

Roundabout

for Edith

The sky was gray-blue and flat. The sea was blue-gray and almost flat. The beach was gray and flattish, with a gentle swell of small disc-shaped pebbles. The people were mostly grey, their faces flat and English. Warm and bright for a March day in Brighton. In the middle of the gray beach beside the almost flat sea and among the English faces the roundabout slowly turned. As people approached it their faces brightened, their steps became quicker and less regular. Some danced. The music. Bright, resonant, circular music. Under the flat gray-blue sky.

I had got onto the beach several miles east of Hove and for half an hour as the dull jingle of the hard pebbles under my feet mixed with my thoughts I could see the pier standing in the retreating tide. I could hear the music before I could see the roundabout. A few notes at first, rounder than the hard-edged chinks of the pebbles' conversation and sharper than the flat whisper of the wind. Then whole phrases, almost a tune. As I got nearer I could see the roundabout turning. I could see it turn the whole way round, till the same gilded horse with the same child in the same blue raincoat came round to the same position. I listened to hear the tune all the way through, to the point where the same cadence led to the same opening notes. I couldn't. The music seemed to keep on continuously, without a beginning or end. But it was definitely round music. I kept on walking, kept getting nearer.

There were clouds in the gray-blue sky. As I walked they increased. Most of the sky stayed clear, the few grey clouds and one black one

were out to sea, beyond the pier. The black cloud was not at all flat. It had depth as well as contour. You could imagine it as dark wool, pulled and pressed into a shape. The lower edge of the cloud seemed at first like a pair of lips pouting downwards towards the sea. The lips extended and became a trunk, making the upper bulk of the cloud resemble an elephant's head with protruding ears. The trunk reached down towards the water. As it approached the surface of the sea a twist of water rose to meet it, sucked up into the elephant's trunk. The waterspout swirled and moved toward the shore, as if pulling the cloud head behind it.

People noticed. The crowd ran back into the town. The roundabout continued to turn. The blue raincoat and, I could now see, a pirate sword, appeared on every revolution. The music continued. The spout moved past the pier and onto the beach. The noise was suddenly overwhelming, like enormous waves breaking ceaselessly, like a train, like a million screams. The funnel advanced up the beach, the sound changing as sand and pebbles were sucked upwards. Its path led it straight to the roundabout. As it came to the roundabout its base seemed to rise, as the roundabout did too, twirling in the air amid the roaring of the wind, through which the occasional scrap of music could be heard.

The roundabout drifted, turning, suspended from the tip of the great dark trunk, down the beach, eastwards, for a mile or more. Then it dropped, slowly, until it touched the sand again, gently. The trunk withdrew into the cloud, which twisted and changed shape, and then disintegrated among the grayer clouds surrounding it. The roundabout rested in the middle of the gray beach beside the almost flat sea, intact, the base level on the pebbles, the carousel still turning, the music still playing. Bright, resonant, circular

music. Under the flat gray-blue sky. One child was still there, still in her blue coat on her gilded horse clutching her pirate sword. The crowd approached, cautiously at first, their steps becoming quicker and less regular as they neared. Some almost danced. The child was taken off. The music continued.

It was the same music. It had the same phrases and the same cadences. I had now heard every bit of it several times, and now I could hear how it worked. You would think the music was going to finish: the tune would head unmistakably towards a final note. And just before it got there another strand of music would start, and continue, until eventually it too would be about to end, but another strand would continue. Between these false endings there were long stretches which were the same whatever segment you were in. Or nearly the same, sometimes I thought I could hear small differences and sometimes I thought I was imagining them. How many times did this happen before it was really back at the point at which it had started? You couldn't tell just by listening. That was all the answer I was going to get, and I turned eastward and walked back along the pebbly beach the way I had come.

I thought it was east, at any rate. As I walked the crunch of pebbles under my feet sounded less harsh and I looked down to see not the gray disk-shaped stones that I had been walking on but smaller, rounder, green-blue pebbles with more sand around them. I looked up. The sky was blue. No clouds. The pier was in front of me. But it was not the same pier. It was the old pier, the one that had come down in a storm when I was a child. I walked towards it, puzzled. I almost walked into the sea, sparkling blue under a light blue sky. I turned, confused, and wandered for a while until I recovered my sense of when and where and who I was and walked

back up to the beach to meet my father. We were going on the roundabout. He handed me my precious pirate sword and I took his hand as we walked towards the music. I asked my dad why the music sounded so round and he said it was because each note was round. Look, he said, at the way they are written, and he pointed to the quavers and semiquavers written to the right of a treble clef above the gaily painted slogan "The Brighton Merry, goes round and round." And indeed the notes were nice round balls stuck to the end of short straight sticks waving cheerful flags.

We paid and got on, me on a golden horse and my father on a red dragon beside me but further in. Sheltered from the wind there he lit his pipe and I watched the smoke rise in little spirals as he puffed it out. He would amuse me by making shapes in the clouds of smoke. They had depth as well as contour, you could imagine them as dark wool, pulled and pressed into a shape. This time he puffed out an elephant's head which rose above us until it got caught in the circulation of the air at the top of the tin roof and became longer and longer, becoming a pair of lips pouting outwards towards the sea. I stared at the disappearing elephant's head until my father tapped me on the shoulder and pointed to the sky outside. frightened me and I looked back at the ceiling, trying to find where the elephant had gone, until eventually the ride was over and I got out and walked onto the beach, glad to be back where in the distance I could hear the bright, resonant, circular music, under the flat gray-blue sky. The beach was gray and flattish, with a gentle swell of small disc-shaped pebbles. For half an hour as the dull jingle of the hard pebbles under my feet mixed with my thoughts I could see the pier standing in the retreating tide.

I listened for the familiar music. A few notes at first, rounder than the hard-edged chinks of the pebbles' conversation and sharper than the flat whisper of the wind. Then whole phrases, almost a tune. As I got nearer I could see the roundabout turning. I could see it turn the whole way round, till the same gilded horse with the same child in the same blue raincoat came round to the same position. I listened to hear the tune all the way through, to the point where the same cadence led to the same opening notes. I couldn't. The music seemed to keep on continuously, without a beginning or end. But it was definitely round music. I kept on walking, kept getting nearer.