

Three Poems on the Violin

JAMES HATCH

To the Makers

*(All those who continue the tradition,
from Gasparo, Maggini, and the Amatis on)*

Searching for the first, true ringing note,
The maker taps the tonewood,
The old-growth, fine-grained maple and spruce
From trees that lived on the northern slopes:
Felled in their winter sleep
And then as fitches bare let rest,
Years seasoning in smokeless air.
So much remains beyond your care,
For time alone can set this solid stillness singing.
 (And you have found, there is another with you
 Who waits and hopes.)

To tune the spirit, cut and carve this flesh.
Lest there be too much of matter left,
With rule and compass trace, with calipers judge
What chisel and plane must clear
To swell the arch and scribe the edge
And curl the Archimedean scroll, elegant and animal,
Till it unroll like a mountain-goat's horn or spiraling seashell.
 (And you have found, there is another with you
 Who conceives the negative space.)

Then turn chemist, alchemist, and light the fire,
Crush sandarac and mastic,
Heat linseed or walnut oil,
With dabbing fingertips or gentle brush
Color with madder root or dragon's blood

The secret ground whose recipe a maker never names.
 (And you have found there is another with you
 Who stares into the flames.)

Then bring, clasped with ebony, ivory, gold, and mother-of-pearl
 (Signs of the Silk Road and knight errantry
 And the sail-spiced journey by sea)
 The wand of Pernambuco
 Supplely curved and tensed into a bow
 With hair of a Mongolian horse's tail.
 (And you have found, there is another with you
 Who bends the stick upon his knee.)

After the bridge is set, the soundpost placed,
 The gut strings, silver-wound, then ache to sound
 The gamut rising from the prime.
 Maker, long laboring in silence for perfection,
 Your work is never done, the finished object only instrument
 Taken from you like the days you spent
 In building it, and loss is your accomplishment.
 For you must let the loved thing go,
 Summon the virtuoso who will wake from death
 This volumed cave and give it breath, for music's sake.
 For music's sake you turn away,
 Enter the empty studio and tap fresh wood again.
 (And you have found, there is another with you
 Always listening ahead of time.)

The Last Generation

(Acoustic recordings of violin virtuosi, ca. 1905–1920)

A crank, a counter-movement; cog and wheel, clocklike;
 A delicately coiled steel spring gently relaxing.
 Wax rolls, shellac disks turning in a casket:
 Night blindness flickers. Listen
 Through the tinnitus that scribbles and scratches:
 Time is burning.

Placards advertise the child prodigy.
 In stiff, dark wool and heavy boots he trudges
 Through the mucky street and climbs the creaking stair.
 An unexpected knock. The *maestro* opens
 And with a suspicious stare
 Reads the letter he is handed.
 Then leaning back in his chair with narrowed eyes
 He calls for *étude*, *fantasie*, or *polonaise*,
 And we can hear the last of them—
 The old Joachim, Auer, Sarasate, and Ysaye—
 Who never heard themselves this way before,
 And so were young as we will never be.

We barely catch the passagework, the *ricochet*,
 Precise *staccato*, *portamento*, *son filé*,
 But sense cascading leaves, cold mountain wind
 That bids high summer clouds unwind,
 Swift streams that pour through rocky land,
 And a sobbing from the dripping caverns down below,
 Stone slabs of Hades' entrance reached with the final *ritardando*.

There a spirit suddenly appears and stops us,
 Telling us with upraised hand
 Everything we did or said in life.
 Only a god's voice can give back to the dead

The true and full account without distortion.
Then are we purified, according to our portion,
In fire and ice, on wheel and rack, till we are whole again,
And step through Lethe, ready to return,
Each a clear, unknowing soul.

Now place the needle, listen:
There is a mighty singing at the door.

Violin at Auction

(Said to be that of HMS Titanic's bandmaster)

Applause like wingbeats, gasping adoration:
 A white-gloved shade holds up a violin
 As bid after bid comes rolling in,
 Waves propelling the auctioneer's song
 That likes itself well and croons its come-along,
 Cannily weighing its chances.

Now the peroration, climbing broad steps
 As if at the end were a chandeliered ballroom
 Or a concert hall where the virtuoso held
 His Stradivarius of ambered gold,
 Flaming in the gleam of centuries' remembered candles.

But smudged, discolored, stained by the black depths,
 Like an oily stone dug from the bed of Acheron,
 This object mutes and quells the spotlight's searchlight-beam
 That sweeps it, then is swallowed in, enfeebled, old.

Spilled silver cannot make this spoiled wood play.
 Our greed to force out its last tune, decode its memory
 Of that famous night on the deck of the *Titanic*,
 Its desperate, distracting dances,
 Its final hymn lifted over the panic,
 Fails. Ocean itself would not strip the player's corpse
 Of modesty or steal this gift from his fiancée
 He clung to as he drowned. Its music
 And its misery, are present and silent as their wedding day.

Only the distant angels can hear color, see sound,
 Hold charity heavy in hand, breathe solid orbs of wisdom.
 Auctioneer, what hidden island is there,
 Protected by jagged rocks and dragging sand,

Sheltering in pine and olive's paradisaal air,
But you would invade it, colonize it, name it home?
What ancient, settled continent with all its temples
Counseling honest labor, but you would wildly roam?

In the chaste Northern seas, the icebergs melt,
The dead zones multiply, the acid water rises.
Alone in his lifeboat, grinning Death
With clicking fingerbones clutching fiddle and bow
Scrapes out dry, unending, telegraphic exercises.