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Symphony
No. 3

Chris Eaton

FIRST EDITION

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Part I

Only children tell the whole truth, you know.

That's what makes them children.

— HENRY JAMES,
The Turn of the Screw

Allegro

SOME CREATURES DON'T DESERVE TO LIVE; THOSE without use, which should go without saying, but also those that are too useful, because they rob us of the opportunity for our own use, for achievement, greater self-reliance, the opportunity for purpose; the mules, the oxen; the camels; the ones who carry us into complacency 'til neither ride nor rider right; those that are good; those that are merely good enough; those who are merely good enough for something; those that are but pale copies of use; the bichon: a pale copy of the poodle and the barbet, who are, in turn, pale copies of pale copies of pale copies, teetering back to the first tamed wolf; the Bali tiger: runt of the species; the Arabian ostrich: mother of negligence; the ape: a laughingstock, a personal embarrassment; the Arabian horse; anything domesticated but especially cats; those that are meek, those who flatter, those who beg, those who gather; the whining collie, bleating meerkat, the emasculated bottle-nose (*kookaburra, kookaburra*), gentled bear; those who expect things, even if it's only bad weather; those who work and also those who will not, who never expect to do anything strenuous, or heroic, or even moderately active during the off-season; those who adapt; those who don't; those who fly because

they have wings; those who crawl because they do not; those who have neither wings nor bellies but still make the attempt, perhaps especially those, who aspire; the raccoons, washing their food like tiny little men, that can be dressed in all sorts of humiliating waistcoats and bobs; the immensely relatable; the uncomfortably honest; those who believe; those who long, even for the peaks of pointlessness, forging aimless out of instinct: the sea turtle, swimming steadily against the currents to Ascension Island to mate, just so the next generation can do it all over again; through all that golden-green water and over the dark, over the chill of the deeps and the jaws of the dark; the sun over the water; the sun through the water; the eye holding the sun, being held by the sun, with no thought of sharks and only the beat of the going, the steady wing strokes of the flippers and the going; those who feed off the weaknesses of others; those who seek community for protection; those with pus, those that preen: the peacock, the Lopshire leopard; those who seek attention merely by standing out; the parvenu, those sudden kings of France: the American mink, American bullfrog, sitting out on the edge of a mud puddle, fast asleep, American cottontail, the American loons, with their long-drawn unearthly howl, more a wolf's than any bird; the mimics, whose ambition calmly trusts itself to the road, instead of spasmodically trying to fly over it; those who are fierce; those who are of affectionate disposition; those who abide the laws; those who write them; those who aim for immortality; those who beach themselves like great pods of whales on the shores of fate, one eye pointed up at the sky, like Isaac to Abraham, the other planted more gratifyingly in the sand, and accept death as the end; those who care too much about this particular moment and their particular place in it.

On the other side are those who deserve to die not because they are similarly without use—because they are—but because they are just too good for this world, have done nothing to warrant this life besides being born, majestic and true, with-

out even dreams because theirs is naught with envy; Verreaux's eagle-owl: feasting on the pregnant hare; the king cobra: eater of other snakes; the fin whale: solitary beast of the sea and unconquerable Cain of its race, whale-hater as some men are man-haters; the Barbary lion: Lord of the Gladiatorial Rings. They barely exist in this world (could care less what the rest of us do) and are yet so often brought low by it. Surely this is why God gave the razorback its great fin, a constant reminder of its truth, projecting like a sundial to the time of its own death. I once saw one swarmed off the coast of Argentina by fewer than a dozen orcas, in the Samborombón Bay, a magnificent creature, over twenty metres in length by the captain's estimation, her dorsal curve as tall as a man, and her straight and single lofty jet rising like a tall, misanthropic spear upon a barren plain. She was gifted with such wondrous power and velocity in swimming as to defy all pursuit from man and our captain, who rarely perceived the necessity to speak with us, said the whalers had once avoided them, too fast for the trouble, but then the tide of the sperm whale receded, the tide of the right whale receded, and trouble took on an entirely new monetary value. There they were, her small black cousins, ennerved to slaughter by newly perceived weakness, their increasingly less furtive teeth upon her fluke. Would they have dared in her day? Like the gangs of Brutus upon Caesar? This is how God rights the world, his pity wasted on those who already receive enough of it. Imagine what this world would be like if He backed the winners for once, the strongest He bore upon the Earth, rather than this constant redistribution. Loftward heaved the razorback and violent brought her tail to crash upon her attackers. But we could readily see the bloody gash, the logjam roll of blackened snakes, the dorsal fin made nod and keel, and her cursèd fin, the fault of design, the sea, a jeering roil, kept her finite body up but drowned the infinite of her soul. The game past up, she carried her shame down to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before her passive

eyes, imprisoned not by man but by possibility, strands of flesh floating to the surface.

We found the lion later, perhaps too late—in the winter of our life (if the fin whale was the fall)—to teach us humility, forgiveness, to rebuild our living house, to tell the Truth, with his golden mane and great, royal, solemn, overwhelming eyes, we could not even look at him directly, even trapped behind bars in the botanical gardens of the Parc Zoologique Ben Aknoun, went all trembly, my brother from the impression of a delightful strain of music, I myself from the sensation of mysterious horror. Yet, at the baring of its teeth there was no more winter. At the sound of its roar, no sorrows. We named him Calando. If we humans had not come along, he would have likely ruled the world. Instead he was forced to witness his own slavery, the last of his kind. Even if a semblance of his old life could have been reproduced in its entirety, in some form of clear dome drawn miles wide, with an entirely replicated food chain, a blazing sun over some North African mountains, a tree branch for reclination, a lioness, and one or two cubs, would he still have been a Barbary lion? Would he still have been Free, would he still possess dignity? Would he know from the smell of the lamb, the loose folds of the antelope's limb, or the bland smack of the wounded waterbuck that it had been placed there by uniformed attendants with their own poor personal hygiene? Likely he gave it no thought. That is what life was and still is. Ben Aknoun existed as a deterrent to hope, or a monument to human mastery, depending on which side of the fence you stood. The lion's entire space was no more than five metres across, devoid of any natural clutter, with its shredded wooden flooring, two large rocks, and a rag doll, surrounded on three sides by walls of brick, a large rubber ball he never touched, a fallen tree. He had worn a path from the wall to the trough and seemed unable to deviate from it. And yet he also seemed oblivious to all of it, as though he existed on another plane, a separate dimension, looked at us like we look at rocks. We were

nothing more to him than rain, less than rain, less than a breeze, he may even have felt pity on *us*, as we pined for the recognition of accomplishments, of victories, for objectivity. The Barbary lion taught that the way was to become subjective, to become the subject. The Barbary lion was not a human being. It was not important for the Barbary lion to have visible evidence so that he could see if his cause had been victorious or not; he saw it in secret just as well. He looked at us as if to say: *As long as you are always looking down at others, you cannot see something that is above you.* And we listened. And we reconsidered. And my brother made a wretched compromise with the beast, in a language it could understand, called to the lion each day until it saw him, recognized him as an equal, coaxed the beast to the bars of its cell and slipped it bits of flesh through the fence when no one was paying attention, which was often, gradually increasing the amount of poison so it would remain undetected by the great beast until it was gradually lulled to a final, peaceful sleep.

Most everyone in this world is either a camel or a lion. The big question: which one are you?

When Camille Saint-Saëns died, there was a parade in the streets of Algiers, beginning at the Hôtel de l'Oasis, where a man named Hautbois unceremoniously slit my brother's throat and drained his blood slowly into a porcelain bowl, sprayed a diluted mixture of phenol and arsenic into his eyes, then filleted him from the lower margin of his rib cage to the superior crest of his hip, tore out his liver, his pancreas, cast his entrails momentarily to the side and dug deeper to remove his lungs, his stomach, reeling in his intestines like a fisherman coiling a rope. Recounting this does not come easy for me, but the task has occupied me totally, occupied me religiously, I have understood the completion of this authorship as my duty, as a responsibility resting upon me. Hautbois went to the balcony for a cigarette, left the heart and kidney to breathe. When he returned, he trimmed my brother's beard, set his mouth in a slight, uncharacteristic smile, shoved wads of cotton and gauze

into his anus, and dressed him with the help of our least Arabic servant in Camille's most expensive suit in preparation for the two-day steamer trip to Paris.

Hautbois was not a camel or a lion but a vulture, a tool, the mortician, his only purpose to introduce my brother to the crowds that had gathered outside, the body escorted by squadrons of cavalry, a mounted corps of Chasseurs d'Afrique, a full regiment of Zouaves in formal *sirwal*, a dozen Senegalese and a phalanx of Ponukelian, with their ebony skins, heavily armed beneath their trappings of feathers and amulets, five companies of imperial fusiliers, carrying the body on the backs of the people from the hotel to the pier, down Rue Tripoli, along the Boulevard de l'Armée de Liberation Nationale, past the beaches, the aforementioned zoo, the *bassin Anglais*, in full view of the lycée, the customs offices, and Aristide-Briand Square, snug between the Opera and the Theatre. When Camille Saint-Saëns died, there was a ceremony at the docks presided over by the archbishop, the governor general. All the players and singers from the Opera—in fact, every musician within a hundred kilometres—took to the streets to mark the occasion, to celebrate the passing of France's greatest composer—and at this point this statement was still true, especially in Algiers—by performing together one last time in his presence. When Camille Saint-Saëns died, they performed Beethoven's *Eroica*.

The state funeral back in France was held, as I recall, at La Madeleine. Franck, for obvious reasons, was not in attendance. Neither was Stravinsky, whom Camille once called “a political anarchist throwing bombs indiscriminately around Paris.” Monet sent his regrets by telegram from Giverny: *Suffering from cataracts STOP Unable to travel STOP Painted a weeping willow in his memory in a general reddish tone STOP*. Anyone else could not avoid it politically, not even Debussy, who once met Camille on the Channel ferry for an introduction to Sir Hubert Parry of the Royal College of Music, yet whom Camille later called (after a confrontation over the use of bassoons) *obsessed with the*

bizarre, incomprehensible, unplayable, his timing always a step or two behind the beat, nor de Givreuse, who had courteously reached out to Camille after being chosen over him for admission to the French Académie with *My dear colleague, l'Institut has just committed a great injustice*, only to receive Camille's matter-of-fact reply from the Canaries: *I quite agree*. In the end, Camille was their victor, it would be like not attending a treaty signing with Napoleon. Those who clearly posed no threat, whose stolid mediocrity remained the unwavering benefactor of Camille's support: Messenger, Widor, Duparc, Fauré, even Dubois; those who did pose one and he did everything to crush: in secret, Ravel, Chaminade, Massenet, and Dukas, whom he never forgave for also befriending Debussy, or more publicly, d'Indy and his acolytes (Canteloube, Auric, Poulenc, Milhaud, Satie, Honegger), who gathered toward the back to shake each other's hands and yawn in unison; d'Indy, who'd never had an original idea in his head, though not as bad as Vinteuil, who ran off with the melody of Camille's Violin Sonata in D minor, then had the nerve, when confronted, to say my brother was "a musician I do not care for"; the Americans: Hemingway, Stein, Valentino without his beard, Fitzgerald and Zelda; Enrico Caruso Jr., just seventeen years old, who had quite rightly distrusted the coroner's report on the cause of his father's demise as pleurisy with an intercostal neuralgia, instead blamed Camille, and refused to leave the coffin's side and then the grave all night in case the whole thing were a trick. Diémer had clearly rehearsed—and very nearly pulled off—the story of the time he had been prevented, by atmospheric inclemency, from performing with Saint-Saëns in a two-piano version of Liszt's Preludes; Camille had, on that occasion, simply placed both scores on his piano and played them simultaneously; the master Dutch cellist Joseph Hollman recounted to the delight of at least a third of the attendees his experience of performing the debut of the Cello Concerto no. 2, written specifically for him, forgetting the score in a taxi in his haste to make the performance at the Conservatoire, and

Camille, without a word of blame or blitheness, rewriting it from memory, as it was being performed, handing the pages up to Hollman from the prompter's box; even Dubois, whom everyone had supposed was already dead, told the story of one of Camille's first appearances as a live performer, when he not only surprised the entire audience by playing his Mozart pieces from memory, but then also offered up as an encore whichever of Beethoven's sonatas would please Her Majesty, Queen Maria. Though d'Indy was no doubt already considering his next move, it was still generally accepted, on that day, in the way these things are when someone has just recently passed, which is to say with the fantastic hyperbole of fact steeped in grief, that Camille Saint-Saëns was one of the best men France had ever known, that he had some faults but that, in the end—and in all things one must take the end into account—he was indeed as good if not better than (when also taken with all of their faults) Mozart or even Beethoven.

I was not asked to speak.

Of course, music isn't about a community of mutual support. Music isn't pleasant. Music isn't nice. Composing music isn't about entertainment or distraction. It isn't a compass, moral or otherwise, isn't therapy, isn't about revealing the true essence of life, the beautiful frailties and strengths of the human spirit. Music is about composers with no humanity not noticing other humans, as the rest of us don't notice ants, while engaging each other in war.

And one could question, after reading all this, whether it was all worth it, whether the lengths to which Camille went to destroy some of the most promising artists of his generation was in the best interest of art, or beauty, which is to say nothing of the others, the innocent bystanders, myself included. Otto Mahler could not take the success of his brother another day. Unable to deal with the emergence of Handel, Jeremiah Clarke flipped a coin to decide if he should hang or drown himself, and when the coin landed on its edge in the mud, used his pistol.

Who knows what more Tchaikovsky might have achieved had he not met my brother and taken his life at fifty-three?

Then again, we won.

When I am dead, people will make of me an imaginary figure, will claim I did not exist. Then this book will be truly terrifying. Non-fiction is a story that happened to someone else. It makes people feel safe. There's only one reason to study history: to confirm that one is less horrible than presupposed, or at least less horrible than others, to confirm that one is still among the living. As a creature of fiction, I will forcibly enable readers to pry themselves from the reality, imagine themselves in my place, create demons where there are no demons, reasons where there are no reasons, justifications where, but for I, to set structure to scripture, to ask, *What would I have done?* It takes a novel, a possible world, for people to feel like they've seen the truth, to make sense of their own existence, by bracketing it, falsifying it, creating a flow and movement, to dream. Real life has no such comfort. Real life is a kitchen drawer of elastics and strings, the cast-offs of order, with no more evil in a rusted corkscrew or creased orphan spoon than one might ascribe to the bite of a child, the sting of a bee, immutable, no different than death, confined only by the physical space of the pine box.

That's if death ever comes. I am no philosopher or scientist; I don't understand the System. I know the System exists, but not whether it is already complete or just a long rest. I'm not sure where it begins or where it ends. The whole idea that man could devote so much time to discovering the beginning of it all, the Origin, whether by math or by faith, is beyond me. Does the mountain cease to be a mountain because of how it was formed? Perhaps the rest of the universe recedes from Earth merely because we are repulsive. Perhaps, of all the bodies in corporeal existence, only ours is afflicted with this human stain.

Perhaps these other worlds recognize our hope and ambition and aspirations and are repulsed, physically, because our hope is so pathetic, and someday they will disappear entirely and eventually regroup somewhere else where we can never find them, an entirely different universe of contentedness, leaving us to take our tiny, torn corner for granted on our own. The universe is. Life is. Asking why is a thumb in the eye of God. Even though one is capable of converting the whole of one's life into the form of a story, be it short, parable, novel, or quest, it does not necessarily follow that one has adequately conceived that life, understands how one got into it, or how it got into one.

We were twins, Camille and I, born in Paris in 1835, in the third storey of the third house on the third street, surrounded by a man and a woman and a woman and a man. The men were weak and accepting of being weak. I remember my father's hands fumbling over the body of Camille like he was a wilting chard, then retiring to the settee for a cigarette before he could even consider me, which he never did. Surely his life as a civil servant had not trained him for much exertion, a government clerk responsible largely for taking notes no one ever read and helping to prop up a corrupt establishment by co-authoring, without credit, an analysis of the effects of stronger prison sentences on ethical conduct, the longest, dullest work of fiction ever penned in this country or any other, which made two things he and Proust had in common if you also count the pulmonary abscess. I don't suppose my father could even have been called a camel, so little he accomplished in his short time on Earth. But at least he worked. People have to work to exist, to warrant their existence, to earn the resources with which to subsist. The only exceptions, at least partially freed from the preoccupations of livelihood, are children, old people, the crippled, the sick, and the voluntarily parasitic, the category to which you might assign my aunt Charlotte and her inappropriately named husband, Esprit. My uncle had decided it was his calling to be a noble bookseller, and his largest success, finding

himself with a roof over his head and regular meals, was largely accidental. For surviving the banality of my father's existence, France awarded my mother a regular dollop of assistance, to be used together with the meagre earnings she collected as a maid to the other more affluent personages in our building, and Charlotte and Esprit rewarded themselves for their genetic association and geographic proximity by taking over the first bedroom on the left, by rights mine, and transforming it into a mausoleum for Esprit's unsold stock, whereby Camille and I were forced into precarious cohabitation on an abbreviated mattress in the hallway closet.

Camille was easily the favourite, the gifted one, the golden child who could do no wrong. My mother and Charlotte lavished him with attention while I was largely ignored, was even left to go hungry, to basically fend for myself, so engrossed were they with my brother and his massive hands. An example: one of my earliest memories is of the park not far from our home, with its splendid fountains around which dozens of children would expel energy and would not stop. We would go and go and Camille would run his drills and because I was generally considered talentless, not worth the time of practice or aspiration or ambition, I was free to run among the park's many statues and press my face to the busts of King Henry IV and Louis XIII and sleep in the laps of Blaise Pascal and Saint Augustine and help Barye's Yvain battle the serpent and hide in the folds of the huge copper robes of François Rude's *Henri Bergson Losing His Faith*. A park is the furthest thing from real life you can find, and sometimes you just need that. It's not really the city, not really the wild, almost an imaginary place, a poor man's facsimile of the idea of nature. A park full of statues is the same but more so, existing not only outside of space but outside of time. No matter when they are made, both parks and statues come from the past, look old, are designed to look old, something that has existed longer than I have and will likely continue to exist long after I am gone, while the city continues to grow around it. If a city is

a living, breathing thing, a growing thing, a constantly changing thing, then the park is a city's enduring heart. Did you know a lion's heart never grows? Like a human's eyes, which are fully formed in the head of a seven-year-old, a baby lion is burdened immediately with the full weight of its life, barely able to carry the load of existence, and as it grows, rather than getting any better, it actually becomes less and less able to manage the rapidly expanding size of its body. This is why lions are unable to run long distances, as opposed to hyenas, who have hearts that comprise more than twice the percentage of their body weight, and the real explanation for Richard the Lionheart's name, as he took his holy war to Saladin's Arabs at Acre, barely able to stand from scurvy, firing crossbow bolts at the walls from a stretcher. The statues of Lionheart never show that.

I apologize. When you have all the time in the world, you find even more time for distractions. On the day I'm remembering, the air was mild and flooded with sunshine and shadow. The sky was as clear as if the angels had washed it in the morning. A group of workers and students were chanting near the big building at the north end and appeared to be having a great go of it. I watched them for some time, as they pushed closer to something I couldn't see, then retreated again. I found it soothing. My aunt Charlotte took out a basket, from which she removed three small sponge cakes (possibly dipped in chocolate, this detail is fuzzy), handed one to my brother, one to my mother, and kept one for herself, and I crept up from behind, intent on snatching one before anyone could notice. Suddenly there was a gunshot at the pond, followed immediately by several others, and a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon this extraordinary thing that was happening around me. Men came rushing past us like startled gazelles, erupting from the hedge and brush in huddles of twos and threes, bayonets out like antlers. The first of them, removed at several stages from the actual threat, danced around the sculptures and brooks, coursed around our blanket rather than over it, safe in

the knowledge that they were outrunning the others, calculated and dull. But later the runners were whipped with blood and spittle, frothing and lowing, with a terror that was pure and beautiful, without time for thought. From whence did it come? What did it mean? How could I seize and apprehend it? Like any child, I turned to my mother to share in the experience, but she was already moving, reaching instinctively for Camille, only slightly slower than my aunt, who tossed my brother over her shoulder, lively and swift like a bird, and I was left with nothing but the retreating face of Camille, a face in miniature, sullen and discontented and sad.

My mother never once spoke to me, would not even look at me directly. I was an orphan with two mothers and a father, the brother of an only child. Not that I blame or resent them. I have no regrets. Had I not been forcibly born into this family of neglect, what might my life have borne? A family of poverty? A family of abuse? The seventh unwanted son of a seventh unwanted son? Perished well before my time? In this life, no one yelled at me. No one molested me. No one set my cheek to the stove. No matter what anyone tells you, life can always be worse. So I made the most of it, and might even have been described as happy, if anyone had ever bothered to take notice of me at all, or if happiness were a real thing. The fact is, it was clear to everyone around me, including myself, that I was unimportant, would never change the world. I was not to be heard, nor to be seen. Even before we were born, my mother had dreamed that her sons would be, in sequence, a musician, a sculptor, and a painter, no doubt spurred by dreams of financial success in the arts as espoused by her sister and brother-in-law. Camille, as the first to draw breath, had his career set; I, in turn, well, let's just say there wasn't enough to invest in the proper training of two offspring at once. Thus it became Camille's job to channel the music, to be a pure vessel for its delivery, to create beauty, while my purpose, conversely, was merely to observe, to walk the grand salons of Camille's life like a careless tourist, without

schedule or plan, not even looking at each painting on the walls, necessarily, but aware of each one nonetheless. I would make no impression on the world and thus was free to live the life less purposed, less underscored, less italicized, with the hope that I might, purely by perceptiveness and proximity to greatness, learn more to see as beautiful what is necessary in all things.

Thank goodness Camille displayed such unmistakable signs of such an abnormal musical instinct, both for my mother and aunt but also for himself. He was not a handsome baby, or toddler, and it was clear he longed for attention, so this seemed his ticket. Charlotte spent our week's food allowance on the services of a professional tuner and directed him to the square Zimmerman we'd inherited from the apartment's previous tenants because it had been judged too cumbersome and poorly maintained to warrant relocation. When it was finally opened to my brother's inspection, instead of banging inaccurately up and down on the keys as the majority of children do at that age, he touched one note gingerly after another, as though sampling a cake batter, craning his neck and lingering on each resonance until the sound had completely died away. Charlotte knew less about the piano than Esprit knew about bookselling. The closest she had come to one before was in the dictionary looking up *piazza*. She was inordinately familiar, however, once again thanks to her husband, with tedium and resilience. So she inquired about primers, and had Camille focus on drills, repeated patterns: four-octave scales, arpeggios, more octaves; steps, skips, and intervals; backwards, frontwards, inverted, transposed. Camille was made not only to command the patterns but also to memorize each exercise by heart, able to perform them in any tonality at any speed. We were made to sit on our left hands while performing with our rights, then the reverse, to keep us from putting the parts together too early. We were made to read books while we practised, so we could perform as if asleep. Charlotte would shout at us with arithmetic, with questions of anatomy, philosophy, any attempt to distract us.

Until she couldn't distract us. And Camille was made to hold mugs of scalding coffee with one hand, and sometimes knives, with pencils across his knuckles to keep them flat. And lord knows where Charlotte got them, but sometimes Camille was made to play with tangerines cupped in his palms, to ensure the proper arch of his wrists. Charlotte taught us the names of the notes and almost immediately Camille could identify each from the next room as they were struck. Only then were we allowed to move on to actual melodies. And when Camille moaned that the left hand in popular children's music was too dull, complained that it did not sing, that it gave him great pain to perform it, Charlotte tracked down a copy of *Le Carpentier Method*, designed for adults, which he mastered in a month, and some simpler works by Haydn and Mozart, which appeared to satisfy him, at least for a time.

Camille cried like a lost soul when the piano was closed, as it sometimes was in the early days to permit the rest of our worthless uncle who often complained of migraines from looking so purposefully at the books he couldn't sell. But this was yet another war Esprit could not win, and eventually my mother, bless her soul, demanded the fallboard be left open so my brother could express his thoughts in music instead of screams. We practised at least five times a day, except on the days when we didn't and on those days we practised at least six. Some days, as I have already mentioned, we went to the park and practised there, and Camille played the fringe of the blanket between our mother and aunt. Some of this was a strengthening exercise. But he didn't need the piano any more to know what sound it would produce when struck, which was why, in his later years when we spent so much of our time in exile, he was able to produce so much of his work without sitting down at any instrument. I was permitted during these lessons to share the bench, but only barely, and not to touch or speak, so I contented myself at the window instead. The window was never open, for fear of incurring the wrath of my brother, who claimed it burdened him with

draft upon his shoulders. But still I was drawn to it and the vantage from which I could safely witness the world outside. I hated the woman pushing the pram, hated the newspaper boy, hated the moon, but mostly I hated the woman from the basement. Her name was Basson and she was a widow. I knew this because of her unfaltering fashion sense, and I had seen her appear from our building and had read the names on the postboxes and, by gradual process of elimination, I reasoned she wasn't the prostitute whose name was left blank (who lived directly below us) nor the mother of five named Durand (from the flat above ours) who let her kids cry all day in one room while she entertained her lover in the next; she was not the wife of the painter next door who had been a student of Ingres, nor was she the woman whose apartment also shared our floor who claimed to be the Vicomtesse de Ségur. I once overheard that last one reciting her family web to the postman, dressed in the most outrageous silk deel at seven in the morning, with an open neckline and sash (I suppose at one point in her life she must have been considered beautiful), but I knew she spent most of her days at home drinking and confiding in her dog. Our building was full of horrible people. The widow Basson was supported by a son who had fled her to South Africa, just to escape her horribleness and his duty to that horribleness. On multiple occasions I witnessed her standing in the middle of Rue du Jardinnet, shouting at the sky in what I assumed to be Italian although the first time I heard it I seriously had no idea. She had trouble with the front steps, required the help of passing strangers to descend from their precipitous seven-inch peaks, so she began each trip as the mother of grace and gratitude; but once she had managed that small victory over nothingness, she was omnipotent, like a storm cloud or a spilled chamber pot, quickly turning on her unexpectant benefactor, like a capsizing ship to the shadowed dinghy. She swung her scowl at complacency, trembled at audacity, smiled at babies but not the producers of said babies, and meanwhile wandered vulnerable among the hooves of horses

and the poor of humanity, and no one from our building said anything to her when she did this. No one gently took her arm or spoke softly to her or made any attempt, physical or verbal or even divine, to guide her demented sob story back to the safety of the walk, the worst sort of camel, a hunchbacked beast with so much burden that she could do nothing but announce it, over and over, and still no one provided assistance. Maybe no one can see her, either, I thought. Just me. Maybe she's just like me. Given the opportunity, I decided, I would end her.

Eventually Charlotte lined us up with the other precious boys at the Conservatoire, a line that wound around the corner and down the street, all the little French boys with their parents' dreams in their pockets. At this age, acceptance to the school was unlikely to happen unless the child was already born with perfect pitch, a group test administered by one of the conservatory professors. The children were brought in five at a time, mostly five- and six-year-olds, mostly from much wealthier neighbourhoods and families. We were only four, and clearly the only ones who could not afford to be there. Yet there we were, all the same. The other boys were unsure, uncommitted, and Camille and I rolled our eyes at each other as the rests between the notes stretched longer and longer. When it came to Camille's turn, my brother answered each strike without hesitation, spoke the letter with such surety, such arrogant confidence, that the other boys were stunned by it all. As a group, they took a step back to admire it, the spectacle of his conversance with the instrument, as though he were not just passively listening to the notes but actively participating in an exchange with it, in a language they just couldn't understand. Who was this child? they wondered. What was he doing? Then, from the other end of the line, one of the other boys laughed. Then another. And another. The professor tried to shush them, but by then it was pointless. Camille had been wrong every time. The professor shook his head and, to restore decorum, we were shown the door.

Charlotte didn't speak until we had returned to our apartments, and even then went immediately to the piano and drove her finger to each key like a stake to my brother's heart, as though the embarrassment of his failure was hers alone, that he had purposefully caused her dream to miscarry before its term (out of malice, the spiteful child), had set her up, as it were, for the worst sort of mortification (anchored so firmly as it was in public ambition). I'm not entirely sure why my aunt never had children of her own, whether it was by choice of ambition, misfortune of tubing, or fear of propagating the seed of Esprit, but she had wedged all of that potential energy instead into birthing success, had endured the back pains and nausea and sleepless nights, tending to my brother's talents, so that she might one day be rewarded with the love and affection of financial stability. Camille, she could have cared less for. If she could have punished realchild to benefit dreamchild, she surely would have done so. Did so. Frequently. So it was not out of character, at this moment, to choose shaming as her first recourse, and each note she forced on him was no longer a test as it was an attempt to remind him of his inadequacies. Camille's hearing was excellent, however, if not perfect. And it quickly became clear that our piano tuner, despite his assurances, had done the sort of job you might do for someone of our class. My aunt had to forcibly accompany the professor back to our flat to prove it, where Camille first played a short piece by Ries, after which the professor ordered him to play a Bach fugue (my brother selected the C minor from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*) and then requested that he transpose the fugue at once into another key, which my brother also did. The professor paused, looked around the room, at the outdated drapes, our scuffed bench and sagging upholstery, the glass I'd knocked over two days previous and no one had bothered to sweep up, and said: *What will the other children think?*

Charlotte replied: *They will think they are inadequate.*

When Camille played the piano, it was like God at the treadle, and the music surged upward from the soundboard and the casement in coursing waves of sound, multiform and indivisible, smooth and restless, like the deep blue tumult of the sea. At four and a half, despite his rejection from the Conservatoire, he composed a variations around a lullaby our mother had sung to us in our infancy, but also birthing intricate variations around any sound he heard in the world, a shattering wineglass or melting icicle, the symphony of the kettle with its introductory oboe solo, or the sound of a blackcap mimicking a nightingale at dusk. When we went to the park, the sparrows twittered in the depths of the chestnut trees and the hammers of the men at the nearby construction site fell like the skittered claws of great beasts upon a polished marble floor. I could hear it and ignore it with all my being. Camille would hear the same thing and experience Hercules reciting a madrigal to the Velleda.

For Charlotte and Mother, however, children were manifestations of life's second chances, and they remained convinced not only that Camille needed guidance to reach his full potential, but that huge numbers of older artists must be lining up to find gifted children to pass on what they had learned before coming up short, someone to resent and push. So many, having come so close, must have seen the potential for domination through a surrogate. The old men without children were without hope. Camille's first instructor was Camille-Marie Stamaty. Mother and Charlotte wanted a name, someone with notoriety and connections to the best performance halls. And Stamaty had not only worked with the young American Louis Gottschalk, he also charged the largest fees. Charlotte took one of Camille's scores,

helped clean up the penmanship, and waited for Stamaty on the steps of his home. He sniffed, took a quick glance, and said: *The first reiteration of the motif is overly simple. You see here how it merely copies the pattern of harmony and restates the theme in weaving quavers? Do you know what Gottschalk was doing at five? Pause. The second pass is also not especially remarkable but not especially bad either. But the third...* Out of nowhere, Camille had shifted everything into an unlikely waltz in a major key, and you could tell by the old man's face that he found it impressive. *Perhaps*, he said, *if he can learn to keep his passions in check and if he follows my instruction properly.*

Stamaty taught a fine, crisp, even-filigree style, with a concentration on the evenness of blows when performing scales, the fluidity of strokes, the independent movement of body and arms, mind and spirit. Within two weeks, however, Camille already found him inadequate, deplored his perpetual legato, like a drunken bear trying to slur his way through Molière. Stamaty seemed unable to see beyond the saccharine models of the day, the waltzes, fantasies, quadrilles, and variations so dear to the nineteenth century, while Camille was already looking beyond. And he also spent at least half of the first month's lessons convalescent on the settee from a combination of rheumatism—for which he carried jars of live bees, to agitate and apply to his arms and thighs, so the venom could reinvigorate his circulation—and a general sort of Calvinist gloom, which was thought to have been eradicated in the late 1600s but had recently experienced another outbreak, particularly among the artistic community. He woke only to request a repetition, or another glass of brandy, or to scratch out an invoice, and six weeks later I looked out the window to see him shouting in the street, that Mother had still to pay him for what he knew and that he was withdrawing his services. Charlotte tossed a potted plant at him from my side and said that what he knew was worthless.

It was all part of Charlotte's plan. She already had what she wanted and, far from dispirited, spent the day ordering Esprit

to move the writing table, move the console, shift the armchairs, angle the commode, transforming the sitting room into a parlour, while I tried to trip him up by getting underfoot. In most situations I was only an idea of a person, an abstraction. There was no real me: only an entity, something illusory, especially in the shadow of my brother; I would never surmount what he would do. But like Chopin (who must have woken one day in sweats to realize he would never be another Mozart, let alone a Schubert or a Mendelssohn), rather than giving in, I could take pains to entrench my position of inconsequence, fully aware that I would pass through life not as an active participant, not the hero, as most people see themselves, surrounded by spear carriers, but as an observer, a critic, a poet like Homer or La Fontaine, typical ghost things, separated from the struggle, the morality, like shake the flame of the chandelier, cause a table knocking bold, rile the hair or quicken the bladder. I would never be an artist, a ship carrying the world's most precious cargo through the storm, but somehow by swerving in and out of his step, step, step, I could be like the critic, a ship's captain in Camille's storm, trying to find the strength to turn the wheel. Esprit didn't know I was there, could not feel me exactly, but more than once he took a swig from his bottle and faltered and swore and, rather than listen to him complain, I suppose, Charlotte finished the redecorating herself and sent him out to paper our neighbourhood with bills instead. For weeks he did this, advertising the great prodigy Saint-Saëns and of course using the names of Stamaty and Gottschalk quite liberally, along with several other local musicians and composers we had never even met, let alone studied under. Come on, everybody, the posters said, come on over here to our apartment, come on, everybody, I have something to show you, just wait till I show you what he can play on this little BOX! It was amazing. My brother began the first night with a waltz by Liszt, then opened the floor to requests, having already memorized countless popular concertos. Unfortunately, most of the attendees had no previous knowl-

edge or experience of music, the seats lathered immoderately with the tactless other inhabitants of our building, people for whom my mother cleaned house, or other women my mother knew who cleaned house, or bookseller friends of Esprit who drank quietly in the corner and ogled the women who cleaned house; there was the negligent mother and her bawling children; there was the widow Basson and there was the prostitute, moaning softly in the back for different reasons; there was Basson's saint of a son; and there was the Vicomtesse, crowned in an oversized hat of white fox fur, her bichon Timbal pitched under her arm, accosting anyone who would listen to her drone about her Mongol hordes, and I began to wonder if she wasn't perhaps more loosely connected cerebrally than the widow Basson. Very few people don't take the truth as an offence—Esprit was another conspicuous example—but the Vicomtesse clearly considered the truth her mortal enemy and did it battle regularly. She was a writer of children's books; her husband, the grandson of a famous diplomat, wrote poetry; her own father had once been the Minister of Foreign Affairs for Russia *and* the Governor of Moscow *and* had set fire to all the Russian capital's churches and monasteries to stave off the invasion of Napoleon. There was no way to tactfully deny them, however, and Charlotte figured, correctly, that numbers were more important at this point than appreciation, but it clearly offended Camille to play their mindless folk songs from the provinces before finishing with Mozart, lowering the fallboard, and giving himself over to the fussings and dotings.

Rather than be forced to witness it, I lingered instead at the back near the harvest of chocolate and cakes and tried to blow into his ears so that he might bark. But Timbal could see me! And finally, after being alone my entire life, I had a companion. A spear! I could order him to fetch me things, to help me harass the ankles of my uncle more physically and piss in the shoes of attendees who had affronted me either by quoting Robespierre or being presumptuous with their attire. From then on

I took pains to disrupt the evening whenever possible, simply for the joy of witnessing Charlotte's face as another plate of pressed caviar and tomatoes crashed to the floor amid Timbal's scampers and yelps. I felt for the first time real. Then, on one occasion, mid-performance, surprising even myself, I set the bichon's jaws to howling, and my brother's countenance at the keys grew distinctly heavier. Camille hated the bichon at that moment, like a flower hates the tree that overshadows it. He demanded that Timbal be excluded from all future performances, Charlotte refused until attendances became higher, and the bichon and I were free to continue our reign of terror until tragically one day someone left the window open and tiny Timbal fell to his death.

Eventually the musicians began to show up, lured as much by the posters and word of mouth as by a rumour my aunt had started that my mother was not only wealthy but single. Charlotte had her eyes on Victor Massé, who had placed quite highly in a recent Prix de Rome (a prize in composition for seniors at the Conservatory that came with a scholarship to study in Italy), losing only to Edouard Batiste's *Musique de Zèbre*. He bragged often about being on terms with Berlioz, as well as Pierre Baillot, which should have been the first sign he was desperate enough to take us on. But the clearer indication was that, even setting the bar for his acquaintances so low, he arrived mostly with other younger musicians—and nearly every week.

Baillot might have been a more desirable choice, but the closest we ever got to him was one of his students, Antoine Bessems, whom Baillot had dropped after years of refusing to listen to him. As a teenager, the young violinist had ventured to Paris from Antwerp on scholarship to make his name as a musician and composer, during the brief period when Belgium was still part of the Empire and its citizens might yet have a chance of making something of themselves. He was not, perhaps, the best violinist in the capital—he played too much from the arm and his bow fought against the direction of the bridge instead of working with it—but he was the most beautiful, and was soon tapped as the soloist for the French debuts of Weber and Schubert, summoned to perform for Louis XVIII and Charles X and many other names and Roman numerals besides. *The musician should disappear, Baillot tried to teach him, until he is only the music. Like a ghost, we should not see him—only the movement of the floating candelabra, only the flickering flame—he should haunt*

the theatre with the spirit of the composer. But Bessems was born to be a star. The tics Baillot aimed to eradicate were what drew the greatest gasps, brought the whoops and claps and all, and rather than following the conductor, he rushed to crush the bow to string, to push, to push, push, pushing the orchestra, forward and forward, leading the conductor on his chase until the room was filled with laughter and eyes wide and mouths wide and flowers were tossed and Baillot, lurking in the wings, would shake his head and say: *Now we have to start all over again!*

Then, in Bessems's final year at the Conservatoire, when he should have been preparing his acceptance speech for the Prix de Rome, Paris was consumed with a new fever for a Norwegian toddler named Bull who was already the first violinist for the Bergen Philharmonic. The exception to the rule, Bull had been discovered not by a falling Icarus but by a French Hermes, a salesman and amateur anthropometrist named Bertillon who, inspired by the work of Camper and Daubenton in predicting criminal tendencies through physical proportions, had begun to test some of his own theories for forecasting a vessel of perfect musical expression. Bertillon travelled Europe extensively for work, attending as many local performances as possible, then lurked at the back doors, long after the performance was complete and: *Oh! Hello!* He had no more than twenty-four seconds to explain it to them, what their participation would mean to future generations, to the future of their art, but he was a salesman, after all, and it didn't take many failures to hone his pitch, press the future, posterity, vanity. *You are the ideal, he said, you are perfection, never have I seen a more impressive finger span,* he lifted the arm, pulled the sleeve taut, *do you mind? You might have a longer little finger than Viotti! A thicker neck than Durand!* Could they meet the next day? Perhaps? Before breakfast? He could bring croissants, he knew a place. Or even better, if they just stepped back inside? For a moment? It was a simple procedure, wouldn't take more than a few minutes, he was almost certain they'd outdo Kreutzer and, by that point, if he had them still

at that point, it was relatively simple to talk them out of their clothing, to measure them nude, the details notched in his notebook: the length of the fingers, the breadth of the wingspan, the nipples, the weight, the height, height sitting, height to the knees, to the pubis, to the shape of the skull, the girth of the neck, the waist, the chest, depressed and inflated, fifty-three precise measurements that he was able to complete, after a few years of experience, in under six minutes, so long as the environment was as close as possible to twenty-three point eight nine degrees Celsius, and then he was gone. Sometimes it took longer, particularly if they asked too many questions. *A muscle knows when it is being watched*, he said, *and will grow or rest accordingly if considered*. Had they heard of Professor Lehmann? From Copenhagen? He had developed a thermometer that could detect differences of zero point one one degrees and had shown that thinking about a hand while measuring its temperature could produce measurable deviations. *It's fascinating, really...when you think about it*. And then he would laugh, every time like it was the first. He hoped to eventually go searching for the same ratios in toddlers and infants before they had even touched an instrument, perhaps before they had even heard a note. But every measurement shifted the needle. And the more maestros he touched, the more contact he craved. Here he was, in the presence of such greatness, and all he needed to prolong it was one more measurement.

So he did. For years and years. Until he arrived in Bergen on business and, finding the brandy so good and so cheap, postponed his departure for several years to finally apply his findings. One morning he stumbled to the pharmacy to ease his hangover and *fylleangst* and was attacked by a display of cod liver oil in the process of being stacked by the owner's grotesque five-year-old. The pharmacist rushed from the back with his belt, swatting the child around the shoulders and ears as Bertillon stared, amazed at what he was seeing, and when he was too exhausted to continue, offering Bertillon anything he wanted in the store, Ber-

tillon pointed at the boy. *He's an oaf!* Bull's father laughed. *He can't stand still without tripping over his patience. You think he can join an orchestra?* But Bertillon assured him: *A clumsy person is nothing but a sufferer of partial paralysis. There are undeveloped nerve centres or nerve fibres that, if not quickened into life, will continue to degenerate and in their decay will involve or at least affect connected appendages. With the proper exercises, he can overcome that—at least in his fingers; dimensions do not lie.* Bull's father did not understand music, nor did he really understand much French. Bertillon, additionally, had no idea how to teach a child the violin, had no capacity for it whatsoever. But the Frenchman had faith in his measurements and bought the boy a lovely red violin, though it was not made for a child and Bull complained regular of sore neck and fingers, and took him to the Bergen Philharmonic, hoping he might just absorb it. Even when he began to moan and wail at the sound of it and they were escorted to the street, Bertillon brought him back the next night, and the next, until one day young Bull was quiet through the entire first movement and then politely requested to go relieve himself and leaped out the window into God's sunshine and air to escape it.

Bertillon was crushed—until he realized Bull had taken the violin with him. No one had ever given him anything before, certainly nothing so beautiful, and they found him down at the water, asleep, cradling the thing against his body like he was a swan protecting his offspring. He told Bertillon that it spoke to him, that he would wake in the middle of the night and hear it calling to him from the other room, with its pretty pearl screws and so red and so smiling at him, and he would take up the bow and speak to it and it spoke back and told him it would be pleasant if he were to pick it up and splay it cross the strings, just a very, very little; and it did sing to him so sweetly that he played a capriccio louder and louder against midnight until he felt his father's belt across his shoulder blades for waking him and the precious thing dropped to the floor and was shattered. Bertillon just bought him another. And even when he happened to maul

two strings at once, or just barely missed his pitch, his thickening fingers were always where they were supposed to be, not always hitting the right note but never seeking the wrong one. And soon after they were in Paris taking the world by storm and Bertillon began writing his book and Bessems's life was over. He tried his best to compete, attended each of Bull's concerts in search of some advantage, but quite swiftly the invitations—to performance, drinks, and various clandestine meetings—began to sparse. He'd gigged briefly around the capital for over a year before graciously accepting a post as the director of a children's choir in the 13th arrondissement, an overcrowded neighbourhood that was, at best, standing on an overturned barrow peering into the window of middle class. Bessems was not a camel or a lion, more like the sea turtle, albeit less successful even than that. He was not very bright, and had long ago used up any contacts he might once have had. Do you know the monarch butterfly? The sea turtle's migration is foolhardy but attainable; the monarch's entire purpose is founded in futility. Shat in a patch of milkweed at the edge of a Mexican corn field, they begin their fantastic voyage most immediately they're hatched, striving for a northern destination they will never reach, their quest taken up by offspring as each previous generation burns itself out mid-trip. Bessems was similarly aimed at a goal far beyond his life force, but unlike the monarch, it was just as unlikely that his grandchildren would make it as he would. Still, Charlotte let him perform some of his own compositions one night, just to see, and while my brother cringed visibly in the back Bessems played, we somehow ended up studying with him for the next two years. I use the words *studied with* rather delicately, instead of saying *studied under* or *apprenticed under*, because I think it likely Bessems learned as much from the exchange as Camille did. But my brother also enjoyed having someone to perform his violin sonata and he was also a passable pianist and we were in dire need of anyone with adult hands to tackle the works Camille was now composing. Thankfully my mother dreaded

handsome men, which Bessems would have known had he only taken a moment to study the image of my father in the entry; otherwise we might have been stuck with him forever.