

**DAWN POTTER**

**Mr. Kowalski**

**1**

In last night's dream I was preparing myself  
to travel over the Tappan Zee Bridge on a moped  
at midnight in the sluicing rain.

I would have to steer by means of a contraption  
that was, more or less, a shoelace,  
and the bridge was not, as during my lucid hours,

a long cantilever span over a broad river  
but a viperish snarl of tarmac and iron grates,  
twisting, coiling,

exits merging into on-ramps,  
cars caroming from the left, from the right,  
howling like an onslaught of wasps.

I filled my tank with gasoline  
and imagined home, wherever it might be,  
imagined my narrow tires—

how they would grip hopelessly at the metal road,  
slide from lane to lane among the furious wasps  
as I wielded my impotent steering-thread.

But I knew I had no choice: I had to cross this bridge  
because my mother was watching me fill the gas tank  
and I could not let her know I was afraid.

**2**

Awake now, I am embarrassed by my own transparency.  
In the barn I load a feeder with hay  
as the goat snorts, flitting her elven ears

and pointedly glaring at the grain bin.  
Hay is not what she wants, though it's what's good for her—  
what keeps her four busy stomachs

in churning, belching, clockwork order.  
Grain is what makes her fat,  
but her greed is shameless and irresistible,

so I dole out a handful of sweet feed,  
letting the sticky collation of oats, pellets, cracked corn  
slide through the fingers of my glove

onto her charging, grasping, prehensile tongue.  
I wonder how it feels to delight in voracity  
instead of coaxing it into harness, year in, year out—

don't drink one more glass, don't eat one more bowl,  
don't reread one more novel, don't say  
I'll open that violin case on some rosier morning—

never wondering how two people invent a necessity  
or why a simple litany of breaths and exhalations  
becomes fear instead of sleep.

**3**

If I say,  
I want to talk about the nature of fear,  
you might assume that I have something precise to say.

But I have nothing precise to say.  
I think that fear is not precise.  
It is a weight, a stench, a twinge in the bowels that will not be vanquished.

Yet though fear may not be precise, it is very simple.  
I am afraid to drive over bridges so I dream of driving over them.  
I am afraid of showing my fear to my mother

so I dream of showing her my fear.  
I was afraid of Mr. Kowalski, and when, on a January night,  
his wife telephoned our house to tell me he had died,

I was appalled at my relief.  
Never again would I have to sit on the bench  
under the dingy quilted window shade

in that house smelling of cabbage and my own weary dismay,  
waiting for him to appear from some distant recess,  
wearing his shorts and brown socks and plastic sandals,

ready to thrust me a few steps further  
toward the future he had laid out for me.  
I was his last violin student; I was his only choice.

He didn't seem to notice that I was the wrong choice,  
or, perhaps, like me, he was afraid to admit that I was.  
That's how fear works, after all.

4

Let me tell you about Mr. Kowalski.  
By the age of ten—a black-haired gnome, dour as a judge—  
he was soloing with the Warsaw Philharmonic;

he was playing Paganini. Imagine it: Paganini!  
If I had been his teacher, watching his fingers  
scramble knowingly among the accidentals,

I would have felt, sitting on my crimson chair  
in the hushed room, as if I had fed him  
Machiavelli instead of music.

Such devilment in the small grip of a child:  
of course it was egregious, but prodigies,  
like pinheads, sell tickets. The year was 1921.

Soon he traveled to Paris to study under the great Thibaud.  
Events transpired. By the year 1982 it did not occur to me  
to imagine Mr. Kowalski as a prodigy.

As a young man,  
he was a popular performer on Polskie Radio.  
Listeners from all over Eastern Europe

sat next to their radiograms, knitting or smoking,  
enthralled by the echo of something magnificent  
yet fleeting, phrases too tender, too brief to explain.

Because his father had been a regimental conductor,  
Mr. Kowalski understood the rules of advancement.  
In his spare time he composed popular songs

and plotted his career.  
One must attract the attention  
of an arrogant master

and then a greater arrogant master,  
and again a greater, and again a greater,  
until one becomes the arrogant master oneself.

In person Mr. Kowalski favored the Leopold Auer stance  
so popular in Russian imperial orchestras  
during the 1880s—left arm stiffly, nobly poised,

like a stop-motion ballerina's,  
fingers arching rigidly over fingerboard and bow.  
He was accustomed to the routine

of bloody fingertips and dusty dinner jackets,  
of second-class rail travel and creaking stage floors,  
of dismal audition rooms and vaporous reviews.

For all I know, he looked forward to retiring to America  
and becoming a short old man in brown socks.  
But perhaps the crackle and hiss of the transmission

softened the formal tension; perhaps his radio listeners  
imagined a young man in soft shoes,  
in a birch forest, in a patch of sunlight after rain.

5

I don't know.  
I never heard Mr. Kowalski play anything on the violin  
except for snatches of études and scale exercises.

His tone was harsh and thick,  
as if it were climbing slowly, hand over hand,  
up through the muddy dregs of an abandoned well.

Lest you conclude that there was something erotic  
about studying the violin:  
there was not.

Yet when he put his shaking hands on me  
to correct my posture, yanking my left elbow and wrist  
into imperious formation, crunching my fingers

into archways, I understood the protocols  
of obedience. In that darkened house,  
I threw back my head and dropped my eyes.

**6**

In 1939 the Germans arrested Mr. Kowalski  
in Węgrów. He managed to escape.  
His wife told me this is how it happened:

An admirer said,  
You are too great an artist to die.  
I will take your place.

On the run, clutching his violin case,  
Mr. Kowalski forged his way to Brest-Litovsk,  
where he met the Russian violinist Miron Polyakin.

Great violinists were everywhere in those days.  
I have seen the photograph  
of Polyakin's letter to the Moscow Conservatory

recommending Mr. Kowalski's admittance.  
It is brown and tattered and seems to have been written  
on graph paper.

So Mr. Kowalski went to Moscow.  
In the meantime  
the art lovers of Węgrów were exterminated.

**7**

Playing the violin saved my life  
could be a bumper sticker.  
One night I may glimpse it on a passing car

while dream-driving a moped over the Tappan Zee Bridge.  
Not that it applies to me.  
In Mr. Kowalski's place, I would have died.

That's what happens to talented children  
who don't practice their scales.  
If one is not greedy about art,

one is nothing.  
I used to sit in Mr. Kowalski's foyer  
imagining that our lesson was already over,

that I was stepping back into the sunlight  
as it gleamed on the tidy sidewalks  
and his neighbors' little square garden plots

overflowing with grape hyacinths and pink narcissi.  
My mother would be reading Virginia Woolf in the park,  
and I would announce, I had a good lesson today!

We would idle on the bench like best friends; we would chatter  
about prom dresses and cats and nineteenth-century novels.  
The violin would wait in the car.

**8**

Muscle memory is what wakes me up at midnight—  
I find my left hand arched around my right wrist,  
fingers held high and wide, fingertips pressed squarely

into the docile tendons, tapping out,  
with exactitude, the opening of a Bach partita.  
Underneath strains my left thumb,

poised for the subtle shift to second position, then back to first.  
Muscle memory is what drove my boyfriend crazy  
because every time we held hands I accidentally started

fingering arpeggios into his palm;  
I didn't even notice; he had to yank his hand away  
before I understood I had one more thing to apologize for.

Muscle memory is the habit of performance.  
The body refuses to dismount from its high wire.  
Even after the Nazis invaded Soviet-held Poland,

Mr. Kowalski was traveling through the provinces—  
rosining his bow, tuning his strings, donning his dinner jacket.  
Why didn't he stay in Moscow,

ensconced behind the conservatory walls?  
When the Gestapo arrested him in Lvov,  
they'd had just about enough of such behavior.

But en route to execution, he attacked his guard and escaped.  
Did he strangle the man  
with his strong, flexible, obedient hands?

And what had they done to his violin?  
What had they done  
to his hands?

No doubt muscle memory kept Mr. Kowalski awake  
during the twenty months he lived under a Ukrainian pigsty.  
Great violinists were everywhere in those days.

9

In the course of my life I have mucked out sheep sheds  
and stanchion gutters and dog yards and loose stalls  
and maternity pens and calf hutches and litter boxes

and buck barns and henhouses and pigsties.  
Each genus of manure has its own particular stench,  
and, when well mixed with fresh air, some varieties—

horse droppings, say—can trigger a farmhand nostalgia.  
But pig manure is foul, whether fresh or aged,  
though, given time, even mild-mannered goat pellets

will transform into a choking miasma  
of dust, sodden rot, maggots, and ammonia.  
Therefore, today, after much procrastinating,

I fear I must break down and clean my goat barn.  
By “much procrastinating”  
I mean one month. By “goat barn”

I mean the droppings of one goat  
mingled with a quantity of dry hay.  
By “fear” I mean nothing comparable

to the state of mind of a thirty-year-old strangler of Nazis  
who spent six hundred days under a Ukrainian pigsty  
without a violin.

**10**

Imagine the rest of his life  
as the plaintive, fragile, vaguely muddled coda  
which a genius composer’s kindhearted but mediocre executor

decides to append to the maestro’s gargantuan final symphony.  
As a reporter for the *Jerusalem Post* sighed,  
“Today, thin spread are the God-gifted Jewish violinists

who formerly grew like mushrooms from the soil.  
With Kowalski, Eastern Europe, once an inexhaustible reservoir,  
has delivered to us one of the last pearls.”

Somehow he acquired another violin,  
managed to stride across an Austrian stage,  
bow to the darkened audience,

bring his instrument to his throat,  
arch his steel-sprung fingers,  
and play not one but two nearly impossible concertos.

**11**

So did I hate playing the violin?  
No.  
It was one of the sounds of my body.



The hands aligned; the clock struck;  
at that instant I was fluent  
in music and words.

I was swift. I was facile. I was vain.  
Fear grew inside me, imperceptibly.  
Practice became the loneliest hole in the day.

My automaton fingers plugged invisible dikes—  
G, A, B, C, D, E, F sharp, G, A, B, C, D, E, F sharp—  
three octaves up, three octaves down,

now the melodic minor, now the harmonic minor,  
now in chromatics, and by thirds, and by minor thirds . . .  
and the automaton fingers marched on and onward.

What endured was pure intonation:  
I could not abide a slovenly pitch.  
Though I knew I was not the angel,

I always heard the angel's voice.  
In this  
Mr. Kowalski and I were very much alike.

**12**

The body refuses to dismount from its high wire.  
Perched on a piano bench, small and square-kneed  
in his shorts and plastic sandals,

Mr. Kowalski sipped at his glass of hot tea and announced,  
When you grow up,  
we will drink cognac together,

and you will marry my son,  
and you will play the concertos.  
He said this not once but once a week.

At the music stand I opened a Beethoven romance.  
The year was 1982. Lifting a violin to my throat,  
I threw back my head and dropped my eyes.

13

A weight, a stench, a twinge in the bowels—  
a dream, a reproach—  
an obligation—

a dynasty unclaimed—  
a muddle—  
What did they do to his hands?

And what of the peasants who fed the pigs?  
What of the mushrooms that grew from the soil,  
the listeners resting beside their radiograms,

the young man in soft shoes in a birch forest,  
the woman in the park, reading Virginia Woolf?—  
a dream, a reproach, an obligation,

a greed that will not be vanquished,  
a viperish snarl of tarmac and iron grates—  
and meanwhile this hunger that must be fed.

An admirer said,  
You are too great an artist to die.  
I will take your place.

You will marry my arrogance,  
we will drink cognac together,  
as if I had fed you music

instead of dust, sodden rot, maggots, and ammonia.  
The stars shriek, a sharp bow lacerates the dark.  
You must cross this bridge you are afraid to cross.