

# Notes on Motherhood: Mother & Music by Dauren Velez

written by Guest Contributor | May 27, 2016



My mother read *Dune* to me when I was very young. At the time, I imagined the beginning of that book so vividly that it became a memory. It is a childhood memory of mine – Paul puts his hand in a box to determine if he is a human being or an animal. The box causes excruciating pain, and Paul is sure that the skin and muscles on his hand are burning away, that when he pulls out his arm there won't be a hand anymore. But he doesn't pull his hand out, because there is a poison-dipped dagger at the back of his neck. In this fictional world, "human" is something you have to prove you are, and the determining criterion is fear. Animals are afraid, can't override their fear of pain with their knowledge of the poison dagger – they pull their hands out of the box, and die. Humans keep their hands in the box until the test is over.

Paul passes the test with a meditative prayer that his mother taught him. A prayer my mother taught me, and that I repeated in my brain as one of the many obsessive compulsive rituals that were a part of my childhood:

*I must not fear.*

*Fear is the mind-killer.*

*Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration.*

*I will face my fear.*

*I will permit it to pass over me and through me.*

*And when it has gone past me I will turn to see fears path.*

*Where the fear has gone there will be nothing... Only I will remain.*

It took me a while to be human. I was a very cute baby animal – big, opaque brown eyes, porcelain skin. Ebony ringlet hair. I was small for my age, and very still. I looked like a doll someone had carefully placed in a chair, with a blank expression on my face. For a while, doctors and family members sought to explain my personality and lack of speech by placing me somewhere on the autism spectrum. Then better explanations and labels started cascading

in. "Abuse," "PTSD," and a rapidly growing web of co-occurring anxiety disorders. My tiny body didn't have anything humanness filling it up, just fear.

My father and abuser was an artist and a storyteller, and when we left him my mother didn't know how to fill that hole in her creative childrens' lives. She was never an adult who could play, building imaginary worlds in real-time. So she lent us the ones she'd found for herself. We listened to Placido Domingo's *La Traviata* and watched Baryshnikov dance. She read us the Lord of the Rings at bedtime, carefully excising anything too frightening (Shelob was a horrible surprise to me in theaters) – but leaving in an incredible amount of darkness. We had already experienced evil, and needed stories that showed small, curly-haired people wading through it, coming out on the other side. She giving us cathartic avenues, the cultural grammar with which to express pain and process something as inconceivable as abuse at the hands of a parent.

I don't know if it was her preference or ours that pushed towards comedy, but the somehow equally absurd and heartbreakingly meaningful worlds of Charlie Chaplin, Steve Martin and Martin Short all became home to us. Places to temporarily move unimpeded by injuries that would never actually heal in real life.

I lagged behind my sister and brother in our push towards being alive. My mother filled us up with art and beauty, and most of it ran right back out of me like sand. She somehow managed to put us in lessons, but nothing engaged me. I was terrible at karate, and I was afraid I would break my neck in gymnastics.

But the levee finally broke. I was sitting cross-legged on the grey carpeted floor of one in long line of cheap apartments that my mother made as bright as she possibly could – watching a VHS of the 1971 *Fiddler on the Roof*. I watched a silhouetted violinist standing on the peak of a modest house, in front of a deep orange sky. The actor pantomimed playing his violin while the overlaid recording of Isaac Stern grabbed at me from behind the opening credits. Of the hundreds of cultural fragments that my mother threw at me, hoping that they would puncture something – this one finally did. For the first time, I cried without understanding why. I turned to her, pointed at the screen. "I want to do that." My first need above the base of Maslow's hierarchy.

It took her less than 48 hours to procure me a violin and a violin teacher. This was around the years when we learned there was no Santa because there was no money for presents. So I have no idea how she managed to afford to buy a violin, how she managed to persuade the woman who refused to teach children to take on a five year old as a student or how she paid her for lessons. I imagine my tiny mother cornering people, physically and rhetorically, until they gave her a bargain price on the violin, until Ms. R (who did not like children, and had no desire for a new student of any kind) was my teacher. There was finally a way she could get to me, and failure was not an option.

My mother had started playing the piano around five, and had studied music in college. She jumped on my interest like a life raft. She quizzed me in the car: Who composed this? What is the time signature? Is it in a major or minor key? Can you tell what key? When there were no more questions to be asked, she tapped along to the rhythm on her steering wheel, and my chubby hands did the same on the hard navy console between us.

I learned to read music as I learned to read words, and while both music and literature would go on to provide a skeleton for my personality to grow around, music would always be a language I turned to more readily, in all its potent abstraction and indeterminate situation between the mathematical and the linguistic. Music is a way to soothe, express, and know pain all at once.

My violin teacher had no small, unbreakable things in her home – nothing for me to fidget with while I waited for my lesson. But she liked me, in the way that cat-lovers always liked me as a child. So she got one toy – I'm assuming from a thrift store or an old relative, or maybe it was her one odd relic from her own childhood: a tall rectangular tower, with a slew of little white balls trapped inside. The tower was split into four or five levels/compartments, each with a complicated exit. The goal was to get all of the balls all the way to the bottom, through complex maneuvering. Then the tower could be flipped, so that the game became never ending. The little white balls never escaped.

When I was early to my lesson, she would gently place me on her couch and put the plastic tower toy in my hands, then put on a recording of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* for me to listen to. It was always the *Four Seasons*. I'm not sure why. I don't know if she felt that I liked it after the first time and continued, or if she thought a musical recreation of the seasons was intellectually child-accessible. It was the first time I saw one kind of experience being translated to another – not necessarily the physical experiences of the seasons being translated to musical ekphrasis of them – but Vivaldi's expression of pain and depression the *Four Seasons'* third movement, *Summer*. Vivaldi's *Summer* sounded like a pressing-down of the soul, by heat and despair. I felt like I met Vivaldi on a summer day, every time I listened.

My mother refused to play piano for an audience. She retreated from the stage-fright-inducing displays of a prodigal childhood, and played alone in our living room when she thought we weren't listening. She played Schumann and Chopin; she played the *Etudes* in the bittersweet solitude of which they are the most perfect expression. She played from memory, her piano music and record collection left behind when we left my father. We might have never heard her, if we weren't always lying in wait. All the games, fights and daydreams of childhood, and all the while we each had one ear tuned in, waiting for the sound of a wooden bench moving roughly and quietly over the living room carpet, the sound of the fall-board coming up over the ivory colored keys of our ancestral piano. When we heard the sounds we were always half-waiting for, we all dropped our toys/books/imaginary friends and moved hive-minded down our upstairs hallway, sliding our bare feet on the floor to

muffle our approach.

*Nocturne No. 2* started as we slid in age order down the stairs and slowly sat down on the steps, concealed behind a drywall banister. We listened, greedy trespassers in a single mother's momentary unguardedness. The music's inherent mood swings became more violent as she alternated between the highs of her most flawless performance and her frustration at being forced to repeat the same two measures four times in a loop, trying to remember the next musical phrase. I don't remember my mother ever finishing pieces in these lonely recitals. They were stream-of-consciousness slidings through her own mind and memories. She wandered from piece to piece in her repertoire until one of us betrayed our presence, shifting slightly on an unforgiving stair step. And then the fall-board came down over the keys, and the pianist was Mother again. She made her children Sleepytime tea, and sent them off to bed.

Only once in our childhood did our mother knowingly play for us. I know we were in a church – I don't remember if it was ours. It wouldn't make sense, there would be no reason, for us to be in someone else's church. But it doesn't look familiar, in my memory. It doesn't register as one of our churches. I only remember it as the church that one time, my mother let us hear her play.

I suppose she had a pressing (and rare) desire to do something both unnecessary, and for herself. Whatever our relationship with this particular house of worship, the fact was that the sprawling sanctuary had a black baby grand on the stage.

We went when the sanctuary completely was empty – some quiet Saturday afternoon. I didn't know if we were allowed to be there. She still couldn't play in front of us, but she also couldn't leave us out of her sight.

"Lay down in the pews," she told us.

Wooden pews, with a dark brown finish and no cushions. We scattered in the huge, southern sanctuary – each in our own pew – and lay down, so that every one of us was alone in the echoing chamber. My mother played her boldest ever overheard concert on the grand-sounding piano and I lay on my side in my chosen seat, staring at the back of the pew in front of me.

For a while I was an incredibly promising musician, but I stopped playing very slowly, and have never been sure why. I knew I didn't want to be a professional musician, but I could have kept playing. There started to be an anxious little aching thing in my stomach when I thought about taking my violin out of its case, and it grew to such a size that it became easier to leave it in my closet. My mother sat at her piano less and less as well. We were former prodigies together, whose faces clouded over in sadness and uncertainty when someone asked us why we didn't play anymore.

I'm not sure why my mother stopped playing her piano either. Maybe performing

for an empty house was less fulfilling than playing for poorly hidden children after all. She put her creative energy and money into home projects and she took in a small, odd cat to replace her small, odd children. She lived alone; she turned fifty. We finally became friends without that initial anchor of music, and our conversations centered on her home improvement projects, the food that we were eating and the food that we were daydreaming about eating.

But then one day, she got the piano tuned. I go home early on the holidays, to help with the shopping, to replace that one weird doorknob upstairs and change the light-bulb in the entryway. On the to do list (that contained about twice as many items than we could ever hope to complete) was to remember to be home to let the piano tuner in. He spoke too loudly, and too intimately. He complimented the structure and quality of our piano. My mother made plans for another tune-up in a few months as he was leaving. I thought maybe she was just running low on household projects to complete, but she started playing again. She plays alone in her living room, in her quiet and increasingly immaculate house.

I tell myself that I have to start again, because she has. But my violin is still sitting in closet, hidden, where I can avoid having to look it in the eye.

I think that “musician” is one of the things I thought I would want someday, but never managed to. I wanted to want to be one of those violinists who sways in rapture when they play, so in love with what they are doing that they let their expressions become grotesque. I wanted to want to believe in God, I wanted to want to be a mother someday. Little placeholder desires, which I assumed would one day be filled with the real thing. But instead, even the hope for most of those desires fell away to make room for a personality I hadn’t anticipated. Especially after the advent of the iPod, music is the thing that makes me capable of being a human being in the world – but at some point I realized I wanted to be George Eliot and not the fiddler on the roof. And I love children, little potential universes exploding into the lives of my friends and family. But I’ve never wanted to make one. “Maternal” is a hard feeling for me to wrap my head around; there must be a space that having children fills for people that other relationships don’t, but I’ve never noticed that space in myself.

My mother was a small, odd child – with white-blonde hair that stood up in wild curls, and her father’s disturbingly blue eyes. I found a picture once at my grandmother’s house in which my tiny mother has been washed and primped and put into a frilly blue dress. In the picture, which is obviously a paid portrait sitting, my mother is leaning forward, muscles tensed, eyes on fire. She looks like a captured fairy, who has allowed herself to be washed and coiffed for her own amusement – it looks as if the photographer captured her in the split second before she ripped off her frilly blue dress and disappeared back into an ancient forest.

A few years ago her brother, my uncle, found an old recording made just for the novelty of the technology – a record that he converted to CD for his siblings. We listened to my grandfather talk to his parents and my great-grandfather perform for posterity a jarringly racist lullaby from his own childhood.

In an echo of the Victorian-influenced childhoods that my great-grandparents lived, the children were paraded out to showcase their musical accomplishments. They played the piano in descending age order – first my aunt, who played her pretty piece with meticulous flourishes. Then my uncle, who played a disinterested few measures on the piano before transitioning to his main act, the guitar. I leaned forward in my chair, listening for any sign of the smallest sibling, wondering if she would come out too. She was five or six at the time the recording was made, so she'd already begun her childhood musical career. Somewhere there is a yellowed newspaper clipping from this time with her picture, about how talented the tiny fairy girl was who played at whatever church or school function.

Suddenly she was there, traveling through time on audio waves. I anticipated an accomplished sounding piece, the kind of thing selected to make grandparents proud. When she began, I felt like an idiot for expecting anything other than the Romantic era melody that she played. Some haunted, sparse piece performed with an imprecise, living rhythm by little elfin hands. The background noises and conversation in the recording stopped absolutely.

This was the only time in my life I have yet experienced a deep maternal urge. I wanted to crawl into the recording, to find the lonely fey creature living in the audio, and adopt her.



**Dauren Velez** studied Creative Nonfiction at Columbia Chicago, and studied logic, rhetoric and the Western philosophical canon at St. John's College Santa Fe. By day she works for a strategic consulting firm, and by night she watches more TV than you would believe. She recently found out her book-length nonfiction MFA thesis was categorized in Columbia College's library with the tags "Time, Psychological Aspects, Death, Psychological Aspects." That seems about right.

Follow Dauren's intermittent tweets: @daurenvelez