

Mercy

Stephen Dunn

The music was fidgety, arch,
an orchestral version of a twang.
Welcome to atonal hell,
welcome to the execution
of a theory, I kept thinking,
thinking, thinking. I hadn't felt
a thing. Was it old-fashioned
of me to want to? Or were feelings,
as usual, part of the problem?
The conductor seemed to flail
more than lead, his baton evidence
of something unresolved,
perhaps recent trouble at home.
And though I liked the cellist—
especially the way
she held her instrument—
unless you had a taste
for unhappiness
you didn't want to look
at the first violinist's face.
My wife whispered to me,
This music is better than it sounds.
I reminded myself the world outside
might be a worse place
than where I was now,
though that seemed little reason
to take heart. Instead
I closed my eyes, thought about
a certain mezzo-soprano
who could gladden a sad day
anywhere, but one January night

in Milan went a full octave
into the beyond. Sometimes escape
can be an art, or a selfishness,
or just a gift you need
to give yourself. Whichever,
I disappeared for a while,
left my body behind to sit there, nod,
applaud at the appropriate time.