

## PETER VAN DYCK

*Night Hallway, 2011*  
Oil on linen, 24 x 30 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## CHRISTIE B. COCHRELL

### Hearing Loss

Paul's hearing was going; he no longer heard everything Marta heard. She didn't understand at first and freaked out, thinking all those nights of Rolling Stones—"Dead Flowers," "Ain't Too Proud to Beg"—on earphones much too loud over and over every night that awful winter semester at Skidmore had jiggled something loose inside her ears, maybe, to make her hear things that weren't there. Some kind of tinnitus. Earwax. Turbulent blood flow (she'd secretly checked the Mayo Clinic website).

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First it was the sound in the car door. A kind of swishing like traffic on a wet road, or cement being troweled.

"What's that?" Marta wondered, not liking it.

"What's what?" Paul asked, turning onto Walnut Avenue, inattentive in his dear, maddening way. They drove past the imposing Victorian houses, the big mature shade trees, the grand, old-fashioned porches she always thought it would be fun to sit out on, side by side, sipping vodka with shaved ice and lime slices, when her stepsons came home from their respective classes in digital photography and media (Randy) and coastal geography or marine ecosystems (Zach)—wistful for the kind of easy family gathering that time and hectic schedules almost never permitted these days.

The sound might be a specter in the air system or trapped inside the door, playing sand blocks to signal SOS, *I want out*. She couldn't describe it to him, so she said, "Oh nothing, never mind."

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Next, at three or four o'clock in the morning, the sound of something on the roof jolted Marta awake. She woke up afraid from her dreams of people she had loved who weren't there anymore. Her start woke Paul, who had his arm across her.

"What was that?" she asked, heart thudding. A squirrel or raccoon on the roof? Or someone trying to break in . . . forcing one of the doors, dropping a hammer or screwdriver on the deck.

"I didn't hear anything," Paul said in his thick, dog-tired voice, with his slight old-world accent. No longer a night owl—or even a noon owl, he joked sometimes, not even up

by noon. No longer young. Twelve years older than she was, thinking about retirement and Medicare and getting an old yellow rescue Lab and maybe a canoe. She'd become so afraid of his aging too fast. Of his not being with her always, keeping her from harm.

She got out of bed and sat in the upstairs office, bundled in the Noël Coward dressing gown she'd given him one Christmas as a joke; ate Cheerios with almond milk and honey; tried to read; turned out the light again and sat in darkness, seeing (though no longer hearing) a whole panoply of frightening things. The windows there had no curtains or blinds, and she felt the darkness pressing to get in, get at her. Waiting for her to drop her guard.

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The third time, finally, Marta knew how bad it was, how much worse it would be. She said, "I love you," in Paul's ear, like one of those seashells that holds the ocean, the hair graying around the lobe and helix like the gentle muffling fog, mornings, that hid the houses on the far side of the lagoon from their back window, softened the sharp edges of the world. She felt so tender, so in the right place, after a long lifetime of being with wrong, disastrous men. She felt grateful and full of love that spilled from her in unaccustomed waves. And her sweet Paul answered only, "That's tickling—do stop." Not hearing her at all. His arm not touching her this time.

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Paul was an architect who'd won awards for eco-friendly design, balancing indoor and outdoor spaces, use of natural light. He designed buildings like da Vinci angels, fluent and resilient, sure-footed, then airborne. He grew up in Austria, in Linz, home of the linzer torte, but moved to California in his teens, when his father came to teach at Stanford in the chemistry department.

He'd gone on making linzer tortes with hazelnuts and almonds, lemon zest, vanilla, raspberries, and raspberry jam. Or sometimes apricot puree in recent years, since Marta liked that especially. He took amazing pictures of monarch butterflies in oyamel fir trees near Mexico City, sacred fir, cloud forests. He'd been involved in fundraising for the Walton Lighthouse—said to be built to withstand a quarter million pounds of wave energy. His first wife's

father had been one of the Coast Guard personnel stationed at the lighthouse on Anacapa Island, one of the Channel Islands (from the Chumash Indian word *Enecepha*, meaning "island of deception or mirage," he told her). Paul had admired him greatly, and Paul's pharology—his keen enthusiasm for lighthouses—came from their late-night talks.

After dropping out of college, Marta made good money as a self-employed tax accountant for over thirty years and was now working her way through a late degree in music, thinking she might like to teach some classes. She'd had fun with courses titled Studies in World Music, Women in Music, Gamelan Music of West Java, and with ukulele lessons, and flute making. Nothing serious. Not music theory or the great composers whom she loved too much to have to criticize, to take apart. She left analysis to her friend Jemima, who was working on a PhD while bringing up a daughter on her own.

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"Fear is a funny thing," Jemima told her, sitting on the lip of the big stage in the grove of redwoods on campus that Marta thought of as a sacred grove, and eating an avocado sandwich with sprouts and pepper jack cheese. She mentioned Mozart and quoted what some family friend of the composer had said, "Until he was almost nine he was terribly afraid of the trumpet when it was blown alone, without other music. Merely to hold a trumpet in front of him was like aiming a loaded pistol at his heart."

They watched Jemima's three-year-old, Lia, running around the stage, touching pieces of sunlight that lay bright and odd shaped in the deep shade, having drifted down like fall leaves through the gathered trees. Lia was formally Cecilia, named after the patron saint of music. Her harpist father had left them for Juilliard shortly after her birth.

"Lia seems afraid of nothing. I'm afraid for her, that she'll have cause to learn to be afraid."

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At night when she couldn't sleep, Marta sat in the office with its blank, uncurtained windows, looking up things on Google—kind of a modern version of consulting the Delphic oracle. She looked up "Mozart, fear of trumpets." On the internet radio station ABC Classic 2, she read that

"in an effort to train him out of this extreme fear Mozart's father hired someone to follow him around with a trumpet and blast sporadic noise at the poor boy's head." Trying to drown out fear. She thought about how that was like a play she'd seen with Paul about King James III of Scotland, who had a choir follow him around so when people criticized, or said things that he didn't like, they'd burst into loud song and drown out the bad vibes.

That probably wasn't a practical solution in her case.

But she taped on the wall over her desk a black-and-white postcard she'd found somewhere of two priests in Tibet blowing twelve-foot trumpets. To remind herself of drastic remedies.

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As Paul heard less and less, Marta was more and more consumed by dread, seeing no remedy at all. Afraid of losing all the things they shared. Afraid he couldn't love her anymore, with her essence taken away. Her words, her laugh, her always singing "Day-O" in the shower. The love of music that was in her bones like DNA.

And maybe worse, afraid that *she* wouldn't love *him*. That his deafness would make her critical, unkind. She had no patience repeating herself. She hated being loud, especially in public. It broke her heart to imagine onlookers—onlisteners—judging her elegant husband infirm. Seeing him as an old man.

She was terrified that when Paul went out on his bicycle he wouldn't hear cars coming up too fast behind him. That when he went looking for monarch butterflies at Natural Bridges, drug peddlers would get him, think he was intruding on their space. That one day he wouldn't come home. Afraid those things she'd heard in the car and on the roof whispered some kind of collective disaster waiting to happen. Gathering around them, closer and closer, while everything they loved receded and was gone.

She grieved for him, knowing he would no longer hear songbirds, the oven timer, the *thwok* of tennis balls hitting the red clay court, the millions of butterfly wings like soft rain. Couldn't hear her come home, or leave, or sit cross-legged on the big bed with its kantha quilt, playing the ukulele badly.

She felt that made her cease to be, like the famous old adage about a tree falling in a forest. She'd vanished, or

*She was terrified  
that when Paul went  
out on his bicycle  
he wouldn't hear  
cars coming up too  
fast behind him.*

soon would, into the yawning chasm that had opened suddenly between them where there had been only pillowcase, sheet, talk of stone, water, ginkgo, old oak. Inhabited spaces of words, of architects' materials.

"You just don't understand," she exclaimed hotly when he returned home from the audiologist one afternoon and was surprised to catch her crying, scraping lumpy, rock-hard biscuits from a pan into the trash. Her favorite comfort food, which she hadn't tried baking since the December her mother died.

"I guess I don't." Paul sounded sad.

"I can't explain it to you, then." She knew she was being absurdly childish and unreasonable, but she couldn't help it. If she could pick a fight, she thought, make him angry, it might prove she had substance still. A trumpet she could blast.

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It should have encouraged her to read during one of her nightly consultations of the Google oracle that, according to Dave Hickman, a commenter in a forum on a community site for trumpet players, Mozart overcame his fear.

"Evidently, W. Mozart did write a trumpet concerto. He wrote about it in a letter to his father, Leopold. He wrote that it was well-received." But then it depressed her to know his bravery had counted for nothing in the end. "The work has not been found. Like most of Mozart's works,

*She found amazing photographs by a Romanian artist of the soft wooden inside of a cello, with light scrolling in through the sound holes.*

it may have been sold to the fish market as wrapping paper because Wolfgang was always needing money.”

She and Paul had visited Salzburg one spring, two years before, in time for the Easter markets. They’d painted eggs and hiked around Lake Fuschlsee and to the Capuchin monastery; heard a quartet and serenade in Mirabell Palace; brought home salt from the medieval mines; learned that *Wolfgang* means “running wolf.” Under the lower slopes of the green mountain on which their window opened, at the beginning of the Alps, they had wakened to the gentle drop of tennis balls and rise of foreign voices on a red clay court among fruit orchards. And long after midnight, the unsteady songs of revelers returning through the orchards from town.

Back home, they’d gone on to try other salts. Red clay salt from Hawaii, with which Paul flavored sautéed brussels sprouts. Fleur de sel with citrus peel on rice. Alderwood-smoked salt on grilled salmon.

And Marta had practiced playing Mozart’s “Turkish Rondo” on her ukulele.

All of their seven years together had been charmed. This was the payment, now, come due.

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She’d have to find some buried treasure if she was to pay. She couldn’t be what Paul needed of her. Not now, not yet.

She didn’t have the resources to overcome her fear of past, present, future. He’d cared for her, after she’d made a mess of things, and she was so afraid it wouldn’t work the other way around. So on one bright, false morning in October, she panicked, fled for her life.

She drove to his family’s cabin north of the Golden Gate Bridge, near Cazadero, along little Austin Creek. A weekend retreat, now a life retreat. She sat on the deck under the thick canopy of redwoods (“if a tree falls in a forest . . .”) for hours on end. When she couldn’t stand being closed in, with no clear view of sun or sky, she drove to the beach at Jenner with a folding camp chair and a thermos of coffee and watched a troop of children chasing gulls, sending the white wings up like mute reflections of the whitecaps in their clamorous upsurge and fall. Sound and none—both equally impermanent. Was that any consolation?

She’d bought a loaf of dark rye bread with caraway in Guerneville and ate nothing all week but scrambled eggs on toast, egg-salad sandwiches, and Vermont extra-sharp white cheddar melts. She was afraid of being there alone, off-season, in the middle of nowhere, but figured it was like the blasting of trumpets out of the blue—a drastic remedy.

She found a poem by a Frenchwoman, Rosclyne Sibille, online:

I write to you from the other side of the shadow  
I write to you  
so I do not vanish  
so the words reveal me  
so you hear more than the void.

She copied it out by hand, wanting to put it in an envelope to Paul, but didn’t know if she could bear to be revealed in her stark-naked cowardice.

She found amazing photographs by a Romanian artist of the soft wooden inside of a cello, with light scrolling in through the sound holes. They made her feel that curling up inside one of the old, deep-voiced string instruments would be the one safe place to be. She taped copies of the photos and the poem to one of the corner windows framing the breakfast nook and added a couple of coppery sycamore leaves. It felt like the beginnings of a little shrine, a prayer corner, a voicing of the truths she sought.

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With shrines in mind, Marta decided to have lunch in Jenner and go on to visit Paul’s most recent architecture project, not far from Bodega Bay. A private nursing home—sacred in its intent and in every line, she’d read in one review; a sanctuary for the old, infirm. She’d never gotten to see it. She’d had some kind of stomach bug the day of the ribbon cutting, and Paul regretfully drove up with Zach instead. “The best thing Dad has ever done,” he told her afterward.

She should feel free to walk around, the lilted Jamaican in the office told her. So she explored, admiring the facility’s rammed-earth walls, skylights, courtyards, and reflecting pool, feeling her heart lift in response to the naturally healing space. She passed through one of the inner gardens, warmed by the midafternoon sun and her husband’s generosity of spirit, present all around, her tears brimming. Finding an elegant elderly woman sitting in a room of earth and gilded glass just off the garden, in a draped kimono cardigan patterned with stylized leaves, she quickly wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand. But then she saw the guide dog, a sturdy white retriever, watching from beside the woman’s leg, and realized she was blind.

“Please sit down,” the woman said, intuiting Marta’s hesitation.

“I’m not disturbing you?”

“Oh not at all. It would hardly be fair for Bianca and me to keep this perfect space all to ourselves.”

Marta wondered what it offered somebody who couldn’t see, then watched the woman running her hand down the smooth wood paneling, which held the suggestion of fragrant sandalwood.

“Don’t you just love the light?” the woman asked, and though unseeing, she showed Marta it was like being inside the cello, with dust-moted light on mellow wood, the mature fullness of autumn in its fabric. Amber stone sweeping up one wall like a flight of butterflies, or the aqueous track of a lighthouse. Bright yellow paintings—Alphonse Osbert’s *Soir Antique* on the side wall, and then three by Chagall, Marta’s favorite, together—*The Clown Musician*, *The Dance*, and another . . . *The Magic Flute*, Papageno with bird and birdcage. For me, she thought, singing inside. The enchantment of music leading, as Mozart decreed, through trial by silence, fire, water, and the fearsome dark.

“Our music room,” the woman said, as if following her

gaze. “For choir practice on Thursdays and Saturdays. And for concerts, whenever local musicians agree to come. That gives us all such joy.” She laughed and laid her hand on the dog’s trusty head. “Even Bianca.”

“It’s a place meant for joy, I see,” Marta said, a catch in her throat.

“Well, we’re happy to share,” the woman said, touching Marta’s arm lightly, uncannily observant of her need. Then she wondered, “Are you visiting one of the residents? We’re hardly on the Bodega Bay tour.”

“I know the architect,” Marta told her simply. “He’s wanted me to see it for some time.”

“What a good person he must be.”

“The best,” she answered emphatically. One who challenged others to be the best they could be, too.

As they sat on in companionable silence, the sanctuary she had sought, Marta realized she’d love to do three things. Besides getting the rescue Lab Paul had in mind, sign up to take in service dogs to raise, through that place in Marin if there was nothing closer. Give music to shut-ins—hospital wards, homes, whoever most needed it. Especially to people who couldn’t see the yellow joie de vivre of the painters’ pigments (saffron, acacia, chrome, or cadmium yellow), for whom she could translate it to sound. Colors and music for Chagall were almost interchangeable. No one sense dominated the others.

Third, most urgently, she’d like to tell Paul . . . tell him how much his gift meant to all those he’d blessed with it and promise him that from now on she’d translate for him any music, any muffled notes of love and light he didn’t know by heart already, hear clearly inside.

On her way out she glanced at the quiet bronze label identifying the artwork. The dedication under the painters’ names sent her reeling. “For Marta.” A chill of pure grief and remorse coursed through her, heart stung, throat closed tight. She’d been right; he’d chosen the brilliant Chagalls with her in mind, his clownish musician. He’d always liked adding allusions, personal touches to his designs.

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Sometime the next day Marta went down to the creek and sat on the flat, cold rock Paul’s father, Lorenz, now ninety-two, called the altar stone (or when he was drinking Canadian whiskey, the stone of the sacrificial ox), a megalith

he claimed had been carried around the cape by Viking seamen from the old world to the new. She imagined a line of solemn priestesses filing into the redwood temple.

On her iPod she listened to Mozart's Piano Concerto no. 24, with its haunting use of trumpets, sounding almost under their breath. Her internet consultation the night before had mentioned the "strange, veiled effect" of the trumpets and timpani and their "mysterious, muted effect." The brash, brassy instruments were dreamy, spellbinding, no longer scary. The composer had gotten over that.

She saw herself again curled up inside the wooden chamber of a cello, or in Paul's otherworldly music room, letting herself dissolve in light.

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Marta started, hearing tires on the gravel drive. Two dogs came rushing down to the altar stone where she now was lying on her back, music over, crying in release. They jumped all over her, their eager tongues not minding the salt of her tears. She struggled to push herself up against the manic Irish setter force of them, amazed they would be there.

"Narwhal! Belugal!"

And then Zach, in his red parka, her younger stepson, the marine biologist, saying just, "Hey, there you are," in his friendly, laid-back way as he bent easily and picked out a couple of stones to skip across the creek. Randy was snapping photos on the deck, Paul unloading bags of groceries from Zach's Subaru, and mesquite chips for smoking lamb—since ox was "only for the plebes," Lorenz maintained.

"Dad knew you'd be here," Randy said, giving Marta one of his bear hugs. "I love the telepathy between you two."

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There was a whole life left, Paul told her in their room that night, watching her sad, expressive face, and returning the love she confided with cold fingers into his palm and drew with quickening assurance down the lithe curve of his back. He held her for a long time, smelling of mesquite and Russian River Valley pinot noir, until her fear was nearly gone.

Marta had been hearing loss, loss upon loss, but lucky for both of them, Paul had never heard a thing.

## PETER VAN DYCK

*Rooftops Looking North, 2010*  
Oil on linen, 26 x 32 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

**Christie B. Cochrell** is an ardent lover of the play of light, the journeyings of time, things ephemeral and ancient. Her work has been published by *Catamaran Literary Reader*, *Tin House*, and *New Letters*, among others. She has won the Dorothy Cappon Prize for the Essay and the Literal Latté Short Short Contest. Once a New Mexico Young Poet of the Year in Santa Fe, she now lives and writes by the ocean in Santa Cruz, California.