Spring 1976

Mozart in the Afternoon

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Recommended Citation

Vogan, Sara (1976) "Mozart in the Afternoon," CutBank: Vol. 1 : Iss. 6 , Article 8.
Available at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss6/8

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It would be nice to imagine my past as somewhere else, a place where things are done differently. And yet again I find myself imagining white barrens of the arctic where small animals and birds camouflage themselves in snowy colors. In that cold silence only the clicking of caribou hooves can be heard on the loose wind-swept stones.

Sitting in the sun, my feet propped amidst my ferns and wandering jews, I feel beads of sweat roll slowly down my side, staining my fresh blouse at the waist. My gin and tonic is icy; I press the glass against my wrist, feel the cold slipping through the pulsing veins and arteries of my arm. Eskimo have fifty-two words for snow. They say you don’t know a thing until you can name it. Sliding the frosted glass inside my shirt, between my breasts, I feel the beating of my heart. I have tried to break this habit for over twenty years.

“Pressure points,” my mother used to say. “The quickest way to cool the body is to freeze the pressure points.”

Liesl, my mother, never told me where she learned about pressure points. Perhaps my grandmother taught her, maybe she learned them during the years she spent in hospitals. Now that I am older I imagine some lover searched out the secret places of Liesl’s body. That they explored each other softly on sweaty afternoons.

We always lived in my grandmother’s house, a place too large for only the three of us. My mother told stories, as much for herself as for me it seemed. She filled the house with pictures of moths that act like hummingbirds, myths of Triobriand Islanders, details of the mating habits of aborigine. Since I was eight or so I understood the erotic significance of whales with long ivory tusks like unicorn. It was as if she learned about life from the National Geographic.

Hot summer days when my grandmother was gone Liesl and I would go up to my bathroom on the second floor. To have a party, to cool off. I carted our supplies to the seldom-used elevator that ran on a track alongside the stairs while Liesl selected records for the livingroom phonograph. Lemons, limes, cherries, the tall glasses we
kept hidden for just this occasion, an ashtray, cigarettes, vodka, gin, the little cutting board for the fruit, a sharp knife. When everything was ready Liesl would turn on the phonograph as loud as she dared and begin making her way up the long stairs. I drove the creaking elevator slowly, trying to keep just above her, the music growing fainter in the humid air.

Propping her crutches on the first step, Liesl would haul her thin body up by the strength in her arms until her foot hit the stair. Steadying herself, she attacked the next one in the same ungraceful manner. Hot and exhausted, she finally reached the second floor, still humming with the music. When I suggested using her bathroom on the first floor she would laugh at me.

"It wouldn't be the same," she always said. Like the elevator, to her it was a matter of pride.

Brandenberg Concerto, second movement. The allegro has a hurried expectant air with fanciful violins and occasional horn. From the old wardrobe that sat in the hall we took the lurid silk print kimonos we always wore after the bath. Keyed up to the music we undressed, hiding our regular clothes in the bottom drawer where the kimonos had been. Liesl would lay a kimono over each of the crutches making headless, one-legged Chinese colored people on the floor outside the white tiled bathroom. She always made them look like they were dancing, holding hands on the deep purple rug.

Sitting naked side by side on the edge of the porcelain tub we cut up lemons, limes, and oranges, dropping them into separate fluted glass bowls. While Bach played softly in the afternoon air Liesl made sweet drinks in the tall glasses with fruit and ginger ale. I broke the ice from the metal trays; the frozen steel sticking to my fingers, a faint ripping sound as I pulled my hand away. She always put the gin in last, stirring it slowly with a green plastic stick. I sat on the cool tile floor, swaying in time to the music. The gin burned my throat.

"Caribou," Liesl said, "have hollow hairs." She explained that in winter the hollow hairs keep the caribou warm. In summer the hair helps dissipate the heat.

"Is a dog's hair hollow?" Her explanations were always thorough: the function of blubber for walrus and seal, the metabolism of the arctic char, build up and expenditure of energy in birds. Always a new set of facts for each party. Always eskimo, always arctic. "Think cold if you're hot, happy if you're sad."
The arctic is a violent place. Volcanoes can create new islands. Glacial hunks of land sometimes drift out to sea. In such cold things end with terrible swiftness.

In early June of 1844 three members of the skerry Eldey went ashore ten miles west of Cape Reykjanes, Iceland. There they battered in the heads of two Great Auks, giant flightless birds expert at swimming and diving, a white oval spot between the bill and eye, light grooves along the beak. In the nest they found a single cracked egg and smashed it among the rocks. The skins of these birds were sold to Christian Hansen in Reykjavik for nine pounds. These were the last two Great Auks ever sighted.

Toccata in D Minor. Baleful horns building in a crescendo. We began with our wrists. Liesl believed in doing things in the order of their logical importance. Pinioning the ice without the use of our hands, our fingers were splayed like dancing clam shells. The hot afternoon sun shone pale through the window. Melting ice dripped down our naked arms, huge drops gathering at our elbows before falling of their own weight to the floor. The ice skidded and slid; our hands and fingers pivoted on the ice and performed tiny arabesques.

The ice had to melt entirely before we could move on. Each pressure point received fresh ice and a small shot of gin. Often I squeezed my ice cube, causing it to melt more quickly. I would suck on limes until my teeth ached.

“Everything is functional for the eskimo,” Liesl told me. “Carving a wooden bird snare appeases the spirits of the wind.”

Clasping our hands around our necks we cradled the ice tightly in our elbows until the cold water ran down our arms, the long torsos of our bodies, making a sticky sweet smell rise in the room around us. Over the soft violins and cellos Liesl told me myths and legends of lost arctic beasts and giants. I asked her if she had ever been there, but she only smiled at me.

In little yellow notebooks I collected facts from the Public Library. Eskimo facts to tell Liesl.

“Do you know lemmings commit suicide?” I asked her. She smiled. “They are good swimmers. Where there are too many of them, some swim to another place far away.”

They say fish can not discover the water, that an islander is the only one who can find the main land.
Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring. Languid violins, a proper minuet tempo. Our bodies would be sticky and cool; Liesl would take a fresh piece of ice for her chest. Her firm breasts made a neat hollow for the ice cube. Thin pianist’s hands fanned out across her chest as she let the ice water run slowly down her arms, down her smooth belly to be trapped in a small glittering pool in her navel. Out of habit or impatience, I slid my ice across the thin lumps of my ribs, feeling the tingling sensation pass fleetingly over the tiny nerve endings under my pale skin. Liesl said that was cheating: the object of the game was to hold perfectly still.

Her hands were beautiful. The miniature moon shape of her fine clear nails always made me want to hide my own stubby fingers splayed upon her chest like ten tiny clubs. She sat motionless, listening to the music as she held an ice cube over each of my freckle-looking breasts. Using my palms, I tried to balance the ice on the tips of her warm brown nipples. My fingers traced delicate circles in the downy hairs silhouetted by the slanted afternoon light. Our nipples would rise, pushing the ice into the sensitive hollow of each other’s palms. The melting water glittered and slid slowly down the smooth curve of Liesl’s soft breasts, leaving little wet trails down her belly, lost in the soft folds of her waist.

Often I asked her if I would ever get real breasts, like hers.

“Some people don’t,” she replied.

“Who?” All the women I knew had breasts, even my teacher at school.

“Men,” she said.

Liesl said everything operated according to a rhythm; we always made a fresh drink when Mozart began. We filled our tall glasses with plenty of fresh fruit, ice, ginger ale, and vodka. Vodka for Mozart, gin for Bach. Liesl explained that vodka was a Russian drink; the Russians were the bravest people in the world.

Sonata in G for violin and piano. Rapid counterpoint of the piano against the fluid violin. Liesl listened until the adente before putting her drink down and handing me an ice cube. She moved her leg over just a little on the side of the tub. Gently, searchingly, I put the ice cube in the secret place up inside her. She would smile, sip her drink as I positioned myself on the wet tile floor. The water would no longer be cool; it was only a damp layer over the tiny concrete fills laid between the white tiles. Softly, numbingly, Liesl put an ice cube up inside me. I was expected to hold absolutely still, squirming silently

20
while Liesl gave us each another shot of vodka, stirring it slowly with the swizzle stick. I tried to tell her how the vodka and ice made me feel hot and cold at the same time, how I felt I was soaring into the soft light of the afternoon yet invisibly anchored to the tile floor by the melting ice.

"It's supposed to," she said.

Lying on the tile floor looking through the afternoon light to the plain white ceiling, I could watch little dust motes dance and twirl in time to the soft music. I could see the smoke from Liesl's cigarette curl through the air to lie in little blankets separating the dust. Sometimes they seemed to float up and down, back and forth, gently driven by the force of the music. Inside me the ice cube melted, making me feel I would swell, burst, become no more than those little pieces of dust and smoke.

“When the eskimo first saw airplanes they were very happy, very relieved,” she said. She told me for centuries their shamans had been travelling to the moon to bring back the souls of unborn babies. Now the airplane could take them to the moon. They had learned a shaman’s secret; they possessed a powerful charm.

Saltz. Piano concerto No. 21 in C Major. Slowly standing, I could feel the dizzying rush as my whole being seemed to drain out of me, trickling down the inside of my legs, numbing every part of me as if I had dissolved. The ice water slowly slid through the maze of childish hair on my thighs, my legs. Sliding around the bones of my ankles, the water would finally seep into my instep, pooling on the tile floor. Ice water from Liesl's body ran slowly down the side of the white porcelain tub, a small glittering stream that caught the light.

Sonata in F. Rondo. A music-box tune in treble piano. Placing ice cubes behind my knees I squatted by the tub in front of Liesl. Sipping my drink with one hand I slowly rubbed ice over the slick hard stump of what had been Liesl's right leg. The stump was wrinkled a bit, not like the scar hidden on her head beneath the thick auburn hair, but like a picture of skin in an old flawed mirror. It felt leathery and dead. I always wondered where the bone was, the exact point within the leathery stump where the bone had been sawed, cut, broken away from what must have been a long slender leg. Sometimes I would move the ice up until I found the hard knob of her hip bone. But the bone vanished somewhere deep in her thigh.
Only if there are objects can there be a fixed form of this world. Even today I do not know how she lost her leg; my grandmother would never tell me after Liesl died. “If your mother wanted to tell you, she would have.” Always the same reply.

Liesl told a different story everytime I asked. Sometimes the leg had been given to a fair princess who later became my fairy godmother. Once she told me my grandfather had cut it off because Liesl had been bad.

For a long time she told me it was because she had been a baby. My grandmother did not want a baby she said. When Liesl was being assembled my grandmother became so angry at the fine detail work she threw away Liesl’s leg in sheer frustration.

“Don’t think I don’t love you,” Liesl always said. “At least I put you all together right.”

But the story I believed was the myth of Paija, a giantess with a single leg springing from her genitals. She is covered with gnarled black hair. In the quiet of that frozen world, eskimo whisper to their children, tell sacred stories about the spirits that guard their souls. To see Paija is to die. Hunters lost in blizzards sometimes see her. These men are found standing upright in the snow, a picture of her in each dead eye. In the long winter nights Paija stalks the arctic wastes searching for strayed huntsmen to help her ward off the loneliness. The spirits of their eyes dance in the auroras against the faint horizon. Wives and children weep and moan for the lost ones not even airplanes can return.

Sonata in G for violin and piano. Rapid counterpoint of the piano against the fluid violin. The fresh ice is hard; I balance it on the end of my fingerbones, feel it cut into the chilled flesh of my hand. Softly, Mozart plays in the afternoon sun. The little concrete cracks between the hexagonal tiles catch the melted water in tiny pools. I give myself another shot of vodka, drink of the Russians, the bravest men in the world. I think of my mother and the husband she never had. Run the ice slowly up my legs and listen to the sounds of snowy ptarmidgans soaring over the tundra. Eskimo huddle together in snow houses, wrapped in warm pelts and hides against the silence and cold.