

1976

Lives of the Saints, Part I

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The Living Room (1941-43): Balthus / Ira Sadoff

Music meant everything to the father, but his two daughters are sleepy now: one has dozed off on the couch and left the living room a mess: the brown felt tablecloth covers half the cocktail table and the bowl of fruit could tumble at any moment. The younger daughter is doing her best to study composition, but her eyes too are wandering inward; her daydreams are still simple, she thinks of ordinary things: of skipping rope in a schoolyard, teasing a girl friend about a dress, the discipline of kneeling in a shelter while bombers fly overhead.

Mother is still working in the factory, well past dinnertime, and father will be home late, if at all. The piano, which was intended for their lessons and bought at a considerable expense, stands idle in the corner, hardly visible. After the first child was born mother promised father the melodies of Mozart would sweep through the house; now anything vaguely German must be whispered secretly, and the music played is mostly French, some faint impression.

Earlier today there was a hint this household was not quite so intact. The older sister held the younger in her arms when she was frightened by a noise, there was the slightest hint of a caress, the mild reflection of a hand against a thigh. So much tenderness comes forth of fear these days, this should not cause surprise. And when the parents arrive to collapse on that same couch, no words of passion will be expressed. The adults save their purest feelings for the enemy, and all they share now is the drug of sleep, where everything is permitted, but nothing is quite done.

Lives of the Saints, Part I / Jon Anderson

This is the rain on Mozart's grave,
Shearing to glissandi.
Where do you little lie, exhausted, whole,
& wholly done?
Sweet Amadeus,
When I sip my bourbon,
Weaving myself toward pure abstraction—
The recollection
Of emotion without the tired events—
I'd trade my part in this to bear your song:

Even the most,
Last, broken, Wolfgang, human moan.
You are so friendly & your pillow was a stone.

*This is Mozart:
A curtain of rain,
The turning heads of certain women,
The sweetness of bourbon,
Sweetness of music,
The poor politeness of oblivion.*

*

“Dear Sir
I am in a Madhouse & quite
Forget your Name or who you are
You must excuse me
For I have nothing to communicate
Or tell & why
I am shut up I don't know
I have nothing to say so must conclude
Yours respectfully
John Clare”

*Was this his letter into the earth?
Was it wholly composed
Of solitude?
It was wholly composed.
Did he bear extravagant pain,
Whose poems, of such light fragrance
As to be
(Dear Sir, forgive us) small?
You are minor, Sir, & would not offend.
I am, respectfully,
Yours.*

*

Under the gathering, luminous clouds
He walked his grounds, thought:
Another reigns:
I must not (Tolstoy) be myself!
& fled from home.
We have the early flickering films,
The mourning strangers, waving.

All day
He lay at Astapovo Station,
Over & over: "I do not understand
What it is I have to do!"

*"Yes, one good deed,
A cup of water, given . . ."
Prevailed: his gentleness, his pride,
Who would not bow
(The light: a small tin lamp w/o a shade)
To read himself:
"I have no passport.
I am a servant of God."*

*

The age demanded acquiescence.
Stalin's cock, a stone.
The heart
Of Mandelstam, in exile, pumps & dries.
The bells of Petrograd,
The bells of Leningrad,
Limed with ice,
Are hollow;
Silence stalks the frozen snow.

*We threw our matches
Three times in our Yankee vodka,
Hoping for a conflagration—
Anger!
For Mandelstam, for Mayakovsky,
Anna Akhmatova!
For timid Mandelstam, three times a fool,
Accused & blessed:
Poet! Russian! Jew!*

*

I am Chopin,
I enclose a little time,
I bow & play:
The sea, the chandelier, this room, the sky,
The cliffs at Sourash,
Even the whole of Europe,
Blown black, spin—

The music speeds . . . retreats . . .
& I am Robert Schumann,
Mad & done,
Yet must, a little time, go on.

*Now
At the hour we lately lie awake,
Give us that surety
On which our fragile art depends.
I am Robert Schumann,
Bewildered, woken
By a strange sonata in a foreign bed
Give me a little time,
Eternity,
& I will mend.*

Getting a Drunk out of the Cab / David McElroy

It is my head in the guts
and my arm growing out of the crotch
hooking the limp legs in,
and my left hand holding nearly its own
as I carry home without fare my older
brother, the body out of its mind.

I

The ritual spilling on the curb
with its coins, the fixing stare
and bog breath of a mastodon thawing,
the mushy fingers flexing in the rain
like gillslits pumping up a desert.
So smashed, I could tie a blue ribbon
around his cock, scot free.

Inside the weight and heat
I become the center beginning to move,