

Fat Cats Go Down Alleys Eating Birds

The new leader had been the deputy of the old leader, but that didn't prevent him from having the old man shot, half way down the airplane stairs on his return from the UN. The band had been playing the old anthem "The mountainous heights of our glorious land". In D major, of course. But the new leader had them stop as the firing ended, and handed out the music to the new anthem. So the band played "The eagle circles our massive peaks" for the cameras, as the new leader came to the podium to explain that the old leader was responsible for the famine and the disappearances, but that now things would be better. Better most fundamentally because we would not have to endure D major anthems, with their wide open spaces that ignored our mountain peaks and valleys. Anthems from now on would be in A major, with more gaps and freedom for our people.

The famine continued and people still disappeared. The new leader was as unpopular as the old leader. People began to hum the old anthem under their breath, in the old key. It was forbidden. They hummed other tunes in D. A few daring ones hummed the new anthem in the old key. The new leader had the instruments fixed; you could only play G sharp; all the Gs were blocked up. The underground philosophers taught us about F sharp minor; we could use the same notes but make the eagle slide disloyally out of his confident arc. The police were out all of one night: in the morning D and A were gone too, naturally. There was cement in the holes, the frets had been filed, the hammers removed. Any attempt to play in D or A was now forbidden, as the land had moved onward to a higher level of achievement and consciousness. We had a new anthem, too, appropriate to our national transformation. "Above the snowy peaks the sun will always shine." At first we liked it. It had a sprightly sound and the now compulsory E major danced with smaller steps among the mountains and valleys of our praise.

Nothing changed, though, besides the anthems. There was no food in the

shops and no work for the young or the old. There were no cars on the streets not just because gasoline had to be imported but also because an imperialist conspiracy had made the horns of both western and Japanese cars sound a D-A-G chord. A wrong-key cell-phone chime and you might disappear. You had to listen carefully to the squeak of your shoes. Life more or less stopped.

But then, the Great Modulation. Another morning, another glorious sunrise over the mountains, another announcement on the radios and loudspeakers, heralded with fanfares of trumpets and piccolos. In B: more sharps than the average citizen could handle without a strong coffee. The new leader was now the old new leader and the new new leader announced that the secret of our national salvation had been found. It was explained by the anthem. "Through the clouds into a different space."

Things were in fact better for a while. We still were not allowed D, A, or E, but every social advance has its cost. Then came the drought, and the oil crisis. Food disappeared again, and so did people. Then the new new leader. He was replaced by a group of shadowy gravel-voiced tuneless men, some of whom were gone in a few months to be replaced with others. Each change brought a new anthem in a new key, and more notes were blocked up or filed off. It seemed to us that music was becoming narrow and fragmented. Like hearing through an insect's eye, as one of our underground poets put it. The vista of the mountains seemed to be blocked by prison bars of sound.

This grim situation lasted for several years. Until the blond man with the black parachute and the horse appeared. He had money; he had radios; he could arrange to have things smuggled. His solution was simple. Blow hard. One morning, the whole nation assembled before the radios and televisions and microphones to sing the praises of the fatherland and its noble leaders. You could hear the pause as we all inhaled, and then just blew, with all our fingers on all the keys. Or we banged strings with spoons. Or just shouted. At first silence, then a noise like a balloon being blown up, then a pop. And

then: C major! All the bungs and plugs had come out, all the strings had stretched down a semitone. Freedom!

Now anyone could own anything, and all the leaders were elected. Children played in the streets, bags of grain appeared from nowhere. Not everyone was happy; there were some people who actually liked the old days. They would whistle jaunty tunes in spiky tonalities. This was dangerous, so our elected leaders had to act, to preserve our liberties. No one was allowed to sing, whistle, hum, or play in more than three sharps.

If you tell people not to do something, they wonder what is so good about it. People would gather in cafés to sing about mountain heights and circling eagles. Our freedom was in danger. More black parachutes, but enormous ones this time. In the morning the streets were full of humvees. They went from house to house confiscating weapons. Anything sharp was taken, especially F, C, G and D. The children did not like the newcomers, they sang at them in squeaky childish voices. People copied them. C was beginning to sound like D.

Retribution was immediate. The next day B was gone. The soldiers patrolled the streets, and when they heard a B they seized the perpetrator and pushed him down, flattened him. They paid us to sing a new anthem. "For the right to wealth I shall pay the price". In F major. Elections followed. The new government enforced another flat. By now we could all hear where this was going.