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Opera

by *Herbert Morris*

Mother sits in the back seat lulled by Verdi,
I beside her, the winter I am seven,
the Rockaways, Father has us believe,
our destination, for a glimpse of the sea,

though we have seen the sea before, my brother
and I, if not yet to the degree Father
would have us see—light, lights, half-lights, gradations—,
sufficiently for us to cry “the sea,”

two boys, seven and twelve, who, having followed
Father headlong in pursuit of routes south,
south, always south, smell the Bay, cross the causeway,
are at last, blinded, stunned, made to confront it.

Father has memorized each rise, each turn,
knows them by heart, as my brother does, too,
it seems, seated as he is in the front seat
with a view of what opens out before us,

I, in what would seem, on the surface, a less
advantageous position, with a view
not as inclusive, car-bound, but, despite that,
bearing an intensity quite beyond

what the mere fact, for all its worth, attests to,
an interior view, one might describe it.
(Why did I not believe, even now fail to,
Rockaway, as claimed, was our destination:

was it likely, possible, all that sky,
all those deep routes opening out before us,
all the fervor of that day-long pursuit,
all that light, all those lights, half-lights, gradations,

deliver us to this, not more than this,
three syllables too composed, too domestic,
to bear us south to the fierce, the exotic,
lacking the least frail light, lights, necessary?)

Mother, in the back seat, hums Donizetti.
It is cold in the car. I sit beside her
nuzzling the grey fox collar of her coat,
asleep, or half-asleep, or merely dreaming

(voyages into life, my life, the music
lying in wait where music lies in wait,
where one senses music must lie in wait),
those voices sweeping to us from Manhattan,

wave on wave, at full tide, breaking across us,
mezzo soprano after mezzo soprano,
one outpacing the other, teaching us
how to live, what to suffer, moving us

in ways we thought, once, we could not be moved,
the car robe tucked and folded in our laps,
blue, like the car, one side faced with soft wool,
the other with smooth Russian karacul

whose knack it is, or was, or always shall be,
to catch the light of each bleached scene we pass through,
light, lights, half-lights, the infinite gradations,
highway, field, causeway, marshland, swampflat, beach,

in a far corner, bold yet modest, quiet,
neither self-effacing nor prepossessing,
an emblem of the same blue, sea-blue, wool,
embossed to shape a circle, duplicating

the initials Mother and Father both share,
an intricate, elaborate nest of scrolls,
inordinately difficult to follow,

from which it seems there shall be no escape,

yet, in a resolution near the border,
curlicues signifying, somewhere, ends
(or beginnings—one cannot yet know which)
neither looked to nor hoped for, unexpected,

fretwork coming, at last, into its own,
worked and reworked, the way cleared, almost cleared,
if not yet cleared, clearing, soon to be cleared,
flowering into something evident,

apparent, from the most hidden of sources,
burdened with complication, breaking into
the most magnificent lucidity
imaginable, all at once made plain,

plainer than plain, ultimate, beautiful,
serene (worked and reworked, done, undone, cleared),
an appliqué-on-applique the fingers
of a boy, seven that winter, seem not to

have enough of, never to have enough of,
never tire of tracing, then retracing,
bm, the circle rounded, bm, bm,
circle reversed, circle rounded, bm,

on and on through a winter afternoon
dazzling with light, with expectation, promise
(the sun makes it seem ice hangs from the trees),
all the way to the Rockaways, beyond,

the Atlantic, still miles south, not yet sighted
(never, perhaps, fable that it is, sighted),
Father and my brother in the front seat,
maps spread between them, views, speed, mileage, motion,

Mother in fox, the car robe tucked about us,
Claudia Muzio's voice filling the car,
instructing us in some romantic anguish
both unforgettable and undeciphered,

hinted at, dimly glimpsed, not yet spelled out—
music lying in wait for us? the sea
Father insists lies south, due south? one's life? —,
that scene least fathomed, least definitive.

It shall not matter that this is the year
gas is rationed, that pale green books of coupons
are to be surrendered, gallon by gallon,
that station after station has been shuttered,

one by one stricken, mute, the length of Broadway,
toppled by forces (plague? contamination?)
hardly comprehended by a boy, seven;
that chains of mail are strung across each driveway

barring entry to the pumps, to the lifts,
to the depths of those bottomless enclosures
where the dark seems to well at its profoundest,
signs spelling lubrication pits effaced.

The car fills now with Don José, with Carmen.
Lily Pons breaks the heart, should one permit her.
(One has no qualms whatever acquiescing.)
Mother, in fox, tucks the car robe about me,

gently, securely, softly croons Bizet.
It is both cold and warm here in the car,
the cold explainable, if not the warm.
Mother launches into the Habañera.

Father, it seems, has little taste for opera,
my brother less. I think the route consumes them,
specific routes, specific destinations
("the Rockaways"), mileage, distance, direction,

the turns to take, not take, marks on the map,
tomorrow visible on the horizon
rather than intimated. It may be
precisely intimation I most savor,

the barely seen, the half-seen, the unseen,
the scene least fathomed, least definitive,
the possible lying in wait, like music,

in a direction neither specified

nor specifiable on the bright map

Father and my brother have spread between them
on the front seat, the glimpse beyond all glimpses,
the note beyond the notes denoting "opera,"

what Puccini, even now, even now,
as we race to the Rockaways, beyond,
a thousand miles from nowhere, drunk on light,
the route at last coming into its own,

worked and reworked, the way cleared, almost cleared,
a whiff of salt, of surf, still in the distance,
one's life lying in wait where a life waits,
has been struggling, throughout, to whisper to us.

(For my part, we need never take the turn,
the route, could all day dawdle, stunned, assailed:
music and light, that year, seem route enough.
One might be quite happy never arriving.)

It is cold in the car, yet we keep warm
in ways not wholly understood, explained.
This is the one afternoon of the week
opera is coming to us from the Met,

Sunday. Rosa Ponselle, this very moment,
the ocean not yet visible, the distance
splendid with prospects hinted at, translates
passion into Italian, lilting, melting,

joined by Mother who, seated here beside me,
a collar of grey fox framing her face,
the four of us plunging south to the sea,
a mythic, fabled, possible Atlantic,

far from here a war raging, the gas rationed,
station by station shuttered, Broadway darkened,
breaks into the sweetest, purest Italian,
heart-stopping, poignant, lyrical, impassioned,

though we have never heard such language from her,
never known singing to such depth, nor guessed
what splendor she might harbor, what translucence,
though we have known her light in other contexts,

mimics Madame Ponselle, spills with Puccini,
takes up that burden of romantic anguish
as though it were, in fact, hers to take up,
a sponsorship no less mysterious

to Mother, we suspect, than to my brother,
to Father, me, we who accompany her
in search of the Atlantic dumb, astonished,
more moved than, once, we thought we could be moved,

saying nothing, not knowing what to say,
or think, or do, at a loss what to feel,
the weight of all that issues from her awesome,
sumptuous, light-struck, opulent, Italian,

letting the opera spin out as it must,
letting music have its way, as it must,
or as one's life, later in the plot, must,
each element of chance, of choice, of risk,

what Rossini has envisioned as fate,
pursuing us who plunge south where the sea
glitters, refracts, repeats, over and over,
the name, the shape, the scope, of an arrival

not given us to know, not yet disclosed,
everywhere light assailing us, cascading,
in the car, past it, causeway, bay, surf, beach,
not least the light of that Italian, Sundays,

raining down on Father, my brother, me,
the day cold, more than cold, but, in the back seat,
folded and tucked in lap robes as we are,
deep blue, sea-blue, nuzzled in fox, grey fox,

Madame Ponselle and Mother in full voice,
in fullest voice, at the peak, so to speak,
of their careers, one mezzo soprano

spurring the other on, ablaze, transcendent,

each, for the first time, soaring past her range,
past all ranges, in defiance of limits,
our maps arrayed before us on front seats
offering what Father might call “a view”

(though no map shall avail here, none, I tell you,
no front seat yield the vision, visions, promised,
and the thing Father may have had in mind
by “a view,” whatever it may have been—

openings to the sky? the sea? a glimpse,
a half-glimpse, of horizons, destinations?—,
proves, once more, once more, to begin and end here,
here, in the car: one’s self, one’s self, not more)

one Sunday, many Sundays, of that winter,
the first winter of the war, I am seven,
the day cold, more than cold, the Rockaways
as far, as problematic, as the sea,

that sea Father would have us hold a glimpse of,
if we are to hold anything, light pouring,
Broadway darkened, stations shuttered, gas rationed,
the Italian dense, rich, resplendent, flowing.

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