Lermontov's Room: Moscow, 1995

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The hollow heart beats evenly.
—Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1841), “Death of the Poet”

No doubt he himself hurried along here, up these breakneck stairs, down this corridor, heels clack-clacking to the rat-tat-tat of mémère’s disapproval. Same old story, the old and the young: he’ll never amount to much if he doesn’t shape up, she just can’t understand what his life is about. . . . His room’s restored, cut out of the clouds breathing sullen, mute, this November day. A poet’s lair—Pushkin above the desk—the Caucasus engraved, craggy, fantastic—notebooks lying open, tantalizing, just far enough beyond the barrier—and books, those lovely leather-bound Byrons and Schillers and Chéniers spilling across shelves like curios in a cabinet. If you ask the old woman who sits by the door, she’ll recite his poems, rocking gently with the rhythm, thinking back to her days at school, when it seemed the most poetic thing, to die young.