

absolute music

absolute music

A Novel

JONATHAN GELTNER

S L / . N T
B O O K S

ABSOLUTE MUSIC

A Novel

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In gratitude for a childhood
immersed in the true fantasy
of the outdoor world
I dedicate this work of fiction
to my parents
David and Deborah

You can always come back but you can't come back all the way.

—Bob Dylan, “Mississippi”

A l'alta fantasia qui mancò possa....

—Dante, *Paradiso*

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FIRST SUITE

Felix Culpa

1

THE ENTIRE REGION OF CINCINNATI, OHIO, from downtown to the outermost exurbs and particularly in the moist clay of the many river and creek valleys, is home to a large and hardy population of native locust trees, both black locusts and honey locusts. The latter produce large, lightweight but very strong and sharp thorns, often formed in bristling clusters, which fall to the ground and are painful if stepped on barefoot or wielded as a weapon by a child in a game of fantasy. The thorns are strong enough to be used as nails. I have even seen the honey locust described in supposedly scientific field guides—so menacing are the thorns—as ominous, haunting, and terrible.

In the middle or latter part of spring the honey locust blooms in small white or pink and purple flowers, grouped like so many bouquets, and if you were to pluck such a sprig you would have a serviceable bouquet, for the blossoms are fragrant with a sweetness like honey. But the first part of the name comes from the pulp of the long pendulous legumes that the tree produces in autumn. The pulp is honey-sweet and may be eaten or used to ferment a kind of beer; it is also thought to possess medicinal benefit. This is what John the Baptist ate in the wilderness when his meat was locusts and honey—not insects, but the pods of the carob tree, which closely resembles the locust.

In the autumn the honey locust's legumes, papery and volute, drop; the small oval leaflets turn bright or sometimes golden yellow and detach individually from the compound stems early or midway

through the season, though the trees are sensitive to the most minute local variations of light, temperature, and moisture, so that one tree may be still mostly green while another, not so much as a football field away, will have dropped all of its color. On the ground, the leaflets collect and, if it has been dry, as September and October often are, swirl in miniature cyclones. Answering the wind in this way, they make a softer sound than the larger leaves of the maples, mulberries, sweet gums, hackberries, sycamores, buckeyes, walnuts, and other hardwoods that blanket southwest Ohio, a kind of tinkling or tapping, rather than the rasping and rustling of the more massy desiccated foliage blown about on the ground or jostling in the crowns.

Since the day Hannah died, when I was fourteen years old, I have been fascinated by the crowns of honey locusts in winter, when they can be seen in their stark and eerie geometrical essence silhouetted against the sky. Winter is the best time to observe the bark of deciduous trees. That of the honey locust displays long, sidewinding ridges that grow more or less parallel to the direction of the trunk or branch. Alternatively, some might describe those ridges as the upcurled edges of long plates of a superficial bark secured firmly to a deeper layer, like a knight's steel armor, as though everywhere the trees grow were a field of tournament or battle. From a distance this feature of the locust also makes the trunk look like the spine of a wooded mountain range viewed from space—for instance the Blue Ridge, with the longitudinal plates of bark between the ridges like so many Shenandoah Valleys.

Or so it seems to me these days, when I pull up Google Maps during odd restless moments and scour the Ohio Valley and the Allegheny Plateau, all the places of our youth. Such a distraction would not have been possible when Hannah died—Google Maps had not been invented, for most people there was not yet an internet, and we could not easily have discovered what those mountains and highlands looked like from planetary orbit. But I did know even then, when I was fourteen, that honey locusts have a lithe and thewy appearance, and that there is something about the habit of the mature locust's crown, with its carefully proportioned pattern of delicate yet jagged and regularly undulating branches, which harmonizes with the skies of winter. This truth was revealed to me through that inflection point

in the history of the world as I have known it: bare honey locusts against a low, gray sky forever remind me of the morning I learned that Hannah had died.

I was not by Hannah's side when she died. Her death came to me by report, from my father. She had invited me to the New Year's Eve party at her house the night before. It would have been predictable for me to be there: I was in love with Hannah. I think I had been in love with her since the day we first met, when we were seven years old. That child's love was still a living bond between us; we were always natural friends. But in the year or two before she died, my imagination of Hannah was complicated by adolescent desire, and I doubted she reciprocated that feeling. But I had to find out.

I knew that if ever there was going to be an opportunity for me to kiss her it would be at her New Year's Eve party, under the mistletoe that would still be hanging somewhere, left over from Christmas. Likely the mistletoe would be suspended over the front door, and it was not impossible that Hannah would answer the door herself, in which case I could kiss her immediately upon arriving. I had decided that that would be ideal, to do it right away as a kind of joke, and then again later, maybe at midnight if things had gone well—as an early birthday present, I could claim, for her birthday fell just a week later. I had been considering this strategy for weeks in the wild hope of being invited to her house for the party.

At last, I was invited. And yet the night Hannah died I was playing Dungeons & Dragons, and getting drunk (for perhaps the first time in my life), in a basement in suburban Cincinnati with my friends. I'm not sure that I've ever previously contemplated the mystery or the morality of that fact, but now that the memory recurs I find my absence from Hannah's party so strange that I don't know how to begin thinking about it.

Difficult though it may be to believe, I spoke the words of the preceding eight paragraphs, or the gist of those words, to my wife, Kew, on the evening of Friday the twentieth of October, 2017, as we stood in the shade of two large black locusts (or so I called them at the time) a block away from our house in Michigan, gazing up into the leaves lit by the setting sun, some still green and others fiery. Kew

brushed the great mass of her straight bright rust-colored hair back over her shoulders, and it gleamed like amber as it caught the sun's last rays and hung down her back over her sky-blue dress all the way to her waist while she looked up into the trees while I spoke. There was not the faintest breeze to caress either leaves or hair. Finally Kew turned to face me with a sad and quizzical look, for I had derailed our conversation.

Just as I have always published under the name McPhail (not my surname but my middle name and my mother's maiden name)—and in fact those closest to me, since I was in my teens, have called me no other name but McPhail—so calling herself Kew is a simple affectation my wife has long adopted. Her initials (whether with her maiden name or my actual surname, which is Yiddish) are K.E.W., and when I first met her in the spring of 2004, shortly before we graduated together from the University of Cincinnati, she introduced herself to me as Kew—*like the English gardens* was the tag she always appended back then. To most people she met in that place it gave no clue as to how to spell her name but instead created an outlandish mystique.

But in my journals from those days I called her Autumn Leaf or Red Ale, since her hair is the color of both, indeed just the color of the heartening, rich ale you find historically in the British Isles. She is by preference and profession, as she would say, an Anglophile, but my wife is not at all English. Her heritage is mostly Irish on both sides, as manifest in her extraordinarily deep yet vibrant red hair, brilliant green eyes, and very fair skin—also, some might say, in a certain passionate and at times sentimental temperament. Kew denies this. . . usually. The Irish are poets and scholars, she says, and so she is herself.

Kew was born and raised in Portsmouth, Ohio, somewhat over one hundred miles upstream from Cincinnati, where the Scioto River flows into the Ohio, and for this reason she was able to say to me, standing down the street from our house in Michigan, that she remembered honey locusts and was I sure this was not one. I replied that I didn't think honey locusts grew in Michigan but perhaps black locusts did, and that there were no thorns. Kew nodded and said, "thorns fit to weave a crown for a king," and then she started us walking back toward our house. I trailed her by a few steps, still distracted

and put out of sorts both by the story I had begun to tell and by the conversation I had interrupted in order to tell it.

Kew and I had been in odd moods all that week. The acute difficulty had begun at Mass the previous Sunday, the fifteenth of October, which, in the Roman Catholic Church (of which Kew and I were at that time strictly practicing members) is the Feast of Saint Teresa of Ávila. I had spent most of the liturgy holding our then-eight-month-old son, our first child, or changing him, or bouncing and swaying with him, or walking around the vast old church with him when he would not be quiet. He was a large and strong baby and desperately wanted to crawl, but was not quite doing it yet, and this made him restless.

When the sacrament was concluded and the congregation dismissed, we chatted over coffee with our fellow parishioners, many of whom were the parents of the children I was then tutoring in Latin, Greek, French, German, and English Literature through a Catholic homeschooling cooperative based in another parish, Saint Brendan's. One of these parents remarked to me that he was surprised to have learned recently that Saint Teresa, to whom he was specially devoted, was a Jew. I answered that she was not a Jew, only her paternal grandfather had been a *converso* and indeed he was almost killed for allegedly reverting to Judaism, but his son, Teresa's father, had been a successful merchant and bought his way into the lower aristocracy and a firm and respected position in Christian society. In any case, Teresa was not Jewish, I said, only the Nazis would have considered her Jewish, but even if she had been in a meaningful sense Jewish why should that have made her life or her contribution to Catholic Christian tradition any more or less remarkable?

The conversation did not move in a good direction from that point. The upshot was that my interlocutor did not consider himself anti-Semitic but that he had no qualms admitting, from *our* religious standpoint, to being anti-Judaizing. Surely I would agree with him, he said, since I myself had converted from Judaism (this was a common misconception among my fellow-parishioners), and why would I have done that if I did not prefer and assent to the Catholic Christian religion? All while I spoke with this man Kew blushed and glared at

me (due to her complexion, the color of her hair and the brightness of her green eyes, her appearance is almost lurid and, I admit, appealing when she blushes and glares), but I was not sure what was embarrassing her.

Two days after that Mass, I had given to a student I was tutoring in French, the son of my anti-Judaizing fellow-parishioner, a copy of Arthur Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell*. And two days after that, I had instructed my literature students, among whom the same pupil numbered, to write an essay comparing Thoreau's experience atop Mount Katahdin in Maine to the Giving of the Law at Sinai, which I described to the students as the foundational story of Jewish peoplehood. The next day, that Friday the twentieth of October, I received a phone call from the headmaster of the homeschooling cooperative inquiring about my motivation for actions that were, he said, a departure from the curriculum and from my role as tutor. When I told Kew about this as we strolled home, I could see her go fiery as she'd done in the church, but she was silent.

I knew what she would say, though: You have no problems, you lead a blessed life, and what you call debility or unfair limitation is in fact grace. In those days, entering into the last fevered phase of the delusion that I had some sort of identity and personal destiny as a writer—which it is the purpose of this book to chronicle up to the moment of its strange evaporation—I was apt to feel resentful and sorry for myself at every turn. As we walked home, I thought only with dread and revulsion of Kew's ailing mother, who had come to live with us a month before, and I thought of *The Upper Country*, the soon-to-be overdue sequel to my novel *Repentance of the Gods* and in fact stalled out since our son had been born. What is more cliché than trouble with in-laws or a writer brooding over his book? But there was nothing I could do about it, and I resented even myself.

Earlier in the week I had told Kew that I didn't want to go that weekend to Chicago to visit old friends in celebration of my thirty-sixth birthday. Such excursions seemed more trouble than they were worth with a baby in tow. All I really wanted for my birthday was the briefest solitude in which to salvage my writing so that I might someday have a proper academic career like Kew's and would not have to

spend my days scrambling for temporary appointments like I had in Chicago or doing things like tutoring at Saint Brendan's, a job I had only taken up to preserve my philological acumen.

To all this Kew said I was three or four kinds of ungrateful and that I envied her success: unlike me, she had finished her doctorate and obtained a good academic position, and now her keenly anticipated book, *Meditations for Margery Kempe*, was about to be published. Becoming a mother had in no way slowed her down. It rather seemed to have propelled her work, both scholarly and creative. Margery Kempe, the roving and vivacious fifteenth-century English mystic, began her book, the first autobiography in English, with the birth of her first child, and Kew had managed brilliantly and at the last minute to work into her manuscript the birth of our first child.

(But let me say here that that is only how *I* thought of our son. Kew thought of him as our third child. After a long gap in our acquaintance, we had married in the summer of 2014: Kew had a miscarriage less than a year later, and then a second early the following winter. It was these losses, in combination with her work on medieval English literature, which precipitated her reversion, passionate and intellectual, to her ancestral religion and her heartfelt request that I join her by converting at Easter 2016, in Ireland—a story to be told later in these pages.)

Nevertheless, Kew felt overwhelmed or under-esteemed in those days too, and more insecure than I could understand at the time. In the short walk back to our rented house, she told me that she could use solitude to work as well, and that she wanted to draw on my musical expertise for a major article she was writing on another medieval English mystic, Richard Rolle, and his *Melos Amoris* (*Melody of Love*). She added that I had become so churlish since her maternity leave had ended and she had gone back to teaching that she did not think of asking for my input, let alone for extra time to devote to her work.

When I answered by saying that she had enjoyed success, had at last found a good and secure job in which she would receive tenure almost right away (at the end of that academic year), and was no longer under pressure, she said it was not so, that unlike in my job—which she said I was privileged to hold and that for someone like me to

devote himself to such a job was an act of deepest *charity*—her religious commitment was a liability in her work, offset for the moment (years would pass before Kew’s words proved true—but not so many years) only by the fact that she was a woman.

Yet at the same time, there was nowhere Kew was perfectly at home. She felt that her intellectual and artistic career put her at odds with our friends in the Church. It transpired that the previous Sunday after Mass Kew had been upset not only by my awkward conversation about Teresa of Ávila’s Jewish heritage, but also by the cool reception she had met with when talking about her forthcoming book.

I said, “The women you were talking to, your friends—”

“*Our* friends,” Kew insisted.

“They’ve all got multiple children, and they’ve given up or scaled back careers to raise those kids, and they believe that’s how things *ought* to go. Not you, you’re sailing full speed ahead in your profession and wouldn’t dream of doing otherwise. But more than that difference between us and them, is that we’re not from here and they are. They don’t fully trust us; we might uproot and disappear at any time. Aren’t they right? We no sooner ensconce ourselves here in Michigan and start our family than we begin talking about where we’d rather be—return to Cincinnati, or what wouldn’t you give to find a way back to England or Ireland? But we’re here for a while, I think, *all* of us.”

At this point we entered our house and were greeted by the rumbling and gurgling of Kew’s mother snoring on the sofa and the static of the baby monitor.

“I understand,” Kew whispered fiercely to me, “that you aren’t terribly fond of having her live with us, that you think she’s more of a burden than an aid—”

Indeed we did not dare to walk very far from our house, lest Kew’s mother call for help with our son if he woke, for she could not lift him from his crib, so Kew and I would just go back and forth many times in the grid of nearby streets.

“—but maybe just maybe you could search your heart for some compassion?”

In truth, I was no longer thinking of Kew’s mother and her failing physical health and crippling depression, which we hoped living

with her first grandchild would ameliorate; nor was I thinking of my own parents now on the East Coast and in suddenly declining health, unable to visit us. I wasn't thinking of my students or of the disappointment my first novel had turned out to be, at least as a credential, and which my second, if I were honest with myself, would likely also prove if I ever got around to finishing it. I wasn't thinking of the ridiculous farce that had followed upon the spat about *anti-Judaizing*. The self-pity and anger were slipping away from me, chased off by Kew's whispered reprimand, sharp as a sword.

While Kew roused her mother I went into the basement where I did most of my work, and tried to think about the moment just passed under the locusts: the man and the woman under the boughs, the autumn air saturated with dust and uncanny heat and my mind without warning or apparent cause seized by the memory that despite every reason to be by her side I spent the night that my childhood love Hannah died far away from her, playing a game of fantasy and getting drunk.

Something about it felt less like recollection than prophecy, as though the event, or its absence from my life, would prove a key to the moral catastrophe soon to befall me. But like most recipients of prophecy, I was blind and deaf to the avertable doom.