

Amos Among Us

Annie G. Rogers

1

The first problem is sizing. How do you size a child's smallest violin to a five-inch zebra from nose to tail? If Amos cannot get his head over the side of the violin, it is too big. But if he can straddle the strings, front and hind legs over them at their highest point (and still breathe easily), the violin is just right for him. You may think that even the smallest standard violin is too big for a zebra the size of Amos to play. Be assured: he will not play it in the ordinary way.

2

Amos studies the length of the violin's neck and compares it to what rises and falls in his throat. Can Amos and this violin find a way to sing together? It seems impossible. The air circulates between two bodies. The impulse to cry hits Amos; he makes no sound. Nor does the violin.

3

Amos considers the shoulders of his violin. They seem to soften with pleasure as he sniffs over them. If you think it is impossible for Amos and the violin, you must see that he has claimed it already as his own. Drop all expectations. He will compose something you have never heard before.

4

Amos balances between the music he hears and the vast silence of deep space. From far out in the cosmos a note falls to his left ear. A trembling, nearly imperceptible orange light licks his back. His mane arcs and rises to its warmth.

5

Amos imagines a horizontal line. He draws many in the air, each one a distinct signature. He draws under the tutelage of silence. He anticipates sound then changes its direction. To learn scales and arpeggios, Amos gazes over the horizon of the violin into another time and place. There, he can play a three- octave range easily. Here, we hear nothing at all.

6

Amos can't read music, and he does not try. He knows that a musical score, already written (already heard), can distract from composing something of his own.

7

How does Amos practice? He has no set schedule but a rhythm, sure as sleeping, rising. The violin does not always rise at the same time. Sometimes it sleeps in late, in its velvet-lined case. It is imperative to play daily, so Amos leaps down into the case beside the tuning pegs. Wake up! Not practicing looms like a dark cloud. If the violin refuses to waken, it turns up the volume of the music inside Amos.

8

Simplicity is key. Amos inhales a resonating air, then blows. Each note repeats at least twice in a dotted rhythm. Amos trains his ear, the left one, to feel joy as the note repeats and skips. The right ear hears only imperfection. He comes to love this imperfection, too. Spiccato sounds like

frog scales in early spring; a smooth legato is a sticky toffee scale, strung between teeth and fingertips.

9

The violin on the table is silent as Amos circles it. It has the stillness of wings beating far away. Amos wonders if the f holes sound the same on each side. He sings a scale; well, he tries to sing. He covers up one f hole with a soft cloth and sings the scale again. Yes, there is a small difference.

10

Amos and the violin study one another. They take their time. Amos opens the violin as if peering into small drawers in a printer's cabinet, one at a time. The violin emerges in segments, fragments of mystery. He sees, from a distance above himself, that the silent violin and the silent zebra have been strung to speak, one drenched in amber, the other in stripes. They take their positions, wait for the music.

11

Sometimes Amos hears voices sounding inside the deep cave of his belly. Sometimes the violin feels a tiny sound spark from each "f" hole as Amos blows a warm breath over its strings. These "f" holes look like an elongated "s" in cursive, and Amos wonders if they are really "s" holes. Soon Amos is laughing. Laughter rides the whole room, travels up the stairs in the dark and enters our dreams. This music we hear in the night is Amos among us.

12

The doctor goes downstairs into the fogbound street in early morning light, through which he can make out nothing but a big oak. He remembers the young woman he was treating. He thinks he sees the head of a zebra, ears up, rounding the base of the tree. The long stripes, all shades of gray and charcoal, mirror the shades of the branches. The doctor returns to the house and smells coffee brewing. He considers the zebra's nose, its darker shade. It is as though this warm nose has bent down and kissed him in his sleep.

13

The prisoner stands in his cell, looking up at the ivory square of brightness at the top of the metal door. He tries to remember (but it is only a glimmer memory): a place among trees, a fragrant silence, the voices of his family calling, and stars pricking the dark. In the corner a sad zebra watches the man who can't remember the faces of his own family.

14

The girl reads by streetlight through the open curtain so as not to disturb her younger sister sleeping. She reads about transcendental functions, the inverse functions of calculus. The girl has just turned fourteen. On her notebook she writes in pencil: "Proof. Since A is an open interval and f is continuous, f has no local maxima or minima. Therefore, f is either strictly increasing or strictly decreasing." Or perhaps both? She has no friend she might ask, no one in her family who might know. She sleeps and dreams of the

continuous stripes on a small zebra, the open and infinite space of reversibility.

15

The garbage collector on the back of the truck before dawn drops down while the truck is still moving, heaves another can off the pavement. The sack bursts; things spill onto the street. He will leave it; the truck has already moved on. He spots a small zebra, a toy, covered by a banana peel (he's almost missed it). He swoops it into his pocket, wet and slimy. That night he remembers it and draws it- not a good drawing, that first one. A year of drawings later, the little zebra is magnificent.

16

The mother awakens at 4 am to hear, from the open doorway, her young child speaking. Was this speech, or the intonations of speech, before words? The Mother had been working late, translating a poem from English to her native Russian. The tea by the bedside is cold and the lamp still on. The meaning of a difficult phrase has eluded her and become a taut physical presence in the room. Her daughter, eighteen months old, talks with a small zebra in her crib. He is attentive. The child babbles, halfway between speech and song. The mother listens intently. The phrase arrives; it's a child's translation really. Those words dissolve whatever it was in the room haunting the mother.

These poems were written in 2014. There is an alternative version located at <https://amosamongus.wordpress.com>

To Annie AuBuchon, who met my zebra and helped me to name him, "Amos Among Us;'

To Mary Rogers, who saw things I did not see in the photographs of Amos and the violin;

To ìde O'Carroll, who loves Amos and practices writing each day;

To Nancy Diesner, who helped Amos and his violin appear as photopolymer prints;

To Dr. Blumenfeld, who waited for words to arrive as Amos waits for music.