WALTZ FOR NOBODY

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Novel

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As the last note faded away in the Bataclan and isolated figures became visible amid the darkness, I suddenly heard the sound of forceps from a long-ago night, when my wedged head was pulled out from my mother's clamped-open pelvis. The distressing noise that rolled into all the surfaces, into the glass in the cabinet, into the water in the glass, all the way to the finest fibres of the lilac changing table in Ospidel Engiadin'Ota, on which I promptly came to lie like a wet, yellow fish, at 1,700 metres above sea level. Alone for the very first time.

This shock with which everything begins; where does it go, I wonder?

MIRROR IMAGE

At some point, we progressed to the notes themselves. I'm not sure exactly when; there were so many passages, so many that led us into temptation. It must have been by chance. We liked the individual sections far, far better than the greater whole. We didn't enjoy stories, no matter what kind. Fairy tales were the only ones we tolerated, if at all. A spine-chilling feeling came over us whenever anyone tried to weave a narrative thread, to construct plausible pasts and futures. Stories: what a sickening, suffocating enterprise. Like that time at the city farm in Crystal Palace Park, when a raw, unshelled egg started dripping out of its mother hen. Sublime and salvific, on the other hand, was the touch of needle on turntable, as it was set down or ever so lightly moved. Either inwards or outwards. Not forward or back. The needle itself resembled a little mouth – no, more like the shell of an ear – or, no, a pupil – at any rate, some softly opened part of the body, tender as a fresh wound. At its tip, a sliver of crystal, sapphire or diamond. Silently, spectrally, the needle slid into the open groove, to betray it in all its detail. Judas Iscariot. The same song might come as easily at the start of a morning as at the end, freed from the march of time. There was no gruesome march of time. Any moment could be repeated or ignored. Overlooked by the needle, unplayed, undone.

We had strictly forbidden ourselves from stopping a piece too soon or interfering with its flow. Woe betide you if you did. A song was not to be interrupted, even under duress. This despite the fact that we'd know after just a few notes whether or not we'd like it. Perhaps we might have been less rigid if we'd had an endless number of records available. But our collection was modest. It had been stored there by its sky-high owners. We, in comparison, were small. We still went around stumbling, unbridled, unrestrained, with all those determinative characteristics that we would one day learn to banish to

the depths of our beings. Our degree of self-control was so minimal that we couldn't be left alone, Nobody, you and I. Do you remember? We weren't yet school age; we weren't yet called by our names. Instead we were midges, buttons, sweetie pies, les petits poussins. And yet we were left alone with the record collection, where the risk of accidental self-annihilation seemed not to exist – yes, we were safe there.

There, in that sideboard which ran along the bare wall of the otherwise empty parlour, were a couple of dozen records. We could see them through the transparent sliding doors. Sometimes we played at being hungry rat babies, licking the cold iron hinges and scratching at the glass. Sometimes we pushed the chaise longue from the hallway into the furthest corner of the parlour and used a pair of army field glasses to spy on our next selection. Sometimes we turned out the lights, took off our clothes, crawled through the darkness, felt around greedily for the magical black discs. Even after prolonged study of the record covers it was impossible to draw conclusions about the notes they contained. We didn't, in any case, think it was possible to form a visual image of notes. What we saw when we heard the notes was very definite and yet indescribable. All the same, we'd look closely at each cover before we pulled the vinyl out of its paper. Some discs were smaller in radius but had a larger hole in the middle. Every record had two sides. Sometimes they were marked A and B. Here, we got into difficulties. We were supposed to begin with A. The feigned existence of a beginning. We actually started with B, but even then, rarely with the outermost edge, the one closest to us, and instead with one of the grooves in between or further away. Preferably further away. It was shameless, yes, repulsive, to commence something so close to yourself. One further obscenity in the series of perfidious tricks intended to make us believe that life was a story. We wouldn't let ourselves be cornered. Do you remember, Nobody? Leoncavallo, B side, groove three, Ridi Pagliaccio, sul tuo amore infranto. E ridi del duol che t'avvelena il cor!

The notes washed through the parlour like a Nordic tide. Where did we get that idea? We'd never encountered a Nordic tide. But still, the notes continued to wash through the parlour like a Nordic tide. Sometimes individually to begin with, in drops; sometimes in layers, stacked on top of one another, intertwined, copulating water snakes. Something would move and everything was different; we were different. The notes washed up entire landscapes, sublime stage sets complete with weather conditions and fish populations, only to swallow forever all trace of themselves just a few moments later. The notes had barely died away before the sand beneath our feet became glassy again, untouched, expressionless. We were swamped by the waves and left behind as the undertow pulled away. Driftline. Time and again. Arrived in the world, departed from it. Until my parents tossed us over their shoulders in the evening and laid us down to sleep in soft bunks.

We were five or six years old when we were transplanted from the United Kingdom to the Swiss Confederation, into a settlement named Spiegel bei Bern. *Mirror-near-Bern.* We looked everywhere for our mirror image. In the puddles of water in front of the garage door, in the holographic stickers on hockey sticks, in the metallic front doors of our primary school, in our parents' eyes. Flowers bloomed in the balcony boxes; in Berlin a wall was smashed up, and fell. We could already read, write, do sums. The other children felt offended; they broke my elbow the very first time we played. Or they beat us black and blue and burgundy, right across the face, with a young oak switch handed out by the caretaker. Diagonally from top to bottom. The rupture healed morphologically; what remained was a tendency to stiffen, caused by little intramedullary nails of stainless titanium. The bruises faded and left behind a physical abhorrence of anything suggestive of crowds, packs, clans, tribes. The boys styled their hair in narrow rattails at the back of their heads, by which they would one day be seized and smashed against the wall of the sports hall by an invading army of giants, the same way we did with the

jumping spiders in the basement – we thought. For one lovely moment, their opened skulls would stick to the wall, before they slumped, powerless, to the floor.

In the United Kingdom, school began at the age of four. There, we learned to read, write and do sums before we were even toilet-trained. The first time I soiled my school uniform was at the Natural History Museum, in front of the famous twenty-six-metre-long plaster cast replica of a Diplodocus skeleton. Do you remember? I didn't notice at the time; only on the way back through St James's Park, walking two by two, holding hands in our pairs, did I feel the mishap. Like egg dripping out of a chicken. Uncontrolled revelations. Much worse, though, was the other occasion, during storytime in the lap of my teacher Adelaide Shelley. Every Friday, the girl who'd collected the most gold stars was allowed to assume that coveted seat, while Miss Shelley read aloud from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Miss Shelley's lap, 'happy and glorious, long to reign over us', a personal audience, while the smell of lukewarm, wet excrement rose inexorably between my pleated skirt and her porcelain-white arms. She was so firmly fixed in her role as custodian that she resisted any reaction. Gave no indication, just read to the end of the story with an open expression, face turned to the class, as a cesspool collected in her A-line skirt. A few weeks later, I was allowed to play the role of God in our school Christmas play. My first experience on stage: 'And lo, I am God.' I looked up through the roof of the assembly hall to the heavens beyond as I said it, and sensed your malicious smile. 'And lo, Nobody, I am God.'

There weren't any gods in Spiegel bei Bern. We entrenched ourselves in the new living room of the flat-roofed terraced house, our stage the persimmon-orange Persian carpet that had belonged to my Iranian grandmother; I played random intervals on the piano with the pedal pressed to the floor, while you stared through the window, expressionless but disciplined, at the water in the

swimming pool. Or were you using it as a mirror? From the outside, it isn't possible to tell whether someone's looking at themselves or through the glass to the world beyond. Forever after, this was something we'd try to decipher in others.

Home for us was where the record collection was. We slipped inside the paper sleeves and re-emerged as new beings. All life was there. Our other life was just a dream. One we had to sleep through, with open eyes. One in which we had to play dead. Our life was among those circling notes. They raised us up and carried us off, flying carpets. The sound waves rolled towards us and away. When the notes came closer, we held on to them tightly. A pendulum that rocked us safely through the confusion. When they fell silent, we dropped back into nothingness.

Not long after, we learned to pose. The TV was broadcasting the football World Cup from the USA, where, during the opening match against the hosts, Georges Bregy, a Walser, took a free kick from nineteen yards and slammed the ball into the top far corner of the net. We would think up winners' or losers' poses to go with certain songs. Like Bebeto during the sixty-second minute of Brazil vs Holland, we rocked our unborn children toward the quaking stands to the sound of Gal Costa's 'Baby'. Or Nina Simone, 'stars they come and go' – shouldering the entire Roman Empire, we turned our backs on the goal and, eternally humiliated like Roberto Baccio, staggered the hundred steps down into the stadium catacombs – into the void. Völler to Klinsmann, knockout round, twilight of the gods, goal! We flung our arms wide, fell to the ground with joy, while Brunhilda went up in flames: Richard Anti-Semite Wagner. Other notes, by comparison, required total paralysis. Delia Derbyshire, 'Time On Our Hands'. We stood by the turntable and placed the needle back into the first groove a hundred times over. And in the process, we managed to follow with our naked eyes the venation of the leaves on the

maple tree in the garden, all the way back to the roots knotted beneath the earth. We're given supernatural powers when we listen to music, you said. I said, no, no, that's when our original, natural powers return to us. There were very bad notes, too, ones that frightened us: 'Study for voice and tape', Alice Shields. We hid under the kitchen stools as though in a bomb shelter, pulling our knees up beneath our chins; but it was no good.

We would move house again a few times, but whenever I think of our friendship, it's that period in Spiegel bei Bern when I remember us being closest, inseparable. It was also the period in which you developed an interest in the history of the Walser people. Yes, yes, history was permitted, remembrance without pain – we thought. Had we heard that somewhere? Who had taught us that? They put Ötzi the Iceman on display, didn't they, we thought. Naked as he was, in the scraps of fabric that had fused with him over the years, preserved by the glacier. How long does a person have to lie down there before they stop deserving to rest in peace? At what point does the sanctity of our dignity cease? Does it cease? I was descended from a Walser family, the House of Hunger, you said. The House of Hunger. You made it your mission to research my destiny, while I provided a destiny for your research.

In the years to come you would acquire considerable expertise on the Walsers and expand it with the results of your own research. The Walsers, that ancient Alpine people who made their home at the highest altitudes. Up there where the air is so thin it hurts to breathe, where every word, every sound uttered is a feat. That ancient people who worshipped not fire but ice. Because ice preserves while fire burns. Those notes and contributions – I've preserved them to this day. After your mother sent for everything else, they're all I have that remains of you in material form. Even though they're all numbered, their order isn't sequential. Or they're following a pattern I haven't yet managed to decipher. What torments me more, though, is the question of motive. What

were you hoping to achieve with the research? Can an interest be aimless? Or was it an affective reaction? Yes, perhaps it stemmed from some kind of jealousy towards the reality approaching us; perhaps it was the start of you fighting for me and, at the same time, the first sign of a parting of ways. If the future belongs to me, then you must be master of the past. Your interest in the Walser women was greedy. It seemed as though with every trait you ascribed to them, you yourself lost substance. Perhaps you wanted to merge with your writing. Because although you were the ideal listener, with your non-judgemental, almost impartial manner, we both sensed that the role of stoic witness was doomed to fade as time passed. The most formative friendship is the one that doesn't last forever, we thought.

As unlikely as it seemed, I was secretly certain. Not of the applause, not of the strobe lights, not of the record deals, not of the Boulevard Voltaire, not of the discovery of shellfish and crustaceans on ice, not of the stalkers, not of the excesses, not of the bedrooms on wheels, not of the performer's visas, not of the self-interest, not of the fall. I was secretly certain of just one thing: that you would fade and I would begin without you, despite the fact that it's you I have to thank for everything.

Walser Woman 1

Walser folklore, which exists only in oral culture, includes various origin myths. All of them, however, begin with death. The Walser woman is born as a mummy and, over the course of her life, provided there aren't any particular circumstances that get in the way, gradually sloughs off the layers of fabric cocooning her. She keeps these scraps of hemp linen, and sometimes steals or obtains others, using them for food or to make clothing. The Swiss pine resin in which the Walser woman's head was embalmed for the afterlife, and the hornet wax used to preserve her lungs, are also slowly eroded with every year the Walser woman lives. Only her brain remains unchanged in this pagan telling, believed to be the location of the heart. The heart, meanwhile, is seen as a whipped-up mixture that only burgeons into a strong organ with the gathering of life experiences, and only after that can it be used to make rational decisions.

THE FIRST HUMAN

In the Anglo-Saxon computation of time, the clock returns to one. To a second one. Each hour comes around twice. This is a fact that can be relied upon. There are two chances; mercy prevails. A double life, solace. The day is in itself a reiteration. Rumination. A chance to practise. There's a dress rehearsal: ante meridiem. And a premiere: post meridiem. Or the other way round. That's up to the performer. Cruel in comparison the German swelling of time, the breakneck speed it induces. For every hour, a new one is added, all the way up to twenty-four. When we transferred from English to Confederation time, something was set in motion that we could no longer escape, we thought. A fatalistic forcing of hands. A nervousness at the ends of which everything tapers off into a corner where the trap is sprung. Cat and mouse. Without a doubt, right at the outset – I can no longer remember exactly when, but right at the outset – we really had run out of breath.

We put on Bruce Springsteen and sang along inaccurately: 'Mister State Trooper, Mister State Trooper, please please stop me, please please stop me, please please stop me, please please stop me.' On the cover we were looking through a car windscreen at a vast, empty plain. The road narrowed to a point on the horizon. A lone wasteland, enclosed at the sides with fences, and governed from above by a drifting white sky. At the bottom of the picture, what seemed a risible amount of snow on the windscreen wipers, and underneath in dim red: NEBRASKA. Nothing could be read into any of the clouds. We'll have no choice but to invent it all, we thought.

'Nina Simone in Concert'. For the longest time, it wasn't clear to us that they were people, that the voices coming out of the loudspeakers belonged to other people. Did we ask ourselves who else they might have belonged to? We must have assumed that it was a completely separate category of being, superior to

humans. At some point we discovered on an album cover a huge figure in a white dress against a green background. Right at the bottom was a double bass; it had been laid down and looked as though it were sleeping, poor thing. The woman in the middle held a narrow metal shaft in her clenched fist, from which a cord ran off the edge of the picture. Was she tied to it? Even though she was standing in the centre, she was absent. She was looking at something that remained hidden to us. At the beginning of every piece, thick wing beats rattled out of the loudspeakers, a rising flock of iron birds. Many, there must have been so many. First she spoke to us, and only after that did she begin to sing, and then she spoke again. She had many voices, not just a single one. She told us this was a play-song, the game for which hadn't yet been invented. Was she a trickster? No, no, she had a smouldering shovel in her voice; she dug the earth over. We started to waver. No, no, she had climbed down alone into that terrifying cave with a torch, and was calling up to us what had been drawn on the walls within that cone of light fifty thousand years before. No, no, quite different – she was a set of scales on which words were given their weight. No, no, it was Nina Simone; her song began again and again from the top, second side, groove three. She didn't follow any rules; she had invented the game. Might she have been the very first human? She was the very first human, we thought.

Our favourite record, which we only removed from its sleeve on very special occasions – after my Breton cousin Katell, on a visit at Easter, had spread the rumour that vinyl degrades successively (this was the exact merciless word she used, one we'd never heard before) with each listen – was 'Songs of the Humpback Whale'. My cousin hadn't just deeply worried us with this information – which, incidentally, was false, or at least very exaggerated, though doubtless intended to induce panic – but had also confronted us for the first time with an awareness of death. Colonel Katell had said it with narrowed eyes, the word 'successive', and repeated it several times.

A1 Solo Whale

A2 Slowed-Down Solo Whale

A3 Tower Whales

A4 Distant Whale

B Three Whale Trip

We thought these were prototypical role specifications for life, and we internalised their voices like a mantra. During an argument we'd go with the melody of the Tower Whales; the Distant Whale was required for humiliating experiences, the Slowed-Down Whale for recovery.

Within this record collection, the collection in the sideboard, there was also a painted sleeve. Possibly harmless. A hilly landscape (green), a Mercedes-Benz coming towards us and a Volkswagen moving away, a sunset in the background. We started with 'Mitternacht', moved on to the 'Kometenmelodien' and jumped finally to 'Morgenspaziergang'. Only after that did we put on the A-side, 'Autobahn'. We listened to it once, and then repeatedly for weeks. Twenty-two minutes and thirty seconds, the A-side filled to the brim with a single song. In the garden, which bordered the living room and also contained the little round swimming pool, we opened up the ping-pong table and played along. Our rallies became longer; during the first couple of shots the grip would still slip in our sweaty little hands; we were tense, no mistakes now, crash, licence revoked. It didn't take long before we slid from time into timelessness, all our needs faded. The dog rummaged in the flower beds. The gardener would kick him for it later, press his muzzle into the new hollows. The dog had been searching for the origin of the world.

Walser Woman 2

In the beginning was movement. No one has always been here. Not even in Goms, between the Furka Pass and the source of the Rhône, the highest section of valley in the Upper Valais. Goms, in the bristled terrain that melted free of the Ice Age Rhône Glacier, flowed through by the Rotten, the young Rhône, and nowadays understood to have been the starting point of the Walser settlers. The first traces of these Alemannic colonists, who in turn had come from the Bernese Hasli Valley, date back to the eighth or ninth century. The Walser women emerged from these settlers. Plagued and blessed by an untameable restlessness, these German-speaking creatures swarmed across the high Alpine plateau from the year 1000 AD, establishing the highest-altitude settlements in the Alps. Moving in waves, pushing forward at 1,500 metres above sea level, over the course of the next four hundred years they created an unprecedented mass migration. They spread out in all directions to over-migrate the Romansh natives. Westwards into the French Chablais; southwards towards Monte Rosa, far enough to colonise Bosco/Gurin in Ticino. In the east, the Walser hordes used all manner of paths to reach Tujestch, Obersaxen in Surselva, and even in some cases the Chur Rhine Valley. From these first tribal colonies, others moved further into neighbouring and distant territories: to Vals and to Safien, where your family, the Safien Hungers, put down roots. From there, they went further, towards Avers and Mutten, through Davos to Klosters and swiftly across the Prättigau. Further towards Schiers, and further still, until the mountain nests of Valzeina, St. Antönien and Furna had been founded, then downwards to the flanks of the Schanfigg valley, and so across to Churwalden and Parpan.

CRAZE

For my eighth birthday, I was given a blue pianino, a small upright placed not in the dark of our bedroom doorway, but the centre of the living room. My parents looked for a teacher in the neighbourhood and eventually sent us to Ladina Salis, a soon-to-be recruit of the mountain grenadiers and the daughter of the local piano tuner. Laduns, this was her name too. What an unfathomable disgrace to have only one, we thought, constantly baptising people. Particularly those who interested us, even the terrible ones. The lessons took place in her father's workshop in the courtyard of Spiegel's reform church, to which we were sent every Wednesday afternoon from then on. Ladünia entered the room, stretching her interlocked hands and cracking her knuckles. The most important thing of all, she said, was to become intimately familiar with the very quietest and very loudest point. At the quietest, the listener would grow very big and slink closer and closer, crawling along like a smoker searching a porous parquet floor for wisps of tobacco. At the loudest point, by contrast, they would rush explosively away, fearing a level of sound pressure that could be fatal for a human. Piano playing, she said, rising onto the tips of her toes and bringing her fingers together into a trapezium, takes place right between these two poles, like a never-ending dance between intimacy and distance. Tension and release. The lessons were very clearly structured. At the start of each one, we had to raise our voices and recite by heart her "Table of Eternal Pain":

The Table of Eternal Pain

97 DECIBELS Steam whistle of a PIKO-BR-55 Deutsche Reichsbahn freight locomotive in 1942

107 DECIBELS The barking of a pack of sheep dogs

109 DECIBELS Maximum range of a Wagner tuba

113 DECIBELS Cry of hunger from a newborn baby during the Holodomor famine of 1932/33

127 DECIBELS The fatal headshot fired at Rosa Luxembourg by Hermann Souchon on 15th January 1919 from a 9-mm Luger Parabellum pistol

129 DECIBELS Loudest human cry for help ever measured, on the open sea near the Island of Lampedusa, 1993

131 DECIBELS Starting volume of the Messerschmitt Me 262 upon inspection by Adolf Hitler on 26th November 1943

167 DECIBELS Average face slap of domestic violence

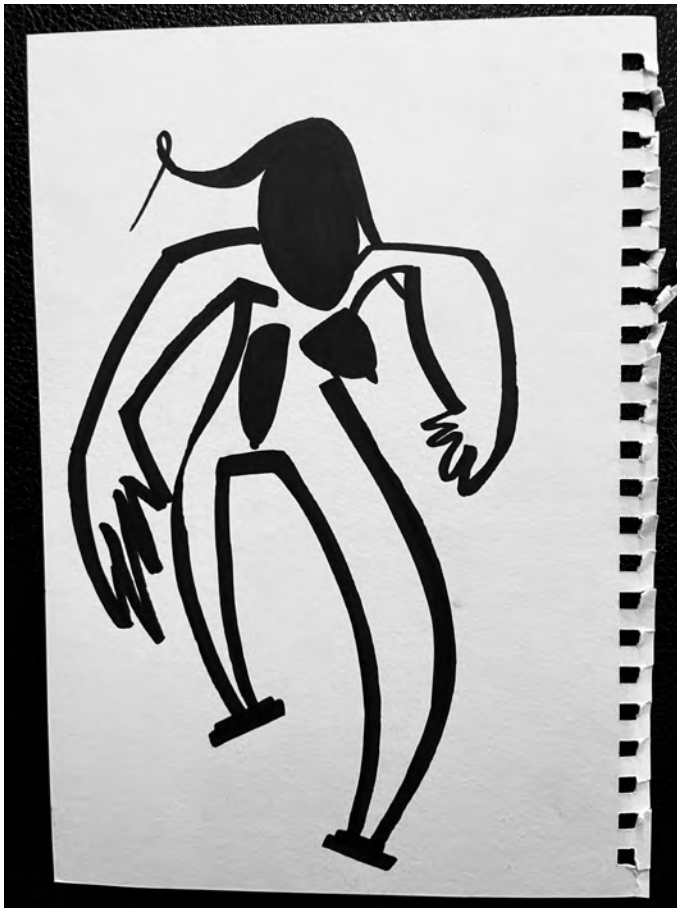
210 DECIBELS Detonation of the “Little Boy” uranium bomb over Hiroshima, at fifteen minutes past eight on the morning of 6th August 1945

310 DECIBELS In Indonesia in 1883, the eruption of the Krakatoa volcano, whose sonar wave circumnavigated the Earth four times, bursting the eardrums of all seafarers within a 30-mile radius. It painted the sky a deep orange which was visible even in Norway, inspiring the young Edvard Munch, who was out walking the eastern coast of the Oslo Fjord, to paint his primal scream.

During this table drill, first one of us had to shout out the decibel number, in order to build the largest possible gradient of terror. Then the other, the second speaker, was instructed to calmly recite the corresponding entry, in a composed, politely civilized tone. That wasn't easy, but it did make the distress more tangible. You really liked it when you were assigned the emotionless part. It suited your natural instincts: to respond to intense emotion with apathetic distance. After we had practised and recited the "Table of Eternal Pain", the actual lesson began. The first few weeks were dedicated to the study of silence. We had to sit there and study the quiet backdrop of the empty workshop, while the younger Salis drank long gulps from Tetra Paks of fermented wine taken from the church's Communion supply. Even though we suspected early on that something about these lessons wasn't right, we didn't dare tell our parents; we liked Ladina, and she made us feel that we were part of something very special. After each lesson she would bow so effusively that her fingertips touched the dusty floor, as though she owed us a great debt of gratitude, as though everything were happening solely because of us, and this always made us laugh. We kind of loved her for it. Little by little, Ladina relocated our studies of silence to increasingly poorly reflective spaces. To the back seat of her car at the edge of the forest, to the skiing equipment room at Belp-Moos Curling Club, to the state archive's reading room, or underwater in the diving zone of Bernaqua learners' pool. For our final lesson before Christmas, she picked us up in her father's Nissan Bluebird, and we drove the long stretch from Bern past Lake Thun, across Kandergrund and through the Lötschberg tunnel into the Upper Valais, to the valley station of Riederalp, the car-free community on the Aletsch glacier. We caught the last cable car up and kept ourselves moving in the cold, under Ladina's instruction, with exercises from skiing lessons. Towards three o'clock in the morning, she eventually told us to lie on our backs. That was where, for the first time in our lives, we managed to hear snow falling: 10 decibels.

That was it, the most wonderful moment of our time in Spiegel bei Bern – do you remember? The disjointedness that surrounded us wasn't threatening. The night trickled down on us in the form of crystallised ashes from the black eternity of the sky. Within us, an inaudible cry of joy against freezing.

The first lesson of the new year with Ladina Salis also turned out to be our last piano lesson ever. We sensed we were close to the final level of escalation, the inevitable final act, even though we had never before then been in contact with somebody who was in the process of losing their mind. We instinctively knew that just one small move would be enough, and her inner chaos would drive her out of herself to atomise in the room. It can be the tiniest of things, we later told ourselves, that cracks the ground on which a person is building their kingdom. The tiniest of things that separates prosperity from ruin. Perhaps it was the snowmelt that imprisoned the Bluebird on the driveway, perhaps the never-ending chimes of the bells in the church tower or the lack of oxygen caused by her chronic smoker's cough, or perhaps it was the specific dazzlement of a single ray of sunshine that delivered the final blow; in any case, Her Excellency Ladina Salis, after appearing in the workshop late and bathed in sweat, a beautiful, sloppy sheen in her glassy eyes, pushed a woodworm-infested Bösendorfer piano out of the attic window of the workshop into the church courtyard. She had stowed away inside it numerous cowbells and cast-iron bowls, as well as assorted recycled glass and even a few porcelain cat figurines, and their toxic high frequencies mixed a little of Ladina's own hysteria into the sound image of the rupture. She had completely lost her mind over the holidays and was now very obviously psychotic. The collision of her missile with the ground made a deafening sound, which, trembling all over, she defined as "fortissimo". This proclamation marked the end of our formal musical education.



Walser Woman 3

Nights in the mountains are – depending on the position of the moon, and in spite of the supposed proximity to the resplendent celestial body – dark or even darker. One of the few orientation aids available to the Walser woman is echolocation. A short snap of the tongue creates a clicking sound that reverberates against the stone structures around her. In this way, she can more easily get her bearings in the nocturnal landscape. The click sonar also helps when there's no wind, when dense beams of fog hover almost motionless above the rock. With the aid of the reflecting echo, her brain creates a nuanced three-dimensional picture of her surroundings. The Walser woman can tap into the terrain. She can't get lost.

TONGUEFOOLERY

Like I said, at some point I began to make up my own songs, and you were my audience. Neither shame nor pride existed between us. Our relationship was fair and had no secrets. You didn't comment on the songs I played to you. And how could you have described them anyway? Like butterflies, perhaps, or rats? *Rattus rattus*, the black rat, not to be confused with *Rattus norvegicus*, the brown rat. Perhaps classifying them by recording location: Mediterranean, sub-Saharan, Alpine. Or by instrument category, frequency group, erosion speed of the vinyl etching. We weren't able to capture music in words. And besides, we didn't like language as a means of denunciation. We only liked it in its nebulous, somnambulistic form. Perhaps that's also where our aversion to stories came from. No, no, we never expected language to be precise; we saw it in its deep disquiet. We speak many languages but master none, we thought. It didn't bother us when we couldn't come to the point. We weren't interested in points. It was stifling to think that there should be a corresponding word for every distinguishable thing in the world. No, no. It was hideous, the thought that language was a precise portrayal of the world. That one could make it disappear through steadfast silence. Or expand it by talking vehemently. We wondered if that meant our universe was proof of Creation's attempts to formulate itself? No, no. We were sure that language is a snake; it can shed its skins, it has secrets, it plays a game without rules. Tonguefoolery. As children we crept through the holes in the playground fence to get to the wasteland, and even there we played in the shrubbery. Human beings gave the animals their names. A short while later, they ate them. But we speak many languages and master none.

Walser Woman 4

In the Walser tradition, besides echolocation, the voice was a further tool for survival practice. A voice's timbre or volume wasn't the only deciding factor when it came to the success of communication; the quality of its performance was also important. How cold cold, how steep steep or how snowless snowless was, you could hear from the tone. Contrary to expectation, lower temperatures were voiced in a higher frequency. A person whose voice sounded particularly precise was seen as trustworthy, and advanced socially. Form and content were more closely interlinked than in any other language.

NOBODY

We must have been a strange sight as we trundled along Ahornweg. Our shoulders always touched slightly as we walked; we were a strolling mobile. Sometimes I watched you in the garden from my window, so I could imagine the impression you made on other people. You mostly stood in a peripheral zone, motionless and with your gaze averted. This made it look like you were waiting. As though you were waiting ever so patiently, and as though that were your actual occupation. The most noble of all activities; a calling. Seen from my room, through the white-varnished window frame, you looked as though you were painted on the wall, a Banksy in Spiegel. I remember how the words *Mene Mene Tekel* came into my mind and accompanied me the entire day as a looped sample. They belonged to this tableau like maple leaves to a maple tree. Everything has something that belongs to it, we thought. To bird migration, the approaching winter; to a frenzy of rage, self-hatred; to skiing, Vreni; to sound, stones and shards. And I, I belonged to you. Thread worms have no associations. We aren't thread worms. Squid? In meditation, you're supposed to infer nothing from nothing. In our eyes, that was yet another perfidious civilising attempt to make us go gaga, and not the masterpiece of transcendental retreats. Mene Mene Tekel, Bern Banksy, Nobody. Were you perhaps only ever waiting for me? Did your life come to a halt when I wasn't with you? Nobody, what was it you actually wanted from me all that time?

When we were together, you looked dazed and worn out when you walked. Or startled, as though in staccato. It was because of your shoes; they were mostly either too loose or too tight, your gait either shuffling or cautious, as though you were walking on broken glass. Almost all year round, you wore these cream-coloured boxing boots. If you'd embarked upon a pop culture

career, this would have been your optical USP. The rubber soles had to be narrow so they could grip the surface of a boxing ring; it helps with balance, you said. The heels and sides have to be reinforced in order to absorb rough shoves and kicks, you said. Towards the front, the shoes have to be noticeably curved so it's easier to lunge forward. Yeah, you said all that. Sliding, spinning and sidestepping, that's all very well, but far too dangerous on snow or ice, I said. And yet your mother still sent you a new pair from the military sport depot every year to commemorate the birth of Christ, in her typical anti-religious irony. During the first few weeks of the new year, the boots were too wide for you, you laced them up tight as a corset to gain some purchase, but towards the end of the year you had to loosen them and, eventually, completely untie the laces and tuck them loosely into your socks. In the weeks when the boots fitted as though you'd been poured into them, in May or June, it seemed like you were floating, your gait almost majestic. From behind it looked as though you were wearing an invisible cape that hovered in your wake as you leapt across the manure-strewn meadows.

There wasn't a single fleck of grass or speck of meadow that wasn't thoroughly doused. A permanent stench of shit hung in the air over our settlement, only increasing the closer we got to winter. No gust of wind ever seemed brisk enough to disperse it. Soaked in the slurry, the soil's harvests grew. The longer the better, said the farmers. There was pride in the stench. An arrogant comfort. On some school days, the smell slowed down our entire thinking. Really? Were we already thinking? No, we were sniffling and listening.

Your favourite book was Ágota Kristóf's "The Big Notebook", because you thought it was a victim's report on twins who had gone missing during the Cold War. You spent countless hours comparing the geographical information in the book with Soviet maps, trying to find the narrative's real-

life setting. You refused to believe that only invented things can come close to the truth.

Your favourite song was Abel Meeropol's "Strange Fruit", sung by Billie Holiday. You said we could only ever listen to it at the end of the day, when we were lying undressed in bed and the buses had stopped driving past the window. It reminded us of a prayer. This track was supposed to have the last word. Its last word was crop. We didn't know what crop meant. But we knew the words mouth, sweet, fresh, flesh and fruit. When my cousin Katell told us that "strange fruit" meant the bodies of black people that hung lynched from trees like strange fruit, we were deeply shocked and thoroughly ashamed. Ever since then, there has been no such thing as harmless fruit; whenever the word fruit pops up somewhere, we think of strange.

At our families' tables, politicising and analysing was a reflex, with consistent disregard for age ratings: separation of powers, putsch, axis, summit, exile, Katharina von Zimmern, NATO, the milk soup of Kappel, coalition, opposition, referendum, 1848, the Defenestration of Prague, the Wannsee Conference, Auschwitz, women's suffrage, the old Swiss Confederation, the new Swiss Confederation, Napoleon I, Napoleon II, Napoleon III. Meanwhile, Thelonious Monk, Violeta Parra or the Kleine Niederdorf opera would play in the background. What our families couldn't have guessed: our perspective was rotated by 180 degrees, to the reverse side of the coin. The strange fruits were in the foreground, at eye level, sparkling like low-hanging chandeliers above our steaming Papet Vaudois (pork sausages on potatoes with double crème), while the proclamation of human rights served as background music. The vocabulary of democracy pushed its way into our musical world events like the weather through badly insulated window frames.

Your favourite food was beef ragout with spätzli, but after we were served tacos with butterfly larvae for El Día de Muertos by the Mexican cultural attaché, you claimed to prefer worms and flies. I can still remember it vividly, because at the dinner, where we were sitting exiled from the adults at the children's table, you took precisely two bites of it. I choked down the rest, through basic politeness and learned compulsion. And yet you claimed for years afterwards that it was your favourite food. Your favourite drink, on the other hand, I'll gladly bear witness to: coffee. We drank it every morning even when we were children, a Walser convention, filling our flasks with it. Our mouths were encircled at all times with a pale-brown coffee beard, darker where it dried in the creases of our lips. It must have looked like gangrene, or eczema. When we bought cigarettes at the kiosk, you breathed on the saleswoman to dissipate any doubts that might arise in her regarding our age. Your indecipherable age served us well in the procurement of forbidden substances. Your angelic, light-filled face contrasted with the early arrival of body hair which, particularly in summer, looked grotesque on your still childlike arms and legs, as though you were coated with black sawdust. A not entirely implausible explanation. The BKSV, the Bernese association for Swiss wrestling, was on the lookout for young recruits. I remember the placards in local trams and buses, advertising for "pastoral wrestling scouts", probably knowing that the boys wouldn't sign up of their own accord, but instead needed to be tracked down in an almost military fashion. "Scouts operate independently throughout the year in the hearts of our communities. Their mission: surveil and report." Surveil and report.

Your favourite film was "The Woman with Five Elephants". You watched it dozens of times, and often, startled awake by dreams, I watched in the night as your face gleamed blue in the light from the computer screen, your pupils moving rhythmically. It was a film about Svetlana Geier, the translator of

the five great Dostoevsky novels. You didn't like Dostoevsky and his reactionary writing. But you liked everything about Svetlana. To you, she was the true author of the five elephants, in the same way Nina Simone was the true singer of "Ne me quitte pas" and Molly Drake the true voice of her son Nick. You thought it was revenge on the Stalinists that she, a native of Kyiv, spoke in Dostoevsky's place. Having the last word was more powerful than the last drop of blood. In Svetlana Geier you encountered the theory of the first and second act, which you then tried to drum into me. Geier told of her early experience caring for her tortured father. An experience that echoed in her later caring for her son, who suffered an accident late in life. She told of the repetition that every life holds. That what happens to us is our first act, and this prepares us for the second. Can it be that both disaster and happiness run in patterns? Thanks to Svetlana, this idea anchored itself deep within us. That ending with horror can teach us horror without ending. When Iris Alig jumped off the bridge, I clearly heard you say: the first act. In that moment, you must have resolved to be the second.

We thought a great deal; it was our way of talking. And I often said things too, albeit rarely what we were thinking. But as we both know, you generally said very little. Often just a few isolated sentences per day, or none at all. Yes, mostly none at all. I was sure the others disapprovingly called you "Dr Schtum". When you did say something, it sounded like you were talking to yourself. Your sentences were self-contained, rarely geared towards dialogue. A bit like the memorial plaques we saw on the walls in Bern's old town.

MARTHE GOSTELI, leader of the Helvetic Revolution and founder of Swiss democracy, despaired here from 21st February 1970 to 7th February 1971

You rarely ever asked anything either. Perhaps due to disinterest, or prophylactic distrust. You would rather have died of thirst in the boiling tumult of a city of millions than ask somebody for water, or the route to it. If a question was directed towards you, usually you would look at the ground and give a melancholic smile. I was the only one capable of interpreting it. Over time, it led to people addressing me when actually they wanted to address you. As though you weren't actually there.

[END OF SAMPLE]