

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Wayne Miller: Two Poems

Wayne Miller · Wednesday, August 2nd, 2023

SOCIALIST REALISM

(*Tirana, 2019*)

In a courtyard behind the museum
stood two derelict statues of Stalin—
each twice as tall as a man,
patinated green, the bases
still slick with last night's rain.

The space was empty except
for two kids rasping up and down
the concrete on skateboards,
then landing with that
familiar, wooden clatter.

One statue's arm had been torn off,
so I could see into the hollow
I imagined was still filled
with the air of the twentieth century.
Inside the museum, the exhibit

was on socialist realism,
because thirty years had passed
and those paintings were now
powerless artifacts—it was
time to consider them

through the abstracting lenses
of period and style. Back home
across the ocean my children
were sleeping, their sound machines
projecting up into their rooms

like statueless plinths. In *Candide*,
the deposed kings will dine forever

in Venice, while all the buoyant,
resolute people in those paintings
are building a future.

They're mortaring walls
and climbing telephone poles,
they're working the fields
in flowery dresses, melting down
metal for I-beams and monuments.

The future is *right there*—
a transit station waiting for them
to lock into it. I can't help
but exude my country's aging
narratives of triumph. Art

is not just agreement
or disagreement, you said,
it shapes the moment into form.
In the cab to the airport,
as we slid beneath a dappled

canopy of beeches, the driver
blessed me three times simply
for being an American
who could say in his language
that his country is beautiful.

*

THE END OF CHILDHOOD

The cathedral hung suspended
From the narrow parachute
Of its cupola

That had unfurled
And snapped full with the silent air
Of the thirteenth century

Then I was inside it
Eight hundred years later

The relics I'd read about

Were an ampule of dried blood
And a severed tongue

Pieces preserved in a museum
Pull away from the public
As time passes

But these objects were still
Grotesquely present

Their simultaneous
Persistence and decay

In the packed café across the street
I ordered a beer
And lit a cigarette

I was there on a fellowship
Unreachable to my parents
Except by email
Owing nothing to anyone

And my childhood was a room
I could finally exit
I was sure of it

Not this open world
I would keep entering
From a vaulted and echoing
Darkness

Not my wet blood
My living tongue

WE THE JURY POEMS WAYNE MILLER



We the Jury by Wayne Miller

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