

# The New Criterion

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## Piano lessons: a memoir of the Thirties

by Donald Justice

*So now it is vain for the singer to burst into clamor  
With the great black piano appassionato. The glamour  
Of childish days is upon me . . .*

—D. H. Lawrence

1: It was a kind and northern face: Mrs. Snow

Busts of the great composers  
Glimmer in niches,  
pale stars—  
and Mrs. Snow  
Towers above her pupils like an alp,  
An avalanche threatening sudden  
Unasked-for kindnesses.  
Exiled, alone,  
She does not quite complain,  
But only sighs and looks off elsewhere,  
Regretting the Symphony, perhaps.  
In dreams, though,  
The new palms of the yard,  
The one brilliant flame-tree  
Change back into the elms and maples  
Of old, decaying streets.  
—The inadequate floor quakes  
With the effort of her rising.  
The great legs, swollen and empurpled,  
Can hardly support the hugeness  
Of her need.

And if  
They do not understand—her friends—  
She has, in any case, the artistic  
Temperament,  
which isolates—  
And saves!

Dust motes  
Among the Chinese jars. Etchings  
Of Greece and Rome. The photograph  
Of Mrs. Eddy.  
Brown sky, so old,  
Fading above them all.

2: Busted dreams: Mrs. L.

The mother's flaring skirt  
Matches the daughter's.  
Today  
They demonstrate the foxtrot,  
Gliding across the living room  
And back, each time avoiding with  
The same heart-stopping little swoop  
or dip  
The shabby, cloth-draped, pushed-back  
Suddenly looming sofa.  
On the piano top,  
A nest of souvenirs:  
paper  
Flowers, old programs, a broken fan,  
Like a bird's broken wing.  
— And sometimes Mr. L. himself  
Returns, compulsive, like a dream.  
He brings  
Real flowers. Thin,  
Demanding, his voice soars after dark  
In the old opera between them;  
But no one sees the blows, only  
An occasional powdered bruise,  
Genteel. Does he come all the way from  
Cuba each time for this?

The children  
Are loosed upon the neighborhood  
To wander. In the summer-idle  
Schoolyard they are the last ghosts  
Of the swings.

Nine o'clock, ten o'clock.  
Susurrus of evenings.  
The moon . . .

Tomorrow, On the Havana ferryboat again,  
A little, overneat man at the rails,  
Examining the waves, his nails.  
And she,  
Plunging the stiff comb suddenly deep  
Into her hair, will turn to greet  
Some half-forgotten pupil at the door.

3: The tropics: Mrs. K.

Four or five o'clock.  
Late summer  
Around us like a cocoon,  
Gauzy and intimate.  
—Sometimes she will succumb  
To the passion of a nocturne,  
And the fury of the climax  
Ascends then through the folds  
Of secret and abandoned flesh  
Into those bitten finger-ends  
That press from the unsuspecting keys  
A certain exaltation—  
dying away at last  
Into some long fermata.

(Satisfaction. The brief  
And inward smile.)  
Meanwhile,  
Dappled with mango shade,  
In canvas deck chair that sags,  
the husband  
Sits peering out across  
A forlorn sea of half-mown lawn,

Balding, out of work, a sad  
Columbus.  
Some drone  
Of traffic, far off, reassures:  
Fifty-Fourth Street still leads  
Off toward the Glades at sunset. And the child,  
What is he afraid of? —  
The yellow lesson-book  
Open on the rack  
To that blue, lofty look of hers,  
That floats there, cloud-like? The fan,  
Placed on the floor, clicks  
With every turn — metronome  
Of boredom.  
*Once more, dear: Larghetto.*  
Laborers  
Coming home, the long day ending.

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**Donald Justice** is the author of *Collected Poems* (Knopf).

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