

My Father in the Night Commanding No

By Louis Simpson

My father in the night commanding No
Has work to do. Smoke issues from his lips;
 He reads in silence.
The frogs are croaking and the street lamps glow.

And then my mother winds the gramophone;
The Bride of Lammermoor begins to shriek—
 Or reads a story—
About a prince, a castle, and a dragon.

The moon is glittering above the hill.
I stand before the gateposts of the King—
 So runs the story
Of Thule, at midnight when the mice are still.

And I have been in Thule! It has come true—
The journey and the danger of the world,
 All that there is
To bear and to enjoy, endure and do.

Landscapes, seascapes ... where have I been led?
The names of cities—Paris, Venice, Rome—
 Held out their arms.
A feathered god, seductive, went ahead.

Here is my house. Under a red rose tree
A child is swinging; another gravely plays.
 They are not surprised
That I am here; they were expecting me.

And yet my father sits and reads in silence,
My mother sheds a tear, the moon is still,
 And the dark wind
Is murmuring that nothing ever happens.

Beyond his jurisdiction as I move
Do I not prove him wrong? And yet, it's true
 They will not change
There, on the stage of terror and of love.

The actors in that playhouse always sit
In fixed positions—father, mother, child
 With painted eyes.
How sad it is to be a little puppet!

Their heads are wooden. And you once pretended
To understand them! Shake them as you will,
 They cannot speak.

Do what you will, the comedy is ended.

Father, why did you work? Why did you weep,
Mother? Was the story so important?

“Listen!” the wind

Said to the children, and they fell asleep.

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Born in Jamaica, Louis Simpson spent most of his adult life in the United States, where he was active as a poet, translator, literary critic, and professor. After serving with an airborne division in WWII, he completed his education at Columbia and in France, where his first book of poetry was published in 1949. Typical subjects included his West Indian boyhood and the mysteries of ordinary life. *At the End of the Open Road* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1964.

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