

BACH'S BIRTHDAY

(Vernal Equinox, March 21, 1974)

By Michael Dennis Browne

For Mari

1

I am stuck in the First Invention.

The eleventh measure. I can't get it right,
Co-ordinate the left hand and the right hand,
I play sharps for naturals, the left hand
is arthritic; it is awful.

Today is Bach's birthday.

Tonight I am taking a cherry pie
to my musical friend, who can play
Bach on organ and piano, both.
On the pie the bakery lady has squeezed
"Happy Birthday JSB" in white cream.
The lettering cost almost as much as the pie.

And I bet Mrs. Bach is busy,
baking pies for all those children
as she does every year on this day;
and tonight after supper
there will be a pie fight in paradise,

and the Bach kids will have at each other
hysterically, until they are spattered with
rhubarb, apple and cherry, pumpkin and mince,
peach and apricot, and custard of course,
and Mrs. Bach will be up half the night
running baths for –how many children was it?
(Twenty, at least!)

Today is windy, cold; but bright.
A thin snow on the streets.
You would not think our hemisphere
was leaning toward the sun again.
But it leans, all the records say so,
and my blood leans toward the sun too,
and toward Bach.

2

And here, as well as the Book of Inventions,
I have two other pages of Bach,
old, stained, torn
from my father's organ books,
too heavy to bring to America.
The first of the Eight Short Preludes and Fugues,
the one I would never tire of having him play;

I would sit in the sunlit church after mass,
the darkened church after Benediction,
and hear my father doing Bach's bidding
on the keyboards, fingering, fingering,
and doing the foot-dance with the pedals
and pushing in and pulling out stops,
busy Eddie, the musical man,
grandson of the Irish ferryman,
bringing us Bach, Bach.

The organ is called the King of Instruments.
Mari says she prefers it to the piano.
Last Sunday I heard her play it
for the first time – a time out of time –
those sounds that survive us.
Organ is like the French word "ouragan,"
Meaning hurricane, and sometimes the organ
brings storms to my mind, where my father
is struggling in a small craft,
the seas tremendous.

3

Last night I fell asleep on the sofa
listening to the Matthew Passion.

Once I heard it in Helsinki,
in Holy Week, when I was twenty-one,
in a language I knew not one word of,
and felt I knew for that while
what the mystical men speak of,
that we are all one with another,
that we are each part of the other,
that all things are one.

And this morning woke,
both animals on the floor by me
as if waiting for me to wake,
and the sky lightening already,
dawn beyond the branches,
day of Bach's birth, and the earth
leaning toward the sun as if
turning over from a great dark sleep,
and the sun beginning to climb
higher and higher daily, the North warming,
the lakes losing their ice.

I lean toward the sun.

I lean toward the father.

I lean toward Bach on the hard keyboard.

Sometimes I think of myself
as a child, sometimes a giant,
and often it is the child who carries
the giant on his shoulders,
the giant weeping;
sometimes I am a young man made
of green wood, and there is
an arrow in my back, fired
by my father The Archer,
the last he loosed, and then lay back.

But now a man is climbing
the cliffs of Bach,
a man is swinging
from white rope to black rope
in the Bach gymnasium,
a man is sweating and shoveling pies
in the Bach bakery,
a man is watching over
millions of tiny clambering notes
in the Bach kindergarten,
garden of children,
Johann's millions of children buzzing

out of the Bach hives,
hot for the honey of the world.

4

And all of us trying to do
things we do not know how to,
now I am caught, now freed,
now I stop, now I begin again,
fingering, fingering; Bach's bidding.
And Mari at the instrument, daughter of men,
building those sounds
in the limitless acres of the ear,
the oaks and harvests and hurrying skies of Bach,
as the North, whose children we are, leans
toward the sun, which is climbing, leans
toward Bach, who is climbing, the ice
streaming out of his hair,
and Death, Death, *wo bist du*, where, where is your sting?

used by permission