

LIFE STORIES

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Child prodigy despite a violin
too large. First in class despite trances
that twisted you like wire. Taking in
languages, philosophy, religions,
astro-physics, and so on, that too
was you: everything too easy.
And bartering sleep for all-night
memoirs. The unexplored veins
of life stories, their far corners of surprises
kept you awake, and the dark receded
in favour of secrecy.

At first you didn't recognize how large
an opening chapter can be, and the second
even larger. Later there was much to learn:
why a linguist like you should oppose
grammars of hell, even the least theoretical,
how to forget, how to sleep again at night,
how to turn silent on your violin,
which experts said was of considerable value,
the reasons for selling it to a dealer
instead of passing it on to your son or
to friends who used to come over
on Sundays to play Mozart and Mendelssohn
with you in the grape arbor or great room.

The time you questioned me about
your second chapter, I sensed a modesty
you didn't have, although I wanted to ask
if you might risk adding at least one more

chapter—perhaps about everyday assaults
on happiness, starting with what
the gang of Russian soldiers did to your
mother,

but for that, you would have had
to lock your office, I suspect,
like someone with secret files, find
the right key, let the evidence speak for itself,
drop your habit of slight flourishes at the
beginning and end of words and ignore
misspellings, let the script grow smaller,
more compact, the ink bleeding through
wherever you stopped longer
than usual, like trying the find
a tighter line, take it home.

I can only believe you will have figured out
how much of your folio notebook
you'd leave empty, reserved for increments
your prayers had ignored, the many unplanned
departures, where you were starting this time,
how much you'd take along,
if anything was wrong. If you should allow
the old yearning to return.
No doubt you would have fingered
those empty pages more than once,
counted the leaves to the end

like words held back as I write
your memoir, more and more certain
than I was that you are there
vowing greater silence this time
and more erasure, thinking the unimaginable,
the revolution you always said you
feared, the refugees, how they would lose
their children, how they would lose everything
except memories of a few melodies
and missing friends, the shouts, the alarms.

I left much of this unmentioned as a courtesy
to the editor I met last week
at his invitation. A single volume, many brief
and lively chapters, he advised.
I stalled for time, for the right words.
Not argument, agreement or that flash of silence
before his words or mine moved on—
I wanted to point you out, introduce you
by name, explain that you too
lived elsewhere. Tell you
of old friends who have died.