

The Other Hotel

Olivia Laing

Olivia Laing was appointed Writer in Residence at The Midland Hotel in Spring 2014, and was commissioned by The Midland and Manchester Literature Festival to write a short story inspired by her stay. The resulting piece, The Other Hotel, was performed at a special Afternoon Tea event as part of Manchester Literature Festival in The Midland's Wyvern Room on Thursday 9th October 2014.

Manchester Literature Festival
The Department Store
5 Oak Street
Manchester
M4 5JD
www.manchesterliteraturefestival.co.uk

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THE OTHER HOTEL

I'm writing this in the kitchen sink. No you're not, she says. You're writing it on an aeroplane. Flight 0177. It's very cold. I have three blankets, one from my new seat, one from my old seat and one from the seat next to me. Everyone's pulled the screens down on their windows, so it's almost dark. I wish I had some gloves. Gloves and leg warmers and a big hooded top. People, she says, didn't dress like that on aeroplanes. In my day. I don't suppose they did. She isn't dressed like people are now. Her shoes are brown, with a low heel, very sturdy. Good leather. Not fancy, just good. Andy Warhol, she says, unexpectedly. Did you know Andy Warhol was a shoe fetishist. He'd wear his shoes until there were holes in the soles and his toes stuck out. *And* he dyed his sneakers black to wear to formal dinners. Anything else, I ask. Yes, she says. He used to do his marbling in the bath. He can't have washed much, can he? I suspect she's been reading my book while I was asleep. Are you, I say. Reading my book. She looks tight-lipped. Anyway, she says. Standards have slipped.

I'd like to make a list of things I know about Mabel, but it would be quite a short list. (I didn't give you permission to call me Mabel, she says, without opening her eyes.) Born: in the past. Twentieth century, probably. Possibly the end of the 19th. Died: not so long ago. Twenty years? Thirty? Ten? Mabel, I say, what are your dates. I know you're not asleep. 1928, she mutters, which definitely isn't true. All you actually know, she says after a minute, is what my handwriting looks like. Which is a total invasion of my privacy, because I don't remember ever writing you a letter. Also that you could draw, I say, also that you were a botanist, also that you once gave a paper in York on propagation under artificial conditions. You've been going through my rubbish, she says. She snaps her eyes open. What kind of trade is it, going through people's rubbish. I do not, I say, go through people's rubbish. I don't. Andy Warhol's pizza boxes, she says. Andy Warhol's wigs. Andy Warhol's corsets. I'm not sure she would have known, before we met, who Andy Warhol was. Did you, I ask. You're changing the subject, she says. Ish, I say. Only ish. I figure you more for Mahler, Mabel. Going to the Proms and the Third Programme and reading Constance Spry on roses before bed. Your problem, she says, is that you don't understand that I didn't live in the past. No one lives in the past. Everyone lives in the present. Except, and she licks her lips coldly, grave robbers. Historians, I say. Spies, she says. Not even spies. Nosey parkers. Biographers, I say, and she makes a rude noise.

I met Mabel some months ago, in a large hotel in a large city in the north of England. First I saw her at tea, and then she was in the lift, smelling of apples and bonfires, as the dead often do, and then she was in my bedroom, sitting on the sofa. I can't use

this, she said. This thingummy. Don't look at me, I said. I'm no good at technology. I took the thingummy out of her hands and waved it in the direction of the screen. I just want to see the breakfast menu, she said. I just want to make sure I can still get a coddled egg. I pressed some buttons on the clicker, the walkie-talkie, the whatsit. Here you go, I said. Breakfast. By the way, what are you doing in my room? It's my room, she said. I could tell she wasn't listening. She was reading the menu on the screen. Rather vulgar, she said. Your century. I sat down on the bed. Are you sleeping here, I asked. Only I don't really like sleeping with anyone else. And when I say *like*, I actually mean *can't*. I won't sleep, Mabel. And I need to sleep, because I've got a lot to do tomorrow, it's quite a packed trip really, so. I looked at her hopefully. Her skirt seemed familiar. My mother had a skirt like that, I say. She wore it at my first communion. Funny, she had a blouse like that too. Yes, she said. I borrowed it. What do you think, we get to keep our own clothes.

I have a nap. First I throw all the cushions off the bed, then I get under the covers, then I cover my eyes with my arm, then I lie there listening to the water moving through the pipes. The writer WG Sebald came to this hotel in the 1980s and found it on the verge of ruin, the once-legendary heating system erratic, the water full of rust, the windows filthy, whole sections closed off. He said the hotel was built in the late 19th century, of chestnut-coloured brick and chocolate-coloured tiles, and that there were nine floors, three below ground, and no fewer than 600 rooms. He said he never encountered any guests in the corridors, only an occasional chambermaid or waiter, prowling like a sleepwalker, and that the whole place was doubtless soon going to be sold off and transformed into a Holiday Inn, which shows he wasn't a very good prophet because in fact it's almost as posh now as it was right at the beginning, when Mr Rolls and Mr Royce went swanking around the front lobby creating cars for rich people to drive. He also said that while he was staying he had what might have been an auditory hallucination or alternately a slip in time, an opening up of the gates between ages, and he heard through the wall a singer he recognised from Liston's Music Hall in the 1960s, a small man in a herringbone coat and Homburg hat who would shuffle onto the stage and sing arias from Parsifal. There is no past, Mabel says again, but I don't listen to her. I go to sleep thinking about the singer, somewhere far behind the wall, and his voice gets mixed up with the water moving around the building and when I wake up the room is empty.

A man comes and brings a tray of coffee. There are two shortbreads on a plate, and a pink orchid in a water glass. Nice touch, I say out loud. There's a new noise now. It's the tram announcer from across the road. Something something something Altrincham. For a long time I thought Altrincham was pronounced All-trinch-ham. How would you know? You wouldn't know. Something something Altrincham, the announcer says, in a pleasant mechanical voice. It's spitting a bit and people are hurrying down the street. I'm right by the library and there's some kind of major building work going on in the square, diggers and JCBs and paving stones up and

holes dug right down into the earth, which I suppose is the same sort of earth you get on the moors, dark and shifty. I saw them from the train, a black lip at the edge of the city. I like Manchester. Canals and rain, things running into one another. A city on the slide, tumbling perpetually through cycles of ruin and renewal, buildings cropping up and falling down and being restored, the ghosts of millworkers wandering bewildered through gleaming museums and pizza parlours. When I was a teenager, I read a series of books set in a Manchester of the future, in which everyone was addicted to a drug called Vurt, which you took by sticking a feather down your throat. Curious Yellow and a man made of flowers, a plague of sneezing, a denouement that took place in an underground swimming pool. Dream images, the kind that linger. I look at the pink orchid again. Rain making patterns in the dust on the window.

As it happens, there is a basement swimming pool here, in this hotel. I'm canny about hotel pools, after all these years of drifting around. I go down just before it closes, because all I want out of life these days is a half hour in a pool all to myself. I have to sign in and get a key and find a pound for the locker. There are people about, not many, running on treadmills; also a couple playing table tennis in a beautiful panelled room painted a pallid arsenic green. Mabel was right. We are vulgar, with our nail extensions and our free weights and our Sky news, watching massacres on giant floating screens while we run nowhere, wasting our labour. Anyway. I put my suit on and go through to the pool, which is gloomy, like a street at dusk, and lined with violet tiles so lovely I'd like to chip them off and cart them home. Mabel's there, surprise surprise, sitting in the Jacuzzi. She's put on a shower cap, and she's wearing a swimsuit I had on a holiday in Italy in the 1990s. 1989, she says. Mark Warner. And weren't you awkward. Twelve, I say. An awkward age. Where exactly are you getting all this stuff, Mabel? It is the prerogative of the dead, she says grandly. I'm writing your biography.

I know why she's cross. I know why you're cross. I say. I would be too. I think it's a disgrace. Yes, but you still read them, she says. Which is true. Weren't you taught not to read other people's letters. Weren't you taught it at school. Weren't you taught by Sister Candida? Or that au pair, the nice one, what was her name, Yrsa? How do you know about Yrsa, I say and she gives me the it's the prerogative of the dead face and the how do you like it face and I say no, I don't like it, but that's what I'm trying to do, I'm trying to write about the past, I'm trying to write about dead people sympathetically, to explore all these issues, you know, privacy and exposure and what we keep secret and what we leave behind and she says there is no past and I say okay but there is and she says there is no past and I say yes but there is and she says where and I say well everywhere, here, I mean think about it, under this hotel there used to be an orchard owned by a man called Mr Cooper, probably full of all sorts of apples you can't get anymore, Catshead and Tom Putt and Ribston Pippin and Pittmaston Pineapple. And then before that it's where the Peterloo Massacre

happened, and okay, here's another one, this is great, the restaurant next door, through that green ping pong room, it used to be called the German Restaurant and it's where all the German cotton dealers went to eat, you know, when Manchester was Cottonopolis and people had money coming out of their ears, and then when the war came it was renamed the English Restaurant and all the poor Germans were whisked away to an internment camp on the Isle of Man, even some of the waiters in the hotel. And as I'm speaking I think of the hole in the street outside the library, going down through the pavement, down through the top soil, down into the earth. That's the past, I say. Under our feet. You have absolutely no idea what you're talking about, she says. Cut glass voice. You don't know the first thing about it. Fine, I say. Tell me. It's now, she says. That's all it is. Now. And she hits the water with the flat of her hand, an echoing slap.

I have a theory about hotels. This one seems solid from the outside, like a giant's wedding cake, but in fact it's hollow. It was built in the shape of a figure of eight, around two enormous light wells, twin abysses. That morning I'd walked all the way round it, floor by floor, ascending through the layers of a labyrinth so densely carpeted that I could barely hear the sound of my own feet. I didn't know what I was looking for, or rather I did, but I didn't know what it would look like until I found it. Maybe an open door to the roof, or a corridor for chambermaids: a passage that would lead me into the real hotel, the one behind the public shell. All hotels are hinged, that's my theory, composed of two halves: the one that's visible to visitors, and the other one, the busy workings, the infernal interior, which is entered via apertures so cunningly concealed that most of the time you don't even notice they're there unless someone steps out. I wanted to find one, and I wanted to sneak through it, but instead what I found was Mabel.

This is what had happened. When the hotel was refurbished, after Sebald visited, after the years of dereliction, someone had the bright idea of framing and hanging all the ephemera that had gathered over the years, silting up in offices and backrooms, squirrelled behind wardrobes, stacked into eaves. There were boxes and boxes of the stuff: Christmas cards that guests had sent to staff, silk stockings that people had abandoned, coiled like shed snakeskins at the end of a bed. There were stamps and first day covers and currency from countries that don't even exist any more. Some of the staff had started a drawing society called the Bellboy Sketchclub, and so there were sketchbooks crammed with caricatures of dogs and fat guests and one of a chair, above which someone had written *The chair is patient. I am not*, which is quite a striking thing to write if you are a bellboy, and makes you think of someone frustrated and talented, locked in position. And in addition, on top of all that, there were a lot of letters sent between guests, long-term guests that is, who'd used the hotel as a mailing address because they travelled so much. And one of these correspondents was Mabel and what she'd written were love letters. They weren't labelled as love letters, because maybe no one had ever read them all, since you'd

have to tramp from floor to floor, through snaking miles of corridors, putting the jumble into sequence, but all the same, that's what they were.

I walked all morning, piecing the story together. Two people, Mabel and Gordon. Gordon was an artist, sort of, and Mabel was – well, Mabel was married. Frankly, Gordon seemed a bit bossy in his letters, a bit brisk, a bit bluff. *It was frightfully good to receive your parcel last week. You really are a splendid girl. I only hope your hubby didn't see you wrapping up all the wonderful goodies.* Hedging, shifting between romance and control. *It's been such a long time since we have had a chance to meet that I feel quite beside myself, it really is too much, I've quite forgotten what you look like my dearest. No, no silly girl, I'm only joking. In fact if I'm honest I have to admit you're my constant companion.* Mabel's letters weren't like that. They were unguarded, open, clear as glass, clear as rain. They were the sort of letters you'd dream of getting. They came from all over the world, and they were illustrated with little sketches and paintings, sometimes of buildings, but mostly of insects and plants. *I have tried to take your advice and change the style of my sketches to those of the Dutch masters. I'm still here in Rome with a few hours to kill. I don't know what I would do without your letters to comfort me. Perhaps I can find my way to help you. I didn't quite know what to send, so I sent everything you love.*

Mabel is looking at her hands. I'm sorry, I say. I really am. But listen to them! You sound so interesting! You had a job, wait, let me find it. *I have news! I have been offered the post as Assistant Curator at the Botanical Archives. What do you think of that! My feet have hardly touched the ground in the last week. It's so exciting. I'll have to travel all over the world, gathering samples.* More acres than most women, Mabel. Nail parings, she says. Ashes. You're like a kitchen maid trying to imagine a feast. But the thing is, Mabel, I say. It's all there. I mean most times when you try and find out something about people who are dead, all the essential bits are missing. But there are letters here so live they practically burn your fingers.

Letter 1. Long. Written in haste, in the hotel. *Darling Gordon. What if we could. Do you think it's even. Then we must make plans. All these years. The American Bar.*

Letter 2. *What happened. I waited. Absolute hell. A day like this.* Writing smudged, as if it had been held under a tap. Pressed flowers beneath the signature, their colour drained to bluish brown.

Letter 3. Much later. *In life we must seize our opportunity. Never look back. We missed our moment, I know; a little hesitation and it passed us by. Our lives now have separate courses. Don't miss the chance. We will carry each other in our hearts, no matter where we are.* And a postscript: *It will always be 14 February at the Midland Hotel.*

Do you think maybe you're writing about yourself, she says. This is on the plane. She leans over and looks at my notes. *Still she thinks of him at 12 and 2 and 4, all the interstices of the night, when she rolls over, rocking herself into wakefulness. He is the beast in the forest, they have never spent a night together, he is the future that will not come, he is a country she is passing through on a train, he has two watches, which doesn't seem quite respectable, he smells of turpentine, his nails are dirty, she doesn't believe he will ever sell a painting, he is the wrong bet, the unmade bed, the debt she can't pay, her love.*

Those aren't my thoughts, she says. Those are yours. Everyone's loved someone they can't have, I say. And what's more, everyone's two people, the one who goes clicking forward in sturdy brown shoes, accepting job offers, giving papers, passing through the mill of life. And inside, the other one; the room that isn't entered, the infernal interior. A pause. She's in the spare seat, drinking my tomato juice. A small, neat woman, in a cloth coat. She looks like she laughed a lot. Do you know about the room with the invisible door, she says. Did they tell you? There was a room at the Midland with a wardrobe in it, and at the back of the wardrobe there was a concealed door that lead to the adjoining room, so that people – women, that is – could be made to disappear. We look at each other. I don't know what I'm supposed to do, I say. With all of this. Look. And I open my laptop, and I show her the photos I took of the things on the walls.

There are newspaper clippings about the moon landings and Victorian postcards of cherubic little girls and commemorative stamps from Prince Andrew's wedding to Sarah Ferguson and a dollar bill from Barbados and good luck cards and a painting of a beach in a storm and photos of sailors and a page torn from a dictionary, and none of it makes any sense, none of it has the significance it once did, but it's still here, unmoored, adrift in time. A list of pigeon racing fixtures, the long-dead birds with their flamboyant names: Morland Minx, General Factotum, The Eagle, Bow and Arrow, Swift Flight, Gay Gambler, Smithereens. There is no past, Mabel says, but this time she says it sadly, and I keep on clicking through the pictures, a newspaper clipping about dog food, a map of Rome, a photograph of women in long skirts and headscarves gathered in a bombed street, amidst the rubble, the pieces of their lives. Two of them are sitting on kitchen chairs they must have dragged out of their house, which is now open to the elements, the front almost completely blown away. A set of doors has survived on the second storey, opening onto nothing. The house next door is still intact. A woman is standing in the window, looking down at the wreckage, her face inscrutable, her hair concealed. I have no idea who they are or what they are or even what war it is. I don't know who took the photograph, or why. All I know is that the women persist, their headscarves unnaturally white, as if they'd only recently been bleached.

Mabel takes my laptop, and carries on clicking. She stops on a postcard labelled *1011. La Guerre 1914-17 – Offensive Franco-Anglaise – MAUREPAS (Somme) - Vue générale*. God only knows why someone sent that. It's of nothing, it's of what's left over when everything's done, which is mud and dust and splinters, a wreckage so absolute you can't distinguish a single article, not one noun, except the stumps of trees, shorn of their branches, and a wheel, right at the centre of the frame. What about that, Mabel, I say. What am I supposed to do with that? The past was the present, I get it, but it leaves bits of itself all over the shop. You can't ignore it, can you? It's like a bloody great weight; you can hear it breathing right down your neck. Voyeurism, she says, but this time she says it softly, almost nicely, and it isn't, or okay it is and it isn't, because mostly it's just trying to work out what things mean, what the point of it all is, because sooner or later we'll all be dead, and then who will come and root through our stuff? Is it better if they chuck it away, like so much rubbish, or if they hang it on their walls to peer at, prying out our secrets, worming themselves at our workings, our private insides?

I'm not going to absolve you, Mabel says, but I will tell you this. If you pick it up, you can't put it down. That's the price of looking. Never look back. Absolute hell. We carry each other in our hearts. You're breaking up, Mabel, I say, but I know she's right. If I was to look into my heart right now, I'd find it all there: white headscarf, moon landing, tree-stump and wheel. And now I've passed it onto you. There is no past except this pass-the-parcel. We carry it with us, willing or not, in splinters and smithereens; no matter where we are, no matter where we go.

Among the people whose work I am talking back to in this story, which is nearly but not quite true, are three writers I admire: Ali Smith, WG Sebald and Jeff Noon. I owe an even larger debt to Mabel Derby, whose letters I quote and to whom I hope I have done justice.