"The Thousand Cuts"

—J.D.J. Plocher, 2014

The first cut in the eight-year death of my academic career came when I applied only to doctoral programs "in places I'd like to live." Looking back, the disconnect between my priorities and my goals is obvious. I was one year into an interim appointment as coordinator of operations for a new music center housed in the same college of music where I'd completed my master's. My wife was just finishing hers. We were ready for something new…so why not more school? The answer has come in another 999 slender wounds.

That coordinator position was an interim appointment. The previous coordinator had left with little warning the previous summer, and I was tapped to replace him. I'd finished my masters in composition and music history. I was keen on new music. I was organized. My wife's remaining year of school helped the timing make sense. It was also a hell of a pay increase from the college bookstore where I'd been working for slightly north of minimum wage.

Still…I did not want to stay in northwest Ohio. By 2005, my description of the area was well-rehearsed: "It's flat in every possible way: topographically, culturally…you name it. The highest point in the county is a hill made from leftover fill from an overpass project. There are seven pizza places, two mediocre Chinese restaurants, the worst Mexican restaurant I have ever eaten at, and, inexplicably, a really good Japanese restaurant. Almost all the undergrads can go home to do laundry on the weekends. It feels like we're farming music teachers for every primary and secondary school in the state." I *really* wanted to move away. I liked my new job well enough, but there wasn't anywhere to advance in it. The center consisted of a director, a coordinator, and a graduate assistant. The director's chair was a 50% faculty assignment, and I wasn't faculty.

I was not sure I wanted to be faculty (and couldn't have been at the time). I did, though, want to learn more about new music. I'd started wondering *why* people kept composing the stuff (even though I was a composer myself). One of my main responsibilities as coordinator of operations was to administer and do the initial screening for an international call for scores. I listened to hundreds of pieces. Most of them weren't particularly good. Some were especially bad. Some were really cool, but we'd never sell the performance faculty on them. We picked our battles in pitching works to the performers. I learned a lot about the sausage-making that goes into any new music festival. Even when the festival went well, it was still full of pieces that left me scratching my head. It wasn't because the pieces were *bad*, per se. (We kept the bad ones off the program.) It was because this music was mostly for people who were already sold on new music. The audience was full of composers.

Going into a musicology program while questioning the function of music was a second cut. It's one that wouldn't have been fatal in the right program, or with the right advising, or with the right courses on offer. That's the thing, though: None of these cuts were

fatal in themselves. Like my geographic limitations on programs, this was a case of me not doing myself any favors.

I waded through the application process for a handful of school and accepted an invitation to the program at the University of Minnesota. I had liked the Twin Cities while doing my undergrad; it was exciting to move back. My pregnant partner and I settled into a nice apartment we quickly discovered was thoroughly in the inner city. (It turns out that hunting apartments from 600 miles away leaves a wide margin for error.) We ignored the murders (three within a mile in the first two weeks) and began to accumulate furniture. Eventually, classes started. I liked my seminars.

My son was born in February of my first year. The timing was as close to ideal as it could be for a grad student. I was on fellowship and didn't have any teaching load. I had the easiest semester I'd had since my undergrad years. I remember walking from the hospital to campus the afternoon after my son was born. I wanted to tell people, but I also wanted to be asked.

Having a kid? That started a whole series of cuts. Every time I was up in the middle of the night convincing him to go back to sleep. Every time I stayed home to take care of him instead of going to a campus event. Those moments accumulated, but the cuts came not just from fatigue and lost time. They came from perspective. The more often I thought of graduate school as a job rather than a calling, the less inclined I was to define myself by it. The less I defined myself by it, the harder it was to see all the hoop-jumping as necessary.

Some selected cuts accumulated during coursework:

The late Michael Steinberg—an incredibly erudite and charming man with an encyclopedic knowledge of the western canon—told me I had "debased musical tastes." I had made the mistake of comparing a neo-classical Stravinsky piece to a Disney musical. His subsequent comment was clearly the kind that make their way out of one's mouth before fully registering in the brain. His later, slightly-mortified apology was entirely sincere. Like my research interests, this wasn't something that would have been a problem in the right program or if I had the right degree of firebrandish commitment to my cause. As it was, the comment proved another warning sign of an imperfect fit.

A prospective faculty member was giving her job talk. She had impressed most of the graduate students in our informal lunch meeting, discussing the breadth of her research interests and methodologies. She was friendly, too. I was close to liking her. Her job talk was among the most boring presentations I have ever seen. I spotted several attending senior faculty members dozing off. I came pretty close to falling asleep myself. Some of that can be blamed in scheduling the presentation for a Friday afternoon, but…if there was such a chasm between her teaching persona and her research, what was going to happen to *me*?

I'd hear rumors about the department's ghosts. You know, the students who were ABD, or technically still enrolled, only nobody ever saw them. I knew there were people like this out there (the gentleman hired to replace me at the new music center was such a fellow), but I hadn't really encountered any. While not literally specters, they embodied the specter of failure. I had come into grad school with the notion that academic success was more or less guaranteed for smart, hard-working people. Meeting some who were smart, hard-working, or both—and still flailing—was a surprise.

The real shock came at the end of my third year, when I got an e-mail notifying me that I wouldn't have funding for the following year. Budgets were tight. I had finished my coursework. The faculty making the decision wanted to protect their graduate seminars by allocating the department's limited resources to those students still taking classes. This happened just a few weeks after we'd discovered my spouse was pregnant with our second child. I got angry. I threw my heavy desk chair across the room. I yelled. I picked up and put down my phone half a dozen times without any idea who I should call to yell at. There had been *no* hint of this in the air. My first year had been on graduate college fellowship; it was only my second year on the department's dime. Cutting me off seemed insanely capricious.

It was my last best chance to hop off the academic track before finishing. I had not quite settled on my dissertation topic. I liked teaching and had just finished assisting the four semesters of the undergraduate history sequence for majors. Except for the dissertation, I was "done." I had gotten the direct experience I expected out of my doctoral program in terms of education.

Instead of using the opportunity to escape, I twisted it around to cling all the harder to my nascent PhD. I swore I'd finish to *spite* the people who'd cut me off. Somehow I convinced myself that the best revenge for the wrong I'd been done was to pretend it had never happened. If I left, I'd let "them" win. It didn't matter that I had no clear concept of which "them" I was spiting, or how finishing my degree would accomplish that.

Losing my funding was my first direct acquaintance with how bad the money situation is in higher education. I had loosely tracked the growing number of stories about adjunctification, but when I lost my assistantship, I began to pay them much more attention. My naive faith that I'd be one of the success stories had been an armor. Losing my funding cracked that armor and made me far more receptive to bad news. If any single thing laid me open to the cuts that followed, it was that.

Some few of the thousand cuts go at the feet of my advisor. Ideally, the participants in an advising relationship (as in any relationship) complement one another. When you work with somebody who can shore up your weak spots and whose weak spots you can shore up, the results can be very good. They can be good, too, when you can amplify each other's

strengths. In my case, I ended up with an advisor who amplified my weaknesses. I was inclined to be independent; he was extraordinarily laissez-faire. I did not ask many questions; he seldom volunteered information. While I was writing, we'd meet once or twice a semester. When I had specific questions, my advisor gave great feedback. Otherwise, our meetings quickly devolved into departmental gossip.

There was a lot of gossip. I had the bad fortune to be working with my advisor as the department's (and college's) political landscape tilted away from him. He wasn't at the meeting in which the department cut my funding, and he wasn't able to do much to mitigate the damage. (He offered to help land me a 25% assistantship that would have ended up costing me money because it required full-time enrollment.) He did eventually help me land a few adjunct jobs and even got me back into the department to teach world music for a semester (sort of…it was complicated). None of our problems stemmed from from ill-will. We were just a bad fit—his benign neglect let us both drift more than we should have, especially when I was off-campus so much taking care of my kids. There was too much out of sight, out of mind…from both of us.

More cuts accumulated slowly but constantly as I worked on my dissertation. I enjoyed my research—even the irony that I made repeated trips to New York City and saw only the inside of libraries and archives. Occasionally, I enjoyed the writing. Mostly, I struggled to squeeze work in on evenings and weekends, annoyed at how much it took me away from my family. Every evening I handed the kids to my wife minutes after she got home was another wound.

Adjunct jobs were no salve. My first one was 100 miles away. Door-to-door, exactly 100 miles. It was also an 8:15 class, which meant I had to be out the door by 5:50 a.m. the two mornings the class ran. My "office hours" were half hours immediately after class in the horn professor's office…and I was grateful that the department had an office to loan me. (They even let me have keys!) The few faculty members I met were incredibly nice. One volunteered to come observe my teaching so she could write me recommendations. It was, as adjunct jobs go, a nice environment. The problem was that the pay was barely enough to cover gas and childcare.

Another was in Shakopee—a mere 35 miles away from North Minneapolis. That one was at a for-profit school in a strip mall. They used Microsoft Outlook for all of their administrative functions and talked earnestly about enrollment targets. I was handed a syllabus that was, quite literally, from the corporate office. My students were mostly studying to be veterinary technicians (though I also had some aspiring accountants and a young man studying game design). World music was not their thing. College readiness, by and large, was not their thing, either. A few of the students were the kind who would have thrived in any environment. Most were not. It was a challenge to get them to read the textbook and pass

basic quizzes (even with terms lists that told them exactly what might appear on said quizzes). The imperative to have them do college-level work without college-level skills necessitated a constant and awkward balancing act.

My adjunct jobs were not the worst ones I've ever had. The hours were bad and the pay was bad, but it was nothing on the couple of weeks I temped at a canning plant. If I were ranking jobs I've had, adjuncting would fall somewhere near working in a grocery store deli. That was a union shop, though, and if I'd stayed there even a week or two longer, I would have qualified for full benefits. That was never an option as an adjunct.

Adjunct jobs were *supposed* to be steps toward full-time positions. Job listings all called for a record of college teaching experience. Graduate assistantships only partially qualified. The real stepping stones were adjunct positions…mostly because those were the only ones available. They made for pretty dubious stepping stones, though, an extremely precarious path to cross the river between graduate school and the tenure track.

As I trudged through my dissertation, I had to sell myself on the idea of being done with my dissertation. I persisted with the idea of spiting my intermittently-supportive institution. In part I was wrestling with the years I'd already sunk into my PhD, and in part I had sold myself on the idea of being done. Being done would make everything better.

Being done did not make everything better.

I graduated in December 2012. Because of some quirks of academic scheduling and a particularly odd adjunct position I'd taken, I wasn't teaching in the spring. I took care of my daughter and sat on my hands and waited for something, anything, to come back from the applications I'd spent October and November sending all over the country. I was miserable. I had begun to understand some of the consequences of my mutually laissez-faire relationship with my advisor. My CV was far too thin to insulate me from the chilly job market. I told myself that I'd chase the one-year positions that begin to be announced in the spring. I told myself that I'd get an interview invitation any day now…

…I told myself that I was worthless, that I'd thrown away seven years of my life chasing a degree that was going to get me something between jack and squat. After a decade in graduate school, I was somehow even less employable than I would have been straight out of undergrad. I'd made my wife work full time through our kids' preschool years, made her live 1200 miles from her family. I was convinced I was failing *my* family. Late one night it got so bad that I cried for an hour, great wracking sobs that I couldn't stop. I don't know what would have happened if I'd been alone. My partner helped me get through that night, and the days that came after.

In March 2013, I went to the Society for American Music conference, hoping it might renew my enthusiasm (and because I had a paper to present). I heard more interesting papers than I'd heard at any previous conference. The members were supportive. They understood

my research and some were excited about the way it fit in with their own work. It was the best conference experience I'd ever had. A week later, I was more convinced than ever that leaving academia was the right next step for me. My peers at the conference were all gunning for the same jobs I was. None of us were optimistic about our immediate futures. The early career professionals committee meeting was filled with too-familiar laments, even though my fellow scholars were excited by and committed to their work.

It also became clear in the wake of SAM that my odds of landing any lately announced long term positions—tenure-track or postdoc—were slim to none. The jobs wiki filled up first with campus interviews then with "position filled." Postings for the secondary market were just starting to roll out. The string of one- or two-year visiting positions gnawed at me. I could not haul my family around the country for short-term jobs with marginal pay. There was no way I was leaving my wife to take care of the kids while I worked somewhere else. The secondary market wasn't practical. I could sit out a year and use my connections to pick up more adjunct positions in the Twin Cities…

…or I could get out. Just plain out. The market and I were not a "good fit," and there was no point in forcing it. The decision was as much realization as conscious choice. I didn't want it badly enough. I had colleagues and acquaintances who thought about musicology every day. Since I'd defended my dissertation, I hadn't really done that. The moderately adversarial position that had inspired me to start my doctorate in the first place had played itself out. I hadn't changed my mind, but I'd answered most of my questions. Pushing further into theoretical constructs of music sociology or developing further music historical topics just didn't seem that interesting any more.

That first cut—the one about only applying to schools in places I'd be interested in living? This was about the time I noticed that all my rationalizations about place were only relevant to the prospect of a stable job. Sure, I'd move somewhere for a job that would last. There was no way I'd move for just a year or two of visiting. Being an itinerant academic laborer seems much more palatable at a childless 25 than in a family of four at 33.

The numerous cuts I accumulated over the course of my graduate work and adjunct teaching did not change my mind about whether I'd be good at the job. They didn't even change my mind too much about the things that had driven me to graduate school in the first place. I still believe that I am a good teacher and a competent researcher (even if I've long since given up fantasies of driving U.S. critical theory). My dream hadn't changed. My understanding of reality did. I was a competent graduate of a midwestern research university. There was not much to distinguish me from the other 200 or so competent PhDs applying for just about every tenure track job and post-doc. Working years for less than minimum wage without promise of continued employment semester to semester just seemed…well, *stupid*. That is what staying inside meant. I wasn't a wunderkind with a fat publication record and institutional legacy to help me out. I'd be adjuncting until I won the metaphorical lottery, died, or got out.

I decided to stop paying Interfolio for lottery tickets.

I knew a year ago that my decision was the right one, but that did not make it easy. I'd already been wrestling with depression. I never quite hit the lows I did in the few months after my defense, but I spent a lot of time as an emotional cork, bobbing up and down. I threw myself into Minnesota's spring, unwilling to commit to anything until my son was done with his school year and we could make a plan. I spent a lot of time at the gym. I pecked fitfully at the novel I'd been waiting years to write. I *ѕlackeԁ off*. I took care of my kids, cooked, tried to keep the apartment clean, read books, played computer games.

About the time I was beginning to feel that I'd slacked off enough, it was time to decide where to live. My wife and I had already decided to move out of North Minneapolis. Our son needed to be in a school where being an Academic All-Star required more than being *at* grade level in reading and math. We needed a place to live that had interior doors. (Two kids had long since driven us out of love with our apartment's open floor plan.) My son received a placement in a school in South Minneapolis, a good one that was also part of the district's citywide autism program. There was a catch, though: rental properties in South Minneapolis were tiny, expensive, or both. Even a cursory look at the numbers made it clear that buying a house was a much better option.

My wife, who'd endured over a decade and a half in the midwest, balked. Her family was mostly in Texas, 1200 miles away. Buying a house in Minneapolis meant committing to that distance for several more years. Those were roots she was reluctant to put down. I wasn't in graduate school any more, though, so we *ԁiԁn't have to ѕtay*. I loved the Twin Cities, and would have happily remained there, but we'd been following my academic obligations around for as long as we'd been married. It was my wife's turn to choose.

We made plans to move in the latter part of summer. That, conveniently, gave me an excuse to put off thinking about things like "I need a job." I still had no idea what I was going to do beyond vague plans of "something with writing." That could be done just as easily in Texas as in Minnesota. I should have started trying to build a network and apply for things, but I was much more interested in playing ultimate and taking my kids to the park and otherwise enjoying a last summer without scorching heat.

The move was about what you'd expect for 1200 miles to Texas in August: hot, tedious, exhausting. We'd moved with the naive belief that job offers for my wife would come quickly (mostly because she'd had a few before we moved). Instead, we had to make do with savings and a mix of my substitute teaching and my wife's face-painting. The small and large expenses associated with moving ate into our savings quickly. One of the cars needed work before it could pass a vehicle inspection. Car registration was expensive. Our apartment complex botched air conditioner repairs in a way that jacked up our electric bill.

I spent the days I wasn't teaching looking for jobs. Technical writing. Journalism. Design. Copy writing. Proofreading. Post-relocation, my network was nonexistent. I applied

anywhere that looked vaguely plausible. On the rare occasions I got interviews, my PhD was the first (and sometimes last) topic of discussion. I wanted to start a new career, not just a new job. Starting in a position with no potential for advancement seemed stupid. I had skills, damn it, and I intended to use them. The problem was convincing potential employers that my skills were more important than my (lack of) concrete qualifications. It was disheartening, but I didn't know what to do beyond "apply apply apply."

About the time we began to think seriously about how much we could get away with putting on credit cards (and for how long), my wife found a full-time job. An unexpected bit of inheritance replenished our savings. We suddenly had breathing room. With my wife working full time and limited childcare options, I went back to being a stay-at-home dad most days. I worked on my novel and my blog. Eventually, we hammered out an arrangement with my in-laws to watch the kids two days a week so I could put in more days subbing.

I was also able to go to what was probably my last academic conference. About two weeks after I had decided to take myself off the market (or not go on the secondary market), I received an invitation to speak at AMS—the American Musicological Society. It was my first invitation to present at AMS. Any AMS, even the twice-yearly regional chapter meetings to which I religiously sent paper proposals. My research and the society's interests had apparently never been compatible. Looking over the conference programs, I could almost see why. Research into post-1945 American art music was scant. Research that *also* took odd methodological tacks, that engaged different elements of music-making was even rarer. I accepted the invitation and seldom thought about it until I had to book tickets and write the paper.

AMS in November 2013 suddenly featured lots of research that I could get behind. I spent most of Saturday hearing papers on post-war American music. The presenters were not just engaging scores or composers. There was a whole panel about music and *branding*. The papers were excellent. Here were scholars doing the kind of work that had pulled me out of composition into musicology in the first place: asking why, and who, and how, and why we should care.

Sitting in a Saturday morning panel, even more than in the Friday afternoon session featuring my presentation, I felt like I had made it. Here was a collection of smart people, mostly young, chasing the same answers I spent years chasing. I could have collected e-mail addresses to wrangle together a group for an edited volume or two, or panel discussions for future conferences, or just to compare notes on all the Cool Stuff…

…and I didn't. Before the conference, I had talked about not having anything to prove, but I hadn't realized what that would look like. I enjoyed being able to approach the presenters with sincere compliments, to share short conversations about our work, and to move on. I wasn't compelled to network or position my research vis-a-vis theirs. I could appreciate the coolness of the cool stuff and get on with my day.

If I had still been invested in the game, I don't know as I would have enjoyed the conference much beyond those papers. Most of my conversations with colleagues were about bureaucracy or the job hunt. Neither subject had much sunshine in it. Even the young academics who were collecting awards and doing awesome research did not seem especially sanguine about staying inside. The faculty who mentored me through my doctorate were making noises about or plans for retirement.

I laughed more that weekend than I had recently. I caught up with people I hadn't seen for months or years. I had too much coffee and not enough sleep. I sat outside panels and worked on my novel. I used my Twitter account more in 72 hours than I had in the previous 72 days. Despite all that, it felt like a farewell tour. Not a victory lap, mind, but that one last walk around campus before everybody goes home for the summer.

The winter (or what passes for it in Texas) was personally dreary without touching the darkness I'd felt the previous February. I staggered from sub job to sub job, intercutting them with working on my novel and taking care of my kids. With my wife working, our household finances finally stabilized, though it took longer to settle into a routine that allowed me to work more than two days each week. My sister-in-law has a son a few weeks older than my daughter. Some changes in her situation allowed her to spend more time watching my kids. I began to sub more.

I was still collecting rejection e-mails, though. The worst was for a coordinator job at the University of Texas that was incredibly similar to the one I'd done back in Ohio. How could I be such damaged goods that I couldn't get a job for which I was not only qualified, but experienced? Looking at job listings got a little more like staring into the abyss every week. Human resources people and departments at the kind of companies that list jobs on-line are as subservient to formulae as university search committees. Miss a keyword or have the wrong job title and you go straight to the circular file, no matter how qualified you are. The more rejections I got, the harder it was for me to look at a listing and think "I can do that" rather than "there is no way in hell I could even get an interview."

The rejections were depressing. Thinking about the reasons for them led me in widening gyres of self-blame and self-recrimination. I complained (mostly to myself, sometimes to my incredibly patient wife) about the bad fit with my advisor, about the idiocy of corporate HR, about my utter lack of network in Texas. On the days I got rejections, I was not much fun to be around. Eventually, I came to terms with the fact that I did not have the right set of skills for the jobs I was looking for. That does not mean I couldn't do them. I learned many things as I went through school. I could *do* most of the jobs I was applying for, official qualifications or not. The skills I lacked were the soft skills of glad-handing and networking, of aggressive self-marketing…skills grad school had done very little to develop.

I don't *like* those skills. It's a temperament thing. I don't hide what I know, but it's challenging for me to talk myself up to strangers. I hit a crossroads where it became clear that

I needed to commit to learning new skills: either the soft skills of self-promotion or a more concrete set of skills that I could turn into certificates and resume bullet points. It took most of a year, but I had finally decided that potentially getting more education—possibly even more *school*—was not anathema.

In late March, I started a long-term substitute assignment that kept me in the same school with the same classes for six weeks. One of the days that first week, I came home and told my partner that I could not imagine myself ever teaching middle school full time. A few weeks later, we had a conversation about how middle schoolers are some of the most interesting kids to teach. I've played around with lesson plans, adjusted pacing, graded speeches and explained narrative conflict. I've felt like a teacher, not a substitute for one. Nothing is certain yet, but as the school year winds to a close, I spend most days expecting I'll be back in a middle school next year.

The thousandth cut? I think it's this essay. A few months ago I made a conscious effort to blog more on post-academic issues. It has been simultaneously therapeutic and frustrating. Being candid about the problems I've run into since deciding to leave is refreshing. Posting about #postac, though, often seems like empty kvetching. Sometimes it is. More often, it's situational observation—I write more about what I have felt than what I'm feeling, describing moments rather than my state of being. It wears me down. I don't have the same righteous fury that drives, say, Rebecca Schuman. I don't have any desire to turn myself into a consultant for other academic leavers. I enjoy the comments about solidarity in suffering, and appreciate some of the lessons I have picked up from other blogs about how to think about my "condition." I'm just not keen on trying to generalize my experience.

Writing about being a postac has made me feel less like one. It's been a year since I decided not to test the secondary market. A rough year, yes, but I amplified that by moving across the country. Now, I feel like I live here, physically and metaphysically. My practical struggles haven't changed all that much. I've been a substitute teacher for almost seven months. I am not certain what I'm doing this summer, never mind next year. I'm still trying to get health insurance for my kids. The difference—and this is key—is that I'm no longer approaching these problems with my past hanging over me. I've made a transition from "failed academic" to "guy with a PhD starting a new career."

The postac is dead. Long live the postac.