

The Second Mourning of Cole Afcott, Chapter 1¹



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Some creatures don't deserve to live.¹ 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 until neither ride nor rider lurch 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 gray 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 bottlenose (*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

¹From a novel-in-progress about the life of Camille Saint-Saens, the death of art, and how he was quite possibly Jack the Ripper. Forthcoming from BookThug Publishing in 2016. .

moderately active during the off-season; those who adapt; those that 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 that long, even for the peaks of pointlessness, forging aimless work out of instinct: the sea turtle, swimming steadily against the current all the way to Ascension Island to mate, so the next generation can do it all over again, through all that golden-green water 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 it with no thought and only the rhythm of the going, the steady wing-strokes of the flippers in the water, I can't believe it, do the turtles know about sharks, do they not think about the sharks when they're swimming that 1,400 miles, I can't believe they'd swim 1,400 miles thinking about sharks; those that feed off the weaknesses of others; those who seek community for protection; those with puss, 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 also 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, without even dreams because theirs is naught with envy; Verreaux's eagle-owl: feasting on the pregnant hare; the king cobra: eater of snakes; the fin whale:

solitary beast of the sea, the banished and unconquerable Cain of its race, whale-hater as some men are man-haters; the Barbary lion: King of the Beasts, 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 pointing 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, as though this should have been a warning to us upon our arrival in Buenos Aires. She was a magnificent creature, near seventy feet 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. 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. And there they were, her small black cousins, enervated 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 beasts He bore upon the Earth, rather than this constant redistribution. At one point, the razorback violently heaved her tail loftward, brought it crashing upon her attackers. She had some fight remaining. But we could see the bloody gash, the log jam of rolling black snakes. We saw the dorsal fin nod and keel, her cursed fin, the fault of design, the sea jeeringly kept her finite body up, and drowned the infinite of her soul. Once she knew the game was 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 began 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. And 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 the semblance of His 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 this is still what life 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 fifteen feet across, devoid of any natural clutter, with its shredded wooden flooring, two large rocks and a ragdoll, surrounded on three sides by walls of brick, a large rubber ball it 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 it 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 that it would remain undetected by the great beast until it was gradually lulled to a final sleep.

Most everyone in this world is either a camel or a lion. (The reference to Nietzsche is not lost on me. Have you read him? You should. He was a venerable, humble and honest thinker, with impeccable music taste, whose writings surely no one can read without the deepest emotion. He did what he said and said what he did, a great rarity in any time.) 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 alone. 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 five companies of imperial fusileers, 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 miles – 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*.

A 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 Camille’s memory in a general reddish tone. 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: Messager, Widor, Duparc, Fauré, even Liszt and 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 others 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 min* 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; and 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 both 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 that 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 supposedly 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.