WRITING DAILY, WRITING IN TUNE

There was a physicist who also played the violin. One day he took his fiddle to the lab, set it in a felt-wrapped vise, and trained the electron microscope on the spruce top, just beside the f-hole, where a steel peg was set vibrating at high frequency. Through the microscope, once he got everything honed in right, he saw the molecular surface of the wood begin to ripple outward like rings on a pond, the ripples rising gradually into waves, and the peg a blur at the heart of play. When he drew the peg away, the ripples did not stop. In twenty-four hours, the ripples had not stopped. There was still a concentric tremor on the molecular quilt of the wood. The violin, in the hard embrace of the vise, had life still. In another twelve hours, the ripple had flattened and the wood was inert. Maybe there was a small whine of song inside the molecules, but the spruce belly of the instrument was motionless.

Musicians know this without a microscope: an instrument is dead if it is not played daily. A guitar, a violin, a lute is dead for the first fifteen minutes of fresh play. It needs to be quickened from scratch. But the fiddle played every day hangs resonant on the wall, already alive when it is lifted down, already trembling, anxious to speak, to cry out, to sing at the first stroke of the bow. Not to rasp, but to sing.

The instrument is in tune before the strings are tuned.

Pablo Casals used to put it this way: If I don’t practice for even one day, I can tell the difference when I next sit down to play. If I fail to practice for two days, my close friends can also tell the difference. If I don’t practice three days, the whole world knows.

Writers know this when they are writing daily: with the first stroke, quiet things seem to tingle. The cold glass of the window brightens; the rug has a biography. There is the tension of silent meeting in the room. Things unsaid grow powerful. Words wish to speak out. Ideas gather their bones and rise up. A face becomes a life, and a place a story. Everything speaks, or is powered by silence. Everything moves in place, treads water. Nothing stops. The pen is numb with haste, yet calm with plenty. Yes, there is practice to it. Yes, there will be hours, and sweat dripping off the elbows. Yes, the words will have to be tuned, but the pen! Already shouting! Poised and happy.

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