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The Photographer

Louis Simpson

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LOUIS SIMPSON

THE SILENT PIANO

We have lived like civilized people . . .
O ruins, traditions!

And we have seen the barbarians,
breakers of sculpture and glass.

And now we talk of "the inner life,"
and I ask myself, where is it?

Not here, in these streets and houses, . . .
so I think it must be found

in indolence, pure indolence,
an ocean of darkness . . .

in silence, an arm of the moon,
a hand that enters slowly.

* * *

I am reminded of a story
Camus tells, of a man in prison camp.

He had caryed a piano keyboard
with a nail on a piece of wood.

And sat there playing the piano.
This music was made entirely of silence.

LOUIS SIMPSON

THE PHOTOGRAPHER

A bearded man seated on a camp-stool—
"The geologist. 1910."

"Staying with friends"—a boy in a straw hat,
on a porch, surrounded with wisteria.

"Noontime"—a view of the Battery
with masts passing over the rooftops.

Then the old horse-cars on Broadway,
people standing around in the garment district.

A night view of Manhattan,
light-lines with sweeps of shadow.

"Jumpers"—as they come plunging down
their hair bursts into fire.

Then there are photographs of a door-knob,
a chair, an unstrung tennis-racket . . .

"Still life. Yes, for a while.
It gives your ideas a connection.

And a beautiful woman yawning
with the back of her hand, like this."

LOUIS SIMPSON

IN RUSSIA

I can see my mother's family
sitting next to the kitchen stove,
arguing . . . the famous Yiddish theater.

The sisters return . . . they're breathless,
they've been down to the river . . .
with their arms filled with wildflowers.

Then, later, night has fallen,
and the stars are luminous,
gliding above the trees and rooftops.

There's a love-song, an air.
And then they turn down the lamps
in the old world long ago.