Piano Lessons

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I have hunted three hares,  
can I be certain I have caught  
even one?  
- Rachmaninoff’s Recollections  
Told to Oskar Von Rieseman, 1938  

A boy bites down  
so hard  
on his index finger,  
it leaves  
a dent for days.  
A bruised half-moon.  
Pink,  
like a gummy smile.  
When you ask why  
he says, “This isn't the first time.”  
And avoiding the question again,  
“Pain inspires.”

You watch the mark.  
Consider the bone beneath the flesh.  
What his teeth couldn't completely  
sink into.  
How has it grown since he last failed to bite  
clean through?  
Perhaps at a different piano,  
age eight, fingers  
building calluses,  
bones growing pains.  
You think this is where he first learned the lesson.

I may have failed to make the best of my life.  
Rachmaninoff tells his editor,  
who wishes he learned Russian shorthand.  
Longs to loop his letters  
like a slipknot noose.  
To snare the timbre  
of his voice,
the accompaniment of distant frogs croaking beyond the garden grounds.

“This is how big his hands were. Can you believe that?”
Across 13 keys, the boy contorts.
His tendons traceable through skin stretched thin as a bat wing.
You are tempted to kiss the moon to bone.
But he wants to reopen his blisters, peel back the gifted tissue,
say “Look”.
This is what a great man could hold, here is where a boy falls short.

Now it’s your turn, lay your hands across the keys.
Let him stretch your pinky and thumb as far apart as nature will allow.
So, when he covers them with his own, pressing down your knuckles, a melody is coaxed out of the thicket.
The white tiles give out like tiny trap doors.

No, not one hare. But all three.