outside: flirting through text messages, his fingers dripping down my back, driving home with show tunes filtering from the radio. A young girl in Disneyworld pulled on her mom's dress and pointed to us: "they look like a prince and a princess." The royalty of the music department--him wearing a brass crown, perfectly refined in the art of winding hearts around his finger; me draped in the pain of three years to come, the musical martyr, a songbird that loses its voice.

(When I'm with you,
it's poison deadly fatal,
but I would jump off a bridge
if you told me it would save you.)

When I was younger, I was under the impression that jumping from a window would never actually hurt me. It was all about the rush of falling and flying, feeling the wind surround me. Landing was an afterthought, something that didn't pose a real threat. I thought that I was invincible when I was growing up. I never knew that one smile could cause me to tumble headfirst, three stories down to the sidewalk below.

iii. accelerando

If you look in the dictionary, there are eight definitions of *perfect*. Flawless, without fault. Complete. Contented, satisfied. In music, a perfect interval occurs when the chord sounds right even if notes are inverted. Even if it looks to be contrasting from up close, it sings in unison.

It started out with texting. When I was around him in person, I stuttered over my words and my nerves fluttered against my heart like a thousand monarchs, their paper-thin wings brushing the empty space inside of me. I felt more in control when he couldn't see me blushing behind my flip phone, savoring every vibration that signaled a new message. Maybe I fell more in love with the

symphonies his words created in me than with him.

My dad and I had been in the car for over thirteen hours, the endless road wearing thin tires and patience. He pulled off at the first open rest stop in Vermont, leaving me curled in the passenger seat as he filled his coffee cup and the gas tank. The moon was high in the ink sky, the night alive with the distant shrieks of birds and cars on a forgotten highway. The light of the convenience store illuminated discarded cigarettes and rainbow oil spills. I felt like the only person left in this wooded corner of the world, not a drop of exhaustion within me. There was only the plexiglass window separating me from the real world and only a phone separating me from him.

My phone left me glowing, an artificial battery energizing me; I ran my fingers across the plastic words like I imagined his lips against mine. All day, we had been discussing our futures--much more immediate for him; he kept reminding me that he graduated in eight months, and I kept denying the thought. I told him the dreams I had engraved on my heart since age seven, ripping open my skin for him to see me raw, rare. I wanted to be a writer; I wanted to use my pen as a sword and save the world. But I wasn't good enough, all the odds were against me, I wasn't *perfect*. Nerves twisted around my throat, anxiously awaiting his reply. I was expecting electronic laughter, his scientific brain dismissing my color-by-numbers anatomy. One incoming text: "You're plenty perfect." I wondered what it would be like to hear him say such lovely things in person, instead of hiding behind technology. Instead of stringing me along in sentences and trapping me between syllables. Those three words were the closest I ever got to a confession--the space between Vermont and Delaware and three years and everything left unsaid plagued me.

When he texted me, it was always easy to forget the line between fantasy and reality--final, the sharp slice of a knife when I paired his warm words with the cold freezing the lines of his face. I caught him shooting glimpses at me in the band room, neutral until our eyes met and his mouth turned down. "You're plenty perfect" twirled on repeat through my mind, but I could see his disappointment. Every time I missed a note, every time I played a rhythm wrong or missed my cue. It was the slight shake of his head, the frustrated sigh meant for my ears only. Doing my best was not doing enough for him. He wanted more and more, and I wasn't enough. Wasn't perfect. Wasn't even close.

Soon, it wasn't just his voice or his words that could unravel me--it was his silence, the absence of sound as my fingers slipped off the trumpet valves and my lungs constricted. One frown from him and my hands started to shake and the music blurred around me. The chair flipped over when I ran from the room, not able to get enough air with everyone's eyes on the back of my neck: the clarinets with their reeds still between lips; the band director, his baton hovering in the air with uncertainty; him, rolling his eyes and shaking his head. I rushed to the bathroom, on the verge of tears when my palms pressed against a locked door. Some girl with a red smile and sympathetic eyes turned the key in the lock and I tumbled onto the tile floor. My fingers clutched the porcelain sink, knuckles turning white as I gripped it like a lifeline, something to keep me from drowning in my own tears.

All I see is the disappointment every time he looks at me. Eyes burning a hole in me. Burning my lungs as they heave for oxygen that doesn't exist. Self-

inflicted asphyxiation. I gasp for a breath, but my body has forgotten how to keep me alive. Salt streaks my face, body collapsing and curling to hold my ribs from breaking outward. I know that he doesn't think I'm perfect anymore. He probably never did.

I'm trapped inside my own head. Screaming, banging on the door of my mind, but it's locked, and there's no help. *How do I get out of here how do I disappear how do I become perfect--*

A knock sounded on the door, not waiting for my reply before entering. The girl from before kneeled beside me, gently removing my hands from the sink and holding them like birds ready to take flight. Her blue eyes looked like mine, back when they were kind. Her smile revealed white porcelain teeth, and I wanted to hold on to this one small act of humanity. She coaxed me into a sitting position, speaking softly and rubbing circles on the backs of my hands --calming, taming the hurricane of insecurities.

"You can do it," she said, encouraging words from the bathroom floor. "You are strong and you can make it through this. You are more than enough. Just breathe with me. In, out."

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A wave of peace washed over me, my grin matching hers when we parted ways. Back to the band room, where glances silently questioned me and I ignored them. I couldn't get this one lick right in Vesuvius, and my chest tightened with his dissatisfied sigh--but I kept on playing, even if my hands trembled. I kept playing despite every second of disappointment, every thing he wanted to fix in me. I kept playing and singing and dancing--I kept up the act, played the role of *being perfect* because to admit his words triggered a panic in me would be to admit weakness.

I was never perfect enough for him. He proved that when he slept with my friend and grinned like the devil.

iv. staccato

I held my cup high above my head, raised above the makeshift dance floor in a stranger's living room. Of all the faces my gaze snagged on, I only recognized two people--neither of them him, neither of them me. I couldn't even feel my body anymore. The only thing that felt real was the deafening pound

of the electronic bass, unwillingly dragging me back to nights in his car. The rain pouring on the roof as he told me about what he feared. I could still taste the memory of words that hovered on my tongue, left unsaid: *What I fear most is losing you.*

Instead of him disappearing, the person that got lost was me. I locked myself in the bathroom--three a.m., tile floor decorated with discarded solo cups. The reflection in the mirror was unrecognizable, the product of too much alcohol and not enough sanity. My breath was tainted with brandy, and he was the reason for the drink in my hand. My friend was singing from the other side of the door, begging for me to rejoin the crowd of people I had met two hours before.

These were not like the parties I had gone to as a kid. There were no movies and pretty people in pretty dresses. This was not a game of play pretend, but something with real consequences. I went for a drive to my friend's house, and she slid behind the wheel, three drinks too many to see clearly. My heart shriveled up in my chest as I stepped out of the car and landed at another party. It was a vicious cycle, a series of weekend attempts to drop myself into the glass bottle and hope that I could drown the part of me that cared for him. Even drunk as hell, I couldn't erase the image of his eyes lowering when he realized how far I'd fallen.

I looked at the other me in the mirror--the girl with the same eyes as me, but with none of their kindness. Just two storm clouds in place of irises. I hated seeing what I had done, what some boy had reduced me to. My reflection begged me not to throw everything away just because one boy had smiled at me, and I had fallen for it.

I needed to feel like I was in control--of my love, of my melody, of my life. I refused to let him conduct what happened to me. The last thing I wanted was to let someone mold me into the perfect puppet--twist my arm this way and I dance, move my leg and I march in formation. Once my heart stopped bleeding, I bandaged my brokenness in the beat of the drums.

v. rubato

My whole life revolved around music. The calendar was booked, every paper square overflowing with a stressful schedule and color-coated reminders. Marching band, symphonic band, brass ensemble, jazz band, women's choir, advanced choir, musical theatre, theory and composition, a cappella rehearsal. I spent more hours cleaning shoe scuffs off tiled floors with tennis balls than I did sinking into the tan couch my parents bought for their first house. People joked that I lived at school--it would have been easier to shower in the locker room and sleep in the nurse's office than go home to a bed haunted by thoughts of his smile finally meaning something. I tried to detach myself in the days of the week, but I kept being tugged back to that balmy April night. The crisp breeze after the Disneyworld humidity, alone with him on Main Street. Just another ordinary town in America. His fingers gripped mine as fireworks exploded over the castle, and my heart turned into a metronome. Beat, beat, beating out of control.

I never could get the tempo right.

When he graduated, I plugged the hole in me with the sweet symphony of

three years. Music streamed from my fingertips and penetrated every moment spent between the band room and the choir room and the peeling, painted stage. Dedication shown in the bags beneath my eyes, determination proved through constant repetition--run the scene one more time, aim for the high B, and stay even after everyone else has gone home. Stay until it's perfect, just to prove him wrong. Stay because quitting is the same as admitting defeat. I was born a lion, steel jaw and golden ambition. I was the ruler of my life.

Everything that I had ever learned in my life was contained within five bar lines. I made a home in the smiles of friendly faces--there were so many that they outnumbered his a thousand times over. The eyes faded from the back of my neck, my hands stopped turning into earthquakes. When I stood on stage with the lights in my eyes, the ground finally felt steady beneath my feet.

vi. adagio

The rain slid from the sky in silver sheets. Classical music tinkled from the overhead speakers of the Longwood Gardens lobby, a soothing background to accompany the boy sitting next to me. Cole's hand linked in mine, an unconscious action as we spread out thin mints on our wooden bench. The whole world was displayed in the glass wall: the emerald branches bowing to the ground, laden with water; pink petals blooming across my cheeks as Cole tucked a strand of hair behind my ear; the reflection of the two of us together, in perfect harmony.

The boy that came before him doesn't matter anymore; he stands on a distant shore, abandoned on past islands. A silhouette that reappears in the moments of paralyzing panic that disappear when I fold myself into Cole's anchoring arms.

Cole hummed Broadway snippets into the air around us; the sound reverberated off the glass and surrounded us in our gravity of inhales and exhales. I was worried that the storm had ruined the planned day of wandering the gardens before the evening musical, but he told me he was just as content to sit beside me--nothing mattered except that we were together. Singing in unison.

Cole's eyes always reminded me of a spring day soaked in sunshine. Sometimes green, leaves budding from trees and grass sprouting from cold ground. Sometimes gold, the glow of a buttercup held beneath a chin. Meeting Cole was when my life started to warm up. When the music started hurting less and grew into ink flowing from lyrical poets. I was awake, I was alive. I planted my roots in the music department and stretched myself towards the sky.

When Cole and I matched our voices together, sometimes the notes would clash and the duet would fall flat. It wasn't perfect. But the song belonged to us, and I sang it with perfect clarity.

vii. soli

The notes flowed from me, pencil to paper--methodical, melodic. They were fast, scribbled marks on lines, each one following the structure born from the curve of my hand. Something that I could control, something that I could create. My own personal song. Full of faults and flaws, inverted chords that made the melody darker, more beautiful. A storm cloud right before it rains, when it turns the sky forty shades of violet.

Music was something I could have for myself--no one else could have this. The rhythms my heart sounded when it beat against my breast, the octaves crafted from flexible emotions, vibrato in my voice when a film brought tears to my eyes, the fermata of my back standing straight, the glissando hiding in my mouth as I smiled into the spotlight. I was composed of the fragmented pieces of a musician that was only ever playing one note. It took me a long time to realize that I was the whole symphony.