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Inventions

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Inventions

Siobhan Phillips

The first---as through our bedroom wall today's
piano practice tries again to further
art: A right hand picks across a phrase
of Bach's; a left hand balks, begins; together
both wind forward, halting; check how far
they've come and start again, uncertain whether
muscles can remember (yes; a bar
by heart at last)---the first is you. Sixteen.
You're racing down the dusk, the family car
your own for half an hour, along a scene
you shun: The nodding wells, the weary ground
of grass and scuff, the turnpike tar, the clean
allowance overhead for every round
and lolling gape of cloud or lazy scrawl
of summer lightning (distant, gone). The sound
unrolling from your homemade tape is all
you notice, all you need---your fingers pressing
chord against the wheel: as if the fall
and rise of notes, this courtly, acquiescing
twine of higher, lower---lines of sand
in oval hourglass spools---were now addressing
truer, future selves. The ones you've planned
forever: living better, feeling free
and clear to undertake and understand
the timeless. The sincere. You can't foresee
how these arise, yet nonetheless you're moving
toward them, right. The second portion? Me,

perhaps. At home one night. Fifteen. Approving
nothing, least of all myself, but sure
that holding to a set of rules behooving

bored sophistication keeps me pure.
Water fills the tub; the flaking taps
spit up a rusty steam; a connoisseur

of private volumes---chain-locked bathrooms, gaps
of crawlspace, closets, halls---I sigh and soak
a sham fatigue. Outside, the city maps

its dusty downward grid; the streetlights choke
their traffic through and manholes quake; the moon
defers to neon boast. But here baroque

piano---harpsichord---is on; I tune
the FM dial to smooth it and conduct
a bit with soap-gloved hands. It's certain. Soon

these hidden minutes, static-ridden, tucked
away among my day, will stretch their clear
and higher tone throughout; this cadence plucked

so briefly loose will last. How very near
it seems, a life of scoring what I do
by what I love. Oh, well. Enough. They're sheer

invention, both these scenes, of course: this you,
this me, these pasts. (And now next door the nameless
pianist has almost made it through

his piece without a pause.) But if my aimless
dreams about tomorrow seem no more
unusual than breathing, why not blameless

musings, too, on what has gone before?
Dim as what comes next, it seems, the way
to this: Our home at dusk, our daily chore

of overhearing. It's as if we stay
the same by wielding, unaware, technique
we never know the end of, and betray
desire into an answer. Merely weak
and wishful thinking? Bach no longer plays.
The quiet swells and echoes. Listen. Speak.