

Extract from *Piano Hill* by Ross Bolleter

Late Sonata

To the memory of Mme Alice Carrard

I arrive for my lesson to find you muttering
as you rehearse that late Beethoven sonata, dizzying
the summer morning, angling trills at heaven,
making the fugue an iron cliff that rings
each time you strike. Nearly one hundred, you live
on a sliver of chicken and a spoonful of broccoli.
Arthritic eagle hunched over the blue ravine you quiver,
an unfiltered Gauloise stuck to your lower lip. Smoke
pours up into your itching eyes over wet cheeks.
You forget your way, circle back and there again
are the crags and ruined parapets.

You played this sonata for your Budapest debut.
Weiner your teacher waddled through battering applause
to kiss you and give his blessing – on your wrist
his fingers' fat warm arch that Liszt had moulded
as Czerny (Beethoven's star pupil) did for him.
Maybe lineage counts, but you never
warmed yourself by that fire.

No bigger than a child you groan
at this dirty labour of uplift and uproar.
Your hands struggle against their own tightening
as a starry sky twists and sings. Blind sighted a moment
you just miss old Ludwig drunk and beaming as he ambles
into the dazzled gap the intact swiftness of your mottled hands
swallow diving into ivory.