

Filar: The Piano Lesson.

I stand half frozen at the door to No. 702, early as usual,
Pressing dark boot prints into the worn maroon carpet.
A mouse rode up the elevator with me, staring in bug-eyed terror
From its corner. It dashed out into the hallway, pausing at this very door,
And turned to regard me with a knowing look before escaping into darkness.
Like the mouse, I hesitate in tremulous silence. Today I am Filar's first pupil.
He is practicing when I arrive. I imagine he chooses the selection
Knowing that I, or some other callow student, is listening at the door, humbled.
He never stops performing. *You must play every note*, he tells me,
As if your life depends on it. You must suffer in order to play.
When you have shed sufficient tears, only then will others shed tears
For your Chopin, for Brahms, the Intermezzi, the Rhapsodies.
For Schubert, the Moments Musicaux, the Impromptus
For the Carnival, the Symphonic Etudes of Schumann.
Always, he cites the Romantics. I stare at my reddened fingers,
Brittle after a long and gusty hike from the trolley stop.
On the way, a snow-bracketed sycamore on Rittenhouse Square,
Dropped a searing packet down my neck, soaking my sweater.
I smell of wet wool. On cold days like today, Filar takes up my hands
Tenderly in his own, washes and caresses them under warm water.
There is no time to warm up by playing, as I would at home.
I have scarcely practiced this week. He will know immediately.
Maryan Filar, my mercurial, virtuosic Polish teacher,
Survivor of the Warsaw uprising, of five concentration camps.
Even the monsters grasped my great gift. I offered them
A kind of redemption. They fed me and fed on me.
Still I cannot scrub them off my sleeves.
When you are ready, and the music will tell me when,
I will tell you more. If this is an invitation to inquire,
I will never ask. At 14, I have very little sense
Of Filar's place in history and the world,
Or of anyone's for that matter. And not much interest.

A thunderous torrent of arpeggios shakes the door.
Chopin, of course, the finger withering Ocean Etude. My first lesson
On this very piece is today. When he hears how poorly I've prepared,
Filar will tilt the fallboard of his Steinway over my clumsy fingers,
As if about to crush them, scowling as I pull my hands away in reflex terror,
Humiliated. Still, I am fairly sure that, in twenty minutes, I will have him in tears.
Schumann, my *Kinderscenen* will redeem me today. In a measure,
Filar is icy fury, but also in a measure, melted. Which is why he keeps me on.
He slides me off the bench to demonstrate a passage I have bungled.
I stare at his flying fingers, my enraptured gaze a tracking beam of desire.
Would that, by sheer will, I might land some semblance of his huge technique.
His hands are lean, tendinous, lithe, the nails, lacquered, closely cropped.

Clicking against the black keys, they make a sound like soft applause.
You will practice that at home. Now we will go on.
I resume the Chopin in the place where Filar leaves off.
He slaps a stack of music with his yardstick to keep me in time
As I stumble up and down the mountainous octaves.
With each pratfall, he raps more sharply.
The memory of his own masterful performance mocks me.

Next, a clangorous outing into the dainty thicket of a Haydn sonata.
Lambert, you should hear my Lambert playing it, Filar shames me.
Lambert Orkis, years later Mutter's accompanist, pianist with the National Symphony,
I am sick with terror on stage. At 15, I will tell my beloved and terrifying teacher
I can never go there again. So badly will I let him down. Then, more
Of my insufferable Haydn. The shrunken head of Beethoven glares from the piano lid,
Plaster hair aswirl in chaotic ringlets, eyes all the more piercing for their drilled-out pupils,
Herr Beethoven forever frowns in blanket disapproval of all piano pedagogy.
Seeking asylum, I turn to a photo of Walter Giesecking, the Nazi's signature pianist,
But arguably the greatest of his day. Giesecking, Filar's teacher in Paris after the war'
And a youthful Filar at the piano in his studio, one arm up on the fallboard.
There on the lid is same bust of Beethoven In the photo, the master smiles
Benevolently down upon his star pupil, his left hand draped on Filar's shoulder.
Filar beams upward with obsequious reverence. I clear my throat.
I want him to see me admiring this iconic image of himself,
At the dawn of an international career, with his hero.
Perhaps it will mitigate his disapproval. Instead he chooses to say,
Giesecking told the world I played Chopin better than even he.

The *Kinderscenen* go as I had hoped. I have earned a muted smile,
Broader with each brief episode. Something more seeps through.
Beneath his impassive eyes, Filar's cheeks are glistening.
He hugs me at the door, a long embrace, his dream of me f
For the time being restored. I press my palms into his stiff dress jacket,
Cupping the bony wings beside his spine. He moves closer in my embrace
And shivers, releasing a faint cloud of Aqua Velva.
You will practice for me this week. You will work on the Chopin.
You will not come unprepared next time. Beth is here before you.
Come early. You must hear her Waldstein.

In the hallway, I look for movement in the shadows, and in myself.
Within seconds of my exit, Filar has again thundered into the Chopin,
Knowing I still can hear. Reluctantly, the elevator door clamps shut,
Scissoring the majestic train of notes that drags behind
Like the brocaded veil of a bride Filar has sent
To follow me through life, a bride I can never win.