

*This MEMPHIS WRITING series aims to give a collective identity to some people whose writings have been nationally published and locally ignored. The series features people who have matured their craft through years of putting up with editors, publishers, and reading public.*

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*MEMPHIS WRITING hopes to be a welcome-home parade.*

*— David Bowman / Series Editor*

## **SUPPORTING THE ARTS / MARIANNE LEONARD**

When I was a child in the 1940s in Memphis, it was not easy to get inspired. There was a lot of repetition. We had not heard of role models so we didn't look for any, and supposed we would grow up to be mothers. The books we read were predicated on the ideal family of four, and the grown-up female with the smile was named Mother.

My own mother played the piano. For her own enjoyment, she said. She might have played for others if it had not been for us and the times. At any rate, her glory was that she had taken years of lessons at The Bohlmann School. Theodore Bohlmann was a German immigrant who looked like Brahms, strode about his studio and roared.

Therefore I was taken to concerts earlier and more than most of my friends. By the age of ten I had learned the more common musical forms in order to jiggle about at intelligent junctures to wake my feet without disturbing anybody's sacred listening. That was the extent of it.

One evening the great mezzo-soprano Blanche Thebom came through. She wore a green velvet gown with a train, and her black eyes flashed to the far corners. Belladonna, some said. I decided she was my future Self, and felt as though a bullet had gone through my head.

Afterwards, going up the aisle, my own eyes, brown, came to rest upon Vivian. With the new certainty that now I would never be a smiling mother, I asked mine, 'Who is that?'

She put her hand to the side of my head and steered my gaze in another direction: 'That's Vivian. Don't get her attention.'

Vivian was a witch, a black-eyed gypsy. The arrangement of her hair was unbelievable. This was before the '50s era of rollers and bouffant, a time for everyone's hair to be waved close to the skull. Vivian could not have managed her affair with pincurls or even the most mistaken

electric-wave. You had to admire it. I did. Later when rapping came in, I knew who invented it. In the top of her creation was a red flower. Transcendent is the word I think of now.

Suddenly the side of my face zapped into an iron railing, which caused a nosebleed. I was an experienced nosebleeder, but used only to the type that descends when one is quietly minding her own business.

Mother led me to the car. 'You always have to look behind. What's the matter with you?'

In the car I held my nose, looked across the black river and tasted blood.

'What were you looking back at?' she asked.

'Viviand.'

'Why?'

'I like her hair.'

The moon was not out. Later when I was in bed I heard my mother talking to my father who would say, 'I don't know.' I felt alienated and could not breathe so I woke up my younger sister and lied to her that she was adopted.

The next time I saw Vivian was at Rudolph Serkin. I had watched for her at Eleanor Steber, the Cleveland Symphony, and William Kappell.

We were riffing through our programs waiting for Serkin. I had the sensation she was approaching. At that time concerts floated the odor of Tabu perfume, later to be replaced by Arpege and Chanel, but that night it was Tabu, dark and murky. Then I got a waft of something else and Vivian plopped down in front of us. She was wearing purple flowers in her hair and smelled like something undiscovered.

As soon as she sat down, people in her immediate radius leaned in the opposite direction, and the effect was like a flower blossoming. In later years, if I sat in the balcony, I could sometimes find her by searching for the bloom.

My mother had veered slightly herself, and watched me. She picked up my dropped program, placed it in my lap and pointed to Serkin's biography.

'I've read it,' I said, staring ahead.

Serkin came on and we started listening to Beethoven. At least the rest of them did. Vivian's hands floated before her to the pulsing of something dream-like where there might be swirling mist, chandeliers and waltzing couples. It was dangerous and splendid.

When it was over she turned around. She spoke an inch from hysteria,

'Hello, how are you! You look very pretty, like the breath of spring! Wasn't it a lovely recital?'

Mother got up, gathered her purse, program, umbrella. She said, 'Yes it was. Nice.' And turned away.

I said, 'How'd you like the last Beethoven?'

She said, 'Marvelous, Marvelous! Who are you?'

I told her and added, 'I like your pink and purple dress.'

She escorted us to the car. She told about seeing Pavlova in Moscow and that her beau was giving her a Steinway and her brother was an artist in Paris.

When she walked off, to the bus stop, my mother said, 'That's a crazy woman. Do you have to be told everything?'

The moon was out as we rode, and I thought about the stories she had told, even though they weren't true. It was more interesting than sitting and going through a lot of repetition.

Later I asked my mother why she had answered Vivian in the first place if she didn't want to talk to her. She said that everyone said whatever was the required minimum to Vivian because she did, after all, support the arts in Memphis, and there was a tacit agreement 'to do this about Vivian.' But that it was uncalled for to carry on lengthy conversations since she was just as happy either way.

For some time after that we ran into her. We lived on opposite sides of the park and would pass her inside it. She walked everywhere she went. She went to all the art openings at Brooks Gallery in the park and she went to all the concerts and the Met when it came in May. She took great strides and covered the distance fast.

I learned that she lived with her mother who never left the house. Her father had run off when Vivian was young. Her brother did live in Paris and possibly he sent them money. She had gone to Paris to dance when she was young. She had performed there and in New York. Everyone said she had been beautiful, and this was not hard to imagine because the vestiges were evident in her coloring and features. But it must have been the sort of beauty that erupts in gorgeousness and then overstates. Finally she had come home in her present condition. She would always be this way, and she would always be at the concerts.

I watched people do the routine with her at intermissions, and I learned how to do it. Good form consisted in edging her over to someone else so she could turn around and take up with them.

Last spring when the Metropolitan was here and it was the last intermission of the last opera, somebody handed Vivian to me. I was tired from the concentration of music, my young children, and my work

which seemed stymied. I was leaning against the wall smoking. Nobody was around much since third intermissions don't bring out anything but smokers.

She said, 'Isn't the opera lovely? I adore Strauss, don't you?'

The opera was Verdi. I laughed. She waited, looked around to both sides of us to see who would be next. She looked back and said, 'I remember you a long time ago at the Serkin recital.'

'What do you remember?' I said.

Again she looked to see what would become of her. At the moment there was nobody within hailing distance. She searched my face. I looked into her black eyes and felt, suddenly, a bone-shattering empathy with what it must be never to speak to another human past a shallow greeting or comment about events.

'I remember you said, "I like your pink and purple dress,"' she quoted.

My throat hurt. Somebody passed and she waited for me to make the usual move. When I didn't, she leaned over and said, 'I know it's not Strauss.'

She strode away down the corridor, picking up with her crazy gait, and I knew she would die.

She did, the following winter, this winter. Last night when we were going in for another concert, I looked around at all of us holding our tickets, waiting. I thought of Vivian. My mother said, 'I miss her.' The feeling hung in my throat as the curtains parted, and a feather from a boa floated gently down to the page.

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*Marianne Leonard began published life as music critic for PRELUDE – a fine Memphis arts magazine with a two-year existence – where her monthly columns were the most entertaining writing about music this town has yet read.*

*Several of her stories appeared in the DELTA REVIEW; the funniest, 'Stuffed Pussy Cats,' appeared in its final issue (Nov./Dec. 1969). Her most significant publication, 'Memphis,' appeared in HARPER'S (Oct. 1969) as a long and moving commentary on the city that had recently made itself world-famous by assassination.*

*Mrs. Leonard grew up in Memphis, graduated from Southwestern, and continues to write about Our Town and its funny-but-sad progress through time.*

