

THE VIRTUOSO

and

**THE TRUTH LIES ELSEWHERE:
An Encounter with the Past through a Reading of
W.G. Sebald's AUSTERLITZ**

A creative project (novel) and exegesis submitted in fulfilment of the
requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

I certify that:

- except where due acknowledgement is made, all work submitted is my own;
- the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award;
- the content of this doctorate is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program;
- any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged.

Signed _____ Sonia Orchard, January 2007

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Preface

In 2003 I spent two months in London to research the life of Noel Mewton-Wood – a Melbourne-born concert pianist who lived in London from 1939 until his suicide in 1953 – for the purpose of writing a fictional autobiography on his life. As well as visiting many of the concert halls and other sites that Mewton-Wood would have frequented, I also conducted a series of interviews with Mewton-Wood’s friends, peers and lovers. I was determined to try and establish a sense of *who* Mewton-Wood really was, and *why* he had taken his life, and maintain as much historical veracity as possible, limiting the fictional aspects of the novel to the dramatisation of ‘real’ events. However, it wasn’t long after my arrival that I realised the difficulty of achieving my objectives. The more acquaintances I spoke with, the more versions of Mewton-Wood’s character arose; the more I questioned why he’d taken his life, the more shrugs, headshakes and varying hypotheses I received. Even though I felt I could almost feel the presence of this larger-than-life personality in the homes, bars and concert halls I visited, the more I tried to conclude anything about him, the more *unknowable* he became.

The experience reminded me of the response I received from several people to my first book, *Something More Wonderful* (Sydney: Hodder Headline, 2003), a memoir about a year in my life when I helped care for a friend, Emma, who was terminally ill with cancer. These friends knew a different Emma to the one depicted in my memoir and their version of events deviated from mine. Even though my book was only ever intended to be a memoir – *my* story – their contrasting stories made me increasingly aware of the complexities involved in creating a record about a person and series of

events, where conflicting eye-witness versions exist, none more or less ‘true’ than any other.

I decided I needed to find a method of recording and honouring the events in Mewton-Wood’s life but, at the same time, not claim historical objectivity. I became uncomfortable even with the level of historical veracity suggested through the dramatisation of real events based on research. I realised that what I wanted to write was neither ‘fact’ nor ‘fiction’ according to traditional definitions that places each mode in a relationship with ‘the truth’.

The approach I finally adopted occurred to me following an afternoon interview with one of Mewton-Wood’s ex-lovers and friends. I had been talking with the friend for several hours about Mewton-Wood, asking for facts, anecdotes and figures of speech Mewton-Wood might have used – all the things that a novelist forages for when creating character – when we started discussing Mewton-Wood’s death, an event which had occurred 50 years earlier. After having chatted excitedly only minutes earlier, the friend fell silent for sometime and looked away, then said, more to himself than me – ‘I just wish Noel had called me that week [before he committed suicide]... I really feel I could have helped him...’. After a further silence, the friend left for the kitchen to pour some drinks.

Of the many hours of interviews I recorded, that interviewee’s silence and interrupted testimony seemed to me the most poignant, and came to represent what it was I wanted to encapsulate in my writing on Mewton-Wood. Not only did I want to depict a personality that couldn’t be summarised in an historical document, I also wanted to convey the effect his life, his music and his death had on those around him, and in doing so, infer the challenges faced in creating an account of his life, or any life, whose essence is – like music – unfathomable.

W.G. Sebald is one of many post-modern authors who has emphasised the importance of eye-witness accounts in history, and the subsequent difficulty of producing an historical record that purports to record the truth of an event. But Sebald is equally harsh in his criticism of the way events have slipped through the cracks in the historical record (as a result of censorship, repression and silence), as he is of the formulation of ‘objective truth’ in history. For Sebald the answer lies in recording eye witness testimonies of the past, while constantly drawing attention to the lens of human error, desire or comprehension through which they’re viewed, so that a person’s flawed process of remembering and recording – often as a result of the effect of events upon the witness – become an integral part of the historical record.

After completing my London interviews, and considering the ways in which Sebald, in *Austerlitz*, uses fictional first-person narrative to comment upon the problems inherent in attempting to capture ‘historical truth’, I started rewriting my manuscript on Mewton-Wood, telling the story – or rather, *a* story – of Mewton-Wood from the point-of-view of an eye witness: a romantically obsessed ex-lover. As in Sebald’s *Austerlitz*, my narrator takes on the role of historian, providing an extensive and elaborate account of Mewton-Wood’s life. However, my intention is that a reader will become aware throughout the manuscript that they are learning less about the ‘truth’ of Mewton-Wood than the difficulty the narrator has in understanding the ‘truth’ of Mewton-Wood’s life (due to being blinded by obsession), a situation that draws attention to the difficulty in locating any ‘truths’ about any person or event behind the eye witness’s or historian’s layers of prejudice, miscomprehension or error.

Volume One:

THE VIRTUOSO

A creative project (novel) submitted in partial fulfilment of the
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I've found out nothing sharpens the imagination as much as expecting and longing for something, and this is how I've been for the last few days. I have been waiting for your letter, and as a result have written books-ful of pieces – amazing, crazy, sober stuff...I sometimes feel as if I'm simply bursting with music.

Robert Schumann

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part one:

a fantasy

Looking back, I realise I'd always been waiting for the arrival of Noel Mewton-Wood into my life. His entrance occurred with such unfaltering ease that I began to believe that he had always been there, waiting in the wings, long before I'd even laid eyes upon him. I suspect now that this attitude can partially be explained by a reluctance on my part to grow up. I remember once when I was a child, my father was unwell and asked me to run an envelope down to Ted Wylie, the bookie's runner who stood on the corner outside the pub. Even though I'd accompanied my father to see Ted a hundred times before, I can still recall that sickening dread of having to head down there on my own. And even now, as I stand here with my dresser doors wide open, staring at my array of suits, shirts and ties, and knowing exactly how I ought to dress for tonight's concert, I still must admit to a touch of weary anxiety – a childish wish that someone might come and do it all for me. Get me washed and dressed, my hair combed, my laces tied, and see me on my way.

There was something else though, beyond my infantile desire to shirk off any adult responsibility. When I think of the days, long before Noel, when I'd come home from school and play alone in my room for hours, travelling on distant journeys with my Hornby trains, or flicking through my father's musical biographies and conversing with the people in the coloured plates – even back then I remember being warmed by this tickling sense of expectancy, a knowledge that one day my life would all be wonderfully different.

I was ten years old when the war broke out. I remember my excitement at the time, thinking that this was the day for which I'd been waiting. The first I knew of it was old Mr Bullard running up and down the street under a wide blue sky in only his woollen undershirt and drawers, waving a cowbell and gas mask, and crying out, 'The war has begun! The war has begun!' My aunt – who'd reluctantly taken on the care of my father and myself after mother's passing when I was born – rushed in from the backyard where she was pegging up the washing, and my father, having summoned us both, sat crouched over at the wireless, his furrowed brow twitching, and his hawk-like glare attached to a fixed spot on the ground. Chamberlain's stolid voice conveyed none of the delighted anticipation I felt. I stared at my father, waiting for some kind of reaction, unable to understand the solemnity with which both he and my aunt took the news. I sat quietly, imagining the proud march and shouts from leagues of armed soldiers, boots polished, chins high, rifles like flagpoles fixed to their backs.

But the war, at least to begin with, failed to deliver much of a distraction; I still had to go to school, do my homework, set the table and do my other usual chores around the house. Days went by and there were no bombs, sirens or enemy fire; life continued as before, on a canvas stretched taut as a board. Everyone went about their own business of barricading up their lives while still ensuring their tablecloths were starched and ironed. My father, reading through the evening paper, rarely even mentioned the fighting across the channel, but just lamented the closure of theatres, cinemas and concert halls, that all the musicians were now out of work, that all the museums and galleries were being gutted of their treasures. He found it amusing, in his quiet grumbling way, that paintings and sculptures were shipped to safety while we were all told to stay put.

Londoners were blackening their windows each night, and walking their children by the hand to board trains and boats for foreign towns. Then near the end of that first month the pianist Myra Hess – whom I now know quite well – a small, dark owl-like woman with gracious movements and sparkling black eyes, decided that now, more than ever, London must throw open its doors to the very best music, to carry its people through this difficult time.

My father told me that Myra had approached Sir Kenneth Clark, Director of the National Gallery, about holding daytime concerts in the gallery, joking that Buckingham Palace was another venue she had in mind. Sir Kenneth, who'd just watched the last Rembrandt be wrapped up and carried out of the halls, for goodness knew how long, was delighted with the idea. So by the end of the first week of October, it was announced that weekday lunchtime concerts would be held at the National Gallery under the dome of the Barry rooms, for an admission of one shilling, in aid of the Musician's Benevolent Fund.

The first concert was scheduled for one o'clock on the following Tuesday, just over five weeks after the outbreak of war. Two advertisements ran in the newspaper and announcements were made over the wireless of a solo recital to be given by Myra Hess. Steinway & Sons offered the use of a piano, and five hundred chairs were collected and were still being brought in when the audience started to arrive. It was hoped that at best, a couple of hundred people might attend, but at 12.20 pm on the Tuesday afternoon, ten minutes before the doors were to open, members of the committee looked out through the Gallery windows onto Trafalgar Square and saw people queued along the length of the entire square and around the far corner. When the doors were opened and the first gentleman presented his half-crown, there wasn't a penny in the bank to give him any change.

That day my father picked me up from school before lunch and together we took the number 59 into town, where we were among the thousand people admitted into the octagonal room before the doors were closed on hundreds more waiting in the street. Tommies in uniform with tin hats strapped on, public servants, civilians carrying gasmasks, office-boys, music students, old ladies with ear trumpets, gentlemen from the press – it seemed all of London had taken off their lunch hour to see the beautiful Myra Hess perform. When all were seated she drifted out silently from behind a curtain, wearing a flowing black gown, sat at the Steinway and glided through Scarlatti sonatas, Bach preludes and fugues, a Beethoven sonata, Schubert dances, Brahms intermezzos, and Chopin. When the recital ended the crowd erupted into an almighty applause before gathering up their briefcases and purses from under their chairs and hurrying back to their offices.

British troops were being siphoned out daily on naval convoys – at school we would make up tongue-twisting riddles from the names of the destroyers *Faulkner*, *Firedrake*, *Foxhound*, *Fortune* and *Forester* – off to the North Atlantic to battle the formidable U-boats. Meanwhile, in London, the gallery concerts continued every lunch hour, thousands of people shuffling into the Barry room each week.

By the beginning of November Lady Gater and a group of volunteers had set up a canteen for the concert goers, and started serving sandwiches and cartons of milk from trestle tables covered in brightly checked cloths. Later a power point was installed, pots and pans were borrowed, English tea and Indian coffee were served from large shining urns, and hot meals were dished up. It was the sandwiches though, which soon became famous as the best in London – honey and walnut, curried egg, lobster and cream – combinations so far removed from the processed meats and over-boiled carrots of my world that they only seemed possible in this magical enclave. My father would drop two shillings in my hand and

I'd queue up for a piece of moist plum cake, if only just to receive a smile from the radiant Lady Gater, tall and lean like a racehorse, her hair pinned back accentuating her pointed features, forever laughing in her dotted pinafore, pearls and earrings sparkling, and a tea towel tucked neatly like a kimono sash into her apron.

It must have been around that time that I first noticed my father's illness, a condition that confined him to bed for weeks at a time. My aunt said little about it, only mentioning he wasn't feeling very well and that it was something to do with his nerves. Even though I missed his activity around the house, playing records and waxing about Schumann or Beethoven, I wasn't particularly bothered by his lethargy, and would quite happily sit on the edge of his bed after school for hours, reading to him from his books. The only time I felt bothered was in the evenings when he'd lock his bedroom door and a pall would hang over the house; I'd sit eating my meal in silence with my aunt, staring at his door, seething that he was lying there yards away, unwilling to emerge. But on other occasions, in the days before he returned to work, he'd let me stay home from school and the two of us would head into town to buy records and musical scores, and attend the gallery concert: this fairytale realm that, it seemed, the war had made possible.

I first saw Noel at his London debut, at Queen's Hall in March 1940. No one knew his name back then, he was simply a boy wonder who'd come out from Australia and been picked up by Sir Thomas Beecham. A gangly wild-haired child with a grey pressed suit and a slight tic in his eye, who walked across the stage as silent as a cat.

But we weren't there to see Noel; the performance was Beecham's farewell concert before he left for New York. It was like going to the wharf to see the departure of a hulking warship. My father might have mentioned that Beecham was fleeing the war, I can't recall.

As an eleven-year-old, I was too young to sniff the dank smell of a wake beneath the blithe and colourful celebrations.

My father didn't admire many living people, but Beecham was someone special, he said – 'The greatest conductor Britain has ever known, the greatest in the world today.' My father was rarely so emphatic – his reverence made me both admire and despise this legendary man, sitting so leisurely at the helm of British music.

We arrived at Queen's Hall around six, the sun melting dimly into the fog. As we approached, the massive pillared Portland-stone building seemed to be emerging from the mist and the chiaroscuro busts of Beethoven, Mendelssohn and Elgar glowered out from the façade like gargoyles.

People were milling around the arches at the entrance, huddled in small groups, rubbing gloved hands together, exhaling frozen clouds as they lined up for tickets. There were fox furs and tuxedos, foreign men with long hair and floppy hats and collars who waved about their programmes as they spoke, and smart young ladies from the Academy hugging scores into their coats. Outside this ensemble, Langham Place and Riding House Street were almost empty, and the few passers-by scuttled like moles digging through the dirt, their grey coats, hats and scarves enabling them to slip invisibly into the fog as rapidly as they appeared.

As we stepped through the doors I remember thinking it was like sliding down the rabbit hole into Wonderland: a glittering celebration in defiance of the world that existed outside the boarded-up windows. Women with Veronica Lake hairdos and gowns that shimmered under the chandeliers sauntered about in front of us, and elegantly dressed men, who all looked like Noel Coward, glided up the stairs past the gold-tasselled curtains. There were others – whom my father said were critics – dressed like detectives in Hombergs and

coats, elderly dames dripping in jewels, colonels sparkling with medals, and silver-haired men in tails, all sweeping along the burgundy carpet of the foyer to and from the grille room and bar, flashing cigarettes and greeting each other with powdered cheeks or handshakes. My father grabbed my hand, as if I might get swept away on this bewitching stream and led me towards the crowd in trilbies and tweed with newspapers underarm, who shuffled in towards the ground floor seating.

The inside of the hall seemed too immense to be contained within the building we'd just entered. A subterranean chamber headed by the dazzling golden pipes of the organ, running the width of the hall and all the way up to the ceiling, looming from the stage over the thousands of supplicants like a grand oracle.

The sides of the platform were decorated with a crowded collection of rusty medallions from famous composers, and fringing the front was a sparse row of potted-palms. The stalls were adorned with rows of tarnished mirrors, and the ornamentation on the balconies and roof was defined by a fine veneer of dust. Except for the Venetian red of the seats, the hall was all grey and terracotta – ‘The colour of the belly of a London mouse,’ my father said, teasing me with the story that when the hall was built, the chief architect had kept a string of dead mice in the paint shop to make sure his orders were carried out precisely.

Shortly after we were seated the lights dimmed and the musicians, dressed in black tie and long black gowns, drifted onto the stage and into their seats; a cacophony steadily arose. The first violin played an A, long and thin as a snake, which rose above the chaos, drawing it into a crystalline hum. The sound drifted out like a receding wave, leaving the auditorium in complete silence.

Applause erupted as Beecham walked slowly onto the stage, as if he were there to collect an award. He made a point of ignoring the audience, yet from his profile it was easy to detect a cavalier glint that shone not just from his eyes but also from the impeccably waxed tips of his moustache. Once he reached the podium, he stood perfectly straight in front of the orchestra, like a diver on the end of a high board. He nodded to the first violin, panned his gaze across the musicians, then lifted his baton as if he were about to strike some invisible object in front of him.

Everyone stood for ‘God Save the Queen’.

The concert began with Mozart’s *Paris* symphony and Handel’s *The Faithful Shepherd*. I abandoned my desire to unveil Beecham’s hypnotic powers once I’d laid my eyes upon him, realising that there was nothing in this man, who looked more like a Russian Tsar than a conductor, that I would ever be able to emulate. I grew gloomy, tired, and by the end of the interval I was fiddling about in my pockets and looking about the audience for someone else my own age. I daydreamed myself up on stage, Beecham applauding my approach, patting me on the back at the end of a recital, the audience cheering wildly, the sound of their applause washing over me.

My father nudged me as he clapped, and I looked up in time to see a pale skinny boy walking out from the wings. He had flushed cheeks and a gentle lilt to his movements, yet at the same time appeared serene and unafraid. He crossed the stage in front of the orchestra, took his seat at the Steinway, and shifted the stool slightly underneath him, then looked straight ahead, under the raised lid of the piano, which looked so impossibly large before him.

‘He can’t be much older than you,’ my father whispered.

I smiled, feeling that it could, indeed, be me up there. All interest in Beecham vanished. I looked around the audience, at the elderly men and women dressed in their tuxedos and embroidered corsages, leaning forward in their boxes with opera glasses held to their faces, scrutinising Beecham's new find. Then I glanced back at the boy, sitting still and quiet, deciding that we were more alike than anyone else in the hall.

He lifted his eyes from the keys and looked straight at Beecham. The conductor lowered his head questioningly and the boy responded with a slight nod.

The hall grew quiet and expectant like a big iron bell, the strings lifted their bows. I looked down at the programme in my father's lap – *Noël Mewton-Wood* – the face of a child with large sombre eyes staring out at me from the page.

The concerto began – C, E flat, G – a grim announcement from the strings marching up the minor triad. The sound branched out into harmonies, modulations, melodies weaving in and out of each other; the orchestra whipped up and churned like a storm. Amidst this great tumult, Noel sat upright at the piano, as if chiselled out of marble.

The orchestral *tutti* ended with three crashing C's. Noel lifted his hands and placed them near the bottom of the piano. A pause, then he began. Forte octaves, both hands, three times up the keyboard, ending up in the theme, those big dark chords producing an orchestra of sound. Then the most pleading, yearning song. I'd never heard anything so beautiful, that sorrowful melody returning again and again, each time more regal or gleeful or tragic. His entire body poured into his fingertips, launching into the most raging fortissimos, his pianissimos spun into the finest thread.

I sat transfixed for the entire concerto. Mesmerised by this sound that thundered throughout the hall, staring at the tall skinny teenager who sat over the keys of the Steinway like a sparrow perched on the haunches of a large black bull.

By the final cadenza and cadence of the third movement I was no longer watching his hands; I sat with my gaze glued to his face, at those solemn eyes that looked down upon his hands as if they were foreign to him.

Noel drew his hands up off the piano and onto his lap, sitting still for one moment, staring at the keys as if he, like the audience, was not entirely sure what had transpired. The crowd was in rapture. He tipped his head up to draw in some air then dropped it down again, this time gazing unfocused beyond the piano, beyond the orchestra. He rose and carefully stepped out towards the audience, standing soberly, and everyone could see – yes, it was just a young angelic boy. He placed his hand on the slippery arm of the Steinway, his chin pressed against his chest. Then he bowed ever so slightly, like a stalk of wheat swaying in a breeze, a gesture as perfectly executed as every other movement he had performed all evening. Beecham, grinning like a proud father, turned to the audience and stretched one arm out toward Noel.

I sat up tall in my seat and clapped as hard and fast as I could, hollowing my palms to produce that same round, loud crack as my father. We were both gazing at the stage amid this applause that seemed to be growing around us, hitting the stage like a showering of bullets. Noel stood for a moment longer, blinking into the din, before turning and walking from the stage. As we sat there, still clapping, both of us with smiles stretched wide across our faces, I looked up at my father and I remember saying to myself right then that I would remember that moment for the rest of my life.

From that day on I immersed myself in my new musical world, acquainting myself with my new set of peers when they appeared in the paper or spoke on the wireless, following all that they said and did. When all of London's critics remarked on Noel's tremendous concerto

performance – his ‘engaging confidence’ and ‘virtue of honesty’ – I agreed wholeheartedly, parroting each comment back to my father, swelling with these weighty adult words and clever new ideas. The conductor Sir Henry Wood declared that Noel reminded him of all the great pianists of the past, and Beecham called Noel ‘the best talent I’ve discovered in the Empire for years’. Beecham had staked the flag; Noel was new musical territory, and I felt that I was part of the pioneering expedition. And so began the traversing, the mapping and the unearthing of Noel Mewton-Wood.

If it weren’t for the cultural blackout that hit London at the beginning of 1940, more would have been made of Noel’s arrival, but there was also a synchronism to his appearance that made him even more remarkable. That this young boy, with the ivory skin and hands that played the sublime, could rise when Britain was poised on the brink of possible invasion. In my mind he was a national hero, as potent as a front-line commander. But at the same time, he was entirely removed from the everyday of a war that trampled our days and blackened our nights. He became gloriously untouchable: a brilliant cumulus cloud floating over our cold and muddy lives.

Like every household at the time, at six o’clock each evening, my father, my aunt and I would gather around the wireless to listen to the BBC broadcast – *Blood for Britain*, *Road Safety in the Blackout* or *Eleven Hours in a Rubber Dinghy*. There were news flashes of European towns captured, and stories of the unimaginable evils of the Huns, who tortured and ate their own children, murdered their neighbours, and marched left-right-left-right towards us that very minute. I happily accepted that I was to do my bit (‘This war is the people’s war!’), and I listened eagerly, standing by for my instruction. ‘Preparation! If the invader comes...’ I waited, masking excitement as alertness, in quiet hope of being given a chance to prove myself. I’d see the invader floating down from a parachute like a spider dangling from his

thread, his body braced in attack position, his helmet, long boots, vest, all charcoal-black as if he'd just walked unscathed from a blaze. 'DO NOT GIVE A GERMAN ANYTHING. DO NOT TELL HIM ANYTHING. HIDE YOUR FOOD AND YOUR BICYCLES. HIDE YOUR MAPS. THINK OF YOUR COUNTRY BEFORE YOU THINK OF YOURSELF.' I readied myself for *his* imminent arrival, and at the end of each day sat forward in my kitchen chair, listening with my father and aunt to the world service broadcasts, awaiting further instructions, updates, food shortages, word from the front. And then: 'Now continuing our evening special on our friends from across the channel tonight we look at the life of the French Impressionist composer, Claude Debussy. To begin the programme, we'll hear three of Debussy's works for the pianoforte from *Estampes* – "Pagodes", "*Soirée dans Grenade*" and "*Jardins sous la pluie*" – performed by the young Australian pianist Mr Noel Mewton-Wood.'

The room would then fill with the most exquisite sounds: harmonies plucked from the ether by a composer who had arrived on the musical stage on the heels of the mammoth nineteenth-century Germans – Wagner, Beethoven and Mahler – with their colossal sounds, their Faustian soul-struggles. Debussy presented the only possible passage forward: impressions of moonlight, footprints in the snow, spellbinding in their simplicity. As I sat in the kitchen, warming my hands by the Rayburn, digesting battle calls, sirens, insistent broadcasts, the hacking machinery all miraculously subsided – evaporated into the passing of a cloud, drifted off in an ephemeral mist.

I closed my eyes and imagined Noel playing, his raindrop touch, his intimate knowledge of worlds so beguiling. No one else could hear what I was hearing, *really*. They just heard sparkling virtuosity, a respite from the war. They couldn't hear because he was playing for me, for the person who knew and understood him.

My desire to see him and hear him felt urgent, and I would remind myself that he was somewhere near me, breathing the same air into his lungs. I'd imagine him in the evenings, eating his meal and taking a cup of tea, gazing out the window and thinking about me.

Each week I'd look for his name in the National Gallery programme in the newspaper (he was one of the up-and-coming musicians that Myra adored, and whose talents she fostered – 'What on earth will the boy be like at forty?' I once heard her exclaim) and when I saw he was performing, if my father insisted I go to school, I'd catch the bus at midday to Trafalgar Square, indifferent to the strife I'd get into if caught.

As London headed into summer, the fences around the gallery were removed, and guests and diners spilled out onto the lawn. Pulling out my lunch from its brown paper bag, I'd sit on the grass, sniffing the warm blossom air, admiring the way the young girls lounged about, pulling up their skirts to sun their legs, bowing their heads coquettishly as they listened to tales from young soldiers who knelt down beside them. As the clock approached one, I'd pay my shilling and walk down the marble corridors to the Barry room with its bevelled glass-panelled dome and Renaissance frieze with busts of the painters gazing down, and shuffle into one of the heavily dimpled cane-bottom chairs, sit down and wait.

From behind the red curtain that screened one side of the octagonal room, Noel would emerge, tall and calm, and step across the makeshift platform. A quiet nod to the audience, then he'd sit at the Steinway and begin, those gargantuan hands concertinaing outward, arching up over the keys. Each touch dealt with the utmost delicacy yet capable of producing a thunderous roar.

Once, after a performance, I lingered around afterwards, hoping to see him, or for him to see me. He came out from behind the curtain with several other men and stepped

down from the stage. Waiting for him on the floor was a middle-aged woman, with a young girl not much older than myself. I couldn't see the girl's face properly from where I stood but could make out, from the tight clasp of her hands at the front of her brown woollen coat, the importance of this meeting.

Noel greeted the woman with a kiss on the cheek then glanced down at the girl, bent his knees a little and leaned over to say hello. I moved forward to listen.

The woman was saying that young Margaret was one of her students, and that she was born in Melbourne – 'just like you, Noel' – and came to watch him play as often as she could.

'I'd give my right arm to play the Fantasy-impromptu,' the girl broke in, gazing dreamily up at him.

'Well, you'd have to follow that up with the *Revolutionary* étude, I suppose, if you only had your left hand remaining,' Noel said, sending the girl into a fit of giggles.

They spoke for a while, Noel showing no concern for the bejewelled women and manicured men waiting to shake his hand. He asked Margaret which pieces she was studying and questioned her about Melbourne – did she swim at St Kilda beach or Brighton? Had she ever been to Studley Park to row along the Yarra?

'Please come back and see me again, I'd be most grateful if you did,' he said. Then he kissed the woman once more and told her he'd send two tickets for his next concert, and Margaret began jiggling up and down on her toes as if she were about to spill over.

The teacher held Margaret's shoulders and started to edge backwards, as if suddenly recognising what an imposition she had made upon this famous musician, thanking and apologising all at once.

‘Make sure you come and say hello again,’ he repeated and then turned to join his friends on the other side of the stage.

Margaret and her teacher walked past me towards the exit; Margaret clutched her small red handbag to her chest and her eyes drifted up to the ceiling where they floated about, bobbing like balloons. I have rarely felt so bitter as I did at that moment, standing fixed to the marble floor, glaring at the girl’s wobbly grin as she drifted towards the door.

It was not until after the war, soon after Noel and I had first met, that I next thought of Margaret. Noel was doing a BBC broadcast for Australia Day that was to be heard in the faraway continent. He mentioned to me in passing that he once knew a lovely Australian girl called Margaret with dark, lonely eyes, who he’d often meet for cups of tea and rock cakes at Fortnum and Mason’s. Her father had died at the start of the war and she’d later fallen in love with a soldier, but her mother had made her return with her to Australia, and Noel and Margaret had since lost contact. During the broadcast that evening, Noel introduced his programme – ‘I’m going to start with Chopin’s Fantasy-impromptu and follow it with the *Revolutionary* étude.’ As I listened to his performance, the rumble of the *Allegro agitato* softening into the sonorous voice of the *cantabile*, my eyes filled with tears, which I put down to the beauty of his playing. Yet the entire time I couldn’t erase from my mind the picture of the girl with the brown woollen coat and red handbag who had stood up on tiptoes to stretch a little closer to her idol.

The gallery concerts spanned the entire war, one hour every weekday until the middle of April 1946. Each working day Londoners would file in under the dome to listen to Beethoven, Mozart and Bach, a portrait of Raphael looking down upon them. In the sanctum of the Barry rooms, only a small note on the bottom of the programme – *In case of*

Air Raid Warning, audiences will proceed downstairs where adequate protection is available – alluded to the world that existed outside the Gallery walls.

Four weeks before the concerts' first anniversary, on the 7th of September 1940, at five in the afternoon, the sound of air raid sirens faded out into the buzz of aircraft engines. Above, in the grey skies, a platoon of fifty aircraft inched over us like migrating ducks, small flocks in perfect diamond formation. They were low enough for us to see them rock from back to front in the wind, the sun glistening off their bellies as they opened their hatches and released their bombs, dropping them in clusters like handfuls of pebbles. My first thought was that they seemed too meagre, those seed-like bombs that spiralled through the air, to cause that piercing whistle.

We had been told on the wireless that the planes would be fired at, that we would be protected, but there was no defence, no retaliation. We just sat there while they bombed us, our shelters rocking like cradles. It sounded as if the whole city were being destroyed, it seemed impossible that we weren't hit, that we were still alive.

The concerts continued without exception throughout the Blitz; air raids were viewed as mere inconveniences rather than threats by the concert committee. During the September daylight raids of the Battle of Britain, the concerts were moved downstairs from the glass-roofed dome into the shelter-room, where they remained for the following nine months. Despite the stifling stuffiness of warmer days, the pools of water that collected on the stone floor and the icy draughts of winter – where I once saw a clarinettist cooking her instrument over an oil-stove, trying to get it up to pitch – every day there they were, hundreds of people who'd made their way through glass-strewn streets and smouldering rubble to queue up for the concerts.

One morning in mid-October, just after eleven o'clock, Myra received a telephone call to say that a time bomb had fallen on the gallery. When the audience started to arrive an hour later to see the Griller Quartet and Max Gilbert playing Mozart string quintets, a young boy standing at the front of the gallery directed them across Trafalgar Square to the library at South Africa House, where the concert had been relocated.

Several days later, it was reported in the paper that a one-thousand-pound bomb was discovered in the wreckage of the gallery, and the concerts were to move to the furthestmost room while the bomb-disposal squad took to work disengaging the bomb. Days later, when the workmen were at lunch, and the Stratton Quartet entertained the concert crowd with Beethoven's F major *Rasoumovsky* quartet, the bomb went off, right in the middle of the *Scherzo*. A loud explosion followed by a raining of shattering glass. The musicians continued without missing a beat.

I once witnessed a similar scene, when Noel and Ilona Kabos performed at Wigmore Hall at the beginning of 1945. It was a Saturday afternoon, and they were playing the Bartok Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion when a bomb exploded – perhaps a hundred yards from the hall – right in the middle of the performance. Noel continued, just shooting an accusatory glare at William Bradshaw and James Blades – the two percussionists – who responded with looks of innocence and surprise.

It seemed everyone in London attended the gallery concerts: people who had never heard a classical note before mingling with those who had dedicated their lives to music. As a young boy in my grey-and-maroon school uniform, I could slip in amongst it all, as eligible to attend as the Queen.

When I remember those days I find myself having to admit that there is an aspect to the war that I still miss. It's the incandescence of a person, of a city, only visible in its darkest

times. I knew that any day the Fifth Army could come knocking on our door; I could return from school to find my entire street ablaze. But then I only had to walk through those arched wooden doors of the gallery and glance up at Noel as he stood on the edge of the makeshift stage, tall and still as an obelisk, and I would know there was nothing at that moment that I wasn't able to endure.

*

We met because we shared the same birthday, it was as simple as that.

So many years past, so many days and nights daydreaming at the piano, designing our first encounter (it was usually in the green room after one of his recitals, or maybe after one of mine, he'd approach me like a friend, his arms out wide, throwing them around me as if bagging a rabbit – *Magnificent performance, truly astounding!*) and in the midst of my whimsy, it was as if fate had tripped and landed me blithering at his feet.

Thomas Steiner was my teacher at the Academy at the time. A student of the great Leszetycki, he was a great bear of a man with a faded Bavarian accent that would sharpen like a whetted knife when he became excited about music. He'd chosen me as his student after my June audition; I'd only just finished the Chopin Third étude and looked up from the piano when he stormed up behind me, grabbed my shoulders and threatened, 'I will make a pianist of you!'

Thomas – as he allowed me to call him – had given me Schumann's *Fantasiestücke* to start on the previous week, and as I played the second piece – '*Aufschwung*' – he sat there nodding his head, sucking his gums so that his white tobacco-stained moustache writhed like a caterpillar. He groaned a little as he did when he was thinking, then, scribbling away in my

notepad, told me that the following Tuesday he was going to a birthday party for ‘your dear friend Noel’. Thomas knew I was smitten with Noel, but so was half of London, and although he often quipped that he’d arrange for me to meet the famous pianist one day, his comments, tossed out like gratis concert tickets, seemed merely intended to encourage and inspire my practice. I never believed he’d really concern himself with anything as trivial as a schoolboy infatuation.

‘Tuesday is my birthday as well!’ I spun around from the piano, thrilled about Noel’s and my unarguable connection, and feeling that a part of the pianist’s brilliance had been endowed upon me.

Thomas let out a rich baritone laugh then said he would ask if he could invite me along. He may have said more, I don’t recall; I sat gazing out the window at the alders and oaks of Regent’s Park, sparkling in the clear, still, nectar-coloured light, imagining myself in some marbled ballroom, stepping up to shake the hand of Noel Mewton-Wood.

Thomas leaned over, patted my shoulder with his sausage-pink paw and said, ‘Keep it up on the Schumann. I’m sure it will be fine for this Tuesday.’

It was my seventeenth birthday, the 20th of November 1945, and I’d been invited to the twenty-third birthday party of Noel Mewton-Wood. I ran home from the Academy that day, opened the *Fantasiestücke* at the piano and practiced for hours – melodies that climbed at first gingerly then impetuously up the keys, lingering on the leading note before taking a sudden plunge – imagining myself as the young student Schumann in his Leipzig apartment, composing music throughout the night for his distant love, the pianist Clara Weick.

On the Tuesday morning I slept until nine; I wanted to be well rested in case the party ran late. But before I’d even swung my legs out of bed the magnitude of the day landed upon me, an avalanche of anticipation and panic, as if I’d never *truly* believed this moment

would arrive. I took my broly and went for a walk around the lake at Regent's Park, watching the swans and grebes gliding to and fro, carelessly at the mercy of the wind skimming them across the water. On the way home I bought the morning paper and some flowers. It was a preposterous idea – No, I wouldn't even let myself admit it – but I did want my flat to be looking presentable. I also bought fresh rolls and marmalade and imagined pouring him a cup of tea at my wooden table by the window, the sun reflecting off his handsome face.

I returned home, put the irises in a jar of water, put the kettle on the stove, sat and opened the paper.

So this was seventeen, I smiled, looking around my lodgings. There was my bed with its patchwork eiderdown, a wardrobe, my Bechstein upright surrounded by piles of music fanned-out all over the floor, a trolley for the wireless and gramophone and all my records, an old Persian carpet that had worn through in several places, two bookcases filled with my father's collection of musical biographies, a green sofa and a round wooden table with four matching chairs near the kitchen window. Everything I needed was here, I thought; I felt quite grown-up. Then I wondered how it would look – to a visitor – my little room. The sofa cushions looked discarded, neglected; I jumped from my seat and puffed them then angled them along the back crease. Then I noticed the downy grey of the floorboards – I rolled up the rug, grabbed the dustpan and brush and, on my hands and knees, began sweeping. Lastly, the piano – I polished the wood, restacked my piles of music, putting the Romantics on top, and chose a few impressive pieces – the *Hammerklavier* and the Liszt B minor – to leave open at the piano.

When I was finished, I sat down again at the table, looked about myself, and felt as though I might be seeing my little grey-walled room, with its small patch of sun that floated

aimlessly across the floorboards, for the last time. It seemed that everything was poised, ready to spring up and away. I looked at the irises and noticed a small ant crawling over the lip of one of the petals to be confronted by the violent purple and yellow flame of the bell. For a moment I imagined myself looking back on this morning, and it all feeling very far away, and I sensed a faint bleating nostalgia. I thought about everything that had brought me to this point, everything that had passed since *then* – March 1940 when my father had first taken me to see Noel Mewton-Wood perform at Queen’s Hall – and it felt as though my seemingly endless longing for this day had sucked away, in an instant, the last five-and-a-half years.

I turned to the piano and began my practice. Starting at C, I played every scale – major, harmonic and melodic minor – climbing chromatically up the keyboard. I practiced my technical work staccato, legato, in rhythms, lifting each finger towards the roof, marching them like soldiers, each note ringing shrilly about the room. Then I pulled out some pieces: Chopin études, the Schumann, and a fantasie I had composed in the manner of Schubert – which I had secretly dedicated to Noel – in case I had the opportunity to play at the party. By the time I stopped it was already dark and I realised I hadn’t eaten a thing all day.

Thomas had told me the party began at eight. I arrived at Stamford Brook Station at quarter to, surprised to be early, as I had taken so long to get dressed that a mild panic had set in, almost preventing me from leaving my room. I had five shirts to choose from; I tried each one on several times but was unhappy with how I looked in each of them. The pale blue one made me look young and gormless; the white dinner shirt was too stiff; the striped one, too prosaic; the patterned one, too cloying; and the woollen one made me perspire. I was certain Noel would sum me up in a glance – *that young boy’s been dressed by his mother* – and have no interest in meeting me at all. Noel had such an effortless poise; clothes hung off him

so naturally – it was something that struck me every time I saw him. I'd once seen him walking around Covent Garden with a tall, horsy woman, presumably his mother, and I followed them for some time as they wandered in and out of bookshops and tailors. Even though he was simply strolling along in baggy trousers and an open-necked checked shirt, I remembered thinking that every hand gesture, every step, exuded such majesty and calm. I tried to imagine which shirt of mine Noel would prefer; I must have stood there in front of my wardrobe pondering all this for almost an hour.

I'd buttoned up the striped shirt and slipped into a jacket when I finally settled upon the blue, remembering that a girl at the Academy who was trying to impress me once remarked how this shirt brought out the colour of my eyes, the shade of a Spanish ceramic glaze, she'd said. Then there was my hair, dead straight with an obstinate cowlick that hung forward in limp bands across my brow. The more I combed it, the more it bounced about mockingly. I tried to convince myself that whatever happened that evening would not be determined by the state of my hair, but each time I picked up my scarf and gloves and walked to the door, I'd take one last glance at the mirror and be horrified by the mawkish face that glared back. I was in a state of near exasperation by the time I finally made it out the door.

The party was at the house of Noel's uncle, the poet and music critic, Walter J. Turner. Thomas had written the address on a piece of paper I had folded in my pocket, but I'd imprinted the *A-Z* map so indelibly in my mind that morning that I was able to head straight toward Hammersmith Terrace as if I came home this way every day. I couldn't help but think about the sorts of people who might be there – plenty of critics, no doubt; musicians and artists, of course; maybe even some politicians. I pictured them all standing about chatting about foreign policy and opera premieres, drinking champagne and picking at

oysters and other delicacies that my father had talked about eating at the Savoy before the war. He'd told me about dinners he'd been to with Chamberlain and other ministers, always shrugging off the distinction of these occasions, telling me that these people were just the same as any other human being – they are only from another class, he'd say, not another world. Then again he was only really talking about politicians and other dignitaries; *not* about geniuses such as Noel Mewton-Wood.

It was cold and the moon hadn't yet risen, and I had to restrain myself from breaking into a sprint. I rounded the corner into St Peter's Square when all of a sudden it dawned on me: I hadn't a clue what I was going to say to Noel when I arrived. All these years – those conversations I'd had with him, telling him about my life, my music – all day today, and I'd prepared absolutely nothing! Perhaps meeting him was a ridiculous idea; I ought to return home immediately. I imagined making some comment to him about music, and he throwing his head back in laughter. I had no one there to turn to except Thomas, and what was I to say to him? I'd never seen him at a party, only at the Academy and at concerts; I normally spoke to him about my pieces and upcoming performances. And what if he wasn't there when I arrived? I decided I couldn't speak to Noel about music – *And how was your recent Australian tour? I read they loved the Beethoven but didn't know what to make of the Hindemith* – No, that would be far too embarrassing, too tedious for him. I'd read he lived out of town in Tunbridge Wells with a wealthy couple called the Eckersleys, and that Noel and Nancy Eckersley bred geese and Alsatians. I also knew he loved literature, painting, antiques, building model theatres and tennis; all of a sudden the possibilities overwhelmed me. The more I thought about Noel's life, the more insignificant mine seemed, and the more I became resigned to the fact that it would be better if I didn't speak with him at all.

At Hammersmith Terrace I pulled out my watch, it was only ten past eight. I was at a low brick wall overlooking the Thames, which ran full and fast below me, a light wind wrinkling the surface. The moon was just beginning to peak over the elms on the far side splashing little daubs of light on the water so that it looked like a river of writhing snakes.

I sat on the steps that led down to the water and started squeezing my right wrist between the fingers of my left and then massaged around the bones at the base of my hand. My right shoulder and arm had been giving me trouble again recently, and when I rubbed it the dull pain, with the occasional electric jab that shot all the way up to my shoulder, gave me a strange sense of relief. Sometimes I could find a point, and pinch it crab-like between my thumb and second finger, and it would sustain the intense pain that ran up my arm. I had that point now and the sensation was like a burning wire that ran from my collarbone to my fingertip.

‘Don’t jump you fool,’ a voice called out from behind me.

I turned around; it was Thomas, silhouetted by the streetlights, swaying left and right as he came laughing toward me. He was swaddled in coat, scarf and hat and had a bottle of red wine held like a club in his mittened hands.

I stood up and brushed off the dirt and leaves that clung to the back of my coat, and walked up the road beside him, telling myself that whatever happened inside, it didn’t matter. If it all went terribly wrong, I could just thank the host, slip out, catch the train home and go to bed, and I’d wake up in the morning and it would be as if nothing had ever happened.

Thomas asked about the *Fantasiestücke* and as I mumbled a few words in reply, we stepped up to the glossy, ivy-green painted door with its heavy brass knocker. The somnolent street now seemed to bathe in the glow of the party inside – a soft carpet of

chatter and laughter emanating from the house, and above it all, the sound of Schumann, purling like a breeze through a chandelier.

I glanced down at my father's old leather brogues, shining up at me so eagerly, and fiddled with the corners of my collar. Up the road, a dull light shone out from the Black Lion Inn and I had the sudden desire to be sitting in there by the fire, surrounded by strangers, all perhaps escaping a party of their own. I decided that's where I'd go if things didn't work out. I'd happily stay there all night, I thought, occasionally wandering outside to sit at the bench and watch the guests arrive and leave from number nine.

Thomas was standing beside me, thumping the brass knocker, his chin pressed against his Fair Isle vest, humming Corelli. I stood waiting with my head bowed and hands clasped in front of me.

The door swung open quickly and Walter appeared arched over us on the landing, glaring at us through the grey hair that hung in front of his crow-like eyes. He was a tall, wiry character in a dark woollen suit, a white shirt and a thin mauve tie. The tips of his shirt collar were buttoned underneath the tie, which jutted out awkwardly below its tiny knot, as if it were trying to slither away. He appeared to have dressed in rather a hurry.

'Hello – excellent, excellent,' he said, flicking his hair to the side, after which it fell immediately back in front of his eyes. 'It's Thomas, yes? – wonderful. And who's this? You must be the young chap having a birthday! Seventeen? Wonderful, what a glorious age, yes, the purity and intensity of youth,' he announced theatrically and nodded to Thomas. 'Do come in, do come in. Would you like a drink? Delphine? Del-*phiiiine*?' he called over his shoulder as he disappeared behind us, pulling off our coats and hats, 'Two champagnes, Dear.' He continued at great haste, 'Of course by the time one reaches my age, unless one

fosters that youthful spirit, one becomes all dry and withered from lack of life,' then he turned to me smiling, 'Like parched orange skin,' before launching off down the hall, a flick of his hand behind his back signalling us to follow.

Not an eyebrow was raised as we entered the living room, through the small clusters of guests that gathered like posies of weary wind-blown poppies. Books lined one entire wall, and impressionist paintings of landscapes and figures hung along the others. Most of the guests stood about in earnest discussion, and although there was the occasional garish bow tie or audacious laugh, on the whole I had to admit it all looked rather dull. As I studied the room further my attention was drawn through the crowd to the far side of the room, where, playing at a Steinway Louis XV Grand, was Noel.

His head was turned towards the higher octaves as if he were listening to, rather than watching, his hands. He appeared lost in thought, as though he too, were standing away from the piano amongst a party of strangers, imbibing the sound that drenched the room. He was playing Schumann's *Fantasia* opus 17.

Thomas handed me a glass of champagne then signalled for me to follow him. I excused myself, telling him I'd join him presently, hardly recognising my own voice, then walked over to sit on the chartreuse-coloured silk sofa in the corner, at the foot of the piano. The instrument almost completely obscured my view of Noel; a sliver of his face, in between the walnut satin body and lid of the piano, was all I could see. If he raised his head and looked forward, he would have been staring straight at me. He did, in fact, lift his head several times, but each time he had that dreamy gaze of a child who's just woken, oblivious to his environment. The rest of his face was expressionless. I felt a little self-conscious, sitting there staring at him, but was unable to avert my eyes. And no one else seemed to be

taking any notice at all. Least of all Noel – his head tilted to the left, his eyes half closed, playing as if he were at home, quite alone.

I looked about the room, and started to notice several famous faces that, ordinarily, would have filled me with a nervousness verging on terror. But next to Noel, and the Schumann that was pouring out of the piano rattling every ounce of my body, all the other guests, I thought, appeared remarkably mundane. The composer Benjamin Britten was over near the gramophone, in a buttoned-up pinstriped suit, holding a beer. With his hair smoothly combed in corrugated waves and his large eyes set too far apart, I couldn't help thinking how comical he looked in real life. Next to him, his musical and romantic partner, the tenor Peter Pears was wearing a green cable knit vest with his sleeves rolled up to the elbows, and stood with his chest pushed out as if he were about to break into an aria. There were others – the radio broadcaster John Amis; his wife, the violinist Olive Zorian; the Earl of Harewood; and the author A.P. Herbert, who, with his large rubbery nose, and the small furry circumflexes that floated above his black-rimmed glasses, looked like he was wearing a children's disguise. Some faces were so familiar I momentarily thought to nod to them, assuming an acquaintance. But, thankfully, just before humiliating myself entirely, their eyes brushed over me without even a flicker of recognition and I politely looked away.

I placed my champagne down beside me on the occasional table and noticed a pair of mother-of-pearl cufflinks that lay on a crumbled bed of blue tissue paper, with a gold ribbon and card discarded to the side – *Dear Noel*, and a flouncing message and signature which exhibited an arrogant disregard for legibility. I picked up the cufflinks, stroked their smooth iridescent surfaces then closed my fingers, holding them like a beetle trapped in the hand, looking around the roomful of guests, challenging anyone to my gaze. Noel was deeply absorbed in his playing, staring dreamily at his hands; a sprightly old man with a white beard,

who I could have sworn was Bernard Shaw, let out a high-pitched laugh on the far side of the room, but no one else stirred from conversation. From nearby I could hear snippets of a discussion on the libretto of Britten's new opera *Peter Grimes*, and over the top, the strident voice of Turner, who stood only yards away, talking with a rake-like woman with a severe middle part.

‘The secret of all the great artists is of pouring the infinite into the finite. And the task for us is to learn to discriminate, to acquire a fine spiritual palate so as to appreciate the true and beautiful, to find that everyday is crowded with a thousand beauties...’

I looked about myself, at this new world in which I sat – a world of Bohemian crystal and Dora Carrington portraits. Listening to Walter's words chime over me, I let the cufflinks tumble about in my sweaty palm, before slipping my hand into my jacket and dropping the little shimmering bugs into my pocket, thinking that no truer words had ever been spoken.

Despite enjoying the view from the sofa, and the sweet musky smell of the bursting champagne bubbles as I rolled the flute against my lips, I was aware that I was the only person in the room, other than Noel, not engaged in conversation. Not wanting to be any sort of burden for Thomas or the host, I leaned over to peruse the titles of the library, and my eyes fell immediately upon a book with a blue canvas spine and a gold embossed title – *The Letters of Robert and Clara Schumann* – I pulled it out and opened it on my lap. I'd read the letters a dozen times before, it was one of my father's favourite books. But sitting there at Walter's party listening to Noel, I could hardly keep my eyes focused on the page; I just kept thinking to myself how terribly auspicious all this was, that I happened to be holding a book on Robert and Clara Schumann, one of the greatest musical and romantic partnerships in history, who'd met at a musical soiree thrown by Clara's father. I'd always been very taken by the idea that the most profound events in one's life could take place, not at the end of some

arduous trek, but quite fortuitously, even unintentionally – any moment could be your very last before fate swoops down and snatches you in its talons.

‘For heaven’s sake, put the book away.’ Thomas was squatting down beside me. ‘Noel is very fond of playing duets and I’ve told him you’d be delighted to join him.’

I looked about the room, then over at the piano. Just at that moment, Noel, still playing, lifted his head, and it was as if the spell he was under suddenly lifted, flinging his presence into the room. He was now at a party – Noel the birthday boy. He looked at me, smiling like an old friend, improvising upon the piece he was playing, spilling into flamboyant flourishes.

‘Don’t be afraid, he’s a wonderful boy,’ Thomas said.

Thomas had called Noel a *wonderful boy*, Noel had beckoned me over; it was too extraordinary, maybe I was drunk. I had no time to think about what was happening, something was lifting me up to my feet. I found myself turning to Thomas and thanking him then walking around the side of the piano, barely able to feel my legs carrying me along.

Noel looked up with a chummy smile, his hands continuing to play, as if they didn’t belong to him. I walked behind him, to his left, and without a word edged on to the burgundy leather piano stool, our bodies almost touching. I looked down and saw how close we were – the grey plaid of my trouser only inches from the charcoal wool of his – and when his arm brushed along mine, it felt like the pluck of a harpsichord string rippling right through me. I might have been sitting next to Schumann himself.

The piece Noel was playing, the *Fantasia* opus 17, is Schumann’s most passionate piano composition, a piece I must have heard a thousand times as a child. But how different it sounded that evening, being played for me by Noel Mewton-Wood.

My father used to tell me that the *Fantasia* was a love letter written in musical notes, the falling five-note phrase at the beginning of the first movement echoing a quote from one of Beethoven's love songs. Schumann wrote it during the three years when his teacher Freidrich Weick forbade the struggling composer from making any contact with his teenage-daughter Clara. The separation unleashed a frenzy of artistic activity in Schumann – he composed piece after piece, reams of extraordinary music, then found a way to deliver them to Clara. I used to love listening to these pieces with my father – huddled around the gramophone, watching the black disc circling around on its bakelite base, the needle bobbing up and down in its groove, then that warm crackling sound before the music started.

My father would be sitting next to me, peering down through the glasses that clung onto the end of his nose, staring at the score in his lap. As the music began, his finger would travel along the phrases like a boat sailing along smooth water, leaving a trail of notes in its wake. Then whenever that five-note phrase appeared in the music, he'd tap me then hold up his finger, tracing the melody through the air, as it hung so visibly in front of him.

The *Fantasia* was the first piece of music with which I fell in love.

Noel had just returned to the main theme and was approaching the coda, where the reference to Beethoven's amorous line is unmistakable, repeating over and over. The rumbling left hand slowed into an adagio, Noel's fingers barely stroking the ivory keys. The final announcement – pianissimo – stripped of accompaniment, was like a shyly spoken revelation; his long white fingers splayed out across four octaves in the culminating chord. By the time Noel's hands settled into the final radiant C major chord, my heart was thundering in my chest, and it was only the feeling of sheer terror that kept me pinned to the seat.

There was a moment's pause then Noel lifted his hands in one smooth movement from the piano, dropped them in his lap, then swung around to face me.

'Well it's your birthday. What would you like to play?' he said, grinning, exposing his pearly teeth; and I realised that for all the times I'd seen his photograph in the newspaper or watched him on stage, I'd never really seen him smile. His fingers started skimming up and down the keys again, fluttering like wings in flight, as if he had little control over them. I stared down at them, avoiding his gaze. I had expected, and wanted, to find his face somehow unknowable, like a screen idol, or the bust I once saw of King Akhenaton in the British Museum, whose beauty made me tremble. I wanted some physical sign of his divinity; but to my disappointment, he looked quite ordinary. His features were rather plain, too coarse to be truly handsome, and his thick brown hair grew straight out from his head, wiry and wavy, with a design all its own. The most distinctive feature of his face, which I had never before noticed, was its ardent boyishness: pleading eyes and an effusive smile that, once arrived, didn't want to leave.

'It's your birthday too,' I said, cursing myself I couldn't think of a better response.

'And I'd like *you* to choose,' he said, continuing to play, and nodding his forehead toward the stacks of music on the sideboards of the piano.

I stood and started flicking through the pile: Mendelssohn, Mozart, Beethoven, Mahler, Weber, Poulenc, Debussy, trying to concentrate on reading the covers while glancing back at him, afraid he might vanish.

He was still smiling, looking straight ahead, then down at his hands. 'Have you found something?' he asked. 'We'll be another year older, shortly.'

I pulled out the first duet that I came across. 'How about the Moszkowski dances?' I asked, putting the music up in front of him.

‘Splendid,’ he replied. Then he stopped playing, turned straight toward me, grinning, his eyes enveloping me. Blood filled my face and I turned quickly away, concentrating on settling comfortably on the seat.

‘Well, off we go then, shall we?’

I nodded, hardly able to speak, and lifted my quivering hands to the keys.

As soon as we began, I relaxed. There was something about the way he played which put me at complete ease. I enjoyed playing duets immensely, it was like dancing a waltz – allowing you to be swept up into someone else’s tempo, and they, likewise, to be carried along in yours. It was extraordinarily intimate, and no duet partner could ever be like another. Sometimes when I played duets, I felt that I was locked in a battle of wills, a fierce game of cat and mouse. (There was a girl at the Academy, Eileen Sanders, who always insisted upon playing primo, and whenever I played with her, by the end of the work, I’d be all thumbs, feeling frantic and undone, as if I’d only just escaped with my life). Playing with Noel was quite the opposite: he had a manner that buoyed you up and took charge in a most tender fashion. I felt more accomplished than I actually was, as if no music was beyond me. I’m not sure what prompted this feeling. Perhaps it was because Noel was so acutely aware of everything you were doing, more aware than you were yourself. He’d *ritardando* ever so slightly when you were approaching a challenging part, or push you along, like a driver whipping a horse, when he knew both you and the music had it in you to charge. Even though he played primo, you never felt that he was the leader, that you had to blindly follow him whatever he did. With Noel next to me, I could play better than I ever could have done on my own or with anyone else.

‘You play secondo just right, you know,’ he said. ‘Nice and quiet, not thumping away!’

I laughed to myself, that he had misinterpreted my timidity so positively.

At the end of the piece we bounced off the last chords and I sat glowing beside him; I couldn't wait to play another. Then he turned to me, his smile dropped and he spoke gravely.

'Well you can't stay sitting *there*, you know.' He stood and stepped backwards, away from the stool.

I blushed, started to stand and edge out of the seat, mumbling a thankyou.

'I just *farted!* I'm terribly sorry!' he said and burst into laughter, waving his hand in front of his face, bowing over in hysterics. 'But if *you* don't mind, then let's play some Schubert.' And chuckling to himself, he stood and started shuffling through the music pile. 'Righto – this ought to clear the air.'

He sat down again, placed the A major Rondo duet in front of me and flashed a devouring grin.

Notre amitié est variable rien – the publisher's subtitle winked at me cheekily from the page.

I'd seen this duet played before and was aware of the intimacy required between the two players, that it was virtually impossible to play without all four hands ending up in knots. I tried not to read too much into his choice; maybe I was being presumptuous. I sat quietly, obediently, like a student in a lesson. We wriggled closer together, a warm seam now running along the length of my body. I could feel my heart beating in my throat. I breathed in, swallowed, looking straight ahead at the music and waited, avoiding his gaze, which I could feel branding the side of my face.

I've often wondered of whom Schubert was thinking when he composed this flirtatious piece. I imagined the young romantic (the 'divine spark' of whom Beethoven spoke from his deathbed), sitting alone in his apartment in Vienna, overlooking the Danube, fantasising about a beautiful pianist, his heart at a gallop, while scratching away with his quill on his manuscript sheets. He was only thirty-one at the time, and several months later, in the autumn of 1828, his life of poverty, illness and melancholia was carried away by a lethal bout of typhoid. But when he composed the Rondo in A, earlier in that final year of intense creative activity, his voice was teeming over with the idealistic poetry of youth. The theme of the Rondo, that keeps returning, taunting, teasing, is a melodious gambol, set at a lively tempo – *Allegretto quasi andantino* – in the style of an andantino: a walk, skip or a frolic.

Noel looked at me with goading eyes, his face inches from mine. 'Are you ready?'

I gathered every trembling impulse, nodded and brought my hands to the keys.

We began.

Whenever I'd heard this duet in the past, I always thought of a couple idly rowing a boat along a stream. Playing the secondo, a rippling legato tenor, I submerged myself into the velvety waters on which the rambling melody sailed. Noel was smiling to himself as he played; and I, gently murmuring and undulating underneath his part, felt thoroughly enraptured. Technical difficulty subsided and I seemed to be doing no more than simply humming the tune.

Each time I rose and dropped away, and his tune came down to meet mine – dip its oar in the water – we'd almost meet. I'd climb up to a C and trickle straight down, just as he descended to the same note, then again soon after on the B, he'd be playing a trill and as I ran up to the note, he'd leap off and away. We were like two dancers, gliding past each other on the floor, a seemingly inevitable embrace hindered each time we drew near by the

beguiling swirl of the music that intervened, thrusting one of us off to the farthest reaches of the room.

And each time it occurred I felt, maybe imagined, that we lingered a little longer; to see what would happen if by chance we were to meet. I'd watch his fingers glide down the keys as if chasing mine, and see how long I could remain without appearing too yielding. Then I'd follow him likewise, praying that he might wait for me, but then as I approached, he'd be off, leaving me in a trail of whispering eddies, trilling from his hands onto mine.

Then at last it was my turn with the melody, and I felt his shoulders slacken as he subdued himself – mezzo-staccato thirds in semi-quaver triplets – light stammering chords like a breathless tremor, a delicate prickle of goose-bumps. And rising from underneath, I sang out the theme, imploring him to hear my veiled words.

He resumed the lead, and we rambled towards the end, both of us now playing the melody, only a third apart. We were singing in unison yet I was suddenly struck by the inevitability of departure; my naiveté shone plainly before my eyes. I resisted any more hopeful glances in his direction, stifling my quiet begging for his gaze. I was a play-thing, and this duet was a meaningless dalliance. I concentrated on the notes I was playing so that my desire to throw my arms about him could be reined into producing a diminutive final chord, a swift mounting to my feet, a gentlemanly thankyou, and a gracious farewell.

We were now only two lines from the end; I felt relieved this would all soon be over. Then we played the final cadence before his rippling finale, both resolving into an A major chord (my right hand fourth finger on A and his left hand third finger and thumb playing the C sharp and E just above), and that's when it happened – our little fingers touched each other, not at all awkwardly, but ever so lightly, like a gentle brush of lips.

I dared not move, I ought to have only played a quaver and then a rest but I waited for his next notes to lead into mine. I was completely at his mercy, I would have been frozen to the keys forever if those following notes of his never came. Then he turned his head slightly towards me.

‘What are you doing this Friday night?’ he whispered.

‘Nothing,’ I replied, handing myself over to him entirely.

‘I’ve two tickets for *Tosca*, would you like to come?’

‘That would be wonderful.’

‘Marvellous. I’ll meet you at Her Majesty’s at six.’ And then, as if nothing had transpired, a graceful mordent around the note, he raced up the scale and jumped into the final proclamation of the theme, trumpeting it out on high C octaves. I nestled my final chords below, folding in under his ritardando. He plucked his way up to a final pianissimo trill, and I hummed it quietly to myself, and it seemed that the sound of him and me, and the quiver running through my veins, were all ringing as one.

Looking back upon that evening at Walter’s house, laughing drunkenly (even though I’d only had one glass of champagne) as I collected my hat and coat from Delphine, bounding down the bluestone steps onto the street, oblivious to the biting wind and sleety footpath, I’m aware that my real interest in the Schumanns was born on that night.

I remember a moment in particular as I skipped toward the station and looked up at the spire of the parish church of Saint Peter’s, the blue and gold clock-face striking eleven, bells chiming through the elms. In the pale cyan moonlight everything around me had a clarity that I’d never noticed before; I could see the outline of every leaf on every tree in the square as if it had been etched with ink, and each blade, needle or frond dazzled an entire

spectrum of greens. The urgent call of a tawny owl, sharp and woody as a flute, shot across the treetops, piercing the rustling breath of the wind through the leaves. And coinciding with this new awareness of everything I saw, felt and heard around me, I thought of Clara Weick.

Clara was only ten years old when the Robert Schumann moved in with her family to take lessons from her father, the renowned but autocratic teacher Friedrich Weick.

Schumann was determined to become the greatest pianist alive, but Clara was her father's top student, and in her early teenage years, she spent years touring around the continent with her father, becoming Europe's most celebrated young pianist. Schumann eventually gave up his dream of being a pianist and shifted his energies to composition. He moved out from the Weicks', but returned to visit often, especially to see Clara, with whom he'd fallen madly in love.

When Clara was sixteen, Schumann asked Weick for his daughter's hand in marriage; Weick, livid at the prospect of his daughter throwing away her future by marrying a struggling composer, threw Schumann out of the house and ordered him never to contact his daughter again. Months later Schumann wrote a 'deep lament' for Clara, a piece called 'Ruins'. A composition that was later to become the first movement of the *Fantasie* opus 17, dedicated to his friend, the composer-pianist Franz Liszt.

I imagined Clara during this time, locked away at the piano for days and weeks on end by her father. He took her touring from city to city, month after month, filling concert halls wherever she went. In the midst of this schedule of rehearsals, performances and travel, she would receive a message from Schumann, hand-delivered behind her father's back by a confidante – page after page of music: *Fantasie, Davidsbündlertänze, Kinderscenen, Kreisleriana, Fantasiestücke, Humoreske, Novelleten...*

My Clara will understand, he wrote to her, for they are dedicated to her...If ever I was happy at the piano it was while composing them.

Clara eventually replied to Schumann, echoing his feelings and the two became secretly engaged. She continued touring with her father for several more years, but then against his wishes, the couple finally married in the winter of 1839, eleven years after first meeting.

When I think of this love story, there is one instance I keep returning to over and over, one moment when Clara's life changed forever. August 1837: Clara is at home in Leipzig and receives, via a friend, another manuscript that Schumann has composed for her: the *Fantasia* opus 17. Clara's father is out sending telegrams arranging her upcoming tour of Austria, and Clara is supposed to be doing her morning practice. She sits at the piano, and places the music in front of her – *To Clara* – scribbled in a hand she knows so well. There are blobs of ink splattered over the page. She takes a closer look: the stems of the notes are frantic scratches; the arpeggios in the left hand, huge clusters written in a single flurry; the phrase lines sail long, sweeping over the top. At first, she doesn't even play a note, just glances over the script, the tumble of notes that rise and fall and glide along the page carving out brilliant patterns, a solo melody singing pleadingly over the top. She lifts her hands to the piano and begins, her fingers close to the keys, playing the chords from the wrist, just as her father has always taught her. As her fingers move around the notes, the music that emanates from the piano is unlike anything she has ever heard before. The tumbling semi-quavers in the left, the fortissimo falling five-note phrase in the right. And from that moment, she knows both her love and her fate are sealed.

*

I recall little of the performance at Her Majesty's that evening. I sat there rubbing the smooth skin of the mother-of-pearl cufflinks under my thumb (telling myself they were a gift from Noel), watching him out of the corner of my eye, admiring his still profile, his attentive gaze, bothered that he was never tempted to glance back at me. I looked down at my father's old suit, running my fingers along the sharp crease of the leg. I wondered if Noel had noticed its narrow tailoring and soft Italian weave, so similar to the one I saw him wearing at the National Gallery earlier in the year.

I had been raised on *Tosca* – my father's favourite of Puccini's operas. We'd sit around the kitchen table in the evenings: my father leaning back in his armchair, his legs stretched out in front of the open door of the Rayburn, and on the other side of the table, my aunt sat staring down at her knitting: a perpetual dull clicking under the soaring cries of Floria Tosca. My father played me all the operas of Strauss, Verdi, Wagner and Rossini, yet I always thought Tosca's aria – '*Visse D'arte*' – that she sings as her lover, Caravadossi, is being sent to the firing squad, the saddest human sound I'd ever heard.

But that night at Her Majesty's with Noel, I sat fidgeting in my seat, unable to engage with this opera that now seemed to mock my infatuation with its rising melodrama, and thinking that if I forgot about Noel for one moment I might lose him. From the opening of the overture – those three ominous chords of Scarpia's leitmotiv – I remained conscious of every moment that past, stayed in tune with every sigh Noel issued, each smile and nod, and eagerly waited for Tosca to hurl herself to her death.

At interval Noel ordered glasses of champagne while I waited for him in the foyer amongst the taciturn gentlemen in tuxedos and the blushing ladies who furiously fanned themselves to douse *les sentiments d'amour* aroused by Tosca's doomed passion. Noel stood a

head above many in the crowd. Over the hats and hairnets I could see him sharing a joke with the bar-man then collecting the drinks and turning to scan the room, his eyes flitting searchingly over the crowd. I was enjoying the sight of him looking for me so much I was almost disappointed when his gaze landed heavily upon mine. I smiled, blushed and turned away. I couldn't help noticing both men and women glancing furtively in his direction – surely they all knew who he was – the crowd gently parting as he walked towards me. He seemed unaware, holding the champagne flutes high, grinning as if he was half expecting to spill one on a mink stole or down someone's back.

'So you're at the Academy – are you with Professor Brainstorm?' he asked, taking a sip.

Noel had studied at the Academy years earlier, and I could only assume he was referring to his old teacher Harold Craxton, considered by many as the Academy's top teacher, but almost equally famous for his extraordinary absentmindedness.

'No, Thomas Steiner.'

'Oh very good. Have you met his wife? Excellent pianist, but makes this dreadful noise when she plays, like she's got a bombinating bee trapped in her mouth.'

'I might have met her once.' I smiled and shrugged, unsure that I wanted to believe Thomas's wife would do such a thing, but also not wanting to disappoint Noel who seemed to be deriving great pleasure from his tale.

'I once heard her accompany a violinist playing a Brahms sonata. The buzzing was so loud I could hardly contain myself. And poor Eleanor, the American lass sitting next to me, she was in such a state she almost swallowed her hanky!'

I kept smiling throughout, despite my embarrassment for Thomas and his wife.

‘Lovely chap, Steiner. Funf, we used to call him. You remember Funf? The German spy?’

‘Can I do you now, Sir?’ I asked in my best Mrs Mop, the cleaning-lady’s, voice, despite thinking little of the wartime comedy programme to which Noel referred, always having preferred the classical music shows.

Noel laughed loudly then dipped his head and in the voice of Colonel Chinstrap, crooned, ‘Don’t mind if you do.’

I forced a smile, hoping the conversation might drift away from this difficult banter. I tried, uselessly, to think of one of the many anecdotes I’d set aside to tell him during the week, but was unsure how to introduce any of them; I resorted to asking him what concerts he’d seen lately and was relieved when he started telling me about an organ recital – Debussy and Jongen – he’d seen the previous weekend.

‘Jongen’s *Symphonie Concertante* isn’t a great work for the Abbey, though,’ he said in a far more earnest tone. ‘If ‘*Nuages*’ was Debussy’s study of what can be done with a single colour, the *Symphonie Concertante* was like a Belgian study of mushie peas,’ he declared, tossing his head back in laughter.

Our conversation continued for the entire interval, rather nervously, I thought; but without any awkward pauses, nonetheless. His eyes darted about as he spoke, as if they were tracing the outline of every detail in the foyer. Then occasionally, at the end of a phrase, or during my reply, they’d come down to land on me, his gaze softening and deepening, and it would be I who’d scurry off to the side.

At the end of the opera, I followed him through the crowd like a child anxious of losing a parent. People were approaching Noel with smiles and handshakes; I stood proudly by his side as they congratulated him on recent recitals and badgered him about why his

agent hadn't fixed him the big HMV contract he deserved. Noel was nothing short of charming to them all, thanking them for their praise, and joking that he'd send a postcard from Carnegie Hall. At the first opportunity he excused himself to the toilet, and as I stood at the door waiting, I could hear from inside a solo melody being whistled, sailing out radiantly above the noisy chatter of the foyer.

'Orlando Gibbon's *Fantasia* in four parts?' I asked as he arrived at my side.

'*Very* good,' he replied, causing me to blush.

We stepped outside and he was almost skipping down the steps, and that's when it happened. He just came out and asked, 'So are your digs near here?' as casually as if he were inquiring the time.

I hardly knew what to say, I just looked at him quite stunned and replied that they weren't too far at all. Then he suggested we go back for a cup of tea with such unfaltering innocence that I felt as though my stifled desire was far more indecent than his bold and breezy approach.

Once we were on our way, Noel seemed far more relaxed, chatting away as if we were old chums, whistling tunes, and even occasionally slapping me on my back, leaving a large warm imprint that sent blood surging straight to my loins.

When we arrived at my place, he was still talking about the opera, sprinkling his discussion with the libretto in flawless Italian. I hardly uttered a word, I kept envisaging the kinds of chandelier-lit living rooms that he surely must have been accustomed to, Louis XIV cabinets, Picassos and Miros adorning the walls. I was panicking about what we would do once we arrived, trying to decide which record to play – would Schumann or Chopin be too obvious? – and hoping he didn't take sugar with his tea as I'd left my week's rations on the bus. But as he followed me up the worn carpeted steps at the lodging house, reducing his

voice to a whisper as if he'd been there a dozen times before, he didn't seem the least perturbed by his surroundings. As soon as we walked in the door he headed straight for the piano.

'We adore the story of Tosca because we relate to her romantic spirit. Only someone who loves so purely could sing such an aria,' gently lifting the piano lid as if he were handling precious jewels. He started playing '*Visse D'arte*' as he was talking, 'Everybody wants to be Tosca.'

'I'm not so sure – she's a rather hysterical type,' I said, despite agreeing entirely. I thought it wouldn't hurt to let him know I wasn't the sort to get too carried away. 'Puccini certainly was fond of his "little girl" heroines,' I continued, glad for an opportunity to air my musical knowledge. I turned away, lit the gas burner, pulled out some rolls and cheese and placed the food on the table.

'Yes – a bit of a sadist they say.' Then flicking through the music I had at the piano, 'Ah – you're playing *Fantasiestücke*! Wonderful! He started on '*In der Nacht*' without even turning to the page. 'You know it's about the romance of Hero and Leander?' He turned to me and smiled.

I can't even remember what I said next; I just recall staring at him, trying to make him merge, visually, into my apartment, make his presence seem natural. Here was he, the great Noel Mewton-Wood, asking my opinions on music, toying with me, noodling at the piano that I had sat at, dreaming of him, for almost six years. I wasn't sure whether I felt more euphoria or acute discomfort, that he had unwittingly stumbled into my lair, where all my secrets lay.

My room, such an obliging accessory to my fantasies, now looked so dreary and grey. I had become accustomed to letting my days slip by like a lustreless backdrop upon which I

could erect my brilliant imaginings. Now that my dream-world had invaded my reality so scandalously – marched straight in and sat down at my piano before me – I was at a loss as to how I might wed the two together. It struck me that perhaps I had conjured this all. But then he was so much bolder, more generous and attentive, than my imagined Noel – whom I knew so intimately – I was quite disturbed by how differently he behaved. All that childish behaviour – jumping about pulling faces and cracking lewd jokes – I really had no idea how to respond at all.

I didn't have to worry for long, though; I didn't have to do a thing. I took the whistling kettle off the burner, and as I returned to face the room, Noel bounded up from the piano and landed in front of me, so close that I had to step back against the cupboards. His right hand slipped quietly around my waist (I didn't notice it until he pressed me against it), and with his left hand, he took the kettle out of my hand, and lowered it onto the bench without a glance. Then, for the first time since the end of the performance, our conversation stopped and we stood facing each other in a terrifying silence. He pulled me in close with those Herculean hands – I thought he might squeeze the breath out of me. I sensed my body freeze up, but that didn't bother him at all, he pressed his lips down hard upon mine. I remember that moment so clearly, as if it happened just now. It felt as if a thousand tiny strings within me were suddenly snipped all at once, and I all but collapsed into his arms.

I hadn't even opened my eyes. I just lay there with the duvet wrapped around me, listening to the patter of the rain, water trickling from the guttering and running down the pipes, the swish of the cars as they sailed through the puddles on the street.

He had left several hours earlier – I doubted it was even light – and although I lay smiling in anticipation of our next meeting (I was barely conscious when he carefully

untangled my arms from his body then whispered that he'd call) I was glad to wake up and have my place to myself. If he had stayed, the morning may have been awkward – even a little sour, dare I say – in comparison to the night before.

I opened my eyes and looked around the room, marvelling at its stillness, at the dull grey walls that had witnessed such a night. I felt as if I were in a concert hall after a symphony had been performed and the orchestra and crowd had all departed; captivated by the silence, chasing the sound of the strings, the horns, the flutes.

My eye was drawn immediately to the teapot and cups on the table; his on the side nearest the window with its handle toward the sink. Because that's where he'd stood, drinking his cup of tea when he slipped out of bed in the middle of the night and started reciting a poem by Cavafy, performing it over and over. Although the room was near freezing, he stood there only wearing his boxers, with bare feet and no shirt – I couldn't take my eyes off his smooth ivory chest. But as I was gazing up at him I suddenly realised he was standing right in front of the window, for all the world to see! The blind was all the way up – the string had recently broken so that I had to stand on a chair whenever I wanted to pull it down. I rarely bothered – what did it matter if someone saw me rinsing a cup at the sink or boiling a kettle? But what if someone were to look up from the street and see the back of a half-naked man, drinking a cup of tea at three in the morning – a *different* man to the one they so often saw up there, cooking beans over a small gas-burner? Even worse, what if they were to recognise, not just a half-naked stranger, but a half-naked Noel Mewton-Wood! That would be the end of his career, I'd thought, he would be humiliated in court, splashed across the papers, sent off to Wormwood Scrubs. And all of this because he spent one night with me – that's what I'd been thinking about as I stared at him. He would forget about how sublime our time together had been, how I had combed my fingers through his wavy hair

and told him he had made me the happiest man in the world; yes, I would just be the wretch who ruined his life. He was standing there reciting Cavafy and I was about to call him over to the piano, rather than make a scene, insist we play some Schubert, get him away from that window; but then he put down his cup – in the very position in which I now saw it – slipped on his shirt, and tiptoed down the hall to the bathroom. I was immediately up on a chair and pulling down the blind, and when he returned from the bathroom – again whistling Gibbon's Fantasia – I was standing at the piano, flicking through some scores, and he didn't notice a thing.

I turned to look at the pillow beside me, the empty space in the bed. I could smell him, feel his hands on my skin. I imagined where he might be now – practicing perhaps, or maybe discussing a programme with Sargeant or Beecham – no doubt also thinking about our night.

Then I had an idea. I would go shopping. I had about five pounds in the tin under the sink, for food, books, music and outings, as well as some extra coupons I'd saved. I wouldn't need all of that now – I hadn't spent a penny the previous night; Noel had bought the concert tickets, the champagne, offered me cigarettes. But it was clear I'd now be needing some new clothes. I'd go to the street market at Petticoat Lane where I'd heard you could buy extra coupons. First I'd get myself a shirt, something smart but relaxed, like the ivory-coloured one he'd worn last night. And I'd need some cologne – I had no idea which brand, I'd never worn cologne before, but I was sure the ladies at Boots would help me if I told them I wanted to ask out a girl in my office. And depending on how much money I had left, I'd buy something for Noel; I'd go to Covent Garden and buy him a scarf, or a book – a book of *poetry*, that's what I'd get him, I thought. I would go to that little bookshop on the

corner and ask the bookseller if he had some poetry, not by Cavafy, but by someone *like* Cavafy; something that an admirer of Cavafy was sure to like.

part two:

a prelude

Four hours until curtain rise.

I just looked in the mirror. I haven't shaved for two days. I look old. Well not old, but beyond my twenty-six years (– Is it possible that only nine years have past?). I have several grey hairs in front of my ears and a couple of white whiskers on my chin. My father went prematurely grey, I can't even remember him with dark hair. Perhaps I'll be grey by thirty too. Perhaps I'm turning into him. I am looking more like him: my face getting longer, thinner; my eyes more deep set, without that wide-eyed gaze.

I ought to have had a haircut for tonight, made the kind of effort I once might have made. Once when I met up with Noel after a trip to the barber, my hair brilliantined into oily submission, he told me I looked like Dirk Bogarde. Noel adored Dirk Bogarde; when I bumped into him after he'd seen *Hunted*, he talked about nothing else for the rest of the evening.

Today, I dare say, I look more like Bela Lugosi after a night on the town. Yes, a vampire – how fitting.

*

The beginning of our affair was the happiest time in my life. Noel and I would see each other most weeks; we'd go on walks through Hampstead Heath, or to the ballet or a recital. We'd stride through crowds, chatting about everything from French clocks (a favourite subject of his) to John Ireland's chamber music, Noel constantly drawing my attention to places and people we passed in the street, elaborating little stories, painting for me an entirely new world from the one in which I'd previously been living. Once, when walking along Ebury Street in Chelsea, Noel pointed to a house where in 1764, Mozart's sick father forbade his eight-year-old from practicing, so Mozart, instead, composed his first two symphonies. Then another time, when walking past St Mary's Hospital, where Alexander Fleming had discovered penicillin, Noel remarked out of the blue, 'Isn't it magnificent that such seemingly inconsequential events – a microscopic spore drifting in through a window – can change the lives of so many thousands of people, can change the course of history?' I agreed, saying what a wonderful word was *serendipity*, delighted that in our discussion we had so playfully touched upon the topic of which I felt we both were thinking, our fateful birthday meeting in Hammersmith only several weeks earlier.

During our conversations I would often think of his uncle, the poet and critic Walter J. Turner and the world that he saw, *crowded with a thousand beauties*. Sometimes I'd see Noel staring up at an elm tree or a swallow's nest under a bridge; I'd look up and see only a tree, only a nest, yet he'd be standing there, transfixed by the sight. I watched his face transform, from curiosity to exhilaration during our discussions of Sibelius, Offenbach or Blake, and the way he would occasionally halt his stride and stand still on the footpath as I spoke, looking at me, his mouth twitching, his jaw clenching momentarily, and an expression of what I took – uncomfortably at first – to be affection, or admiration, coming over him as he teased me

with his gaze. I'd be as self-conscious as if I had the eyes of the entire Wigmore Hall upon me, but at the same time feel that we were the only two people alive in the world.

It is the occasions when he visited me at home, however, when we would sit at my table with pots of tea and manuscripts spread out in front of us and the wireless humming in the background, that I find myself thinking about the most. There was nothing more deliciously tortuous than those long wintry afternoons in which we discussed the pieces we were working on, knowing that hours later we'd be grappling with each other's belts and buttons as we stumbled towards the bed, clawing at the other's yielding skin.

He'd sit there so casually in his grey flannels and sports jacket, leaning back in his chair, twiddling a pencil in his fingers and chatting quietly, his chin pressed against his chest, looking up sheepishly. Then an idea would come to him in a bolt, and he would lunge forward, his face animated, and his hands open in front of him as if he were actually presenting his miraculous concept to me. Often I'd even forget to listen to his words; I'd just sit and watch him, his mind leaping about, his fingers drumming on the tabletop, his shimmering eyes, his slender wrists.

Other times we'd be engrossed in conversation for hours, discussing the technical aspects of a single composition. 'How do you finger that phrase there?' I would ask, and without a pause he could tell me his fingering for any passage in any piece of music, and demonstrate to me by playing it slowly on the table. Often he would take my wrist, lightly tracing the tendons in my hand with his fingertips and remark, 'But your hand is different, you see – you must play the A flat with the fourth not the third.' He would lead me by the hand to the piano, sit me down, and as I played, he'd gently support my wrist with his third finger, rolling it up and down, left and right, guiding me through the most treacherous passages.

I once asked if he could help me with the cadenza from Tchaikovsky's *Fantasy* concerto. He sat me down and didn't even ask with which part I was having problems, he just told me to put my right hand on the keys and play the first note. Then he asked me to play the first two notes, then for the first three, and so on. Any problem in a passage of music, he said, can be broken down to a problem between two notes.

He told me that Cortot, the brilliant Chopin pianist, was asked what was the most difficult thing about piano playing. Cortot thought for a moment then answered, 'Getting from one note to the next.' Noel said that one time Cortot was practicing at the Academy for a concert, sitting at a piano, slowly playing two notes over and over. After some time, a teacher in a neighbouring room charged in and was about to hurl abuse at this infantile annoyance when he saw the magnificent Cortot, sitting intently at the piano, rolling his fingers back and forth over the notes like a child.

This was the way Noel presented the world to me; he would break it all down and explain in the simplest terms the inevitability of the fall of the ancient Egyptian Empire, the process by which a virus replicates itself in the human body, why cooked onions tasted so sweet.

I would watch the way he would leap to the piano when he thought of a piece of music he wished to learn, approaching it with childlike gusto. Noel didn't believe that anything could be too difficult or incomprehensible once reduced to its most elemental parts. 'A flower is simply made from atoms,' he told me once. 'This music – it's just notes, nothing more.' Then he smiled and shrugged, as if it were all so perfectly simple, placed his hands on my shoulders, drew me in close and kissed me.

That's what Noel believed and that's what I believed too when I was with him. That when I played the piano I could create something wonderful like a flower, atom by atom, note by note.

He was a difficult man to pin down. He stayed down in Sussex with the Eckersleys most of the week, practicing from early in the morning until midday (and one knew never to call him at such a time), then after that he'd be off visiting Michael Tippett or another local musician, or heading into London to see his agent, rehearsing, arranging scores with conductors or visiting friends. So I never knew where he might be at any time, or when I might see him. Besides, he seemed to prefer to turn up announced; I'd open my door to see him standing on the landing wearing an ardent gaze as if he'd been waiting to see me all day. He enjoyed the element of surprise, often bearing some object of great interest – a Stravinsky record he'd had on order for months that had only just arrived, or the latest issue of *Nature* that contained some fascinating article that he wished to share. He was also very fond of food (he once played me his 'first composition' which he'd written when he was five, a rollicking number about going to the corner shop to buy some cheese sticks, the piece ending with an exuberant glissando as the cheese slid down his throat) and would often pull from his bag a jar of his aunt's homemade green-tomato relish sent over from Australia, half a dozen eggs from a neighbour in Renby Grange, or some other delicacy that simply hadn't been available on the London shelves since before the war.

One time he walked in swinging a string bag, grinning like a mischievous schoolboy, reached inside then presented a butcher-paper wrapped package. 'Chicken,' he said with a nod, as if I'd dared him to front up with such a meal.

‘For tea?’ I hadn’t eaten chicken since I was a child. The first few Christmases after the war began my aunt would mould a pound of mince into the shape of a bird and roast it. After that she tired of the effort involved and started cooking it in a tin, making it indistinguishable from a regular meatloaf. But if it came with apple sauce and arrived anywhere around Christmas, we called it false goose, nonetheless.

‘Well unless you’d like to keep it as a pet. I don’t suppose it’s done much laying for sometime though,’ and dropped the package into my hands.

‘Where on earth did you get it?’ It was difficult to imagine Noel waiting in that interminably long queue down at Redlich’s when word was out there was anything more interesting than calves feet or rabbit in the trays.

‘Oh, I have friends in fowl places.’

I hooted a celebratory laugh and hurriedly unwrapped it, pepped up even more having noticed he’d brought the little wooden box that I knew contained his toothbrush; he’d obviously been planning on staying with me all day. ‘Well I hope it didn’t cost more than a poultry sum.’ I was becoming more accustomed to Noel’s playful repartee, and was always pleased with myself when I managed to join in.

‘Would you like to invite any friends over to join us?’ he enquired, and I immediately worried he might be tiring of my company. Sometimes when we were together I’d catch his heavily lidded gaze wander off across the room, and I knew he was thinking about a piece he was working on, or an upcoming concert. It often seemed an impossible task to compete with such momentous considerations.

‘It’s probably a little late to call anyone,’ I said, dismissing the idea; I had no intention of sharing him with anyone.

We cooked the chicken in a saucepan over a single gas burner, absolutely swimming in lard, both of us taking turns to stir the potatoes about, spooning dripping over the top, then reporting back to the other how smashing it looked and smelt. It turned out a little burnt on the bottom, but served with lashings of lumpy gravy we didn't mind one bit. We barely spoke as we chewed at bones and wiped gravy from our chins to the sound of a Delius concerto carousing about us. I couldn't help but feel it was all devilishly extravagant.

'Oh, this is bloody marvellous,' Noel said, holding a drumstick up in one hand, sucking the fingers of the other. 'Things aren't so tough, are they?' He grinned at me and winked.

'Not at all. Quite satisfactory indeed.' I imagined the smell of our feast spiralling down the hall, to stiff old Kingsley upstairs, and downstairs, to the O'Gradys and the Italian couple who'd only recently been released from internment. I could tell none of them thought much of me at all – there was never more than a nod as they passed me in the corridor – and I was quite tickled by the thought of the succulent aromas wafting into their rooms.

'Ben's been having a heck of a time with his arm,' Noel mentioned after a time. 'Shall I find out who his doctor is?'

Without me having said a word, Noel had detected the problems I was having with my right hand: the chronic pain that would intensify throughout my practice from a dull ache to a blaze up my arm, over my shoulder and down the right side of my back. I was more than happy to be suffering from a similar ailment to Benjamin Britten, but I'd already seen several doctors, and found the experience – and their suggestion my affliction was imaginary – quite dispiriting.

‘I shouldn’t bother. None of them has a clue what the problem is. My father gave up on them and eventually took me to an osteopath who told me I had gout! He started twisting my arm as if he were giving me a Chinese burn. Of course that just made things worse.’

‘Oh you poor boy.’

‘It’s my aunt’s fault,’ I said, shocked by my bitter tone. ‘As a child, she made me write with my right hand even though I was left-handed. She’d hold my left hand behind my back to stop me grabbing the pen out of my other hand.’

‘How dreadful!’

‘For years – it still happens occasionally – I’d wake during the night, my right arm locked rigid and my hand balled in a fist.’ I held up my clenched hand, my thumb and knuckles gleaming white.

I couldn’t stop talking. I told him about all the piano teachers I’d tried, hoping one might be able to help me – some who taught in the manner of Liszt, others who taught from the Deppe school – and how there was never any improvement.

‘One teacher told me to think of my palm as being like the soft palate in my mouth; I must work from there, pulling each finger in towards it as I played. Old Neville Majors, who had hardly any teeth – and used to eat yoghurt all through my lessons – he insisted I play as if I was holding an egg in my hand,’ and I curled my thumb and third finger together forming a perfect circle. ‘The opposition of the thumb and third was his big thing. There was also Miss Friedman, whose huge breasts would hover over me as I played – “You are pulling back rather than pushing forward,” she’d yell, parting the air in front of her as if she were swimming breaststroke. I’d try leaning in towards the keys and she’d command, “No, no, no! From within. With-iiin!” – clutching her enormous chest. I obviously didn’t last long with her!’

Noel, laughing, got up from the table, washed his hands, then walked behind me and started massaging my back, at first running his fingers through the back of my hair. Then with one palm against the nape of my neck, and the other gripping each shoulder in turn, his fingertips worked into my bones, as if recording shape and movement, exploring their way around each tendon and muscle, rolling the joint in circles, and driving his thumbs into my blades.

I could feel him pressing his body against me, pulling me back towards him, and although blood was heating up my face and my groins, I also felt like I might burst into tears any moment. I wanted him – I knew that – but I wanted him to listen to me even more. I felt compelled to speak: compelled to listen to my own unfolding drama.

‘I think you just need to relax more.’ He gave my shoulders one last squeeze before returning to his seat.

He leaned back in his chair, reaching down in his jacket pocket for his cigarettes. He looked bored.

‘I wonder what I’d do if I didn’t play the piano,’ I asked. ‘Have you ever thought what else you’d have done?’

‘If I didn’t play the piano?’ He asked, lighting his cigarette, sucking in his cheeks as he drew, then hanging his head back to watch the smoke drift up and hover around the light globe. Our two dinner plates with their dry purple bones and sticky film of gravy, sat ugly between us. ‘I’d rather be dead,’ he said with a short laugh, still gazing up at the ceiling.

I cleared the plates and fetched the bottle of Seagram’s I’d recently bought from under the sink, afraid my morose behaviour had ruined everything.

Early the following morning he rushed out the door; never content to lounge around with me, listening to or playing music. Daytime, for Noel, was for getting things done. I sat

there for a while, staring at his string bag hanging over the back of a chair, always grateful when he left something behind. I lifted my arm to inhale the musky sweet smell of him on my skin, and recalled the doughy warmth of his chest after he undressed.

Even though he'd only just left, as usual I started to feel slightly anxious. The room now seemed unnaturally still and airless; the absence that remained possessed a suffocating starkness. There was something condemning about it.

I was bothered by our conversation the previous evening. I felt like a fool, having asked Noel what he'd do other than play piano. He'd more than once made casual comments about something or other that he'd do once he was the world's top pianist. I can't even recall what the words were in reference to, I just remember admiring the way he them tossed out so nonchalantly, as if he'd said them so many times before that they no longer had any really significant meaning. I'd heard his mother, Dulcie, exhibit the same amount of ease with Noel's endowment when she spoke on the radio, chatting about 'her darling Noel', who, at the age of three, would sit at the piano saying he was playing 'concerts', then ask for paper with 'train tracks' on it. I felt appalled with myself; I had no idea why I'd said what I said, why I'd shown so little respect for who he was.

Then I thought about my aunt, who, so unlike Dulcie, had rarely ever spoken a kind word about my playing, or anything else for that matter. I remembered when I was young, my father read from the paper about a child pianist from Herefordshire whose parents had insured his hands for £3000; how envious I was, and how quiet I kept when my aunt proclaimed the parents were clearly 'out of their minds'. Years later, when she told me how my piano teacher had recommended to her that I study at the Academy, she smiled prudently, shook her head and told me that if I was going to be a brilliant pianist, we'd surely all have known about it by now.

It was my father who loved to listen to me play, and for whom I always performed. He'd sit in his armchair, reading the evening paper as I practiced, and although I'd sometimes think he wasn't taking any notice, he'd often dip the paper down below his eyes at the end of a piece and say, 'The no. 3? Yes, an extraordinary piece,' before smiling and returning to his news. He'd sit there for hours if I continued, and I would, even when I'd grown sick of everything I'd practiced. Simply because I could tell how much he enjoyed listening to me. Those were the times I'd think I could play all through the night, when I knew how it surely must feel to be the greatest pianist in the world.

Noel dropped over on his way to the Wigmore and handed me a ticket for his evening's performance, a Beethoven recital. The seat was in the middle of the second row; I imagined he'd chosen it especially, so that he could look down and see me from the stage.

I was standing by the table with my hands clasped at my front, unsure if I ought to play a record or even offer him a chair and a cup of tea; I just stood watching him, waiting for some kind of indication. He was leaning against the sofa, his suit in its cover draped over one arm, chatting as if he were at a party.

As he spoke, I thought about his programme, running through each sonata in my mind – the *Patbetique*, the *Waldstein*, opus 110, opus 31 no. 2 – tens of thousands of notes to be played, to absolute perfection. I could feel each chord under my hand, I could hear the swell and fall of each phrase; I could hear that thundering silence as the audience inhaled, my hands paused above the keys at the start of the cadenza.

I wanted to enquire if he was nervous, but thought that might be inappropriate only hours before the performance. I didn't want to jinx anything, yet I couldn't stop thinking about his programme, especially the last movement of the *Waldstein* sonata with its

prestissimo runs of octaves, one hand galloping after the other. Only a month earlier, we were together at the piano and he'd confessed that the one thing he always had trouble with was glissando octaves. 'Really?' I had replied, dropping both hands onto the keys, octaves rippling up the keyboard. 'I used to use Moiseiwitsch's method,' I said as I continued my display, 'but now find it easier with the thumbs turned in.' I looked up from the keyboard; he wasn't looking at my hands but straight at me with fierce eyes, his face motionless. I stopped mid-passage, dropped my hands into my lap and looked down at them, ashamed. When I looked back up at him, he'd completely transformed, gazing at me with those glimmering eyes. 'I prefer Schnabel's method,' he said. 'When a piece gets difficult, just make faces,' and he launched into an horrendously demanding passage from the Busoni concerto, contorting his face from a manic grin to a choking grimace.

I asked him if he needed any nugget, a comb or anything else at all. He told me that Nancy had shined his shoes for so long that morning that he was surprised he had any shoes left at all, then leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. I could feel him leaving. A part of me wanted him to go, a relief from the tedious navigation through each second. But as soon as he'd left, the door clicking shut behind him, I remained rooted where I stood, my 'Break a leg' and his sweet musky aroma clanging around the room like dying moths.

I returned to my books but kept thinking about each word that had passed between us – wondering if I ought not have been more aloof, or alternatively, shown more confidence in his performance. I tried to imagine how he'd have behaved, if it had been me heading off to perform.

I did manage several hours of practice but as soon as the fading light darkened my room, I started to see the shimmering chandeliers of the concert hall, and the women flitting about in the crowd holding their slim ivory wrists head-high, their cigarettes trailing

serpentine wisps of smoke. By five o'clock I was dressed in my navy suit, my hair combed back, and heading out the door, even though the concert didn't start until a quarter to seven.

Light shone out from the glass doors; the foyer was filled to overflowing. I skipped up the steps and onto the black-and-white-marble floor, through tuxedos and evening gowns, towards the small bar on the far left where I ordered myself a glass of champagne for interval.

Even though I couldn't see anyone I knew, I felt like a host watching over his guests, inebriated by the champagne laughter of the ladies with plunging neck-lines leaning over the banister, and the banter of the silver-haired men who smelt of lavender brilliantine and Upmanns. I reached for my silver case – I'd only recently started smoking, since meeting Noel – lit up and checked myself in the etched mirror near the bar, amused by the grin that sidled up from the corner of my mouth each time a velvety curl of smoke escaped from between my lips.

After two cigarettes, I entered the hall and made my way through the crowd towards the stage, settling into my red plush seat that was positioned exactly in front of the middle of the stage.

The seats about me were filling rapidly. Amid this commotion the platform seemed unnaturally still: empty except for the large black Steinway, the piano stool, and two pillars at either end of the stage, which supported large brass vases of white lilies. Above the stage floated the cupola, arched with Numidian marble, containing its frieze of the Soul of Music – a man crowned in gold leaf, his hands grasping upwards and his eyes gazing rapturously towards Harmony – a fiery mass with tentacled rays beaming across a blue sky.

In the front row, several seats to the right of me, a tall lean woman caught my eye. She had a sharp imperious glare, and her neck was so long that when reading the programme

in her lap she looked out of her horn-rimmed glasses and along her long pointed nose as if gazing down from a tower. When the gentleman on her left addressed her – ‘Dulcie my dear woman’ – and she snapped her head around, giving me full view of her square chin and the thick waves of brown hair upon which her hat neatly balanced, I immediately knew her to be Noel’s mother.

The lights dimmed, a spotlight illuminated the side of the stage, an applause erupted, and out from behind the curtain stepped Noel. He carried the light with him as he walked, quite rigidly, through the darkness to the front of the stage. He stopped and stood tall and brilliant within the centre of the illuminant disk; it seemed the light actually radiated from his skin, glowing alabaster; his hair glistened around the edges like a halo. His gaze was loose, out into the crowd brimming with adulation; he almost seemed oblivious to it all. Then his eyes dropped a fraction, and I tried to pull them in towards me. He didn’t smile, but there was a moment when his face seemed to slacken. He lifted his eyes, his Adam’s apple dropped suddenly, then rose. He turned and walked over to the piano, his coat tails swinging gently behind him.

He stepped in front of the piano stool, swept his coat from underneath, then sat, grabbing the sides of the chair. The applause stopped, and the shuffle of the stool on the stage floor and a few muted coughs from the back of the hall were all that could be heard. He stared at the keys. I clasped my hands, anticipating that first chord. Minutes seemed to pass. I could feel a rapid fluttering in my chest, echoing around my ribcage; my body was trembling and cold. He raised his hands, pausing an inch above the notes. Then in one movement his hands opened up like vipers about to swallow the piano whole and he landed them on the keys – the C minor chord of the *Pathétique* sonata – fortissimo, diminishing immediately into that dark, agitated introduction.

Two hours later, arpeggios bolted up the keys to the triumphant A flat major chord of the opus 110 sonata; the audience leapt to their feet, cheering and clapping. Noel stood next to the piano and nodded swiftly, stony-faced, then turned and left the stage. I adored his on-stage aloofness, how terribly dignified he appeared.

The lights rose and I shuffled out into the aisle as the murmur of the crowd built, resuming the lively din that had filled the hall before the recital began.

‘He played the G minor awfully well...’

‘*Well?*’ another retorted. ‘He played it within an inch of its life!’

I turned to see Dulcie glaring like a cobra at a small woman with powdery cheeks and eyes that appeared on the verge of tears.

‘You can hear Schnabel’s influence,’ a gentleman’s voice spoke from behind me. ‘His technique is astounding.’

‘But so much more sensitive and passionate,’ replied a middle-aged woman whose perfume couldn’t quite disguise the sweet smell of sherry. ‘He makes love to the piano when he plays!’

I went back stage and entered the green room where several dozen guests stood about in groups chatting and sipping beer or champagne. A steady flow continued to arrive and glide past me, looking about as they entered, smiling and nodding to a familiar face then taking off into the room. Noel was standing on the far side by the fireplace drinking a glass of champagne with a couple of gentlemen whom I didn’t recognise, blinking and nodding as he listened.

Dulcie was standing in the centre of the room, next to a table that was laid with champagne glasses, a silver tray of dry biscuits, cut sausage, pear and cheese, and several ice buckets holding bottles of champagne. I was anxious for a drink but wary of approaching

her; I was unsure how obvious Noel's and my relationship might be to everyone in the room, and it had crossed my mind that with a single glance she might uncover everything.

I turned to my right and walked along the edge of the room, taking my time to peruse each and every one of the signed photographs that crowded the wall: Melba, Hess, Curzon, Moiseiwitsch, dozens of others. Glamorous publicity shots where performers posed like screen actors on velvet chaise-lounges, lively rehearsal photographs at the Wigmore, many with personal messages scribbled below. I leaned forward to decipher the scrawl under a portrait of a balding man with heavily lidded eyes: *To dear old Wigmore Hall, an old friend, Artur Rubenstein*. I wondered where Noel's photograph would one day hang.

'Now there's a good-looking young thing,' someone whispered in my ear. 'How come I didn't spot *him* earlier?'

Noel was smiling, offering his hand. 'Thankyou so much for coming along,' he said more audibly, his palm warm and soft.

'Thank *you*. The performance was...' – I felt him let go of my hand –
'...magnificent.'

'You're awfully kind. I saw you there. Sitting behind Mother,' then he leaned in and whispered again, 'Hope she didn't bother you.'

As we spoke, others lingered nearby, looking me up and down; Noel didn't acknowledge them at all. But after ten minutes he leaned in again, 'I'm awfully sorry, I'm going to have to go do the rounds. It's a terrible bore.'

'Of course, go ahead.'

'Why don't I give you a call soon and we'll catch up at your place?' He held out his hand to shake.

I wasn't quite sure what he was getting at, if he was suggesting I ought to be on my way. I lifted my hand, impassively; it hung there limply and ridiculously until he grabbed it. Perhaps, I wondered, this was all for the benefit of those listening nearby.

'Thankyou again so much for coming. Wonderful to see you.'

He gave my hand a hearty shake, beamed and nodded, then turned and was immediately enveloped by a group of men in tuxedos. As he disappeared into the crowd, I noticed others who were also quietly monitoring his location, timing their approach. I kept standing there, hoping to see Thomas, or someone else I might know, when Dulcie appeared in front of me, blocking my view of the room.

'So who are *you*? You're too *young* to be a critic.'

'I'm... ' I decided against telling her I was a student. 'I play the piano –'

'Don't we all,' she interrupted, her gaze fixed on my eyes in a way that could have been either flirtation or disdain.

'I'm a friend of Noel's –' I said, still trying to keep an eye on his whereabouts.

'My son has *many* friends. I suppose you think he might be able to help you with your career,' and then she smiled, partially raising her eyebrows and nodding, making it clear she didn't require a response. She continued, enquiring if I'd read the notice Eddie Sackville-West had written in the *Times* earlier in the week that commended the *musical intelligence* of Noel (or *my son* as she continually called him). 'Now there's a critic who understands music,' she stated, glaring at me, as if issuing a warning.

Before I had a chance to agree, she started complaining about Noel's agent, Emmie Tillet. 'You know she inherited the business from her husband,' she said as if she were talking about the contraction of some unspeakable disease. 'She was originally Tillet's secretary, and now she *runs* the entire agency!'

She then launched into several stories about Noel, her eyes drilling into me the entire time. ‘One time he came up from Sussex the night before a performance with Sir Henry Wood at Cambridge Theatre. He had influenza, so slept until one hour before the performance. I didn’t unpack anything when he arrived, just hung his morning coat, and put the poor tattered pianist to bed – his pyjamas travelled in his music case as they always did. When he decided to get dressed I opened his case, and I found to my horror, that that silly woman Nancy had forgotten to pack a white shirt, or any shirt at all for that matter! Well! So I rallied to the cause –’

She paused and drew in a breath, releasing me momentarily from her stare. I seized the opportunity to excuse myself, telling her it was lovely meeting her but that I really must be going. She lifted her chin, looked down her long nose and smiled at me and for a moment I felt a tremendous sense of relief. But then she did the most curious thing – I thought at the time she must have been drunk – as she leaned in close and said goodbye, she slipped the bony fingers of her right hand between my legs and tickled me on the crotch, giving me such a fright that I jumped backwards, smiled, nodded and headed straight for the door.

As soon as I was in the corridor and walking down the back stairs, I wondered why I had left so abruptly, why I hadn’t simply said goodbye and retreated to the other side of the room. I could have got myself a glass of champagne and introduced myself to another guest. It wasn’t as if Noel had asked me to leave. I could easily walk back in, I thought, and find out what Noel wanted to do later on.

I stepped out onto the laneway and kept walking. It hadn’t entered my mind that I might be going home alone. I kept tempting myself to return, thinking that it wasn’t too late, that we could still go home together. But the further I walked the more I became resigned to the fact that I wasn’t going to be going back inside, and realised that this was the way it had

to be. He wanted me to leave because he was protecting me, protecting us; I had to trust that he knew best.

I turned left into Wigmore Street, snowflakes feathering down through the fog. I dug my hands deep into my pockets, buried my chin into my scarf, and whistled the theme to Orlando Gibbon's *Fantasia* all the way home.

One afternoon on our way back from a trip into Ibbs and Tillett, Noel mentioned he needed to drop into his mother's apartment in Belsize Grove to pick up some shirts she'd had laundered for him. I had no intention of losing him so early on in the day, so realised there was no option other than to accompany him.

Since meeting Dulcie backstage at the Wigmore, I felt as if I'd been seeing her everywhere I went, yet rather than becoming more comfortable with her presence, I was finding the mere sight of her increasingly terrifying. She was always easy to spot in the crowd at a concert: tall country-girl frame, impeccable deportment, cat's-eye glasses, a brightly patterned home-tailored dress and an elaborate hat that, given her height, could be seen floating upon the crowd at any size gathering. She would invariably be sidling up to some gentleman wearing a Savile Row evening suit and sporting a silver-headed cane, threading her arm through his and whispering in his ear, or throwing her head back girlishly, letting that haughty laugh of hers ring across the room. At the Hypocrites Club after a concert of Noel's, I once even saw her reach under the table and squeeze the top of Lord Livingston's thigh. Then, only the previous morning, just when I was beginning to wonder if I were imagining her ubiquitous presence, I turned on the wireless to hear her shrill voice. She was talking to Samuel Rogers about her pianist son, earnestly trying to stifle her Australian twang, and littering her oration with deliberate pauses, and emphases on selected syllables like a

musician leaning on the first beat of every bar. She spoke about her own musical upbringing; her talented brother Fred who'd died of a heart attack while conducting 'Now's the Hour' with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra (followed by a whooping laugh); and of course her cousin, the outspoken critic and poet, Walter James Turner, 'who is like a brother to dear Noel'. She sounded perfectly charming as she spoke, and in possession of a razor-sharp wit; and she was after all, I thought, doing *all this* for Noel. Yet even just listening to Dulcie's voice, I began to feel a shiver running through me and was most relieved when the interview came to an end.

Dulcie opened the front door to her neat first floor Victorian flat, lifting her chin high before pressing her powdered cheek lightly against Noel's. She glared at me standing behind Noel in the doorway, and spoke with perfect diction, 'What a surprise to see you again so soon,' then smiled. She spun on her heels, her tight-waisted checked pleated skirt (too young, I thought, for a woman of her age) flowering out, and walked tall and erect towards the kitchen, like a finishing school graduate. I pulled my shoulders back and straightened my neck, awkwardly aware of Noel's equally statuesque posture. We followed her into the kitchen.

'I thought you might have come earlier, for lunch. You don't want something to eat *now* do you?' she said, turning to look at me, while returning to her operation of rolling the rims of martini glasses in a flat dish of what appeared to be crushed sugar cubes.

Noel took one glance at her extravagant use of sugar and smiled. 'What *have* you been up to, dear Mother?'

'They're from Claridges,' she declared proudly.

The image of her sneaking the sugar cubes into a napkin in her handbag allowed me to relax momentarily.

‘I’m going to *Don Giovanni* tonight, so I expect a few may pop over afterwards for brandy Alexanders.’ She held up a glass, twirling it in front of the window, inspecting the sugar rim. ‘Lord knows why I said yes to going with that Meredith woman, but her husband’s at the BBC; I’m hoping he turns up. Don’t know how he puts up with her; she’s a dreadful bore – *do-gooder* – always meddling in things. Friend of Nancy’s, I presume.’ She sighed. ‘Another of those tedious Marlowists, no doubt.’

Noel started flicking through a pile of mail on the kitchen dresser.

‘I’ve heard back from Mason, if that’s what you’re after. He said the ABC can’t afford to bring you out again just yet, but they’ll keep you in mind for ’47. I wrote back and told him that next year is already booking up fast and he’d best arrange dates immediately. He keeps telling me how much the Australian press adore you yet says he can’t seem to find a penny in the bank. *Really*. So I enclosed those recent notices from Manchester. And I’ve written to Bernard and Waldemar also. Oh – and remember that lovely gentleman, Haynes, who took us to the races in Sydney – he died recently – so I sent condolences to his wife and colleagues from us both.’

Noel put the letters down and looked up. ‘Are my shirts ready, Mother?’

‘Hanging off my wardrobe, Dear.’

Noel left the room leaving me standing pressed against the sink. Dulcie continued with her job as if there were nobody else in the room.

‘I do wish you’d look after them a bit better,’ she called out after him. ‘Two were frayed at the cuff. You *do* know how hard it is for me to find shirts that fit you.’

When Noel returned Dulcie asked if he could move the buffet in the living room against the far wall. As soon as Noel walked towards the living room door, she turned and

drilled her eyes into me and spoke the first words to me since her greeting, ‘Well you’re not here for your health, you know!’

I rushed out to help Noel, moving the green glass vases to the mantelpiece; Dulcie kept calling out from the kitchen, her voice even more shrill, mentioning the upcoming Salzburg Festival, that *everybody* had been saying was the first truly international festival since 1937, the year she and Noel had attended after their arrival from Australia. ‘Didn’t we have a magnificent time, darling?’ Her voice sounded strangely romantic. ‘I remember watching Fürtwängler up on stage at the Festival Hall as he brought in the Mozart concerto, and thinking – Next time I return to Salzburg, my darling Noel will be performing.’

Noel carried the dining room chairs out of the path of the buffet, as if he hadn’t heard a word.

‘Fanny Bridges tells me that the British Council have suggested Hesse, Solomon and Lympny as the pianists,’ Dulcie continued. I could see her through the doorway, carrying her tray of prepared glasses towards the fridge.

Noel nodded, signalling for me to lift my end of the buffet. Only once we’d placed it down in its new position did he speak.

‘Mother, von Karajan’s been banned, so has Schwarzkopf, and a dozen others. Denazification has almost dissolved the entire Vienna Philharmonic. It’s a miracle they’re managing to put on a festival at all. Next year will be a far better line-up.’

‘I suppose. Those Americans will probably replace *Othello* with *Oklahoma!* Ha!’ She stood in the doorway, screwing the lid on the jar of remaining sugar cubes. ‘Yes,’ she beamed at her son. ‘Next year.’

After our visit to Dulcie's I started to become quite excited by the prospect of touring with Noel, imagining us spending weeks together at sea, then stepping off the gangway at some hot and dusty port.

Noel and I had only spoken about his last Australian tour, and although he'd said that the Australians weren't a very sophisticated bunch – 'Just as happy to hear Tchaikovsky's First every night', and most thought Hindemith was 'a brand of rash ointment' – I distinctly remembered him saying his mother and he'd had a delightful time and that the entire country had treated him like royalty.

I mentioned to Thomas that Noel might be touring Australia again, and he told me he'd heard that last time Noel had toured there, he'd had a row with his mother and had returned to England on his own.

I tucked this piece of information away, deciding that as soon as appropriate, I would ask Noel who managed all his tour arrangements. I'd just make a casual comment, I thought, say what a bore it must be to have to worry about all those annoying little details – and let him know that I'd be more than happy to write any letters or make any calls. I wouldn't mention Dulcie at all; I'd just tell him that of course I wouldn't accept any payment, I wouldn't expect anything of him at all – I'd just be glad to know that the job was being done properly and that he was left to concentrate on his music.

One morning Noel dropped over to my place; he said he was going for a walk around Regent's Park to see the winter roses and asked if I'd like to come along.

He remained standing while I gathered my hat, scarf and gloves, walking around the room, perusing music and books and anything else that happened to be lying about.

He picked up my cufflinks from the sideboard for a close inspection, commenting on their appeal. I became suddenly anxious, remembering where I'd got them. I told him they were my father's – mother-of-pearl, I believed.

He walked with them towards the window and held them up to the light. 'Marvellous creatures, oysters,' he said. 'Nature's true artists.'

I walked over to join him as he turned them over in his palm. I ought to have felt some sense of guilt, I know, but I was too pleased with how taken he was with them.

'Any grit or dirt that threatens to hurt the little critter, it wraps up with crystalline secretions, turning it into a pearl.' He looked over at me with a solemn look before raising his eyebrows and smiling. 'Clever little buggers, aren't they?'

I told him he could have them if he liked; but he just laughed, thanked me and returned them to the sideboard.

We walked down Regent Street and Marylebone Road towards the main gate of the park; I thought about mentioning the topic of his management, but wasn't sure how to raise it. I decided it was best if I didn't rush the issue – or else it might appear to be something I'd dwelt upon – better if it just arose naturally from our discussion. He was looking about himself as he walked, and I was afraid I was boring him. But I was thinking so much about this whole management business that I really couldn't think of anything to say.

We walked in silence for a while, then Noel mentioned that he had started learning the Prokofiev no. 7, and asked if I'd heard it.

Mildly insulted by his suggestion that I mightn't know it, I said, 'Of course. Not so keen on it though. I find it a little empty, bombastic.'

Noel nodded thoughtfully and replied 'Yes...I suppose it could be.'

I was surprised by his response, and suddenly felt a little cruel about so rudely lambasting the piece. I mean I was sure he would play it superbly, but it really was a rather tripey piece. I wasn't sure at all why he would choose to perform it.

He screwed up his eyes, looking up towards the trees along the verge. 'I can never concede that, though, when I'm learning a piece.' He shook his head adamantly, opening his eyes quite wide. 'The piece *must* be perfect. It *has* to be... Perhaps later,' and he turned to me, his face relaxing into a smile, 'Perhaps then, I'll agree with you.'

We were almost back at my place when I asked him what he was up to in the coming weeks. I was hoping he'd be free for a few days sometime and we could go away together, perhaps to the Lakes District, or Brighton, or even over to Cornwall. Somewhere where we wouldn't be bothered by engagements and people, somewhere we could just spend our days walking around the countryside and talking about music, eating fisherman's pie in country pubs, then coming home to some remote cottage, and lying entwined in front of a blazing fire.

'Didn't I mention? I'm off to Europe for a while.'

'What – touring?'

'Pretty much.'

'That's wonderful,' I said, a feeling of panic growing in my chest. We walked a little further while I thought what I ought to say next. I wanted to go with him, that's all I could think. What's more, I didn't see why I couldn't. I would have to tell Thomas, I thought, but he would probably agree it would be a tremendous musical education. I'd have to ring my aunt and ask her for money, I thought. I wanted Noel to ask me, though. I imagined him stopping in his step, spinning around, then saying to me, *You know it would be awfully good if you*

could join me. I'd smile and tell him of course. And he'd then know that there wasn't anything he couldn't ask me, he could depend upon me for everything.

I looked over at him, he was walking along casually, gazing up the road ahead. I could hear him quietly humming.

'So when do you leave?' I asked.

'Sorry?' he turned back towards me. 'Oh, for France? Friday week. Must say, I'm rather looking forward to getting away.'

We kept walking a little longer. I was thinking of asking him if he wanted to stay and play some music then join me for lunch, I thought maybe if I gave him more time he would realise how jolly it would be to have me along. But I noticed him check his watch and speed up his step. We turned into the end of my street.

'Can I come along?' I asked. Even though the words had been repeating themselves over in my mind, I was surprised when I heard them come out as casually as they did.

'Where? France?'

'Why not? Wherever.' I shrugged and was suddenly overcome by an awareness of how I might appear. I felt that I amused him. 'I've never been to France.'

He laughed, and although I felt as if I might burst into tears at any second, there was something about the escalating drama that made the situation strangely exciting. My entire body was whirring like an engine, blood surging about my veins; I wouldn't have been surprised if I had lifted off the ground and taken flight. He seemed to take forever to respond, but I knew he eventually must. I'd said all I had to say and now he could do nothing other than reply.

His eyes lit up and he exclaimed, ‘Oh look, there’s Walter,’ pointing up the end of the street at a tall grey-haired man, bent over, investigating something on the footpath. ‘Walter!’ he called out.

Walter turned around, waved, then started marching towards us.

‘You remember Walter?’

‘I must go – have a wonderful time – knock ‘em dead.’ I forced a smile.

I wanted to turn and go but he grabbed my hand in both of his, wished me well, and thanked me. He gave me one of his big smiles, his lips parting to reveal his pearly teeth. He shook my hand in his once more, patted me on the arm and took off.

I barely left the apartment the following week. Each time I heard the phone ring downstairs I’d sit upright in my bed or at my table, waiting, sure that it would be Noel. I took my suit to the dry cleaners and every time I opened my wardrobe, I’d work out the clothes I’d pack and imagine the concert hall to which I’d wear each item. I kept the cufflinks by my bed, having decided I’d insist he wear them on stage.

Noel didn’t call, and when Friday came around I woke with a fever and didn’t get out of bed all day.

*

Ever since I can remember, I have had the feeling that I was the keeper of an extraordinary secret. It was something that had been given to me with great intention. It had been placed in my palm at birth, a small nugget that I rubbed under my thumb, and along with it came the knowledge that one day it would either propel or destroy me.

Perhaps its presence wouldn't have frightened me so much if I'd known exactly what it was. But it seemed I could never really lay my eyes on it. I danced all around it, fishing for clues and grasping at signs. Sometimes, when I heard music on the radio, as soon as the applause arrived, fevered and jubilant, I'd notice the enlivening effect it had on me, the way I rose to it so naturally, as if I'd been quietly rehearsing for this role all my life. Nothing else mattered to me then – my lack of friends at school, my mediocre marks, the aching distance that stretched between my father, my aunt and me. This knowledge would arrive like a glorious gust of wind, lifting me off the ground. My secret – it was a gift. And it was now only a matter of time before it made itself known to me and the world.

There were other days when this awareness would appear with the same unwavering glare, but I would curl inward upon myself with dread. On these occasions, I was sure that my secret was so monstrous, that even I, its keeper, could not know how awful it was.

I never knew which interpretation was the one I ought to cling to. It would be revealed one day, I could be sure of that, and until then, it remained just out of reach, providing me with an unlimited source of both fear and thrill.

When I began my affair with Noel, I felt for the first time the slow approach of my impending exposure. Even though I could feel it drawing closer, my understanding of it remained as clouded as ever making it occur to me that perhaps both outcomes were possible at once.

I was in love with Noel. That part for me was simple and filled me with unending joy. It also terrified me as there was now no avoiding the possibility – something I had only taunted myself with until then – that I might be queer. What this meant for me, I wasn't sure. Because Noel was so unlike any other man and I could not imagine myself ever loving anyone else, *homosexual* was not a title I was willing to accept.

One time, early on in our relationship, after a concert at Morley College, we were talking to Noel's friend John Amis. Noel had said to John that he thought the tenor was absolutely ravishing and John replied that he didn't think the young singer was 'TBH' ('to be had'). Noel retorted, 'Well that's the problem with you, John – you don't have the bugger's eye!' then he turned to me and winked.

John threw his head back, guffawing. I smiled at Noel but felt my insides grow cold and heavy. It was not just that Noel was quite openly admiring other men – I had become used to this – it was the way that I had now found myself a member in this elite but somewhat ignominious club. A part of me knew that I ought to be grateful for their acceptance. But there was another part of me that felt unconsulted, that this had all been a terrible mistake, and that there might be no turning back. I couldn't rid myself of the vague sense of inevitability that at the end of the day I would be despised and derided by both sides.

As the empty, blustery spring days passed, counting down the time until Noel returned, I again began to feel something building, trying to surface, within me. While this occasionally sent me into a choking, heart-palpating panic, making leaving my room for anything but milk and bread quite impossible, I was occasionally able to take stock and reassure myself with visions of Noel performing in the concert halls of Paris and Berlin, rising after the final chord of the *Appassionata*, standing on the edge of the stage, gazing out into the crowd and looking for me.

And while I could sustain these little whimsies, remind myself of their very real possibility, I felt assured of the glittering future that I'd always secretly suspected awaited me.

I didn't see as much of Noel after he came back from the continent. Shortly after he returned he dropped over to my place with Stravinsky's *Dan Concertante* and insisted we sit down and play it immediately; three weeks later we went out for lunch at *Mon Plaisir* and one evening went to see *Salome* at Covent Garden.

The last time I'd seen him we'd been for a swim at Roehampton. Noel lolled about on the grass at the crowded swimming-hole like a sylph, naked except for his checked trunks, running his fingers through his curls and batting his willowy lashes into the sun. I remember feeling, once again, quite abashed by his unfettered sensuality, his flagrant self-offering in front of scores of lusty eyed men.

I told him I'd heard that he'd been invited to play at this season's Promenade concerts and enquired of his programme. He rarely spoke about his performances but would always answer any questions about concerts and tours in the same manner as a councillor might discuss his upcoming meetings and appointments.

He lay down on his back, closed his eyes tight against the sun, and told me he'd be premiering the revised version of Britten's First piano concerto, as well as playing the Beethoven C minor concerto. I said that I saw him perform the Beethoven at Queen's Hall, and was about to tell him how it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever heard, when he started laughing, not even rolling over to face me or open his eyes. 'Good Lord,' he said, 'You must have been barely out of nappies!' I sank back unto my towel, furious, and unable to speak to him for a good twenty minutes.

It was an unusually warm day for mid-spring. Noel splashed about in the water, occasionally lunging into a backstroke, while I frantically trod water in the shallows. We then stretched out on our towels and Noel chatted about some of the concerts he'd recently attended, including the premiere of Britten's new opera *The Rape of Laetitia* and the following

party where Gordon Stockard had gotten so drunk that he'd congratulated Britten on being 'Britain's most prominent rapist'. Noel then asked me what I was working on, and I mentioned the Rawsthorne bagatelles with a yawn, as if they were the most commonplace pieces in the world, despite having practiced them around the clock, desperately trying to get them up to speed before today. Noel didn't respond immediately, and I was just about to ask him if he knew them when he lifted himself up on his elbows, turned to me and said that he'd love to hear what I'd done with the *Presto non assai*. I held back a smile – I hadn't anticipated *he* would invite himself back to my place so readily – then he said that he was terribly busy for the next little while but that we ought to try to find some time to get together soon.

He was smiling out of the right side of his mouth, exploring my pale body with his glances. I felt exposed and could sense the thieving eyes of the other male bathers roaming over both Noel and myself. I rolled onto my stomach, then turned my head away, afraid my disappointment was plain for all the world to see.

'Did you hear me? Are you listening?'

I turned to see Thomas put my notebook down on the table next to him and lean in towards me at the piano.

'I've heard about the work you've done for Dr Titchfield and I hope you realise it's against Academy policy to let our students work professionally while studying here, *especially* those on scholarship.'

Dr Titchfield was an obstetrician on Harley Street who fancied himself as a composer of piano and violin works. He'd decided to record his turgid compositions and

had hired me to accompany him while he laboured away on his immaculately polished Stradivarius.

‘I’m sorry, Thomas. I’m having a bit of trouble getting by at the moment –’

‘You’re on a good stipend; there ought to be no reason why you’re unable to survive quite adequately. I’ll overlook it this once, but I’m concerned about your practice. At this rate you’ll have little chance at any of the student prizes.’

I mumbled an apology and shuffled my music together. All I could see was the image of Noel on the grass propped up on his elbows, his head hanging back, his Adam’s apple protruding like a large ivory knuckle, his long eyelashes gently meshed together, and the admiring glances shooting in from the other bathers.

‘Your notebook?’

I turned around from the door. He was holding out my exercise book without rising from his chair, his lips clamped together.

In the corridor outside I bumped into Will, Arthur and Stephanie, students from my composition and history classes, who invited me to join them for lunch in the cafeteria.

Will, in his customary mocking tone, was teasing Arthur about doing his essay on Tippett. ‘Last week it was Britten, this week Tippett – next week it’ll be Mewton-Wood. Is there something you’re not telling me, Arthur?’ He laughed and put his arm around his friend.

I looked up from the ground and glared at Will.

‘Are you propositioning me, Will?’ Arthur laughed back.

‘What’s that about Mewton-Wood?’ I asked, attempting a flippant tone but surprised to hear my voice sound absurdly high and thready.

‘You must have heard what they say about him,’ replied Will, who prided himself on being the authority on everything from Haydn’s use of Croatian folk music to the *leisurely repentance* of some of the *more unfortunately* married Academy professors. ‘He’s always about with Tippett, Britten and Pears – spends his weekends down at that house – Long Crickey or something – with those critics Eddie Sackville-West and Desmond Shawe-Taylor.’

‘Donald says he saw him out trolling the other night,’ Arthur added.

‘How do you mean?’ I almost yelled. Not that I believed what I was hearing for a minute, but I hated this unwitting suggestion that Arthur and Will might know more about Noel’s life than I did.

‘He was walking home along Charlotte Street at about ten o’clock and there was this young chap standing out the front of the Fitzroy Tavern, you know, as if he were *waiting* for someone, and then next thing out steps Mewton-Wood and the two of them walk off together towards Regent’s Park!’ Will raised his eyebrows and nodded, proud as punch.

‘When was this?’ My face was heating up.

‘Just the other night.’

‘Well it could have been a mistake. It must have been dark, he could have been a friend...’

‘Hey I’ve got a good one for you – where do you find Peter Pears in Groves Dictionary?’ Will asked, grinning.

‘I-I don’t know, I suppose –’

‘Just look underneath Benjamin Britten!’ And the two of them doubled over with laughter.

‘What have you two got against *homosexuals* anyway?’ Stephanie asked, articulating each syllable carefully as if she were reading out a Latin term of unknown meaning.

‘I haven’t got anything against ho-mo-sex-u-als. My best friend’s one,’ Will laughed looking at Arthur, to which Arthur responded with a punch in the arm. ‘Quite to the contrary I wish I *were* one; I might have some chance of getting published then.’

‘Sorry chaps,’ I interrupted. ‘I don’t think I can make lunch. I’ll see you later. Good luck with your essays.’

I turned around and took the nearest stairway. Hoards of students were heading down for lunch and I found myself carried in this stream of animated discourse. Floating down, I arrived on the landing standing face-to-face with the stone busts – Beethoven, Mendelssohn and Elgar – retrieved from Queen’s Hall that were now mounted just beyond the foyer to meet the entrants to the Academy. I stood for a moment, eyeballing their impenetrable stares; it seemed impossible to slip past them unnoticed.

I wanted to run but it was as if these cold grey faces were interrogating me. I started to feel dizzy, I thought I might be sick. I closed my eyes and all of a sudden, I saw myself back there, at the Queen’s Hall ruins, walking up Langham Street on that Sunday morning in May 1941, the day after the Luftwaffe’s *final fling*. We had spent the night hiding like mice while the sky was torn open by a harrowing roar, followed by the familiar sound of our city being destroyed. The following morning a dewy calm spread over the smoking, rubble-strewn streets. My father told me to fetch my coat then walked with me to the bus.

We didn’t speak as we made our way up from Oxford Circus, bowing our heads in the drizzle that had just started to fall. It had been a little over a year since Noel’s debut concert at Queen’s Hall, yet in my mind the night had taken on such mythical proportions that those Venetian red seats had become plush velvet thrones, and the golden organ pipes reached miles up into the sky.

With my father walking silently by my side, I looked westward along Langham Street. There was something grossly different, but I couldn't work out exactly what it was. A slice of the world had been removed, but it was too extraordinary to be able to say precisely what it was. I kept staring toward where the crowd was gathered, toward where Queen's Hall had once stood, and then I noticed it, a great stretch of smoke-filled sky where before there'd been none.

We walked closer, and arrived at the edge of the pit, our eyes drawn immediately down. The auditorium looked even larger than before, now that its roof had been ripped off and burnt down into this filthy black lake. Other people were standing around, whispering amongst themselves or staring bleakly into this huge charred mine, filled with burnt rubbish, drenched in water. I tried to reconstruct the hall in my mind, fill it with balconies, a stage, an orchestra, an audience. But all I could see was a monstrous gaping mouth exposing its macabre, torched innards.

A few thin plumes of smoke rose up from the still mass, sullyng the sky. Down in the swampy base, I noticed a carpet of twisted vines, thousands of springs, all that remained of those Venetian red seats. I looked up the far end for those celestial pipes, glistening gold and majestic, and saw a tarnished mangle, a giant pile of black slumbering snakes. We walked around the side, down Riding House Street, and I could just make out beyond the stage, the sooty debris of musical instruments – cymbals, trombones, a harp with strings splayed out in the air, a cello rolled on its side and embedded in ash – like the scattered, broken remains from some Antediluvian civilisation.

We walked back to the front and I peered down one last time, onto the floor and the stage, and that's when I saw, just distinguishable, staring out ghostlike from the cinderous remains, the disembodied head of Beethoven, his stony gaze fixed up toward the sky.

I looked at Beethoven's granite bust, now where it sat in the Academy corridor with the other heads salvaged from the ruins; Will's haughty voice churning over in my mind. The sounds of the Academy foyer started to rise up around me – groups of students heading off to lunch with their scores held to their chests; professors discussing lessons and upcoming concerts; the clanging and clattering of plates and cutlery in the cafeteria below. I turned and ran for the exit, almost toppling three young women sauntering up the steps as I charged through the heavy glass-panelled doors. I ran towards Regent's Park, I ran past gentlemen swinging canes and secretaries perched neatly on the garden benches eating sandwiches. I kept running, through the oaks and the alders, past gladioli and snapdragon and an old man cooing to the pigeons. I felt that I couldn't breathe, my throat a thin claggy straw. I wasn't even sure why I was running or where I was going, but I was scared what might happen if I stopped. So I kept going, no longer able to feel my legs, just aware that a blur of colour was moving swiftly past me, and there was something faintly beautiful about it all, as if I were seeing everything from very far away, as it really was, a large piece of elaborate scenery.

I don't know where I ran to, I can barely remember a thing. I just know that when I staggered up the stairs to my flat, unlocked the door, collapsed on my bed and looked out the window, it was night and I was staring at a heavy bank of dark blue clouds and the dull and muffled glow of the moon.

*

In the late autumn of 1854 while in exile from his home in Germany, Richard Wagner wrote from Zurich to his dear friend Franz Liszt. Wagner was forty-one at the time, a well-regarded conductor and composer, having already written and performed *The Flying*

Dutchman, Tannhäuser and Lohengrin. This day he wrote to Liszt in a considered but despondent tone that he had been reading Schopenhauer, finding consolation in the words of this philosopher who held that the final negation of life – *death* – was the only salvation possible. For Wagner – a man who lived with a terminal rumbling in his heart, *a genuine, ardent longing for death* – this idea came as a great relief. It allowed him to bide his time riding a torrent of sonorous melodies, in sober anticipation of that glorious final cadence. It allowed him to create.

I only play with art, he wrote, to pass the time.

His art at this time was a four-evening opera – *The Ring* cycle.

He went on to say that as he had never in his life felt the real bliss of love, he must erect a monument to the most beautiful of all his dreams, in which from beginning to end, love would be totally satiated. This opera sketch that he carried around in his head, this surrogate for a love he professed to know nothing about, was *Tristan and Isolde*.

My father first told me this story when I was eleven. Perhaps I was too young to understand, but he had no one else who would listen. My aunt had little interest in music, and my father's colleagues at the Home Office would have been horrified to hear of his love for the composer who wrote the anthem of the Nazi party, who had been officially condemned by the British government and recently banned from radio broadcast.

My father knew that I loved hearing his stories of Wagner, Beethoven, Bach, Schumann, Schubert and the other great German composers, and it is his storytelling I remember most vividly about him. Sitting in front of the stove after dinner while my aunt washed up and the last broadcast came to a crackling close, he'd suddenly lift from his reverie, lean in towards me and start up, 'Did I ever tell you about the year Chopin travelled to Paris?' as if he were recalling his own adolescence. He invariably had already told me the

story, but I always replied no, as it was the only time, other than when absorbed in his music, that I ever recall seeing my father truly happy, or interested in anything or anyone at all. His bushy eyebrows would dance about his forehead, and he'd become so animated and carried away with his tale that his pipe, grafted into his palm for the rest of the day, would be left to smoulder on the kitchen table, releasing a fine stream of smoke like a fluttering veil up to the ceiling, which over the years formed a sepia cloud above where he sat, a mark that my aunt, with any amount of steel wool and cursing, wasn't ever able to remove.

These stories became the fabric of my relationship with my father. Each composer became a dear uncle – I was too young to think to ask for any explanations – their legends both as fantastic and plausible as *The Jungle Book* or *Robinson Crusoe*. By the time I was old enough to ponder the meaning of any of these tales – to ask why a repeating melody drove Schumann to attempt suicide; what enabled Beethoven to rise above deafness, madness and physical decline and compose the ecstatic and exhilarating 'Ode to Joy'; how Wagner substituted life and love with music – my father was already dead.

Unable to comprehend what really happened the day he died – the 1st of November 1944 – the entire event quickly morphed into a strip of black-and-white celluloid, inseparable from the newsreels shown at every cinema at the time, complete with reassuring voice-over and a triumphant orchestral score.

I saw him so clearly, sitting on a bus on Etherow St in East Dulwich, humming Schumann's *Fantasie*, the manuscript of which he was on his way to purchase for my sixteenth birthday, oblivious to the silent rocket V2 – *Vergeltungswaffe* opus 2, as I called them – careering towards him. In the cyclonic explosion and vaporous silence that followed, I sat shuddering and alone with a ghost-given birthday present, a giant jigsaw puzzle of

Westminster Abbey, five-thousand small pieces of coloured confetti, so dull and uninspiring on their own, but each integral to the creation of a magnificent musical tomb.

I was too young to know my father well, to understand what made him tick. I barely remember the warmth of his hands, the sound of his laugh; I only remember missing him. In my mind I have recreated, hundreds of times, that frosty morning he walked to the bus headed for Boosey & Hawkes, pipe in hand, never to return to his olive-green armchair by the stove. Although now, ten years on, I'm not at all sure how much of that, or anything else I recall, resembles anything that may have actually happened.

My aunt didn't say much when she broke the news, she wasn't crying. I came home from school and she told me to sit down, then she sat opposite me across the table. I remember that moment when I sat and looked at her, that very last moment when for me he was still alive, but knowing from the thick sour taste in the room that my understanding of the world was about to be betrayed. I looked at her impatiently and she seemed lost beyond her eyes. 'Your father went to heaven today,' she said, followed by, 'Things will have to change around here,' and then her words began to dull and bleed into a liturgy of muted tones, a few words rising above to become audible as she looked down into her lap – 'How could he have left us?' She stood up and made me a coffee, a beverage my father had recently started to drink. It had a bitter, burnt taste but I made myself swallow it sip by sip. She sat down again at the table, yet it seemed an interminable distance stretched out between us. I watched myself watching her, fiddling with her bracelet, as if she were posing for a photograph, occasionally sniffing the air like a cat. Then a strange thing happened, the room started to darken and I felt very light all of a sudden, as if I might rise off my chair and float away. I felt very close to my father at that moment as if the cells of my body were disintegrating and becoming the air around me and dissolving into his. It seemed almost

possible that he might walk in the door and put his arm around my shoulder, something that he'd never done before, but I could imagine him doing then. That seemed real and possible and I waited for it, each second that passed, thinking I could hear him approaching the front door and the rattling of the knob. But I didn't wait for my aunt, who sat like a stone sphinx, to come and put her arm around me, because I knew that would never actually happen.

*

I lift my head out of my hands and stare at the soggy red heels of my palms that've been planted into my aching eye sockets, and realise that I must have been crying for some time. It's only fitting, I suppose, that I should be thinking of him now. Though it does always surprise me, how memories creep up and ambush you without a moment's warning. The mind, it seems to me, functions according to some grandiose scheme carefully kept from its owner's awareness.

I can hear Martha, the housekeeper, downstairs, cleaning with the wireless on. I wonder if there's been much talk about tonight. Not that I want to turn it on and find out. Couldn't bear to hear them carrying on with their pompous twattle: Noel this, Noel that, my dear friend Noel.

No, I don't think I'll even leave my room today until I must.

So my father never met Noel, never saw me as his lover, never knew his son was queer. He would have adored Noel; what he would have thought of the two of us I'm not so certain. I like to believe he'd not have minded. After all, he didn't seem so interested in women himself; as far as I know he never so much as glanced at a single female after my mother. He was far too busy with his records, his scores, his pianos (even though he could

barely play, he kept buying new instruments, I'd come home and find he'd replaced the Weinbach with a Bluthner, then the Bluthner with a Schimmel). Or else he'd be raving about propaganda and the bloody war effort, or threatening to throw himself under a train.

And then there was the V2.

I recently saw an article in the paper about von Braun. That blasted German rocket scientist who surrendered to the Americans at the end of the war; he now runs the US army's ballistic missile project in Alabama and is still harping on about space travel. Seeing his name there in print, reading about his recent book, *Conquest of the Moon*, a heady feeling came over me, and I only just managed to make it to the end of the article before I had to leave the kitchen table and take a lie down.

I've spent a lot of time over the years thinking about von Braun, the creator of the world's first long-range ballistic missile to be used in active combat: the V2 rocket. It started shortly after my father died; I was overcome by a strange desire to write to this notorious man, and tell him about my father, who obsessed over Wagner, Beethoven and Strauss, and who promised to take me one day – 'once this damn war is over' – to von Braun's homeland to visit the birthplaces of Bach, Handel, Schubert and Schumann. My father hated the war, but he never said a bad word about the Germans. My father would have said that von Braun was simply doing his job, just like him. My father, in fact, would have greatly *admired* von Braun, seen him as a young man with worthy goals. But even he would have found it perverse that von Braun's enamoured stargazing, his obsession with fantasy, his majestic ideal to take humankind into the heavens, could have propelled him on a path of such prodigious destruction.

Yes, at the time it all seemed so perfectly fitting that my father should die at the hands of such an unquestionably brilliant man.

Noel, I recall, was also fascinated by rocket science. After reading Neils Bohr's *Atomic Theory and the Description of Nature* I remember him trying to explain to me how similar atomic principles govern the functions of rocket engineering and human physiology. He told me that all matter was made up of energy, and there was a virile potentiality stored inside everything – all of us were the prudent progeny of that great ball of flames that blazed in the centre of our orbit. All movement, all life, all evolution could be boiled down to the fusion and fission of particles moving from one state to another, and every change effected a potent release of that simmering energy. 'Energy is not created,' he said, his face excited like a child's, 'It is expressed. It is the music of matter!'

On the 8th of September 1944, the first of over five-hundred V2 rockets hit London. It landed early on a Tuesday morning on Haveley Road in the London suburb of Chiswick, five minutes after its lift-off near the Hague. I've often tried to visualise von Braun's gleaming 18 000-pound creation preparing for lift-off, a symphonic machination of fuels and pressurised gases surging around pistons, turbines and pumps; a high-pressure inferno of 2500 degrees Celsius. When the rocket launches, it blasts fifty-miles up into the sky, and across a two-hundred-mile range. After only thirty seconds, it reaches the speed of sound; after another thirty, the engine cuts out, and the rocket hurtles towards its target like a meteorite, at three times the speed of sound, approaching in complete silence. After the terror that reigned over London in previous months from the V1 'flying bomb' attacks (I remember staring up at those pilotless planes with their cargo of bombs, listening to that deathly rattle as they motored along in the sky and waiting for that mortifying silence when the fuel cut out, watching them tumble down through the air like birds shot from the sky), British authorities decided against using air-raid sirens to warn people of an approaching V2. The phenomenal speed and malefic soundlessness at which the rocket travelled rendered any

warning futile. And so these massive weapons rained down silently on London, killing almost three thousand people. Occasionally I would catch a glimpse of one, like a giant telegraph pole streaking across the sky. But those being hit would never see a thing, they had no idea – as they took the roast from the oven, shopped at Woolworths, or as I'd so often pictured my father, simply boarded a bus – that von Braun's most brilliant work of art was careering towards them. The only warning they would get – if you could call it that – a split-second before their obliteration, would be the mysterious sound of a whip cracking – a blast wave created by the rocket, bouncing off the point of impact – accompanied by white flashes of light leaping across the sky. This would be immediately followed by the sound of impact, a thunderous explosion that could often be heard across the entire city.

Shortly after the blast, as the dust and debris begins to settle over the still, annihilated landscape, the sound catches up with the rocket. But of course, there is rarely anyone alive in the vicinity of the ten-foot crater to hear this ghostly approach. At first there is the whine and rush of whistling air. This grows into a deafening roar, which soon tapers off into silence.

*

I didn't ring Noel; that was not unusual. It was implicit in our relationship from the beginning that he would call, or call upon, me. He was forever busy with musical and social engagements and I was always willing to see him. Up until then, the arrangement had appeared to work well.

I tried, unsuccessfully, not to wait for his call: not to lie on my bed, fully dressed, staring at the reflection off my shoes, fingers clasped over my belly, thumbs rotating about

each other, listening for the sound of the telephone ringing downstairs, and Ma O’Grady’s slow tread up the stairs to my door. And as I lay there I’d grow even more despondent, reminding myself that Schumann, when separated from his love, had thrown himself into his music, composing some of the greatest piano works ever written, and yet faced with the same situation, all I could do was mope around in bed and think about Noel.

I imagined Noel’s reasons for not calling: his mother had been unwell, he’d been in Wales recording for the BBC, he was working on a composition that required all of his attention; he hadn’t even been aware of the days, weeks, *months*, that had passed. I wouldn’t ask about his mother, about the recordings, the composition; I would demonstrate how well I had survived without him with a graceful aloofness. He’d be chattering nervously and I’d be looking at him with a distant curiosity as if he were someone I hardly knew.

When I did venture out for the day (usually to the Academy or a daytime concert), I’d often be struck by a sense of urgency as if I’d suddenly remembered that I’d left the gas on in my apartment, or that an essay was due to be handed in that day. I couldn’t think of anything I’d neglected or forgotten and could only attribute this feeling to the thought that Noel was trying to contact me. I’d run home and upon finding my door empty of messages, collect a pile of shirts (mostly clean), and take them down to Ma O’Grady to be laundered, chatting with her as long as possible – asking if she’d heard from her sister who was working as a missionary in Ceylon, or if the improvement in the weather had done anything for her husband’s chronic cough – hoping that during our conversation it would dawn upon her that she had taken a call for me in the morning from a most polite young man, *a real gentleman, he was*, and that he’d requested I call back immediately.

As I lingered at her door, her cheeks would grow more plump and shiny and her stories more labyrinthine and I’d realise I didn’t have a clue what she was talking about. I’d

be standing there, nodding thoughtfully, catching myself peering through her wispy ashen hair to her boiled-egg scalp, all the while growing increasingly irritated with her. At that moment she seemed the only thing standing between Noel and me, and her raw-potato smell, her lard-smearred apron, would begin to appal me. But I'd remain, smiling pleasantly, trying to tease out the recollection with my geniality, convinced that my kindness (who else cared that she spent the day running about for her invalid husband?) would somehow be remunerated into a phone call from Noel.

After a while I began to find comfort in playing the piano; I'd stay home all day practicing, telling myself that Noel would arrive at the precise moment when I was suitably ready to charm him with my performance. He'd be summoned by the aching melodies of Chopin with their willowy arpeggios and wrenching chords. He'd be struck, upright, in the middle of his own practice, overcome by the desire to see me. This conviction enabled me to sit at the piano all day, untroubled by hunger, propelled by the belief I had in my own musical powers.

I tended to my devotion quietly, it was a small but steady flame that flickered soundlessly, ever ready to ignite into a blaze. I listened to stories on the radio of war widows who worked all day in factories without complaint to support children they rarely saw. Their nobility and humility impressed me, and as I sat at the piano to practice through the night it would occur to me that my consuming musical endeavours were my own silent sacrifice, an integral part of the whole affair.

It wasn't long before Thomas mentioned that I was playing with more life – *Con gusto!* It was not just my practice, though, that improved at this time; I also threw myself into other subjects, especially musical history – staying up late into the night reading my father's

books, trying to increase my understanding of the composers and what lay at the source of the heavenly sounds they created.

It was during this time that I wrote a biographical essay for the Academy on Tchaikovsky that caused such a stir that I was called to the Dean's office to explain myself, and asked why I was wasting the time of the Academy staff with such vile innuendo about Tchaikovsky's music being an expression of his repressed homosexuality. (This same essay, incidentally, was one of the first I later had published overseas, virtually word-for-word, in the *Musical Quarterly*). I wasn't able to respond with any good reason and hadn't even been aware that my teachers might read the essay in such a way. I stood there in front of the Dean's large oak desk, apologising and staring into his ruddy face with its full white beard and receding quiff, thinking I'd never before noticed how much the man looked like Brahms. The Dean leaned back in his chair, shook his head once more and sent me out with a warning.

I'm not sure when my fascination with Tchaikovsky began, but he was the composer of whom I most thought whenever I worried that my crippling anxiety and lack of showmanship and charm would prevent me from being a musician of any significance. Tchaikovsky was often accused of being a wimp, a hypochondriac, and a madman; he was also as susceptible and excitable as a child. But when he composed music, the millions of miniscule antennae that covered his being, making living so torturously difficult, would coalesce, and like a tuning fork, transform those terrifying vibrations into the most superlative sound.

As I worked on my essay, sometimes until the dawn with the sun peeping gingerly through the window, I'd think about Tchaikovsky, who laboured over his G minor symphony, his first major composition, day and night, inducing insomnia and headaches,

drinking heavily, and driving himself into a state of near-collapse. I thought it absolutely fitting his compositions were reluctant creatures to which he was giving birth: inspired melodies borne of some kind of torture.

What interested me the most about Tchaikovsky, however, was the connection between his creative output and his romantic life. It seems that virtually all the major composers endured a year of great personal crisis that affected the development of their music. For Beethoven, it was when encroaching deafness drove him to near suicide; for Wagner, it was when the Dresden Revolution forced him to rethink his political convictions. (Naturally, this discovery had me welling, once again, with thoughts of my own creative possibilities – this would be the year, I was quite sure, in which my musical brilliance would reveal itself to me, Noel, and the world). For Tchaikovsky, it was the consequence of an extraordinary decision he made in 1877, at a time when he was finally starting to enjoy some public success. He'd just finished his work on his ballet *Swan Lake*, and returned from a visit to the Bayreuth festival, Nuremberg and Vienna; then after staying at his sister's house in the Russian countryside, where he was so touched by the warmth and intimacy of her household – in such stark contrast to his own solitary existence – he returned home, and decided he would marry.

For a thirty-six-year-old bachelor, such a resolution mightn't seem unusual at all, except for the fact that Tchaikovsky had never before glanced at a woman, and was quite undoubtedly *hermo sumi obrepens*. Now I can't claim that the thought of marriage had never crossed my own mind. Marriage did often appear to solve myriad problems for gentlemen like Tchaikovsky and – if I may be so bold to include myself in the same sentence – myself also. The main problem being the curse of desperate loneliness. I'd often thought, what a thrill it would be to lie in bed and have another heartbeat galloping alongside my own, to

have someone who knew how much milk to put in your tea, who grew concerned when you were even moments late home from work. Unfortunately most women I met – though capable of fulfilling these functions – I found either tediously dizzy, or terrifyingly overbearing. No, loneliness was not so bad that it was worth losing one’s freedom for: freedom to flirt, to fraternise, to compose. But Tchaikovsky was after more than another being with whom he could share his meals and his thoughts; Tchaikovsky wanted to silence the malicious whisperings of his society, and more than that, to curb his ‘natural inclinations’, which he blamed as being the greatest obstacle to his happiness. Convinced that people despised him for his vices, he declared that he would make a serious effort to marry, legally, anybody, and that if he was not brave enough for that, he would at any rate conquer his old habits once and for all.

Whenever I’d imagined *giving up* Noel, I acknowledged that I might be able to stop attending his concerts for a while, but I knew, deep down, it would be impossible to sit at my piano and play a piece of music without imagining that it was he for whom I was performing. (Didn’t everyone have such a figure? To whom they dedicated everything that they did?)

Tchaikovsky, however, went ahead with his harebrained idea, and married Antonina Milyukova, a young student of his who’d threatened to end her life if she had to go on without him (I’m sure that this sense of melodrama was what partially drew him in). As anyone could have foreseen, as soon as the train carrying the honeymooners pulled out from Moscow station, the composer fell into a deep depression and state of panic, suddenly certain that the finest part of his being – music – had died forever.

Soon after the newlyweds returned to Moscow, Tchaikovsky fled from his marital apartment to his sister’s place and worked on what were to be two of his greatest works:

Eugene Onegin as well as his Fourth symphony, and it seemed that in composing, he was able to crawl his way back to sanity. But as soon as he returned to his wife and his Moscow flat, his feeling of desperation returned, and it wasn't long before he waded, fully clothed, up to his waist into the ice-covered waters of the Moskva River in the hope that he would catch pneumonia and die.

In my essay for the Academy I wrote much about Tchaikovsky's twelve-week marriage with Antonina Milyukova. I was fascinated by the way he continually worked his way back from the edge of madness through his feverish outpourings, and that even though he went on to live alone and in fear of being caught for his clandestine affairs, he survived by escaping into his music: dedications to some impossible love, works so amorous that they teetered on the edge of hysteria.

I listened to Tchaikovsky's First piano concerto, each night, imagining myself performing it for Noel, as he had performed it for me at the Albert Hall, in the early years of the war. As the hissing crackle of the disc began, I'd sit at the piano looking down at the keys, so quiet and lifeless. I was the nucleus of the silence echoing about the Albert Hall; my hands trembling as I anticipated the quiver and fall of Stratton's baton.

During the horn introduction and the orchestra modulation up to D flat I'd lift my hands to the piano, and a feeling of tremendous vulnerability would sweep over me, as though my flesh were falling from my bones. Then I'd launch onto the keys – a thunderous sound would come crashing out from the wood, a colossal steamship pounding through the tumescent waves of the orchestra.

Afterwards, in the silence that followed the final chord, I'd see Tchaikovsky sitting alone at his desk at night in his dim Moscow flat; in front of him, a glass of vodka, a gas lamp, an abandoned game of solitaire, and page after page of the most fiercely romantic

orchestration. Music in which he evaded the realities of his life. But as any level-headed person knows, one can only escape one's life to a point, and for so long. For men like Tchaikovsky, life will always fall short of the perfected beauty they are able to compose in their minds. And I realise it is easy enough to say this with full knowledge of the desperate act he was to commit eighteen years later. But you do only have to listen to the man's music, full of so much longing, so much desperate desire for life, to hear the whisperings of his final lethal escape, singing out loud and clear.

I was walking home from the Academy when the drizzle that had set in two days earlier finally broke into a leaden downpour. I'd left my umbrella in one of the rehearsal rooms so I bought the *Spectator* from a newspaper stand and ducked into a café on Regent Street and ordered a pot of tea.

Flicking through the concert notices my eye fell on one for Noel's performance of Hindemith's *Ludus Tonalis* by Walter J. Turner: *It is a work which makes exacting intellectual and pianistic demands, all of which were completely met with astonishing assurance and verve. Mewton-Wood gave a superb performance.*

I closed the paper. It had been six months since I'd last spoken to Noel, yet rarely a day went by without something triggering a memory – hearing the Beethoven Third on the radio, walking past the Wigmore, seeing his favourite pickled tomato relish on the shelves at Woolworths – and then the months would peel away. I was in the second row at the Wigmore as he divined his way through the *Appassionata*; I was skipping along by his side through Covent Garden drinking up his idle chatter on the way to the opera; I was standing on the grass at Roehampton, about to dive into the icy water, watching his long white arms propelling him to the other side of the black glassy pond.

Recently, as our shared birthday approached, I started thinking about him even more. Almost a year had passed since the evening Walter had opened the ivy green door of his home on Hammersmith Terrace and offered me a glass of champagne. I was certain of an imminent meeting, and each day as I dressed and headed out of my room, I'd wonder where the encounter might be. I started to imagine Noel everywhere; I'd walk to a tube station and sense that he had just left, every wavy brown coiffure bouncing above the crowd would be him.

Then, the day before our birthday, I turned on the BBC news and heard that Walter J. Turner had died suddenly from a brain haemorrhage in his Hammersmith home at the age of sixty-two.

Our birthday came and went. I couldn't get Noel out of my mind; I searched for word of him everywhere. I bought every newspaper every day, scanning every page. I pored over the tributes for Turner from Schnabel, Hindemith and Stravinsky, finding references to Noel, *the beloved nephew*, sprinkled across the pages. The great Australian pianist was going to move into the Hammersmith house, and would receive most of his uncle's assets – his paintings, his books, his piano. There were articles about Noel's arrival in London from Australia, how Turner had told Dulcie of the legions of young musicians in England, and warned that so few of them ever came to anything. But when the fifteen-year-old Noel walked into Turner's Hammersmith home, sat down at Steinway, and played him a Beethoven sonata, Turner knew that his young nephew was destined to be one of the greatest pianists in the world.

I wondered to whom Noel would turn now that Turner was gone.

The following week I was with a friend from the Academy, a rather jaunty young tenor called Clifton, walking along Notting Hill Gate. Clifton was bent over laughing, in the

middle of performing one of his jokes – ‘We don’t need a tuning fork, said the conductor, we need a forking tune!’ – when I looked up and saw, walking towards us, a familiar tall lean figure in bags, pullover and scarf. A soft bounding walk, gently melodious. It was Noel.

When he was ten or so yards away, he recognised me and broke into a sheepish smile. His eyes were moist, sparkling. He appeared quietly glad to see me.

‘Hello there,’ he grinned.

‘Noel.’ I held out my hand; his grip was strong and his palm was soft and warm, as I remembered. ‘This is Clifton Coombes...Clifton – Noel Mewton-Wood...’

I watched Noel give Clifton the same lingering handshake and smile.

‘It’s a pleasure to meet you Mr Mewton-Wood,’ Clifton said with a hankering grin.

‘The pleasure’s mine, Mr Coombes,’ Noel replied.

‘I was sorry to hear about Walter,’ I said.

‘Yes, terrible business. Poor Delphine. It was all so sudden, they were planning a trip abroad...’

‘I heard yours was the last concert he attended.’ Noticing his downcast eyes, I wondered if I ought not have got in contact with him earlier.

‘Yes. Awfully good of him, wasn’t it?’ he laughed. ‘But he always was very good to me.’ He smiled briefly. ‘How’s your music going?’

‘Good. Thomas’s really happy, thinks I’ll pick up some awards this year.’ I immediately regretted my pitiful boast.

‘That’s wonderful.’

‘And yourself?’

‘Oh, the usual. Keeping busy,’ he laughed, his eyes lingering on mine.

‘I was planning to come and see you with Peter Stadlen next Wednesday,’ Clifton interrupted.

‘Oh yes. The duets.’ He turned to me and smiled. ‘I could post you two tickets if you like?’

‘Would you?’ Clifton said, his voice rising shrilly. ‘That would be smashing!’ He turned and beamed at me.

I refused to even glance at him. I was wishing desperately he would disappear.

‘Thankyou, Mr Mewton-Wood,’ Clifton continued. ‘We’ll be there all right. We were just saying the other night how we’d like to get out to more concerts. This cold weather, keeps you indoors, doesn’t it? I suppose not someone like you, you’re probably out every night. And this ol’ sop has been in such a sulky mood lately, seeing you at the Wigmore will cheer him right up.’

I couldn’t speak, all I could think about was how terribly this was all going.

‘Can we come up and say hello after the show?’ Clifton asked.

‘I’d be offended if you didn’t,’ Noel replied, and I was horrified to detect a flirtatious smile.

‘We must get going. Cliff?’

Clifton looked at me, confounded.

‘Noel great to see you. I’ll look forward to seeing you – next Wednesday, yes? I ought to be able to make it–’

‘Listen to him,’ Clifton turned to Noel. ‘He wouldn’t miss it for the world! Lovely to meet you Mr Mewton-Wood. See you at the Wigga’s, then. Thankyou again.’ He tilted the rim of his hat and nodded to Noel.

Noel shook my hand and left with a soft, weary smile. Clifton and I continued on our way up the street, Clifton jabbering away, springing off the footpath with each step. I didn't say a word until telling Clifton – who was clearly expecting to come back to my place – that I wasn't feeling well and wanted to go home alone.

I can barely remember the concert. I organised to meet Clifton at the Pontefract Castle beforehand, arrived two hours early and proceeded to get drunk. By the time Clifton turned up I could hardly balance on my stool and my forearms, heavily planted on the bar seemed to be the only part of my body still active and keeping me upright. He took one look at me and burst into giggles. Clifton ordered a Pimms for himself, a mug of tea for me, then began tucking in my shirt and fixing my tie.

'Have you managed to hang onto the tickets, or did you hock them for beer?'

I panicked, reached into my pocket and pulled out two dog-eared tickets and a half-smoked Jamaican cigar that I swore I'd never seen before in my life.

I realised I'd sobered up after the concert when the cold air smacked me in the face as we stepped out from the artist's entrance onto the wet cobblestone laneway behind the Wigmore.

'Why on earth are you so rude to everyone?' Clifton asked.

I raised my eyebrows and drew in a breath, about to speak, but decided against it and kept walking, turning left onto Wigmore Street. We strode briskly, in silence, and as we drifted further away from the glowing lights of the foyer, the evening seemed to sink rapidly into night.

'I thought he was a friend of yours,' Clifton said.

‘I didn’t like the chap he was with,’ I said, recalling the tall balding man with the ridiculous medallion around his neck, who’d hovered by Noel’s side in the green room, making chatting with Noel impossible. ‘He laughed when I mentioned Bruckner – *Noel doesn’t think Bruckner’s a very good idea at all*,’ I said, imitating the man’s camp inflection. ‘I found him utterly tiresome.’

‘Well if you can dig your way out of your sour mood, I’ve grabbed a bottle of wine from Pops,’ Clifton grinned mischievously and reached into his satchel. ‘Ready for a hair-of-the-dog? How about we head back to your digs and run through the Mahler?’

I shrugged. My non-objection interpreted as compliance, Clifton smiled, stuffed his hands in his pockets and started rabbiting on about a fellow he’d recognised in the audience who’d been a conductor in the RAF and who’d posted his cousin Geoffrey, an oboe player, to the Orkneys for disagreeing over a tempo. We headed in under the dark dripping leaves of Cavendish Square towards Oxford Street, Clifton leading the way back to my place with a long determined stride, occasionally flicking his messy curls from his eyes with a horsey shimmer. He chatted without a pause until well after we walked through my front door, and only seemed to draw breath once his score was open at the piano and he was ready for me to lift my hands to the keys. That was how our relationship began.

Ever since the day Clifton rushed up to me in the cafeteria, introduced himself with a roguish smile and blustering enthusiasm, and invited me to the debut of the London Philharmonic Orchestra, I’d become the recipient of not only Clifton’s fawning attention but also numerous gifts which he continually skimmed from the family coffer. Clifton’s mother was apparently a descendant of William Byrd, and his father was on the board at Rover, and due to their combined mixture of generosity and inattentiveness, Clifton could regularly

swan out of their presence and into mine with tickets to various premieres, along with bottles of Hennessy Cognac and nougat from Montélimar.

I quickly grew accustomed to these little luxuries, however my eyes always remained wide open to the fact that Clifton and I were less than perfectly suited – he was a little too coltish and immodest for my liking. Nevertheless, I did look forward to seeing him each time we arranged to meet. In the hours before he was due to arrive at my digs, I found myself thinking about the handsome face that would be appearing on my landing: the broad jaw, the unruly auburn hair, the elfish eyes, the wide mouth, already smiling its devilish smile before I'd even opened my door. There he'd be: staring at me, grinning. I couldn't help but admire his gall, that while the rest of London was getting about in patched-up utility suits or, if lucky, a demob suit, he'd be standing there, shamelessly, in a bespoke double-breasted ensemble, hand-sewn in the brightest of Italian fabrics that his uncle, a diplomat, had procured from some dethroned monarch on the continent. But before I'd even have time to register my pleasure in seeing him and find an appropriate way to respond, I'd notice that look – his head tilted back, his eyelids laconically drooping, and his lips pursed at the edges – and I'd see something greedy in those dark eyes, smug almost; I'd find myself feeling immediately repelled. Then both of his arms would fling themselves around me, pulling me towards him, thrusting me against his chest. As those big wet lips crushed against mine, my eyes would open wide, gaping down the hallway, terrified that Ma O'Grady or some other lodger might walk past and see.

I'd pull him inside and try to recover the feelings I'd had – of affection, fondness – that I'd cultivated in the hours leading up to his arrival. But then I'd take one look at him, slumped angrily in a chair – that showy suit, those ravenous lips now wearing the trace of a

sneer – and I'd move to the other side of the room to make a cup of tea, rummaging around for conversation.

'Did you enjoy the records I lent you?'

'Not too bad. Though I have to say, Schnabel's not really my type. I find his playing a tad earnest.'

'Earnest?' I'd attempt to maintain my composure while finding a fitting reply, something that would make him realise what an unsophisticated remark he'd made. 'Schnabel's the greatest. *Anyone* will tell you that. That record is musical perfection.'

'Well *I* disagree,' he'd shrug, with that riling smirk of his, challenging me to tell him he was outside of the *anyone* of my world. 'He's too restrained. The *Andante*,' he'd pause for a moment, looking about, 'It left me cold.'

And so our evening would begin. Occasionally I would thaw out – usually with the assistance of a few drinks – enough to allow him to stay. It didn't take him long to stumble upon this equation and from then on he never arrived without antidote in tow – a few bottles of Carlsberg, a bottle of gin, or if he'd arrived from his parents', a liqueur or plummy red he'd snuck from the cellar. Before he'd even removed his jacket he'd pull out his loot and place it in the centre of the table, along with the score he wished to rehearse; then sink purring into a chair, like a hunter who's just presented his kill.

We behaved like two drunks with permanent hangovers – our heads always throbbing with just enough lingering bitterness to be intolerant of anything the other said of which we didn't entirely agree, and mildly addicted to the intoxicating drama of our flexing wills. To make things worse, Clifton constantly made up stories about things I'd said or done after a few drinks, an attempt to bully me into guilt-ridden submission. It was a ridiculous situation – we both knew that – but anytime we tried to have a calm and frank discussion I

could never resist suggesting that he ought to be less overbearing and boorish to which he'd reply that I ought to sober up and try to be less of a righteous little sulk. We continued on though, nonetheless, both convinced that all could easily be resolved, if only the other would simply admit to and undo all their wrongs. And also due to the tacit agreement that an evening of tireless bickering was more agreeable than a night spent on one's own.

Then one day early June, Clifton dropped over to my place to let me know that his mother had booked tickets for the Salzburg Festival and was now unable to attend; she had given them to Clifton suggesting he take along a friend. Clifton waved a handful of train and concert tickets in front of my eyes, then grabbed my hands in his and waltzed me around the room singing Tamino's ditty from *The Magic Flute*.

Such a windfall couldn't have arrived at a better time for Clifton and I. The topic of our elopement to the Salzburg Festival and the excitement it brought saved us from our accelerating descent into quarrelling. It was extraordinary how quickly the effect took hold. From that very first day Clifton seemed less insistent, less cloying; when we were together I no longer felt that I was trapped in some rapacious creature's lair, with nowhere to look but at the curl of his lip, his dirty red hair, his pronounced widow's peak. No longer alone, we were now in the company of Lotte Lehmann, Maria Reinhing, Werner Kraus and a constellation of other celebrities, sipping champagne in the back of a chauffeur-driven Packard, heading off to one of the greatest concert halls in Europe.

I started to spend more time at the Bayswater apartment he shared with his older sister Ginny and her best friend Dora. Clifton would cook dinner for the four of us – Woolton pie with a soggy pile of peas on the side, and blackberry trifle for dessert – entertaining us all with his anecdotes and impersonations of Academy professors. The girls would be falling off their chairs, almost crying with laughter each time Clifton stood and

performed his imitation of Peter Pears in a nasally strangulated-voice, singing Britten's 'I Wonder As I Wander'. As I watched his gleeful face – happiest when making those around him laugh – I'd start to forgive him for his coarseness, his incessant chatter, his abrasive quips – and I wondered if maybe he did possess some musical talent after all. For years I'd envisioned myself attending the Salzburg Festival with my father, and then after that with Noel. So many years longing to go to Salzburg that it now seemed quite ironic that this most unlikely character had bounded into my life and with the least effort was sweeping me off to this illustrious place. I started to think that perhaps I was extremely lucky to have found Clifton, and maybe I'd initially been too intolerant of this big, floppy, kind-hearted boy with his booming laugh and insatiable physical demands.

As our departure neared, my mind started brimming with images of Salzburg: Rolls Royces pulling up outside the Festival Hall with movie stars stepping out wearing the latest Parisian fashion and cradling long, skinny cigarette holders in their hands. Clifton and I followed the newspaper columns daily to find out the latest international performers to confirm, and to gossip about all the famous people we'd heard might be attending. It seemed that in an attempt to resurrect the festival once more, the organisers had filled the programme with debuts of young composers and musicians as well as world premieres. I started to see my arrival with Clifton as being symbolic of this process of renewal, and the more I convinced myself of this, the more my mind was flooded with images of the two of us meeting the up-and-coming young performers from all around the world who, charmed by Clifton's humour and my musical knowledge, would invite us for martinis at the festival lounge, or present us with green-room passes to the Festival Hall. I started to fantasise, walking with Clifton along the banks of the Salzach River, dining in the Mozartplatz,

listening to the radiant voice of Elisabeth Schwarzkopf in *Figaro*, that I might actually forget about Noel, and lo and behold, the two of us might even fall in love.

We stepped out into the unnervingly still and bright air of Salzburg's main railway station at around eight in the morning. We were amongst a hundred or so other tourists and troops who had also alighted the train; most were sighing and grinning giddily at the snow-capped mountains circling us in the distance, sniffing the clean, icy air and rustling about in their purses for hotel vouchers. We were the last to collect our cases; Clifton was too overawed by it all – yodelling and laughing – to rush, and I'd hardly slept, having been kept awake much of the night by the French children fighting and crying in our cabin, and a stomach upset from the goulash I'd eaten for tea. In addition to all that, I hadn't had much time since my rude morning awakening by the border police barking their commands in my face, to collect my thoughts and establish how I now ought to be behaving towards Clifton following the previous evening's incident. Even though I'd dissected the entire event in tremendous detail during the wee hours of the night, I realised as soon as I stepped down onto the platform and was slapped in the face by the white-gold light, that I was, literally, in a new land entirely, and I was going to have to rethink everything.

We had been seated in the dining car; the entrée plates had just been taken from our table and quiet conversation bubbled around us from the other guests' tables. Clifton took a sip of wine and moved forward in his chair – even though it seemed completely out of the blue at the time, when I reflected back, it all appeared so cringingly rehearsed – then, staring me in the eye, he whispered that he was in love with me. It was the first time in my life someone had ever said those words to me, yet, strangely, my initial reaction was complete obliviousness, as if he had simply mentioned that his dumpling soup was a little salty. He

remained in this position, leaning forward, his gaze upon me, forcing me to look away. While contemplating how to resolve this situation, I found myself staring across the aisle, my sight landing upon an older gentleman wearing a dinner suit, who happened to be eating a plate of snails. I can't be sure if I'd ever seen anyone eat snails before, but even if I hadn't, it wasn't the alarming content of the dish that caught my eye, but rather the expression of the gentleman himself, and the chilling apathy with which he ate those grotesque little creatures. He looked down upon each slug, carefully placing the pincers around its slippery shell. He looked up occasionally at his wife, the same sang-froid expression hanging off his powdery cheeks, then returned to his precise working at the shell. With his cocktail fork, he prised out a delicate little morsel, taking one last glance at it as it dangled in front of his mouth, slipped it onto his tongue – that had poked out gingerly from between his lips, so snail-like itself – then swallowed both inside with a drawn-out salivous slurp.

'You don't have to say anything, I just wanted to tell you,' Clifton added, smiling, drawing me back to our table, before catching the waiter's eye and ordering two more glasses of riesling.

At first I was greatly relieved that Clifton had disposed of the topic as smoothly and rapidly as he'd introduced it; but over the course of the meal, as I thought further about what he'd said, I began to grow increasingly irritated. While Clifton chatted away I began to practice my retort – the words I ought to have said – and several times during the quiet moments that passed during the main meal, I was tempted to raise the topic once more, and remind Clifton that his comment was unwarranted, even ridiculous, and that he couldn't love me as he really didn't know me at all. But after prevaricating a number of times, and leaving my response for what I realised was too long, I decided that as I'd gotten out of what could

have been a remarkably uncomfortable situation rather well, I'd do best to leave the matter alone.

Even though I hadn't seen what happened coming at all, it wasn't in the slightest how I might expect such an event to transpire; but what bothered me afterwards, and even now, more than anything, was how completely unmoved I found myself. I struggled to touch upon some kind of feeling, response, but all I could summon was a sense of immense annoyance, that a trip that had been proceeding along so smoothly had been so unnecessarily disrupted.

By the following day my anger had passed and I was left moping about in a shroud of disappointment. One of the strange thoughts that I'd had during the night – after the French children had finally dozed off and I was left lying awake listening to the snoring of fellow passengers and the rattling and clicking of the train hurtling through the mountains – was that perhaps when I woke in the morning and opened my eyes upon this fairy-tale town, some deep and loving feelings for Clifton might possibly have emerged. However, sometime after my military-style rousing in the morning, my insomniac meanderings returned to me, appearing like some mildly delirious dream. I was touched by a moment of sadness, as if something that I'd held during the night had been lost, and I relapsed into the same morose mood in which I'd found myself before going to bed.

After taking our cases to the pension and getting freshened up, Clifton and I visited the Mirabell Gardens, conversing little as we wove about between the beds of red and gold tulips. He was smiling the entire time, eyes half closed like a cat enjoying the sun on its face, occasionally making one of his poetic remarks about the large ceramic urns with their 'cascading violets', and the 'coveys of cloud white pigeons' that gathered at our feet every time we paused. I was having trouble finding anything to say and it was only when we sat on

a bench and I looked up at the fine mist spray of the fountain in front of us that I noticed the medieval castle set against the blue sky in the distance, lording over the town, and I finally spoke.

‘Look at that castle. Imagine how big it is.’

Clifton looked off towards the castle then turned back to me laughing. ‘Why? I can see how big it is.’ Then in a theatrical voice, staring upwards, ‘Imagine how blue the sky is, how white the clouds are... You really say some daft things.’

‘I just mean that it doesn’t look real, does it? Even though it’s there you have to imagine it’s real.’

‘I can see it’s real.’

I felt a lump in my throat, something hard and sharp wedging in my chest. I looked up and around at where I was – the blossoming roses, the brilliant blue sky, the ice-capped mountains along the horizon – and longed for the familiar streets of London, the stifling heat of the underground. I wondered how I was possibly going to survive the next seven days.

But as we walked around the maze-like alleyways of the old town, I may as well have been wandering the streets of Soho or Covent Garden. When I looked about myself, I’d feel momentarily alarmed; all of a sudden I’d realise I was surrounded by neat little shops and cafés with wrought-iron trade signs and colourfully painted coats-of-arms hanging out the front; it was as if someone had quietly wheeled in theatre sets about me when my back was turned. I was occasionally aware of the baroque spires that rose from the terracotta rooftops, the white-peaked Untersberg Mountain looming over us from the south and the emerald-coloured Salzach River flowing quietly through the town, but could only really appreciate them as backdrops for my imagined meetings with Noel.

Over the next few days we went to some small musical events, a choral concert held in a small church, and a local string chamber orchestra playing Debussy and Schubert; the standard of neither, I thought, of which was any better or worse than what we saw regularly around London. On the following day, we had morning tea outside at the Café Tomaselli, surrounded by groups of infantry soldiers, their chequered-tablecloths strewn with *Stars and Stripes* newspapers and army hats. They were laughing and downing Stiegel Biers, their feet in brown, high-laced, spit-shined boots resting on the spare wooden chairs they'd gathered in about them. Corned-beef sandwiches in one hand, cigarettes in the other, flicking their ash into half-eaten bowls of vanilla pudding, they seemed to be having the time of their lives.

After silently taking our *Kaffee mit Schlag* (Clifton insisted on not being taken for an American and so ordered everything in German) and a Linzertorte that seemed to have been made with barely a pinch of sugar, Clifton leaned across the table and asked me if I was enjoying our stay.

I stared down into my coffee and kept stirring, hoping to find an answer. I was bothered by all the American accents that clanged through the streets; 'G.I. Jive' and 'Jill's Juke Box' blasting out from every café's wireless; the jeeps and motorbikes hooting along the laneways; and the paucity of food, even at the most famous cafés, that made our ration system back home seem quite luxurious. 'It's different to how I imagined—'

'Red carpet being rolled out along the footpaths, drunk old barons stumbling out of the casino in tuxedos in the middle of the day, yes, yes, yes. Well there has been a *war* on, you know.'

I smiled back, grateful for his humour, if nothing else.

After a lunch of cheese and bread in the park, I took a walk by myself along the cobbled-streets, past *beisse wurstel* stands where troops lounged eating hotdogs, and along

streets where cardboard signs hung crookedly in café doors under dusty lace curtains, apologising in German and broken-English that the café would be closed until further notice. I thought about my father, who'd told me stories about holidaying in Austria as a boy, riding bicycles with his father through the woods and hamlets outside Salzburg and visiting the terrifying fortress outside Vienna where Richard the Lionheart once lay imprisoned, and I wondered if it were my father's presence that was missing in my visit to this great city, or whether my melancholy was due to the sight of all the boarded-up buildings and burnt-out shells of medieval apartments that sat rudely among the tourists and festivities like a pack of vengeful ghosts.

I walked to the Mozartplatz, where in the centre of the square stood the bronze statue of Amadeus, looking out over the river, a quill in one hand, his cape billowing over his other arm, the Mönchsberg Mountain a giant green throne behind him. I glanced about the busy plaza and imagined the composer walking through the crowd, humming a melody that he would later scribble down. Looking back up at the statue, so large and noble above me like some great deity or liberator of the town, I wondered what he'd think if he were alive today, what he'd make of all this cheer and adulation. After all, during his life, the people of Salzburg didn't appreciate his music one bit; they disliked it so much, in fact, that the twenty-five-year old composer moved to Vienna where he only lived for another ten years before dying in poverty and obscurity, and being buried in a mass grave.

I looked out towards the mountains; in front of them a three-storey medieval building stretched the entire width of the square. Underneath its central gable, a large white triangular frieze had been fashioned to appear as if a part of the original building, but bore the rather un-Gothic inscription, *Headquarters Zone Command*. Dozens of soldiers were spilling out the front entrance, jogging down from the steps in their baggy belted khakis, behaving

more like school children after the bell than commandeering troops. Some of them had massive black holsters strapped loosely around their hips. How ludicrous, I thought, the idea that these hungry ashen-faced Austrians might need any disciplining at all.

I headed away from the river and walked to the Domplatz, dominated by the imposing gothic cathedral with its two tall green spires standing like rockets about to launch into the sky.

As I looked about, at the tourists, troops and locals in the square, I tried to conjure up what it would have been like to be standing here, at five in the afternoon on the 22nd of August 1920, for the inauguration of the Salzburg Festival, which had opened with the medieval morality play *Federmann*, performed on the steps of the cathedral. I'd seen a photo of this very performance the previous day when Clifton and I went for a bowl of goulash in a small café off the Mozartplatz. There was a zither player in the corner, and the walls were covered with framed photographs of various sizes, all dust-free with sparkling clean glass – dozens of photographs from past festivals, with names and dates written in cursive hand down below, recording crowds, performances and faces, all the way up until the year 1937, after which it seemed this enchanting world suddenly ceased to exist.

In one photograph, hung at eye level, I recognised the façade of the cathedral with its three large stone arches; inscribed at the bottom was *Federmann, Domplatz, 1920*. The Domplatz was full to the brim with people, on wooden benches and chairs, standing and jostling at the foot of the cathedral. The bottom third of the photo was a sea of heads, the audience stretching fifty-wide across the front of the wooden makeshift stage, where Federmann – Everyman – stood, dressed in capes and robes, celebrating the peak of his power, unable to see the figure of Death approaching him from behind.

In another photo, the writer Thomas Mann was sitting at a café table between the two great conductors Bruno Walter and Arturo Toscanini – the three pairs of eyes fixed on something, presumably a performer, to the right of the camera. The dignified Mann looked as if he might break into laughter any moment, Toscanini bowed his head, his brow heavy in consternation, and Walter, his lips gently parted, the skin of his face smooth and relaxed, held a look of delighted disbelief, as if having just laid eyes upon a long-lost friend. One couldn't help but stare into these men's faces and wonder who it was that held their gaze, who'd been so neatly and judiciously cropped from the scene.

The last photo to catch my eye was of Werner Krauss, dressed as Mephisto, a skull balanced on his palm, gazing demonically into the eye of the camera. I immediately thought of Noel when I read the date – 1937 – written underneath, who'd told me about seeing Reinhardt's magnificent staging of *Faust*. Knowing that Noel had been there in front of Krauss that very moment, I felt I was no longer looking at a photograph taken ten years earlier, but rather at Krauss's portentous stare through Noel's own eyes.

That was the last of the golden years of the festival. By the time the Nazis marched into Salzburg the following March, the festival had already lost most of its central figures: some had been assassinated, some banned, and others – Jews such as Walters – had fled the country. Toscanini – 'an enemy of the regime' – had already pulled out of the 1938 festival, and it's told that when he heard the news about the Nazi invasion while in New York rehearsing the NBC Symphony Orchestra, the maestro exploded over some petty incident, dismissed the musicians then locked himself in his dressing room and cried.

Max Reinhardt, Germany's greatest ever theatre director and dramatic producer and the last surviving of the festival founders, left for Hollywood soon after the magical 1937 festival. He never returned to his homeland nor lived to hear of another Salzburg Festival; he

died of a stroke in New York's Gladstone Hotel in October 1943. I wonder, when he set sail for America that last time if he'd had any idea he wouldn't ever be going back.

After spending the day walking around the festival city, drinking a few Steigels at the bustling Hotel Pitter, and feeling underfoot the shadowy rumble of the past, I returned to the small third-floor pension room with its lace curtains, frosted glass lamps and floral quilts that smelt like over-boiled peas and lavender. Clifton was sitting on an armchair near the window, with the Domplatz in the distance, reading *Then and Now* by Somerset Maugham, bookmarked with two tickets for that evening's performance of *The Marriage of Figaro*. I went to shave and dress in the pink-tiled bathroom down the corridor and when I returned Clifton was still sitting in the armchair, no longer reclining with his book but perched expectantly on the edge of his seat. As I closed the door behind me, Clifton rose and stepped toward me, clasped his hands at his front, tilted his head and smiled. His smile was not one of excitement nor reflection, but rather, it seemed the involuntary gaze that can overcome someone quite unwittingly when watching something that brings them great joy. His hair was oiled and combed with California poppy, his suit was neatly pressed with a sprig of edelweiss pinned in the lapel, and within moments of my entrance the smell of Chanel wafted over to me at the door. He remained standing there, as if he were prolonging, now consciously and proudly, this chanced-upon moment. He told me I looked *magnifique*, then held his hand out to me. I looked over his shoulder through the window and noticed the scaffolding on the cathedral and the shifting mass of darkly coloured hats and umbrellas in the square and, for a moment, I seemed to lose my hold on time completely, and was sure I could hear the troubled ghosts of Mozart and Reinhardt, among the meandering promenade, calling out fearful warnings. I felt a clamouring in my chest and glanced around the room

then turned to catch in the washstand mirror a startled stare I hardly recognised as my own. I took my coat off the stand and as I pulled it onto my left arm I could feel him behind me, straightening out my collar, and drawing the right side around and helping me through with the other arm. His cologne grew stronger, throwing its diaphanous arms around me, sucking the air dry with its demanding bloom.

As he stepped in front of me, I turned my head, realising I was no longer even able to kiss this man on the cheek, then I opened the door. ‘Mozart beckons,’ I said, and directed him out before me with outstretched hand. We walked down the stairs and onto the street and entered the slow and steady stream of the festival crowd.

part three:

a fugue

An innocent flirtation with an American tourist in a Salzburg bar put a swift end to my relationship with Clifton. The following morning as we marched around Salzburg, calling each other every name under the sun, I defended myself until I was blue in the face, quietly pleased that his hysterical claims were tearing the two of us apart. When I did finally get back to London and started receiving postcards from a music student called Max, inviting me over to Minnesota, I panicked, having no clear recollection of this man, and feeling that I had fallen prey to some elaborate hoax.

I wonder what's happened to ol' Clifton? I'm ashamed to say I've thought little of him over the years, despite now being well aware of the significance of our relationship in regard to my attempts to wean myself off Noel. The last I heard was several years ago, that he was the lead in some American cabaret, touring around the South Pacific. His parents used to live around here, so I'm sure I shall bump into him at some time or another. It's quite unnerving reflecting back on it all: part of me horrified that I could have become so embroiled with such a flounce, and another part thinking that if the circumstances had been slightly different, we might easily have stayed together and been remotely happy. Perhaps he wasn't such a child after all – it being more than possible that the entirety of our problems were of my own lovesick making. Yes, fancy that, I could have been reclining with him on

the deck of a luxury liner, sipping a Tom Collins, and voyaging around some provincial region this very minute.

Which couldn't be further from where I do find myself. Sitting at an oak desk in a Georgian manor, scribbling meaningless notes, biting my nails, watching the second-hand on the clock chop away at the minutes. And with a glass of daphne that I picked yesterday – thinking a sprig would add a nice touch to my evening suit lapel – choking the room in the most nauseatingly sweet aroma.

Anyway – enough of Clifton. There were many other men, both during and after my affair with him. There was Clifton's friend Kingsley, another singer, who would stop at nothing until he'd landed first baritone in the Sadler's Wells Opera; David, a banker whom I met in a bar in Soho, who took me on drives up to Suffolk in his silver Triumph roadster and cajoled me with promises of escapes to his family's castle in Argyll; Andrew, a portrait painter, who entertained me with stories of all the Earls and Lords he claimed to have seduced after sittings; and many more who have merged into a faceless creature, whose vague outline I can just make out behind a veil of smoke rings and cologne.

Most were very good to me – they adored my curling eyelashes and milky skin – and enjoyed parading me about in restaurants, bars and galleries. I obliged, with a resignation that translated as modesty, accepting their Chinese jade rings, Moroccan teapots and gramophone records from America. But these *affaires d'amour* were over before they began. I would fall into them quite dutifully but it would only be a matter of weeks before my obedience would sprout thorns of contempt. The more they fawned over me, the more I despised them and their cold, dry hands slithering down my back. Then one day without a moment's notice – I would be as surprised as they – an hour before they came to pick me up for the theatre, I

would find myself telephoning and explaining in my most doleful manner how my dear father had been taken seriously ill and I would be taking the overnight train to Aberdeen – *Yes, I would be fine...No, I didn't need to a lift to Kings Cross.* And that's how it would end: they, fumbling for apologies, ladling out condolences; and me, thanking them humbly, promising a call, quietly returning the phone to the receiver, tiptoeing up to my room, and seating myself down at the piano.

At the end of my second year at the Academy I entered several piano and composition prizes and performed remarkably well in all, winning a total of twelve pounds in prize money. One of them in particular, I swore I'd completely botched; I walked into the room, sat and had barely started Beethoven's *Les Adieu* when I could hear an examiner, only yards from where I played, scribbling away with his pencil. I stumbled through the first few lines, most of my concentration consumed in channelling fury towards the examiner. I was in half a mind to stop and ask him to be quiet, remembering the occasion I saw the soprano Maggie Teyte singing 'Chansons de Bilitis' at the Wigmore, when, after a poorly beginning, she called out to Gerald Moore her accompanist – 'Stop! We'll do that again,' shaking her head to the adoring crowd, sighing – 'What would Mr Debussy say?'

At the end of my programme, I stood with my hand resting on the arm of the piano and nodded to the panel, recognising the offending examiner as Professor Cecil Bellamy. I'd heard many stories about this chinless accompanist with the great buck teeth, whom everyone swore was such a magnificent sight-reader that he could be woken in the middle of night and sight-read anything, but that sadly, there wasn't an ounce of beauty in his playing. I had it in my mind there and then to write a letter to the Dean complaining about his behaviour, but dilly-dallied for a few days, chastising myself every time I remembered that I'd let him off, and then decided after a week I'd left the whole affair drag on far too long to

do anything about it. You can imagine my horror when, two weeks later, in front of a crowded Dukes Hall, I was announced as the winner of the major piano prize, and awarded the certificate and cheque by Professor Bellamy himself, shaking my hand furiously and grinning that dreadful buck-tooth grin at me.

The growing recognition I was receiving for my playing, and the attention I procured from an ever-changing band of suitors never ceased to amaze me. After some time, however, although I never felt any great sense of gratitude for what came my way – but rather, more a mischievous sense of having hoodwinked another innocent – I did begin to expect a certain level of success.

During the summer I travelled down to the rarefied halls of Dartington and took some composition lessons from Imogen Holst, Gustav's eccentric daughter. She was a woman who gave no concessions to glamour, playing the piano with her elbows up in the air, and parting her hair in the middle, tying it back with a piece of string. But I did get an awful lot out of her teaching and was most pleased when she offered to give me the odd lesson in London at Peter Pears' house in Regent's Park, for only a nominal fee. Most afternoons before our lesson she'd be with Benjamin Britten – with whom everyone knew she was desperately in love – writing out his scores, and tirelessly performing other duties. Then one day Imo burst in and railed across the room, frightening the life out of Berta, Peter's long-haired Dachshund, crying, 'We can't go on meeting like this – I just had to leave Ben in the middle of a phrase!' She put her satchel down on Peter's desk and marched out of the room for a glass of water to calm herself down. As soon as she was gone I packed up my books, rifled through her satchel for some music she had of mine, and started for the door, seeing no reason to stay any longer or to wait for Imo to return from the kitchen to say goodbye. Then later that night she called me at home and accused me of stealing a

manuscript from her satchel, Act One of Britten's *Michelangelo* sonnets. I actually had it in my hand when she called (I was studying the underlined musical direction on the second last line, where the tenor's song becomes particularly affectionate – *Sempre pp* – a message, I suspected, for the tenor for whom Ben wrote all his music). So I told her I was utterly offended that she would accuse me of such a thing, and that perhaps she was losing her mind.

Around this time I also met Peter Pear's niece Sue, who studied music at the Guildhall, and who'd often invite me to visit at her father's house outside Oxford. Her father was an ornithologist with a large rambling house with shelves overflowing with books and ledges from which leered dusty stuffed raptors. Many a pleasant Sunday afternoon we'd sit at the piano in the sunroom, surrounded by cabinets of owl pellets which quivered away while we played Mozart and Schubert. As well as being a fine pianist and a wonderful cook, Sue also had a lovely voice and would transcribe the songs of the various blackbirds around the garden, singing me their songs, different melodies to the words 'pretty birdy'. Sue was very close to her father's brother Peter, and talked about him all the time, and I fear it must have been this fondness that tainted her choice in men; not only did I once or twice have to dodge her giddy advances, but the following year when I ended up at her engagement party, sometime late in the night while Sue drank champagne in the next room, I was seduced by her fiancé, a budding Tory statesman, right under the bust of Wellington. I'm not sure whether it was connubial bliss or wagging tongues that carried Sue away, but I wasn't invited to the wedding and don't believe I've laid eyes upon her since.

I was mildly amused by how utterly unfazed I was by the sudden departures of friends. I found it peculiar that the *thought* of losing a close acquaintance was quite mortifying, yet the *reality* of the constant comings and goings was often, dare I say,

tremendously refreshing. I was tending to believe, more and more, that only music could ever be my true companion. Yes – only music could move me with its beauty and grace; only music could provide me with a constant and reliable source of *raison d'être*.

Even though I continued attending as many nightly concerts as I could afford (or find myself escorted to), my weekly musical highpoint was often the access we were given, as students of the Academy, to Wednesday morning rehearsals of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra at the Royal Albert Hall. Just to be in this glorious building, with its auditorium swathed in gold and maroon, sitting beneath the tiers of royal boxes, gazing up at the dizzying height of the ceiling, watching the lighting and stage technicians dashing about and listening to the cacophony of the orchestra tuning their instruments and warming up. One needn't hear a bar of music to feel completely entranced.

Then the captain of the ship would stride onto the stage, and everyone in the hall would be immediately transfixed. The orchestra's conductor, Beecham – Sir Tommy, as everyone called him – had the entire orchestra poised in a state somewhere between hilarity and absolute terror. He would halt the orchestra into a trembling silence in the middle of a movement and point his baton towards a cellist and remark, 'Madam, you have between your legs an instrument capable of giving pleasure to thousands, and all you can do is scratch it!' But as rude and disparaging as his wit could be, Beecham had the absolute respect of every instrumentalist, and always got the very best out of any orchestra, especially when performing Delius or Mozart.

During those rehearsals I was privileged to hear dozens of astounding performers, many who, I soon realised, played far better in front of a few stagehands and several dozen onlookers, than they did in front of a worshipping crowd of thousands. Other musicians were entertaining simply for their antics, especially the pianists. There was Flagstaff, who

used to sit in the wings to relax before rehearsals as well as performances, who'd invariably have to be woken up when it was time for him to walk on stage. And Backhaus, who was also relaxed to the point of indifference, and knew every concerto so well, that he'd walk over and sit at the piano, and not even know what he was about to play until he heard the orchestra *tutti* begin. There was also Beecham's wife, Betty Humby (Beecham was one of those archly heterosexual men who got involved with silly women, and his second wife was no exception); I remember a group of us sitting in the third row while the orchestra warmed up, waiting for her to arrive to run through the Beecham-Handel piano concerto. Betty marched through the doors half an hour late, in a big fur coat with her hands shoved deep in the pockets, announcing that she wouldn't be able to play, she'd just cut her hand on a box of tea.

Also unforgettable was the soprano Elizabeth Schumann. The morning she came in to rehearse, a chap I was seeing at the time had dragged me right to the top of the hall, where I sat pinned against the back of my seat, feeling sick as I gazed down from those vertiginous heights. But then Elizabeth started to sing, and I no longer even remember the lad being there, let alone anything we might have gotten up to, but just recall leaning back in my red plush seat and hearing every single word of Elizabeth's sweet voice singing the aria from *Der Rosenkavalier* as it ran like treacle over my skin.

I always stayed home, though, when Noel was due to rehearse. Gazing up at him on stage while surrounded by a rabble of pimply students was not how I wished to be seen.

I was, however, convinced that I'd shed the pain of his neglect, and so every now and then I'd pluck up the courage to buy a ticket to one of his performances. Each time I'd feel quite blasé until the moment I arrived at the concert hall, and then as I shuffled into my seat, my heart would be pounding in my throat, my skin chilling with sweat, terrified that he

might glance at me in the audience and not recognise me at all, just stare straight through me as if I wasn't even there.

By the time he walked on stage, I'd be deliberately slowing and deepening my breath, and closing my eyes to postpone being confronted with his image. It wasn't too late to leave, I'd think. I could duck out easily, people would imagine I'd taken ill and would enable a swift exit; I could be standing outside on the footpath within a minute. But each moment that I pondered the feasibility of my getaway was a moment lost, increasing both the difficulty of departure and the level of disruption it would cause. The point would arrive when I felt utterly trapped; escape then seemed both an imperative, and an outright impossibility.

After a few seconds, in the midst of the applause, I would open my eyes and there he would be: an aurora of light balanced on the edge of the stage. He seemed older now, more confident and natural. But the boyish charm remained. His lips gently quivering, his eyes blinking far too regularly; bowing ever so slightly as he stared out into the lights and the crowd.

He would sit at the piano, look down at the keys for a few seconds, then slowly bring his hands up to his gaze. Ever so softly his fingers would sink into the ivory as if he were dipping them into a bowl of cream.

I would sit, quietly enthralled throughout the performance, not even realising that I'd been crying until I felt the stream of tears rolling down my neck and dampness spreading along the edge of my collar.

I began to be regarded as one of the top pianists at the Academy, and fellow students, I found, wanted to make my acquaintance. All in all, it ought to have been a very happy period in my life, and perhaps, relatively speaking, it was. But it's quite clear to me now that despite

all the success and coquettish behaviour – I really was becoming quite the libertine – my hedonism was close to getting the better of me. At the time I was quite chuffed to wake up after a night out drinking with classmates to find myself in another student’s bed. To me it showed an element of spunk that had been absent in my make-up up until that point. I was aware I was drinking more than most – and once did have to call upon my aunt to bail me out from a debt at the licensed grocer – but failed to see, when I was achieving so much in my musical studies, why a bit of nightly decadence was such a problem. Especially when it provided relief from the one tangible complaint I could claim, my invisible ailment – the pain in my arm – which worsened over this time. It was not so much during, but after, my practice that I’d often be in so much agony that I’d lie on my bed in tears – not simply from the blazing sensation running down from my shoulder, raging as furiously as ever, and the near paralysis of my wrist, but also from complete exhaustion and fury. I was at a point in my life when I was as close as ever to embarking upon a career as a pianist. And accompanying me on my way was this troll on my back, trying to force me to the ground, ruin me.

I tried everything I could think of to fix my condition, returning to all the piano techniques and exercises I’d been taught over the years – circling my wrist in loose exaggerated loops as I played, or practicing my entire pieces in staccato. I visited numerous doctors and other specialists, but nothing – except a nip or two of gin before I sat down to practice – seemed to help me in the slightest.

At one time I had a brief liaison with a singing teacher called Leonard – the affair probably wouldn’t have extended beyond one night had he not informed me he was training to be an Alexander Technique practitioner. Leonard instructed me that it was impossible to separate mental and physical processes in the body; that our will to do something arose from

deep within the brain, in our subconscious and unconscious minds, and that I had *learnt* this crippling behaviour, he could see it in my body – my tense shoulders, my stilted walk, my constant fidgeting – and I now had to *re-learn*, to stop these unconscious processes from taking their pre-set path. He said that the only hope for me was to *inhibit* my old way of thinking and acting (starting with total abstinence) and as he told me this he'd draw to his chest his dainty hands – I could never get over how impuissant those fragile instruments looked – and motion in the air as if doing invisible needlework. He needed only to gauge an inkling of interest from me and he'd jump from his chair and I'd sense those little silky skinned hands with their bristling fingers – like a millipede lying on its back wriggling its tiny legs in the air – clambering towards me and I'd run to pull the new Brahms recording from its sleeve and make another pot of tea.

I did, however, ponder all Leonard told me and was impressed by his many stories of recovery – from famous violinists who'd indefinitely postponed world tours, to ballerinas who'd been told they'd never dance again – to which he'd resort when pressed with too many questions. I was momentarily intrigued and found myself quietly delighting in the idea that I had resigned myself to being a pitiful invalid of my own innocent and clumsy making. But Leonard, like the rest, with his pin-striped pants and colourful bow ties, passed in and out of my life so fleetingly, before I would let him anywhere near my ailing limb, or digest the kernel of his words. Sitting at my small sunlit table only minutes after Leonard's final exit – 'You're making a big mistake, young man, I could really help you!' – it was far easier to pour myself another drink and cradle my rotten arm than to deliberate over any remnants of Leonard – including his inspired teachings – having so cleanly eliminated him from my life.

I ended up deferring my studies several times, convincing myself that I'd been overworking my arm and that a period of inactivity would be of the most benefit in the long

term. Thomas wasn't much help at all – once even getting quite irate and calling me a drunk – he'd just shake his head with growing dismay each time I left the Academy halls to work at Boosey & Hawkes, the Royal Albert Hall or the Steinway showroom. My position at these places never rose above that of sales or tea boy; and, quite frankly, I preferred making pots of Earl Grey than approaching customers who might correct me on the year of the Leipzig pressing of some ancient and unremarkable manuscript. But after a period of several months in each job – and usually on the verge of retrenchment due to my apparent slovenly appearance and crankiness with other staff – with my arm well rested, I would turn on the wireless and hear, 'Chopin's F minor concerto performed by the pianist Mr Noel Mewton-Wood'. Suddenly everything about me would seem to tremor, my job would appear a sham, and I would run all the way home and find myself lifting the stained oak lid of my piano and staring devoutly at the keys.

Each time it was Thomas who lured me back to the Academy, and no time more successfully than the last. The knock of Ma O'Grady came on the door one evening as I sat alone in my room, listening to an old Schnabel recording. I followed her large dumpling hips down the stairs, and as I leaned against the mottled wall of her apartment, preparing myself to have to weave my way through another of Thomas's brusque check-ups, he said to me the words that every aspiring pianist dreams of hearing one day. He told me that if I returned to the Academy and learnt to curb my erratic behaviour, I could solo with Sir Henry Wood and the senior Academy orchestra. It would be my turn, at last, to perform a concerto.

Ever since seeing Noel's Queen's Hall performance, I'd tried to visualise my own public debut – the venue, the audience, my entrance on stage, my bow and, most importantly, my programme. I decided that solo recitals, though empowering for the performer, can

sometimes seem a little bit bereft. A solo pianist becomes his own orchestra, he creates his own world; he is everybody and everything. But this was not what I had in mind. In a concerto, the soloist is elevated *above* the *tutti* – the *everybody* – of the orchestra. The soloist is seated separate to and *on top of* the world.

In a certain mood I did enjoy listening to the early baroque concertos: symphonic pieces with solo parts written for a particular instrumentalist the composer had in mind. I found them particularly gratifying – perfect on a sunny autumn morning after a vigorous walk through the commons. But as for performance, one really couldn't go past the virtuoso concerto, where the soloist has true isolation and supremacy within the orchestra. They were the ultimate form for showcasing a soloist's virtuosity, a flamboyant display that culminates in that signature cadenza just before the end of each movement – an extraordinary flourishing passage from which the audience can judge the musician's ability. Always the most thrilling moment in a concerto, I find: holding your breath while the soloist embarks upon this daring display, the conductor and orchestra lowering their baton and instruments, seated in reverent silence.

Although Mozart was the father of the virtuoso concerto, establishing its form and writing close to fifty concerti, it was not Mozart, with his ordered phrasing, his innate politeness, whom I wanted to play. No, the man who I would perform had carried the Classical into the Romantic era: combining Mozart's attention to form, design and beauty with the desire to express ideas, emotion, and passion. Ludwig van Beethoven was the man who completed the final transformation of the concerto from a baroque *concerto grossi*, with its tapestry of alternating groups of strings, into the musical hero myth: the soundtrack to the euphoric triumph of the individual within the world.

Over the first few weeks, Thomas and I listened to each of Beethoven's concertos, contemplating each one in terms of its musical and technical demands. Thomas, it became clear, was a boffin of the Napoleonic wars, and for that reason alone, it seemed for a while that we might choose the *Emperor*, Beethoven's fifth and final concerto, written in Vienna the year of Napoleon's second onslaught and occupation of the city. We listened to it over and over. Each time that regal fanfare began, I'd imagine the truculent Beethoven sheltering in his brother's cellar, listening to the gun and cannon fire of the encroaching French army; and in the second movement, during the slow, dignified march of the orchestra, the piano singing out pleadingly, I'd see the composer stepping out from his refuge the following morning to find his city freezing, on fire and in ruins.

Thomas eventually dashed the idea of me taking on the *Emperor*, he didn't believe I could quite yet muster the exhilarated defiance and quiet restraint that were required. Incensed by his judgment, the only thing that stopped me telling him that he clearly didn't know me at all, was his final comment that he thought I had the perfect temperament for pulling off the Third – the C minor concerto – brilliantly.

I worked on my part with Thomas for several months, it was a momentous project and one for which I attempted, at first, to remain relatively sober. Sometimes we'd work on just the first movement cadenza for the entire hour, him standing and conducting next to me through three tempo changes, singing in his deep baritone, his arms paddling in front of his chest as if he were spooling wool, or tapping in the air with his invisible baton, closing his eyes and whispering the *bom ba-bom ba-bom* of the timpani entry at the close of the cadenza. These lessons were the most trying, my right hand spidering up and down the keys, Thomas shouting out commands – 'Back to the Presto–faster–slower–more crescendo–more decrescendo–more resolution–more anticipation–again, again, it must be perfect!' – the pain

in my arm so great blood would drain from my face and I'd be willing the clock on the wall to move at the pace I was being forced to play. Some mornings, when I felt I could barely get myself out of bed, I'd telephone him through a message that I had a funeral or important family gathering to attend and I wouldn't be making my lesson. Only once, early on, did I ever mention the ongoing troubles I was having with my arm. His response was as I expected: I must continue my wrist exercises and keep my shoulders down as I played. What's more, in order to be a great performer, I must learn to put my own concerns aside. Especially when one is playing Beethoven, he'd state as if reciting a well-known edict, the only thing one must feel is the music.

Six weeks before the performance, the orchestral rehearsals began in Dukes Hall every Thursday and Friday afternoon. Although each rehearsal went for three hours, while I was at the piano, carried along by the exultant sound of the orchestra, I rarely thought about my arm. Strangely it was the more technically challenging orchestral sections, those that ought to have stressed my arm and mind the most, that I preferred to play. During the cadenzas, and the languorous second movement I would often forget about the orchestra, and become more frighteningly aware of myself: I would remember the pain in my arm, and fret about what came next. But those spirited sections in the *Allegro con brio* – arpeggios tearing up the keyboard in lively discourse with the strings, the entire orchestra trumpeting out notes below me like footholds on which to climb higher, and Sir Henry's lumpen body heaving over the orchestra, shouting out, 'Like a cavalry charge!' or 'Onward, onward, strings, to its doom...' – those were the times I forgot myself entirely.

At the end of each rehearsal, as others stood about cleaning their instruments, chatting about the music, whistling phrases, stacking chairs and folding stands, the pain would arrive like a burst of flames shooting up my arm, and I'd be paying all at once for the

pleasure I'd just enjoyed. The music would vacate my body like a passing spirit and I'd be thinking of nothing else but breathing through the agony. I'd decline offers to join the others for a beer at the Glue Pot, and wander home on my own, nursing my arm like a sick animal.

After rehearsals, the most I could ever manage was to lie on my bed with a bottle of gin and listen to recordings of the concerto – Schnabel, Rubenstein, Curzon – imagining how wonderful it would be to be pain-free, and able to comfortably perform this great work. I would listen for hours, fascinated by the differences in the way each pianist interpreted this piece; I'd think about Noel and the way he'd played it, combining volcanic power with such trembling beauty, notes that barely whispered above the heads of five thousand listeners. People always remarked upon his ability to *understand* a piece of music. I would understand this piece too, intimately, as if it were a person – know every twist and turn in its character. I listened to the recordings for hours on end, following the score with my finger, sometimes as the viola, other times as the oboe, wanting more than anything to own this piece, to make this concerto mine. So that Noel would hear me play it as he'd never heard it played before.

I started to practice technical work and pieces entirely in the key of C minor; wanting to *feel* Beethoven's obsession, bordering on mania, with this *Sturm und Drang* key. When Beethoven wrote the C minor concerto he was nearing the end of his first C minor period, and this *tono tragico* coloured much of the music he wrote. In the years leading up to and during this time, Beethoven had witnessed the final stages of his mother's battle with consumption and the death of his drunk, tyrannical father. Then in the autumn of 1802, when Beethoven was thirty-two and in the middle of his work on the C minor concerto, it was confirmed that he was going deaf. From Heiligenstadt, a village outside Vienna, he wrote a Will-like document to his two brothers describing his despair: *Little more and I would have put an end to my life – only art it was that withheld me, as it seemed impossible to leave the world until*

I had produced all that I felt called upon me to produce, and so I endured this wretched existence – truly wretched...

Just as blue is said to evoke sadness and red, passion or rage, I've found there is an equally inexplicable effect drawn from the twenty-four major and minor musical keys. C major suggests majestic splendour; D major, joyful exuberance; E flat major, elegance and grace; E minor has been likened to a maiden dressed in white with a pink bow on her bosom; and Beethoven himself referred to B minor as 'the black key'. C minor, the key Beethoven turned to more than any other, is the key of melancholy and lament. A desperate plea for deliverance from suffering.

I listened to the concerto, all thirty-five minutes, several times each evening. I'd sit in my chair with a gin in my hand, close my eyes and moan along to the music. I no longer thought of it in terms of notes, but as one long exhaustive thought, a series of yearning demands and weeping sighs. I knew the music so well; I felt the lift of the bow preceding every string entry, every inhale and exhale of the flutes, and when the timpani entered at the end of the cadenza it was more like a heart beat than a drum. I began to feel as if I'd composed the concerto myself.

With the performance inching closer, I started mentally rehearsing for the night I'd walk on stage with an uneasy mixture of exhilaration and bone-chilling dread. I saw myself standing up there, lights aimed down at me from the roof, staring into the crowd, every seat in Dukes Hall filled. I knew that Noel regularly visited his old alma mater for the end of year concerts, and in my mind I had him seated in the middle of the second row.

I began to think of the virtuoso's role as being less about simply entertaining, giving a performance; but rather as comprising this extraordinary *obligation* to provide the audience

with a release from their lives, to carry them off to an entirely different world. I thought about all the great virtuosos of the past, and the crowds they enraptured every night, yet rather than feeling an elated impatience with being at the threshold of such a league of performers, these thoughts only increased the grip of terror upon me, bounding me in a state little short of complete mental and physical paralysis.

I wondered if Liszt – the greatest virtuoso musician ever known – had ever felt this same sense of fear, whether he was racked with self-doubt before walking on stage in Paris, Vienna, Budapest or Rome. Never before had so much been expected of a musical performer as it was of Liszt during the height of his career. They called him *the God of the piano*; it was his duty to provide hope, redemption, escape. Off-stage, he might have locked himself away in a room, practicing fourteen hours a day, fighting off depression and melancholia, but the moment he walked out from the wings, there was nothing this man could not play. What's more, his dashing good looks and Byronic manner – something I certainly didn't possess – brought a touch of drama to the performance – something that up until then had been a rather bloodless affair. With the exception of Beethoven, pianists had always held their hands closely to the keys; Liszt, however, would lift his hands a foot in the air and bring them crashing down on the notes, his long blonde hair falling in front of his eyes. The women in the audience would go wild; they'd be flinging their jewellery on stage, fainting in the stalls, fighting over the green gloves he intentionally left on the stage. I might add that this reaction is completely understandable to anyone who has seen a picture of this extraordinary man (I only have to glance upon the drawing Ingres sketched of the young Liszt to break out in goose bumps and feel my heart thumping away madly), or anyone who has had the experience of witnessing a great virtuoso up on stage. A feeling that can only be described as complete and utter salvation.

And now it was my turn to sit in the spotlight, coat-tails swept behind me, sweat moistening my collar, five-hundred pairs of expectant eyes upon my hands. But the more I thought about this night, the more I thought about my aunt's blunt words – 'If I was going to be a brilliant pianist, we'd surely all have known about it by now' – and the more I felt as if I were walking towards my own execution.

Outside of rehearsals, the pain in my arm was intensifying; some mornings I'd wake and barely be able to lift my arm and it was only a swig from the bottle kept next to my bed that enabled me to rise and face the day. I had to button my shirt with one hand, I couldn't even hold a saucer in my right to pour a cup of tea. I thought about how many losses I'd endured throughout my life, but how amongst all the departures, this ailment had never left my side. I couldn't rid my mind of the image of me as a child sitting at the kitchen table, writing out the alphabet under the hawklike eye of my aunt, my right hand gripped around my pen, tearing at the page as I wrote, and behind my back, my left hand, clenched in a fist, this *bad* hand that had such an overwhelming desire to grab the pen and glide all over the page leaving a trail of whooping circles. As I sat at the piano, the C minor concerto in front of me, trying to coax my arm to relax, I had half a mind to ring my aunt and scream at her for all the damage she'd wrought.

I decided that the most sensible way to manage this increased state of anxiety, was to balance the intensity of my schedule and demands with the frivolous and gratifying rewards of sexual and alcoholic indulgence. It all really started one sunny afternoon; I was walking down a quiet avenue in Piccadilly when I noticed an older gentleman parked at the curb in a maroon-and-grey Daimler, staring fixedly in my direction, so I held his gaze and walked straight towards his car. When I was only yards away, he opened the passenger door and I stepped in and sat beside him, noticing his suit pant wide open, his royal staff displayed in

his wrinkly old hand for all world to see. My presence was only required for a matter of minutes in order to help the struggling brute along his way, and as soon as I had him slumped back, eyes closed, in his shiny maroon seat next to me, wearing a crooked grin of something akin to relief and pain – it was as if I'd actually killed him, I laughed to myself – I plucked his hanky from his top pocket, wiped my hand, lay the cloth delicately over his lap, then stepped back out onto the street. I was immensely proud of myself as I bounded victoriously down the footpath; I couldn't really remember where I'd been going before I'd been summoned over, but I couldn't have cared less, nor been more satisfied with my day's work.

That was the beginning of a series of similarly bold encounters, that often commenced with the scantest eye contact at a bus stop, and rapidly progressed to being ravaged in a delightfully debased manner in the middle of the day in a St John's Wood apartment (set-up away from the marital home, specifically for such purposes, I gathered), or once even in a council chamber. Although they were mostly brief and wordless exchanges (though occasionally preceded or followed by oysters and champagne), I found myself becoming quite addicted to these little forays, and craving them every couple of days. Each time I took a break from my practice and stepped outside my door, knowing exactly the goal in mind, I longed for that electrifying moment of being spotted, the feeling that some ferocious animal had me – amongst a crowd of thousands – within its sites; that he would soon be tearing at my clothes, wanting me with so much heated aggression, ripping at me, biting me, grunting and groaning, then collapsing at my feet alongside his Henry Poole cashmere suit crumpled on the floor. There was also that priceless look in his eyes as he handed me a ten-pound note, glimmering of a tender sadness and, dare I say, of love. Yes, I

know it's a ridiculous thing to proclaim, but I truly believed these men, even mildly, loved me.

I, however, didn't love them at all; I found most of them quite repulsive (even if I was exceedingly choosy about the calibre of gentlemen I would yield to). But I loved, with unquenchable passion, the diversion they offered, what they did to me, and how adored they made me feel. I also immensely enjoyed the feeling of slapping one of their filthy notes on the counter at the Savoy, sending it on its merry way, ordering a gin martini and one of their finest cigars, and congratulating myself, all the while, on this thrilling lifestyle I'd so masterfully concocted for myself. And in my state of post-coital and gin-infused bliss, I managed to convince myself that by liberating myself so effortlessly from all financial and sexual burdens, I'd enabled an even greater dedication to my musical practice. Yes, I honestly believed I was doing myself, and my music, the greatest of services.

Then one morning, two weeks before the performance, everything suddenly changed. I was in my room, sorting my laundry, listening to two announcers on the wireless discussing the British Council's role in Germany and the British scores now available to German orchestras. I was hardly paying any attention until one of the gentlemen spoke about the popularity of British entertainers that the council had sponsored to tour Germany. 'Absolutely,' the other responded. 'Noel Mewton-Wood's already heading back for his second tour of the country this year – leaving, I believe, in ten days time.'

It was not – or so I told myself – that I now knew that Noel was not going to witness my debut at Dukes Hall. In fact, at first I felt a certain *relief* that he wasn't going to be there. But it was something else, something more – it was the sudden awareness of the futility of what I was doing. That I was forcing myself through such inordinate pain, in order to play in a student hall with a student orchestra – I almost laughed as I imagined the

programme – the Academy orchestra performing at Dukes Hall, Marylebone Road – yes, it was laughable, I thought – while Noel toured Germany. He'd be playing to audiences in Frankfurt and Hamburg, and I, at twenty-one years of age, would be at *Dukes Hall* of all places – with the Academy orchestra – the highpoint of my career! Thank Christ he wasn't going to be here to witness it, I thought.

I poured myself a drink then sat down and composed a letter to Thomas saying that I'd decided to leave the Academy, and would he please be so kind as to inform my understudy that he would be performing the concerto. I was not in the least undecided – and not at all disappointed – in fact I was so unwavering that there really was no reason to discuss my decision. Then I thanked Thomas for his tireless support over the years and wished him all the best in the future with his flock of other aspiring pianists.

I walked about my room, quite stunned at first, unsure how to comprehend all that had appeared to me, all that I was about to do. But as I mused over this revelation, I began to feel almost ecstatic – what extraordinary clarity I now had, I thought. It didn't even cross my mind what I'd do with myself that afternoon, the following day, week, year; or for the rest of my life. All I felt was an overwhelming relief.

I delivered the letter to the staffroom that afternoon and continued on to the administration building where I filled in the necessary forms to remove myself from the student register. I then, predictably, headed off on one of my debauched little jaunts.

I greatly appreciated that Thomas didn't ever call.

The evening of the performance at Dukes Hall, I had a wonderful night. I sat in my room with half a dozen bottles of beer, listening to my Schnabel recording of the C minor concerto, overwhelmed by its stunning beauty, reassured by the knowledge that I would never have been able to play it so well, and that such a piece ought to be left in the hands of

the masters, those that allow humble music-lovers like myself to best enjoy the music. As I listened I kept thinking how pleased I was, that despite all that had passed, I was still able to enjoy this concerto so much. In fact, without the anxiety of having to perform to some inconsequential crowd, I found the concerto more beautiful and moving – yes, far more moving, in fact – than ever before.

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I still feel quite stunned, remembering leaving the Academy – that I could suddenly throw everything away like that. I don't lie when I say it really seemed to mean little to me at the time. I'm not sure whether this was simply because I was so rotten drunk every night, my head awash with the clammy, strained faces of so many anonymous men, or whether, it was something else. That somewhere deep within, I knew I didn't have what it took. To be a virtuoso. To be great. Yes, that was what I'd discovered through all of this – my wonderful secret had at long last been revealed – I possessed not an ounce of greatness at all, but rather a hideous ordinariness, at the very best. I suppose I ought to have been more upset than I was as this devastating realisation slowly emerged, but strangely I mainly felt a deep regret, knowing that I might have saved myself a lot of pain and bother if I'd stumbled upon this knowledge earlier on.

I mean, I certainly had everything else required to become a virtuoso. Determination. By God did I have determination. Just the other day, the physiotherapist was giving me some arm stretches to practice (– I'm finally getting on top of this damn problem, resting my overworked right arm, and writing and doing everything with my left). I asked him, 'Shall I just do a few stretches each day?' And he raised an eyebrow and said, 'Knowing you as I do,

I'd recommend you do only ten, not one-hundred-and-ten.' My face heated up and I had to blink furiously – can you believe it? – to fight back the tears. (Why on earth do I just cry at the drop of a hat these days?). I realised there and then with what dogged determination with I've pursued everything in my life – my father's approval, Noel, my music – how I've fought, fought, fought. I ought to be proud of my tenacity, I know. But for some unbeknownst reason, it just made me want to cry.

And love. Yes, my love for music could never be questioned. It really was everything to me, it always had been, even as a small child. I remember my first piano teacher, a wonderful woman called Miss Andersen. She lived on her own around the corner from us, though I never saw her outside, on the street or at the shops. It seemed her existence terminated at the walls to her apartment, and within this cocoon, which she always managed to keep warm even when snow was piling up outside the windows, she'd float about in chiffon dresses, using fur stoles for warmth. I could barely wait for Wednesdays to come around, when I could elope to my magical land, see my queen.

I was Miss Andersen's first pupil for the day and often she'd be playing the piano when I arrived. I'd hear music tumbling out through the walls and windows onto the street and I'd perch down under the geraniums on the sill and listen, imagining this quiet, elegant lady in her floral dress, poring over the keys like a swan gazing into the water. I would wait until the very last moment I could, until it might seem that I was late, then I would lightly knock, half hoping she wouldn't hear, bracing myself for that abrupt silence, like a flower being ripped from the ground. There'd be a velvety flurry then she'd open the door, gloriously flustered. I wanted to tell her I'd been listening for ten minutes, that more than anything I'd like to sit next to her on the stool while she played. But I was always too embarrassed to ask, so I'd just smile and tell her that I'd only just arrived, then wander up to

the piano and pull out my Czerny or Clementi, hand her my exercise book then sit up straight and wait to begin my scales.

Oh, I adored those lessons, and I adored that woman. I'd leave her house each week drunk with music, humming the suites of Bach all the way home. I was devastated when she left London at the beginning of the war and I was shunted off to Neville Majors, like some greyhound switching kennels. I still loved the music, of course. And I guess I must have been good at it. Just not good enough. Not great. I didn't have the fury. The madness. I know I ought to be glad.

Martha was at the door just now, banging away to be heard over the C minor. Gerald was on the phone – checking on me, no doubt. Told her to tell him I was fine, but a tad busy – she's quite used to my lies, dear woman – and I'd see him at the Pontefract at six. Dear me, that's only two hours away. So I asked her to bring me a strong coffee and a bite to eat.

No I didn't lie – I am busy. I'm listening to my records.

So anyway – my career as a musician. All gone. One must get used to that in life, I suppose: watching one's lifelong dreams, drifting like debris out to sea.

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In the summer of 1950, I went to see Noel perform Khachaturian's Piano Concerto at the Proms. Each time I saw him perform, I sensed something – a *hunger* – growing within him that extended to his playing, to his approach to the music and in his choice to perform such demanding, even punishing, works. He'd once joked to me that it was only with pure luck that he had been born with fingernails that weren't too embedded in the pulp of his fingertip so that he could bang away on the piano without drawing too much blood. I considered his

increased daring as being a part of a growing musical maturity, carrying him even further out from the swarm of pianists that had flooded post-war London with their tiny repertoires performed with such chilling expertise. Sitting back and watching him from the floor of the Royal Albert Hall, gazing at his solitary figure at the foot of the massive black Steinway, I saw a lone explorer venturing further out into a blizzard, propelled onwards by lord only knows what. The Khachaturian groaned and sighed with muted snaking sounds, chords pounding over dizzying cadenzas; it was as if we were all seated within a rumbling volcano. I often wondered what Noel was experiencing when he played such works – music that seemed to take him to the very edge.

The lights rose gingerly, and the audience started to shift from their trance. I was not ready for speech, or any human contact at all, so when I turned to my left to find myself face-to-face with the gentleman next to me, I immediately looked away.

‘I’m sure we’ve met before –’

I turned back towards this clipped, velvety voice. He stood tall and solid in a Burberry coat and spoke with a refreshing smile. I thought of a Scots pine, with its heaving stillness and balsamic breeze. Behind him stood an elderly woman I assumed to be his mother, who barely came up to his shoulders and who was done up as if for a coronation.

‘You’re a friend of Tippett’s aren’t you? I’ve met you at Morley College. Gerald Maddever.’ We shook hands and the woman peered her tiara-crowned head over the miniature lace-covered hand she had perched on his shoulder.

I was quite sure we’d never met but nonetheless introduced myself and explained that I didn’t know Tippett personally but often attended the Morley College concerts, so perhaps we’d bumped into each other there. He was a good ten or so years my senior – his hair, a fertile crop, was already peppered with grey – and underneath his coat I noticed an

immaculately knotted lilac silk tie and a string of carved beads that hung halfway down to his waist.

‘Trappist monks,’ he said quite casually. ‘Mother picked them up in the Philippines when she was visiting her healers.’ He glanced down and started to twirl the beads within his long manicured fingers. ‘Arthritis,’ he turned to her and smiled.

‘And I’m also a friend of Noel’s...’

He looked at me inquiringly, his eyes shining every colour from brown to smoky blue, like a wintry forest landscape.

‘Mewton-Wood.’

‘Oh, of course. Yes,’ he said with a huge purring grin which made me blush. ‘Lovely boy. Didn’t he play magnificently tonight? A most exciting musician, isn’t he? There really is *no* one else like him.’

I was beginning to find Gerald rather attractive; I edged a little closer.

‘I’ve always been very fond of Dennis Matthews – I mean aren’t we all? – but then whenever I come and see Noel perform, Dennis’s playing just starts to seem so awfully timid. Don’t get me wrong, he plays Mozart superbly, but you could never ask Dennis to play the Khachaturian, or the Busoni, or the Hindemith. I mean it would just be plain rude, wouldn’t it?’

‘Absolutely.’ My enthusiasm sounded a little forced.

Gerald raised his eyebrows, nodded and continued. ‘But then, there’s Noel’s problem, he’s far too masterful a musician. Nobody wants to be bothered with all that – they just want their pianists to keep pumping out the Beethoven Third and the Tchaikovsky First – they’re what get bums on seats! The *Ludus Tonalis*, the *Fantasia Contrappuntistica* – most people simply can’t understand those works!’

‘Yes, but even the Tchaikovsky First was booed off stage at its premiere.’

‘Yes, we critics are a ghastly bunch,’ he said and laughed. ‘I say, how about we continue this over a drink? I was just about to pop Mother in a cab – she wasn’t feeling at all well today – this humidity – and I said to her, Mother, what you need is a night at the Proms. And wasn’t I right, Mumsie?’

She beamed at her son, threaded her arm through his and squeezed it.

‘Righto,’ he grinned at me, ‘Let’s find Mother a cab and be on our way.’

We went to La Douce on D’Arbly Street: a dark basement bar with wood-panelled walls crowded with framed photographs of helicopters, soldiers and bombers, as well as mounted medallions and other war paraphernalia. It was crowded with gentlemen in suits, some with their hair oiled back, some wearing hats and gloves, and others with carnations in their lapels. They were mainly in pairs, or in small groups huddled around a lamp on a table; a few leaned against the bar, cigarettes dangling from their fingers.

We ordered gins-and-tonic and Gerald lit me a cigarette.

‘I like it here,’ he said, surveying the room while rubbing the silver lighter on his breast and returning it to his pocket.

I looked around, with that feeling of surprise I always get when stumbling upon any new environment, that abrupt awakening to the fact that so much of life passes me by without my noticing; I only have to wander down the wrong laneway to find an entirely new world stretched out in front of me, a world I would have never known to exist. I studied the faces of a few of the men, they all looked quite at home; I wondered who they all were, when not here. Sometimes I would catch the eye of one and they’d turn away and burst into laughter with their friends as if they hadn’t seen me. But mostly they’d hold my stare, and I’d

wonder whether I was imagining a wry smile creeping across their lips. ‘Yes, I’ve never been here before. It’s awfully friendly.’

Gerald started laughing. ‘Yes, I suppose it is. You know it’s *sturmfrei*,’ in a perfect German accent. ‘The safest place around. You’ll see Ducky bring round the hat later.’ Then he leaned in close. ‘For the Policeman’s *Benevolent* Fund.’

His cheeriness irritated me, especially whilst giving me information I really didn’t want to hear. I looked away, about the room, and another gentleman smiled in my direction, as if in confirmation.

‘Noel comes here,’ Gerald continued. ‘When he’s not in Germany, if you know what I mean.’

I smiled, not sure at all what he meant.

‘I’m sure the British Council over there would have him performing at the *Musikballe* every evening if they could.’

‘Yes, I’ve heard the German audiences adore him.’

‘Oh no, not that,’ Gerald laughed. ‘I’m talking about the Director of the British Council over there – Bill something-or-other – forgotten his name. Don’t think he’s very *fond* of what Noel gets up to back here.’ Gerald took a sip, then before he’d even brought down his glass, he raised his eyebrows and nodded towards the wall near the door. ‘Well I say, speak of the devil. Let’s say hello, shall we?’

Noel had just walked in from the street, and stood a few yards from the door, his skin glistening from the mid-summer humidity.

It had been over two years since we’d last spoken; he’d since toured Europe and Turkey, recorded the mammoth Busoni Concerto with Beecham, as well as several other Schumanns. And even though I’d been reasonably successful at banishing any romantic

thoughts about Noel from my mind, each time I read articles and notices, or saw him on stage, I'd experience a sudden tremor of weariness, like a marooned voyager looking up at the sun as it travels across the sky. As if time had become a measure of physical distance, and it was actually me, though stationary, who was drifting further away.

But seeing him there in front of me, it was suddenly as if only days, and not years, had really passed.

A small chap in a teal smoking jacket jumped up from a table to greet him. 'Have you met my affair?' I heard him ask Noel. He had impish eyes, an aquiline nose and black strands of hair swept across his shiny pink dome.

'No, not *this* week's,' Noel replied.

'Oh, get you. You're just jealous I'm not available. *Vada* – the goldilocks,' and he turned and nodded towards a young man with blonde curly hair. 'Isn't he divine? His father's a *Lord*,' and he broke off into giggles.

We joined Kip, a West End actor, and Noel; I turned to Noel and congratulated him on his performance. 'Good Lord,' he responded, laughing, shaking my hand and patting me on the arm. 'Fancy seeing *you* here!'

Gerald was soon engrossed in conversation with Kip, bending over to chat with this man who barely made it up to his shoulders, as if talking with a child. I asked Noel about his recent tours. 'Oh the Poles are wonderful,' he told me, 'They think every English man wears a coronet and drives a Daimler,' and, 'Well I won't forget the Ankara concert in a hurry. An enormous black cat walked on stage and curled at my feet at the beginning of cadenza in the Bliss Piano Concerto. I had no idea it was there but the orchestra were so distracted they completely fozzled their entry.'

He hadn't changed at all, I thought; as beautiful as ever.

‘And what have you been up to?’

‘Not a great deal.’ I immediately regretted my answer, so downed my drink, dragged on my cigarette, then added, ‘I’ve got tickets for next Friday’s performance of the *Snow Maiden*. Why don’t you come along?’ I spoke in the most offhand manner manageable, almost sneeringly.

‘That sounds smashing, I’d love to—’

I took another puff of my cigarette and looked away, aware my fingers were trembling furiously.

‘—only I’m heading back to Germany again. Then around Europe for a bit. And I’m afraid I’ll only be back for a week before setting off for Johannesburg,’ he laughed, as if the entire touring business were a tiresome joke.

I barely registered what Noel said next, all I could hear was the echo of my own small and pleading voice. I imagined him meeting prime ministers, kings and queens; performing for movie stars and millionaires; I began to wonder if he was only speaking with me to be polite.

‘You’re rather fond of Germany, it seems?’ I asked, bracing myself for his response.

‘Well, yes. Charming chap who works for the British Council over there organises everything superbly. Treats me like royalty, takes care of absolutely everything. Last time I was there the dear man even saved my life.’ He let out a spontaneous laugh.

I decided to leave, hoping he’d forget this entire conversation. I wished him all the best on his tour, tapping my cigarette in the air and watching the little grey flakes feather their way down to the carpet. Next to me, Gerald was chatting with a dark-haired man holding a bowler hat upside-down at his chest – Ducky I presumed. I said goodbye to them both, speaking over the top of Ducky, but the entire time I could feel Noel looking at me

and hear his jolly voice – ‘Wonderful to catch up. Sorry to hear that arm of yours is still playing up’ – splintering through the smoky sounds of the bar and my mumbled goodbyes.

Gerald was laughing at Ducky’s gossip – ‘If his crew weren’t queer when he took off, they certainly were by the time they landed’ – then noticed me leaving and signalled for me to wait. But I didn’t look at him either, I just reached into my pocket, pulled out two pennies and dropped them into Ducky’s bowler hat as I pushed past the other guests and walked towards the door. From the corner of my eye I saw Ducky smile, his chin growing enormous and his eyes wrinkling up like raisins, weaving a ‘Thankyou Sir’ seamlessly into his monologue, to the tinkling sound of the coins landing in the bottom of his hat. I opened the door, stepped off the footpath and straight out onto the street, wishing that someone might come along and mow me down. Amidst the tooting and yelling for me to get off the road, all I could think about was this tall faceless man in a khaki British Council uniform, standing on the platform at Hamburg’s Hauptbahnhof Station, waiting for the London train to pull in.

I entered the first pub I came across as I headed up the road and stood at the bar, surveying the gentlemanly crowd, waiting for someone to buy me a drink. I didn’t have to stand there for long before a mild and apologetic retired Oxford professor started plying me with champagne then kindly offered for me to accompany him home.

*

William Lang Fedrick was his name.

I found the fact he chose to call himself Bill and not William rather amusing. Bill certainly wasn’t a very *noble* name, not the name of a concert pianist. But then Bill was *not* a

concert pianist, he was a bureaucrat, of sorts. The Director of the Cultural Relations branch for the British Council in Germany.

Gerald sat back with his cigar, arms splayed to the side, his long legs gently crossed out in front of him. He reclined his head as if he were gazing at the stars, and not the ceiling rose in his library. He seemed more interested in the rings of smoke that floated out of his mouth and washed all over the roof than the information he relayed to me.

I had been seeing quite a bit of Gerald. I had mentioned to him on the night we met that I worked at EMG Handmade Gramophones on Grape Street behind the Prince's Theatre, and it only took him a matter of days to wander into the shop and invite me to the Lily Pond for a cup of tea.

Since then, we'd been frequent concert companions. Gerald also took me into some of the queer bars and cafés around town. Cautious as I was at first – I didn't quite understand who *these* people were and was uncomfortable with the lashings of make-up, perfume and outright candidness – it wasn't long before I began to enjoy myself and feel quite comfortable, if not totally at home. The topic of homosexuality, however, was never broached – except perhaps to ask of someone the other knew: Is he *so*? We disclosed very little at all, yet somehow, through all the gins and cigars, the concerts and ballets, details of our lives seemed to sift through the innocuous patter and into the other's understanding. Without it ever being discussed, I knew that Gerald was a frequent visitor to Piccadilly and Shaftesbury Avenue. And from the little jokes that he made about me – all white gloves and lavender – he was clearly well aware that I preferred to be wined and dined.

Gerald had never approached me, and even though I told myself he was decidedly not my type, I was nevertheless offended. I would watch him staring at others, or coquettishly angling his head to a chap standing next to us at a bar and remark, 'Goodness,

what exquisite cheekbones you have.’ When he returned to face me with his pursed grin, like a schoolboy who’s just set a booby trap and is waiting for the scream, I’d smile encouragingly, then spend the next half hour listening to my own snapping responses to his questions, my unnecessary little whips. Other times, when witnessing the meeting of two men he knew, he’d shake his head towards me and sigh, ‘bread and bread,’ and I’d console myself that perhaps that was the real issue between us.

I was never sure how much he understood of my feelings for Noel. He always filled me in on any relevant gossip he heard and no matter how much I badgered him for more information, he never enquired about my curiosity or treated the conversation as anything more than idle gossip.

‘So does Bill play the piano?’ I asked, pouring a cup of tea, using that as a focus for my gaze.

‘No, I don’t believe he does.’

I smiled.

‘Son of a builder,’ he said with a wry smile.

‘So what does everyone say about him?’

‘Well, I’ve asked Felix, Andrew and Gordon – they’ve all met him briefly. But no one seems to have very much to say about him, one way or the other. So I suspect he’s rather dull.’

I handed Gerald a cup of tea and passed him the plate of biscuits.

‘He’s moving over here, you know. Düsseldorf’s becoming the new headquarters for the council and they’re taking over the cultural work in Hamburg. So he returns in November. Noel and he are setting up house in Hammersmith.’

Blood drained from my face. I put my half-eaten arrowroot biscuit on the saucer, the crumbs in my mouth feeling thick and floury, impossible to swallow. I sat back in my chair in a mild panic, feeling as if the room were shrinking around me.

‘Apparently, he’s been most successful in bringing Constable to the cannibals,’ Gerald continued.

I didn’t want to hear any more; I thought to rise and leave.

‘He’s organised touring exhibitions of British theatre design, British town planning, and even the art of British children, can you believe?’ Gerald started laughing, then turned to me, his coffee cup in one hand, his cigar in the other. ‘Well, unless he’s extremely tolerant, I can’t see it lasting a week. He’ll never change Noel. Dorothy isn’t Dorothy without her ruby slippers.’

The following March, Gerald and I were invited to Noel and Bill’s Oxford-Cambridge boat-race party at the house in Hammersmith; an annual tradition that Noel had taken over from Walter.

I’d been seeing Noel frequently, out at parties, bars and concerts, and had developed an ease in his company that I hadn’t experienced during or since our affair. I told myself that his relationship with Bill was not of his own doing, that he had become ensnared, and that now he would begin to see me in a more desirable light.

It was fairly easy to convince myself that Noel and Bill weren’t happy, despite what everyone told me. Bill never seemed to join him out socially; he was always at home with a stomach-ache, or the flu – ‘I think it’s a brain tumour tonight,’ Noel would laugh as he sipped his martini. I would order him another and one for myself, as if in celebration of our robustness; to let him know I was not *that* sort, that I was more like him.

I also knew that while Bill lay at home in bed, Noel would gallivant around the town; he was always to be seen at this bar or that, or jumping in a cab to mosey off to another party. This only fuelled my dislike of Bill, that he clung on regardless.

My increased comfort with Noel was also partly due to the inference I took that I could be one of his liaisons. But the years of longing had nurtured a patient resilience in me, so I decided to wait for the right time. When that would be, I couldn't be sure. Bill would be gone, and Noel would come to me. Of that, I was sure.

The Saturday morning of the party was wet, with a bitter westerly wind whipping around the streets. I met up with Gerald at Notting Hill Gate for breakfast; he was wearing a navy velvet jacket and scarf and a slightly tattered Oxford boater. Gerald loved a party and rubbed his hands together excitedly as he spoke, striding out of the café into the wind, the wintry conditions only adding an inspiring edge to his day. We caught the train to Stamford Brook amongst the supporter crowd, all jiggling and rousing each other, rugged up in their Oxford navy or Cambridge pale blue, some with flags and banners, discussing the pre-race sessions at Putney, the orders of the crews; others cheering and hooting.

I stepped out of the station onto King Street and the thought that had been quietly eating at me for the last two weeks, since I'd received that gold embossed ivory card in the mail – that I had not been back to Hammersmith since *that* night – induced a sudden feeling of terror. How different Hammersmith seemed now, in daylight, all these years later. The traffic, the shops and cafés, the frantic newspaper man outside the station, the florist with his buckets of tulips, lilies and chrysanthemums. That night, it had been so dark and still, everything frozen in wait; I had slipped through the frosty evening air, propelled along the empty streets by anticipation – a *knowledge* – that my life was about to change.

Gerald, I was aware, was talking to me, but I couldn't hear a thing. I was overcome by sadness as I remembered the future I had authored for myself back then, the famous musician whom I imagined I would become. And now I contemplated this being, walking along in his place – hands in pockets, head bowed – who fell so far short of all I had envisioned. I searched for the excitement I'd felt the last time I'd walked this street – my skin bristling, my heart racing, feeling that I was about to burst from my chrysalis – I scrounged about for a sign that something was *about to happen*. Nothing – just the astringent taste of regret.

We turned into South Black Lion Lane, and I was grateful for the crowd of supporters in which to hide. Men and women singing boating songs, or running to get out of the wind and into the pub; and others – staggering, inebriated – holding each other up, as if the race were already long past.

We arrived at the door – still glossy ivy green, perhaps a fresh new coat – with its heavy brass knocker. Gerald knocked; I waited, and for a moment, Gerald became my old piano teacher, Thomas. Thomas who had also invested so much hope in me. I listened for Schumann and was surprised to hear Fats Domino, and realised I had never discussed any music but classical with Noel.

Noel opened the door, grinning, in a sports coat and slacks. He shook Gerald's hand and gave him a kiss on the cheek. Behind Noel I could see a face in the hallway, looking out towards us. He was tall, fair, with large hopeful eyes. Noel opened his arms wide and hugged me, kissing me on the cheek. His entire body was pressed against mine and although I was enjoying the feel, the smell of him – he was rarely so demonstrative – I felt embarrassed, holding him like that, while looking straight into the face of this man, who stood quietly, behind him in the hallway.

Noel introduced us all. But I couldn't look at Noel any more, only at Bill. He was much older than Noel, a tall strong build yet not at all athletic. It was as if his body was a slight encumbrance for him, he'd rather be a little smaller. He had thinning blond hair and a face that ought to have been handsome yet wasn't. There was something wet, flimsy, about him. His smile broke, mildly, upon introduction and his hand rose up from his side, ever so deliberately, to shake. It was cool and soft; I withdrew my hand as quickly as I could.

We moved inside; the house was set up similarly to how I remembered, only it was now filled with flowers. Noel was a keen gardener and had a great knowledge of botany so I presumed the large vases of azaleas, lilies, cherry blossom and tulips were his touch. I was glad to detect little evidence of Bill's presence. The living room was crowded with guests, and outside in the backyard I could see a few people braving the cold, gazing out down the river. Someone called inside that Goldie, the Cambridge reserve crew, were first round the bend; a few got up and walked outside, but most ignored the comment.

I recognised Noel's usual crowd – Tippett, Amis, Pears and the eye-surgeon Patrick Trevor-Roper; I also noticed a few of the Redgrave family, who lived next door. Almost immediately Gerald spotted some of his critic friends and took off into the room, and Noel went to get us some drinks; I was left standing with Bill.

'Lovely food,' I said, looking down at the trays of devilled plover's eggs, cantaloupe and caviar, oysters and strawberries.

'Noel,' he smiled weakly. 'He does all the cooking. I can't even boil an egg,' then let out a very unmanly giggle.

'Really?' I said, peering around toward the front door. The knocker sounded regularly, and each time, I looked about, not to see who had arrived, but to watch Noel greet each guest and usher them into the room. He gave most people a kiss (something he'd never

normally do in public), but I was pleased he hugged few. Occasionally the greeting seemed a little over-friendly – like the lingering embrace he gave to a handsome chap who I believed worked for the BBC – and I'd find myself shooting an interrogatory stare.

I lost him for a few minutes – I thought I could vaguely hear him over near the piano – and was perplexed that Bill could just stand there, talking to me about Henry Moore, without bothering to offer me a drink.

Just as I was about to excuse myself, Noel arrived with a glass of champagne for me, and John Amis, who was standing behind Bill turned his head towards us and said, 'Noel, this is *bliss*,' while holding up a half-eaten salmon and asparagus tart.

'Oh no, John. This is Bill – *that's* Bliss,' and he nodded towards the doorway, where Arthur Bliss, the composer, stood, having recently arrived. Bill and John both let out a whooping laugh and Noel, pleased with the response, rushed off to attend to more guests.

I watched Noel as he toured the room, his hand on the shoulder of a seated guest as he lent down to present his tray of canapés, tell jokes, then move on, creamed lobster sandwiches and smiles in his wake. I turned back to hear the doleful sound of Bill, telling me of his experience living in Hamburg.

'...shortages you can't imagine – soap, paper, electricity – I was living by candlelight most nights. And they went out of their way to make the council offices as modest as possible. It was thought the least sign of luxury would be resented. *Die Möwe*, the Russian artists' club in Berlin had waiters in spotless white coats and nobody could talk of anything else. So a cup of tea and a biscuit were the maximum entertainments permissible...'

I imagined Noel in these surroundings, with Bill. A tiny apartment with no heating, no hot water, sitting around a grubby table by candlelight. Hot buttered toast with a skerrick of jam from the bottom of a tin. Outside on the streets, a city in ruins. The libraries, the

universities, the municipal buildings, all destroyed. I imagined him walking along the streets, the children playing on piles of rubble, the only cheerful sight to be seen. What was it that Bill offered that enabled him to bear such a place?

‘...the “Old Masters” exhibition was supposed to be two hundred years of British Art, Hogarth to the pre-Raphaelites but the committee wouldn’t allow us to put in the pre-Raphaelites and leave out the Victorians...’

His voice droned on like a wireless in the background. I listened to little; just stood, grinding my teeth, staring at his face, its features, his limpid skin, his watery blue eyes, his long spidery eyelashes. I grew tired of looking at it, repulsed, and moved down to his blocky workman’s hands holding his wine glass, his little finger, wearing a jade ring, splayed out to the side. We couldn’t have been more different, and I couldn’t see anything about him I liked. This both pleased me, and bothered me. Bothered me that whatever Noel saw in Bill was so clearly absent in me.

‘...what Heiser kept forgetting is that it was the Germans that needed re-educating, not the British. Really, it was maddening...’

I looked back at his thin pale lips, blotchy and dry, that moved so sluggishly as he spoke, and imagined Noel kissing them. I looked at the skin of his neck, his ears – all areas that Noel had explored. And I returned to his hands. Those plump square hands. And I saw them on Noel. I tried to ignore it but it played incessantly in front of me each time I saw his fingers twitch around the glass.

‘...there are five women to every man in Germany, and the men are either children or elderly. And it’s exceedingly difficult to get Germans to come out socially – large parties only confuse and depress them. Thank goodness for visits from Noel, we’d have such a jolly time together when he came over—’

‘Pardon?’ I had a sudden need to rejoin the conversation in order to quell my anger, and find out all I could about their time together in Germany.

‘I knew you two would get along swimmingly,’ Noel interrupted, arriving by Bill’s side. ‘The race is about to begin so you must step out for a few moments. Which side are you on?’ Noel turned to me.

I hadn’t, up until now, considered that I ought to be barracking for a particular crew. I looked around and saw Gerald, his thick navy scarf wrapped around several times under his chin, his boater tilted to the side, waving his cigarette about his head as he spoke. I looked at Noel, smiling expectantly at me in his navy jacket; Bill with his duck-egg blue tie.

‘Oxford,’ I replied.

‘Really?’ Bill said. ‘*We’re* barracking for Cambridge. May the best team win then, eh?’

Noel charged our glasses, and we headed out through the French doors onto the patio.

Gerald wandered towards us and before long I heard Bill talking to him about how most of the libraries across Germany had been destroyed, the resulting gross shortage of books, and how the German view of British literature was represented by London, Kipling, Wilde and Galsworthy. I was dismayed to see that Gerald looked enthralled.

The garden was now full of guests, many pressed up against the low brick wall overlooking the river, others were on the wooden seats or gathered under the newly budded peach tree. Being some of the last to venture outside, we stood at the top of the bluestone steps that lead down into the garden, overlooking the boaters, felt hats, umbrellas and glasses of champagne. Down below us all, the river was a confused grey-brown, and waves were tearing up the water, heading upstream, despite the outgoing tide.

Inside, a couple of guests remained, and had turned down the music, and turned up the wireless. A call rang out from the living room, which soon spread across the yard – ‘Oxford won the toss, they’ve chosen Surrey Station!’ The noise of the gathering rose as the news was sent around and discussed, everyone bracing themselves for the start.

The voice from inside yelled out that the race had begun.

Although it would be at least five minutes before we first saw them coming around the bend and under Hammersmith Bridge, people started shuffling towards the far end of the garden, leaning over the embankment, looking out and down to their left.

‘There are waves breaking over Oxford’s washboard!’ the voice called through the doors. No one outside seemed to be listening, though, everyone was too busy gazing out down the river, wrapping scarves tighter around themselves, or, bored with the wait, returning to conversation. Noel started telling me about the next party they’d be having, sometime in June – ‘a Kiftsgate party’ – for the flowering of the Kiftsgate, and he pointed to the huge rose bush, almost ten yards high that had climbed up the southern wall of the house and over the doorway behind us. Masses of clusters of creamy-white flowers that smelt like apples, he told me. ‘The bees go crazy’. I looked back and around us to admire the huge shrub, which I realised had almost entirely taken over the wall of the first floor of the house, and was grasping up higher, towards the second level. That’s when I realised that someone was shouting out from inside the house.

‘They’re sinking, they’re sinking!’

I lowered my eyes from this massive rambling climber to the inside doorway where a small fat man in a chequered jacket was rushing out waving his hands about.

‘The Bishop’s stopped the race. Oxford have sunk!’

The first people I turned to were Bill and Gerald, both laughing and raising their glasses in mock celebration and commiseration. I didn't want to even look at Noel, though I could hear him laughing loudly beside me. I just looked out to the river, at the murky, wild and icy waves, then into the yard, at everyone laughing, cheering and clapping in the biting wind and spray as if they couldn't have anticipated such a wonderful result.

As well as the annual boat-race and Kiftsgate celebrations at Hammersmith, Noel hosted a string of birthdays, theatrical performances (using one of his homemade marionette theatres and performing *Electra*, *Salome*, or a play he'd written and composed himself) and dinner parties, where he'd impress guests with fish mornay, Polish poppy-seed cake, or another dish or cocktail he'd picked up on the continent.

One night I was there amongst the remnants of a daytime party. The food and the sunshine had dwindled away hours earlier, and only a dozen or so guests remained, all terribly drunk, gathered in the living room, holding gins and cigarettes. After wandering about, weary and quiet, for much of the late afternoon, Bill disappeared completely. He had a habit of doing that: after chatting away for hours, he'd suddenly switch off as if he had suddenly exhausted his reserve of energy and charm, and an insipid smile and slow deliberate blinking would be all he could manage. I was always glad to see him slink off unceremoniously while Noel stayed behind, enjoying the company of his guests.

Two men at the piano were improvising on a monotonous jazz riff; Noel slid by them with a tray full of drinks and smiled, You *are* fond of C major, aren't you? I'd had too much to drink and took advantage of my brazen mood by chatting with Michael Tippett, who stood quietly over by the bookshelf, and upon whom I'd always had a mild crush. I complimented him on the recording of his *Heart's Assurance* song cycle, with Noel and Peter

Pears. His melancholy eyes sparkled as he spoke about the extraordinary radiance of Noel's performance; and his meandering dialogue jumped about each topic, from one idea to another, like a dog tracking a scent. Knowing, as everyone did, that Tippett had served three months at Wormwood Scrubs during the war as one of London's more famous conscientious objectors, I found myself talking with him about my father, about how he was suspended and facing trial in the weeks before he died for his refusal to continue publishing a litany of lies about the Germans. Tippett must have been accustomed to speaking on such topics, as he didn't flinch at all in response to my tirade, and without a change in tone, plainly assured me that in a world militarised up to potential self-destruction, pacifism will always be politically powerless and inescapably at odds with society. His soothing voice ambled on and I was thinking that I could happily listen to Tippett chatting away all night, when all of a sudden, a surge swept up through my body, my head started to spin and I thought I was going to be sick. I placed my drink down on the sideboard and concentrated all my attention on my rising nausea, leaning one leg against the sofa behind me, and focusing my wavering glare on Tippett. I was aware he must have noticed my sudden muteness, but before I could think up a witty comment and take leave, my giddiness overtook me. I blurted an excuse right over the top of his words, and left as quickly as I could manage. His apologetic smile was all I remember seeing before heading out into the hall. After that, I remember little: collapsing through a doorway into a cool dark room.

I awoke cold and stiff with no idea where I was; my head was pounding and my throat painfully parched. I could feel the soft velvet cushions of an armchair beneath me. There was a thin strip of streetlight coming through the window between the curtains enabling me to make out, after a moment or two, the greyish outlines of a room.

I stood, unsteadily at first and felt along the wall for the light switch. An unfamiliar room appeared brilliantly about me: a walnut-wood writing desk; shelves full of books on ballet, fine art and architecture; and framed photographs evenly spaced along the marble mantelpiece: family photographs, presumably of a mother and father, another of a young uniformed man with a thick crop of blonde hair and a familiar sheepish smile. In the centre, inside an ornate silver frame, was a large photograph of Noel, walking towards the camera, grinning. I didn't recognise the landscape – a park of tall conifers, blanketed in snow – possibly northern Europe. I realised I was in Bill's study.

I couldn't hear a sound; the party, I presumed, had long finished. The eerie stillness of deep night hung about me as if it were about to pounce. I looked around at my new surroundings – the impressionist paintings, the large Peshawar rug, the Polynesian mask – feeling like I had awoken within a dream, within another's life: Bill's life. I tiptoed around the room, exploring it all, touching its surfaces; a gradual realisation starting to emerge, of the sheer size and weight of this existence, everything it amassed, encompassed – this man had a study, filled drawers and cupboards with letters and work, kept private belongings collected over a lifetime. I wasn't sure what to make of my predicament – it was too ironic, scandalous. I looked at my watch – three o'clock. My heart was beating furiously, and I could feel a wave of heated agitation rising up through my body; an agitation that I wasn't quite able to discern as either excitement or rage.

I walked to the desk and sat, and immediately had a sense of being in a control room, or even a throne, looking down over Bill and the world, and I was filled with a thrilling sense of inviolability.

I imagined Bill, sitting in this leather chair where I sat: typing letters, making telephone calls, writing these immaculate copperplate-script lists. I grinned as I imagined

myself whirl out of my chair – like a bear woken from sleep – and smashing *everything* in sight. I had to close my eyes to calm myself, settle my breathing, try to slow my pummelling heart.

I waited to open my eyes until I knew I could look at what was in front of me, just slowly take it all in, not do anything rash, and work everything out from there.

The first thing that leapt up at me was his handwriting. Everywhere – lists, notes, envelope labels – its perfect uniformity, monotonous angle, giddying to read.

There was also a typed letter, in duplicate, in front of me on the desk. I picked it up and began to read:

Dear Mr Alwyn Jones,

Thankyou for your letter of 14th of April. Mr Mewton-Wood would like to avail himself of your kind offer to book him accommodation at the Park Hotel in Cardiff for the night of the 30th of May. Please note that the Brahm's Concerto no. 1 that Mr Mewton-Wood will be broadcasting with the BBC Welsh Orchestra is in D minor, not D major. Mr Mewton-Wood also asked me to point out that the playing duration is 48 minutes 40, and not 45 minutes, as stated in your last letter. Please give my and Mr Mewton-Wood's regards to Rae Jenkins and his wife.

Yours Sincerely,

William Lang Fedrick.

The file next to the letter was titled in the same neat hand, *BBC correspondence 1951-*, and was filled with carbon copies of numerous similar letters, all written or typed by Bill,

organising Noel's BBC Cardiff broadcasts for the Home and Light Programme, his fees, his accommodation, his programmes.

I leaned back in my chair and started reading, one by one, every letter, my anger cooled by a prickling curiosity.

It had never crossed my mind that Bill managed all of Noel's affairs, that he had sown himself into Noel's life so intricately, creating such a formal arrangement. I laughed to myself, at the earnestness of Bill's efforts, performing such a facile job. By the end of the file, Bill's words – his polite, meticulous tone – became so familiar to me that I felt I knew the man intimately, and was incensed by how tepid and inefficacious he appeared.

Ignoring the sound of the wind rummaging through the house, and my headache and thirst, I opened the second folder on the desk – *Noel's BBC correspondence 1940-51* – and continued reading. Some of the letters, scrunched and ripped, dated back to during the war, when Noel had composed and broadcasted for the BBC London Transcription Services – music for the British at home and at the front, and incidental music for the strip cartoon *Fred Perkins, War Correspondent*.

I was about to close the file, when I found a series of letters from the BBC Music Department, some of which looked like they'd been screwed up then pressed flat: *...our director of music asks me to inform you with regret that we are unable to include your new piano concerto in the programme for the 1944 Prom season...we are returning your sonata herewith and thankyou very much for showing it to us... I am afraid some time has elapsed since you sent in this score... it was reported upon by our advisers four years ago and none of them felt able to recommend it for our use... the answer must be that I cannot broadcast it...*

Pages and pages of letters, rejecting Noel's compositions. I read through them carefully, not only unable to recall any of the works mentioned, but also certain that Noel

had never breathed a word of them to me. As I read on, my anger returned, shifting from H. Vowles, Dr. Hely-Hutchinson and other members of the BBC Music Advisory Panel – whoever’s words I happened to be reading – before coming to rest on Bill, on his incompetence, his clear inability to advance Noel’s career.

I stopped occasionally to think of Noel, fast asleep, not far above where I sat. I leaned back in my chair and felt that I could almost hear his breath, that I had somehow slipped into his unconscious sleeping world. I heard the creaks and groans of the house, and occasionally even thought I heard laughter or chatter; I imagined Noel up and roaming about the house, knowing I was there, coming to find me.

There was a photograph on the desk of Noel in evening tails at the Royal Festival Hall, standing in the spotlight at the edge of the stage; he never did show much emotion at the end of the performance – unlike Hess, whose smile would melt an audience – not even a full bow, just a brief nod in each direction. I remembered soon after the opening of the hall, the day I’d accompanied him along the corridors on his way to rehearse for his first performance in this new auditorium, hailed as the greatest concert hall in the world. He was stony faced, unusually quiet.

I had watched the Festival Hall take shape on the banks of the Thames for two years, read of the two-and-a-half million pounds it had cost to build: restaurants with furnishings in white maple and off-white leather, the auditorium – *with acoustics like the soundbox of a Stradivarius* – with floors of teak and Ugandan cork, the panelled walls of Australian walnut, rosewood plywood chairs. *Everyone* had heard from *someone* what it was like to perform there: the wave-shaped sycamore soundboard above the stage, the massive Compton organ, the rows of black and white boxes jutting out from the walls of the auditorium that appeared suspended in space. Moiseiwitsch had performed in the inaugural concert of the Festival of

Britain in front of the King and the Queen, with Myra Hess and Denis Matthews performing later that opening week. Noel didn't perform until week three.

There we were, walking towards the rehearsal, gazing through the glass wall over the river. I'd wondered why Noel showed so little excitement, whether perhaps he was nervous. He walked in silence, running his hand along the cool Derbyshire stone walls, then he stopped and gazed at the polished surface next to his hand; I moved closer to him, and looked closely at the white shapes floating in the greyish brown stone, thousands of them, some shaped like rings, others the shape of small sausages and eggs. 'Ammonites,' he said. 'They've waited hundreds of millions of years to be immortalised in these walls.' I looked closer and realised that the small white shapes in the marble were fossils, that I was standing next to a wall containing thousands of tiny Palaeozoic animals. I looked ahead along the smooth glassy surface and was overcome by a feeling of great unease, by the motionless drift of creatures as far as I could see.

As soon as Noel joined the conductor, Maurice Miles, and the Yorkshire Orchestra on stage he was his usual buoyant self. But watching him, grinning and making jokes, I wasn't able to forget that troubled look – suddenly so much older than his twenty-eight years – as he stared at the wall, at that ancient, frozen parade.

I looked back to the silver-framed photograph on Bill's desk: Noel's Festival of Britain performance, and slipped the souvenir into my pocket. That moment, I decided, belonged more to me than to Bill.

There was one last letter in the manila folder, addressed to Dulcie, still in its envelope. I realised I was grinding my teeth and my lungs felt small and tight. I began reading, hoping the letter might provide some kind of relief, reveal some valuable insight, or a delightful new aspect of Noel. But it was another rejection letter, for a composition that

Dulcie had sent to the BBC. I angrily put it away and found, sharing the same dog-eared envelope, a letter to Dulcie from Noel, written in the early years of the war. The crossing of the T's were scratched almost across an entire line; the letters were barely legible, frantically written and oriented in all directions. I wouldn't have recognised it for Noel's usually steady hand if it weren't for the sweeping signature at the bottom, with its two dots punched into the paper, unlauding the *e*.

Saturday

Dear Mother,

I received your letter today, and I must say I was very surprised at your feeble-mindedness. You may be sure that until I am really famous I shall receive many adverse criticisms, but for you to change your opinion of any particular performance of mine because of a critic, is so surprising. You told me after the concert that the only thing you wished to improve was the way I walked on. You now say in your letter that the pedal spoilt the effect of the Chopin étude, yet when I especially asked you after the concert whether this was the case you definitely said “no”!!! If you thought it was spoilt, you might have said so when asked: but if you didn't think so, then to change your opinions to that of someone else is *very* feeble-minded.

Do see if you can come to the Glasgow concert, we must both start saving up. And please cheer up about your job! Remember the proverb:

‘Everything comes to him who waits.’

With best love,

Noël.

I pocketed the letter, and could feel myself growing unsteady again; I started to wonder if I should leave, concerned about what I might do if I stayed. I couldn't have even said what it was that disturbed me – I felt immensely troubled, as if I were inhabited by some foreign, seething being. I paced about the room, sniffing at every object, stifled by the odious veneer of watercolours, glazed Chinese tea sets and framed letters from the Queen.

But I didn't want to leave – like a snarling creature in its lair, I felt I was exactly where I wanted to be. I continued marching about in circles, winding myself up, thinking about my next move. I imagined I heard noises above me, the sound of the creaking floorboards, and other times it seemed as if the house were filled with music and guests, people chatting and laughing, walking up and down the hall, the front door opening and closing.

I visualised Bill, half-naked, slipping out of the bed; Noel sleeping under the sheets and blankets, only waking to the sound of Bill placing a tray of tea and toast on the bedside table next to him. As I saw all of this, Noel sitting up in bed, Bill stirring the tea, I started to think how *pathetic* they *both* were. That Noel had *chosen* to be with this ridiculous *feeble-minded* man who didn't understand him at all – that they had fooled themselves how happy they really were! And this quaint little study with its fastidiously kept files and affectionately displayed photos was really – like everything else they'd built around them – just one enormous farce!

I'm not sure how long I stayed; I can't remember leaving. Only walking past the wall at the end of the street, feeling quite shaken, and it seeming that someone was walking beside me. I recall looking out to the river and thinking how extraordinary it was that at times of extreme sadness, the world can possess such unearthly beauty. The sky was a milky blue, a brilliant

colour radiating out from the rising sun peeking over the elms far in the east near the bend, and I was struck by the desire to throw myself into that deep shimmering water.

*

Martha's just brought me up a plate of rather cheerless looking macaroni cheese, a slice of jam sponge, and a pot of coffee. She looked at me most intently when she placed down the tray, as if she were expecting me suddenly to burst into tears or blurt out some confession. What has Gerald been telling the dear woman? I really do wish he'd hold that tongue of his in check.

Anyway, I'm now not sure I'm terribly hungry, thinking about that shameful night in Hammersmith – I really must have been quite off my head at the time – but it will be a long evening so I'd best try to eat something.

So, no – I hadn't the faintest idea Noel dreamed of becoming a composer. I only now, regretfully, imagine that perhaps it wasn't that important to me at the time. I simply saw him as the greatest pianist in the world; the rest, I suppose I thought would surely follow. So I probably forgot about the letters in Bill's study. Maybe I just chose to forget. I don't know. I had enough on my mind. Well there was bloody Bill for starters. And there was – well, the entire circumstances, really. It was most unpleasant for me. Us all being such great *friends*. I really had no idea how I felt – angry? besotted? frustrated? bored? All of these, I'm sure. But I couldn't see any of that at the time. No wonder I had no idea what was going on for Noel. But don't think for a minute I haven't wondered how it all might have ended up. If I'd behaved differently, that is. Such small, simple things that I could have said or done, that could have altered everything. I think a lot about that, actually – how we find

ourselves where we are, at the end of an intricate, delicate web – a cloth of miniscule crossroads trailing out behind us, endlessly in all directions. And whether we could have just as easily made a small, often innocent, turn – caught an eleven-thirty bus, say, rather than one at twelve o'clock – or a series of them, way, way back, and now be living an entirely different life.

Oh well. Will do me no good to go thinking about all that now.

*

I decided not to go to the 1952 Aldeburgh Festival. I'd been twice before. In 1948, the year Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears founded the Suffolk seaside festival, I saw Noel stand in last minute after Clifford Curzon cancelled; he played Schumann's entire *Davidshändlertänze* and several other mammoth works to a full-house in the Aldeburgh Cinema on a Sunday afternoon. I also went in 1951, the year Noel premiered the Gerhard Piano Concerto at the fourteenth-century Aldeburgh parish church. But a month before the 1952 festival, at one of Noel and Bill's Hammersmith dinner parties, Bill asked over his limply held glass of burgundy if I'd be attending Aldeburgh. He lowered his glass, picked up his cutlery as if it were surgical implements and edged a morsel of Noel's juggled hare onto his fork and placed it in his mouth. As I watched his lazy, ungulate-like mastication, I announced, 'No.' I said it quite loudly; loudly enough for Noel and Tippett, who were arguing about Sibelius, to turn their heads momentarily. 'No, I won't be going to Aldeburgh,' I said again. Noel was to be performing twice – works by Beethoven, Britten, Weber, Rainier, Hindemith, Saint-Saëns and Poulenc – several pieces of which I hadn't yet heard. But I had said no, and I wasn't going back on my word.

I spent the festival week in London, sweltering in my room and on the underground, avoiding any word of Aldeburgh. When I next bumped into Noel at Rockingham's, he didn't seem his usual lively self: his laughter was forced, and his words either stumbled or blurted out too loudly. In retrospect, it was probably the first time that things hadn't seemed quite right with old Noel.

I didn't enquire of the festival; however it came out through the course of our conversation that Ben had been very busy the entire week working on his opera *Gloriana*, which he hoped would be ready for Coronation week the following year, and Ben had asked Noel if, after the Proms, he would substitute for him and tour the country with Peter. I knew Noel enjoyed accompanying musicians, especially tenors like Peter, but I wondered how he felt to be *standing in* for another pianist. Noel Mewton-Wood – an *understudy* – filling in for Britten who made being a musician, a composer, a performer, appear so stunningly simple; who was called upon to perform all round the world, who was commissioned to compose by the Queen. What's more, everyone knew that Peter was miserable when without his partner; that he moped and whined and would barely even eat. That even though Peter adored Noel and considered him a brilliant pianist, he'd *far* rather be performing with Ben.

I remember Noel standing there with his head bowed, looking out under his eyebrows, his eyes flitting about the room, as he mentioned that Bill was off to Scotland the following day, to curate an exhibition of modern British portraiture. He said that Bill had an extraordinarily keen sense of colour and light, and he had recently bought Bill some paints and an easel to set up in the yard. Bill had already finished some lovely watercolours of the wildfowl and grebes feeding in the evening, he said, and another of the rowers as they trained on the river. I wanted to tell him that I couldn't think of anything more hideous than an amateur rendition of a spindly brown bird pecking in the boggy littered mudflats, but I

said nothing. I stood, letting my heavily lidded eyes tell him how disinterested I was in the amusements of this lumbering man with his wispy blonde crown and manicured nails, who smelt as pink and soapy as a baby; I wanted him to suddenly recognise the absurdity of Bill's behaviour and be embarrassed, even *appalled*, by the realisation. Then out of the blue, Noel said to me that maybe I'd like to come over for dinner the following night, it would just be the two of us, then he just stood there – sadly, now I come to think of it – waiting for me to reply. Even now, I'm as astounded by my response as I was moments after I spoke: standing with my arms crossed, smoke trailing from the cigarette between my fingers, I said to him I believed I was busy.

That winter was one of the coldest I can remember. Some days the smog was so thick, you could barely see your feet, and one night, a performance at the Sadler Wells Theatre had to be cancelled because the stage wasn't visible from the stalls. It was too cold to stay home, so most nights after work I'd go out drinking, often with Gerald, always keeping my eye on the time so that at least half-an-hour before close I could start batting my eyes towards the finest suit in the bar, and find myself a charming rosewood-carved bed for the night, with the plumpest goose-down pillows and duvet. I heard little about Noel and Peter's tour. And any time he crept into my mind I'd shoo him out the door, slamming it shut with the thought that Bill, like myself, was stuck, working in London. I was also convinced that out of the three of us, I was surely having the most fun.

I was now working at the library at the Royal College of Music, supervising the record collection, and also in charge of writing articles, programme lists and notices for their newsletters, magazines and concert programmes. More recently I'd also been writing articles for *Gramophone* and other journals, jobs that Gerald had lined up for me. I didn't particularly mind all this new work; I moved through it quite effortlessly. Though every now and again,

as if someone had tapped me on the shoulder or whispered in my ear, I'd become suddenly aware how far I was being carried from my music; that a considerable stretch of time had passed without me returning to the piano; and that perhaps it could now be assumed that I never actually would. Strangely, I almost sadly realised that I wasn't particularly bothered.

I'd do all my writing at home, working at the table with a tumbler of gin and a packet of cigarettes, on the typewriter Gerald had given me soon after we'd met, as a gentle inducement to write down some of my *precocious* – as he called them – musical ideas. I enjoyed coming up with the inconsequential pieces I wrote for the College, and even more so the journal articles I'd been writing since the time Gerald went away for a cousin's wedding on the Amalfi, and had asked me to cover his notices and column, 'The London Stave'. I never told him how flattered I was by the request; I simply shrugged and agreed. I remained quietly pleased with the work he subsequently sent my way despite considering the clattering contraption on which I tapped away a vulgar apparatus.

I never missed a performance when Noel was in town. He played less and less of the *lollypops*, as he called them – the Beethoven and Tchaikovsky concertos, the Bach Toccata – and more pieces that audiences had rarely, or never before, heard; often by contemporary composers – Seiber, Ferguson, Oldham, Rawsthorn, Bliss, Bush and Tippett – some who wrote works specifically for Noel to perform, dedicating the music to him.

During his returns to London, I'd see him out drinking at parties and bars around Soho, always without Bill, and often disappearing out the door on the tail of someone who I'd joke to Gerald looked *five-dimes-for-a-dame*. Noel never mentioned the tour with Peter or any other work he was doing. I'd hear from Gerald that everyone was talking about how Noel and Walter Goehr had just that day recorded such-and-such concerto in a single take,

and I'd look over my shoulder to the corner of the bar and there I'd see Noel sitting at a booth ordering champagne for some pouting youngster.

I remember the day the notice came out in the paper for his recording of the Bliss concerto, telling of *most ingenious and brilliant passage-work and cadenzas, a thrilling account of a defiantly romantic concerto*. I carried the paper around with me all day until meeting up with Gerald at the Lily Pond for a drink and pulling it out to show him.

'Oh, that's very odd,' Gerald said, his brow knitting up as he read, and I thought he must be referring to the fact that Noel still received the occasional tongue-lashing from a member of the old guard. But when he finished reading, he told me that he'd bumped into Noel on the train at Liverpool, and Noel hadn't mentioned a word about the notice; he'd had his head buried in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and when Gerald approached him he jumped to his feet and started reciting, by heart, long tracts from the work. 'He really was most peculiar,' Gerald said, shaking his head disapprovingly. Then when Noel finally broke off his monologue, Gerald said, he sat down and leaned in towards him, raised his eyebrows, looked around the carriage and whispered, 'Tell me – I haven't got my glasses with me – are there any good-looking boys about?'

That final summer, Noel performed at Festival Hall twice, as well as the Proms, Aldeburgh Festival, Edinburgh Festival, and the St Ives Festival, where he premiered a sonata Bliss had dedicated to him. Hindemith publicly announced, 'If you want to hear my music the way it is meant to sound, listen to Mewton-Wood perform it'; the conductor Malcolm Sargeant proclaimed Noel 'a genius'. Noel appeared unstoppable.

The only times he ever upset his increasingly large following were the occasional performances when something would rattle him and he would *go through his tone*. Once, during a performance of *Carnivale* at the Wigmore, the orchestra hashed their entry at the

end of one of his solos; Noel's jaw and temples rippled, his hands came crashing down on the chords, and I felt the entire audience bristle, fearing for the piano's safety.

Then in the green room after the performance, Noel was as cheerful as ever, flirting outrageously with a young clarinetist from the orchestra. I was annoyed that he had lost his temper on stage, and now, rather than talking with critics and conductors, he was more interested in hunting down a bit of trade. When I first entered the room, I walked past him and without intending to snap, said, 'I've told you before not to sit down before walking on stage – your trouser was all creased!' He jerked his chin back – I wasn't sure if he was shocked or bemused – so I added, 'You know your crotch is the first thing people look at when you walk on stage!' and winked, which sent him into fits of laughter. I walked to the other side of the room and kept an eye on him as I chatted with John who mentioned in passing that Noel was terribly depressed about how few times he'd been asked to perform at the Festival Hall. He said that up until that summer, in the two years since the Festival of Britain, Denis Matthews had played seven times and Noel had only been asked to play once. I was surprised by John's words and said, 'But everyone adores Noel.' But as I was speaking, I felt a strange sensation, a feeling of both panic and sadness, as if I were suddenly aware that everything were rapidly coming to an end, that time was running out. It all seemed so clear to me, that these were the last few quivering moments before a momentous breakthrough, before *real* international success. It was now only a matter of time before a major recording contract was signed and Noel and that blasted man Bill left for America, possibly not returning for several years. I looked around the room at the large crowd that had gathered here after his performance – London's most notable musicians, politicians and aristocracy – and glanced at Noel over near the wall, talking to this young boy over the rim

of his champagne glass, and for a moment, I was seized by a terrible feeling that all of this would soon be gone.

At the beginning of autumn, when the leaves on the plane trees first started blanching and withering on their limbs, Noel and Bill bought and moved into a Georgian terrace in Hillgate Place, Notting Hill. I didn't see much of either of them around this time. Bill was now Exhibitions Officer for the British Council and was frequently away setting up shows and liaising with other cultural officers (Noel spoke of the exhibitions Bill curated as if they were symphonies Bill had composed), and Noel was recording a long list of concertos for the small Concert Hall label with the conductor Walter Goehr. I, on the other hand, was out drinking every night, only just managing to hold down my job at the library, only recently having received my final warning after blowing up at a student for returning a record to the wrong shelf.

Noel told everyone that Bill was the best thing that had happened to him, that he couldn't stand it when Bill went away. Yet it was these days and weeks when Bill was out of London that I'd see more of Noel – he'd be at Rockingham's, the Fitzroy Tavern, the Lily Pond, or Copa's – surrounded by a group of friends or admirers, a cigarette in one hand, a champagne in the other, and a gin-and-tonic, ordered by some young hopeful, bubbling quietly on the bar.

One evening, when Bill was away in Germany, I bumped into Noel as he was heading out the door of a bar in Charlotte Street. He was broadcasting the following day, Stravinsky's choral ballet *Les Noces*, and suggested that we go out for a drink afterwards. I had the afternoon off and as he wasn't sure what time they'd be finished, we settled that I'd

come to the BBC Maida Vale studios and sit in on the recording, then we'd head out somewhere from there.

I'd seen Walter Goehr conducting at Morley College and with other orchestras, but had never made his acquaintance, so when I arrived I slipped into the recording booth and picked up a paper to read while the choir, percussionists and pianists set up. I'd only nodded to Noel through the glass, but even with my head buried in the *Guardian*, I could hear his jovial laughter rising over the rattle of chairs, drums and cymbals, the cacophony of scales and chords on the pianos, and the arpeggios of the singers.

Once the recording began, the large white studio transformed, as if a net had been cast and pulled, drawing everyone together. The men and women who'd been scuttling like mice – tightening stands and carrying percussion, warming up their voices – all fused as one: a chanting choir, four grand pianos, mechanical percussion, producing one eerily melodious sound. Faces hardened, not a flicker of emotion was shown by the singers or instrumentalists evoking the matter-of-fact manner of a Russian peasant wedding – a betrothed bride performing this ritual for her village, for her State. The music leapt mid-beat from one phrase to the next as the pianos rippled and the timpani rumbled, the snare hissed and the whispers of the choir bit like bullets. Walter, this tiny dark-haired Berliner with a jaw clenched and a stern brow was striking the air with his arms, as if he were conducting a fleet of tanks.

I put my paper down as the music stormed towards the end, and I braced myself for those final wedding bell chords played by all four pianists – B, C sharp and its octave – over the top of the fading voices. Then a moment before the first of the chords, Noel jumped in a fraction too early – it was only a split second, but enough to ruin the bell-like effect – the red light on the studio wall lit up, the music collapsed in a heap and all the musicians fidgeted

and mumbled. The perfect tension that had been breathed into the room, inflating it like a balloon on the point of explosion, had suddenly expired, and the air became a swarm of bees, expelled from their hive.

Noel was the first person to leap up from his seat, his face scarlet, his body large and lurching, straight over toward Walter, as if he were about to pounce on this tiny man who was shrinking on the spot.

‘Walter, you bloody fool! You brought me in too early!’

I turned my head, not wanting to witness the following scene, wanting to slink outside, but worried if I moved Noel might turn his wrath on me. A moment later, however, I looked back and the commotion had completely blown over; Walter and Noel were laughing and Noel was slapping his big hand on the little conductor’s back.

‘I say,’ Noel called out, turning to the technician who sat next to me in the booth, ‘It’s awfully stuffy in here, do you suppose you could fetch us all some water?’

The recording was completed in one more take, Noel packed up, spoke to Walter and several of the musicians and singers, then joined me in the booth, shaking my hand and picking up his coat.

‘So how’d it sound from up here?’ he asked as we stepped out onto the street and he lit a cigarette.

I couldn’t ever recall him appealing for any feedback; on the contrary, he usually seemed to forget about a performance as soon as it had finished.

‘It went alright, I suppose.’ I was still bothered by his outburst, that he could have behaved so unprofessionally. ‘The sound was a bit tinny though, a bit thin,’ I said, digging my hands into my pockets and looking straight up the street, as if it really didn’t matter anyway.

‘You thought so? Yes, I was wondering...’

‘And the tempo seemed to lag a bit at times.’

I’m not sure what came over me, why I said the things I said, why the music now sounded so terrible to me. But my mood had sunk and they were the only comments I could think to make. I didn’t feel like going out for a drink with Noel anymore, I regretted coming along, and in the silence that followed each remark I made, I thought about heading home.

Noel offered to take me out to dinner; I shrugged and nodded, holding onto my sour mood as if it had been ordained upon me. We took the train to Oxford Circus and Noel chose a French restaurant on Berwick Street, close to my digs – I knew immediately what he was up to but said nothing – and after two courses and a bottle of wine, Noel led me around the corner to a quiet basement bar that was filled with wooden tables in small nooks, dimly lit by red lanterns. I’d never been there before, but the staff seemed to know Noel and nodded familiarly as we entered. Within moments of taking a table an ice bucket and bottle of champagne arrived beside us.

‘I’ve started writing an article for *Musical Review* on the Immortal Beloved,’ I said, leaning back in my chair and looking about the room, as if I’d be just as happy sitting at any other of the tables, where pairs of well-heeled gentlemen sipped wine, smoked cigars, and took little notice of the food placed in front of them. ‘Gerald thinks there’d be interest in me writing a book on the subject, but I don’t know that I could be bothered,’ I lied – I’m not sure why.

There has always been continual debate in musical circles about the mysterious love letter found in a locked drawer in Beethoven’s apartment, the afternoon after his death; thought to have been written by the composer fifteen years earlier. The letter is written in a tone of almost delirious passion for the woman to whom he wrote - *Unsterbliche Geliebte* – his

Immortal Beloved. Given that Beethoven was considered to have been a loner, without ever having had a single serious romantic relationship, the letter became one of the most intriguing personal documents in musical history. Every now and again, such as had happened recently, someone would stir up a controversy, claiming they'd uncovered proof of the identity of this enigmatic woman.

'Really? My money's on Therese Brunsvik, the one whose portrait he kept in the secret drawer. Unless you're going to suggest someone else?'

'No, I haven't a clue who she was. I actually don't even want to know,' I flicked my cigarette in the ashtray, smiling smugly, beginning to perk up a bit. 'It's far more romantic that way.'

'How very Wagner of you,' Noel laughed.

'I do find it fascinating that we presume to know every square inch of Beethoven's life,' I waved my cigarette around in the air as I spoke, feeling quite theatrical. 'We know his favourite lines in Homer, Virgil and Shakespeare; and that he ate goulash at the White Swan restaurant each night and once threw his meal at a waiter so that the gravy dripped down the man's face. We've all heard about Prince Lichnowsky constantly visiting him to hear him play, and how the prince would be locked out and made to sit on the steps with the servants. There's little of his life that we can't account for. Yet the one thing that supposedly meant more to him than anything else – his love for a person whom he called his *true home*, who made him both *the happiest and the unhappiest of mortals* – we know nothing about this at all.' I fixed my gaze on Noel as I slumped back in my chair, my jacket hanging wide open, suddenly imagining his naked body seated opposite me, and everything I'd like to do to him that very moment.

Noel sat back, drawing on his cigarette, squinting at me through the smoke. ‘Perhaps he never sent the letter, perhaps *she* didn’t even know how he felt. That’s often the way with these things,’ he smiled.

‘Perhaps. I don’t believe her actual identity matters anyway. She might as well have been his maid, a character from a book he’d read, or his so called *heavenly muse*.’ I wasn’t at all sure if I believed what I was saying myself, but the idea seemed potent. What’s more, I was drunk and having fun holding court, with Noel sitting there as my gracious listener. I put my glass down and looked over to the bar, where a young barman in waistcoat and bowtie stood alone polishing wineglasses; he seemed completely absorbed in thought, almost sad. ‘In fact I’m not sure the Immortal Beloved even existed. I think he made her all up. Life was too goddamn wretched without her.’

Noel laughed out loud at this last comment, one hand resting on the table and tossing his head back. I laughed as well, I didn’t care if I sounded ridiculous. I’d have been happy to argue my new-found resolution all night.

The waiter informed us of last drinks, and when our second bottle of champagne came to an end, I started reaching around in my pockets as if preparing to leave. A look of mild panic crossed Noel’s eyes.

As I stood and walked to the door, I could feel him close behind; the hairs on my neck prickled upright.

We headed towards Oxford Circus, without discussing where we were going. I was walking towards my place, and assumed he was coming. We stumbled along, neither of us saying a word. I regretted that I hadn’t dragged him into the gentlemen’s room at the bar when I was feeling frisky and full of myself earlier. But I was now in one of my drunk maudlin moods, which seems absurd looking back, given that I was finally – as an adult –

taking him back to my room. It wasn't the fear of rejection that silenced me this time, but more a tired resignation to the roles we were both performing. I saw us as acting out parts in a play, charged with lines and emotions, carrying out an inevitable plot from which afterwards we'd both walk away. It seemed so overly rehearsed. I longed not just for the Noel of eight years earlier, who would have laughed and joked all the way down the street, but also for the old me, who might have found some source of beauty and exhilaration in the moment. Even the physical closeness between us failed to send much of a thrill around my deadened body; it only served to accentuate the gulf that yawned open, and highlight the thought that fleetingly punctured my inebriated mind: that it was only in this broken-down, desperate state that the two of us could ever meet.

The fog prevented us seeing too far down the street; our heads tucked into our shoulders, focused on the glistening cobblestones ahead of our feet. When the polished black boots and stiff navy trousers stepped out of the mist and into our path, the two men appeared like a wall in front of us.

'Evening ladies – what are you two girls doing out so late, then?' spoke one of the officers. His face was hidden by the shadow the streetlight cast beneath his helmet, and the steamy cloudlike vapour that emerged from below his moustache when he spoke. I could detect a clamped grin.

I bowed my head and stared at the ground as I ran through the evening, as if having to scour it clean of any incriminating evidence. Even though I realised the entire day had been free of anything that might be considered improper, my guilt seemed irrefutable.

'Just on our way back from the Wigmore, Sergeant,' Noel said, like a well-mannered schoolboy. Even though I was surprised to hear him lie so casually and needlessly, his voice

was happily assured, it seemed that the Wigmore was precisely where we'd been. He was clearly far more sober than I.

'Don't I know you?' the officer said. He squinted, studying Noel's face, and for a moment, I almost laughed with relief. What extraordinary fortune, I thought, to be pulled up by a music lover.

'You're a chum of Montagu's and his mob, aren't you?'

I'd heard that name, it trembled through me before I'd even registered who it was. Montagu and Wildeblood – I'd seen them in the paper – everyone had; I'd been horrified by their surreal, unfathomable stories. Men from the highest echelons of society – who, I'm sure I had seen, probably met, at parties and bars – and now victims of the Great Purge. *Depraved godless creatures* who committed such *abominable* acts, who must be *cleansed* from our streets. They were hauling in a dozen men a week, putting offenders on trial and sending them out to Wormwood Scrubs for hard labour; I'd heard stories from all around town, of men who one day simply didn't turn up to work, and rumours of what had become of them. I'd *read* these stories from the safety of my room, sitting there at my table with the gramophone playing; looking at their faces staring out from the pages, *imagining* what horrors these poor men endured.

'Read about them in the paper, Sergeant, but I wouldn't recognise them if they were standing right here in front of me.' A hint of a smile crept onto his lips.

'Your name?'

'Noel Mewton-Wood.'

Ah – just the memory of the way he stood there staring straight into the eye of the policeman and spoke his name with so much cool assurance still sends a shiver straight through me.

‘And what do you do, Mr Wood? When you’re not drinking at ill-reputable bars and corrupting young men, with no thought for God or your country?’

‘*Mewton*-Wood, Sir. I’m a concert pianist.’

The second officer, who’d said nothing up until now, burst into laughter.

‘My colleague and I have been recording for the BBC all day in Maida Vale. This evening we attended a meeting in the rooms behind Wigmore Hall, and as it’s been a long day we decided to stop by any bar that had its light on for a quick drink. I have no idea about the reputation of the bar we visited, Sergeant. It seemed most friendly, they had a good selection of wines, the prices were reasonable, and it was convenient for my colleague who lives locally, and for me on my way to the station.’

Under the streetlight his forehead glistened; his eyes shone with cool determination. Noel *Mewton*-Wood on stage, tall and calm, unbreakable.

I stood – though next to him – removed from it all. I was convinced of Noel’s invincibility, and emboldened by our apparent association. And although I felt proud of his performance, I also shuddered at the thought that perhaps all he’d said had been true; he’d been simply walking to the station, to return home to the house he shared with Bill.

‘Well. Mr *Mewton*-Wood. Very well.’ He seemed satisfied with Noel’s answers, yet unwilling to relinquish his rule. He turned to me, sniggering, ‘A bit nervous are we?’

‘A tad tired, Sir,’ I attempted a smile. ‘Been a long day.’

He nodded and grinned, clearly pleased to be in a position to stretch out my day even longer. ‘And where might you be heading?’

I pointed towards the intersection of my street before managing to speak. ‘I have a lodging a hundred yards around the corner, Sir.’

‘Have you now?’ Then he stood, for an interminably long time, looking about himself almost whimsically, as if musing over his options, thinking about how he’d like his evening to proceed. The night weighed like a heavy black blanket thrown over us. I could hear the occasional car swishing along the street in the distance, sailing off, gracefully unencumbered, into silence. We stood there waiting as he decided. I hung my head, not sure what else to do.

‘Right, off you go then,’ he said angrily, as if we’d waylaid him.

We scattered in separate directions like squirrels running off the path.

‘Don’t let me catch you two *loitering* around here again. You hear?’ A crack of a whip at our heels; a sudden regret, perhaps, that he’d let us off so lightly.

I walked as rapidly as I could without running, drawing the curtain of mist and darkness around me. The muttering of the two policemen and Noel’s light footsteps smacking off the damp pavement and heading off towards Piccadilly echoed out into the night, reverberating through the fog as if at the moment, we were the only four people alive in the world. I ran home and locked the door behind me, threw my hat and scarf on the table and stormed about the room.

I poured myself a gin, threw it down, poured another and finally sat, still wrapped up tightly in my coat. Now devoid of the sobering cold air lashing my face and the adrenalin pumping deliriously about my body, the reality of the incident began to emerge, in all its sickening glory. I kept running over everything in my mind, wondering whether it really was possible that we’d so narrowly escaped. It didn’t seem possible that a person’s fate could be determined in such an arbitrary fashion.

I could feel a loosening, as if everything about me were slowly shifting in its footings. I imagined a completely different ending brushing past me. I could see it – a dark shape

ahead of me glancing back. I checked that the door was locked securely, and pulled the blind down past the sill, sat on my bed and waited, with my glass clasped in my hand. We had come close, too close to feel fully safe; I could see the other version – where it *had* ended differently – now running alongside. I could actually feel myself somewhere else entirely – being hauled off to the West End Police Station – I could feel myself there – hands gripped around my upper arms, pushing me into a cell – and for a moment I felt I was only imagining myself here now, imagining I was free.

The following week, two days before our birthday, Noel invited me over to his and Bill's new home for a drink before heading out to a party. Noel greeted me at the door accompanied by a waft of sandalwood incense, paint and glue. He gave me a kiss then ushered me straight through to the music room, immediately to the left off the entrance hall, and stood with me inside the doorway, gazing contentedly about the room. The tall sash windows were framed with green raw silk pelmets and curtains, gold cords and tassels drawing them to the sides; the wallpaper – Dorian columns and billowing drapery in ivory, pale olive green and real gold leaf – shimmered under the chandeliers like the autumn sun's reflection off a pond; and amongst the Frank Lowry's and other paintings Noel had inherited from Walter, there was a new Duncan Grant he'd recently bought from the artist's studio, hanging above the mantelpiece. In the middle of the room sat two grand pianos, a Steinway and a Brinsmead.

Noel took me on a tour of every room – except for their bedroom, where he told me Bill was sleeping – pointing out every piece of furniture – the French Empire ormolu mantel clock on which lay the languid figure of Pallas Athene, the Louis XVI mahogany centre table with green marble marquetry top – continually apologising for his excitement, explaining

that I was one of the first visitors to the house since the renovations had been completed. He waved his arms wide, telling me that they were going to have a huge house-warming Christmas party when he returned from his German tour. Then we returned to the music room and Noel poured us both a tumbler of gin as we sat down together on the chartreuse-silk chaise-lounge, where I'd sat watching him, so many years ago at Walter's party.

I knew I mightn't see Noel on our birthday – he'd already told me he'd be in Wales recording most of the day – and ever since he'd rung me several days earlier, inviting me over for a drink, I'd been sent into a fit of terror about the evening. I felt that *something* was going to happen and I was paralysed by indecision, of whether I ought to sit back and let it all take place, or whether this *possibility* that I felt circling us was something that I was going to have to incite.

I'd been shaken up by our interlude with the police the previous week, and everywhere I walked I imagined these men following me about; I could hear their sniggering laughter, feel the cold thud of a hand landing on my shoulder. The more I thought about these two uniformed hounds and the night that they'd stormed in upon, the more I realised how all these other worlds – the worlds of infinite possibilities – were so tantalisingly close, bubbling and simmering, just below the surface of the mundane one I inhabited. Noel understood all of this – that's what he taught in his music – and I felt that I was finally beginning to feel it as well, another life, humming like a harmonic within every movement, behind every moment, making me often feel quite *ajar* from myself. It was getting louder, day by day, as if any moment I might alight from my body and into this *other* life for good.

I'd been holding a present, wrapped in crepe-paper, at my front since I'd arrived, and Noel had pretended not to notice. When we were seated on the sofa and had raised our crystal glasses I presented Noel the gift. For weeks I'd been mulling over what to buy him,

wandering through shops, stumbling over possible presents – a Moorcroft vase? A hand-knitted cashmere scarf? A signed copy of Melba’s gift book? The day had finally arrived – I was walking home along Regent Street, with only two hours to go before seeing him – and I hadn’t bought him a thing. I was furious with myself that I had let this happen, that I could be so extraordinarily careless, and it crossed my mind that maybe I ought to call off our evening. I finally talked myself around, deciding that cancelling was absurd; I’d simply tell him I had something to bring him over on the day. I settled upon this when I walked into my room and my eyes fell upon the perfect gift: an etching that my father had given me not long before he died, that I’d had packed away for years, and only recently reframed and mounted above my bed. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t thought to give it to Noel earlier, a picture that spoke volumes about what I’d never been able to find the words to say: Robert and Clara Schumann, sitting together at the piano.

Noel unwrapped the present, carefully peeling off the tape so as not to rip the paper. He laid the miniature picture in his lap and sat quite still, staring down at it, and for a moment I thought that he didn’t like it at all, that I was going to have to tell him that it was just a silly little knick-knack I’d found in a second-hand shop. Then he lifted the picture close to his face, his eyes tracing the fine black lines. Then he placed it on the coffee table, put a hand on my thigh, and told me it was exquisite. I was sure he was about to kiss me.

He said he had something for me, jumped up and stepped out of room, returning with his hands behind his back, apologising that he hadn’t had time to wrap. He sat upright on the edge of the sofa and handed me what looked to be an original pressing of Schumann’s *Davidsbündlertänze*.

I’d always adored these pieces, yet had never gotten around to learning them. I knew they were favourites of Noel’s so was most flattered that he considered me worthy of playing

them. But what really made me want to throw my arms around him, was Noel's implicit message. For we both knew more than well that Schumann had given this set of dances to Clara shortly after the two had become engaged.

We raised our glasses again and shifted closer together on the sofa. I was feeling quite jittery, wondering what Noel really had in mind for the evening; we clearly couldn't stay there. He had mentioned, earlier, a party in Chelsea, at the house of his good friend Raymond Russell. At first I hadn't been that keen to go; but now, thinking of Bill lying in bed on the level above us, I couldn't wait to get out of the house, and hoped we might do so before Bill woke up and decided to join us. I asked Noel if Bill was ill, half-hoping I might raise an issue. Noel, playing with his coaster, replied that Bill had been complaining of a bad stomach-ache for days and had gone straight to bed when he came home from work. Noel started swilling the ice around in his glass and said, as if an afterthought, that he hoped Bill wouldn't mind about us going out to the party.

'*Surely* he couldn't mind,' I said, almost laughing. I was excited, detecting a fault line, wanting to hammer away at this prissy little dolls' house of theirs.

Noel stood and smiled, 'Of course he won't mind.' Then draining his glass he walked to the stairs, adding, 'He just gets so *awfully* grumpy when he's unwell,' brushing it off with a laugh.

Noel returned from saying goodbye to Bill and looked around, in silence, for his coat and scarf; we rugged up and stepped outside into fog so thick we could barely see the end of the street.

As we marched along Noel cheered up, mentioning he'd received a letter from an aunt in Australia and that it was almost 100 degrees there at the moment. He said that when he was a child they used to go down to a place called Brighton Beach for his birthday –

much nicer than the English Brighton, he added – which had colourful little beach boxes along the shore.

I'd only once before heard him speak about his childhood; one time he'd mentioned a cinema he used to visit, which had little twinkling stars stuck to the roof which would only brighten and sparkle when the lights went down. He told me he was so captivated by them he'd find himself gazing up at this celestial sight rather than the talkie he'd paid to go and see. I noticed as he spoke about Brighton Beach, the same wistful expression as he'd worn recalling this enchanting cinema. I didn't say a word – I was actually rummaging through my own childhood memories, trying to think of some magical moment with which to respond – but before I'd a chance to speak he'd changed the topic completely and was telling me about Raymond Russell who, he boasted, had one of the greatest early keyboard collections in the world.

By the time we arrived, the large Victorian manor was full of guests, mainly gentlemen, young and elderly, dressed in sports coats or bow ties, standing in the salon with tumblers or champagne and chatting in groups amongst the twenty or so keyboard instruments spaced evenly around the ballroom. The room resembled a private museum, except that at the end near the foyer, there were sofas, wingchairs and occasional tables where people were lounging, drinking and nibbling canapés. As Noel darted off into the crowd, I walked amongst the instruments: single and double-manual harpsichords, painted with scrolls, vines or scenery; small desk-like virginals, one from Verona that was dated 1586; spinets; clavichords; and square, cabinet and grand pianos, including, I noticed, a Broadwood with the same make and date as the one owned by Beethoven.

Noel brought me a gin and nodded to the instruments. 'Lovely, aren't they? We'll see if we can't have a bit of a play later on,' then he winked and again turned and disappeared.

Frankie Laine was crooning in the background, a seemingly endless supply of champagne, beer, whisky and gin was sweeping around the room on silver trays from the kitchen, and a steady trickle of guests were arriving, removing their gloves and hats, and waving across the room. I accepted every drink offered to me, ingratiating myself with the waiting staff as I did, so that before long, I was in the kitchen helping myself to the bar, each time pouring doubles for Noel. Leaning against the kitchen counter, knocking back a string of martinis as I surveyed the crowd, and enlivened by the joie de vivre of the party, I stopped thinking about trying to seduce him. I was far more taken by a vision I had of him stumbling through the crowd at the end of the night, in an intoxicated state, looking for me, begging for me to forgive him and take him home.

I was in a particularly genial mood, flirting with any gentleman or lady who came near me, praising their dress or jewellery, rubbing their lapel or pendant between my thumb and forefinger and staring into their eyes until they blushed, or the abrupt heave of their chest warned me to think carefully where I might be taking this harmless little prank.

At one stage my wiles landed me in the amorous arms of a chorus boy in full stage make-up who'd just arrived at the party from the London Coliseum where he'd been performing in *Guys and Dolls*. He was a persistent little chap, and it was only when he swung me across the room while belting out a heavily vibrato-ed version of 'Take Back Your Mink' that I was able to make my escape. I was then drilled into a corner by a poet and his halitosis-infused reading of an obtuse free verse called 'Blue Danube', about our loss of innocence in this nuclear age, he told me with a dejected gaze. I also recall some drunk lass with morsels of dried biscuit and caviar caught in her brilliant red ringlets, who leaned with both silky white paws on my shoulder as she slurred emphatically and repeatedly that I was the embodiment of her dear dead brother Freddie.

I shook myself from her clutches and made my way into the more sobering milieu of the library where I found Gerald, Pat Trevor-Roper and several others, standing about with brandies and cigars, talking about a recent impressionist painting exhibition they'd all seen at the Tate. Pat was espousing his theory about the work of sight-affected painters, how their poor vision gave them a unique perception of the world, and was actually, he believed, an artistic asset. Pat was reeling out names – van Gogh, Cezanne, Monet, Turner, Renoir, O'Keefe – and I was about to interrupt – still feeling a bit frisky from all the bustling ardour of the adjoining room – and suggest that maybe the same could be inferred of musicians, that perhaps their creations sprang from an impairment in the way they perceived the world, borne from some shortcoming or absence, a threatening darkness from which they rose up like Phoenix's, assembling around themselves these breathtakingly beautiful universes. I was about to make some rash conjecture that hadn't entered my mind up until then, about illusion – the illusory world of sound – but Pat was waxing on, and Gerald and the others were clearly fascinated, and before long I'd both completely forgotten what I was about to say, and lost track of Pat's thread entirely. I was deciding whether to persevere with this discourse, which was only making me more confused, when from the salon, across the foyer, I could hear an unusual thin, crisp jazz being played, amongst cheers and clapping. I retreated from the discussion about Cezanne, slipped into the kitchen, fixed two more drinks, then squeezed through the crowd to find Noel sitting at a Ruckers harpsichord, thumping away, playing a boogie.

Several yards from Noel, a young man in a candy-striped suit started accompanying him on a chamber organ, which sat like a tall kitchen dresser, with its cupboard doors wide open exposing shining metal pipes that ran up towards the ceiling. The floor in front of the two performers was gradually filling with people twisting and foot-tapping, and sofas and

chairs were being pushed to the walls to allow for the dancers to swing each other around the room.

I moved over towards Noel and noticed that the lid of the instrument had been opened, revealing on the inside, the most tranquil sylvan scene of languorous courtiers and musicians. The soundboard was painted with powder-pink roses, violets, birds and insects, and the panels were bordered with bronze arabesque designs, of vines and classical heads. An older gentleman wearing a velvet suit and beret leaned in towards me and said, ‘Aren’t they wonderful?’ I wasn’t quite sure if he meant the musicians or the instruments, but then he nodded toward the chap at the chamber organ, who was vigorously tapping his foot to the beat, and added, ‘That one belonged to George the Second.’ People were descending the stairs and others were pushing past me from the foyer, and in the middle of it all I spotted a small, tidy man – Raymond, I guessed – running about with burlap covers, frantically covering the remaining instruments.

Noel’s whole body, from his head and shoulders to his toes, was pulsing to the beat, a grin fixed on his face as he stared down towards the keys and all about the room into the crowd. I put our drinks down on a side-table, carried it close to Noel’s right side, downed half my drink then slid in beside him at the bass end of the keyboard. Noel shifted his body over, allowing me more room, then his hands hopped to the upper manual of keys without skipping or blurring a note.

Noel was improvising around an A major twelve-bar blues with a strong boogie bass line. As I listened to the riff, I looked down, gazing at the nameplate above Noel’s hands – *IOANNES RVCKERS FECIT ANTVERPIÆ 1638*, embossed in gold – tapping my shoe on the marble floor for a few bars, my heart racing to the same beat. I jumped in, left hand first, thumping up and down the keys, then added some jingling right-hand chords,

hammering away, letting them drift up the keyboard towards Noel so that his elbow nestled into my side.

I looked out toward the crowd and saw that the candy-striped organist had also been joined by another; a trumpeter stood by as well, waiting to catch Noel's eye before he started; and a woman had stepped forward from the dance floor and was resining a violin bow as she tapped her feet on the ground in front of the swelling, hooting, jiggling crowd.

Noel carried us all from one motif and key to the next; he lead each of us into a solo, then jumped in at the end with a few crashing chords or a dazzling cadenza, drawing the music back to the original theme; nodding out to the crowd, provoking their applause.

We might have been playing for hours, I'm not sure – I must have waved over the drinks waitress half a dozen times, downing each glass in one. I could barely hear the notes, or think a single chord, I'd merged so completely with this glitzy bacchanalia: naked arms flickering like flames above the whirling Lindy Hop, men hand-in-hand as they jived about the room, women dancing in bare stockings or landing on the lap of a spectator as they skipped from the floor.

I glanced down at my hands and noticed that we were back in A major and as I watched my left-hand leap up the seventh, I heard a melody rising above the throng of the room. I not only knew this melody, but I shivered with recognition, it was as if I had suddenly heard my father's voice, or something equally distant and resonant. I thought that maybe it was a favourite piece of my father's, or perhaps a tune I'd learnt as a child. But my head was so full of gin and jitterbug and blues that this tune I longed to remember fluttered about in my mind like a hummingbird trapped in a room, taunting me with its message. Then all at once it came to me, this tune that was rising out from the harpsichord, out from the courtiers and musicians who so gracefully lounged in the centre of this party; this music,

it was coming from Noel! He was playing the melody of the Rondo in A! He remembered that first night at Walter's! He was playing it for me! I tossed back my head laughing – laughing so ecstatically I thought I might fall from the seat. I turned around and looked out among the suede shoes and ostrich feathers; I wanted to catch someone's eye, anyone, and yell out to them – 'Listen! It's Schubert! It's the Rondo in A, isn't it the most magnificent tune! It's like a hummingbird, don't you think?' – I desperately wanted to tell someone, but they were all swinging and cheering, threaded in each other's arms, and no one was looking my way, no one had noticed the Rondo; they were too entrenched in this raucous sound that was ringing through me like a school bell clanging down the corridors; too entrenched to hear the hummingbird twittering over the top. I gave up on finding anyone to share my revelation; no one else need understand. I kept laughing, my head hanging back, giddily gazing up at the chandeliers that looked like thousands of rain drops frozen in the air above me.

I looked down towards the keyboard, towards the hands that were singing out for me and my eyes settled and focused on his frenetic fingers, and it took me a moment to realise – I didn't understand at all – his hands were shaking at chords, gliding through jazz riffs, jumping about in boogie time, the same as they had been before. I closed my eyes and listened, trying to hear the Schubert, remembering how sweet that gambolling melody had been. But the boogie was loud and clear, as loud and clear as my heartbeat thundering in my chest. I opened my eyes and looked again at his hands, ripping up a G seventh chord into runs of swinging thirds. I looked around – waiters skating across the floor and couples throwing themselves around the room – it was as if nothing had even happened, as if the Rondo had never been played. But I *knew* I had seen it, I knew I had heard it! It had all been so undeniably clear! I started to worry that perhaps none of this was actually happening at all.

I felt light-headed and had this crushing feeling under my ribs as if someone was standing on my chest. I needed some fresh air, I needed a glass of water. I dropped my hands into my lap, my entire right arm burning in pain. I started massaging my forearm and slid out from the stool, stumbling, barely able to stand. I rested my hand in the bough of Noel's shoulder and neck, feeling his warm, damp skin against my palm. I leaned down, and told him I'd be back, not to go anywhere. He turned his face toward me, inches away, and smiled; his beautiful brown eyes burning into mine. And though I remember him leaning in and saying something, his breath hot in my ear, his words have since been engulfed by an impenetrable haze. Like the messages from the dead received in one's dreams that disappear behind the glaring curtain of day.

I turned and pushed through the crowd, propelled by a blast of drunken determination. And that's the very last thing I remember of that night.

Two days later I started my birthday morning with a cup of coffee, listening to a recording of the *Davidsbündlertänze*. I looked at my watch: seven o'clock. Noel wouldn't be back from his Wales broadcast until the late afternoon. I decided I'd ring him when I returned from work.

The day wore on; tediously slow, uneventful, except for an argument with Marjorie, my boss, regarding my so-called shambolic appearance. My senses still felt numbed from the party, and I was disturbed by my inability to remember how everything had finished up at Raymond's. I'd woken the following morning at home, dreadfully sick, my right arm aching, and my gloves and scarf, and the music from Noel on the floor. The last thing I could vividly remember was *that* look from Noel, as I leaned down to him at the harpsichord. I had assumed we were going to be going home together, but I was at a loss to remember if anything at all had happened after that.

When I arrived home from work that day there were two messages on my door; my aunt had rung to wish me a happy birthday, and Gerald had called and asked that I ring back immediately. There was no message from Noel; I decided to put off calling him until later.

Ma O’Grady had recently installed a pay phone in the hallway, so before going up to my room, I sat on the stairs and dialled Gerald’s number. I was still lost in thought, thinking about ringing Noel – my heart-rate trebling at the idea of it – when Gerald answered. I didn’t listen to a word he said, just sat staring up at the evening light shining through the frosted pane above the front door. Over the previous few weeks I’d been experiencing occasional bouts of breathlessness – sometimes I’d stand at the edge of a busy road, and the traffic would seem particularly fast and chaotic, the car horns reverberating all through me as if I were made of jelly, and I’d be rooted to the kerb, unable to step out onto the street. This same feeling of terror was closing in on me now, rattling around in my body. I wanted to hang up the phone and lock myself in my room, but the urgency of his tone broke through my glazed dread.

‘I said Bill’s dead!’

I sat there frozen, my heart pounding, letting the words trickle down through my brain and permeate their meaning.

‘Did you hear me, I said—’

‘Yes, I heard you,’ almost angrily. And for a moment, the most extraordinary thought entered my mind – that maybe *I* had killed him. Again, Gerald’s voice faded into incoherence, and I sat, my elbows on my knees, my head and receiver in my hands, trying to remember what had happened that night. Whether I’d come straight home, or had first gone home with Noel. My mind was racing so furiously I started shaking; I looked up at the front door, imagining the thumping knock of the police, arriving any moment.

‘Noel’s *beside* himself.’

All I could remember were his eyes staring up at me.

‘Such a *tragedy*. The doctor’s said he’d be fine, then only an hour before Noel was to collect him from the hospital...complications of some sort...secondary infection they said...’

For a moment I felt I couldn’t breathe, I was so confounded by relief, joy and shock. ‘That’s awful.’

‘I know, it’s simply dreadful.’ Gerald’s words were drawn out, each syllable carefully enunciated, giving me time to calm my thinking. He continued, saying what a lovely man Bill was – ‘We were just chatting the other day, he told me the funniest story about when he went to greet the Ballet Romberg at Hamburg station during a heatwave. One of the male dancers had fainted on the platform, and Bill said Romberg walked straight towards him, and just *stepped over* the unconscious dancer, held out her hand and said, “A pleasure to meet you, Mr Fedrick”.’ Gerald started laughing, only momentarily. ‘Oh I really can’t believe he’s gone!’

I asked Gerald to repeat what had happened, I said I’d been too shocked to listen properly before.

Gerald sighed, but as soon as he started I could tell there was nothing he’d rather be talking about.

‘Peritonitis – burst appendix. Apparently he’d suffered stomach-aches for days...’

‘Really?...’

‘And *poor* Noel, he knows more about medicine than most doctors – he blames himself entirely.’

‘Would it have made a difference?...If he’d stayed home?’

‘Oh I have no idea, darling,’ Gerald always called me darling when unhinged. ‘I really don’t think there’s much he could have done. Though Raymond says Noel was in a *ghastly* state by the time he left.’

My head sank further into my hands. ‘So was I...’

‘Don’t *I* know – *I* was the one who found you in the kitchen drinking Pommeroy straight from the bottle and put you straight in a cab!’

I sat on the stairs, listening to Gerald’s story, all the little details that he’d been scrupulously collecting all day. How Noel had rung Pat several hours after getting home, in the early hours of the morning, and that Pat had picked them up and taken them to Westminster Hospital, just as Bill’s appendix burst. When Bill came out of the operating theatre the doctors had said that everything had gone well and he could leave the following morning. ‘Noel cancelled his broadcast and stayed with him in hospital all day, then early this morning, only an hour before Noel went in to pick him up – oh, it’s just *amf!* And you’ll never believe what day it is today.’

The ivy green door, the Rondo in A.

‘It’s simply *amf!*’

Over the following week or so I barely left my room, even to see Gerald. I didn’t want to run into anyone – least of all Noel – who might hold me partially to blame. I also felt uncomfortable about the thought of having to display any grief over Bill’s death. I spoke to Gerald daily; he told me about the funeral – *Beautiful flowers, a lovely Bach chorale. Noel did a wonderful job* – and anything else he’d heard from others. He’d barely spoken to Noel but had been told that he was staying with Pat for the time being.

It's an awful thing to admit, but at the time I felt that the outcome couldn't have been better for me. As the days went past, I felt a growing sense of ease, that I now had all the time in the world to play with. I'd sit in my room listening to records in a luxurious state of calm, like a caterpillar snug in its cocoon enjoying its last still moments before making its glorious entrance out into the sunshine. I sensed, also, that after the initial shock – and the irrational thought that he or *we* might be to blame – Noel would feel it too. Yes – I was beginning to feel as if I'd masterminded the entire event; that everything was unfolding exactly as it ought.

Then one evening, as if to confirm everything, I was relaxing in my room with a gin and listening to Maynard Sullivan's Concert Hall show, when Maynard mentioned that the evening's programme had changed due to Mewton-Wood cancelling his scheduled broadcast of Weber sonatas. So instead, he'd repeat a broadcast from the previous week, which had received such an overwhelming response: Mewton-Wood performing several of the dances from *Davidsbündlertänze*. As I jumped up to fetch my score, Maynard went on to say that in the spirit of Schumann, Mewton-Wood had dedicated the broadcast to Clara, his Immortal Beloved.

There could no longer be any doubt, I thought: this time he was performing for me. After a week, I decided to write to Noel. Gerald told me that Noel was spending his days practicing at his Hillgate Place house, in preparation for his German tour, only returning to Pat's in the evening. I addressed the letter to his home, and kept the message brief – aware that so much can be misconstrued from written words – expressing my deepest condolences and letting him know how fond I was of Bill. I then went on to tell him how thrilled I was to hear his *Davidsbündlertänze* broadcast, and how I really did understand *everything*. I told him I'd get started on the music as soon as my arm allowed, and that whenever he was ready – no

rush at all – he must come and see me. I'd be at home every evening after work, waiting for his call.

It took me several attempts to strike just the right balance in the letter, to convey all I needed to convey, but without appearing disrespectful given the circumstances. I spent even longer again, poised at the mailbox at the end of my street, with the envelope in my hand, imagining Noel, sitting on the sofa where we'd exchanged our birthday gifts, opening and reading my words. When it started to drizzle I had to tuck the letter under my coat; I stood for a minute longer then slipped the envelope in the slit, quickly walked home, and waited.

Friday came around and I still hadn't heard from Noel. I'd been on the verge of calling for three days, but each time I found myself at the phone dialling his or Pat's number, I'd run through the probable sequence of the previous week's events, and hang up the phone after one ring. I reminded myself that Noel mightn't have received my letter until Tuesday. Being so busy preparing to leave for Germany the following week it was perfectly understandable that he hadn't found time to call. After all, I thought, perhaps he had decided to write to me, in which case a letter was sure to arrive on Monday. I consoled myself with Noel's wise words: Everything comes to he who waits.

To take my mind off things, I decided to go to Aldeburgh for the weekend, breathe some fresh sea air, then call Noel on Monday, whether I'd heard from him or not.

At Aldeburgh, I checked in at the Mill Inn, and spent my first morning walking along the shingled beach, all speckled grey, blue, brown and white, and fringed with bushes of red valerian and yellow-horned poppy. I passed Crag House, Ben and Peter's home, where Noel stayed whenever he came to the festival, wondering if the pair were home, and whether, given the circumstances, I ought to drop in for a visit. As I stood staring at the house, which sat in between the ocean and the main street, I thought about the times, many years earlier,

when I'd wandered past during the festival, how it always seemed to me like a large faded pink music box, melody pouring out over the pots of geraniums hanging from the second-floor sunroom, wafting into the seaside breeze, mingling with the sound of the waves slapping and sifting through the sand, bicycle bells and the cries of gulls. On those summer afternoons I would often see Ben, Peter, Noel and others, sitting in sun chairs around the side of the house, watching the herring and lobster fishermen return with their nets and pots. In the evenings, after the day's concerts had come to an end, E.M. Foster, the Del Mars, Lord Harewood, Imogen Holst, and all the other visiting musicians, artists and performers would descend on the house, playing music, chatting and drinking until late. Each day I would walk along the beach or the main street, watching them head down the road to a recital, or pile into Ben's Alvis, taking off for a drive through the countryside. Years later, when Noel told me about rowing on Thorpeness Meare with a boat of carol singers drifting by, and about the premiere of Britten's *Saint Nicolas* in the parish church, when Ben was so nervous that he listened from the churchyard, lying on his back with his hands over his face, I'd nodded attentively as Noel told his tales, never mentioning that I'd witnessed each entire event.

On the Sunday afternoon I borrowed a bicycle from the owner of the Inn and rode past the old Aldeburgh cinema where I'd seen Noel, only twenty-five at the time, perform to a full house on the first afternoon in that inaugural festival year. He was in the middle of Lambert's Nocturne when the cinema was shaken by two loud bangs, the maroons summoning the floaters to push the lifeboat down the slips and out to sea, as if a reminder to the visitors who'd descended on this sleepy seaside town how far they were from the urban bustle of London. After the closing notes of the Debussy Toccata, the crowd jumped to their feet applauding Noel's performance. The Aldeburgh Festival had officially begun.

Even though the clouds were low and dark, I rode west out of town to the fourteenth-century Aldeburgh parish church where two-and-a-half years earlier I'd stood among a crowd of hundreds, waiting to hear Noel unveil the new Gerhard concerto. I thought about that sunny afternoon, of Norman Del Mar conducting from the pulpit, waving his arms about all the way from his shoulders like a crazed evangelist, gazing devoutly at his soloist at the piano. I remembered how I'd walked from the church that afternoon, the sun still high in the sky, the churchyard and garden abuzz with people, my senses keenly aware of the warbler singing in trees, the bees circling about the roadside poppies, and that for months after settling back into London life, I'd found myself drifting into the same dazed euphoria each time I'd thought about that day, imagining myself returning to Aldeburgh one year with Noel.

I wrapped my coat tighter around me and entered through the shadow of the tower and stair turret into the cold, empty church, listening to the distant hum of the wind coursing about the meadows. Even though I sat alone at a pew, the *reality* of this return with Noel seemed, at that moment, as close to me as ever. I looked up at the stained-glass window of St Peter and St Paul, which even in the diminishing light, still rained down its kaleidoscope of colours, and stood up from my pew. Stepping over the gravestones in the aisle, the memorials to fallen Aldeburgh soldiers, and heading towards the door, my eye was caught by the large brass and marble plaque commemorating the crew of the lifeboat *Aldeburgh* who'd all died in a capsizing over fifty years earlier. Arched above the sculptural relief of the boat, an inscription was blazoned – *Greater love hath no man than this that a man lay down his life* – and as I read this line, my body, which had been trembling with cold, was suddenly kindled with the realisation that there really was *nothing* I wouldn't do for Noel.

I wandered around the churchyard and garden, my eyes flitting over the crumbling gravestones and inscriptions, and I thought about the years that I'd known Noel. I realised that I had, for so long, been an aspiring musician myself, hankering for his attention, yet I'd never once told him how I really felt. This was a man who embodied Romanticism, who could play Schumann, Beethoven and Chopin in a way that brought his listeners to tears. Yet I had never been willing to tell him what he meant to me, and that I was willing to devote myself, unconditionally, to him. As I thought of all this, I remember a feeling of extraordinary serenity filling my body. Even thinking of Bill, I realised I'd forgiven him for all that had passed. Perhaps he wasn't such a bad sort after all, I thought, just caught unwittingly between Noel and me. Yes, I even felt gratitude towards Bill, and found myself telling him I was sorry he'd had to endure everything he'd endured in order for things to work out the way they had.

I rode straight back to the inn, anxious to return to London and call Noel. Looking up at the sky as I peddled, the clouds seemed to be shifting hurriedly to the east dragging darker ones behind. At the inn I consulted the train timetable pasted to the wall at the entrance to the stairs and realised I had several hours to wait until the next city-bound train. As I packed my bags, I looked out the window and noticed the small Moot Hall that had sat in the centre of this little Tudor town when Shakespeare's theatre troupe had performed here, but which now trembled a stone's throw from the waves, as if resigned to being one day swallowed by the sea.

I walked up the road and ordered a fish pie at the grey weathered benches out the front of the Cross Keys Inn, amongst barrels of pink hydrangea, looking out across the ocean. The clouds were beginning to darken once more, the filtered sun casting a surreal light over the boats which rocked precariously, moored on the water, as if posing for a

Turner painting. I remembered, with some excitement, the photographs in the paper from earlier in the year when the North Sea had risen eight feet, and the Aldeburgh sea wall had burst: an angry white mist rising out of the sea, clawing at the anti-tank blocks on the beach and submersing the entire Moot Green and the eastern side of town.

On my way back to the inn, with the wind whipping in off the water, I spoke to the only other person on the beach, an old lady foraging for pipis, whose face was as weather-beaten as the igneous rocks strewn along the point. She told me in her thick Suffolk accent that the Romans had built a fortress here that was now well under the sea; that a bronze head of Claudius had been found in the nearby river; and that she had been standing on this very spot when *Magdapur* was sunk by the Germans. With her craggy face wrapped up in scarves she looked like a hermit crab, and spoke with her finger, pincer-like, pointing out threateningly to the sea, telling me that we stood powerless against the ravages of time. Normally I would have been irritated by such a garbled rant and menacing grey eyes, especially in the face of an encroaching storm, but there was little that could upset the revelatory mood I was in.

I arrived back home late that night to find several messages taped to my door, including one mentioning that Gerald had rung several times and I must call him back urgently. I peeled the messages from the door and, exhausted by my day and excited by the thought of the week ahead, went straight to bed, feeling as I lay there as if I were on a large steamer ship, being carried along by the ocean. I enjoyed the deepest sleep I'd had in months.

By the time I finally spoke to Gerald the following afternoon, I had already bought the morning paper and read on the front page that, over the weekend, Noel Mewton-Wood, *the brilliant Australian pianist*, had killed himself.

part four:

a requiem

I still shudder when I think of that day.

There he was on the front page – *Australian pianist found dead in flat*. In the newspaper, next to an advertisement for Yardley hand cream – a picture of long slender fingers at a piano keyboard, can you believe? And underneath, *Are you proud of your hands? Hands are such tell-tales...*

I had just made myself a cup of tea, just sat down with the paper rolled up under my arm, and was deciding whether it was the right time to call him. Then I opened the paper and saw his face, his sombre eyes. It was one of his recent photographs taken for the German tour. He didn't much like those photos, he wouldn't have liked them using them like that on the front page; he thought they made him look angry. If I recall, the day they were taken, he had been angry. The wallpapering in his flat had been delayed and he was going to have to cancel his house-warming party until his return from Germany. But then he laughed it off, as he always did, saying he ought never to have asked a Roman Catholic to wallpaper a room in a print called Colosseum, then went chuckling off to Kensington to have his photo taken.

And now his simmering face stared at me – *dead* – from the newspaper.

I remember it all chillingly well. The rain rapping at the window with its long icy fingertips. Pressing my palm flat against the page, running my fingers across his cold,

newspaper face, taking a sip of tea. I couldn't taste it, just felt it like warm tears rolling down the back of my throat.

Dear God, I'm crying again. And I've been feeling so much better lately. It was bound to happen today. I'll be fine in just a moment.

And now my coffee's cold. A horrible thin, wrinkly skin stretches across the top. I'll call Martha and ask her to bring me a nip of whisky. Only a nip. It's almost time to get going. Get this dreaded evening over and done with.

The funeral was at Golders Green Crematorium on the Wednesday. Gerald arrived at my door in the morning wearing a mauve suit with a sprig of winter honeysuckle in the lapel. I became suddenly aware of how wretched I looked and smelt. Until that moment, I'd found a brutal comfort in the fetid smell of my room – the stale air of cigarettes and whisky (I hadn't been able to stomach gin, being for me too closely connected with Soho bar life; I found the punishing sourness of whisky much more desirable at such a time) – there was something vibrant and robust about the stench of decomposition. But the dewy waft that accompanied Gerald's entrance instantly aged everything around me. Gerald was aware of it too, I'm sure, but simply smiled, patted me on the back, and trundled me into the Citroen.

'Pull up alright then, did we?' he asked as he started the engine, nodding to my suit, the same navy velvet number he'd seen me in the night before. 'I feel horrid this morning. As if I've been half-beaten to death by the entire Chelsea horn section.'

Gerald had spent the last two evenings at my place. I'd refused to go out, as he had wanted, so we compromised by sitting in at my digs and polishing off three bottles of

Glenfiddich, listening to all of Noel's recordings and reminiscing over his career like two drunk old radio announcers conducting an on-air retrospective.

I could barely remember Monday night, or Monday daytime either, for that matter. When Gerald came over on the Tuesday night, he told me that he'd found me in bed the previous evening, listening to '*Visse D'arte*', wearing an evening suit, my mother-of-pearl cufflinks, a silk hanky in my pocket and reeking of Chanel (as well as, of course, whisky). I was blathering about having been to Her Majesty's to see *Tosca*, but that the *insolent wench* at the ticket booth would only sell me tickets to *Salome*. He says he put me to bed around midnight, after I started snoring in my chair and my tumbler dropped out of my hand onto the carpet and rolled across the floorboards. I followed a trail of ants to a sticky glass under my bed the next morning, so I guess most of what he told me was true.

Tuesday, I could remember. I rang work and told them I had a migraine – which was partially correct: I *did* have a vile hangover for that treacherous half-hour upon waking before the first shot of whisky went ringing through my veins. Then Gerald and I went for a walk around Regent's Park, visited a few galleries on Bond Street, stocked up on chocolate at Woolworths and even poked our heads in at Harrods. It was one of those blue-sky winter days when everything appears so still, crisp and clear, as if you're looking at it all through a bottle of fine gin. Quite frankly, I was surprised how reasonable I felt. But by about five, when the sun had sunk below the treetops of Regent's Park, that long cold evening ahead stretched out in front of me like a desert, and a feeling of absolute terror set in. I tossed out the idea of a quick whisky at my place with a tone of such utter indifference I was surprised when Gerald instantly agreed.

And then, so I was lead to believe, it was Wednesday.

We were slowly motoring along Queensway, making scant conversation about a record Gerald was reviewing and an exhibition of medieval manuscripts that had just opened in Chelsea, when Gerald started up again on his campaign to get me chatting to his friend, Charles Monk, a commissioning editor at Oxford University Press who'd apparently been most impressed by the *daring* but *level-headed insight* of my articles, my ability to *penetrate the minds* of musicians and composers.

'Yes, I suppose I could,' I replied, partly to get him off my back and partly because it suddenly didn't seem such a big deal anymore, and I struggled to remember why I'd been so opposed to the idea in the past. The last two times I'd called the library to tell them I wouldn't be making it in to work, I'd felt as if I was calling someone else's work, that this place actually had nothing to do with me whatsoever. I thought about my colleagues – Marjorie, who glanced at her watch every time I was moments late to work; Angus, and his cloying obsession with Bach's sacred cantatas; and dithery Gladys, who'd blown the element in the urn three times so far this winter – and already they flickered in my mind like characters from a past life. The smell of the books, the rattle of the trolleys, the furry edged cards of the catalogues, all seemed like snapshots from childhood, isolated and indistinct. I started to doubt if I would ever be going back.

There was a hold-up in the traffic, so we just sat there behind a bus, the car humming away contentedly, making occasional hiccups as if choking on the cold. I was about to suggest that maybe I'd write about Chopin when Gerald said, 'Perhaps you could write something on Noel.' Although he started off with his usual candour, his voice trailed off as if something had caught his eye on the street outside my window. I turned around and saw, parked alongside us, a hearse. Yards away from where I sat, two men in black suits stood at the open back doors, sliding in a casket, or rather, a casket-shaped box. It didn't

seem to be made from solid wood, but rather, what resembled plywood, and was draped in lengths of blue and red satin material.

‘Oh dear,’ Gerald said.

We both sat there, unable to take our eyes from the box; I measured the length of it in my mind, felt the weight of it in the pallbearers hands, imagined the body lying prostrate beside us. We barely spoke a word for the rest of the drive.

We had lunch at a pub in Golders Green. I don’t know what I was thinking ordering steak-and-kidney pie, I could stomach little more than the crust; the stout went down far easier. Our conversation which had started up again as soon as we took a seat by the fire was again beginning to grow rigid. Each time I spoke I felt as if I were in front of an entire auditorium, every word rattling about awkwardly in my head. By the time we arrived at the gates to the crematorium, I was almost mute.

We drove down that interminably long pebble drive, bordered by beds of roses, irises and daffodils, empty wooden benches that sat in contemplation at the edge of lakes, the hoary limbs of oaks and elms standing ghostly across stretches of silver-green grass. We parked the car and walked towards the spread of redbrick Lombardic buildings with their marble pillars and arched cloisters, towards the motionless, large crowd that had gathered out the front. As we drew closer, the mass of dark grey at the pebbled entrance began to define itself, into hundreds of suited gentlemen, hands in pockets or drawing on cigarettes. Faces I’d seen on stage, on screen, in the green room, at music festivals, at Noel’s and other parties over the years; it seemed every London musician, conductor, composer and critic was here, on this overcast Wednesday afternoon, standing about with the solemn looks and nervous laughter of students waiting to be called for an exam. For a moment I felt a twinge of pride, seeing all these famous men, with whom for one day, I belonged.

I only recall seeing a few women, though there were probably more. Chatting to a group of men (who I just managed to recognise without tumblers and cigars in their hands), was Claire, who ran the Copa Bar in Soho, looking like Queen Mary, draped head to toe in crepe and clutching a bunch of palmer violets. As I was watching her, tears streaming almost gaily down her blotchy face, a man from the *Times* approached Gerald and I, nodded in Claire's direction and asked if that was Noel's mother.

'Heavens no,' Gerald replied, almost laughing.

It didn't take us long to spot Dulcie and point her out; she was chatting to Pat, in the sea of tar-coloured suits, wearing white cat's-eye glasses, a narrow-waisted sky-blue frock and a matching blue hat with a plume of white ostrich feathers spraying out from the top. She looked as if she were on her way to Ascot.

He raised his eyebrows and smiled tightly, as if to restrain himself from commenting. He turned back to Gerald and me, 'Knew him well then, did you?'

The word *knew* hit hard – Gerald and I had refrained from using such language, delicately sidestepping the past tense – and I resented hearing it from a journalist I'd only met in passing. What's more, he had that perky stare of a newshound on the job.

'Fairly well.'

'First time I saw him was during the war, with the Liverpool Philharmonic. The way he played that big cadenza at the end of the first movement of the Beethoven no. 1 was absolutely dazzling. Received an ovation. Later I heard some old colonel say to FitzBrown, "I wish you'd ask your young pianists not to play those flamboyant cadenzas!" Fitzie told him it was Beethoven's original cadenza, just played as it ought to be played.' The journalist smiled, and when Gerald nor I responded, added, 'I'm sure the colonel was much obliged for the information.'

The wooden doors to the chapel were opened, and as we shuffled towards the entrance, I was struck by a grave familiarity; we all having done this – to see Noel – so many times before. The Wigmore, the Royal Albert, Festival Hall – it now seemed, as we were quietly ushered inside, that all those past occasions had been unwitting rehearsals for this one momentous performance. It seemed impossible, that Noel wouldn't step out under the lights, and play for us all, as he always had.

Inside the chapel, I looked toward the platform. Up there, waiting for his audience, there he was. On a navy skirted podium, surrounded by wreaths of white lilies, roses, chrysanthemums and blossom: a plywood box draped with blue and red satin.

The sermons began, the hymns, the telegrams from Stravinsky, Hindemith and other conductors, composers and musicians from around the world. Then Eddie Sackville-West stood and spoke of Noel's enthusiasm, his friendliness, his brilliant intellect, and that rhapsodic Lisztian quality he possessed. That hidden strain of romanticism, he said, the mixture of power and extreme sensitivity that made his playing of the *Davidsbündlertänze* so utterly memorable.

Despite all the reminiscing about Noel, or perhaps because of it, I listened without any sense of Noel's absence. It was only once the service was over, and we were asked to move out into the memorial garden, that I felt the first stab of panic. That was when I looked over my shoulder at the casket for the first time, properly, and imagined Noel lying inside. The crowd was drawing me outside where a numbing wind landed on my cheeks. I heard sniffing, weeping – saw glazed blinking eyes, hankies blotting cheeks. I walked through the grieving crowd, watching with fascination, as if I were in fact a bird, safely perched up in the maple, gazing down upon the gathering. I was reminded of a plaintive piece of music I'd become quite besotted with as a young teenager, whose musical direction was *Wie aus der*

Ferne – as if heard from a distance. I remembered how I'd never really understood how to imbue that sense in the music, yet how I'd always found the piece so profoundly sad.

Britten was standing amongst Pears, Myra Hess and several others, shaking his head and exclaiming that he didn't understand why so many people he loved found living so difficult; and as everyone started to shrink into comforting huddles, unburdening themselves with memories, crying freely, crumpling under each other's shoulders, I started to feel everything unravelling. It was as if an air-raid siren had sounded and I was the only one who could hear it. I could feel my lungs contracting and rising in my chest, a hard-walled capsule wedged beneath my throat. I knew that I had to get out of there immediately.

Gerald clearly would like to have stayed – his eyes and cheeks were sodden, and he now wanted to douse himself further with wine and recollection – but he took one look at me, patted me on the back and said, 'Let's get you home, shall we?' And thank God he did. When we arrived back at my digs and bumped into Ma O'Grady at the bottom of the stairs, she handed me a letter, that had been mistakenly delivered to the neighbours on Monday.

I took one look at it, saw that sweeping handwriting that I knew so well, and burst into elated laughter, as if everything over the last few days had been one enormous, outrageous farce. I ripped open the envelope. Inside was one small piece of thin notepaper, folded in half.

Friday

My dear friend,

Thankyou so much for your kind letter, I really am very grateful. I'm so glad you and Bill got along so well, he thought you most charming and was looking forward to more of our evenings together.

I leave for Germany next week and expect to return just before Christmas. Would so like to pop over and see you after I get back, I recently stumbled upon some wonderful Weber duets that I'm sure you'll find simply delightful. Have you managed to get going on the Schumann?

I'm sorry that your arm is still playing up

– Really, one's insides are the devil.

Once again, very many thanks.

Yours,

Noël.

I must have read the letter several times, unable to establish any meaning; unable to make any sense of it at all. I was standing there, reading it over and over, without actually registering the words, but just looking at the lines, the swirls, the crosses, mesmerised by the shapes on the paper. I started to feel angry and confused, as if I'd been the subject of some perverse and humiliating joke. After that I can't remember what happened. Gerald later told me that I started laughing and speaking absolute gibberish, then walked upstairs, went as white as a sheet and collapsed.

Sometime that night, or perhaps it was early the following day, Gerald admitted me to Westminster Hospital.

I vaguely recall waking, lying in a large white-walled room, filled with beds of howling patients; incessant traffic moving past. I remember a nurse with loose puckered flesh, like the skin of a mandarin, and her large freckly arms that would hover over me holding a syringe – 'Just a little injection to help you sleep' – and the entire time, even

though I had little sense of where I was or why, feeling a tremendous sense of calm. And that's how I remained, drifting about in a sublime soporific state from which I became quite irate if ever disturbed. I didn't see Gerald – he told me after that only family were allowed to visit – and the only company I enjoyed was of that little red-haired child of a nurse who brought my meals – usually a tray of pills in a small kidney-shaped metal dish accompanied by a serving each of stew and jelly – and who I'd insisted call me Clara. She seemed, like me, oblivious to the blood-curdling screams and barking military commands that ricocheted about the brick walls and vinyl floors. Thinking she was doing the right thing, she told me that Noel Mewton-Wood (who I'd apparently called out for more than a few times) had been an inmate in this very ward only two weeks earlier – he'd been an absolute gentleman, she said in her dreamy Cockney voice.

I didn't have the heart to tell the dear girl he was now gone.

I was only there for three days before Gerald convinced my doctor that I wasn't about to kill myself, and that he would manage my medication and see that I was alright. I don't think the doctor would have needed much coercing, he clearly couldn't wait to see the back of me. When Gerald arrived at my bed and started packing my suitcase, repeating the conversation he'd had, I smiled wearily in agreement. No, I wasn't going to kill myself. Even in that respect I felt like a complete and utter failure.

'I've spoken to Ma O'Grady,' he started, once in the car. 'Told her some story about a sick uncle in Bournemouth you've gone to visit; so I've packed up some of your things. Thought it best if you stayed at my place for a while. Mother's in the country so it'll be nice and quiet.'

In the back seat I noticed several suitcases and boxes; the cylinder of the typewriter Gerald had given me sticking out the top of one.

‘Your work’s been ringing. Ma O’Grady said she’d pass on about your uncle if they rang again.’ He waited for me to reply; I said nothing. ‘We’ll probably have to do something about that.’

I was looking out on the street. Somehow it was even greyer than usual, a storm coming perhaps. There was a lady with a barking terrier at her feet unsuccessfully trying to erect her umbrella with such a sour look on her face that no one bothered to help; two young secretaries with heads in the air carrying boxes of flowers (I guessed one had just got herself engaged); and a stocky grey-haired man in an olive-coloured suit who, at first, I thought was Thomas. I felt entirely removed from it all – a bus could have run them all down that very second and I wouldn’t have flinched. I watched, simply, because there was nothing else to do, and because there was something strangely amusing about the way everything, so pointlessly, went on by.

‘There’s a gathering at Pat’s tomorrow.’

I didn’t respond.

‘Anyway, we can see how you pull up in the morning.’

I realised I ought to have said something – that Gerald was trying – but there was really nothing I could think to say.

I didn’t go to Pat’s. I stayed in the room that Gerald had had made up for me, with a four-poster and a desk with gramophone, wireless and typewriter, overlooking a grove of walnut and pear trees, all which stood naked and shivering in the fog on the frosted grass. Martha, the housekeeper, had stacked the fireplace, and for lunch brought me up the *Times*, a tray with a plate of beef hock stew and waxy potatoes, and a bottle of brandy. So after lunch I sat in the armchair by the fire, read some Genet, and proceeded to get drunk.

The wireless played in the background, and every hour my ears pricked up to hear the BBC news, each time feeling a sense of both betrayal and relief to hear no word of Noel. The only mention came in the afternoon when Neville Boucher spoke of an upcoming performance of *Voice of the Prophets*, which, he added, was premiered last summer at Festival Hall by Peter Pears, and Noel Mewton-Wood, to whom Bush had dedicated the piece, and ‘the latter who sadly passed away last weekend’. And in those eight simple words, I thought, Noel had been smoothly swept from the world.

The papers had been conspicuously quiet. Bliss had written an obituary in the *Times*, and apparently Pat had been put in charge of the press, providing them with the appropriate story, making sure no scandal erupted. There had only been oblique mention of the recent death of a *friend and associate*, which had caused the pianist *some distress*. They had also reported no suspicion of foul play. The death was believed to be due to poisoning, *while the balance of the mind was upset*.

I’d always envied Noel’s robust and optimistic spirit, the apparent grace and ease with which he moved through the world. But as I remembered him perched on the edge of the sofa with that unflappable smile, handing me the *Davidsbündlertänze*, I had the terrible notion that perhaps there was far more to this thoughtful gift, and his provocative dedication over the wireless.

Shortly before Schumann had given Clara the dances, he’d made a confession to his fiancé, about a *psychical malady* that he’d been burdened with as long as he could remember – his ongoing cycles of suicidal despair and euphoria – begging her not to worry; assuring her that she was capable of curing him entirely and making him completely happy.

Schumann was aware of the two battling sides of his personality, *characters* which he named *Florestan* – who was passionately enthusiastic – and *Eusebins* – lonely and

introspective. I wondered what Clara thought, when, several weeks after confessing his *secret*, Schumann presented her with the *Davidsbündlertänze* – the League of David Dances – each piece bearing an *F* or *E*, or both, at the beginning; several of them titled with thoughts or gestures of the two contrasting personalities. Perhaps she responded as we had, when Noel walked out on stage to perform this extraordinary opus: awestruck by the man's genius. Surely she could never have conceived how anyone capable of creating works as beautiful as these, could one day simply lose the will to live.

I thought about how Schumann's fits of depressions were followed by periods of frenzied composition – the First symphony in B flat major only took four days to compose, as did the *Liederkreis* of twenty pieces; and about the furious pace Noel would learn some horrendously difficult work like the Busoni concerto, sometimes in a matter of days. The more I thought about these remarkably similar men, the more convinced I became that neither had lost the will to live, or *lost* anything at all; but rather, had simply just stopped, stood still. Let that thing – whatever it was – that had been chasing them, driving them, finally just catch up.

London audiences had rarely heard the *Davidsbündlertänze* before Noel performed them. So satisfied, they were, that they knew all the great classical works, so resistant to hearing anything new. Yet when Noel played these pieces I'd look around the concert hall and see tears streaming down faces and smiles of recognition. Noel's extraordinary understanding, that's what we all said after he played (*not a note was insignificant...art psychologically true to the composer's style*, wrote Neville Cardus), without giving a thought to what it meant, this *understanding*. None of us considered it as anything more than some supernatural gift that had landed in his lap, some astounding ability that he possessed, to be able to walk on stage and into the shoes of Schumann.

Gerald arrived home from Pat's around ten, came to my room and asked me to join him for a drink and a smoke in the library. He stood hunched over at my door, leaning all his weight on the knob as if it were the only thing holding him up. The few wrinkles around his brilliant brown-blue eyes were more prominently etched than usual, with fine layers of skin drooping over each line.

'They all say it was guilt,' he trailed off, swilling his brandy in its balloon, and looking over towards the wall of books. 'And grief of course. Yes, most certainly grief. *Devastated* about Bill, naturally. But everyone was talking about how *happy* he'd been that last week – that he kept saying he felt he was getting over it all. He rang John Amis the night before and they spoke for *two* hours.'

I wondered why Noel hadn't tried calling me that night. I felt a weary anger towards John, as if he'd misappropriated those precious two hours of Noel's final night.

'John says Noel was talking about the future, upcoming tours, terribly excited about the recordings he was going to be doing with Max Rostal.' Gerald had his legs stretched out crossed in front of him and was staring at his shoes, quite intensely, as if some answer might lie there.

Martha carried in a basket of wood for the fire. She knelt down and started loading the blaze without glancing back at either of us, clearly aware we were in for a long night. 'Earlier in the week,' Gerald continued, 'Pat and Noel drove down to Cambridge to visit Carl Winter at the Fitzwilliam Museum – he'd just opened an exhibition on eighteenth-century portrait mezzotints; Pat thought it'd be good to get Noel out of town. They'd only been there half an hour when Noel excused himself, said he wanted to drop in on a friend and that he'd be back in ten minutes. Several hours later he returned – quite cheerful, apparently

– had this small dark brown bottle,’ Gerald paused and put his drink down on the desk beside him, looking at it quizzically. ‘Said something about the *damn rats* in his new house, that this friend of his in the Chemistry Department had given him some cyanide to get rid of them.’

Gerald continued relaying the tale, telling me about Pat and Noel’s drive back from Cambridge. I saw Noel, sitting in the passenger seat of Pat’s Bentley as they drove through the countryside chatting about the portraits they’d just seen, aware, the entire time, of the cold glass bottle, heavy in his pocket. Over the next few days, Pat had said that Noel’s spirits seemed to lift. I imagined him each morning, chatting with Pat over breakfast then heading off to Hillgate Place to practice – whistling Gibbon’s *Fantasia* as he walked down Harley Street towards Notting Hill Gate – this grave weight, swinging pendulously in his jacket as he walked.

Gerald paused, and looked at me quite sternly. ‘Are you alright, ol chap? Would you like me to grab you another one of your pills?’

He stood and walked off towards the kitchen. I filled my balloon with brandy and tipped the contents down my throat, warmed by the feeling of my entire insides blazing alight.

As I lay in bed that night, my mind roamed a series of flickering pictures, eventually settling on one salient image: standing with Noel in front of a large oil at an exhibition of modern Dutch painters at a gallery in Kensington. An oily blue-black sea consumed almost the entire canvas, and even in remembering this sight I lay there overcome by a sense of vertigo, gazing down at the impasto white-caps from the mast of this storm-weathered whaling vessel. We stood there for several minutes and just when the silence between us had stretched a little

too long, Noel started upon one of his anecdotes, about the paint colour the artist had used – Prussian blue – telling me that this pigment had originally been made from dried blood. As I stood gazing into the tumultuous waters, Noel told me how two early eighteenth-century German scientists had heated dried blood with potash and green vitriol to produce a pigment with an intense blue colour, ‘As if all the oxygen had been sucked out of the blood,’ he’d said. They named the blue pigment after its place of discovery: *Berlin* – or *Prussian* – *Blue*. As we walked about the gallery, Noel said that later that century, a Swedish scientist heated the pigment with diluted sulphuric acid to create an acidic solution he called Berlin Blue acid. In English, the acid was called prussic acid, and later, hydrogen cyanide.

I never questioned Noel’s possession of such macabre knowledge – he stood in awe of the sciences of both chemistry and physics, and with little prompting would explain in meticulous detail, processes such as plutonium fission inside a nuclear reactor, or alcohol absorption inside the human body.

We walked a full circle of the gallery and stopped near the door before leaving, once more staring into the swirling cyanic sea, both of us bothered, it seemed, by this work, but neither of us saying a word.

Then another day, just before he moved out of Hammersmith, I’d dropped over to the house and was waiting for him in the living room while he took a call in the study. I started flicking through an American medical journal that was lying on the table, and read an article published by two ex-German Jews about the effects of cyanide poisoning on the human body. I’m not normally interested in such morbid things but it was all so hideously described I couldn’t take my eyes from the page. The cyanide, they wrote, attaches itself to all the haemoglobin in the blood, making it unavailable for carrying oxygen. Within seconds, the cyanide is distributed around the body, and the victim, starved of air, experiences

dizziness, coughing, headaches and nausea. Then, the most extraordinary thing happens: the oxygen-deprived central nervous system becomes frantically energised causing hyperactivity and palpitations. I remember as I read this, recalling from a school science class that a dying plant, as if somehow aware of its fate, will spontaneously flower and seed; I thought of Schumann, and his burst of frenzied composing before sinking into a suicidal abyss; and of Beethoven, during one of the saddest periods of his life, almost completely deaf, unable to perform, surviving the deaths of family and close friends, composing his final symphony: an exultant ‘Ode to Joy’. One final desperate lunge towards life.

The body’s attempt to rise up above what is happening, to override the effects of the poisoning, is short-lived. The pulse slows down and weakens, breathing becomes laboured and stertorous, limbs tremor and convulse. Within minutes, grasping for air, the poisoned body becomes paralysed, comatose, and shortly after, dies.

Noel had been on the phone, laughing in the next room, while I was reading and thinking about all of this, completely unaware – how could I have been otherwise? – of the awful irony of what was happening. That one day I would remember all that I’d read, and Noel’s waggish voice in the background, and the entire scene would take on an air of such grotesque horror.

When Noel didn’t arrive home for dinner on the Saturday night, Pat said that he and Raymond Russell set out into the fog towards Hillgate Place. When they arrived, the house was dark and quiet; there was no answer at the door. They called the police from a neighbour’s house then forced an entry. Once inside, they turned on the lights and could see, through the open door to the music room, the Steinway, with its lid open. There was music on the piano stand and scattered about on the floor.

The morbid smell of bitter almonds cut through the still, icy air of the entrance hall. They walked into the music room, and there they saw Noel, crouched on the floor, his right arm resting on the sofa, his head collapsed on his forearm, his skin bearing a faint blue pallor. Despite the near-freezing temperature, he was dressed as if he were somewhere quite warm, wearing a red plaid open-necked shirt, khaki shorts and white plimsolls.

On the coffee table beside him were a near empty bottle of gin and a small brown bottle of prussic acid, labelled by the Cambridge University Chemistry Department, later found to have been stolen. On the desk near the window, and all over the floor, were loose pages of writing, some ripped or screwed up into balls and strewn across the room, amongst a mess of manuscripts, scores and gramophone records. On the wall near Noel's body, at about chest height on the brand new green, gold and ivory wallpaper, was a large stain, like a watermark, and stuck to it were tiny shards of crystal. Scattered on the carpet below were the broken remains of a tumbler, coated with a clear sticky residue of gin and cyanide.

*

My first real venture out was to see a Myra Hess recital at Morley College. I was nervous about going, not just because Tippett and no doubt many of the others would be there, but also because of the thought of seeing that small brown Steinway – which would tremble under Noel's pounding fortissimos – sitting there on stage, having survived him. But it did seem fitting to go and hear Myra, of all people: a woman whose gentle touch and radiant smile had carried London's audiences through the war. And what's more – and without taking anything away from her brilliance – one always knew what they would get with Myra, who rarely veered from what she called the *roast beef of music* – Bach, Beethoven, Brahms,

Mozart, Scarlatti, Schubert and Schumann. In recent times, Myra had grown even more uncompromising in her programmes, and today's recital was entirely Bach, mainly late partitas and toccatas. As Gerald collected my hat and coat from the stand, he insisted once more, that this performance was just what the doctor ordered.

There was something indefinably calm and enduring about the music of Bach, attending to the spirit rather than the emotions. And although I felt quite moved throughout – it really was such a fortifying atmosphere – one felt a great sense of dignity in being stirred by such music.

As an encore, Myra played the crowd's old favourite, 'Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring', a piece that she'd performed many times at the National Gallery concerts. There was one performance in particular that I recalled seeing with my father, on a lovely still autumn day after a night of heavy shelling. Myra, as everyone knew, had nerves that gnawed at her like ants and was often totally incapable of giving a public performance, but that day she rose to the occasion, drifting into the room in her long black gown, and playing the most lambent rendition of this familiar work, as if she'd arrived from a place that had never known bombs, raids or propaganda. The voices that emanated from her hands meandered like trickling tributaries into a sunlit stream on which the audience gently floated.

Just as it had that day at the National Gallery, a reverent silence settled over the room once Myra lifted her hands from the piano. Then after several seconds the room launched into fierce applause. Myra stood and took a bow, wearing a timid but gracious smile, then floated off behind the stage.

We joined Pat, Tippett and John in the foyer, they were standing about raving about Myra and her playing, John insisting Dame Myra ought to be ordained as the Jewish Queen Mother.

I hadn't seen any of these men since the funeral, and even then, I'm not sure that I'd spoken a word with any one of them. They all nodded and greeted us cheerfully as we approached, but I felt, maybe imagined, a degree of distance, nonetheless. I couldn't be certain how much Noel had told any of them about his radio dedication to me, and about me being over at his house the night of Bill's death, so was unsure how cleanly I'd emerged in their eyes from all that had happened.

The conversation turned to Bach, and soon enough cataracts, the cause of Bach's blindness. Pat mentioned a colleague of his, Harold Ridley, who'd developed a synthetic lens for cataract suffers from plexiglass. 'If Bach had been alive today,' he stated in his scholarly tone, 'We could have prevented his blindness.' He raised his eyebrows and smiled, as if, I thought, laying claim to all those yet-to-be-written works of the composer.

I watched this tall, slender well-to-do man, how impeccably he spoke; it wasn't at all surprising he'd done such a sterling job with the press of quieting any rumours about Noel. I'd always been slightly intimidated by Pat's intellect, and, shall we say, class. But the longer I stood listening to him chatter away, I decided that despite what this distinguished surgeon might or might not know about Noel's and my relationship, he could hardly afford to think ill of me, or blame me in any way; he was, after all, a doctor, and in charge of Noel's care on the day that Noel had died.

'In Bach's time, they treated cataracts with *couching* operations,' Pat continued. 'The blind patient sits in a chair – no anaesthetic of course, maybe a mug of mead if they're lucky – and the surgeon leans over with a sharp instrument, a bit thicker than a darning needle, and pokes it in the patient's eye.' Then he turned to me, positioning his long surgeon's fingers in front of my face, as if holding a large needle, and demonstrated the deft jab into my right eye. 'When he feels something hard – the lens – he works it down away from the

pupil, letting it fall into the vitreous fluid. If the lens doesn't stay down, it has to be broken up in pieces and these fragments pressed down inside the eye.'

'Oh, how barbaric!' Gerald said, screwing up his face. The others were braced between amusement and disgust.

'The procedure was a favourite with travelling surgeons, because the patient would usually go blind soon afterwards,' Pat continued, performing to his captive crowd.

'Bach's surgeon was an Englishman called John Taylor,' I said, compelled to air my knowledge.

'Yes, scoundrel of a man!' Pat said without even glancing at me. 'He blinded Bach in Germany one year, returned to England, and – you won't believe it – blinded Handel a year later!' Pat laughed.

'Well he clearly wasn't very fond of Baroque music, was he?' John remarked.

'An absolute villain,' Pat added, turning to me smiling.

'It's a matter of perspective, really. Many people at the time actually considered Taylor a highly skilled surgeon,' I said, avoiding Pat's now-indignant gaze. I'd always been fascinated by the character of John Taylor, but hadn't realised until this point that I actually felt quite sorry for the chap. I found it hard to accept that Taylor understood the ramifications of the operation he was performing, or that he didn't believe he was acting for the good of humankind; surely it was a case of either bad luck or sheer incompetence. I tried to imagine what he would have thought if someone had told him that two hundred years after his own death, he would be remembered not for anything he had contributed to the world, but for what he had taken away. That a group of musicians and music-lovers would be standing around at a Sunday afternoon concert talking about his heinous role in musical history.

Pat shifted his stare from me, returning to the group. ‘Well you can believe what you like, young chap. I think Samuel Johnson summed Dr Taylor up perfectly when he described him as the triumph of impudence over ignorance.’

Pat stood there wearing his charmingly clever smile, while Tippett, John and Gerald stood about him, laughing.

I remained bothered about the conversation at Morley College all evening, and shortly after dinner, retired to my room, pondering the life of Johann Sebastian Bach.

Several months after the fateful operation by Taylor, and less than a year after writing the Mass in B minor, Bach died from a stroke. On his death bed, lying there poor and blind, I wondered whether Bach thought about all the people he had lost in his life, and was grateful for the pending reunion. Would he have reflected on his mammoth opus and felt at peace that he had left the world so much, or would he have been frustrated, departing with still so much more to give? Or perhaps – as Pat would no doubt suggest – he lay there cursing the day John Taylor was born into the world, wishing the worst possible retribution upon him.

When my father told me the stories of Bach – how as a child he copied out the manuscripts of Froberger and Buxtehude by moonlight each night, while his strict jealous older brother was sleeping; or how as an adult, he’d walk 250 miles and back to hear an important musician perform – I wonder why other people did not choose to follow in this great man’s path. I did not question for a moment that virtuosity could not be earned, that we could not all *choose* to be brilliant. Yes – I remember as a child, lying there in bed, listening to my father potter around his study late into the night, and actually *deciding* to be brilliant. I thought about Bach during the 1720s, after the death of his first wife, and during the long

dirge of infant deaths suffered with his second wife, how he was writing up to one cantata each week, one of the most astonishing feats of creative productivity in the history of western music. I had lain there thinking about all this, and decided that *I too* would do the same.

I sat in my room at Gerald's house, looking out at the night sky and garden, deathly still and glowing steel grey. Downstairs in the library, I could hear Gerald playing the *Pearl Fishers* on the gramophone, and imagined him sitting back in his armchair, closing his eyes and listening to the flute and the harp, and that sonorous duet of the two lovestruck fishermen. I thought about my father, and all those times I'd watched from my bedroom window as he was carted off to hospital in the neighbour's Morris Minor. I thought about Noel's imploring eyes as he gazed up at me from the harpsichord the last time I saw him. Parading past me was this stream of events, in which had I been someone else, someone of some worth, I might have *acted*, and things might have turned out quite differently. I began to think that in life, we actually get to decide very little at all. We don't decide to be a Johann Sebastian Bach or a John Taylor; the world decides for us. The more I thought about this the more certain I became that I indeed possessed no greatness, I held no claim on fame or glory at all. The truth that I'd held so closely to my chest was that the world had seated me closer to Taylor than to Bach: a realisation with which I wasn't sure I could live.

The next couple of months at Gerald's passed in a fog of whisky, writing and cigars. I'm not sure if Gerald was regretting his open-ended invitation for me to stay – I was now making a decent income from my articles, and at least was now able to pay my way – but he was occasionally becoming quite short with me, accusing me of all manner of things around the house, from purposefully withholding telephone messages, to quietly drinking the house dry.

It seemed outrageous at the time, although I can't help wondering now if perhaps some of it may have been true. Don't get me wrong, we got along marvellously most of the time, but every now and then little rows would erupt over some small annoyance and I'd jump down his throat, such as when he was too stingy in metering out my pills, or when he came up with unthinkable stories that such-and-such a person had apparently said about Noel.

Things had been quite good between us for some weeks – Gerald seemed much improved and was behaving like his old self – when one night he dragged me out for a drink at the Athenaeum. I went along just to please him; he had, after all, done so much for me, it really was the least I could do. Besides, playing up to the gin-doused flirtations and dreary innuendos of priggish Cambridge lads and chorus boys was an act I'd been pulling off with very little effort for years.

It didn't take me long to fall back into my old routine and sidle up to a tiny man seated at the bar with pencilled eyebrows, dark almond-shaped eyes, a shining black comb-over and wearing an indigo silk neck scarf. I recognised him as Kip, the actor I'd met years ago at La Douce, the same night I'd met Gerald. I contemplated going home with him, and amused myself with the possibility, that I could effect something – an event, an intimate exchange.

I noticed his kohl-lined eyes batting and sizing me up in the same cold and listless manner I recognised in myself, and it was at that point I realised I had no real interest in this man, that my desire was borne of boredom and something more akin to malice.

Kip spoke to me about being terrified of leaving his digs at night since a close friend had been charged with gross indecency. 'Luckily he was spared from the queer-ken,' he said in a seamless blend of polari and hysteria. 'He's been put on the treatment and ever since

he's been growing bloomin foofs!' Gesturing a large pair of breasts in front of him. 'He was wearing a sweater the other day and I told him he looked like Lana Turner!'

I mentioned my close call with Noel, realising as soon as I'd spoken that I hadn't told this story to anyone, and I had the dreadful thought that I might be incriminating myself in some way.

Kip replied with a theatrical shrug and exhaled his cigarette smoke. 'Yes, but that bold *omi* did plough his own furrow, didn't he?'

I responded with a concurring laugh and nod, unsure which had pained me more: Kip's outright dismissal of my tale, or the reminder of Noel's notorious reputation.

Kip went on to tell me he'd heard from a neighbour in Hammersmith that the police were constant visitors at Noel's house, always dropping in for a cuppa and a chat. 'You know what I heard?' he said with a salacious smile, 'Noel was out trolling one night and tried to blag an undercover rozzar who was having a barclays in the Kings Park cottages – Noel would have been thrown in the queer-ken except it turned out the rozzar's mother was an ex-opera singer. He said to Noel as he was taking off the cuffs, she'd have strung and quartered him if she'd found out her son was responsible for putting away the likes of Mr Mewton-Wood.' He raised his pencilled eyebrows that already hung in a surprised expression too far up his forehead, and pursed his lips. I responded with a weak smile, obviously not enough to warrant further attention; he turned away and dipped his head coyly to a young spiv wearing a velvet collar and a lurid kipper tie, who'd just arrived next to him at the bar.

Later at home, when Gerald and I sat for our night cap in the library, I relayed Kip's story, hoping that Gerald would assure me what an incorrigible liar Kip was known to be.

‘Oh, *that*,’ Gerald responded, as if I were referring to some inconsequential incident. ‘Yes, yes, well the dear boy was bound to get into a bit of trouble now and again, wasn’t he? I mean that was just the way Noel was.’

‘How would *you* know how he was?’

Gerald had been getting on my nerves a lot lately with his clever little titbits, and oh-so-knowledgeable insights about everyone we knew. I was feeling a little bit tetchy as it was, I couldn’t bare the thought of Gerald going off on his high horse again.

Gerald leaned back in his chair, smoking his cigar; his eyes squinted, gazing off into the corner of the room. ‘Noel wasn’t a very happy man.’

I shrugged, not really wanting to get into another heated argument.

Gerald took his time, looking about the room. ‘You’ve seemed quite good over the last month. You seem to be getting over it all. Is that right?’ I wasn’t at all sure what he was talking about – when I didn’t respond he continued. ‘When you were in hospital I chatted with your aunt – not at all what I expected, I must say – and she told me you went through a similar sort of thing after your father passed. Really – why didn’t you tell me how your father died?’

I still had no idea where he was heading, and frankly, was feeling quite annoyed. I couldn’t understand why he had to behave so peculiarly each time I mentioned Noel’s name. He looked down at my foot, which I realised was tapping up and down restlessly on the Beauvais tapestry carpet.

‘I realise this must all be terribly upsetting for you,’ he looked at me almost sternly, ‘But, Noel...he was not a well young man.’

I glanced up from my lap towards him and saw his eyes as I hadn’t seen them before, completely unguarded. It was as if I’d looked at him at the precise angle to see deep into the

back of his eyes. It only lasted for a fraction of a second, then moments later I lost that minute degree, and again I saw only his glassy blue-brown irises.

‘Much like your father, it sounds. So you don’t need me to explain... Anyway, it certainly wasn’t the first time Noel had tried. Poor boy. Lord knows how long it had been going on. Very...*tragic*...really.’

Gerald was studying me, and just for a moment, I saw my aunt, and her sober, weary gaze when she told me that my father had just died; words that she spoke so calmly, that have hung in my mind as a string of sounds, but of which I’ve never felt able to grasp the meaning. My face felt flushed, and my head heavy and dizzy, as if a motor was whirring inside. I rolled my head back and closed my eyes.

Gerald kept talking; his words were swimming about me; I thought I was going to be sick.

‘It might have been the night of Bill’s funeral, Raymond was over at Noel’s, keeping an eye on him. Noel had been fine over tea, a little quiet, but nothing you wouldn’t expect. He said goodnight and went upstairs to the loft, threw down a hundred aspirin and washed them down with gin.’ Gerald paused momentarily, rubbing the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. ‘Anyway, he didn’t die, so started slashing at his veins – very brashly – and that didn’t help either, dammit. So he staggered back downstairs, covered in vomit and blood, bumped into Raymond on the landing, just smiled and said, “I’m very sorry, I seem to have made rather a mess”.’ Gerald slipped into Noel’s characteristically jolly voice, with its mild Australian inflection. I thought he was going to start laughing.

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I started to wonder if I might have been exceedingly drunk and imagining everything Gerald was saying.

Gerald paused. ‘Oh dear...’ He put his hand on my knee.

I opened my eyes to see him leaning forward, perched down, trying to gaze up into my eyes, holding out his hanky to me.

‘I only found out myself after Noel was gone, and, well, you were in such a state, and hearing about your father and all...I tried to talk with you once and you almost snapped my head off.’ Gerald’s voice was strained, his lips twitching. He eventually sat back in his seat again, his brow tightly knitted.

‘So what else do you know?’ I asked in the most childishly sarcastic voice I could muster.

He took a sip on his brandy and relit his cigar. His tone changed: apologetic but at the same time, not addressed to me at all; he was just thinking aloud, speaking to the musty smoke-filled air in the room. ‘I only really know of one, but there’s been mention of others – they keep these things quiet, of course. A chap at the British Council told me that in Germany – sometime just after the war – one day on tour, Noel just felt that he couldn’t play the piano anymore; he said later that he wasn’t able to concentrate properly. Bill, who’d only just met him, was the one who found him in his room – veins all cut up – salvaged him – very inexpertly, I hear. But managed to get him back on his feet again.’

I was staring down into my glass, swilling the amber liquid so violently it skirted the smooth rim of the balloon. I could feel my face heating up and blood rushing around my limbs. I looked up at Gerald, restraining myself from throwing the entire glass at him – the critic, the historian, the arbiter of truth – sitting there so cleverly in his silk upholstered armchair.

‘He adored Bill, he really did. Despite all his little indiscretions, Bill was the one person who seemed to be able to keep him from going off the rails. Extraordinary, isn’t it?’

Such a brilliant boy.’ He shook his head and sighed. ‘The Busoni was a breeze for Noel. I can’t understand it at all. But clearly Bill could.’

I reached for one of his cigars. I’d have one more smoke, I decided, then off to bed. I didn’t want to hang around all night listening to this.

‘You know just a few days before Bill died, Noel did a broadcast from Wales and dedicated it to Clara – “To my Immortal Beloved”, he said.’

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees, trying to restrain the smile that threatened to spread wide across my face. I stared at the floor as I contemplated how much I ought to tell Gerald, and what he’d think of it all. Gerald, who prided himself on knowing everything about everyone.

‘Apparently Bill’s mother, when pregnant with Bill, was certain she was going to have a girl, and called the unborn child Clara. When Bill grew up to be as camp as he was, his father would scream at him that he should still be bloody well called Clara,’ Gerald was laughing, his eyes pinned on me, hoping I’d join in the joke. ‘Noel thought that story was priceless.’

Gerald, wearing a childish grin, refilled his glass, then leant towards me, pointing the bottle in my direction. He hovered for a moment, trying to catch my eye, put his other hand on my knee, then leaned and pulled himself towards me. He was drunk. I had to go to bed before I throttled him. I stood up, shoving those tampering little hands off me and almost knocking him to the floor. I turned around and headed to the door, wondering why I hadn’t punched or kicked him on my way out.

Gerald was yelling at me as I walked out into the corridor, ‘Young man, you come straight back in here at once,’ cursing as I left the room.

The high-pitched ring of my cognac balloon smashing on the floor, like a hundred tiny glass bells ringing, prevented any other thought or sound entering my mind. I reached the top of the stairs and headed straight for my bedroom door.

*

Your father stepped in front of a bus today – they may have been my aunt’s exact words, I’ve done my best to forget. What an inglorious way to go out. It undid everything he ever taught me. No goodbye, no note. Nothing. Just left with his unfulfilled dreams, the fantasy he couldn’t sustain.

*

As for Noel:

Forty-three pages of suicide notes were found littered about the room, starting off quite sober, apologetic – *I’m sorry to be doing this, but if I can’t play the piano, my life cannot continue...* Then as the gin kicked in, working himself up to the deed, getting more and more erratic and excited, his handwriting barely legible, the demon within him starting to surface. He lashed out at everyone: his close friends the critics Eddie Sackville-West and Desmond Shaw-Taylor, the BBC, his agent Emmie Tillett – *You mustn’t do anything for Ma Tillett, she’s no good, she’ll say one thing and do another, she’s a sick woman* – anyone who might have stood in the way of his music, his *destiny*. The heat of the gin, thumping around in his veins, his writing and logic increasingly confused, forming violent streaks across the page, until finally, all of it, suddenly, stopped.

I'm sure he had no idea what he was doing, that he thought of this act, like his pounding concertos, as simply a flight – a miraculous escape. That he could gaze down, unscathed, upon us – see our stunned faces, shower in our thundering applause.

Music is my life, he wrote. *If I can't play music, there's no point going on.*

I'd never questioned that music was Noel's life. But for the first time I had to ask myself what that really meant, when the alternative to music was death. I wondered whether a love that existed as a refuge from the world, could really be described as love at all.

*

I still spend a lot of time thinking about Noel's and my relationship (I even checked in the *Oxford*, as I, too, was beginning to wonder whether this word was really apt – *the state of having relation to; kinship* – yes, yes, surely we had this, didn't we?). A lot of time thinking about love. And each time I've tried tracing the relationship to its source I've found myself travelling far back to before I'd even heard of the illustrious Noel Mewton-Wood.

My father had taken to coming home from work and going straight to his room, often not coming out for dinner or for the rest of the evening. During the night I'd hear him walking about the house like a ghost, or sitting by the gramophone listening to his records. In the morning, he'd leave early, before I'd even woken; and there, sitting on the stove with a cloth draped over it, the evening meal my aunt had cooked for him, exactly as she'd left it the night before.

I started to create a game for myself, where I too would hide in my bed for an entire afternoon, only coming out for tea. First of all I'd puff up the blankets and quilts so that they'd best conceal my body, then I'd slip in carefully, turning my head to the side, lying as

flat and still as I could, and calm my breath to a shallow murmur. And then I'd just wait; wait for someone to find me.

Several months before I'd started this afternoon ritual there'd been a kidnapping in London. Edward Mathers, a young boy the same age as me, had disappeared from his bed one night without a trace, his bedroom window left wide open. On the wireless and in the newspapers we'd hear about Edward's despairing parents who would do anything for their dear boy's return, even just a word to know that he was all right. Our neighbours, while putting out the milk bottles and watering their vegetables would all discuss how terrible it was, how dreadful for the poor parents; that a young boy from a good home in a good suburb could be snatched from his own bed in the middle of the night. I'd watch my father read the articles, shaking his head, and I'd search for any sign of emotion on my aunt's stern face as she sat with her darning in the living room and the broadcast came over the wireless.

I convinced myself as I lay there in bed – quiet slow breathing, trying to ignore the increasing pressure in my bladder – that I knew Edward and was somehow in contact with him, and that by removing myself from the visible plane of our house I had slipped through a crack in my world and had descended into his. I'd whisper quietly into the blankets, which grew hot and moist around my face, telling him of the things he'd missed at school, that all the teachers and students had been talking about him, saying how sad it was that he had gone. I reassured him that everything would be okay, he just had to wait, because we would both be rescued together and everyone would hold a big party to celebrate our return.

Edward Mathers was never found, and the mystery surrounding the kidnapping was never solved. But my fascination with him and his disappearance continued long after the articles ceased; that wonderfully chilling thought kept returning to me that someone – someone just like me – could vanish from their bed without a trace. There were rumours

about the mother's jealous lover, blackmail and revenge, which tickled my imagination despite the fact I never fully comprehended their meaning. I'd hear old ladies on the bus tell stories about poor Edward, tales so alluring and unfathomable, and as I sat and listened a warm flush would fill my body with an exhilarating calm. Each week, before I bundled up our newspapers and took them down to the fish and chip shop, I'd cut out any article I could find on Edward and paste it into an exercise book. Alongside I'd write my own personal letters to him; convinced, the entire time, that I could reach this faraway world, and that he could read my words.

I realise now that this preoccupation with Edward Mathers was a rehearsal for what came later with Noel, an obsession that continued up until recently, when, months after his death the last trickle of articles dried up, leaving me foraging through the papers, unable to find a word. And it then seemed that Noel, like Edward, had simply vanished from the world.

At some stage my attachment to Edward must have faded away completely, as it was only many years later, as a teenager during the war, when I read the letters between Tchaikovsky and his patron Madame von Meck, that the memory of Edward Mathers resurfaced, accompanied by a pang of guilt that it had been so long since I had spared my old friend a thought. I spent the remainder of the afternoon wondering about what might have become of Edward, and was only able to calm myself by writing to him, explaining everything that had happened in my life since abandoning my letters so many years earlier.

Tchaikovsky's relationship with Nadezhda Filaretovna von Meck, a wealthy widow and music lover, was like no other relationship of which I'd ever heard. It started when she wrote to the composer to commission a violin and piano arrangement. After Tchaikovsky

completed the job, von Meck wrote back expressing her gratitude, and asking just one thing of him: *To believe absolutely that your music makes my life easier and more pleasant to live.*

They began to write to each other several times each week. Von Meck provided Tchaikovsky a salary, giving him the opportunity to compose with absolute freedom. He dedicated his music to her and also wrote to her of his emotional troubles and creative processes. She quickly became the most crucial support in the composer's life.

I remember the feeling of envy and longing when I read of their love for each other, their bond of undying and unconditional support. A relationship that they were able to maintain in its pristine state by one important rule that they brokered at the very beginning of the relationship: *I feel the more you fascinate me the more I shrink from knowing you*, she wrote. *I prefer to think of you at a distance and to be at one with you in your music.* The rule that they must never meet.

Their letters grew increasingly passionate and intimate, and the two became more and more dependent upon each other. They informed each other of their movements and, when in the same town, detailed their daily itineraries so to avoid any personal contact. Besides a few brief, unintended encounters – catching a glance of each other across the crowd at the opera, or when their carriages passed each other's in the street – the couple maintained their intense relationship for thirteen years without ever meeting.

When von Meck asked Tchaikovsky if he had ever known non-platonic love, Tchaikovsky replied with words that I now feel could be my own:

Yes and no. If this were put slightly differently, i.e. by asking if I have known complete happiness in love, the answer would be No, no and no!!! However, I think that it is in my music that the answer to your question lies. If you asked me if I have understood the whole power, the whole immeasurable strength of this feeling, the answer would be: Yes yes yes, reiterating that I have passionately tried more than once to express

in music the agony and at the same time the ecstasy of love...I completely disagree with you that music cannot fully communicate one's feelings of love. I hold the complete contrary that only music can achieve this.

I would often find myself thinking about Tchaikovsky and von Meck's correspondence and when musical peers proclaimed the arrangement as tragic or pathetic, I would nod while secretly coveting such an affair. I recalled my secret dialogues with Edward that I conducted from my bed, hidden deep under the blankets, and the hours I spent daydreaming of Noel at the piano or pasting his pictures into my scrapbook, nurturing our romance. I understood Tchaikovsky's dependency upon von Meck entirely, and why it was so essential they never meet. There is no greater intimacy than that which lies hushed and full of potential. Even after Noel's death, after all that had happened, after all that I'd learnt, I could amuse myself with thoughts of others as a way to pass the time, but it was those childhood and teenage imaginings – those perfect compositions – of Edward and Noel that always remained immaculate and complete for me, shimmering like pearls within the hard, calcareous walls of my life.

*

Over time my presence at Gerald's house seemed to become like one of those vaguely domesticated tabbies that will one day just walk into a stranger's house, help themselves to a plate of milk, curl up on the couch, and never question for a moment that this hadn't always been their home.

Autumn had arrived, my favourite time of year in London, and with it, the realisation that I'd watched the walnut trees outside my window through almost a full cycle of season.

They'd now turned golden and were about to shrink into that petrified stance I'd seen them in when I first arrived. Gerald didn't seem bothered by my long-term residency; in fact he even seemed relieved when I started discussing coal orders and meals with Martha (Gerald wouldn't have minded if we'd had pork pie every night of the week – he loved the ceremony of meal times – the embroidered napkins and all the various little forks and spoons – but couldn't give a hoot what we ate). Nor did he mind me making myself quite at home, flicking through his late father's rare book collection, and disappearing with a signed copy of *Prometheus Unbound* and several other treasures up to my room.

I did try to raise the topic of my stay, but every time I mentioned finding somewhere else to live, Gerald would widen his eyes, appearing horrified, and say, 'You're not missing that ghastly place at Ma O'Grady's are you?' Even Gerald's mother, Virginia, seemed to prefer having me in the house. She was spending more and more of her time in the country these days and said she always fretted about Gerald being in the London house on his own. 'He's like Harold,' she'd smile down apologetically at her Highland terrier, 'Just rattles about the house in a terrible state when left on his own.'

I thought a lot about Ma O'Grady's, where I'd lived for over eight years – its leaking pipes that trumpeted and shook throughout the night, the dusty grey floorboards, the scratching of the rats nesting in the walls, the one small window over near the kitchen sink – and wondered how I'd survived there so long. Yet I did also *miss* the dank solitude of my damp little room. Sometimes the summery comradery at the Maddever's (even Martha was unnervingly cheerful, whistling Vivaldi as she dusted all the picture frames) was a little suffocating. I'd feel I was letting the side down when I'd sneak off to be miserable in my room, a pastime I absolutely refused to give up.

Other times I found myself feeling quite at home amongst the frivolity and general bonhomie of the household; Gerald and I would get drunk and laugh about silly things each of us had done – like the time Bill caught me in his study at Hammersmith, rifling through his belongings and pocketing photos of Noel – things that I'd never really been able to admit myself, let alone laugh about with someone else, before.

Gerald, however, grew tired of sitting around the house day and night as I did, and soon returned to his old ways, gallivanting about to bars and parties. I'd hear him in the middle of the night on the porch fumbling for his keys; then in the morning, over tea and scrambled eggs, before heading to a meeting or off to his study to write, he'd tell me about whomever he'd met up with the night before. It could be anyone from Sergeant 'Molly' Bloom, with tip-offs of upcoming raids, to Betty Lou who was making a costume for the Chelsea arts ball of a peacock with a fifteen-foot tail that could rise and lower and fan out across the room.

Gerald, in his off-the-cuff manner, would often tell me I needed to get out more, that I was beginning to look a bit peaky. I knew what he was suggesting, but had no desire whatsoever to go importuning about between the lamp-lit shadows up at Hampstead. The sensory prison I had constructed about myself seemed to be the one amenable furnishing in what I'd decided was an increasingly alien and iniquitous world. What's more, I had a more than moderate fear that if I did venture out of my cocoon and indulge in a little trade, what was sure to be a clumsy and soul-sapping encounter could sour my enjoyment of such activities for life.

I might have remained in this frigid state for quite some time if it weren't for an unsuspected presence that had crept slowly into my life, something of which I was not fully aware until it had become quite familiar – a delightful *frisson* between Gerald and myself. I

wasn't at all sure from where or when it had sprung or how it had grown to be something so unwavering and clear. I just looked around one day and there it was.

As to be expected, I was terrified when it began. But I did manage to welcome this new visitor – as it did seem like an additional presence in the house – enjoying the passing glances, the cups of tea delivered to my room, and the occasional gift – anything from my favourite vintage cheddar to a rare musical biography. And for quite some time, I saw no reason why we shouldn't maintain this titillating little game forever.

But then Gerald would stay out all night, or even worse, bring one of his chavies back to the house. One time, I was forced to share breakfast with a young Cockney projectionist called Danny who called Gerald 'darling' and touched his hand each time he spoke to him, then went on to make comments about what a *bona* marriage Gerald and I had – 'I've had to scarper down the bloomin' drainpipes wearing only my boxers to escape the wrath of some wives.' Gerald sat upright in his chair and laughed, finding the whole situation thoroughly amusing, honey and butter dripping off his forkful of drop-scone onto the tea-rose china plate in front of him. I was appalled, not only that I'd been dragged into such an unsavoury milieu, but also that this stout lad with blotchy white skin and only a scant acquaintance with a knife and fork was Gerald's choice in bedfellow. I sulked for the entire day, pepped up occasionally by little chinks of curiosity, wondering what Gerald had told young Danny boy, for him to have made such a remark about Gerald and me.

Only a week later at Rockingham's, Reggie, an acquaintance of ours, enquired, quite sneeringly I thought, how long the two of us had been married. I was completely flummoxed by the question, but after I recovered from the shock, found myself feeling quietly tickled. I blushed and let out the most idiotic giggle.

Gerald, on the other hand, laughed heartily, as if he'd been asked for how long he'd been straight. He brazenly replied, as if I weren't even present, 'Married? Oh no, he won't let me anywhere near him.' Then turning to me, twitching his lips and right eyebrow, tantamount to a wink – a roguish look that I'd seen him throw to others during the act of seduction, but had never received myself – 'Married to the dead, aren't we, dear Persephone?'

My blush must have fully blossomed to vermillion at that point. I was partly smarting from the jarring reference to Noel. But also embarrassed (how ghastly that anyone might believe I still maintained such loyalty to Noel) – and *angry*. If I had thought of it sooner I might have made some retort about not being married to the dead, but to beauty and greatness, attributes perhaps he hadn't stumbled across amongst those flea-ridden chimney sweeps for whom he had such a penchant. But I didn't say a thing, I just stood there dumb, his unabashed gaze pinning me against the wall, rousing the most tantalising sense of terror in me. For all my indignation, it was a delightful moment: I couldn't have felt a more panicky thrill if I were about to walk on stage at Festival Hall to perform in front of the Queen.

Charles Monk arrived on a Tuesday afternoon, down from Oxford for the day, and keen to meet this young chap who'd been writing these scandalous articles for musical journals in Britain and America.

'I enjoyed the piece you wrote on Chopin for the *Canon*,' he nodded sternly, as if I'd done something wrong.

'The one on Chopin's heart?' I said, as if there'd been many. 'Oh yes,' I smiled feebly, remembering the state I'd been in when writing it, shortly after Noel died. It was a

piece about Chopin's crippling longing for his homeland, Poland, and the request in his will to be buried next to Bellini in Paris, but have his heart cut out and returned to Poland.

'I thought that little reverie you included about Liszt, Delacroix and the others sitting in Chopin's Paris flat by candlelight, listening to him on his Pleyel piano, most bold – you wrote it as if you were there yourself. And Madame George Sands sitting entranced, Chopin longing for Poland, Sands longing for Chopin – very poetic. To be honest I don't normally enjoy reading such whimsies, but it really was strangely compelling. You mimicked the haunting nostalgia of Chopin's music extremely well.'

I smiled appreciatively; I couldn't remember this having been my intention at all.

'But what can you do with Beethoven?' His tone changed – almost chastising, as if it were I who'd come begging to him. 'We've all read a hundred biographies, and the old man's getting a bit dusty these days. Can you come up with something new? Something about the Immortal Beloved?'

I shrugged. 'I'll see what I can do.'

And for a moment, even Gerald looked disappointed. He'd told me Monk would be arriving for our meeting with a cheque-book in his brief case, and he'd encouraged me to tell him exactly what he wanted to hear ('He's not like you, ol' chap, he's not interested in the hunt, he wants the animal clearly within his sight from the very start').

'I can't promise what I'll find out in Vienna,' I continued. 'I'm primarily interested in what *inspired* Beethoven. And it seems the one thing other than his art – his *heavenly muse* – that really stirred him was his secret obsession for the Immortal Beloved. Many of the great composers had an obsession with a distant or fantastical love. They're sprinkled throughout musical history. These mythical figures who embody the perfect world for which the composer longs, the world he strives to create in his music.'

There was complete silence, from both Gerald and Monk. Then slowly, Monk smiled, the corners of his thin mouth turning downwards as he did so, and nodded.

We had a few sherris and chatted about the music of not only Beethoven, but Schumann, Brahms, Wagner and Berlioz. When the clock in the hall chimed four o'clock, Monk looked at his watch, got up from his chair and walked to the desk, reaching into his briefcase. I walked over and stood, I realised, like an army officer, heels together and hands behind my back; I might even have been rocking from my toes to heels, in that partly smug, partly agitated way, such men do. I relaxed as soon as I brought my hands forward to meet his fountain pen, and leant over the table. I signed the contract, intentionally illegible (I'd recently started signing my name with my left hand, and although I could manage some gallant loops – something I could have never achieved with my right – there was no denying a timid awkwardness in the unpractised lettering that was best hidden in a scrawl). He pulled out a cheque book from his inside coat pocket. How quaint these publishers are, I thought as he scribbled on a cheque, ripped it carefully from the book and handed it to me. I found it hard not to grin, not because of the £400 piece of paper which seemed to burn the skin of my finger tips, but because of the theatricality of it all – Monk's momentarily steely eyes, which met mine with a conspiratorial glint, and the way he clipped the lid back on his fountain pen so precisely, handling it like a surgeon with a scalpel. I felt like we'd just signed a warrant, and I was the mercenary being sent out to return with the body. Poor Monk, I hoped I didn't disappoint him too much, I thought. But it did get so boring, all this debate, all this discussion, as if the answer – *who* was the face of the Immortal Beloved – as if it really mattered. As if it might actually unlock the door to the composer's phenomenal genius.

'All the best in Vienna then,' he smiled. Yes, there was that look again: the compatriot. He would have slapped me on the back, but was far too starched a sort.

‘Yes, it’s very exciting,’ turning briefly to look at Gerald, who was wearing his familiar purring grin.

Monk glanced around the room in that perfunctory way people do before leaving, and as Gerald and I showed him to the door, I realised how true that glib line I’d tossed out actually was. It was just that feeling – *excitement* – was such a distant notion, like a childhood Christmas; I used it these days merely to fill a gap in sentences, without the least nostalgia for that tantalising sense I’d once known so well. That superlative joy of creating *what could be*.

But as we walked Monk to the door and he spoke about several other upcoming publishing projects, I pictured myself with Gerald, strolling through the doors of the *Theater an der Wien* to see *Fidelio*, which had had its premier in that very theatre almost one hundred and fifty years earlier, when Beethoven had lived in a room upstairs. I imagined visiting Teplitz, the spa town where the Immortal Beloved letter was possibly written, and walking the streets with Gerald, as Beethoven had walked with his friend Goethe. No, we wouldn’t be hunting down the Immortal Beloved like a pack of hounds chasing a rabbit, we would just be walking in the composer’s footsteps, visiting the White Swan, eating stracchino and Verona salami on the banks of the Danube, roaming through the fields beyond the Vienna woods, things that had inspired the composer, and simply enjoying the Immortal Beloved’s elusive presence when we sat in the audience, listening to the Vienna State Orchestra performing ‘Ode to Joy’.

Gerald had barely closed the door behind Monk before turning to me with his pursed grin. ‘Champagne?’

I was relieved by Gerald’s good cheer; Monk was, after all, a friend of his. I would have been most upset if Gerald thought I’d just fleeced him.

Gerald filled two champagne flutes and we raised our glasses.

‘Cin-cin then, ol’ boy. To the book.’

‘To the book,’ I repeated. Then we both took a sip.

‘So have you got any idea what you’re actually going to write about, then?’ Gerald smiled, almost mockingly.

‘Haven’t the foggiest. Beethoven I suspect. Something will pop up...I hope.’ But I wasn’t really thinking about the book at all. I was noticing how devilishly handsome Gerald appeared to me all of a sudden. The realisation made me almost want to weep.

‘Righto then, that’s good enough. To hope.’ Gerald raised his glass before taking another sip. I watched him – so different to me, I thought – his eyes closed, sucking the tiny bubbles against the inside of his cheeks, savouring each miniature explosion.

On the 29th of March 1827, Beethoven’s coffin was carried through the streets of Vienna preceded by an honorary escort of a hundred men, and followed by a long procession of riders and carriages carrying the nobles. Around 20 000 mourners crowded behind fences, hoping to catch a last glimpse as the funeral cortège moved past. A travelling merchant arrived in the city that day and asked an old woman what the fuss was about; the woman answered, ‘Don’t you know? They’re burying the Herr General of the musicians.’

As I walk along Portobello Road, watching the after-work crowd spill out of the shops and office buildings and into the bars and buses, I imagine myself yelling out a similar announcement. Noel’s memorial concert had loomed in my mind for months, and although I’ve done my best to put the thought aside all day, now as I head towards the Wigmore, with the evening sinking further into night, a steely terror prickles under my skin. The utter disinterest of the crowd – all rushing off to get done up like a dog’s dinner and to swing their clammy bodies around a dance hall, or head to a neighbourhood hall to laugh along with

some dreary New Year pantomime – only increases my feeling of dread. I'm not bothered by being dragged back through the muck of that dreadful time a year ago – God knows I could do enough of that on my own – but rather, by the thought that this is to be Noel's final burial, his very last concert.

People don't talk much about Noel anymore; his name only comes up when discussing great performances of the past. Someone will mention the thundering *Ludus Tonalis* at Morley College when the small brown Steinway seemed about to collapse under his crashing hands; or the Busoni concerto at Chelsea Hall with Norman Del Mar conducting and an orchestra that took up half the hall, a huge wax-disc machine in the centre of the room (that no-one could remember how to work), and a chorus of critics in the first three rows sitting like hyenas ready to pounce on this long, difficult, atrocious piece. And how Noel had just walked on the stage and tossed it off so effortlessly, so magnificently. Yes, he has given us an extraordinary catalogue of programmes and discs to flick through and reminisce over. But Noel himself, the man – he is now, undeniably, history.

Everyone will be there, of course. Except Tippett. He requested that his song cycle *Remember Your Lovers* be played, but apparently is still too shattered to attend, poor chap – not the first close friend of his to suicide and he really hasn't coped with it at all. Cecil Day Lewis has written a poem about Noel that Bliss has put to music – *A fountain plays no more*, it begins, then goes on to say something about *the fury and the grace*. Bush has also composed a memorial piece; and of course there's Ben, he's written something to an Edith Sitwell poem about the Blitz. Ben's also going to play a piece Noel composed when he was fifteen years old, the year he and his mother boarded the *Earl of Charlemont* in Melbourne and steamed to London. Fifteen, and heading across the Atlantic on his way to meet Turner, Schnabel and Beecham; fifteen, with his whole illustrious life stretched out before him.

The memorial ought to have been a month ago, of course, on the anniversary of his death. But then Ben's bursitis flared up and the whole thing was postponed until today. I was furious when John told me; it was like postponing Remembrance Day because the bugle player had a cold – inconceivable. It's not a performance for Britten, I said, it's a memorial for Noel. If Ben's arm's too sore, I told him, *I'll* play the bloody piano!

I actually had a good chat with John when he rang to tell us. Lovely chap, John – strange how I never really got to know him when Noel was alive. He said that I could come over and play on Noel's Steinway anytime I liked. He also told me the most extraordinary story. The week after Noel died, John said he went to Hillgate Place to help Dulcie sort through Noel's things. He sat at the Brinsmead and started playing his part to Stravinsky's *Danses Concertante*, one of Noel's and his favourite duets, and just at the moment when Noel's part enters with a low forte C, the low C string in the Steinway snapped, like a gunshot echoing around the room. John said he was in fits of laughter when Dulcie raced back in to find out what all the palaver was about.

Yes, a very kind offer, I thought – for me to come over and play Noel's piano – but I'm not sure, it might be a bit grim. Said I'd have to think about it.

He also told me Peter and Ben have Noel's sofa now, up at Crag House. They asked Dulcie for something to remember him by, as everyone did at the time (Noel didn't leave anything for anyone in his will, except for John, to whom he left both pianos, his radio-gramophone and all of his records). There was a terrible frenzy of friends, colleagues and admirers all scavenging for mementos from Dulcie – asking for the music to this or that, a pair of gloves, a scarf or a photo. I didn't ask for anything – I still had the mother-of-pearl cufflinks, the *Davidsbündlertänze*, as well as the sheet music to Debussy's duet *La Mer* (it had actually been my father's, but I once took it to Noel's house when I went over for lunch, and

Noel spilt a forkful of omelette with wine sauce on the front page. So I still have that, the stain under the title of the music). No, I didn't want a *souvenir* – how was that going to help matters? I can understand the Steinway or the Brinsmead, or one of his lovely paintings (I've heard that a couple of Lowrys and Grants have been popping up occasionally at Southeby's already). But the *sofa* – I can't imagine how they could even think of sitting on it.

I spent the day of the anniversary at home listening to Noel's recordings. That devastating second movement of the Chopin E minor – cried like a baby all through it, couldn't stop the tears but just had to hear it over and over; could have listened to nothing but that all day. (Thankfully Gerald had some work on in Oxford; it would have been awfully embarrassing if he'd seen me in such a state, not that I imagine he'd have minded one bit.) I hadn't listened to them for such a long time; for months I couldn't even glance at the sleeves let alone play them. Each note had the metallic whiff of gin, each minor cadence was the quivering and sudden bow of his knees as he collapsed on the floor next to the sofa. So a relief, of sorts, to be hearing them again. To close my eyes, and be carried to the second row at the Wigmore, or the Albert. To listen as if I'm hearing them for the very first time, Noel playing them just for me.

A poster in a shop window I just passed caught my eye, a woman in skirt and bonnet with her arm around a girl with blonde plaits, both waving down at a steamship on a river, snow-capped mountains in the distance, and underneath, the words *The Beautiful Blue Danube is Calling You!* I smile, thinking of Gerald, and our little trip, and am surprised that even the thought of meeting him in half an hour at the pub before the memorial is so *gladdening* for me. I have to admit, I have been looking forward to our Viennese jaunt enormously. We packed the Citroen this morning, and after the concert we're driving straight to Dover; we'll be on the ferry to Calais by eleven o'clock this evening. Gerald bought tickets for the Orient

Express as a birthday present, tried to cheer me up a bit, dear soul. We had planned to travel straight after the memorial on the 5th of December – pictured an eggnog and marzipan Christmas – but then, of course, everything got delayed and we were stuck in London. Probably for the best, remembering the maudlin state I was in over that awful birthday period. For weeks, I just sat around in my room, listening to records, hardly eating a thing – Gerald was most relieved I was sorted by Christmas, knowing the effort his mother would go to, the roast goose, the pudding with bread and brandy sauce, the bonbons. One morning just before Christmas, I walked out from my room, met Gerald downstairs for breakfast, and he said to me, ‘My word, you look quite a different chap this morning!’ I was glad he’d noticed, as I felt remarkably changed myself. For the first time in weeks I hadn’t woken thinking about Noel. No – instead, I’d woken actually excited about my research and the writing of the book. What’s more, I’d decided I wouldn’t write anything at all about the Immortal Beloved – it seemed almost vulgar to dissect that too much – but rather, I would write on a subject that I believed *encapsulated* the Immortal Beloved, encapsulated it all: a book about Beethoven’s ‘Ode to Joy’. It was only later that day that I again thought about Noel, and resolved that I would write the book in memory of him. Because, I thought, it was really seeing Noel perform the Beethoven C minor that got it all started. I still remember so clearly, sitting there at Queen’s Hall next to my father – the *joy* of watching Noel perform up on stage – of rising up above my seat, floating around the dome of that magnificent building, and everything else simply sloughing away.

I reach the entrance to Notting Hill Gate tube and as the crowd carries me tumbling down the stairs, every step taking me closer to the Wigmore, I think about that very first performance, how hearing Noel perform the concerto had made Beethoven really come *alive* for me, so that I felt that I almost *knew* him. Since that day there’ve been times when,

walking along a street, I've seen someone who, for a moment, I've sworn is the great composer. With turbulent eyes; ruddy, febrile skin; a fright of brown hair; dirty, patched coat over bullock-like shoulders; bruised black boots; storming through the crowd like a pitching bull. This shocking vision would be more real to me than the sight in the street of a classmate from school and I've had to stop myself from running up to him and tapping the damp wool of his shoulders.

I step down onto the platform and stand against the yellow brick arches, humming that luminously sad second movement of the Fourth, wondering if I'll ever hear it played like that again, and watching the stream of people exiting the westbound train. Then all of a sudden, amongst the crowd, almost a head above everyone else, I see Noel. The crowd is moving quickly, as if some great current is sucking them off the train, up the steps and spitting them onto the street; and in the midst of it all, there he is, joyfully oblivious, his wavy hair floating up and down in time to his heedless stroll, a playful rhythm all his own. There is no time to realise how impossible this all is; I just feel this wondrous fluttering in my chest, as if my heart has swelled and actually *lifted*. He is only thirty yards away – *how glorious to see him again!* – blood rushes to my cheeks and this great bubbling energy surges about my limbs. Then the gentleman I am adoring turns his head to look in my direction, and instantly I am aware of my folly – a complete stranger who bears no real resemblance to Noel to all. Yet *I had seen* Noel's features so clearly, heard his chuckling voice in my head. I watch this unfamiliar, unremarkable man walking through the crowd and this deadening stone drops within me as I remember, once again, that *I will never* be seeing Noel again. But for that one moment, before the realisation – half a second, perhaps that's as long as it lasted – the melancholy second movement in my head skipped over to the radiant Rondo finale, and all it took was for me to quicken my pace and lunge through the after-work throngs, call

out his name and tap him on the shoulder. Because for that one moment, with that exhilarating fanfare trumpeting all about me, there wasn't anything in the world that wasn't perfectly possible – it didn't matter I'd been mistaken, a fool, because for that one divine moment, he did exist: it *was* him.



Noel Mewton-Wood

Born: Melbourne, 20 November 1922

Died: London, 5 December 1953

No other musician of our time was so vitally gifted. Composers, performers, critics, all who listen to music – we shall all feel his loss. RIP.

Andrew Porter, *Gramophone Magazine*, Dec. 1953

Volume Two:

**THE TRUTH LIES ELSEWHERE:
An Encounter with the Past through a Reading of
W.G. Sebald's AUSTERLITZ**

An exegesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Introduction

All of us, even when we think we have noted every tiny detail, resort to set pieces which have already been staged often enough by others. We try to reproduce the reality, but the harder we try, the more we find the pictures that make up the stock-in-trade of the spectacle of history forcing themselves upon us: the fallen drummer boy, the infantryman shown in the act of stabbing another, the horse's eye starting from its socket, the invulnerable Emperor surrounded by his generals, a moment frozen still amidst the turmoil of battle. Our concern with history, so Hilary's thesis ran, is a concern with pre-formed images already imprinted on our brains, images at which we keep staring while the truth lies elsewhere, away from it all, somewhere as yet undiscovered.

(*Austerlitz* 101)

In his fourth and final novel, *Austerlitz*, W.G. Sebald confronts the historicising of the Holocaust: the record of the events that occurred in Germany and neighbouring countries during the Second World War, and what he perceives as the gross inadequacies in the way historians, writers, politicians and even the public 'remember' these experiences.

This is not the first time Sebald has tackled this subject; much of his writing and interview discussion is dedicated to the way the Second World War is remembered and recorded. However, in *Austerlitz*, Sebald takes a more novelistic approach to exploring the topic – employing a fictional protagonist and a narrative based on that character's discovery of his past – not as a way to imagine or dramatise past events, but rather to call into question the notion of

objective truth and the implicit claims upon knowledge and understanding made by historical archives and representations.

In the above quote, Sebald voices his thesis on history – our record of past events – through Austerlitz and Austerlitz’s history teacher Hilary. For Sebald, an understanding of the past will never be found in history books; in fact, a true understanding of our past can never be *found* anywhere. However, in accepting this verdict, he resists resigning himself to the self-imposed ignorance and silence that blanketed post-Second World War Germany where he grew up. Sebald’s alternative is rather to accept and investigate the notion that the *undiscovered truth lies elsewhere* – beyond the historical narrative of events – and to find another way of encountering events of the past.

Winfried Georg Maximilian Sebald was born in Wertach im Allgäu, Germany, in 1944, the darkest year of the Second World War. This places him in a generation of Germans that was not involved in the war, but grew up having “to look at their own parents with horror” (Jaggi, “Recovered” 7). Sebald’s father was admitted to the Weimar One Thousand Man Army in 1939, and was briefly interned in a French POW camp towards the end of the war, though, after he returned home, these experiences were rarely mentioned. It was not until Sebald studied at the University of Freiburg in 1963 that he became curious about Germany’s recent history and began to feel frustrated about the “conspiracy of silence” in Germany regarding the Second World War: “Everyone avoided all the kinds of issues that ought to have been talked about. Things were kept under wraps in the classroom as much as they had been at home. I found that insufficient” (Atlas 290).

It was this frustration that prompted Sebald to write about his country’s recent past. The writer A.S. Byatt says of Sebald and his generation: “They’re a wandering lost generation that felt

they had no right to speak. He's started speaking painfully out of that silence" (qtd. in Jaggi, "Recovered" 7).

In his collection of lectures on the Allied fire-bombing of Hamburg, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, he wrote: "People's ability to forget what they do not want to know, to overlook what is before their eyes, was seldom put to the test better than in Germany at that time. The population decided – out of sheer panic – to carry on as if nothing had happened" (41).

The difficulty in finding out about his country's past is what most shapes the subject matter and style of Sebald's writing. He constantly draws attention to the "almost perfectly functioning mechanism of repression" (12), and he sparked a national debate on post-war literature when he claimed that German writers had failed to adequately address Germany's recent past (Wilms 177). But Sebald is not simply interested in the way the past is remembered, but more specifically, in the way it is *written*. As Mark McCulloh notes, "the primary subject of Sebald's writing is, in the end, writing itself" (xxi). So although the events at the heart of Sebald's writing are manifestations of the destruction wrought by modern Europeans, he often seems less concerned with questioning the version of events that comprises modern European history than he is with questioning the notion of history – a record of past events – itself.

Direct and indirect references to the historical record appear throughout *Austerlitz*, as well as in his other books, in the form of academic texts, newspaper clippings, manuals, propaganda films, feature films, operas, and other archives – documents that Sebald has clearly studied in the course of his own research in what one can only surmise was a frustrating attempt to understand and come to terms with the events of his country's past. For whenever we do come across these records in his writing, we are always left with a sense of their inadequacy or bias in explaining the events. What Sebald clearly found wanting in his research, and in society in

general, was rigorous discussion and purposeful narratives that went beyond the bureaucratic lists and chronicles that catalogued the events of the Second World War.

According to James Atlas, Sebald finds facts “troublesome” (282), which not only explains why he considered archives to be grossly limited and misleading in their appraisal of the past, but why he also took exception to historical dramatisations: films like Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993), with their faux-documentary style, which present history as a seamless, objective narrative of ‘real’ events, and which “lure viewers into thinking they are watching the Holocaust unfold before their very eyes” (Anderson 110). Hence, despite the attempts of directors and writers of historical dramatisations to bridge the gap between the past and our own experiential understanding of it, Sebald objected to the way they provided the public with a perceived knowledge of the past.

Dorrit Cohn, discussing the way ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ function within this genre, claims that the fictional devices of historical dramatisations can often be boiled down to scene dramatisations and focalised thought through ‘real-life’ figures; devices which, “far from erasing the borderline between the two genres [biography and novel, or non-fiction and fiction], actually bring the line that separates them more clearly into view” (29). By doing so, she believes, authors of these works uphold the rigid polarisation of fact and fiction, encouraging the reader to form an opinion on *the truth of the matter*. Similarly, James Wood writes that the novels of writers such as Julian Barnes or Umberto Eco, who take facts and superficially destabilise them within fiction, are actually works “in homage to the superstition of fact”. He claims that “[s]uch writers do not believe deeply enough in the fictional to abandon the actual world. They toy with accuracy; they are obsessed with questions of accuracy and inaccuracy, for even inaccurate facts, to such writers, have a kind of empirical electricity, since they connect us to a larger informational zealously” (“Right Thread” 39).

As will be demonstrated, although Sebald's subject matter is 'the past' and our ability to represent and understand past events, and he explores these topics using fiction, his approach differs markedly from the writers of historical fiction, whose narratives continue to work within the conventions of both realist fiction and conventional history by presenting a formalised (albeit fictionalised) narrative of an historical event.

Before venturing further, it is important to briefly touch upon some definitions. Throughout this exegesis I will frequent use the somewhat slippery term 'narrative', employing it as defined by Gérard Genette, as "the signifier, statement, discourse or narrative text" (27) that 'narrates' a 'story' or 'event', where the story/event is the signified or narrative content.ⁱ Further, in order for a story/event to be recounted, a narrative is constructed and presented by a narrator (or author, via a narrator) utilising conventions of order, duration, frequency, mood and voice.ⁱⁱ Although I will be discussing fictional and historical 'narrative', both will be viewed in these terms, as oral or written discourses that exist separate to, but dependent upon, a relationship to a story/event. Occasionally I will refer to *anti*-narrative devices: effects that jar the reader out of the seamless flow of narrative discourse and hence interrupt the recounting of the story/event.

I will also use the term 'history'. Paul Ricoeur points out that "in most European languages, the term 'history' has an intriguing ambiguity, meaning both what really happens and the narrative of those events" (288). In an academic setting, however, these two elements are generally divided into the categories 'the past', to include everything that ever happened, recorded or not, and 'history', which is what historians represent the past to have been (Wilkinson 80). Throughout this exegesis, I will adhere to these two categories,ⁱⁱⁱ accepting that any study of history, that is, what we know – or what it is possible to know – about the past, will

largely encompass a study of the representational properties made possible by historical narrative.^{iv}

Sebald believes that an acute difference exists between “history as historiography and history as experienced history” (Romer), and the greater truth, for him, lies in the more malleable area of experiential reality, sourced from the individual voices of survivors. This is an attitude common amongst Holocaust scholars, expressed by the documentary filmmaker Claude Lanzmann in the claim that, regarding the Holocaust, testimony is the only source of “true knowledge” (Rosenbaum 265). Sebald often professed a preference for stories about the ‘real’ people of history, and his own novels are based around the fictionalised (or “adulterated”, as he put it (Lubow, “Symposium”)) testimonies of actual people.^v

Historians and Holocaust scholars have written extensively about the “vexed” relationship between history and memory, especially in regard to the Holocaust (LaCapra, *History* 20). An example of the ‘gap’ between *what happened* and *what the witness saw* is provided by Dori Laub, who was amongst a group of interviewers recording a woman’s testimony on the Auschwitz uprising. The witness, despite providing an intense and vivid account that conveyed her sense of awe and confusion, reported an exaggerated number of chimneys that she claimed she saw being blown up during the revolt. For the other interviewers present, this factual inaccuracy discredited her account; Laub, however, differed from the other interviewers by seeing the subject of the woman’s testimony as being not historical events themselves but the extraordinary impact they had on her: “The woman was testifying not to the number of chimneys blown up, but to something else, more radical, more crucial: the reality of an unimaginable occurrence” (“Bearing Witness” 60). Michael Bernard-Donals writes that testimony has an authority as evidence not because it can be squared with the events themselves but because it has the ability to move an audience to “see” an issue or an event through the

witness, alerting us to issues and impacts that traditional narrative fails to capture (“History” 149).

Notions of memory – both cultural and individual – and how memory intersects with history, are central to Sebald’s work; Arthur Lubow states that Sebald sees remembering as “a moral and political act” (“Symposium”). Due to his cynicism regarding ‘facts’, Sebald cares little for the difficulty of extracting objective truth from testimony; in fact, the gap between *what happened* and *what the witness saw* highlights Sebald’s case for the existence of a ‘truth’ based on experience that sits separate to the factual truths gleaned from archives.

Despite preferring to work with the life-stories of actual people, Sebald admitted that when confronted with holes or inconsistencies in information, a writer was often forced to make things up. He once stated: “There isn’t the pretence that you try to arrive at the literal truth. And the only consolation when you confess to this flaw is that you are seeking to arrive at the highest truth” (Lubow, “Symposium”). But unlike the writers of historical fiction, Sebald does not attempt to re-produce facts through fabrication; rather, Sebald uses fiction as a framework to investigate the way in which memory records the past, and hence to unsettle and question facts. It is in this way that McCulloh believes that Sebald’s fiction could be eminently more *true* than non-fiction (7).

In order to better understand Sebald’s attitude to truthfulness in regard to history and fiction, it is helpful to look at Art Spiegelman’s indignant response to the *New York Times Book Review* after his cartoons *Maus I* and *II*ⁱ were classified as “fiction” on the paper’s bestseller list. Spiegelman’s works use animal figures to represent himself, his parents – Holocaust survivors – and other relevant characters, and the narrative of the cartoons reconstruct the difficulties his parents endured in trying to come to terms with their experiences during the Holocaust as well as Spiegelman’s frustration and determination in attempting to understand their pasts. In his

letter, Spiegelman wrote: “to the extent that ‘fiction’ indicates that a work isn’t factual, I feel a bit queasy” (“Taxonomy” 3). He explains: “As an author I believe I might have lopped several years off the thirteen I devoted to my two-volume project if I could only have taken a novelist’s license while searching for a novelistic structure”. He claims a distinction between invention (“a novelist’s license”) – not factually reliable – and artistry (“a novelistic structure”), pressed into the service of facts.

Spiegelman makes an important differentiation between creatively inventing a framework that aids in highlighting our approach to the past, and imaginatively inventing a *version* of past events. By utilising the former and not the latter, that is, not attempting to reproduce past events, but rather examining the problems inherent in the ways we remember, relive, narrate, and experience the past, Spiegelman alerts us to the difficulty of representing the past, and hence, calls into question the concept of a comprehensible, unified historical truth.

Sebald’s approach has much in common with Spiegelman’s. Although his works are more overtly fictional than Spiegelman’s, Sebald’s novels, like Spiegelman’s cartoons, also employ a novelistic structure in order to investigate our historicising of actual events, and have attracted labels such as “faction” and “documentary fiction”. For Sebald, writing solely within the genre of non-fiction, with its connotations of fact and objective truth, would have only compounded the illusion of historical veracity and knowledge, and limited his ability to confront some of the issues inherent in remembering and recording the past.

Sebald’s most novelesque work – comprising a clearer narrative plotline than his earlier prose works – is his fourth and final book, *Austerlitz*. The story is told by an unnamed narrator, of whose background and thoughts we hear very little, but who bears a striking resemblance to Sebald. The story, however, is about Austerlitz, an almost catatonic figure whose slowly unfolding past forms the central ‘narrative’ of the novel.

Austerlitz's story – removal from his home in Prague at the age of five at the beginning of the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia, and growing up in Wales oblivious to his Jewish past and the whereabouts of his parents – is not an uncommon or unlikely story. But what is possibly of equal importance for Sebald as the story of Jewish exiles itself, is *how* this story (or history) is revealed to the psychologically repressed Austerlitz through public and private memory. As Austerlitz excavates his past through archives and testimony, constantly confronting omissions and inconsistencies in the record, the inextricable link between history and narrative becomes clear. We are increasingly mindful of the fact that the past exists whether we are aware of its presence or not; while history needs to be narrated in order to come into existence. Therefore the elements of the past that, due to their political or psychological nature, have escaped narration as a result of censorship, erasure or silence, have inevitably escaped 'history'. In this way, Sebald again draws our attention to the gaping chasm between history – our narrative of the past – and the past, *as it actually happened*.

The reconstruction of history – and the difficulties and suffering involved in this feat – is a major theme in all of Sebald's work. McCulloh writes: "There are certain forces, Sebald constantly reminds us, that are bent on neutralising all historical consciousness; they are continually wiping the slate clean, as if the experience of living – of having lived – means nothing" (109).

This *force* can be seen throughout *Austerlitz*, in the erasure of evidence, dissemination of propaganda, razing of buildings, and more insidiously, in the selectively exclusionary process and didactic form in which history has been recorded. But perhaps the most powerful method Sebald uses for illustrating the "antihistorical force at work smothering the truth about the past" (McCulloh 109) is showing the effect of erasure upon the individual. In *Austerlitz*, this erasure is

largely caused by trauma and repression; thus we witness through Austerlitz's fragmented testimonies the damaging effect of historical events upon the narratives meant to contain them.

In hearing of the suffering of one person – Austerlitz – the tragedy wreaked in the past and the impersonal nature and glaring inadequacies of the official historical record become much more acute. We cannot help but wonder not only how many other *Kindertransport* biographies like Austerlitz's are out there, but further, how many people in general experienced a near totality of identity erasure, losing their families, homeland, language, and in certain cases, their memory, in the years during and after the war.

However, we not only learn of the suffering of the individual from reading *Austerlitz*. Through witnessing Austerlitz's recovery of his past, we also encounter some of the psychological processes involved for the individual when translating an experience from witnessing, through memory, to testimony, and finally to a written record. Essentially, we are given a breakdown of how narrative is 'constructed' after an experience of an event, a process that can then be transposed from the individual to the public.

Sebald recognises that public histories are written by individuals – from witnesses to historians – and hence must be understood as subject to the same influences as the individual during the process of narration. Hence, just as psychoanalysts understand certain influences to be taking place in the individual inhibiting an objective translation of an event from witnessing to narrative, so too, these influences that undermine the narrative process – influences such as trauma – must be expected to affect the public's historical narrative.

In this exegesis I will be examining the techniques W.G. Sebald employs in his novel, *Austerlitz*, to comment upon the ways we remember our public past. I will discuss Sebald's use of fiction and narrative strategies to explore memory and outline the problems inherent in the translation

of an event into an historical narrative. I will argue that by doing this, he not only calls into question the pursuit of a knowable, singular truth in history, but also encourages an alternative approach to ‘understanding’ past events.

In the first chapter I will look at Sebald’s use of Freud’s notion of ‘the uncanny’.^{vii} Although Freud discussed the uncanny as an aesthetic concept, it is only an aesthetic concept if viewed purely in terms of its representations. At its heart, the uncanny is a psychological concept and relates to how we repress and recall past anxieties. This chapter will look at the many ways Sebald uses the uncanny to unsettle our position of comfort in relation to understanding the past and to alert us to the many aspects of the past that remain, like the uncanny, largely inexplicable.

In the second chapter I will discuss the problems involved in formulating a narrative about a traumatic event: what it is possible to say and what is essentially *unsayable*. I will look at theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Michael Bernard-Donals, and their work on psychological processes known to affect victims of trauma, and show how these concepts are illustrated in *Austerlitz*. I will look at how experiences of trauma can undermine a witness’s ability to narrate that very experience, before discussing the limitations of language to convey human experience, and its shortcomings in terms of re-presenting the past.

In the final chapter I will examine the role of the witness in formulating an historical narrative and in aiding historical understanding. This chapter continues on from the problems raised in chapter two – the discrepancy between *what the witness saw* and *what it is possible to say* – by looking at the problems posed when no witness is able to effectively testify to a event: a situation discussed by Holocaust scholars Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman, and played out in *Austerlitz*. The difficulties in utilising witness testimony for traditional historical purposes are acknowledged before a discussion of alternative narrative possibilities, such as Sebald’s “periscopic” (Wood, “Interview” 26) style of narrative, whereby a secondhand witness is able to ‘capture’ incomplete

or fragmented witness testimonies. These theories have implications for the historian as well as a reader of testimony (or of fictions such as *Austerlitz*), both of whom are placed in the role of secondhand witness.

The inadequacy of language and narrative in conveying human experience has been noted since Plato. Talking about the difficulty in writing about events such as the Holocaust, Sebald argues that you could not write about “the horror of persecution in its ultimate forms”, because “no one could bear to look at these things without losing their sanity” (Jaggi, “Last Word” 4). The traumatised character of Austerlitz illustrates the impossibility of *writing* or even *talking* about the *ultimate forms* of the events of his past. Throughout the novel we witness Austerlitz’s inability to comprehend the events of his past, the affect of trauma upon his ability to narrate, and his confrontation with the inadequacy of language to describe experience. This leads us to the unsettling finding that the truth of the events of Austerlitz’s past is the truth not only of the past’s unrepresentability, but also of its incomprehensibility.

At the core of *Austerlitz* lies the reality of the Holocaust, yet unlike the historian’s or historical novelist’s approach to this event, Sebald does not attempt to tell us *how it was*. Rather, he uses a “bricolage” (Lubow, “Symposium”) of fictional testimonies and historical documentation to investigate the difficulty in re-presenting past events through historical records, narrative, and even memory. Atlas’s description of Sebald’s earlier novel, *The Emigrants*, is equally as appropriate of *Austerlitz*: “an anomaly in so-called Holocaust literature, a book that goes to the heart of that catastrophic event by hovering on its periphery” (283). In *Austerlitz*, the Holocaust, like the idealised notion of historical truth, is kept permanently out of the sight of the reader, reminding us that *the truth lies elsewhere*. After reading this novel we are left with the

unsettling realisation that Sebald's *higher truth* – the *heart of that catastrophic event* – is that we can never understand, much less narrate, this event.

Chapter I – The Uncanny

Much has been written about the haunting effect of the language and the subject matter of Sebald's novels. In Germany it was said that Sebald wrote "like a ghost" (Dyer), Geoff Dyer said that it was "as if the spirit of ruined Europe were speaking through him", and Lynne Sharon Schwartz wrote that "[h]is meandering narratives, convoluted yet meticulous, embody the lingering state of shock".

In *Austerlitz* we are constantly confronted with repetitions and long hypnotic lists, doppelgangers and ghosts, characters having numerous chance meetings, repressed and triggered memories, photographs and other 'survivor' objects, ambiguities, and the grotesque. We are left with the uneasy feeling that there is some *meaning* behind all these strange occurrences, which somehow keeps eluding us; a feeling that Europe's history of destruction is constantly breathing down our neck. These feelings can be attributed to Sebald's deft handling of 'the uncanny'.

Sebald acknowledged that he was greatly influenced by the works of Freud, and it is clear from a reading of his books that he adopted many of Freud's theories, particular from Freud's 1919 paper "*Das Unheimlich*" ("The Uncanny").

Freud's paper begins, not with any kind of definition or analysis of the subject, but with an extensive preamble, where he explains his decision, or rather, compulsion, as a man interested in explaining the workings of the mind through scientific analysis, to venture into a field that had previously been of interest predominantly to people in the arts: "It is only rarely that a psychoanalyst feels impelled to investigate the subject of aesthetics [...]. But it does occasionally happen that he has to interest himself in some particular province of that subject" (219). It was as if Freud, referring to himself in the third-person, was under the spell of the uncanny – isolated, unsettled, startled to have found himself in such an unfamiliar place – unable to articulate

properly what it was that this seemingly foreign concept had to contribute to his particular branch of science.

Sebald, too, seems almost compulsively drawn to the notion of the uncanny. Although *Austerlitz* is entrenched in detailed and mundane banalities of the ‘real’ world, there is an unnerving – uncanny – feeling that accompanies the reader through this exhaustive rumination on post-Second World War Europe: a feeling that all is not what it seems, that there are larger powers at play. Or at least, if we are not prepared to swallow the frightening and whimsical notion of roaming vengeful ghosts, that there is a far more gruesome (hi)story lurking just beneath the seamless narrative of Modern European History.

The origins of the word ‘uncanny’ come from the German ‘*unheimlich*’, a word whose literal translation is ‘unhomely’, the inverse of ‘*heimlich*’ (homely); hence the original, most basic interpretation of ‘*unheimlich*’ (unhomely/uncanny) is something that is frightening because it is new and unfamiliar.

But *heimlich* has a double meaning; as well as “familiar”, it can also mean “concealed” or “hidden” (Freud, “Uncanny” 224), so strangely, *heimlich* comes to have the meaning usually ascribed to *unheimlich*. Freud states, “Thus *heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* is in some way or other a sub-species of *heimlich*” (226).

Maria Tatar explains this apparent incongruity by drawing upon the nature of a home, the idea at the centre of the concept: “A house contains the familiar and congenial, but at the same time it screens what is familiar and congenial from view, making a mystery of it” (169). And Freud, in one of his many examples of the uncanny, provides a scenario that illustrates Tatar’s notion: “[O]ne may wander about in a dark, strange room, looking for the door or the electric switch, and collide time after time with the same piece of furniture” (“Uncanny” 237).

Today, it is generally understood that the uncanny is related to what is frightening, and what excites fear in general, but also, that the uncanny is a special brand of the horrific. The definition Freud finally settles upon is an extension of one quoted from Schelling near the beginning of his paper: “*Unheimlich*’ is the name for everything that ought to have remained [...] secret and hidden but has come to light” (224).

In attempt to explain these feelings of uncanniness – why the return of the secret and hidden produces such a feeling of unease – Freud returns to some of his earlier theories, arguing that all emotional impulses transform into anxiety when repressed and, thus, the “uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (241). Hence it seems the prefix *un*, rather than indicating an inversion, is none other than “the mark of repression” (245), as it is with the concept of the un-conscious; and the frightening notion of the uncanny is, essentially, the return of the repressed.

But Freud also suggests that it is not only anxious thoughts and fears repressed from childhood that lie within our unconscious, waiting to be proven true and valid, it is also thoughts and beliefs that we may have had as primitive man, that have been conquered not through maturation but evolution. Freud claims that nowadays we no longer believe in omnipotence of thoughts, prompt fulfilment of wishes, secret injurious powers and the return of the dead, as “we have *surmounted* these modes of thought”, however, “we do not feel quite sure of our new beliefs, and the old ones still exist within us ready to seize upon any confirmation” (247).

In the following chapter I will identify some of the sources of uncanniness within *Austerlitz*, and then discuss reasons why Sebald may have used the uncanny as a literary technique to challenge our reading of historical narrative.

The minimal ‘action’ in *Austerlitz* revolves largely around the chance encounters between the narrator and Austerlitz, which occur across continents and over decades. But despite these numerous, quite astounding coincidences – embedded in an otherwise realist landscape – neither the narrator, nor Austerlitz, ever seem to make much of them at the time, the narrator only later ruminating, “our paths kept crossing, in a way that I still find hard to understand, on all my Belgian excursions of that time” (36). With the element of surprise or disbelief removed, the recurrent accidental meetings present themselves as if they *were meant to happen*, as if there was, as the narrator intimates, a reason that warranted further understanding.

Freud notes that every neurotic patient he has observed has been able to cite numerous incidents of wishing something to happen (like a person’s death) directly before it happened, or of thinking of a person he hadn’t seen for a long time just before running into them. He states that the patient will always refer to these events modestly, saying they have “presentiments” which “usually” come true (“Uncanny” 239-40). By treating extraordinary coincidences as nothing out of the ordinary, rather than bizarre chance encounters, Sebald increases their significance as signs; it becomes implicit that these occurrences were *destined* to happen.

When asked about the frequent use of coincidences in his writing, Sebald stated:

I don’t particularly hold with parapsychological explanations of one kind or another, or Jungian theories about the subject. I find those rather tedious. But [occurrences of coincidences] seemed to me an instance that illustrates that we somehow need to make sense of our nonsensical existence [...] and I think all our philosophical systems, all our systems of our creed, all constructions, even the technological worlds, are built in that way, in order to make some sort of sense, when there isn’t, as we all know. (Cuomo 1)

Sebald always refrains from ascribing his fictional coincidences with any meaning; there is no accounting for the narrator and Austerlitz's chance encounters; there is no reason why the narrator sees a newspaper article on the Breendonk fortress immediately after Austerlitz has just talked about the place; there is no explanation why shortly after finding out his birth name, Austerlitz studies the battle of Austerlitz in a school history class. Sebald doesn't use these coincidences towards some end, because, according to Sebald, that would trivialise the nature of them. Nevertheless he insists that despite his coincidences being devoid of an identifiable meaning, they nevertheless have significance. Sebald suggests that when coincidences occur, "we think, perhaps, that not everything is so futile. It gives one a sort of passing sense of consolation, occasionally" (Cuomo 2).

This vague sense of some greater meaning is hinted at after other sets of coincidences: it is "through a series of coincidences" (195) that Austerlitz finds himself in Liverpool Station, where the memory of his past is suddenly triggered, and it is "because of a series of coincidental events" that Austerlitz comes to the conclusion that he had left Prague at the age of four on a children's transport train. Although Sebald never fully satisfies us with any logical explanations for these occurrences, we are nevertheless made to *feel* that there is something – within Austerlitz's unconscious, or a more supernatural force within 'destiny' itself – that is compelling him to return to the site of past events, and leading him to the necessary information that he needs in order to piece together his past.

The coincidences are occasionally so uncanny that we are made to feel that characters are responding or behaving, not necessarily of their own volition, but are under constant direction from their unconscious,^{viii} or some other *power* arising from the history embedded in the architecture around them. For example, when we learn that Austerlitz has written a history on the Paris railway station before having learned that his father had been transported from this

point, we are left without a logical explanation for this coincidence, but with more a bewildered sense of the resonance of objects and places, and the history that can be ‘heard’ emanating from them if we are only willing to listen.

These kinds of coincidences blur with another of Freud’s uncanny elements – repetition. Freud only touched upon this idea in “The Uncanny”, developing his theory much further in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where he claimed the urge to repeat past traumas and anxieties was an instinctive drive of the unconscious.^{ix} When a person, however, finds themselves in the situation of having unconsciously repeated certain behaviour, or found themselves back where they were before, this can produce a feeling of the uncanny, and in certain circumstances, recalls the “sense of helplessness experienced in some dream states” (“Uncanny” 236). This is touched upon in *Austerlitz* by Marie when she sees a girl who is skipping in the Luxembourg gardens, trip on the hem of her skirt and graze her knee, “a scene regarded by Marie as a *déjà vu* because, she said, over twenty years ago just the same accident had happened to her at exactly the same place, an accident that at the time seemed to her shameful and aroused in her the first premonitions of death” (380).

In an example from “The Uncanny” that could have come straight from one of Sebald’s novels, Freud writes:

As I was walking one hot summer afternoon, through the deserted streets of a provincial town in Italy which was unknown to me, I found myself in a quarter of whose character I could not long remain in doubt. Nothing but painted women were to be seen at the windows of the small houses, and I hastened to leave the narrow street at the next turning. But after having wandered about for a time without enquiring my way, I suddenly found myself back in the same street, where my presence was now beginning to

excite attention. I hurried away once more, only to arrive by another *détour* at the same place yet a third time. Now, however, a feeling overcame me which I can only describe as uncanny, and I was glad enough to find myself back at the piazza I had left a short while before, without any further voyages of discovery. (237)

To the reader, much of Austerlitz’s journey appears as a loop of repetitions, in which Austerlitz is haplessly stuck, doomed to either consciously or unconsciously repeat the journeys of his past. One of Austerlitz’s more tragic repetitions is his return to the spa town of Marienbad upon the invitation of Marie de Verneuil, who presents as Austerlitz’s one romantic possibility – or as Austerlitz puts it, “she hoped to try to liberate me from my self-inflicted isolation” (290) – and an opportunity for healing. Although Austerlitz cannot remember holidaying there with his family at the age of four, his entire time in Marienbad with Marie pervades a sense of the uncanny:

I had gone over to the window, where I looked down the main street, still wet with rain, and saw the grand hotels ranged in a semi-circle rising to the heights, the Pacifik, the Atlantic, the Metropole, the Polonia and Bohemia with their rows of balconies, their corner turrets and roof ridges emerging from the morning mist like ocean-going steamers from a dark sea. At some time in the past, I thought, I must have made a mistake, and now I am living the wrong life. Later, on a walk through the deserted town and up to the fountain colonnade, I kept feeling as if someone were walking beside me, or as if something had brushed against me. Every new view that opened out before us as we turned a corner, every façade, every flight of steps looked to me both familiar and utterly alien. (298)

Austerlitz's condition, and his relationship with Marie, only deteriorates in Marienbad, and as he reflects later, "I had retained no memory at all of that summer holiday when I was just four years old, said Austerlitz, and perhaps that was why when I was in that very place later, in Marienbad at the end of August 1972, I felt nothing but blind terror in the face of the better turn my life should have taken at that time" (290).

In *Austerlitz*, many of the uncanny moments (including coincidences, repetitions and others) stem from repressed memories – sites of anxiety that have been *bidden* from Austerlitz's conscious self, an overt interpretation of Freud's psychoanalytical definition of the uncanny. And because many of Austerlitz's uncanny moments – his fits of emotion at the Paris railway station (45), his extensive research into the European rail system, the sudden memories of arriving at Liverpool Street station as a child (195) – do pertain to actual events whose memory has been repressed and/or triggered, and hence warranting further investigation, the reader is compelled to lend some significance to any of the uncanny moments that pass.

The feeling of the uncanny also arises in *Austerlitz* as a result of the presence of haunting elements. Ghosts are conjured throughout the novel, never in full view, but fleetingly along its periphery. Freud noted that "[m]any people experience the feeling [of the uncanny] in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts" ("Uncanny" 241). Freud believes that despite "supposedly educated people" having ceased to believe officially in ghosts, the primitive fear of the dead is still extremely strong within us and always ready to surface on any provocation: "Most likely our fear still implies the old belief that the dead man becomes the enemy of his survivor and seeks to carry him off to share his new life with him" (242).

As a child Austerlitz imagines that he has seen people from the submerged town of Llanwddyn walking down the road or out in the fields. He questions Evan the cobbler “who had a reputation for seeing ghosts”, who tells him tales of the dead who had been struck down by fate untimely, “who knew they had been cheated of what was due to them and tried to return to life” (74-5). Evan advises that “If you had an eye for them they were to be seen quite often”, encouraging the reader to look out for them amongst the ruins and other sites of devastation strewn throughout the text.

As an adult, Austerlitz imagines ghosts of the inmates from the Bedlam Asylum filling the twilight (188), or “when I felt a cold breath of air on my forehead” as he walks the flights of steps at Liverpool Street station (183). He also feels them in the Terezín ghetto, “still living crammed into those buildings and basements and attics, as if they were incessantly going up and down the stairs, looking out of the windows, moving in vast numbers through the streets and alleys, and even, a silent assembly, filling the entire space occupied by the air, hatched with grey as it was by the fine rain” (281), as well as wandering around various Métro stations, as he lies in the men’s ward in the Salpêtrière. Such instances intimate a presence of ghosts throughout the novel, so that when we see lone beings, like the “bent figure toiling very slowly forward and leaning on a stick” (266) who suddenly vanishes from the empty street in Terezín, we are left with a sense of unease.

The presence of ghosts is also evoked by old architecture and objects. While walking the “crab-like plan” of Breendock (28), the narrator does not confront a single person, but only empty rooms filled with objects used in the day-to-day of this hostel of torture – tables, chairs, a stove, adages painted on the walls, black posts around the execution ground, and wheelbarrows in the labour site. This prompts the narrator to ruminate on the intrinsic purchase on history these silent objects retain, a proximity to the actual events about which our knowledge and

understanding is being slowly subsumed by the darkness of ignorance, forgetfulness or official historical narratives:

I think how little we can hold in mind, how everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life, how the world is, as it were, draining itself, in that the history of countless places and objects which themselves have no power of memory is never heard, never described or passed on. Histories, for instance, like those of the straw mattresses which lay, shadow-like, on the stacked plank beds and which had become thinner and shorter because the chaff in them disintegrated over the years, shrunken [...] as if they were the mortal frames of those who once lay there in that darkness. (31)

Later in the novel, Austerlitz is transfixed by the objects on display in the Tereziín bazaar, “as if one of them or their relationship with each other must provide an unequivocal answer to the many questions I found it impossible to ask in my mind” (274-5).

Sebald alerts us to the paradoxical nature of ‘survivor’ objects – “objects that for reasons one could never know had outlived their former owners and survived the process of destruction” (277). On the one hand they appear to ‘bear witness’ to events, and in their very muteness seem to ‘tell’ a story as does a mute survivor; yet on the other hand they also comprise an element of immortality, allowing them to *outlive* their owners, and exist, often relatively unaltered, in their original state. This latter aspect ties in with a notion of time that runs throughout *Austerlitz*, that all moments in time co-exist simultaneously, rendering our understanding of history as illusory. According to Austerlitz, all past events “have not yet occurred but are waiting to do so at the moment when we think of them” (144), a belief that explains Austerlitz’s eternal stuck-ness in the past, and a notion that accounts for the

uncanniness of objects and buildings, which because of their apparent permanence, seem frozen in time.

This is captured most poignantly when Austerlitz and his history teacher Hilary visit Iver Grove, an historic home in Oxford. The owner of the house, a gentleman called Ashman, takes them into the games room, where nothing had been touched, no one had even picked up a billiard cue, since the night of Ashman's great-grandfather's death on New Year's Eve 1813. Everything – the scoring apparatus, the chinks and brushes, the cabinet drawers – were exactly as they had been left one-hundred-and-fifty-years ago. Austerlitz says: "It was as if time, which usually runs so irrevocably away, had stood still here, as if all the years behind us were still to come," and Hilary remarks on "the curious confusion of emotions affecting even a historian in a room like this, sealed away so long from the flow of the hours and days and the succession of the generations" (152). The difficulty in rationally coming to terms with the intrusion of the past upon the present is also expressed by Ashman, who, after revisiting the nursery, which had been hidden behind a false wall for ten years when the house was requisitioned, explains:

[I]t wouldn't have taken much [...] to upset his reason altogether. The mere sight of the model train with the green Great Western Railway carriages, and the Noah's Ark with the pairs of well-behaved animals saved from the Flood looking out of it, had made him feel as if the chasm of time were opening up before him [...] and before he knew what he was about he found himself standing in the yard behind the house, firing his rifle several times at the little clock-tower on the coach-house. (153)

Alison Landsberg provides an alternative explanation for the power of survivor objects in an article on the New York Holocaust Museum, which has been constructed as a kind of

‘experiential’ museum, allowing visitors to walk along cobblestones from the Warsaw ghetto, and be confronted with various objects that have ‘survived’ the Holocaust. She claims that a situation is set up where:

[T]here is no longer a clear distinction between your space and the exhibit [...]. Even though you are not invited to touch these objects, their very materiality, I would argue, their seductive tangibility, draws you into a lived relationship with them. [...] Not only are [the objects] meant to testify – as evidence – to the atrocities, but they are imagined to be in some measure digestible, comprehensible in a local way. (78)

She claims that even if we don’t know the factual basis for the objects we’re confronted with (i.e. exactly who used a certain tool and when), their appearance creates anxiety, because we are already aware of elements of the history, and the contact with the objects allow us to imagine the ‘gaps’.

Without mentioning the word, Landsberg touches upon the notion of ‘haunting’, so powerfully evoked in Sebald’s empty forts, ghettos, and halls, when describing the experience of passing through a boxcar which was used to transport Jews from the Warsaw ghetto to Treblinka in 1942-43. But Landsberg doesn’t attribute the anxiety produced in these states with feelings of uncanniness, but rather with the horror produced by our imagination as we try to construct a narrative around these objects: “[Y]ou attempt to reconcile [the boxcar’s] present emptiness with the fact that people were at one time crammed into its interior. The effect, I would argue, is an odd sense of spatial intimacy with those people who are at an unbridgeable distance – with people who are profoundly absent” (78).

Again, when describing her response to seeing a “chaotic jumble” of “survivor shoes”, of which “each shoe bears the trace of the absent body that lived and marked it”, she claims that the visitors’ reaction is based in the visitors’ sense of empathy^x and that “[t]hese mute objects, the objects that survived the Holocaust, stimulate our mimetic faculty” (80); we create our own narrative out of these real objects, with ourselves as the narrator. She discusses Michael Taussig’s claim that mimesis can offer an alternative mode of knowledge – “What happens is that the very concept of knowing something becomes displaced by a relating to” (Taussig 26) – suggesting that the power of the experience is derived from our ability to *imagine* a relationship between ourselves and the object.

I would suggest that a similar reaction can be observed in readers of character-based narrative where ‘real’ objects, places or events are described. Hence, although the degree to which we relate to individuals evoked during a museum visit, or characters depicted in a narrative, will depend upon our capacity for empathy, the *anxiety* which is provoked in both situations can at least partly be explained by the uncanny – a repressed knowledge surrounding the context of the objects presented or depicted that is being forced to the surface through the indisputable presence of this object from the past.

The reaction of seeing another’s shoes and feeling our own shoes is touched upon by Freud who describes a similar sensation, that of inhabiting disbelief, as “derealization” or “depersonalization”, which, he claims, produces a momentary split in the ego (qtd. in Landsberg 81). Although this idea, again, touches upon humans’ capacity for mimesis, it also raises an anxiety that could be considered uncanny, resulting from recognising one’s double – one’s twin or alternate existence – in another person. The concept of the double will be discussed shortly.

By far the most uncanny objects that appear in *Austerlitz*^z are photographs. It is not simply the way Sebald employs photographs in his text; photography and film – which Sebald

also refers to – are inherently uncanny. Susan Sontag claims that “all photographs are *memento mori*” (15), and Roland Barthes wrote of “that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead” (9).

In *Austerlitz*, the photograph becomes the perfect metaphor for Austerlitz’s uncanny relationship with the past. Photographs freeze past events, rendering them unchangeable and ever-present. Like Austerlitz’s concept of time, the moment captured by the camera’s aperture re-occurs every time one looks at it, leading to endless repetitions, and the desperate feeling of being held captive by the past. Austerlitz makes this point explicitly in reference to a sixteenth-century painting:

I feel as if the moment depicted by Lucas van Valckenborch had never come to an end, as if the canary-yellow lady had only just fallen over or swooned, as if the black velvet hood had only this moment dropped away from her head, as if the little accident, which no doubt goes unnoticed by most viewers, were always happening over and over again, and nothing and no one could ever remedy it. (15-16)

As Nicholas Royle writes in his book *The Uncanny*: “Every day is Groundhog Day in a movie” (80).

Sebald uses photography in two ways in *Austerlitz*. Firstly, he inserts them into the framing narrative of the text without commenting upon them, a depiction of what the narrator might be seeing.^{xi} Here they are merely an adjunct to the text, a form of documentation for the reader, pinning the narrative down in a particular moment in time. Secondly, he incorporates photographs via a direct reference to the photograph from one of the characters, usually Austerlitz, who has an obsession with photography.

Much of Austerlitz's interest in photography stems from his sense of debt to the past (for as soon as the aperture has clicked, the moment has past and, hence, been lost). Austerlitz's freezing of past moments is therefore a type of memorialisation. When he takes photographs of the dead who have been uncovered by the Liverpool Street station excavations (184), his behaviour does not come across as ghoulish, but rather as an act of respect for the dead – of capturing and hence *remembering* a past that will otherwise be forgotten.

The photographs presented by the characters are often discussed at length, and, for Austerlitz especially, represent the moments from one's past that are unresolved and constantly re-emerging. The anxiety associated with these photographs is related to the sense of loss of the one thing held complete in the photograph, and the viewer's feeling of impotence in being able to warn the subject of his or her future. Austerlitz, like Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes, anticipates impending misfortune when regarding his photographic subjects (Duttlinger 155); he senses an approaching tragedy that is always, in the suspended world of the photograph, just about to happen.

This notion of warning the past through the time-portal of photography is first raised by the narrator who expresses a tremendous sense of guilt while looking at photographs of the Glacier Museum in Lucerne the morning after the museum had burnt down, and the day after having visited it: "I could not get the pictures [...] out of my head for several weeks, and they gave me an uneasy, anxious feeling which crystallized into the idea that I had been to blame, or at least one of those to blame, for the Lucerne fire" (11-12).

This anxiety associated with viewing photographs is intensified in film, where the past, something which is dead and inanimate, is re-animated, seeming to "bring back to life what had been irrevocably lost; [...] blurr[ing] uncannily the distinction between life and death" (Smith 121). Austerlitz experiences this raising of the dead when he obtains a copy of a propaganda film

made in Theresienstadt, which he believes will enable him to “see or gain some inkling of what it was really like” (342). When he is unable to see Agáta, his mother, in the film, he has the idea of slowing the film down, helping him see “previously hidden objects and people” (345) – things that were beyond, or within, the unreal reality being projected in front of him.

Within the slow-motion frames, Austerlitz sees a woman who may or may not be his mother; it is a harrowing scene for the reader, as we witness Austerlitz attempting, over and over, to bring his dead mother to life. The ambiguity of the woman’s identity – is it Agáta? Or Agáta’s double? – adds further to the anxiety, as we are reminded of the blurry line between reality and imagination, and the difficulty in casting any of what we believe we know of the past into one category or the other. We are left with a spectre, but a spectre of whom? Just as the uncanny, doubling nature of film can trick one into thinking they can see *what it was really like*, it can also trick in other ways too.

One of the most uncannily disturbing images presented in *Austerlitz* is Věra’s photograph of the five-year-old Austerlitz, in costume as the Rose Queen’s page, about to accompany his mother to a masked ball. Austerlitz “dared not touch [the photograph]” (259), as if it were a fragile, living thing. Although Austerlitz recognises the “unusual hairline” of the child, “otherwise all memory was extinguished in me by an overwhelming sense of the long years that had passed”. Austerlitz later examines every detail of the photograph “without once finding the slightest clue” (260). The clue to what, Austerlitz doesn’t mention, but moments later he hints at the enigma when reflecting upon the moment when he first saw the photograph: “I was not, as you might suppose, moved or distressed, said Austerlitz, only speechless and uncomprehending, incapable of any lucid thought” (260). This response echoes an understanding of the ‘uncanny’ described by Jentsch in Freud, its essential factor being associated with “intellectual uncertainty” (qtd. in “Uncanny” 221). Austerlitz’s anxiety relates to what is experienced but not remembered,

hence known (subconsciously) but not known (consciously). Although Austerlitz is looking outward at the photograph, it is really within that he is searching for some kind of certainty on the past.

Although he doesn't voice it explicitly, Austerlitz's grief is palpable as we witness his attempt to re-embody his past self: "As far back as I remember, said Austerlitz, I have always felt as if I had no place in reality, as if I were not there at all, and I never had this impression more strongly than on that evening in the Šporkova when the eyes of the Rose Queen's page looked through me" (261). What Austerlitz is describing is a split in the ego, a doubling of self. But in trying to inhabit both the boy looking out of the photo, and the adult staring back, he ceases to be fully either.

Freud wrote extensively on the 'double', a theme connected with several other 'uncanny' concepts by the underlying link of confusion between reality and *un*reality:

Thus we have characters who are to be considered identical because they look alike. This relation is accentuated by mental processes leaping from one of these characters to another – by what we should call telepathy – so that the one possesses knowledge, feelings and experience in common with the other. Or it is marked by the fact that the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words, there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self. ("Uncanny" 234)

Freud accounts for the uncanniness of the double by harking back to an earlier stage of development (again, both in evolution, and in the infant) before the self was fully differentiated from others,^{xii} as well as an anticipation of the stage after death, when our relative sameness with

others returns. But there are likely to be other elements that explain the source of anxiety produced by the double, especially the most terrifying of all doubles – one’s own doppelgänger. As Heinrich Heine noted, “There is nothing more uncanny than seeing one’s face accidentally in a mirror by moonlight” (qtd. in Rank 43). Seeing one’s own double can, as Freud mentions, lead to thoughts of self-criticism, or even unfulfilled but possible futures (“Uncanny” 235-6), but it is possibly the confrontation with seeing the seeming impossible, that lies at the root of this panic: “The subject is confronted with his double [...] and this crumbling of the subject’s accustomed reality, this shattering of the bases of his world, produces a terrible anxiety” (Dolar 11).

“Even later nothing but blind panic filled me when I thought of the five-year-old page,” says Austerlitz (260). Here, Austerlitz has shifted power to his double, and it is the job of the adult Austerlitz, hopelessly trapped in the present, to make amends to his younger self, who, at the moment captured by the photograph, appeared to have a far greater future before him than the one his adult self knows him to have lived.

The uncanny communication that takes place between one’s present self, and one’s double from the past is beautifully described by Věra who speaks to Austerlitz of:

[T]he mysterious quality peculiar to such photographs when they surface from oblivion. One has the impression [...] of something stirring in them, as if one caught small sighs of despair, *gémissements de désespoir* [...], as if the pictures had a memory of their own and remembered us, remembered the roles that we, the survivors, and those no longer among us had played in our former lives. (258)

Several times throughout the novel, Austerlitz mentions the sense of having, or having had, a twin – a double. As a child, the twin represented his parallel life, the self he left behind in Prague;

as an adult, the twin becomes the ghost of his former self, the five-year-old child who stares back at him, wanting some kind of explanation for past events.

Sebald also creates a sense of the uncanny through his narrative strategy. The relative plotlessness and lack of character development creates anxiety for any reader who expects or desires a more conventional, linear narrative progression; they may feel, as Freud did when wandering through his provincial Italian town, that each time they feel they are making any advancement, moving towards any discovery, they find themselves back in the same place, having made little, or no, headway at all.

Furthermore, by embedding testimonies within testimonies,^{xiii} the voices of witnesses, some of whom are long dead, appear to the reader dislocated from any living, present body; they become eerie and ghostlike.^{xiv} Even Austerlitz's and the narrator's strangely similar, long, meandering rambles create an alienating effect. Devoid of variations in tone or pace, their monotonic orations possess a frighteningly inhuman quality. We are reminded of one of Jentsch's examples of uncanniness, which arises when there are "doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate". According to Jentsch, this explains the uncanny effect of epileptic fits and manifestations of insanity, because "[t]hese excite in the spectator the impression of automatic, mechanical processes at work behind the ordinary appearance of mental activity" and "leave the reader in uncertainty whether a particular figure in the story is a human being or an automaton" (qtd. in Freud, "Uncanny" 226-7).

This is constantly evoked through the narrator's and Austerlitz's use of repetition and, especially, lists, which carry an almost robotic tone. When Austerlitz discusses Adler's book on the Theresienstadt ghetto, he mentions it gives him insight into matters "I could never have imagined" (330), and says that there was something "incomprehensible and unreal" (331) about

the ghetto system, before launching into an exhaustive list cataloguing the sixty-thousand people that were crammed into the area approximately a square kilometre in size:

[I]ndustrialists and manufacturers, lawyers and doctors, rabbis and university professors, singers and composers, bank managers, businessmen, shorthand typists, housewives, farmers, labourers and millionaires, people from Prague and the rest of the Protectorate, from Slovakia, from Denmark and Holland, from Vienna and Munich, Cologne and Berlin, from the Palatinate, from Lower Franconia and Westphalia [...]. (331)

The list reads like a computer-generated manifest, dizzying and incomprehensible on a personal level. What we sense from Austerlitz is his failure to fully understand or verbalise the degree of human loss, and a desperate attempt to convey the scale of the tragedy by translating it into a meaningful structure: a list of professions and nationalities. However, the extent to which the list falls short of being truly meaningful and conveying the human suffering is, uncannily and paradoxically, the source of its potency.

Survivor testimony is also often characterised by lists, repetitions and metonymy.^{xv} Examples abound in Abraham Lewin's *A Cup of Tears: A Diary of the Warsaw Ghetto*: "Today the Germans have surrounded the following streets: Gesia, Smocza, Pawia, Lubiecka, and took away all the occupants. Yesterday the following were taken away: Khanowicz, Rusak, and Jehoszua Zegal's whole family" (146). Lewin resorts to language that Bernard-Donals claims is exceedingly difficult to "read through" as a window into the experience, explaining that "the context in which the items on the list are meaningful to the writer is unspoken" ("History" 159). Saul Friedlander goes further, making the connection between repetition (within a testimony) and the uncanny, an explanation that could as easily be applied to the narration of lists, claiming that the

feeling of uncanniness for the reader lies within the uncertainty brought about by “human beings of the most ordinary kind approaching the state of automata by eliminating any feelings of humanness and of moral sense” (“Final Solution” 30). In lists such as Lewin’s, as well as Austerlitz’s, the uncanniness can be accounted for by the lack of explicit meaning conveyed precisely where there should be meaning; by the fact that each list item rings of familiarity (e.g. common vocations, street names) – homeliness – yet remains unexplained and, hence, unfamiliar, unhomely.

After establishing the overwhelming presence of the uncanny in *Austerlitz*, it is necessary to understand Sebald’s objective in taking the reader on this macabre, unsettling journey.

Sebald was always curious of all things strange and irrational; for example, in the 1970s and 1980s, he spent many summer vacations at a mental clinic near Vienna, not as an inmate, but apparently for reasons of research and personal interest. McCulloh claims that “Sebald harboured a fascination with the strange, fantastic, and irrational” and that “the appeal of his writing arises less out of what he tells us about the nature of things than what he can show us about things beyond comprehension” (xviii).

Royle discusses the interest of several philosophers and writers in the uncanny. Amongst them, one can detect some kind of commonality between the philosophies and objectives of Sebald and both Wittgenstein (to whom *Austerlitz*’s narrator remarks that Austerlitz bears a resemblance (55)) and Bertolt Brecht. Gordon C.F. Bearn claims: “The uncanny is the silent shadow of many of Wittgenstein’s internal conversations” (48), while Wittgenstein once wrote: “Thoughts that are at peace. That’s what someone who philosophises yearns for” (qtd. in Bearn 50). Royle suggests that Wittgenstein’s desire for security and peace was the driving force of his work, and that “[p]eace, in effect, becomes uncanny – an estranged ordinariness” (4).

Brecht's work approaches the uncanny more overtly, through his idea of the alienation effect (or A-effect). The A-effect, according to Brecht, consists "in turning the object...from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected". He provides the examples of suddenly seeing one's mother as another man's wife (through acquiring a stepfather), or seeing one's teacher hounded by the bailiffs (143-4). Both of these examples challenge our idea of homeliness, confronting us with the feeling of homelessness. Royle argues that Brecht's interest lay in "the political, transformational, indeed revolutionary possibilities of making the familiar strange" (5). As Brecht says, "new alienations are only designed to free socially conditioned phenomena from that stamp of familiarity which protects them against our grasp today" (192).

Royle states that writers such as Wittgenstein and Brecht "allow us to sense in different ways the ineluctable significance of the uncanny as a means of thinking about so-called 'real life', the ordinary, the familiar and everyday" (5-6). Sebald belongs amongst these two, as someone who uses the uncanny as "a metaphor for a fundamentally unliveable modern condition" (Vidler x); for Sebald, that unlivable modern condition is living with the strangeness of our own history. Sebald's uncanny does not simply reissue the threat of the return of the dead and repressed superstitions, it also signals a re-emergence of the public past, an horrific past that on one level is *known*, but has been recoiled from, and intentionally buried, away from view.

In this way, the uncanny challenges our way of thinking – or at least our rational thinking. It reminds us that all cannot be rationally explained, that our thought process will always be limited by our own mental and psychical boundaries. However, Sebald does not suggest we give up or abandon the quest for comprehension, but rather, try a different, far less linear, approach to understanding. In the opening pages of *Austerlitz*, Sebald's narrator takes us into the Antwerp Nocturama where, in the darkness, he is taken by some of the animals'

“strikingly large eyes, and the fixed inquiring gaze found in certain painters and philosophers who seek to penetrate the darkness which surrounds us purely by means of looking and thinking” (3), and the text is interspersed by the images of the eyes of nocturnal animals, and philosophers. Indeed, Sebald constantly confronts our approach to comprehending the past by persuading us that we can, in fact, find our way through the darkness.

The uncanny for Austerlitz, and for us in reading about him, relates to the emergence of his (and Europe’s) past, rising out of the darkness of history: “I was always especially entranced, said Austerlitz, by the moment when the shadows of reality, so to speak, emerge out of nothing on the exposed paper, as memories do in the middle of the night, darkening again if you try to cling to them, just like a photographic print left in the developing bath too long” (109).

Austerlitz is filled with scenes of mist and darkness, where one’s surroundings cannot be quite made out. However, Sebald’s darkness does not carry the innocence of fog or forgetfulness. His darkness is an institutionally imposed dimming of the lights.

Austerlitz tells us he took early retirement “because of the inexorable spread of ignorance even to the universities” (170); he endures a fainting fit after visiting the museum of veterinary medicine (filled with jars of animals and body parts floating in formaldehyde), as well as a fit of melancholy when he visits the Grande Bibliothèque in Paris. It is the institutions of learning that are the most injurious to Austerlitz and his quest to understand the past.

Royle writes that the uncanny is “bound up with analysing, questioning and even transforming what is called ‘everyday life’”, and that “[t]here seems to be general acknowledgment that our lives, our experiences, the comings and goings within and all around us are increasingly *programmed*” (23). Austerlitz has been a victim of programming, both self and publicly imposed, and tells that he only ever concerned himself with cognitive history and

knowledge, as a way to protect himself from the realities of the past: “I had constantly been preoccupied by that accumulation of knowledge which I had pursued for decades, and which served as a substitute or compensatory memory” (198).

Jacques Derrida writes that “[h]egemony still organises the repression and thus the confirmation of a haunting. Haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony” (*Dissemination* 37). Sebald is not so explicit with his condemnations; however, he does implicitly point the finger at the seat of historical ‘knowledge’ – the university. The university is, after all, where Austerlitz has worked his entire life as an architectural historian; it is the main promulgator of scholarly information, and the institution responsible for the education and expansion of minds. In *Austerlitz*, Sebald seems to come to the same conclusion as Bill Readings and Royle, that *the university is in ruins*.^{xvi}

Both Readings and Royle conclude that “institutions of higher education are increasingly becoming transnational corporations” (Royle 55), cut off from themselves; mechanised places run by automatons. They “deliver units” based on “learning outcomes”, and pursue Excellence rather than Thought. Royle provides an uncannily empty motto for today’s institutes of learning: “The excellent University is excellent at being excellent” (55).

Royle insists that “[t]he University is, increasingly, a ghostly institution”. This is an idea raised by Nietzsche in his lectures *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions*, where he speaks of “marionettes” in “the puppet-play” (91) of lecturing; also referring to the “pseudo-culture of the present” (140) as an orchestra of “mechanical, lifeless bodies” (142).

The world of *Austerlitz* is filled with the institutions and machinery laid out by *mechanical, lifeless bodies*. And although, for Sebald, it is vital that we try to see beyond the façade of history, rather than live in ghostly darkness, he cannot guarantee what we will find when we look. As

Austerlitz's narrator remarks: "No one can explain exactly what happens within us when the doors behind which our childhood terrors lurk are flung open" (33).

The uncanny does not provide answers, it simply compels us to look and to try to understand that which will never be fully understood. Freud wrote that psychoanalysis is uncanny on account of its capacity for "laying bare [...] hidden forces" ("Uncanny" 366). The uncanny has a similar role to psychoanalysis in that it begs us to question and uncover; it encourages us to accept Derrida's proposition of the scholar or intellectual as someone who would "learn [...] from the ghost" (*Spectres* 176). Conflating psychoanalysis and the uncanny, Sebald's approach to history becomes a kind of public psychoanalysis, a pursuit of understanding within "something one does not know one's way about in" (Jentsch qtd. in Freud, "Uncanny" 221).

Sebald's uncanny reminds us that although our past can never be fully comprehended, at present it is cloaked in an almost impenetrable darkness. Sebald's goal is to put history on the analyst's couch, not in order to provide complete answers – since Sebald's history comprises no answers, only further mysteries that continue to pervade our present – but in order to help explain the stultifying haunting in the present.

Chapter II – The Problem with Narrative

In *Austerlitz*, darkness signifies the eclipsing and often complete erasure of public and private memory. Images, rooms, people, moths (132), voices of history (234) and even reality (109) continually emerge and disappear from the shadows as a reminder of an entire world that exists after dusk: the world of censored, forgotten or obfuscated truths.

For Sebald, growing up in postwar Germany, the “taboo” on remembering (*Natural History* 34) the Holocaust and other events of the Second World War created a situation in which, as an adult, he found it impossible to live, motivating his emigration. The long term effects of this silence “in every household” upon the psychology of the German people, and on history in general, permeates all of his work, but nowhere does he discuss it more explicitly than in *On the Natural History of Destruction*, where he caustically writes of the “well-kept secret of the corpses built into the foundations of our state, a secret that bound all Germans together in the postwar years, and indeed still binds them, more closely than any positive goal such as the realization of democracy ever could” (13). There is an oppressive tension within this book, as well as in the subdued monologues of Sebald’s other novels, that conveys the “tacit agreement, equally binding on everyone, that the true state of material and moral ruin in which the country found itself was not to be described” (10) – a tension commensurate with the silence with which the country had responded to its past, which constantly threatened to burst through the narrative of history.

Not only does post-war Germany lack testimonials, much of the documentation that might potentially corroborate Holocaust testimonies has been lost or destroyed, thus historians have been unable to extract much verifiable information from the personal accounts that have emerged more recently. For many survivors, having the historicity of

their narratives examined and evaluated is traumatic in itself. Like all survivors of brutal victimisation or abuse, many Holocaust survivors report a sense of shame about their experience, a feeling of belonging to a “secret order” that is sworn to silence, and a sense that because of their “participation” in the Holocaust, they have become “bearers of a secret” (Laub, “Bearing Witness” 67). As one survivor’s psychoanalyst puts it, “Hitler’s crime was not only the killing of the Jews, but getting the Jews to believe that they deserved it” (Laub, “Event” 75). This situation has not been aided by the publication and critical acclaim of hoax testimonies such as Binjamin Wilkomirski’s *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*, which fueled Holocaust deniers, and prompted all readers of survivor stories to rethink how much they should question and accept all testimonies claiming a traumatic history. For many survivors, it has been easier to remain silent.

The troubled relationship between historical truth and narrative is a central concern in Sebald’s four novels, all of which deal with the historical events at the heart of their stories almost exclusively via personal testimony. Sebald’s preoccupation with testimony is so pronounced that we rarely ever see any character *doing* anything other than testifying, reminding us that, historically speaking, events only come into being once they have been narrated.

In *Austerlitz*, Austerlitz’s meandering, disjointed testimony to the narrator forms the main ‘narrative’^{xvii} thread of the novel. When the narrator first meets Austerlitz in the *Salle des pas perdus* in Antwerp Centraal Station, the eccentric figure stands out from the other people “staring apathetically into space” by the fact that he is engaged making notes, drawing sketches, and taking photographs of the waiting-room (6). Austerlitz, we find out, is an architectural historian, a man whose job it is to publicly ‘remember’ and narrate past events. But his job is two-fold: he not only must rationalise and record public history in his role as

an historian, he must also remember and comprehend the past in his private role as an individual who has been traumatised by the events of the Second World War. When we first meet Austerlitz in 1967, he is ironically unaware of his own history, and appears simply as a professional historian obsessively attempting to understand the human-built world around him. When questioned by the narrator, Austerlitz launches into an extended history of the Antwerp railway station, a monologue that reveals his preoccupation with northern European railway stations; a fixation whose greater significance has yet to emerge from the darkness of his repressed memory.

It is the growing schism between these two irreconcilable fragments of Austerlitz's self – the rational (or cognitive and fact-driven) and the irrational (or experiential and sensorial) – that come to represent his two disparate approaches to penetrating the past and lead to Austerlitz's first major breakdown. Austerlitz's collapse is an eruption of his own history – that which he has been unable to remember and hence rationalise and narrate – through history – the rationalised narration of past events – and manifests itself most profoundly as an inability to make sense of language.

The breakdown is triggered when Austerlitz attempts to formulate his notes and sketches on architecture into a theoretical book. In the 'histories' he has written, he finds "the most appalling mistakes, inconsistencies and lapses staring at me from the paper" (172). This is followed by a complete inability to express himself: language becomes "a conglomeration of the most inane phrases" (173), and "[t]he very thing that may usually convey a sense of purposeful intelligence – the exposition of an idea by means of a certain stylistic facility – now seemed to me nothing but an entirely arbitrary or deluded enterprise" (175). Austerlitz compares language to "an old city full of streets and squares, nooks and crannies", but that now, "[t]he entire structure of language, the syntactical arrangement of

parts of speech, punctuation, conjunctions, and finally even the nouns denoting ordinary objects were all enveloped in impenetrable fog” (174-5). Austerlitz is not yet consciously aware of the trauma in his past, but there are *no words* that can narrate his sense of his forgotten past.

Sociologists recognise the loss or breakdown of language by a culture or group of people as corresponding to a loss of the group’s cultural heritage: a rupture from one’s past. While alluding to this phenomenon (which becomes more overt later on when we realise that Austerlitz’s native tongue, which he has all but lost, is actually Czechoslovakian), Sebald is also raising the post-structuralist concern with the limits of representation within narrated history, and language’s inability to draw attention to anything but itself and the institutions that wield it (Kellner 279-80).

Sebald conveys his belief in the insidious role narrated history can play in regard to public remembering via Austerlitz’s revelation that “I sensed that in truth I had neither memory nor the power of thought, nor even any existence, that all my life had been a constant process of obliteration, a turning away from myself and the world” (174). Although he is detailing the well-documented psychoanalytical process of repression and dissociation, he is also describing the way that on a broad, metaphoric level, Austerlitz’s past – a past that involved war, child removals and death camps – has been censored, tailored and rationalised within history to the point in which it has lost all true meaning and relevance. Language, for Austerlitz, becomes little more than a human construct designed to rationalise and hence deceive, and, like much of the post-war architecture he studies, another manifestation of the way in which humankind, throughout time, has recorded *over* past events.

Austerlitz’s disintegrating language skills involves more than his nervous breakdown; throughout the book his testimony is filled with moments where he halts and is forced to

revert to terms that infer his experiences lie outside of the limits of language: events are “incomprehensible”, “inconceivable”, “inexpressible”; Austerlitz has “no words”, is left “[s]peechless and uncomprehending, incapable of any lucid thought” (260); other times Austerlitz gives up on language altogether and simply falls into silence.

What Sebald illustrates through Austerlitz is the most problematic element of survivor testimony for historians: its failure to deliver rational and comprehensive truths. Survivor testimony is notorious for anecdotes filled with contradictory information, hyperbole, omissions, and irrational or nonsensical observations. Simply put, such testimonies rarely yield a clear ‘narrative’: a rationally constructed sequence of events that, in their totality, meaningfully recount a story or event. Their historic value is undermined by the prevalence of *anti*-narrative features such as interruptions, lacunae, repetitions, and other ‘irrational’ characteristics that illustrate what Maurice Blanchot terms “the disaster of writing”, and which occur, according to Bernard-Donals, “when the weight of events proves too much for the language meant to bear” (“History” 146). The language in Lewin’s diary provides clear examples:

Last night I couldn’t sleep. It passed peacefully. Everything reminds one of September 1939. People rushing through the streets. The day is so long. Packages, mainly of pillows and bedclothes. Noisy movement. The never-ending question: “*Meken do durkhgen?*” [“Can one get through there?”] Disaster: Gucia has been thrown out of her flat. Five killed in Dzielna Street in the night. Terrible scenes in the streets. The police are carrying the elegant furniture from the homes of those who have been driven out. Umschalplatz: a policeman is crying. He is struck. “Why are you crying?” “*Meine mutter, maine frau!*” [“My mother, my wife!”] “*Frau, ja; mutter*

nicht.” [“Wife, yes; mother no.”] A smuggler who threw himself out from the fourth floor, I saw him land on his sick bed. (137-38)

Lewin’s diary – like Austerlitz’s testimony – repeatedly exposes the ineffectiveness of language to reproduce the event; the result of trying to express the inexpressible: “The details of these events are so devastating that they are not for the pages of a diary” (108). Lewin writes, “I feel that we are standing on the threshold of the intolerable, between existence and annihilation,” and later, “every passing minute brought with it the danger that our hearts would literally burst with fear and dread” (73). Such details tell us little about the actual experience, and more about the inadequacy of language; they leave the reader not with a picture of a scene, a person or a place, but rather, with a sense that the truth of what Lewin has experienced lies outside of the possibilities of narrative. That what he has experienced is essentially *unsayable*.^{xviii}

By having Austerlitz’s story read, at times, like glimpses into his memoir, Sebald draws our attention to the problems of those survivors who are caught between having too much to say but no adequate language in which to say it, and the integration of this troubled testimony into public history. In particular, this might come down to the difficulty many historians have with translating the *unsayable* nature of traumatic memories. But for many Holocaust scholars the truth of the events lies *beyond* the rational reality of language; it exists in the very *unsayability* of the traumatic memory; in an event that is, quite simply, beyond rational understanding and therefore can never be narrated.

Psychoanalysts have always attached great meaning to the slips in narrative – lacunae, metonymy and stuttered words – the aspects of a testimony that cannot be narrated, believing that these thoughts and memories that have defied or escaped conscious

rationalisation are the ones that contain the most significant information. They believe many of the anti-narrative features that interrupt testimonies of trauma originate in the psychological process of translating traumatic memory into a narrative. Some of the earliest published writings on survivor testimony come from the psychoanalyst Pierre Janet who, in 1889, asserted a difference between *narrative* memory and *traumatic* memory. Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, who have translated and written about Janet's work, write that:

Familiar and expectable experiences are automatically assimilated without much conscious awareness of details of the particulars, while frightening or novel experiences may not easily fit into existing cognitive schemes and either may be remembered with particular vividness or may totally resist integration. Under extreme conditions, existing meaning schemes may be entirely unable to accommodate frightening experiences, which causes the memory of the experiences to be stored differently and not be available for retrieval under ordinary conditions: it becomes dissociated from conscious awareness and voluntary control. (160)

A traumatic memory lies so far outside of the witness's catalogue of lived experiences that the witness is unable to comprehend it and integrate it into their understanding, and, according to Caruth, they simply fail to experience the event at the time ("Trauma" 4). According to psychoanalysts, witnesses commonly experience amnesia following exposure to a traumatic event, and access to the memory may only occur through flashback, triggered by an association connected with the event. Although the flashback will be recalled from start to finish and reproduced in exact detail, the witness is unable to

interpret or respond to the flashback and will often be rendered speechless. In some extreme cases, a witness may have no recall at all of the experience after relaying or acting out the traumatic events (van der Kolk and van der Hart 162). Caruth suggests that such a literal registration of an event appears to be connected precisely with the way traumatic experience *escapes* full consciousness as it occurs, and claims that modern neurobiologists have suggested “that the unerring ‘engraving’ on the mind, the ‘etching into the brain’ of an event in trauma may be associated with its elision of its normal encoding in memory” (“Recapturing” 152-3).

This confirms what many trauma survivors report: that they feel they were automatically removed from the scene of the event, or that they were watching the scene from a distance (van der Kolk and van der Hart 168). Many even walk away feeling nothing and remembering nothing. As Freud wrote, the trauma patient gets away “relatively unharmed” (*Moses* 84). Felman’s approach to trauma follows both Freud and Caruth; she states that the victim apparently escapes and the traumatic event remains unknown, unexperienced. What follows, in the absence of the event, but in the full awareness that something horrible took place, is a “precocious testimony” that “speak[s] beyond its means”, an uncontrolled, unanticipated compulsion to talk that precedes the obligation to provide an historically accurate account (“Education” 21). As Lewin writes, two paragraphs after an event he failed to describe: “Perhaps because the disaster is so great...words are beyond us now. Our hearts are empty and made of stone” (97).

Narrative memory, on the other hand, is memory that is integrated into our bank of experiences. The survivor has been able to digest and make sense of the material by working it through his or her mental constructs; the formulation of a narrative is, hence, a rational act. It follows that, only after an experience is placed in context with other experiences and transformed in the mind into a narrative, can the subject make inferences about the meaning

of the event. However, as soon as experiences are woven in with old knowledge in order to extract meaning, memories become inaccurate. As Janet points out, once a particular event or piece of information becomes integrated into a larger scheme it will no longer be accessible as an individual entity, and hence, the memory will be distorted (van der Kolk and van der Hart 171).

Narration not only infers a rational process has taken place, it also infers a subjective one, during the act of tailoring a story to be told. Narratives are ‘composed’ through the selective shaping of certain details into a format that comprises a beginning, middle and end. Narration is therefore also a social act; there is always a listener (or implied listener), and there is always a purpose to deliver a desired meaning. Furthermore, a narrative can be adapted and shaped for various audiences (i.e. the psychoanalyst, the police, the friend). As the narrative is retold, further meaning is extracted, and the narrative continues to grow: the memory of the event, according to Felman, “whose origin cannot be precisely located [...] continue[s] to evolve even in the very process of testimony” (“Education” 21-22). Hence by the time a memory is transformed into a narrative, rational and subjective processes have corrupted the traumatic memory from its pristine, unsayable state; the *truth* of the event, which may lie in its incomprehensibility, has been lost. It is findings such as these that prompt Dominick LaCapra’s insistence that “memory is always secondary [to history]” (*History* 21), and Caruth’s claim that “any testimony of the event will bear at best an oblique relation with it” (“Unclaimed” 187).

As well as habitually falling silent and having his voice fail him (231), Austerlitz changes language three times throughout the novel. When the narrator first meets Austerlitz, he is speaking French; when they switch to English, the narrator is “strangely touched to notice in him an insecurity which had been entirely concealed from me before, expressing

itself as a slight speech impediment and occasional fits of stammering, during which he clutched the worn spectacle case he always held in his left hand so tightly that you could see the white of his knuckles beneath his skin” (42). Then when Austerlitz meets Věra in Prague, and Věra is midway through her testimony, Věra “quite involuntarily” starts speaking in Czech, and Austerlitz finds that he “now [understands] almost everything Věra said, like a deaf man whose hearing has been miraculously restored” (219). The act of moving between languages, and the effect generated by each language, reminds us of the variety of meanings that can be imparted into or extracted from a narrative according to the fashion in which it is narrated. An event always exists in an immutable state beyond its narration, and while the narrator may shift to another narrative – whether another language, another set of descriptions, or an alternative meaning – to provide the illusion of approaching the event, the narrator will still be bound by the same linguistic constraints.

Lewin’s diary exhibits many of the narrative features Sebald employs in Austerlitz. Lewin also writes in two languages – Yiddish during the period of concentration; Hebrew during the deportation – and his testimony is filled with repetitive, discomfiting words and phrases, which, according to Bernard-Donals “inscribe a moment so utterly alien and yet so utterly natural that they jar the writer and the reader out of the narrative of history” (“History” 146).

On May 20th, 1942, Lewin writes:

Yesterday afternoon, at half past two in the afternoon, two officers drove a 17-year old Jewish girl out from the Pawiak Prison. They took her as far as 11 Pawia Street, led her into the entrance-way, let her walk a few steps in front and shot her several times from behind with a revolver. They had found that the girl was living on the

Aryan side [of the ghetto wall]. Yesterday morning she was arrested in her flat, not fully dressed, wearing slippers. She was taken away as she was and after several hours in the Pawiak she was executed without further ado [...] The level of the Nazi brutality quite simply lies beyond our power to comprehend. It is inconceivable to us and will seem quite incredible to future generations, the product of our imagination, over-excited by misery and hunger [...] I'm not making this story up, God forbid. It happened today. (80-1)

Beyond the immediate power of what is being told, several things strike the reader about the testimony: inappropriate word choice (“without further ado”), repetitions, contradictions (yesterday versus today), a non-linear narrative, a kind of intoxicating breathlessness, and the sense of disbelief of the witness. Lewin writes that the very story he is conveying is *inconceivable*, and it seems in an effort to try to *conceive* it himself, rather than delve further into contextual details – the setting, the girl’s name or who she was – he removes himself from the event, imagining himself as someone in a future generation, as if it is only through dissociation from the events he is witnessing that he may be able to attempt to understand. But even to them, he concedes, it will still appear *a product of our imagination*. Even in witnessing, it appears he doesn’t believe these acts himself. His testimony, interspersed with several precise and evocative details (“at half past two in the afternoon [...] They took her as far as 11 Pawia Street”) is remarkably like reportage; its distance and lack of emotive language is chilling: “she was executed without further ado”. The closest we get to any sense of emotionality or subjectivity are details that illustrate the utter inhumanity of the Nazis and the vulnerability of the victims: “They [...] let her walk a few steps in front and shot her several times from behind” and “she was arrested in her flat, not fully dressed,

wearing slippers”. However, what is even more interesting about this testimony is that it mainly describes moments that Lewin did not, himself, witness. We are not made aware of Lewin’s relationship to the events at all, and yet he is somehow omnipresent: within the girl’s flat, at the prison, in Pawia Street, and privy to the discussions of the officers. Lewin has become the omniscient judgment of the future, yet his own presence, his own ability to truly, wholly experience ‘the inconceivable’ has disintegrated. It is easier for Lewin to imagine another story that he didn’t witness, than to re-imagine his own, and yet at the same time he states that it is not “the product of our imagination [...] I’m not making this story up”. Lewin testifies to events he hasn’t seen, suggesting that the *truth*, for Lewin – what he has seen and experienced – lies outside what he is able to narrate.

Bernard-Donals states that “[t]he events that comprise the disaster, particularly traumatic events, remain outside of history, if by history we mean our understanding of events” (“History” 164). In situations of trauma, narrative will never be able to convey what the witness saw; this is only maintained in its integrity in traumatic memory, where it has not been integrated into mental constructs, and hence narrative. Traumatic memories remain in their inflexible and unvaried state precisely for the reason that they have not been fully experienced and are not accessible as memories from which meaning can be drawn. Unlike narrative memory, which is shaped into a story for a listener (or implied listener), traumatic memory, according to van der Kolk and van der Hart “has no social component; it is not addressed to anybody, the patient does not respond to anybody; it is a solitary activity” (163). As traumatic memory cannot be ‘told’, it must be witnessed, such as by an analyst or an interviewer who happens upon the trigger; this underpins the difficulty in accessing the *truth* of traumatic events and tailoring them into some kind of usable or meaningful history.^{xix}

The way in which the truth of a traumatic memory escapes translation into narrative is illustrated in an interview by Lucy Stanovick with the Holocaust survivor, Mary R, who works in St Louis’s Holocaust Museum.^{xx} Regarding Mary’s transport from the Lodz ghetto to Auschwitz:

Interviewer: You were there with your mother and your father?

Mary: Just my father. My mother died in the ghetto.

I: Of starvation?

M: [hesitation] She became sick. [Hesitation] And that combination, I guess...[silence]

I: Was she living with you?

M: Oh, of course, we were in that one little room together, but she had hepatitis and she had pneumonia, there weren’t enough medications, she was a fragile person.
[silence]

I: How was taking care of her?

M: Very difficult. I don’t even like to think about it. In all, eleven million civilian people were killed in the concentration camps and otherwise by Germans. Out of that were six million Jewish people, and out of that were a million and a half children. (qtd. in Bernard-Donals, “History” 153)

Bernard-Donals claims that Mary cannot fully recall the experiences of which she speaks because, as they were witnessed, they were not conceptualised as experiences. The silences and hesitations in this interview mark spaces in which the experience of her mother’s death cannot be narrated at all but which continue to haunt her (“History” 153).

Mary departs from what she saw, not only into silences, but also a codified language of medical illnesses and statistics, marking her dissociation from the event. It also reveals Mary's attempt to translate an 'irrational' event into a rational narrative. It is this gap between what the witness saw, and what the witness is able to say, that marks the effect of the trauma of history upon Mary; we are observing the damaging effect of the events in question upon the language which attempts to describe it. Although such a history cannot be narrated, Caruth claims it is in this gap that history is "preserved" ("Unclaimed" 190).

Bernard-Donals points out how problematic testimonies like these become for historians: "If a witness's participation in historical events – particularly traumatic events – is irrecoverable except through fragmented and troubled narratives that fail to contain them, then the connection between the events and the resulting testimony is more tenuous than we would like to think" ("Beyond Authenticity" 1311). So we are left with the irony that the characteristic which indicates the presence of some kind of untailored *truth* – the overwhelming presence of 'irrational', anti-narrative features such as omissions, repetitions, metonymy, slippage between languages, 'amnesia' and incoherence – is the very feature that makes these testimonies so problematic for historical translation and extrapolation and prohibits their inclusion in history.

Many Holocaust scholars have agreed with Caruth that it is within the *unsayability* – the impossibility of comprehending and narrating – of certain traumatic experiences that the truth of the event resides. This truth, because intangible, cannot be isolated and expressed, but only indicated to via the distance between what has been witnessed and what can be said; found within "the shrugged shoulders, the winces, the tears, and the silences that punctuate the oral testimonies" (Bernard-Donals, "History" 151). According to Bernard-Donals, testimony will never be able to produce knowledge of a state of affairs for an audience but

derives its authority from its ability to “indicate” what lies *beyond* the regularities of history and to move an audience to “see” an issue or an event that exceeds language’s ability to narrate it (“History” 149).^{xxi}

Drawing upon Freud’s notion of an ‘unconscious testimony’, Felman claims that it is not simply that the witness does not have the language to narrate the truth, but as the witness has failed to *experience* the event, the truth may not even be available to the person who bears witness to it. Nevertheless, the truth may be *accessed* via the testimony (as truths may be accessed via dreams, according to Freud), even though not narrated, or fully understood by its speaker: “one does not have to *possess*, or *own* the truth, in order to effectively *bear witness* to it”. She notes “that speech as such is unwittingly testimonial; and that the speaking subject constantly bears witness to a truth that nonetheless continues to escape him, a truth that is, essentially, *not available* to its own speaker” (“Education” 24). Felman later attributes much of the power of the poetry of Paul Celan to the fact that the works are testimonies to a knowledge they “do not possess” (42).^{xxii}

Sebald was a prolific reader of psychoanalytic thought, particularly Freud, and his construction of the narrative and structure of *Austerlitz* shows evidence of his concerns with highlighting the existence of a *higher truth* to certain events that have been obscured behind the event’s translation into a rational – that is, narrated – history. The narrator in *Austerlitz* functions as an invisible witness to Austerlitz’s occasional flashbacks, compiling his traumatic memories over the thirty years of their meetings. Through the narrator we hear moments in Austerlitz’s past – often events that had previously been repressed – in minute detail, with little or no subjective take on the event, a technique used to mimic the process of flashback and to comment upon the importance of patience, chance and attuned listening

skills in accessing these events that have not yet fully integrated themselves into a survivor's subjective consciousness.

Austerlitz recalls his flashback like a reporter, devoid of emotion. Although his arrival in Wales on the Kindertransport occurred over sixty-years earlier, and had been hidden from his conscious memory, Austerlitz can suddenly reproduce every detail: “[I]n the gloomy light of the waiting-room, I also saw two middle-aged people dressed in the style of the thirties, a woman in a light gabardine coat with a hat at an angle on her head, and a thin man beside her wearing a dark suit and a dog-collar”. He also recalls himself but from *outside* of himself: “I also saw the boy they came to meet. He was sitting by himself on a bench over to one side. His legs, in white knee-length socks, did not reach the floor, and but for the small rucksack he was holding on his lap I don't think I would have known him” (193). Austerlitz presents the event as it has remained, fixed like a photographic imprint, outside of his consciousness, *before* narrative. The effect is to produce a dreamlike – flashback-like – vividness that imbues the testimony with the pristine clarity of memory untainted by rational or subjective thought; to give the relayed experience a *heightened* reality.

In between flashbacks, Austerlitz's recollections revert to a testimony whose most distinguishing features are its disruptions – silences, stuttering, repetitions and failures to describe. Moments after Austerlitz's flashback to the moment of his arrival in Wales, he says:

I cannot give any precise description of the state of mind this realization induced; I felt something rending within me, and a sense of shame or sorrow, or perhaps something quite different, something inexpressible because we have no words for it, just as I had no words all those years ago when the two strangers came over to me speaking a language I did not understand. (194)

Austerlitz's testimony echoes both Lewin's ("Words are beyond us now") and Mary R.'s ("Very difficult. I don't even like to think about it"). And it is in the dissolution of his narrative, rather than in the narrative itself, that we sense the events that are outside the grasp of Austerlitz, and hence the reader, and which produce in the reader what Friedlander calls a feeling of the uncanny ("Final Solution"): a sense that the gruesome reality of the past has momentarily broken through the seams of history. It is another reminder from Sebald that we must not fall into the trap of thinking that history can be objectively narrated as a seamless flow of actual events.

Sebald's use of photography highlights the limitations of language, especially narrative, in truthfully representing history: fractionary glimpses that appear before us like triggered traumatic memories within the interrupted narrative. As Carolin Duttlinger writes, photography has "resonances of arrest and freezing, notions that make photography structurally comparable to the concept of trauma" (166). As with Austerlitz's narrative silences, the lacunae these images enforce in the text present significant meaning, a flashback whose weight we can feel, but whose exact meaning lies outside of our comprehension. Throughout the novel, the act of recording through photography, the development process, and subsequent viewing and reappraisal of images, is often referred to, reinforcing the ongoing processes of memory – especially traumatic memory, with its fixed, photographic nature – and its assistance and hindrance in the construction of history.

Austerlitz is rarely seen without his camera, presumably to document moments and sights that words simply cannot capture. After he arrives in the township of Terezín – location of the Theresienstadt ghetto where his mother had been encamped – and briefly wanders the empty streets, Sebald interposes the narrative with six photographs across five

pages, of closed doors and windows, barring entrance to the barracks, where one can only presume Agáta was imprisoned. The sentence which is interrupted midway by these haunting images is Austerlitz's equally ghostly sentiment:

What I found most uncanny of all, however, were the gates and doorways of Terezín, all of them, as I thought I sensed, obstructing access to a darkness never yet penetrated, a darkness in which I thought, said Austerlitz, there was no more movement at all apart from the whitewash peeling off the walls and the spiders spinning their threads, scuttling on crooked legs across floorboards, or hanging expectantly in their webs. (272)

By presenting the reader with physical documentation such as photographs – what Barthes calls “the certificate of presence” (87) – the reader is confronted with the indisputable reality of – and a tangible link to – the horrors of the camps. In many ways the locked doors signify the edge of reason and understanding: we, like Austerlitz, are forced to try to imagine the lost histories of people like Agáta who perished beyond the doors. The absence of narrative across the five pages of photographs reiterates that narrative can never convey this history, a reality we realise, after trying, that we can't in fact imagine, because it is a history we will never comprehend. The encounter with the raw and definite images of the barracks doors contrasts with the stylistic concerns and uncertainty that pervade the writing and reading of narrative. There are no words amongst this series of photographs because, faced with the incomprehensible thought of what happened beyond the doors, Sebald, like Austerlitz, the narrator, and now the reader, has been rendered speechless.

Chapter III – The Role of the Witness

The ‘witness’ occupies a paradoxical role in the establishment of historical truth. Within the judicial system, the eye-witness’s testimony is considered the highest form of evidence; on the other hand, in the construction of historical narrative, eyewitness testimony has been continually called into question and its ‘truthfulness’ doubted.

The ‘narrative’ of *Austerlitz* is based on witness testimony. As the reader, we ‘see’ little for ourselves; we only hear about events from witnesses. Sebald was fascinated by the witness’s role in history, the relationship between testimony and ‘truth’ and the problems created by testimony for those trying to formulate some kind of historical understanding. Sebald once said that he always carried a camera with him (as does his character, Austerlitz), because of the need to document what he was witnessing; an allusion to the difficulty in establishing ‘truth’, even for the witness himself. After witnessing an unusual event, he claims, “sometimes one asks oneself later on whether one’s made it up or not. And it’s not always quite clear” (Cuomo 3).

There seems to be little disagreement between historians and other scholars regarding the gap between transcribed history and eye-witness memory. “For all of us there is a twilight zone between history and memory” (*Memory* vii), Friedlander writes, quoting Eric Hobsbawm. As has been shown, Austerlitz’s own widening ‘twilight zone’ – the discrepancy between recorded history and a more personalised ‘what the witness saw’ account – is the fundamental factor that triggers Austerlitz’s first major breakdown. His realisation of the shortcomings of official versions of history bring us back to the words of Hilary, his inspirational secondary school history teacher, who claims that our concern with history “is a concern with pre-formed images already imprinted on our brains, images at which we keep staring while the truth lies elsewhere, away from it all, somewhere as yet undiscovered” (101).

Finding that *elsewhere* is Austerlitz's goal. And the more he encounters processed data and meaningless lists, the more we, the reader, become aware of the ghostliness of history – its emptiness and lack of penetration of the lived lives of the past – and the more we crave to hear the voices of those who were actually there.

Holocaust survivors such as Elie Wiesel assert that personal testimony is the only relevant history: “The truth of Auschwitz remains hidden in its ashes. Only those whom lived it in their flesh and in their minds can possibly transform their experiences into knowledge. Others, despite their best intentions, can never do so” (166). Lanzmann, when making *Shoah*, was led by a similar belief. His film is made up almost entirely of personal testimonies, and in interviews and articles he regularly condemns the use of archival footage, direct representations and other forms of conventional historiography (in depictions of the Holocaust) because of their generalising, normalising, idealising proclivities (LaCapra, “Shoah” 240). The most obscene crime of historians, according to Lanzmann, is their goal to understand the Holocaust (“Obscenity”) by attempting conclusion, closure, totality. In the making of his film, Lanzmann adopted “the rule of Auschwitz” from Primo Levi's Holocaust testimony, that “Here there is no why” (qtd. in LaCapra, “Shoah” 237).^{xxiii} What resulted was a film almost entirely made up of testimonies that sit in stark contrast to traditional historical accounts since Lanzmann's witnesses, almost forty years after the event, still do not understand the events they lived through. There is no closure for them; they still don't know ‘why’. This inability of the witness to understand is depicted powerfully in *Austerlitz* by Věra's testimony about Agáta's behaviour during the period immediately before Austerlitz's departure and her own deportation: “I can see her now pacing up and down this room, said Věra, I can see her striking her forehead with the flat of her hand, and crying out, chanting the syllables one by one: I do not un der stand it! I do not un der stand it! I shall ne ver un der stand it!!” (243-4).

Sebald's attitude towards historical understanding, and his preference for turning his attention to the witnesses in history, has much in common with Lanzmann's. This can be seen through his exclusive use of witnesses as characters in his novels; his professed abhorrence of historical representations; and his denigrating depictions of the institutions of knowledge (universities, libraries etc). Sebald, however, does occasionally introduce historical archival sources – documents, photographs, film – into his works, but whenever he does, he always shrouds their meanings in ambiguity, reminding us that *the truth lies elsewhere*. The film made at Theresienstadt, we are told, was made for propaganda purposes and depicts nothing of the atrocious reality of the ghetto; both the film and the photos Věra produces contain a figure that may or may not be Agáta; and, when Austerlitz does look at photos to 'bring them to life', we are aware he is doing it in an imaginative way.

Holocaust scholars have continually highlighted the limitations of historical representations of the Holocaust, many of them agreeing with Wiesel that the *truth* resides only amongst those who were there. However, even for those who were there, accessing and expressing this *truth*, is not always possible, as has been previously discussed. Friedlander refers to survivor memories that remain essentially unrepresentable as “deep memory”, illustrating his concept with the last frame of Spiegelman's *Maus*, where the dying father addresses his son Artie with the name Richieu, Artie's brother who died in the Holocaust before Artie was born (“Trauma” 41). Regarding this frame, James Young says, “[t]he still apparently unassimilated trauma of his first son's death remains inarticulable – and thereby deep – and so is represented here only indirectly as a kind of manifest behaviour” (277).

The virtual impossibility of accessing “deep memories”, processing and translating them into any kind of meaningful and objective narrative has lead Laub to claim that the Holocaust is “an event with no witnesses” (“Event” 80). Laub claims that most actual or potential witnesses

failed, one-by-one to take up their position as witnesses, and in addition to this, the Nazis tried to exterminate the physical witnesses of their crime. But he also says that those on the inside were so affected by the power of the event that they were unable to remain sufficiently detached as fully lucid, unaffected witnesses:

[I]t was not only the reality of the situation and the lack of responsiveness of bystanders or the world that accounts for the fact that history was taking place with no witness; it was also the very circumstance of *being inside the event* that made unthinkable the very notion that a witness could exist, that is, someone who could step outside of the coercively totalitarian and dehumanising frame of reference in which the event was taking place, and provide an independent frame of reference through which the event could be observed. (81)

Laub's thesis rests on the understanding of what it is to be a witness; that "[a] witness is a witness to the truth of what happens during an event" (80), and as that *truth* has been contaminated by trauma for those who were present, these individuals are unable to fully occupy their role as witnesses. What's more, witnesses need to be witnessed: "Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude" (Laub, "Bearing Witness" 70-1). Hence, if someone who was there is unable to testify – cannot, like Art Spiegelman's father, gain entry and give voice to the deep memories – then they have failed to bear witness.

The 'problem' of the witness in relation to Holocaust history is illustrated in *Austerlitz*. Austerlitz, in his search for the *truth* that *lies elsewhere*, is constantly confronted by the absence, or silence, of witnesses. His family were exterminated; his foster parents – Emyr and Gwendolyn Elias – refuse to bear witness; and at Terezín he is greeted by empty streets, mute 'survivor'

objects, the “so-called” Ghetto Museum – fronted by a taciturn woman, and filled with historical archives – and bolted barracks’ doors. The only person who can bear witness for Austerlitz is Věra. But even Věra cannot fully testify to what happened to Austerlitz’s parents; she recalls that when she tried to track down Austerlitz’s father, her efforts were stymied by the “army of censors causing havoc in the postal services” (288). What’s more, when Věra does attempt to testify, we are often listening to deadening silences, and the flawed narrative of a woman who has failed to come to terms with the events she has lived through; who is unable to reflect upon a complete picture of her past. Austerlitz says of Věra:

She had indeed gone into the teaching profession and did what was necessary to maintain herself, but almost all her feelings had been extinguished, and she had not truly breathed since that time. Only in the books written in earlier times did she sometimes think she found some faint idea of what it might be like to be alive. Such remarks of Věra’s were often followed by a long silence, said Austerlitz, as if neither of us knew what to say, and the hours passed by almost imperceptibly in the darkened flat in the Šporkova. (288-9)

Austerlitz presents the Holocaust as an event that, as a result of exterminations, censorship, silence and trauma, can present no true witnesses. Hence the history of the Holocaust must be a history that contains silences, deletions and omissions. As LaCapra says of *Shoah*, the film “bears witness to the breakdown and impossibility of witnessing” (“Shoah” 247), and, according to Felman: “To understand *Shoah* is not to *know* the Holocaust, but to gain new insights into what *not knowing* means, to grasp the ways in which *erasure* is itself part of the functioning of our *history*” (“Return” 253).

In order, however, for the erasures, silences and omissions, to function as a part of history, they must be recorded and imbedded in the narrative. As Young writes: “Can the silences of a witness be part of the essential historical truth of the events here? They can if historians come to hear these silences and to grasp their role as part of the empirical data they are collecting” (280-1). Hence it is not merely that witnesses require witnesses in order to record the silences; the integrity of historical narrative requires that witnesses be witnessed.

The silences of the witnesses – the deep memories, the lack of comprehension – are a record of the events that refuse to be relegated to the past; they are the events that are being continually re-lived in the present by the survivor and, hence, defy closure. This ongoing trauma experienced by the survivors, this inability to comprehend what has been witnessed, is an integral part of the continuing history of the Holocaust. Hence, Lanzmann states that “[t]he worst crime, simultaneously moral and artistic, that can be committed when it is a question of realizing a work dedicated to the Holocaust is to consider the latter as *past*. It is either legend or present” (qtd. in LaCapra, “Shoah” 240). That is why, when editing his film, Lanzmann excluded accounts from witnesses who simply *described* the past, and only included those who would *re-live* the past: those who fell into long silences, broke down, or begged not to be made to continue (LaCapra, “Shoah” 258-9). Lanzmann elaborates: “The film is not made with memories; I knew that immediately. Memory horrifies me. Memory is weak. The film is the abolition of all distance between the past and the present; I relived this history in the present” (qtd. in LaCapra, “Shoah” 261).

The theme of historical timelessness – the past existing simultaneously in the present – has been touched upon already. But Sebald steps the present in the past, not just to create the unsettling effect of uncanniness, but also to remind us that, for those traumatised by historical events, the past *is* still present; the effects of these events is ongoing and cannot be confined to a

chapter in history. He conveys this through references to past and present time occurring simultaneously, the dead being among the living and existing outside of time, and also in the way characters seem eternally stuck in the past. Austerlitz continually re-lives moments from his past, and Věra “could not bear to alter anything” in her apartment, leaving it exactly as it had been almost sixty years earlier (216). When Austerlitz tells the narrator of Věra’s past, he says “[a]nd in this way the years had raced by, seeming in retrospect like a single leaden day” (288). And in one of his many musings on time, Austerlitz says: “It does not seem to me [...] that we understand the laws governing the return of the past, but feel more and more as if time did not exist at all, only various spaces interlocking according to the rules of a higher form of stereometry, between which the living and the dead can move back and forth as they like[...].” (261).

Felman claims that the challenge for the viewer of *Shoah* is “not the finite task of making sense out of the Holocaust, but the infinite task of encountering *Shoah*” (“Return” 268). We must do this, she says, by becoming “contemporaneous” with the experience of the testimonial reenactments, rather than relegating the events to a past, and therefore distanced, history. This corroborates Lanzmann’s explanation that he was not making an “historical film”, but rather that he was making it in the present with “traces of traces” (qtd. in LaCapra, “Shoah” 239), and that his imperative was to “transmit” the unspeakable suffering from the witness to the viewer. Although Felman never uses the word “transmit”, she nonetheless argues that by becoming secondhand witnesses – witnesses to the witnesses – we can “become contemporaneous with the shock, with the displacement, with the disorientation process that is triggered by such testimonial reenactment”. In the words of one of Lanzmann’s interviewers: “Something that had not been lived must nonetheless be relived” (qtd. in LaCapra, “Shoah” 255).

Landsberg has written extensively about the process of ‘transmitting’ memories from a witness to a secondhand witness, through the notion of “prosthetic memory” – “memories that

circulate publicly, are not organically based, but are nevertheless experienced with ones own body and hence become one of the body's archive of experience" (66). Prosthetic memories can result from sharing space with a witness or survivor objects, and from being encouraged to personally identify with the referenced events. Landsberg draws on Nietzsche's idea that "if something is to stay in the memory it must be burned in", claiming that there are some varieties of 'knowledge' that cannot be passed on via cognitive means, but must be transmitted through these more sensory channels; that is, they must be transmitted by an experience.

Landsberg claims that the New York Holocaust Museum is an example of a space in which sensual knowledge can be transmitted, and which she claims is "part of a larger trend in American mass culture towards the experiential as a mode of knowledge" (74). On arrival at the museum, visitors are given a name tag to wear, and biographical details, of a person who was of the same gender and age as the visitor during the Holocaust. The museum comprises four levels – visitors are taken to the top and must work their way down – tracing a chronological journey from the beginnings of Nazi rule, through the war, to eventual liberation and post-war years. The building is designed in such a way that the visitor must go through the entire journey, walking along cobblestone steps which have been brought from the Warsaw ghetto, and surrounded by objects from the ghetto as well as newsreel footage. In effect, the visitor is asked to *become* a 'witness' to the event.

For Landsberg, representing the Holocaust is about making the Holocaust concrete and thinkable. She quotes Martin Smith, the director of the museum's permanent exhibition, that "[s]ix million deaths can become a statistic, but one person's death is a personal tragedy, a keenly felt tragedy" (77). It is this 'feeling' or imagining of the tragedy – this transmission, via an empathetic association from witness to secondhand witness – that she claims can install in us

‘symptoms’ or prosthetic memories through which we didn’t actually live, but with which we can have a kind of experiential relationship (82).

Landsberg’s theory opens the doors for other modes of conveying non-cognitive knowledge (which function by working on the viewer’s/reader’s imagination and based in an empathetic response) to be recognised for their contribution to historical understanding. Some forms of fiction could certainly be considered in such a role.

For example, *Austerlitz*, as a narrative, functions for the reader in many ways as the Holocaust Museum does for the visitor. Both create a non-negotiable ‘factual’ space (that is, they incorporate historically substantiated events and elements, such as actual objects or photos of places), from within which an imaginary response may take place. Just as visitors to the Holocaust Museum are forced to bear witness to survivor objects, and yet are provided little narrative in which to place these objects (prompting them to *imagine* a lived relationship with them), both *Austerlitz*, and the reader/witness of *Austerlitz*/Austerlitz are taken to Terezín, the Ghetto Museum and other sites of atrocities, and are provided with no historical representations, but instead are left to ponder what may or may not have taken place at these locations. Our role is not dissimilar to Austerlitz’s, who also arrives at these places as a secondhand witness, unable to ever really *know* what took place. Nevertheless it is by *imagining* the inmates “still living crammed into those buildings and basements and attics” (281) that he is able to comprehend the incomprehensible: “I understood it all now, yet I did not understand it, for every detail that was revealed to me as I went through the museum from room to room and back again, ignorant as I feared I had been through my own fault, far exceeded my comprehension” (279).

James Freed, the architect of the Holocaust Museum, explains why the Museum encourages the visitor to imagine their own history in such a place (or create prosthetic memories, as Landsberg would call it): “[M]emory is a charlatan [...] Everybody I talked to has

reconstructed a different memory of the event. I as the architect reconstruct yet another memory that never was, but it can act as a resonator for the memories of others” (qtd. in Landsberg 83). He constructs *memory that never was*: a reference to the subjective, malleable aspect of recollection, and highlighting the potential interchangeability between fiction and memory when dealing with non-objective, or experiential, ‘truth’. Landsberg explains Freed’s intention: “His polemic statement is not intended to justify or sanction revisionism, but rather to underscore the negotiation between an individual’s own archive of images and experiences and the archive presented at the museum”. This statement could easily be applied to the kind of ‘documentary’ fiction Sebald writes, where unnegotiable sites, objects and people, which exist containing silences and spaces, can be filled by the secondhand witness’s own negotiable thought.

However, there is one element of the experience of the Holocaust Museum which is fundamentally different to the experience of viewing/reading works such as *Shoah* and *Austerlitz*. The visitors to the Holocaust Museum are not only asked to witness the witnesses of the past, but by being given a name tag and survivor identity, they are asked to *become* the witness, leaving open the possibility that they may feel as if they *understand*. This is perhaps why Philip Gourevitch responds with repulsion to the museum, calling it a “theme park” and saying: “I felt like a trespasser, someone engaged in an unwholesome experience, the way I might feel if I were asked to lie in someone else’s coffin” (61).

Landsberg’s thesis poses perhaps the most extreme version of transmission, where the museum visitor is asked to imagine actually *being* a witness. This differs from the role of the secondhand witness in both *Shoah* and *Austerlitz*, where it is integral to the role of (secondhand) witnessing that the viewer or reader merely witnesses – stands *outside* of – the witness.

There are two important reasons for maintaining this subject position, of bearing witness to the witness. Firstly, it creates a situation where the viewer/reader remains impotent to act;

what is transmitted from the witness who testifies is not simply the suffering, but a feeling of hopelessness. This is well illustrated in *Austerlitz*, by the chain of silenced, paralysed or incapable witnesses: Agáta witnesses the effects of the Nazi regime (“I do not understand it! I do not understand it! I shall never understand it!”), and is witnessed by the shattered Věra, who testifies to the incomprehending Austerlitz, who testifies to the almost invisible narrator, who testifies to us, the reader. The sense of hopelessness is passed, or transmitted, along the chain, forming an integral part of the reading (witnessing) experience. The secondhand witness is awed by the enormity of what they are hearing, but as they are only *listening* to – rather than becoming – the witness, they are incapable of acting.

The other important role of the secondhand witness is to enable and record the witness’s testimony, and place it within a communicable format. As has been discussed, the truth of the witness’s testimony may often be contained and conveyed not in what they say so much as what they are unable to say. As Felman notes, the witness themselves may not be in possession of the truth to which they bear witness, so a secondhand witness is required to bear witness to their testimony. For example, in the interview with Mary R (relayed in chapter two), the most telling parts of Mary’s testimony are the moments where testimony falls apart: silences, hesitations, the official language of statistics. However these interruptions to the narrative – where Mary confronts the truth but cannot understand it or voice it – the gaps where history is *preserved* can only be captured or witnessed by a secondhand witness. In this way, as Felman claims, the historian is simply a secondhand (or “second-degree”) witness: “[They are] neither the last word of knowledge nor the ultimate authority on history, but rather, one more topographical and cognitive position of *yet another witness*” (“Era” 112).

The secondhand witness can provide a framing device for the witness's broken narrative. They create a 'narrative' out of what would otherwise be fragments, even though it is a narrative that overtly negates the obligation of traditional narrative to provide resolution and meaning.

Friedlander argues that the incompatibility of "deep memory" with historical narrative constitutes one of the central challenges to Holocaust historiography, and that historical understanding of this time remains altogether impossible without taking into account the voices of the victims as well: "For it is their voices that reveal what was known and what *could* be known" (*Nazi 2*). He proposes an historiography of testimonies, whose narrative skein is disrupted by the historian's own, self-conscious voice, the introduction of what he calls "commentary" into the narrative (53).

Friedlander's suggestion – to weave witness testimonies into historical narrative – is effectively what both Lanzmann and Sebald have done. However, where Friedlander suggests that "the voice of the commentator must be clearly heard" in order to "introduce alternative interpretations, question any partial conclusion, withstand the need for closure" (*Memory* 132), both Lanzmann and Sebald present narrators who are defined by their silence and whose roles exist purely as listeners and recorders. Felman writes of Lanzmann's role as a narrator in *Shoah*:

Lanzmann speaks as an interviewer and as inquirer, but as a narrator, he keeps silent. The narrator lets the narrative be carried on by others – by the live voices of the various witnesses he interviews, whose stories must be able to *speak for themselves*, if they are to testify, that is, to perform their unique and irreplaceable firsthand witness. It is only in this way, by the abstinence of the narrator, that the film can in fact be a narrative of testimony, a narrative of that, precisely, which can neither be reported, nor narrated, by another. The narrative is thus essentially a narrative of silence, the story of the

filmmaker's *listening*, the narrator is the teller of the film only insofar as he is the bearer of the film's silence. ("Era" 117)

The narrator of Austerlitz functions in much the same way. We are aware of his presence mainly as a listener, as someone who holds Austerlitz's fragments together in a narrative frame. His role as a subjective persona is so limited that we never hear his name, nor the details of his life that take him to the places in which we find him. The novel begins: "In the second half of the 1960s I travelled repeatedly from England to Belgium, partly for study purposes, partly for other reasons which were never entirely clear to me" (1). His identity and past is never revealed; he simply functions as Austerlitz's witness. Despite this role, the narrator refrains from passing judgment upon Austerlitz, and in the rare occasions when he does comment, it is not so much to provide an opinion or theory, but rather to record Austerlitz's narrative interruptions, simply showing us the things we cannot see (as the camera does in *Shoah*), often telling us that Austerlitz has fallen silent or behaved in some other indicative fashion. The narrator states:

It took us nearly an hour to travel a distance of not much more than three miles to Tower Bridge by way of Greek Street, Evelyn Street, Lower Road and Jamaica Road. Austerlitz leaned back with his arms round his rucksack, staring ahead in silence. Perhaps he had closed his eyes, I thought, but I did not venture to glance sideways at him. Only at Liverpool Street station, where he waited with me in McDonald's until my train left, and after a casual remark about the glaring light which, so he said, allowed not even a hint of a shadow and perpetuated the momentary terror of a lightning flash – only at Liverpool Street did he resume his story. (159)

It is through this framework that we – the reader – become involved in the testimony: as listeners and of listeners to the listeners. Sebald’s style of narrative voice – which he clearly borrows from Thomas Bernhard – builds testimonies upon testimonies; he refers to this as a “periscopic point of view through the layers of hearsay” (Baker R2). The narrator tells us: “From time to time, so Věra recollected, said Austerlitz, Maximilian would tell the tale [...]” (237), and all at once we feel these numerous strata of testimonies and listeners – ourselves included – slamming up against each other, as if the testimonies were all occurring simultaneously. Sitting, as we are, at the head of the chain, and in search of the *truth* of the events, we find ourselves telescoping through what we come to realise are *endless* “layers of hearsay” – or witnessing – in which we have now become involved. As Sara Horowitz writes in reference to Spiegelman and Lanzmann, in an argument that could equally be applied to Sebald, they “structure their works so that the reader or viewer becomes not so much a listener to a story, a memory, but a witness to ongoing acts of remembering, of reliving” (7).

Felman’s article “Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching” is a discussion of what can transpire for the viewer/reader, during and after the process of secondhand witnessing. Felman tells of having devised and conducted a university course entitled “Literature and Testimony”, in which, in the latter part of the course, she showed two video testimonies of Holocaust survivors, from the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale. During the viewing, some of the students were crying; afterwards the class left in silence. Felman describes the reaction of her class to the testimonies, to their experience of witnessing, as “*something akin to a loss of language*” and then, later, “a deep need to talk about it” despite the feeling that “language was somehow incommensurate with it” (52). Felman describes what happened then as a “crisis” or “trauma” – the class spiraled out of control, students started ringing her at odd hours, needing to discuss and trying to understand what they had witnessed.

The *trauma* experienced by the students, however, did not stem from an identification with the witness, but from their distinct role as (secondhand) witnesses, and from the feelings of hopelessness that were transmitted to them. Some mentioned that they felt that, unlike the survivor they witnessed, if they'd been in the camps, they're sure they wouldn't have survived; others stated that they felt that after witnessing, they “*did not count*”. Felman, in response to the crisis, asked students to write *their* testimony, of witnessing the witnessing, to work through the trauma they had experienced in witnessing, to give themselves a “*chance to count*” (54).

This crisis of (secondhand) witnessing – the transmission of suffering – is illustrated by Austerlitz's reactions to visiting both Terezín and the museum of veterinary medicine: “I felt drops of perspiration break out on my forehead and a constriction in my chest” (282), and “I had the first of several fainting fits I was to suffer, causing temporary but complete loss of memory, a condition described in psychiatric textbooks, as far as I am aware, Austerlitz added, as hysterical epilepsy” (374).

Felman's experience with her class illustrates the power of transmissible elements (such as suffering, feelings of hopelessness) of testimony upon the empathetic secondhand witness. It also shows how the very *act* of witnessing a witness has a significant effect upon the reader/viewer, implicating them in the receipt and transmission of history. As we listen to *Austerlitz's* narrator's testimony (of Austerlitz's testimony), we are thrown into a similar situation. Like the narrator (and Austerlitz at various times), we are silenced in our role of witnessing. In our position as silent listeners, we bear witness to the “deep memories” – the inexpressible truths – of the various witnesses. We witness, not a totalised, harmonised historical representation, but rather a history of fragments, of hearsay, of failed attempts to understand. We also learn, through its transmission from the witnesses, that the ‘past’ is by no means *past*; it is ongoing. And we, the

secondhand witnesses, stand helpless to act, as we acknowledge its existence in the present for those who were there.

Conclusion

Of all the digressive anecdotes that fill the pages of *Austerlitz*, the one that seems the most indicative of Sebald's attitude to the historical record is his 18-page discussion near the end of the novel of the Parisian Bibliothèque Nationale. By shifting his focus to Paris, Sebald reminds us that the disregard for the human elements of our past is not confined to Germany.

Austerlitz tells us that a visitor to the Grande Bibliothèque would have to travel through “a desolate no-man's-land in one of those robot driven Métro trains steered by a ghostly voice” to reach this “hideous, outsize building, the monumental dimensions of which were evidently inspired by the late President's wish to perpetuate his memory”. According to Austerlitz, the library is both in “its outer appearance and inner constitution unwelcoming if not inimical to human beings, and runs counter, on principle, one might say, to the requirements of any true reader” (386). The library boasts of being “the treasure-house of our entire literary heritage”, yet for Austerlitz it consists “entirely of obstructions” and proves “useless” as a resource for investigating war-time disappearances (393). He realises that his true place of work should have been not amongst official archives that purport to tell the truth, but rather in “the little fortress of Terezín” where his mother died (395).

In the library, Austerlitz meets an old acquaintance, Henri Lemoine, and they discuss “the dissolution, in line with the inexorable spread of processed data, of our capacity to remember, and about the collapse, *l'effondrement*, as Lemoine put it, of the Bibliothèque Nationale which is already underway”. Lemoine tells Austerlitz that “[t]he new library building, which in both its entire layout and its near-ludicrous internal regulation seeks to exclude the reader as a potential enemy, might be described, so Lemoine thought, said Austerlitz, as the official

manifestation of the increasingly importunate urge to break with everything which still has some living connection to the past” (398). These ruminations are little more than an echo of the thoughts of Austerlitz that have run through the book, but Lemoine then reveals to Austerlitz the extent of the insidious nature of the building in terms of the history of the library site. He tells Austerlitz that up until the end of the war there had been, where the library now stood, a warehouse for sorting the loot taken from the homes of all the Jews in Paris. Forty-thousand apartments were cleared in an operation that took the Nazis months, and which required the services of fifteen-hundred removalists and over five-hundred art historians and restorers working fourteen-hour days. In addition to those who took part, Lemoine reminds us that financial and fiscal authorities, residents’ and property registries, banks and insurance agencies, police, transport firms, landlords and caretakers, all must have been aware of what was going on, and that most of the assets seized “remain in the hands of the city and the state to this day” (401-2). The ghastly history hidden within and beneath the library are made, for Austerlitz and the reader, so much worse by the fact that Austerlitz had come to the library in search of information on his father, a Jew, who disappeared from Paris during the later years of the war.

The library, in its design, function and site history, is one of the most poignant metaphors in the novel; rather than the location of rigorous historical investigation, it becomes a monument to the victory of ego and political power over integrity and truth, entirely undermining the library’s professed role as a keeper and purveyor of historical knowledge: “The most valuable items, of course, were not sent off wholesale to the bombed cities, and no one will now admit to knowing where they went, for the fact is that the whole affair is buried in the most literal sense beneath the foundations of our pharaonic President’s Grande Bibliothèque, said Lemoine” (403).

Mitterand's Bibliothèque Nationale and the post-war reconstruction of Germany cities represent the most concrete step in burying the human atrocities of the past by a callous officialdom and a startlingly compliant public. In an article published posthumously in *The New Yorker* in 2001, Sebald wrote about the unusual effect that the bombing of German cities had upon the collective memory of the German people; that after the air raids ended, the rubble was cleared and reconstruction began with extraordinary efficiency and speed, and a protective amnesia settled in. He wrote that it was as if "the images of this horrifying chapter of our history have never really crossed the threshold of the national consciousness" (qtd. in Dean 125).

Scrutinising historical narrative in terms of human psychology – what the human mind can bear to see and know – is at the heart of Sebald's writing. That no one could look at events such as the Holocaust *without losing their sanity* is both Sebald's dilemma and preoccupation when wrestling with historical narrative possibilities. His topics are those that, in the words of Todd Samuel Presner, "resist traditional modes of spectatorship and witnessing" (347); in the face of this, Sebald equips himself with an arsenal of modernist narrative techniques in order to "interrogate what history is and can be" (357).

The limits of representation have been discussed and debated in depth by a plethora of post-modernist writers and Holocaust scholars. Sebald, though, uses fictional devices to investigate beyond the theoretical and illustrate what *limits to representation* actually means for an individual trying to come to terms with, or testify about, the past. Presner points out that when *Austerlitz's* narrator sees an iron hook at Breendock upon which, he later imagines, Jean Améry was hoisted and tortured, it reminds him of the iron hook hanging from the ceiling of the butcher's shop in his hometown. Presner comments: "This is not a flippant association but an acknowledgment of the limits of both knowability and narrative strategy..." (351). In other words, we cannot hope to understand the kinds of tortures that might have taken place at a site

like Breendock; an individual only has their own personal catalogue of experience for which they can refer for experiential understanding. For someone never exposed to atrocities on the magnitude as those known in war, an experience of torture can never be made fathomable, especially through narrative.

The way Sebald uses Améry's description of torture is typical of the way he integrates all archives into his narrative: they are never presented as a means for obtaining historical understanding but, more often, as a way to highlight our ambiguity and confusion about past events. McCulloh writes: "In Sebald, documentary is used, paradoxically, to evoke that which cannot be documented" (9). Sebald does this, most overtly through the use of photography: a mode of documentation which is prized for its function as evidence, since it supposedly captures a moment as it actually happens. But for Sebald, photographs could, and did, lie. He grew up in a country that for twelve years had been exposed to Nazi-generated photographs masquerading as historical truth. His attitude towards photographic 'evidence' is unambiguous, and clearly voiced in *The Emigrants*, through the character Uncle Leo, who determines that a photograph published by a Nazi newspaper of an evening book-burning was a forgery: "And just as that document was a fake, said Uncle, as if his discovery were the one vital proof, so too everything else [about the Nazi regime] has been fake, from the very start" (*Emigrants* 183-4).

When asked about the use of the book-burning photograph in *The Emigrants*, Sebald explained to Lubow:

I had that picture [and] thought very consciously that this is the place to make a declaration. It acts as a paradigm for the whole enterprise. The process of making a photographic image, which purports to be the real thing and isn't anything like, has

transformed our self-perception, our perception of each other, our notion of what is beautiful, our notion of what will last and what won't. ("Preoccupied" 1)

In Sebald's writing, photographic documentation becomes, according to Mark Anderson, "a kind of punctuation that subtly irritates and challenges our notion of what is real, what is fictional". Photographs – just like other pieces of so-called factual evidence – are not presented as a means to help us understand, but to outline the difficulty in ever understanding. In that respect, they must not be ignored or written off simply as propaganda, as they still hold an important place in historical documentation: they testify to an obscured past. Anderson writes: "[I]n a country thoroughly decimated by war, where the past was ruthlessly denied, forgotten or covered over, the surviving remnants of history provide the only possible means of access to this past" (109).

Photographs, and other forms of archival documentation become important not so much for what they tell us of events, but for what they tell us about the representation of events. Barthes referred to the photograph as "*le constat d'une mort*" – in Anderson's words, "a kind of death warrant stipulating what has died and cannot be recovered" (111). But the photograph does not simply signify the death of the moment as it passes from present to past, to where it exists no more; it is also the death of the possibility of understanding that moment. All that remains is a representation, testifying to the occurrence of a moment that could not be fully captured and understood. In reference to the *Theresienstadt* film – undoubtedly the most striking example of the impossibility of representing an event through photographic or cinematic representation – Anderson writes: "This is in a sense the dilemma posed by all the 'documents' in Sebald's texts, which point not so much to the reality of their representations as to the limitations of the human subjects looking at them across an unbridgeable temporal divide" (111).

It is not just archival documentation, however, that is unable to reveal the truth of the past; individuals – even individuals who were there – are confronted with a similar dilemma. Freud’s observations after witnessing the traumatic neuroses of soldiers from the First World War precipitated his most influential works on trauma, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and “The Uncanny”; they also, unwittingly, attested to a vital link that up until then (and not until sometime after Freud’s seminal works had been published) had not been made: the connection between memory – and hence psychoanalytic theory in general – and the recording of history. J.J. Long and Anne Whitehead write: “The notion of the uncanny provided Freud with a way of thinking through the First World War, but it has proved an equally useful concept for thinking about the post-1945 period” (7-8). The argument could easily be extended to all historical events in general.

Aspects of psychoanalytic theory are now regularly considered by scholars whose main form of research is witness testimony in terms of the effect of memory and trauma upon the construction of narrative. It is clear that each time a narrative is formulated, there are not only conscious political forces at play, contaminating the objective translation of event into narrative,^{xxiv} but there are equally powerful unconscious psychological forces acting upon a narrator, determining what it is possible to have understood from a witnessed event and what it is possible to say.

The outcome of these findings has led many historians to question the ability of witness testimony to function as historical narrative; other scholars suggest that testimony must be valued only for its emotive power rather than its historical insight (Novick 275). Regardless of the degree that trauma is seen to impair a witness’s testimony, if the destructive power of an event is such that those who were there struggle to narrate it, then the effectiveness of any narrative to represent the event must be further examined.

What we see in *Austerlitz*, however, is that despite the limitations of testimonies to provide us with a clear understanding of an event, they can still function as representations of sorts: representations of the inability to represent. The historical ‘meaning’ of a testimony may not be easily deducible; but like photographs and other archival documents, they nevertheless exist as fragments, or remnants, of what has survived from an event. Sebald’s testimonies function not as portals of knowledge but more as artifacts; he places them alongside objects that have survived from the ghettos and found photographs that allude to the existence of a person, place or event that has been lost, erased or forgotten. For Sebald, testimonies are the ‘ruins’ of the war and, like so many of his rubble-strewn locations (or even his built-over sites such as the Bibliothèque Nationale) they are sites in the present for confronting ghosts of the past. As Presner writes: “In *Austerlitz*, through the interactions between the narrator and the protagonist, Sebald stages the reality of an encounter with the remains of the Holocaust in the layered spaces of the present” (345).

This impossibility of witnessing or ‘seeing’ history is largely represented, in *Austerlitz*, by a darkness that sweeps across his landscapes, and a twilight that dims his rooms; a blackness in which only owls and philosophers can penetrate. Throughout the novel, whenever the darkness momentarily lifts, we are thrown into worlds clouded by fakery, silence and erasure. After a childhood where Austerlitz believes himself to be Daffyd Elias, everywhere Austerlitz turns he is confronted by false ‘truths’, reconstructed buildings, and propaganda. Even the photographs Sebald finally obtains from his childhood are shrouded in un-reality: snapshots from the theatre, and himself in fancy dress.

In many ways then, it is understandable that Sebald chooses fiction as a frame for exhibiting his remnants of war. Fiction cannot be counterfeit as it never makes claims upon objective truth; fiction allows imaginary spaces; fiction is not obligated to provide conclusions.

What's more, according to Sebald: "The moral backbone of literature is about that whole question of memory" (Jaggi, "Last Word" 4): he believes that the act of writing itself is an attempt at retrieval of that which is lost or rapidly passing.

Attempting to rescue certain Jewish lives from oblivion is an objective in Sebald's work; in particular, it was the inadequate representations by German historians that compelled him "to write about these lives in a different sort of way" (Romer). He speaks of the "temptation to work with very fragmentary pieces of evidence, to fill in the gaps and blank spaces and create out of this a meaning which is greater than that which you can prove". Stephen Romer claims that "this is why he resolutely calls his texts prose fiction. His books are actually a complex hybrid of fact and fiction, in which, as Sebald explains, "there has to be something like veracity, something that is 'made' as honestly and as truthfully as possible, even if it employs devious means".

Wood writes that for Sebald, "facts are indecipherable, and therefore tragic". Even though Sebald's fictions are made up from "the cinders of the real world", he questions apparent 'facts' by the way he places them within his fictions. Wood argues:

[T]hese facts seem never to have belonged to the actual world, and seem only to have found their proper life within Sebald's prose. This, of course, is the movement of any powerful fiction, however realistic, this is the definition of fictionmaking: the real world gains a harsher, stronger life within a fiction because it receives a concentrated patterning that actual life does not exert. It is not that facts merely seem fictive in Sebald's work; it is that they actually become fictive, even though they remain true and real. ("Right Thread" 39)

The main way Sebald queries the facts he has magpie-picked from the world is by presenting all the information in his works within layers of hearsay, thus calling everything into question. The narrator's primary job in *Austerlitz*, as is the reader's, is to listen and bear witness; but by bearing witness, we are made aware that his testimony – and the testimonies he testifies to – are fraught with problems. In this way, Sebald draws further attention to the ambiguities surrounding the events of which he's reporting. He argues:

[This] whole process of narrating something which has a kind of reassuring quality to it is called into question. That uncertainty which the narrator has about his own trade is then, I hope, imparted to the reader who will, or ought to, feel a similar sense of irritation about these matters. I think that fiction writing, which does not acknowledge the uncertainty of the narrator himself, is a form of imposture and which I find very, very difficult to take. Any form of authorial writing, where the narrator sets himself up as a stagehand and director and judge and executor in a text, I find somehow unacceptable. (Wood, "Interview" 26)

It may seem that Sebald is telling us to trust neither evidence nor narrative. That is not to say, however, that we should give up on engaging with the past, and retreat into silence. Rather we must find a different way to engage with the past, one that places less emphasis upon reaching a cognitive understanding (which will then allow us to distance ourselves from, and build over the past), and one that rests more upon being willing to *encounter* past events within the gaps in the historical record and, in doing so, accept the past's incomprehensibility in the present. Despite the pessimistic tone that pervades Sebald's novel, and the reiteration that so much of history has

been engulfed by “smoke”, “fog” or “twilight”, Sebald nevertheless reminds us that our eyes are capable of adjusting to this darkness (381).

It is often commented that there is a sense of mourning pervading Sebald’s writing. This grieving, however, is less for the people known to have died in horrific circumstances and more for those who, due to the methods of historiography, have slipped through the record and “vanished” without recognition into the “chasm into which no ray of light could penetrate” and who can “never be brought up from those depths again” (*Ansterlitz* 414). Sifting through ‘facts’ and forms of historical documentation will never help us ‘know’ these people nor ‘understand’ their stories. The best we can do, Sebald urges, is to remain vigilant to the presence of the ruins of the past – within historical sites, objects, witnesses and their testimonies – as it is within these ghostly spaces and silences that our human-experienced past is preserved.

Notes

ⁱ Genette defines narrative according to three distinct notions: “the oral or written discourse that undertakes to tell of an event or a series of events”, “the succession of events, real or fictitious, that are the subjects of this discourse, and to their several relations of linking, opposition, repetition, etc”, and “an event: not, however, the event that is recounted, but the event that consists of someone recounting something: the act of narrating taken in itself” (25-26).

ⁱⁱ These headings will not be discussed further in this exegesis but are examined extensively in Genette’s *Narrative Discourse*.

ⁱⁱⁱ I will also be accepting both Shoshana Felman’s and Ricoeur’s reading of the relationship between history and narrative that alludes to the subjective nature of history and its inherent disparity with the actual past events; these being, respectively, that history is “the establishment of the facts of the past through their narrativization” (“Camus” 93), and that “events begin to be explained when they are transformed *into* a story by emplotment” (290). These follow Foucault’s notion that every record of history is also a representation and therefore subject to all of culture’s mediating forces, a position also argued by James Young who claims that history is a combination of events and their representations, a “combined study of both *what happened* and *how it is passed down* to us” (283).

^{iv} In defining histories as narratives, Ricoeur, in reminding us of the stylistic and structural constraints of narrative, argues that “the activity of narrating does not consist simply in adding episodes to one another; it also constructs meaningful totalities out of scattered events”; hence,

the art of narrating requires that we are able to “*extract a configuration from a succession*” (278). He also remarks that the continuity between narrative and history insists that we dispense with the “blind complexity of the present as it is experienced by the authors themselves” (279), in other words, in order to read histories with the purpose for which they are written, we are put in the difficult position of having to disregard the element of judgment by a narrator upon his or her events, a factor intrinsic to the formulation of narrative.

If history is simply a narrative, a representation made up only from the surviving traces and fragments of verifiable data, then the relationship between history and the past, *as it actually happened*, is clearly a troubled one. While a thorough investigation into the limitations of representation in history is a topic far too vast to be covered in this exegesis, it is important to acknowledge that Sebald was well-versed in and influenced by the writings on these issues.

^v However, Sebald’s characters were often based on more than one figure. For example the character Austerlitz is based on at least two people (McCulloh 132).

^{vi} The full titles are *Maus I: A Survivor’s Tale: My Father Bleeds History* and *Maus II: A Survivor’s Tale: And Here My Troubles Began*.

^{vii} From Freud’s 1919 paper “Das Unheimlich” (“The Uncanny”).

^{viii} This Freudian notion is expressed by Austerlitz: “We take almost all the decisive steps in our lives as a result of slight inner adjustments of which we are barely conscious” (189).

^{ix} Freud observed that return war veterans and even small children often repeat or re-enact trauma through dreams and behaviour. This seemed to violate the ‘pleasure principle’ of human behaviour, and Freud explained it through the theory of the ‘death instinct’ or ‘death wish’, referring to an individual’s own need to die.

^x Landsberg cites the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of “Empathy” as being the “power of projecting one’s personality into [...] the object of contemplation” (82).

^{xi} Sebald also uses this technique in *Vertigo* and *The Rings of Saturn*.

^{xii} Freud writes: “[T]he quality of uncanniness can only come from the fact of the ‘double’ being a creation dating back to a very early mental stage [...] at which it wore a more friendly aspect. The ‘double’ has become a thing of terror, just as, after the collapse of their religion, the gods turned into demons” (236).

^{xiii} This technique is discussed in more detail in chapter three.

^{xiv} This uncanniness was intensified by the sudden death of Sebald in a car accident in December 2001, shortly after the publication of the English translation of *Austerlitz*. Readers of the book were then, quite literally, listening to the voice of the dead.

^{xv} This is discussed further in chapter two.

^{xvi} In Readings' book, *The University in Ruins*, he provides an account of what teaching is and could be, and discusses the role of Thought in the future of universities. He proposes the idea that universities have gone through three periods, a period where they were based on the concept of Reason, followed by a period based on the concept of Culture, followed by today, where they are based solely on the pursuit of Excellence.

^{xvii} As will be discussed, however, Austerlitz's testimony lacks many of the features of traditional narrative. It is only through the narrator's collation of Austerlitz's fragmented testimonies that we approach a *sense* of narrative.

^{xviii} Felman and Laub, amongst other scholars, refer to the intrinsic *unsayability* in the personal trauma endured and witnessed by survivors, often rendering them silent. For example, Holocaust survivor Primo Levi, one the most celebrated and prolific writers on the Holocaust, regularly confronts the 'incomprehensibility' of the events. Critics comment that the power of Levi's writing often lies not within his scientific-like detail, but rather, in what he fails to express; according to Marco Belpoliti, it is within the "white-hot anger beneath his marble prose, beneath the reasonable and calm tone [...]" (Levi, *Black Hole* xv).

^{xix} The role of the secondhand witness – a person who witnesses the testimony of the witness – will be discussed further in chapter three.

^{xx} This interview was recorded in March-April 1997 at the St Louis Holocaust Museum, Missouri, and is transcribed by Bernard-Donals.

^{xxi} In this discussion, Bernard-Donals acknowledges the ideas of Plato in *Phaedrus*, where Plato suggests that language leads the speaker and listener to Truth by indicating rather than by producing it (*Phaedrus* 47-64).

^{xxii} Whilst a study of Holocaust poetry is beyond the scope of this exegesis, it is important to acknowledge – given the aforementioned rational and stylistic constraints of narrative language – the popularity of Holocaust poetry such as “Todesfuge” (“Death Fugue”) by German-Jew Paul Celan. Celan’s verse seeks to bear witness to “his literally shattering experience as a Holocaust survivor” (Felman, “Education” 32) through dislocated language and broken-down verse, in a way that challenges the imperative of conveying a rational truth. As Felman writes of his poetry: “*The breakage of verse enacts the breakage of the world*” (Felman, “Education” 32). “Todesfuge”, written towards the end of 1944, evokes the concentration camp experience, “not through linear narrative, through personal confession or through testimonial reportage”, but rather through the “disjointed art of counterpoint, and through the obsessional, compulsive repetitions and the vertiginous explosion of a mad song [...]” (Felman, “Education” 34-35):

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at sundown
we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night
we drink and we drink it
we dig a grave in the breezes there one lies unconfined [...].

(Celan 61)

In rejection of the anthologising of his poem, and the public infatuation with its melodious aesthetics, Celan's later poems are even less explicit and more jarring, and are unambiguous in their attempts to convey the disintegration of rational thought, and the reappropriation of the language of his torturers:

NO MORE SAND ART, no sand book, no masters.

Nothing won by dicing. How many dumb ones?

Seventeen.

Your question—your answer.

Your song, what does it know?

Deepinsnow,

Eepinnow,

Ee-i-o.

(Celan 233)

After making his famous dictum that “[a]fter Auschwitz, it is no longer possible to write poems” (*Negative* 362), Theodor Adorno was forced to confront the paradox set up within Celan's poems – of speaking without speaking, of testifying without (wittingly) testifying, of using language to communicate what language cannot traditionally communicate – and conceded nine years later that “I have no wish to soften the saying that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric

[...] But Enzensberger's retort also remains true, that *literature must resist the verdict*'

("Commitment" 312). He explains how Celan negotiates this dilemma: "Celan's poems articulate unspeakable horror by being silent, thus turning their truth content into a negative quality", and, what's more, how Celan's poetry "maintains its integrity only by refusing to go along with communication" (*Aesthetic* 443-44).

Although Sebald doesn't venture near the extremes of Celan in disintegrating language and narrative, it's worth noting that he does overtly reject many stylistic conventions of narrative. These include but are by no means limited to: character and plot development (as discussed in chapter one), paragraph breaks, chapter breaks and traditional sentence structure.

^{xxiii} This quote is taken from Primo Levi's Auschwitz testimony where he describes snapping off an icicle from outside his window in order to quench his thirst, only to have an SS guard immediately snatch it off him. When Levi inquired "*Warum?*" [Why?], the guard replied "*Hier ist kein warum*" [There is no why here] ("Survival" 28-9).

^{xxiv} This theory has been well illustrated by post-structuralists such as Michel Foucault.

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