

# LIFE STORIES

LEONARD NEUFELDT

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.