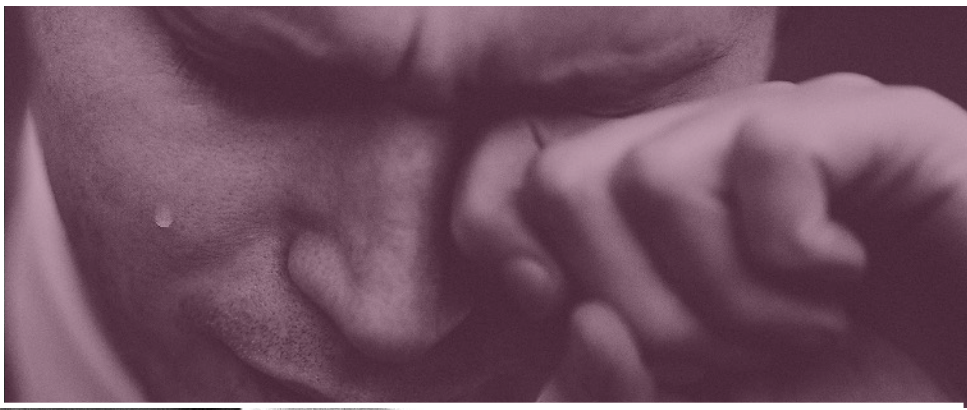

MONDAY OPERA CLUB

Everything I've learned about desire, disease, & death by listening to dying divas

By Henk-Jona Klijn

Contents

Prologue

"It's nice to see you. Thank you for coming."

The man with blond hair was making a point of shaking the hand of every person walking into the Temple Sholom lobby. "Let's chat later, over some tea?"

"Oh my god. He is such a queen And *such* an opportunist." Bob and I were a few people away from the handshake and greeting by the blond man, Thomas, whom Bob did not appreciate under the most favorable of conditions, let alone today. "I mean, it's one thing to be here and part of a fraternity in mourning but this guy is such a climber and *what* has he done for Marvin…?"

"It's nice to see you. Thank you for coming," the voice was getting closer as we were now just a few handshakes away from Thomas' earnest greeting..

"…that we actually know about and was good for Marvin, you know," Bob was on a roll, "not like the time he reprimanded me for setting up Marvin's Grndr account…"

"Thomas objected because Marvin was 93…" I interjected.

"And he was horny. He wasn't dead—yet." Bob rolled his eyes in the direction of the memorial platform. "And Marvin *did* have a huge thing for blond Dutch boys, the taller the better…"

"Bob." We were at the front of the line. Thomas' tone was stiff. His voice, cold.

"Thomas." The reply, even colder.

"I trust you'll find your way around. You have in the past." Thomas said, looking Bob up and down, and then turned to shake my hand. "It's nice to see *you*. Thank you for coming," he said as he shook my hand. "Are you coming to Westlawn?" I nodded, and smiled. "Great. We'll chat over tea."

"Did Marvin have any nephews or nieces? Any family?" I asked. "Just curious if anyone is sitting shiva."

"We'll talk. But no," Thomas said, his eyes closed and shaking his head a few times as if to underline the impossibility of my question. "Anyway, Marvin was not a religious man, as you know. Ok, speak later. Again thank you for coming. We need to see more of each other."

We walked away, scanning the room while simultaneously trying to avoid too much attention.

"Well. I did not expect a red carpet, but that was shade even by Thomas' standards," Bob said. "Oh wait, I see Sven and Diego and they saved us a few seats. And what did Thomas mean when he said 'Marvin was not religious—as you know?' I find that a little loaded."

We walked down the center aisle and then squeezed past several burly types as we made our way to the two open seats.

"Hey guys." Diego said, quietly. "Did you walk? Or take the 151? It's such a nice day out."

"Unseasonably, really…" I struggled a little to take off my puffy winer coat. "151. I would have schvitzed less had I walked. Thank's for saving us seats," I said, looking around. "Who knew it would be this crowded." I reached over and gave Sven a hug. "Hej då!" I said. I always enjoyed sayin that to him as it was almost the same words my Afrikaans "haai daar," and it formed part of an

ongoing linguistic game we played finding odd word matches between Swedish and Afrikaans, which added something to our twice-yearly trips to Bollingbrook's Ikea.

"Hej då!" Sven smiled at our Swedish greeting despite the day's somberness. "Big turnout for Marvin. Who knew?"

"I saw you got second degree from your nemesis, Thomasina the ice queen," Diego said to Bob. "He was very nice to me. So, again, no real beef there. With me, at least."

"Well, you know, Thomas chooses not to get over stuff and I can't put up with that level of pettiness," Bob said.

"Is it still the Grndr thing?" Sven asked in a whisper, mouthing the word "Grindr," but to no avail as two guys in front of us turned around to look. I smiled.

Bob rolled his eyes, and nodded. We all looked around the hall and said nothing for a few minutes letting the reality of the moment—its finality—settle. One couldn't be in this space without wondering about Marvin. Was he happy? Did we do enough? Do any of us ever do enough? What if that was me…

"I just have one question," I said in a low voice. Bob, Sven, and Diego leaned in. "Are we continuing our arrangement, even, you know, without Marvin?"

"I was wondering about that, "Bob said, "and I think we should. It's the right thing to do. Marvin actually did say, a few months ago, after he had that terrible fall, that he hopes we continue, you know, in his absence."

"That was a little different." Diego said. "He was in hospital yes and he did also have Covid for a while there, but had recuperated so well and I think there was little suggestion of, you know, a more permanent absence from the group, if you know what I mean."

"He was 95. Any absence of any kind was implied to be, potentially, a permanent thing," Bob said.

"Marvin knew," I said. "Let's just say he didn't buy green bananas anymore."

"Well you are right." Sven said. "Every time I left his condo, saying good night, I would wonder whether this was the last time and mentally I've prepared myself for this day more times than I care to remember."

I scanned the text I had received late the previous night. By then we all knew and the machinations of this say was set in motion just as planned by Marvin himself: "Marvin David Berns died on Tuesday, November 22, at 95. He was preceded in death by James William Whetstone, his beloved husband of 50 years. Loving brother of Robert, and devoted son of Philip and Pauline-who have preceded him. Marvin is survived by his sisters-in-law Cheryl Walden and Terry Hopkins of Minnesota. Marvin led a fascinating life from growing up in Albany Park to serving in WWII and the Korean War; Mad Men era advertising; and with James, a joyous ride through life together. Marvin will be missed by so many who were lucky enough to be his friend." There was a harsh truth of gay death being exposed by the self-arranged memorial for an aging gay widower who nevertheless, without significant blood family around, was packing a large Chicago synagogue with chosen family.

"So? Are we carrying on?" I asked again. "For the record, I'm in. I need this."

"Me too." Bob said. "Mondays have been made better because of us."

"Yes," Sven and Diego said at the same time.

"Great," I said. "See you Monday."

A love bizarre

Thy hand, Belinda, darkness shades me,

On thy bosom let me rest,

More I would, but Death invades me;

Death is now a welcome guest.

When I am laid, am laid in earth,

May my wrongs create

No trouble, no trouble in thy breast;

Remember me, remember me, but ah! forget my fate.

Remember me, but ah! forget my fate.

Dido and Aeneas, Henry Purcell, 1689.

As far as we know, England's oldest opera was first performed in at Josias Priest's Chelseas boarding-school for young ladies in 1689. The libretto was written by Nahum Tate.

"In honor of Marvin, I figured I'd dedicate tonight's playlist to him." I passed around a decanter of South African Shiraz, allowing time for each of us to fill a glass and then I raised mine in the universally recognizable symbol of celebrating the life —in this case, death—of the recipient. "To Marvin. And I am glad he brought us all together."

"To Marvin," Bob said, raising his glass, "and yes. I love you guys. And I love our meeting on Mondays, rain or snow or shine, and I love the fact that in the crazy that is the world right now, there is this group."

It was an odd toast, as Bob is frequently cantankerous—self-admittedly—and less than fond of Sven which he declared directly to Sven once during a heated debate over Covid-19 protocols, a thing Bob thought necessary and adhered to religiously while Sven rejected most of it and, as far as he could, refused to be part of. It was only after threatening to throw him out of the group for fear of what has cavalier attitude may do to Marvin's by-then frail health, that Sven started to wear masks more assiduously and made sure his vaccinations were up to date. But the little tiff left both somewhat sulky and emotionally bruised in the way when you learn something you wished you hadn't, and the resulting spleen cast a shadow of sorts over the group and seemed to erupt sporadically, infecting interactions between the two in subtle ways.

And so, a dissonant undercurrent permeated Monday Opera Club gatherings, but the same slight unease—call it a frisson if you feel generous—was there when we met for lunch or the Lakeview Halloween parade, or a bar—even when one of the two was absent—the possibility therefore existing tension was just part of friendships made later in life, and linked to old habits, bullheadedness, and fear of rejection. Monday Opera Club was therefore less about us fitting in and more about just holding on. For that reason it felt natural to play up to positivity tropes, meaning that in the broader scheme of playing nice, today's overly magnanimous toast by Bob was unsurprising, even expected, since interactions between Bob and Sven during Marvin's last months had started to flirt with pantomime-level graciousness.

"Indeed, Bob. As do I." Sven said, raising his glass. "This group is so important to me. And especially now, as we face this emptiness—this hole in our hearts—let's be our best versions," he said, nodding at Bob. "And of course, to Marvin."

I looked over at Bob who rolled his eyes. He had been, at various points during his long theatre career a singer and director eventually forming his own small theatre company in Philadelphia before relocating to Chicago sometime during the second Obama term. He knew ham acting when he saw it.

"Agreed. To Marvin. And you guys. I hope we continue to do this." Diego's was possibly the most sincere toast to Marvin. There was always something wounded about his persona and a hesitance to partake in more virtuoso discussions around opera, yet his sharp insights suggested an old soul in a much younger body.

I scrolled around the Music app for a few seconds deciding which version would best do the trick to honor the memory of the man who brought us all together.

"I thought I'd start with this one," I said, and pressed play.

"It really blows me away," Bob said after the first few notes, even before the music had a chance to fill the room, "just how efficient Purcell is at setting the mood for the scene right at the beginning of the recitative, in the minor and, of course, the descending line flirts a little with dissonance every few notes. I love how it still sounds pretty and elegant but, nevertheless, a bit off—just off enough to signal how, for Dido, the jig is up. And—sorry for talking so much—but it's perfect because in these few moments music, text, and drama—it all lines up."

Sven put up his hand. He was always painfully polite in group discussions partly because his generation valued order and permission more than the rest of us and party because he harbored a gentleness that did not need to impose or intrude for him to feel heard. In some ways, Sven was a

lot like Diego who also abhorred confrontation of any kind, yet unlike Sven, Diego never took a polite route to make a point, instead frequently blurting things out and then looked a touch contrite for his boldness.

"Let's just take a minute and talk about this text," Sven said holding up a small square CD inlay card he brought along, and so I paused the track "Dido first speaks to Belinda, her servant, in the recitative when she says, *Thy hand, Belinda, darkness shades me / On thy bosom let me rest / More I would, but Death invades me / Death is now a welcome guest.* That is truly beautiful," he adds.

"I would maybe have some issues with the librettist for most of this work but I agree, the recitative and lament are both beautiful and anyway, sometimes a text become so ingrained in the psyche that quibbles are pointless. But again, listen out for the descending bass pattern when the Lament starts, eventually," Bob said, looking at me.

I pressed play, again.

To begin with, I selected the soprano, Simone Kermes', recording. It's an idiosyncratic interpretation, Kermes resolutely avoiding letting her voice soar on higher notes, instead opting for, to say the least, introverted and distinctly sotto-voce higher sections.

Maybe it was the text, or the voice. Maybe it was because each of us, at the same moment—probably—had the same thoughts around what it meant to remembered and, more than that, one couldn't get away from considering what it meant to have our fate forgotten, but the reading—the sound of it—felt extraordinarily emotional. Like it pierced something. Maybe it was us remembering Marvin.

Listening carefully, while also observing the others, I was struck—again—by the weight of resignation in the music, the slow tempi feeling not only mournful but downright ponderous, as if the very passage of time was a burden too heavy to bear and that, perhaps, Dido in this moment was the public acknowledgment of a certain weariness that comes with age after a life of

disappointment. Dido—Kermes—was us: a little lonely, a little depressed, and a little pissed off that life wasn't just a little bit more. A little extra.

"The descending bass line is so woven into the very fabric of the aria. It seems to be a metaphor for this tragic inevitability that Purcell is telling us, is so close," Bob said, "but, it also feels as if there's a gradual descent into fatigue. Each descending note, for me, seems dragged down by the weight of living and then, when she sings, it's the sound of someone who has just had it. I feel that this is a soul that has seen too much and felt too deeply."

"She's so out of fucks to give." I said. "But Purcell does also manipulate us a little, the occasional dissonances highlight these jarring jabbing emotions, but they also tell just how hard it is to deal with a reality prone to glitching. And also, sometimes life sucks and right now, for Dido, it sucks."

"I find it interesting that she's so clear about not craving forgiveness or hoping for grace. She trusts her wrongs will not cause trouble for those she leaves behind," Diego said. "And it reminds me of how I felt for the first few years after I came out. I was so worried that if anything bad happened to me, my mom and family would obsess over me, and stuff, and it has taken me a long time to get over that. Then my one sister came out as gay and the other one got pregnant by some cholo, and all of a sudden I was the one my mom had least to worry about."

"Not to get too technical," Bob said, all but ignoring Diego's comment, "but those dissonances on the words 'bosom' and 'now,' are 9-8 suspensions—little clashes—dissonant minor 9ths, as opposed to the more digestible major 9th. It's just a compositional thing that speaks to Purcell as a great composer who knew exactly what he was doing. He needed his audience to feel the location and the pressing nature of Dido's pain."

"Not sure what that meant, Bob, but what I get is a serpentine line." One could sense that Diego felt ignored or spoken-over by Bob. "And those little clashes you pointed out, to me, feel like

stabs—like a nerve is hit—a reminder of the fact that now, to Dido, death is a 'welcome guest.' That she is ready. At peace."

Diego paused for a second, looking a somewhat troubled.

"I wonder if that is how Marvin felt?" He paused again, "I wonder if Marvin, in those last minutes experienced something along those lines. Like Dido. He had been so tired and listless the last few month, I wonder if he, too, was ready to 'welcome' his 'guest.' I think he knew that none of his wrongs would create any trouble in any of our breasts?"

"I cannot help but think that, for Marvin, life turned into a living hell when James died, and at his age," Bob said.

"It seems almost that we need to rehabilitate those left behind after the death of someone they loved, the same way we have to learn again to walk or speak after one of life's other calamities, but somehow it's ok for a man, about to turn 90, to be left alone, suffering, himself frail and emotionally compromised," Sven said. "Losing someone like that is like some kind of amputation. Marvin lost more than just a friend or a distant relative. I felt that he had lost a limb. A support."

"I cannot even begin to imagine the sense of panic that he must have felt. The meaning of it," I said.

"It's why I couldn't say no when he wanted that Grndr profile," Bob said. "Part of me resisted the very notion bit another part of me just thought it's great that Marvin still had a hint of spark and, while it remained to be seen if he would make the leap from the app to the cocktail bar, it reminded me that if someone is still alive, hope will find a way."

"Tell that to Dido," I said.

"Well yes," Bob laughed, "but she *is* a queen."

"And operatic. She dies so we may live," Sven laughed.

"She allows us to live through her and imagine ourselves as queen with a faithful Belinda by our side," I said.

"Belinda is the kind of girlfriend who holds your hair when you talk into the porcelain telephone after too many tequilas," Bob said.

"Aww, that is the sweetest thing anyone has said in this group, ever," Sven said.

"That opening 'Thy hand, Belinda,' is a touch drama ka-ween, don't you think?" Diego gestured with a fainting hand movement. "I mean, in the best possible way. Really it says, 'what-up Belinda'—show a girl some support."

I laughed. "We all need a Belinda."

"We were Marvin's Belinda," Diego said. He was right.

In 2010, BBC Radio 3 announced a survey asking listeners about their favorite aria and, to the surprise of many, *Dido's Lament* came out on top beating stiff competition. *Dove Sono* the Countess' aria from Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* was second, with the *Liebestod* from Wagner's *Tristan And Isolde,* third. Curiously, *Nessun Dorma*, the Puccini warhorse from *Turandot* did not make the top 10, nor other well-known works such as *The Toreador Song* from *Carmen* by George Bizet. Radio 3 Breakfast Program presenter Rob Cowan commented that he was "not in the least surprised. As operatic arias go, this has to be among the greatest of all—a grief-laden outpouring that's up there with the best of Puccini or Wagner. And what a melody."[1]

But what is it about that Dido and her lament? I was in my teens when I heard the aria performed in a school production by a soprano with a sweet voice—with a Priscilla Presley, circa Jenna Wade, blowout—and I convinced myself I was in love with her to my mother's delight since she caught me in her wardrobe a few times trying on her church frocks and Mireille Matthieu wigs. But, I digress.

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[1] From the article, "Purcell Aria is nation's favourite," as reported by The Independent.

We have to take a moment and marvel at the skill with which Purcell generates an authentic locus of infinite heavy-heartedness, so precisely? One mechanism used by him is that the aria is through-composed, meaning it lacks the typical *da capo* ABA form we more commonly encounter in Baroque works. Instead, Purcell weaves a continuous stream of music that ebbs and flows—like grief—in an almost organic manner.

"Dido's Lament" begins as a slow burn with a downcast, even melancholic, tempo. Elongated phrases evoke sad sighs, their descending structures conveying the downcast, melancholic mood of the titular character, her unceasing—almost remorselessly—emotional intensity maintained throughout her aria, reflecting her profound grief. But that's not all. Purcell also writes chromatically, occasionally flirting with dissonance as he reveals Dido's inner conflict and resolve. We are left with little doubt: Dido is not winging this. She is staunch, determined, and maybe even a touch calculated. She is fully aware of her fate and in fact, guided by it, the chromatic descending bass line underlining the inevitability of the inescapable tragedy ahead, a series of suspensions and non-chord tones adding tension to the music, thereby intensifying the overall emotional impact. It's theater after all. Baroque theater.

Nahum Tate's text for this scene is deceptively simple, unexpectedly affecting, Dido's repeating the phrase "remember me" simultaneously acts as desperate plea and calming, almost soothing, gesture—the afflicted becomes the caregiver—and I cannot help but wonder if this kind of love even truly exists. What exactly makes up this love that knows supposedly knows no limits?

> We all want the stuff that's found in our wildest dreams
> It gets kinda rough in the back of our limousine
> That's what we are, we all want a love bizarre
> — *A Love Bizarre*, by Prince & Sheila E

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From its first iteration, Dido's death has always been poetic, capturing the imagination of all who encountered her. Unlike much of mythology, mostly Greek hand-me-downs as part of an oral tradition, the tale of Dido and her doomed liaison with Trojan prince, Aeneas, was the works of Virgil and Ovid, Roman poets. Both approach Dido in slightly different ways although at its core, the story remains the same. Virgil's *Aeneid* takes the shape of an epic poem and focuses on Aeneas as hero reducing Dido to a lesser part small within a broader narrative. By contrast, Ovid positions Dido as protagonist in *Heroides 7*, part of an anthology of elegiac poetry presented as love letters by piqued mythological women to their swains, and at the core of Ovid's poem we find Dido, lamenting that Aeneas has deserted her as she informs us of her doomed fate.

After his ship is caught in a storm, Aeneas—he is en-route from Troy to Italy where he is to help found no less than Rome itself—takes shelter in Carthage, a city founded by Dido. She puts on a banquet—he is flattered, though unfortunately unable to stay long because the god Jupiter impressed on a by-now reluctant-to-leave Aeneas that he has a city to found. When she realizes that Aeneas had indeed left, Dido constructs her own funeral pile and intentionally takes her life on it. Virgil positions this act in a specific way and rather than focus on the act—the sheer despair—felt by Dido, it is her self-sacrifice and unquestionable love for Aeneas that juxtaposes and gives meaning to the importance and scale of Aeneas' task ahead.

What surprises is how swiftly Virgil pivots Dido from powerful widow-queen to suicidal mope and he does so by deftly using the most powerful force known to Romans: Cupid and his lethal arrow, a thing that readily converts even the most resolute and most dismissive of love. To her subjects, Queen Dido's infatuation with a Trojan prince is nothing but a fool's errand bringing her loyalty to Carthage into question, as she seemingly so readily traded her responsibilities for Aeneas, a man who exposes her as flesh and blood, fallible and fallen.

But beyond that, Dido tells us exactly what she is *doing*. She informs us, not to judge her harshly as she knows she cannot bear the pain of Aeneas's departure nor—perish the thought—life without him. Sometimes, pain is unbearable—men will do that to you, and so Dido immolates, throwing herself on the very funeral pyre she had built, lighting the way as Aeneas leaves her.

The contemporary audience may be forgiven for thinking all this reminiscent of something else, something that renders Dido, from a privileged perspective at least, more challenging and even loaded.

In her canonical post-colonial essay "Can The Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Spivak[2] focuses on the extraordinary ancient Hindu Sati practice, where a wife would fling herself onto her husband's burning pyre thereby incinerating. The act had morphed over time from being voluntary into a coerced practice, one symbolizing the greatest act of devotion a widow can show her deceased husband, her death by fire signifying her chastity and purity. Spivak noticed that white British men, especially, had sought to outlaw Sati and so she coined the phrase "(w)hite men saving brown women from brown men."

Spivak uses this line to emphasize the role played by British colonizers in outlawing Sati in pre-independence India, pointing out that women performing the act of Sati act as subaltern with unrecognized agency. They are not heard, whether they choose to participate or not. Simply put, British (white) men prevented Hindu (brown) women from subjugation of the highest order to Hindu (brown) men by outlawing Sati and so, really, men are still make decisions for women—albeit less violent and ostensibly better—in patriarchal colonial cultures. Because, to them, a woman without a man is nothing. Spivak wrote the essay to draw attention to the fact that the subaltern—the oppressed or the downtrodden—is not represented and do not have their voices heard. Brown

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[2] A foremost literary and post-colonial theorist, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, over nearly 50 years, has built a formidable reputation. Spivak's work is difficult, with Columbia University co-faculty—Spivak is a professor in Humanities—and Her work, Can The Subaltern Speak? (1988), criticizes western views cultures on the margins that essentially distorts representation of the 'subaltern'. Spivak relates this to western reaction to sati as a case of "white men saving brown women from brown men", and she questions why voices of subaltern women are seldom included.

men, white men—MEN—were making and imposing decisions on her. And not that much has changed judging by the reversal of Roe VS Wade by the US Supreme Court in 2022), for white or brown. Especially the latter.

If the purpose of Sati—rather than just its outward appearance—is taken into consideration, the practice of burning widows alive is not a phenomena specific to India. The provision of attendants for deceased people has served to confirm and strengthen the social and political order throughout the world in many societies where there is a widespread belief that a person's position will continue in the afterlife. The word "Sati" means "virtuous woman" in its most literal sense; a woman transforms into sati through devotion to her spouse. In order to reclaim and establish complete devotion to her husband, Sati serves as a ritual.

The killing of Roop Kanwar was one particular instance of sati in 1987 that sparked a public uproar in India, sparking discussion and controversy among academics. When her spouse passed away, Roop Kanwar—18 years old at the time, and married for only eight months—performed Sati in front of a large crowd, which her community viewed as a voluntary gesture of devotion and honor. Politicians and activists, however, chose sides, disputing claims that Kanwar had been forced, and drugged with opium.

The accounts of those who witnessed the Sati differed; some claimed to have seen Roop Kanwar exhibit supernatural abilities, including red glowing eyes and extreme internal heat, while others thought the widow to appear shaky, as if under influence of alcohol or drugs. Both versions of the events indicated that Kanwar was experiencing a spiritual trance. Protesters demanded that celebration of widow deaths be halted while pilgrims and villages worshiped Kanwar as a new deity, building shrines to her. Pro-Sati groups proliferated in opposition to anti-Sati movements, arguing the right to practice religion freely, denouncing anti-Sati types as "corrupt, godless, westernized, and having abandoned tradition."

The burning woman according to Mary Daly, a radical feminist and plainly outspoken on the subject of Sati, is a victim of patriarchal society's cruelty and negative perception of widows. Discussing treatment of widows in Hindu culture, Daly observes that "their religion forbade remarriage and at the same time taught that the widow's death was the widow's fault... everyone was free to despise and mistreat her for the rest of her life.[3]" Hindu writings, such as the "Adi Parva of the Mahabharata," declares that a woman is to have only one spouse during her life and should not have sexual relations with another man while her husband is alive or after his death, can be used to defend this social norm (Banker). The widow—the ultimate abandoned woman—loses her position and worth in society due to the expectations placed on women in Indian society and the standards of femininity, particularly if the widow is without sons to continue and secure the lineage.

Let there be little doubt: Dido is abandoned. She sets herself alight. And although the practice and rhetoric around Sati is a distance and a stretch away, we cannot ignore the message and the optics of this act. Virgil seems to display an embedded and societally expected take on Dido's suicide, Aeneas' sudden departure causing her breakdown. Virgil writes about the Queen, "helpless,", "tragic," and "lovesick," hurling herself onto a funeral pyre. But, to me, he underrates the capacity of a woman to endure distress and letdown, and the way she wilts losing the very will to live is a cis-het view of how the "other" deals with things—be that women or gays. And so, before Aeneas, Dido was all about leadership and strength and survival, but after just the merest of time in the presence of the Aeneas the Alpha Male, she is reduced to a depression-riddled basket case, her world entirely constructed on him. Virgil thinks that when we love a man, we lose sight of everything. That's some serious big D energy there. Enough to push Dido over the edge with her only recourse, immolation. Because (alpha) men move on, and the ones they fuck, well, don't.

And if any operatic character's utterance is an old-school every-bottom phrase, it has to be that of Dido when she plaintively sings of being laid in earth in a way that every single one of us,

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[3] Mary Daly, Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 115.

upon reflection, may identify with, if we were forced to. She is the antithesis to Miss Benny in Netflix's "Glamorous," when she says, "I'm a twink on Prep, I can do anything."

But, there is a resolute quality in how Dido launches the first section of that scene as she implores the help of her confidant, Belinda, in facilitating this, her final journey, and Purcell adds a palpable sense of resignation to the scene as she leans into the notion that, to her, "death is now a welcome guest."

Dido referring to death as "a welcome guest" is jarring, even when heard for the umpteenth time. It makes me pause and think and wonder just how bad she must have it, to be driven that far and why she would say something like that, leaving us to surmise that for some at a certain point perhaps, the only logical conclusion out of a certain predicament is a total extraction of the self from the situation, a possibility she hardly dwells on as she launches even more resolutely into the aria stressing that when she is "laid in earth," she wishes that her "wrongs may create no trouble in the breast" of those she leaves behind, save for remembering "her and not my fate."

It is Dido's plea to remember some bits and forget the others that speaks to a universal frustration in life, as it hints at questions around what the point of all this is, asking why do I bother doing all this, when I have no-one within whose breast I cause any trouble at all? It's the kind of existential question many LGBTQ+ folks have grappled with in various iterations since forever. It loosens up feelings of loneliness and fears of growing old alone, and reminds me of talks—and jokes—between middle-aged gays that they don't know *who* to leave their stuff to because there *is* no one to leave it to. No one who will remember. And so Dido's Lament, as a gay man, is an uncomfortable truth. A beautiful lament, yes, but also a reminder of a painful reality that many of us are forced into "chosen" ecosystems. Little pockets of people who can barely stand each of other, each confronting the same awful reality. Most of us won't be remembered.

I pressed play again. Earlier in the day I had made a little playlist of the recordings I intended to play and arranged them so as to tell a little story, or set a scene, and over the course of a few hours I had thrown out and discounted many highly regarded readings of the the work as they felt somehow off or less surprising in this moment as I imagined it. There was the old Flagstad recording from 1952 but since it was mono and the diva herself was in the "mature" phase of her career it seems to exist mostly today as historical document. And much as we are supposed to love the 1961 Janet Baker on Decca, her voice ravishing, it too felt a little old-school and expected. Recorded a few years later, 1965 to be exact, the Victoria de los Ángeles reading under Barbirolli on EMI is all sorts of wrong with de los Ángeles misjudging the role stylistically and Barbirolli leading an orchestra as if they are playing Mahler.

"It's a tough choice, just settling on one or even five, as I have done but there is something about all of these that just work, for me," I said. "I looked at other fine recordings when putting together this playlist, one by Jessye Norman under Raymond Leppard in 1985, Norman, of course, magisterial—her Dido a little too reminiscent of Strauss' Ariadne for my liking—but another reading that wants be better than it is has to be the Anne Sofie von Otter under Trevor Pinnock from the late 1980s and although von Otter is glorious, the rest of the recording is a little forgettable."

I play the first few bars of von Otter's recitative and a brief listen left us cold.

"Von Otter uses ornamentation and rather than adding embellishments, she sings in a sparing way underscoring the idea of weariness and of a deep need for solace," Bob said. "You just know that unnecessary ornaments for her would be like false fleeting moments of beauty that may well manage to shine through darkness but, ultimately, that would be false."

"With her the text, its plea for remembrance, takes on a different meaning and it becomes a desperate cry for some semblance of meaning or significance in a world that has grown indifferent," Sven said.

"OK, so Otter is a no, but what do you think of this?" I scrolled for the Kermis recording under Currentzis again. "We listened to it earlier."

Teodor Currentzis' 2008 reading with MusicAeterna and The New Siberian Singers recorded in Novosibirsk in the heart of Siberia, delivers an unexpected moment of clarity. Say whatever, but this is not a version that leaves the listener bored, staring blankly into the distance. Currentzis' Dido, Simone Kermes, is not altogether universally loved with a frustrated Robert Levine writing for Classics Today that "Dido is never exactly zippy, but to hear every note sung at a ravishing pianissimo, with phrases taken in long, long breaths may be a stunning stunt and can be appreciated as art, but even as the opposite of sound and fury it manages to become nothing."

"That breathy, hothcy-witchy, half-voice she uses is certainly effective here, in this space, but I dare say it would only work for a microphone—there is little chance of that working in any kind of opera house," Bob said, "bigger than a small hall, at least."

"She does however capture the tiredness of a tormented soul, and I must say I *feel* something when she sings but I'm also kind of turned off by this recording's self-conscious eccentricity," I said. "It seems hellbent on making a point."

"Be the emotion and her intentions as they may, I agree, Dido cannot transmit through eery whispers alone, not as core vocal solution and this relentless determination to pitch her at this level of depressed and breathy borders on pretentious.,"Bob said. "Can you play it again?" He paused a second. "Another part of me does like it a lot."

"Yeah. Me too.,"I said. "Sure." Sometimes all it took was a moment and something small in the recording that would suddenly click and make fans of (most of) us.

"Kermes does seem to summon a little vocal mettle for words like 'trouble' before she defaults to by-now trademark floating, which blends into the ethereal reading they seem to want to create for the rest of the recording," Bob said. "Ir's literally a mile away from recordings like the Jessye Norman or even the von Otter."

"Kermes might be German, but her English is flawless and what I love is how she projects the problem facing Dido, a woman forever changed—defeated—by what she feels for this man. She is fragile, sensitive, and tormented. And about to pack it up. This is life stuff and to me, Currentzis gets it," Sven said.

I quickly scrolled around to find the Norman for a reference. "So, I wasn't going to play this, but this is the polar opposite and since Bob brought it up…" I quickly changed playlists to the Leppard recording with Norman as Dido.

"Normally I'd be all over this kind of queenly dignity in such a characterization but Norman's conviction and intensity sweep me along," Bob said, "And the orchestra is exceptionally jaunty—not exactly period—but aware of the baroque style which seems a good compromise in this case."

"That voice is something else. *This* is a queen," Sven said.

"Yaaaas—I'm there for it but if you listen closely she is also vulnerable and then she just quickly blast out a little gloss for good measure," Diego said.

"Not to disagree or be a stick in the mud, but for me, this is less Purcell's Dido and very much Jessye Norman's Dido," Bob said. "It is stately and grand but frankly she doesn't give us broken queen much. I expect that her Dido will take an Advil and sleep it off. I mean, does she really sound like a woman at the end of her mortal coil, about to end it all? But, I love it for that very reason."

"I do want you to hear this," I said, scrolling around my app. "and this has made me crazy for ever. I think it's from the early 90s and its recorded live at Ravinia in the small hall on a hot summer evening and Norman is, well, amazing." I pressed play.

Norman's voice as she launches defies description, suffice to say that it seems stretched and pulled simultaneously in the best way into some place that we don't have language for, the sound managing to take on qualities both statuesque and vulnerable with her clearly lost while in charge, sculpting and punctuating

"That sounds is incredible," Sven said. "Formidable, smokey, rich, like thunder and then suddenly a whisper then, I swear, like an angel. I mean, she is just everything.

"It would be fair to say that she did not shy away from exaggeration nor to point at what I think is a certain interpretive spontaneity. If anything, she is the very model of a singer who does something because she can. He voice allows her to do that. She doesn't have to take risks because for her, there are simly no risks, as long as she stays within the parameters of what that voice can do. This really works. Later on, when she recorded Santuzza, and Carmen and Fidelio, for the most part, she flirted with disaster. But this, this is perfect. She is, even for just 5 minutes, Dido."

We let the recording finish and took a sip of wine. Norman made us feel something.

"OK, Back to Kermes and Currentzis," I said after a few minutes, and pressed play. "I do love how the orchestration sounds in this one. The theorbo and the sound in general is consciously percussive and that really pushes elements like the storm sounds and, besides feeling somehow mythical, as if a recording for the Game of Thrones generation, this combination does something else that I think may be a negative for some. They make Purcell sound even a little French as if its a Rameau and the recording, especially the final chorus, is just more alive for it."

"This is such a difficult recording to get my head around because there are such deliberate irregularities everywhere yet at the same time, little innovative touches everywhere shifts Dido into focus in a way that us unusual and unexpected," Sven said. "But I do think this is one to rate highly."

"And now, listen to this—as an alternative. For perspective, and fun," I said. I quickly found the next track. "Alison Moyet—from British synthpop group Yazoo—and she does approach the aria more as a song, of course, with resignation and fatigue and each phrase is delivered with a weary tone, as if every word and every note is an effort to continue because her spirit is all but spent while the dynamics of her singing, instead of expressing longing as one would expect convey a sense of surrender."

"She sounds tired—weary—as if she's seen life's disappointments," Diego said. "Dido's love for Aeneas is intense—genuine—and when Aeneas leaves Carthage to fulfill his destiny as founder of Rome, it shatters Dido, leaving her heartbroken by his departure and abandoned. One gets the feeling that Alison Moyet…"

"…who studied music, by the way…" I interrupted

"…that she understands this," Diego continued, unfazed, "and she continues a tradition of pop singers throwing out a classical number, firstly because they can and secondly because channeling Dido is an emotionally safer place from which to comment on pain."

"Didn't Klaus Nomi also record *Wayward Sisters* from Act 1 of Dido and Aeneas?" Bob always surprised me with his knowledge across a wide range of music.

"He *also* did Purcell's *Cold Song* from King Arthur—and it's amazing," I said.

"Nomi is a perfect case in point," Bob said, "When he sings *Wayward Sisters* he totally inhabits the space of Sorceress and, perhaps, because much like Kermes, Nomi in baroque mode you feel just how vulnerable he is and he ends up giving you this deeply moving—admittedly flawed—but relentlessly idiosyncratic performances."

"I remember seeing Klaus Nomi on television in the early 1980s in Germany, and when he performed *Cold Song* he was wearing a different costume from his usual Dadaist plastic tuxedo," Sven said. "I remember reading that he opted for Elizabethan costume with the big collar as he got sicker

and especially toward the end of his life because it covered the sarcoma that had startied to appear. That song is incredible. It still send chills up me," Sven said.

"Have you ever heard Jeff Buckley's *Dido's Lament?* What I love about him is that 'Remember me' is that it's not just a request; it's a plea. For validation, or even a sense of yearning. Like he knew he would die soon," Bob said.

"Buckley's version so weird. I do love it. And it's beautiful. It sounds alone, abandoned, and even tormented. You feel how he or Dido, I don't know, have lost the will to fight. And because it's Buckley in a pretty good falsetto, it kind of turns the song on its head in terms of gender fluidity and it, to me, is something Buckley could not have foreseen or even intended but he is nonetheless comfortable within," I said. "OK. Last one."

I fumbled around the playlist and pressed play. "Susan Graham, with Haim conducting."

"Out of all recordings of this scene, it's this one that conveys a sense of setting," Bob said.

"It, and you must forgive me my overreach perhaps, but it recalls the Mediterranean evening in the way that *Cosi Fan Tutte* does, although with less shimmer on the ocean, but I do get sense of place here," Sven said.

"I'm getting villa and the idea that civilization itself is wedged precariously on the edge of the cliff as Dido, weak and struggling to express herself, is, note by note, giving up the very will to live," Diego said.

"Nothing says Florentine Camerata quite like the theorbo," Bob laughed.

"A lot here works well—and a few things work on my nerves—but for the most part I love the reading and especially how Haim seems to round out the sound a little without losing the translucent quality that she seems to have found—what you compared with Cosi—and for good measure, the tempi are brisk with good emphasis on the downbeat," I said.

Diego looked at me. "Meaning?"

"I think he means that the music propels forward in an almost angular way giving it that 'baroque' feeling and in my mind almost Italianate rather than the meandering Englishness that we sometimes get from softer edges. But I love it," Bob said, nodding at me in agreement. Although not a qualified, I studied music too and found our evenings invigorating.

"And she is glorious. Dido, I mean," I said.

"In a softer way. Again in no way is this Queen of Carthage a monolith. This is no Dido in the style of Norman or the old guard. Her mezzo is contained and focused and her sound seems permanently placed in the mask but that does give her a certain vocal security," Bob said.

"To me, she echoes Kermes in that she's dynamic yet she veers close to the pianissimo setting with some sotto voce—often on the higher passages—and so her Dido seems also to be closer to the Kermes version in terms of vulnerable—exposed even—with a detectable diminished regal quality," Sven said.

"Maybe when we're betrayed we lose our regal bearing?" Bob laughed and got up to refill the wine glasses. "What happens when we get too tired and worn out to be a bitch about stuff? I remember my dad making a big deal about it not being the size of the dog in the fight by the size of the fight in the dog."

"That's the same man who, literally five minutes after meeting me, called me peppery," I said.

"Yeah—he did but he liked you," Bob said. "But my point is that sometimes the fight in the dog is broken. From betrayal or hurt or a bad diagnosis, who knows, but the size of that fight is not a certainty, not on the long run, anyway."

Bob returned with wine and filled each glass carefully, "Remember a few months ago, at the Harris Theater when I heard Joyce DiDonato? And she did the Dido lament? Well. On that 'remember me,' more than ever before, to me, it seemed as if the music grew more assertive and impassioned, then as that resolves and buckles on the 'ah,' and the melody collapses with a melismatic sigh, DiDonato captured this moment of steel and dread—her body upright and

resolute, broken only for a moment as if she momentarily gave in to vertigo. That scene, her singing that aria, it all stayed with me for weeks and especially when I visited my mom in Baltimore a week later in her nursing home. She had been ill for a while and as you know, I hated her—I still do—but that's another story, anyway, she has been pretty much confined to her bed and in a constant state of weakness, and, also, dementia has started to set in and so it's been harder for her to accurately express herself or even use appropriate gestures that are timed to events around her. As I sat there on the edge of her bed, holding her hand, I found myself thinking of Joyce DiDonato."

"As one does." I joked, secretly worried that my attempt at levity may be viewed in a negative light. "Sorry, Bob," I said hastily as I noticed him smiling at my comment.

"It's true. In times of need we conjure the diva," Sven laughed.

"Exactly. And that is what I did," Bob said, unfazed by the momentary break in solemnity. "But here's the thing. I felt a little envious."

"Say what now?" Diego looked genuinely confused.

"It was something I have never really been aware of," Bob said. "I mean I have never thought about it in quite that light, and I have seen plenty of sick people in the 80s and 90s, but something about how Joyce DiDonato interpreted that moment—what Dido knows would be her last words—felt so clearly juxtaposed with what my mother was going through, and what I now can't quite get my head around."

"I mean, I used to think that slipping deeper into a twilight state is almost ideal, kind of like falling deeper and deeper into to some kind of quasi-dream state and then, eventually just cease to be. Isn't that better than consciously suffering or the anticipation of something that is slowly but surely creeping up on you, yet are powerless against?" Sven asked.

"I possibly may have thought so too at some points over the years," Bob said, "but sitting there with a woman I honestly never liked and now faced with the fact that we cannot go and smooth over some of those calloused parts or kiss and make up, as she was here with the light all

but dimmed in her eyers and in the last throes of cancer, Dido's death—much like most opera deaths—seemed unattainably yet enviably clear-eyed."

"I get what you are saying," I said, "but Joyce is not dying, and she is acting—presenting an approximation—of a deeply glamorous death, one with a hair stylist, make up, and a Dior frock. And so, it's little wonder that life's most important exit is met with a degree or lampoonery and ridicule in opera. I mean, Dido is stretching it out. And I can see how the sheer artifice of her death is even off-putting to opera newbies."

"I agree! I am not saying that I imagine any death to be that. Rather, what I think I am saying, is that opera—Dido—is helping me to think differently about the whole process," Sven said.

"And how lucky some are to be able to depart with grace and certain degree of agency," Bon said, "And how hard it is to just face the reality of the situation—of death. The staff at the hospital and even the contact person at the hospital whom I presume works with in this liaison capacity fairly frequently, seem to genuinely have a hard time calling the spade what it is. And in this moment of profound uncertainty with my mother, all this beating around the bush is hard to deal with."

The Dido and Aeneas Listening List

- *Thy hand, Belinda/Dido's Lament,* Henry Purcell. Simone Kermis, Currentzis, MusicAeterna, 2008.
- *Thy hand, Belinda/Dido's Lament,* Henry Purcell. Susan Graham, Haïm, Le Concert d'Astrée, 2007.
- *Thy hand, Belinda/Dido's Lament,* Henry Purcell. Anne Sofie von Otter, Pinnock, The English Concert, 1989.
- *Thy hand, Belinda /Dido's Lament,* Henry Purcell. Jessye Norman, Leppard, The English Chamber Orchestra, 1986.
- *Dido's Lament,* Henry Purcell. Alison Moyet, "Voice," 2004.
- *Dido's Lament*, Henry Purcell. Jeff Buckley, live at the Meltdown Festival, England, 1995.
- *Wayward Sisters,* Henry Purcell. Klaus Nomi, "Simple Man," 1982.
- *A Love Bizarre,* Sheila E, "Romance 1600," 1985.

Marvin

"No one likes a miserable old queen, darling. Especially the old bit," Marvin said, looking away as if surprised by his own bluntness. "*Especially* not *that*," he emphasized. "The old." He smiled a little as if he aware of how it sounded and he meant it that way.

When Marvin Berns turned 94, the exhaustion of a lifetime of otherness, of being considered less than, nearly overwhelmed him. "It's always something," Berns said to me over dinner one evening. "You're either too Jewish, too gay, or too foreign. And now, too old." Like most gay men, he had experienced his share of discrimination and micro-aggressions. "You quickly learn to read between the lines, and I have eyes in the back of my head," he said, only half-joking as he recalled how on "more than one occasion I had to outwit and outrun drunken straight louts on a Friday night."

A scar on his right arm acted as daily reminder of one such incident, when taunting turned violent at a bus stop on Halloween in 1975. "They may not have liked us. But we were there, dressed to the nines," he said. "We were out, despite being second-class citizens. But things are different now, especially after gay marriage."

Marvin was right. The Marriage Equality Act of 2015 changed the tone of the conversation around queerness, and American society has since grown more welcoming and accepting of the Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression (SOGIE) community than at any point in our history. But challenges still existed, and it was mostly the shape of discrimination had changed over the previous decade with a recent study in the Social Science and Medicine Journal focusing on the social stress associated with simply "not mattering anymore," confirming a link between ageism and homophobia in what it termed a hybrid internalized gay ageism prevalent in contemporary society.

To sit with Marvin, whether to keep him company, or playing dirty boardgames filled with swearwords and the pleasure of him saying smutty things with a glint on his eye, or over dinner, or listening to music, was to be connected to our people. Those who came before us. The ones who died young and the ones who were persecuted so that we may live in societies where we are accepted and free to display PDA and wear nail polish and say "Yaaasss girl," and use words like "Slay." Because sitting with Marvin reminded me that it wasn't always like that, and that for many, it still is not. And for that reason, we need to have a voice and stick together and be willing to speak up.

Marvin was born in 1927, in Chicago, to a young immigrant family from the Ukrainian port city of Odessa to escape the ongoing and widening famine, the direct result of Soviet "prodrazverstka," a food communism policy sanctioning the requisition of all agricultural produce that engSvened Ukrainian society as part of the brief but consequential 1921 Russian Civil War.

"Of course, I knew nothing of any of that or much of anything really, but even living in Albany Park in Chicago, the shadow of that war and the big one and my mother's shtetl mentality haunt me to this day," Berns said, "because my mother, Pauline, was a stoic woman, steeped in denial. Sangfroid, some would call it," he said. "When I left the house at 18, she told me, 'Marvin, you can be whatever you want, just be younger than you are, don't be too Jewish And hide that other thing.' And of course, that was the last we spoke of that other thing," he said, rolling his eyes. "She meant being gay, of course. But I just thought, 'fuck her' and so I became a ballet dancer. I did join the Presbyterian church, however, at some point in the 70s. She was right about that part."

"How my mother got through all of that pressure she, I think, partially herself thought, I don't know because she always took the Jewish holidays off. But I don't think anybody at BorgWarner, where she worked, was even aware of what was going on—nor cared, probably. Funny world. Or rather, it is an interesting world. Really." Marvin paused for a moment. "And my mother, God bless her, was made a widow at a very early age. She was told—I had an older brother—she

was told to put her children in an orphanage and just get on with her own life. But she wouldn't do that."

"And so, we never knew how old my mother was because she kept changing her birth certificate herself and I didn't think that was even be possible, but she did have a reasonably good grasp of survival. I remember one day she called and said, 'Marvin, it's all over.' And I said, 'What do you mean?' Well, BorgWarner told everyone they had to produce a verified birth certificate and so they learned that Pauline Berns was 15, maybe even 20 years over the retirement program limit and so they had to let her go—with sorrow, I may add—because they liked her. And I did too. I liked her very much."

"I completed high school in June 1945. War World Two was ending but the draft was still on and of course I was drafted. I *wanted* to be drafted." He smiled as he clasped his hands. "I thought it would be a wonderful, exciting experience for a young kid. I had just arrived at basic training when someone walked into the barracks and asked, 'Does anybody know how to type?' Of course my hand went up because my mom taught me to type from a very early age so I missed basic training and ended up in an office. Somewhere along the line I was instructed in some basic things even though I was not in basic training, but I did learn how to be a sharpshooter with an M or M1 rifle. or something like that, I forget."

"I was transferred to a California army base and again, somebody announced that they needed someone who knew how to type, and while I was in the office, someone walked in to announce that Air Force planes of this particular division could not leave without a flight attendant on them. And so they asked if anybody wanted to be a flight attendant? Three days later, I was in Paris, and I also went to Rome, the Azores, and Calcutta—I was lucky as I was at the right place. And then, I was discharged. War was over. And I could resume my life."

"And then the Korean War broke out. Of course, Congress established that anyone who hadn't served a full year was recalled and since I was 20 days shy, I was recalled. And so, I had to go

through that whole that whole rigmarole all over again—all those tasks and all that struggle. One day in the barrack, somebody came in and announce that the flight cannot leave without a flight clerk on them and whether anyone there could see themselves doing that. Now, I could type and I was a flight attendant so up went my hand, and three days later I was in Paris again, and I was now a flight clerk. Funny thing, no-one really knew what my duties were because it wasn't until much later that that the Air Force established a flight attended school in Florida. I never attended that because I'd already gone through the motions, so I didn't have to do that."

"And then, after the war, when I was discharged I went to Roosevelt University in Chicago under the GI Bill but I didn't complete my college education as my mother needed help financially and beside, I knew I wanted to work. And indeed, I got a job at J. Walter Thompson, where I was in media working in radio and printing. But, of course, I wasn't 'Jewish.' There were a few of us. Gay and or Jewish. I'm my mother's son."

"J. Walter Thompson, transferred me to Detroit to work on the Ford account. I didn't like Detroit. I was only there for a year. I remember working on a report and the agent asked me to take it to the Ford headquarters in Dearborn and I said that I don't drive to which they looked at me like I'm crazy and they wanted to know why and so I explained that I lived at the Mies van der Rohe building in Detroit from where a bus took me to the office and back, and when they learned that I didn't drive, that caused a ruckus with most colleagues thinking it was rather amusing to be spending that much time in Detroit and not learn how to drive. If I had said I was gay—or Jewish—it may have been more digestible.

"And so I came back to Chicago and met James Whetstone and my life was never the same.

"James changed my life. Considering the time, I don't know for certain if they really understood or appreciated that, but they knew that it—I—was important to James. Okay, so I didn't really care about family or other's opinions but he did. And he did convert to Judaism. Okay. Reform. But still. It was a big deal. But I was my mother son, so I chose to become a Presbyterian.

When I say become, I mean I pretended, when someone asked. I knew I couldn't "become" Catholic—too much mumbo jumbo and stuff in that just in case I got caught. But being Presbyterian? Oh, so simple. No questions asked. Ever. And do you did what what society was demanding of you."

James lived in the Tree Studio Building and Annexes, built by Judge Herbert Tree and his wife in 1894 as an artist colony in the most perfect location right behind the Medina Temple. We had a garden apartment that opened up in the center and there were quite a few artists. The actor Peter Falk live there as did Burgess Meredith who by then had divorced Paulette Goddard. An artist, Macena Barton—supposedly the first American woman paint a nude-self portrait—lived next door to us." He pointed at a chair in the corner. "You see the pillow? It's by her and yeah, I sat for her as well. I think James found that before he died."

"We were happy and life was easy. And we took driving lessons, finally. And, of course, we always liked plants and a friend said that they were tired of hearing about how we loved plants, and suggested we open a plant store—so we did, on Oak Street.

"It where I met Maria Callas.

"After a performance at the opera, we fell in love with Callas. Went to all Lyric performances, they had opened the year before in 1954 with Norma which she sang as well. And after seeing Butterfly at the Lyric one night in 1955 we arrived home, we were living above the shop, and just as we arrived, a limousine pulled up at the 40 East Oak Hotel next door and the interior light went on. Inside was Maria Callas and Giovanni Meneghini, her husband at the time. So Meneghini came out of the car first and walked into the hotel, and then Callas came out, there was another woman with her, and we stopped and chatted to Callas for a few seconds—gushing really, telling her how wonderful she was, and she really was. So, the next day, we had a fourth floor walk up, I brought my librettos dow and left them at the hotel front desk with a little card and a note that said: would you be so kind as to sign my librettos. I picked them up the next day. And she signed

them. Now I'm sorry I sold them on on the internet because they were worth a lot of money with her signature but that's all fine. A few days later I saw Birgit Nilsen as well. Oak Street was amazing. We bought a house in Michigan and we lived there for over thirty years, it was just beautiful,

And then one day we looked at one another and we had the same thought: it was time to move back to Chicago. James was beginning to show the signs of decline. There was nothing specific—there never was—just a general slowing down and a nagging worry that if ever anything was to happen, being in the Michigan Harbor Country, 2 hours away from Chicago, may cause a layer of additional exposure, so it wasn't emotionally difficult to sell the house. Life takes over. "A friend in real estate showed us this unit, James walked in and just bought it cash from the sale of the Michigan house. I wasn't even here, that's how in-sync we were. He knew and give the good price, we didn't need or want a mortgage. We were fortunate and so our lives just went on, but here. Then, six years ago, James feeling unwell one morning decided to walk to the ER at Weiss Hospital a block away from here and died. They took him from me," he said, referring to the day James . "He seemed fine, it was supposed to be a minor dizzy spell, and by the time I got to Weiss, he was gone. I woke up that day, a married man and went to bed a widower. And here I am. 94. With just a lot of memories. "

Marvin pointed at the wall of framed photographs in the sitting room. There was one of him and James as young men with broad smiles striking a beefcake pose. Another showed them middle-aged, one of them looking suave on Oak Street, and a small one—a selfie—showed the couple goofing around at Chicago Pride, taken just weeks before James died. The lakefront condo in Buena Park, a Chicago neighborhood of sizable mansions, midcentury condo blocks, and elegant co-ops, has become shrine to life and loss, Marvin since constantly declining unsolicited advice to downsize since James' passing in 2017.

"No one tells you how hard it is lose your anchor—your rock—and then try to find some kind of place in what feels like a very unwelcoming society," he says. "The most difficult thing I've had to do, was face having become invisible." He paused for a moment. "That's unfair. I have such wonderful friends. Just in this building I have at least two couples who see me almost every day and many people who offer to get my groceries or fill my prescriptions, I am very blessed.

"When I was part of the Gay Men's Chorus, in 1989, we went to Seattle to perform. We did the execution scene from Poulenc's Dialogues of the Carmelites. Just fabulous music. So dramatic," Marvin said. He described how over the course of the scene in which the nuns are taken away to be guillotined, the chorus is reduced one singer at a time until a single voice remained to sing the last sustained note. "The last remaining voice was mine. And I was the last one left of my friends. HIV had taken so many. Now, again, I'm the last one alive."

He pause for a while. "Do you know that Sondheim song? *Good times and bum times, I've seen 'em all And, my dear, I'm still here,"* he sang. "It's true," he said. "I've seen some things. And lost others. I've lived a good life. But I'm still here."

* Marvin Berns passed away a few months after this interview, on November 22, 2022. He was 95. Images of Marvin at 92, and as a young man serving in the US military.

The Marvin Listening List

- *I'm Still Here.* Elaine Stritch, "Elaine Stritch at Liberty (Original Broadway Cast)," 2002.

- *Salve Regina,* Francis Poulenc, *Dialogues des Carmelites*. Nagano, Choeurs de l'Opéra National de Lyon, 2007.

- *Yuh Mein Tiere Tochter*, The Barry Sisters. "Yuh Mein Tiere Tochter," 1965.

- *I'll Be Your Mirror*, The Velvet Underground & Nico. The Velvet Underground & Nico, 1967.

- *Speak Low*, Kurt Weill. Anne Sofie von Otter, Gardiner, Radio-Philharmonie Hannover, NDR Symphony Orchestra, 1994.

Folly!

È strano! È strano! *How strange! How strange!*

Ah, fors'è lui che l'anima *Ah, maybe he's the one*

Follie! Follie! Delirio vano è questo! *Madness! Madness! This is a futile delirium!*

Sempre libera *(I must stay) always free*

La Traviata, Giuseppe Verdi, 1853.

La Traviata (The Fallen Woman) is set to an Italian libretto by Francesco Maria Piave and based on "La Dame aux camélias" (1852), by Alexandre Dumas fils. La Traviata was first performed on 6 March 1853 at La Fenice opera house, in Venice.

"There's no noise in water." Sven a handsome man originally from Sweden, ended up in Chicago when he visited a guy he met in Copenhagen in the 80s. "His name was Ryan, from South Carolina who fled the south for the north after getting weighed down by pervasive racism of Myrtle Beach's gay community. I had given up on love. I just did hookups. And after, I'd always have this need to find a pool of some sort, either the gym or the hotel, just a pool. And so that became my thing that I do. Call it a cleansing ritual, if you want, but I love how in the water there is just a fuzzy buzz."

It was Monday evening and I was desperately eyeing the freshly baked baguette and duck patè which not a soul had touched because, carbs—a fact that was hardly surprising as every self-respecting gay man over forty now lives by keto. "It looks so good—and the smell—the whole place just reeks of yeasty goodness," I couldn't stop myself from gushing, "in a good way." I laughed, painfully aware that my awkward bread comment had made short shrift of Sven's confessional hookup comment.

"My real agent insisted I bake fresh bread when we sold our condo after the break-up," Sven said, beaming. He was hosting tonight's get-together.

"Did it work?" Bob asked.

"Multiple offers and several over asking." A soft gasp and a stunned pause followed. Gay men knew real estate and this was sheer gospel truth, besides, real estate was legit one of the only subjects that could put the kibosh on intimacy confessions that bordered oversharing.

Chosen family, what this group essentially resembled from its inception, had become increasingly important for all of us. The notion of chosen family holds significant value in our lives, these found families often emerging as a vital source of love, support, and understanding. For many within the LGBTQ+ community, the journey towards self-acceptance and affirmation is paved by the unwavering solidarity of chosen kin and in the face of societal challenges and frequent familial

estrangement, these tightly-knit networks serve as beacons of resilience, fostering a sense of belonging and provide a safe haven for shared experiences, joys, and hardships alike.

And, certainly, queerdom thrives across multiple chosen families with this one, our Monday Opera family consisting now of four men (and one one in spirit) with three things in common: a love of good music, not necessarily opera as the name suggested, but as it turned out, mostly opera, was listened to; a feeling of increasing isolation while the world around us seemed to flourish on dating apps; and a lingering creeping awareness that time, really, was not on our side after all.

"I just started feeling anxious because everyone is hooking up but no one talks about love, or the deeper stuff, anymore," Diego explained. He was a handsome art lecturer who moved to Chicago from his hometown of Kankakee as soon as he could afford the train ticket. It was with bewilderment that he had noticed a radical shift in how people connected, especially since the 2015 Marriage Equality ruling, "and of course, PrEP," he added.

"Yeah exactly." Bob said. "I don't know, it was like it was just too much freedom to handle so we just went crazy."

"Honestly, I feel like things have changed a lot since PrEP. I was in a relationship before it was first available." Diego continued. "When that ended I got onto Scruff again and I was like—really?—everybody's polyamorous now? And suddenly men were undetectable, and like, things are different out there today. It's better, for sure, but it feels like, sexually speaking, the Wild West."

Bob nodded, agreeing, "I feel like now, no one cares what you do anymore, because we don't *have* care so much what we do, and so most of us are still not very educated, so there is this lingering perception that we may as well go ahead and do whatever—because well, why not? I'll just take a pill and deal with the consequences. And I know it sounds like I'm shaming the popular among us, which, of course, I'm not. One can't. But I have to say, I'm not quite as guided by a need for the heteronormative."

Bob had become increasingly outspoken against what he viewed as the restrictions of monogamy which he viewed as an unnecessarily prescriptive bar, set by a heteronormative society needing some artificial standard by which to judge the LGBTQ+ community.

"Well this is why we started hanging out together," I interrupted "because it's a cruel world out there with stigmas that still exist, as does misinformation and sometimes it's nice to just relax with a glass of wine and listen to music." I sliced another wedge of bread off the loaf. "And really, Sven, this is so good."

"Rye. Swedish recipe," Sven said. "I am glad you like it."

It may have been appeared to the uninitiated scanning the room, that this was, at its most basic, a pod of gay men—a homonormative space, even— but that would have been an oversimplification of gay life in the third decade of the Millennium as most of here were more motivated to forge lasting friendships than meet single horned-up men per se and so, the structure and purpose of our evenings were simple: every week's meeting was hosted by another member; and every attendee had to bring their choice of drink to share and something to contribute to dinner. Sex with group members, although not exactly verboten, was never alluded to. The goal of the group, especially following Marvin's passing, was to provide some sort of weekly anchor, a thing to look forward to with a group of people whom one perhaps wouldn't pick to be stranded with on a desert island but still brightened up the start of every week through witty repartee, wine, and, sometimes, bitching.

In the age of Covid—and Grindr—small pods like these had popped up in gay communities around the world especially among older men who had grown tired of their boring and staid homogeneous circles, and weary of the accelerated pace with which sex and carnal desire had exploded in what had become, essentially, a post-Aids landscape.

"If we end up looking around this room in twenty years and still see these faces," Diego said, "I think we would have done well."

"Or been there for each other should we lose one or two, for whatever reason." Bob raised his glass. "To Marvin." We all echoed the name and raised our glasses.

And to some, social geographers we may call them, physical spaces—streets and bars and squares, and even homes—are containers that host and tolerate events and the groups that frequent them: passive backdrops, shaped and guided by human actions and interventions. But to the queer, the fluidity and responsiveness of those spaces and how it forces reconfigured identity suggest otherwise. That spaces and backdrops are constantly remade and repeatedly renegotiated as byproducts of the fact that this is, still, a heterosexual world where declarations of that heterosexual predisposition are invisible yet stitched into the fabric of society as normal—a lingua franca of sorts. And its only when lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender expressions, such as a pride parade for example, take place, in those very places that they are temporarily "queered," revealing the normativity of heterosexuality that ordinarily dominate those spaces.

What made early 90s Pride gatherings so jarring to everyone, including the participants, was just how suddenly, a profusion of same-sex display in otherwise and hitherto hostile environments made a public display of queer protest, or affection, or even queer solidarity, acts of dissidence. But in the 21st century, barring some—significant—red-state pushback and a number of hostile supreme court decisions, LGBTQ environments have radically shifted in alignment with social and political gains. Our communities have changed. We have left gay ghettos and moved into previously verboten suburban and rural areas.

This issue of homonormativity takes a socially more problematic turn when we consider its overwhelming pro-whiteness stance and its maleness and how it effectively established a new hegemonic elites. We have picket fences, and labradoodles, and often, children, all of which leads to de-radicalized versions of queer representation and in some cases, even selective—impotent—

representation as same-sex marriage and Pride events increasingly reproduce neutered capitalist and homonormative values. We have become acceptable—we're tolerated—because we have come to also espouse Stepford values.

And so, we get to the issue of intersectionality and how, in queer geographies, sexual orientation and gender interact with other aspects of human identity, such as race, class, and ability —and approach that challenges both traditional one-dimensional identity and the focus on narrow intersections within the hierarchy.

And so, here we were in our "queer space." A radical thing, in its own way disrupting a power system invested in normative sexual and gender expression, by playing hysterical divas on bluetooth stereo. It was our queer place for us: queer people. Exclusive. Anarchical. Even anti-capitalist. Free from hetero-moralistic pressure. And although, compared to many, our space may have been less queer than others, a certain spirit that accompanied the need to overthrow oppression still lingered, guiding our sexualized and uniquely oriented identities within this queer-enough for us, space.

"Do you think there is, today," Sven asked, "such as thing as the pure queer? Or pure gay?"

"Possibly not." I said. "We're all implicated, in one way or another, in some political and social structure or another. And we are often coerced into participations with these structures in personal and unique ways. So no, but we make sure there is no pure straight either."

"SO. I went to the bar on Saturday and this guy came over and said hi. That he was Jeremy, and that this was Mikey, his husband," Bob said, "I shook hands with both. It was an awkward moment. A hug would have been, maybe, a little over-familiar, but somehow a handshake felt wrong. Hetero—do you know what I mean? Anyway this guy introduced the other guy in the group as his dad—George—and then this guy Jeremy continued and so, I greeted the dad cheerfully. And also Allan. Who turns out to be the dad's husband."

"As in daddy-dad? Or dad-dad?" Diego looked confused.

"Exactly. Who knew??" Bob said. "It was only later that I got the whole story. The guy, Jeremy told me that he did not realize that his dad had told his mom a week prior that he was gay himself. And so, Jeremy came out to his dad he said, 'well good luck, so am I.' And of course the mom fucking flipped. Of course at the bar on Saturday the dad laughed about it and although it was a big deal to them and their family I was kind of envious that in my family it was just me and the wall of Catholic guilt from my very straight parents and brother and the fact that they thought it was my piano playing that caused it."

"That story was so complicated," Diego said. He paused for a moment. "But why nor? I mean, my sister is gay. Gay people may very well have gay family."

"Wow, It used to be so simple." Sven said. "But I know someone with exactly the same story. Except he is now 70 and his dad is in his 90s and, to say the least, their conversation is awkward at the best of times. Oh, the dad lives in Key West and has a thriving sex life."

"So the dad, later in the evening, said that his wife blamed him and that she accused him of molesting Jeremy. That was awkward. I think he sense that I was secretly envious of their all-in-the-family story. But I did think about it and back then, there was a huge question mark around people and their orientation," Bob said. "My ex-husband, Jeff, was a big shot at United and has by now been HIV positive for over thirty years. Initially he thought he was going to die and, to be honest, we were super aware and the thought of undetectable as a status was something that did not exist even in our wildest dreams. He had to take two viagras to have sex. He saw himself as a loaded weapon." Bob paused. "But he was also a Virgo with a Gemini rising, so I don't know which was worse."

Sven turned up the volume a little, not in a dismissive or conformational way, rather as a host who was eager to get to the reason for our gathering. I took another sip of wine. Looking at Bob I felt a profound sense of pride. That this was my friend. That these, were, my friends. I felt fortunate.

Hanging over *La Traviata,* from the first note to the last, is the specter of disease—and obsession, desperation and moments of hope, but mostly the notion of illness—and how specifically tuberculosis is associated with everything from lovers to poets to the extent that it becomes a cultural cliche for most of the 19th century. It's a disease that forms a regular theme in art of the 19th century, in books—Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables,* for example—and paintings like Edvard Munch's *The Sick Child* while other operas, such as Jacques Offenbach's 1851 opera, *Les Contes d'Hoffman* and Giacomo Puccini's *La Bohème,* first performed in 1896*,* are both also based on phthisic death.

Much of 19th century opera in Italy was dominated by Giuseppi Verdi and his operas remain some of the most performed in the repertoire with *La Traviata,* by some estimates, leading the pack, and although not rapturously received at first—the subject was considered too distasteful—*La Traviata*, was eventually reckoned a masterpiece of everyday scenes as Verdi, by making a courtesan the heroine in the opera, challenged the social order. Opera at the time intended to present an ossified, even backward-glancing view of the world, which contrasted sharply with Verdi's *Traviata* with it's salacious subject matter, unsavory desires, and all that while set to glorious, hummable tunes on stage (Salazar, 2018).

Violetta is, by standards of Verdi's day, an anti-heroine, based as she was on a Parisian courtesan, Marie Duplessis, a woman who also happened to be "known romantically" by author and playwright, Alexander Dumas fils. After Duplessis' death at 23 from TB, Dumas set about to write *La Dame aux Camélias*, which was reworked as a play, thereby encouraging Verdi to create an opera using the Dumas play (Rakatansky, 2015, 11-12). On hearing that Marie Duplessis had died, Franz Liszt—under the pen name Daniel Stern—wrote to Marie d'Agoult, "Believe me that I felt for her a sombre elegiac attachment, which, without her knowing it, put me in the vein of poetry and music."

La Traviata's 1853 premiere was, however a failure. Audiences simply could not reconcile with the naturalistic elements of the characters, nor that those very aspects were, at best, so empathetically presented, the story seen as sexually explicit and the ravishing Violetta, the model of licentiousness. Dumas's description (from the preface of the 1867 edition of his play) describes Duplessis and her "phthisic beauty" by mentioning that "she was tall, very thin, dark-haired and with a pink and white complexion. Her head was small, her eyes long and slanting like those of a Japanese woman but lively and alert. Her lips were the colour of cherries and she had the most beautiful teeth in the world."

In "Illness as Metaphor," Susan Sontag writes that, "like all really successful metaphors, the metaphor of TB was rich enough to provide for two contradictory applications," Sontag, 25). Sontag continues, "It was both a way of describing sensuality and promoting the claims of passion and a way of describing repression ... and a suffusion of higher feelings."

The sexual agency claimed by Verdi's Act 1 Violetta contrasts strongly with her almost transcendental atrophy on Act 3—or that of Mimi in *La Bohème*—yet both versions of diseased beauty suggest a romanticized view of a disease born out of a vacuum of knowledge, one made clear by Charles Dickens in "The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby," when he call it the "dread disease, in which the struggle between soul and body is so gradual, quiet, and solemn, and the result so sure, that day by day, and grain by grain, the mortal part wastes and withers away, so that the spirit grows light and sanguine with its lightening load."

What divides Violetta and *Bohème's* Mimi, however, is the 1882 discovery of Mycobacterium Tuberculosis, known as Koch's bacillus, named after Robert Koch, the German physician and bacteriologist. But with this knowledge also came the burden of confirmation. Earlier medical theory suspected that TB was infectious and passed between people and soon, Koch's discovery was international news. When Violetta was conceived, a certain romanticized fuzziness still existed but by Mimi's creation, print media fueled enormous public debate around the prevalence and spread of

the disease. The fuzziness lead to a nature/nurture theory that suggested gullible beauties with certain lifestyles (read sexually active) easily slip into phthisic decline. Fallen women, slipping into ill health. It's not for nothing that *La Traviata* translates as "the fallen woman."

Again, it is impossible to overstate the sexualized aspects of the "phthisic beauty," as Sontag writes, "TB was—still is—thought to produce spells of euphoria, increased appetite, exacerbated sexual desire. … Having TB was imagined to be an aphrodisiac, and to confer extraordinary powers of seduction" (Sontag, 13).

From the prelude's first notes, a gossamer intimation of pervading death tells the audience exactly who Violetta is at heart: frail, and tragic. Even when the curtain rises on a bawdy party, Francesco Piave's libretto stipulates that Violetta is first seen in conversation with her physician. The party is Violetta's first after a lengthy convalescence and she is eager to assert her right to party and enjoy life, indeed she insists that celebrations will be her future cure for pain. Then, she is introduced to Alfredo Germont, a young man who after seeing her on the street only once, had been to her house daily during her recovery enquiring about her health.

"And so, Alfredo makes a toast, the well-known *Libiamo ne' lieti calici*, and it is, as one may suspect, an invocation of love until Violetta joins, a little flirty but still resisting and she poses that, instead, maybe love was like a flower—vulnerable—and from the moment of its appearance exposed to the possibility of death, leading her to believe in fervent passion above all," Sven said.

Piave and Verdi, tellingly, use the word "fervido" meaning passionate or even burning, but also strongly implies feverish. "Violetta understands—and has accepted—her limits and yet, is coaxed out of her resolve by the promise that this man seems to personify. This exchange, the creeping awareness she feels, the strangeness of it, his persistence, and finally her surrender—a glorious oh-what-the-fuck-moment—forms one of the most famous scenas in opera," Bob said.

"When Violetta meets Alfredo, she knows," I said. "In a way, they remind me of Candide and Cunegonde who each desire very different things: he, ruby red glowing fires and she, glowing

red rubies. But there's more to it. Violetta knows, she is not long for this world and yet, she relents, agreeing to make a go of country life, and, for a while at least, it all works out."

Sontag writes that a "TB patient was thought to be helped, even cured, by a change in environment. There was a notion that TB was a wet disease, a disease of humid and dank cities. The inside of the body became damp ("moisture in the lungs" was a favored locution) and had to be dried out. Doctors advised travel to high, dry places—the mountains, the desert" (Sontag 15). The Sanatorio Durán outside Costa Rica's capital San Jose, founded in 1918 by eminent physician Dr. Carlos Durán Cartín—who also briefly president of Costa Rica—and had a daughter with TB for which there was no known treatment in Central America at the time, is a fine example of this mindset. Sitting on the road to the Irazú Volcano, the sprawling facility could house 300 patients at a time when it was thought that altitude, temperature, and humidity were perfect cures for TB, or white plague, as many referred to it.

Of course, for Violetta, things were not to be simple. Alfredo's father arrives unannounced and, worried about his family's reputation, convinces Violetta to end it the liaison with Alfredo and so she moves back to Paris to resume her career and social life as courtesan.

"Violetta literally is the whore with the heart of gold," Diego said.

"Yes. And more. Because she is not only sacrificing her love for Alfredo, she is sacrificing her opportunity to live out her remaining months in love and in the end, dying well," I said.

"Does Alfredo perhaps mean hope to her?" Diego asked.

"Well—while in Paris, Alfredo comes to find her, accuses her of loving another man and ends up throwing a wad of money at her in an obvious display aimed at humiliating her and of course everyone is upset at Alfred for being an oaf including his father who is also at the same party. So Alfredo goes to Violetta's deathbed and they make up—she says how much she wants to be back in the idyllic countryside with him and, after a burst of life and vitality, she drops dead. Her demise

plays into the romantic notion that the pinnacle of human virtue lies in the attainment of a good heart," Bob said.

We all took another sip of wine. "Sven, did you end up meeting that guy you met at the "Beds, Bears, and Beyond" party last Sunday as you planned?" I was ok with asking personal questions, and besides, Sven was always keen to share scandalous insights and scenes from his life with willing listeners. I had long suspected that he was a verbal exhibitionist.

I've also long been suspicious of our community and our stories. Do we lie more? When one grows up othered and in denial, having to variously conceal and fabricate much of who are, and then spend a lifetime leaning to undo that, like a dog that had been beaten too often before being rescued from the pound by some benevolent family, can one ever truly return to a factory setting?

Sven, for example, was recently duped into thinking that he was seeing someone, an arrangement that turned out less predictable than he expected. Some gay men liked to say how much they valued relationships and how 'this just feels so right—I feel like I know you,' without ever making good on the non-sexual parts of, well, a *relationship*. And so, essentially, they would use the specter—promise—of love or a relationship as lure, yet be fundamentally disinterested in displaying anything that resembled a serious relationship. Because pretending to love someone when you fuck them feels more authentic and makes the loneliness more tragic when you think about the evening's events later that night on the train back to home.

"I don't know. He's just a little baffling to me. I feel a little Act 1, Violetta, not quite sure about Alfredo's bullshit but flattered. And curious. Oh, and, apparently, he'd done a fair amount of drugs in the past so he doesn't really do much of anything now, sexually that is." Sven paused and had another small sip of wine. "I mean, we made out when we got in bed the other night and he stayed over but I was too tired and he was too drunk, so we didn't even cuddle. Anyway, and here's

the thing I am struggling with. None of that really mattered to me, and yeah, I mean, I think he's attractive. But I don't feel any sexual spark with him, or for him. But then, I'm like, do I *really* care about that? Does that actually matter? Because I feel as if sex has ended up playing a factor in every single breakup I've ever had. So maybe just enjoy this for the fun and the laughs."

"Well fun and laughs have been contributing causes to most of my breakups," Diego said. "Frank, the guy I'm supposed to be seeing, doesn't ask me any questions—he is just not interested in what I think or what I have to say—so I'll ask him something—anything—just to break the silence, which provokes a pretty lengthy, somewhat rambling response, and then, when he's done, I don't get like, a '…so, what do you think? About that?' I don't know. He is very sweet and I know he isn't on the apps and sexually we are very compatible and there are so many things about him I like, but, I don't think those are the kinds of things that sustain a relationship. I need someone to say 'bless you' when I sneeze, or at least as me what I think about stuff. The world. War. Hunger. Poverty. Anything."

Bob smiled. "What is it about these guys? Is it that we live in an era, so bombarded by one killer disease after the other that most of us have lost the ability to connect and get real? That guy I took to the opera. you know, Opera Twink, well that turned out to be a complete bust. When we walked in two other guys came running over and it turns out Opera Twink is poly amorous blah, blah, blah and I'm thinking that now it seems pretty apparent he was only interested in getting to know one more dick, right?"

"Did you go home with them?" I asked.

"Of course. I'm perplexed at the state of play. Not sitting out the game," Bob said.

"Well. That all is now the new normal." Sven said. "I do feel as if the lack of pressure to have sex from this guy's side—his name is Nate, by the way—is almost a bonus at this point, because it's, in some way, a relief that there's possibly something deeper, something else except the

sexual, like hanging out with me for example, that he finds interesting. But I wonder. Men are men. And you know…sex does tend to define us."

"But does it though? Does it have to? It's good, so far, what you have with this guy, Nate." I said. "And at least you know. You're sort of figuring it out. And you're not over-investing. Besides, you definitely don't have a lack of people wanting to get to know you because there's always somebody on the radar. In a good way!"

There was a brief silence.

"It still feels like we are dealing with a lot." Bob said. "The guy I was dating for two years before I met you all is now only 37. And because a gay uncle he was close to, and was, actually, his mother's favorite brother, died of AIDS, and *that* uncle turned out to be the first dead body he'd ever seen, and the trauma he is still dealing with and how it affected him, revealed to me that any state of grace that we find ourselves in is not always neatly defined by just one thing. Because I am older my view of gay life was shaped in such a specific way, and yet, HIV and AIDS is still very real to younger guys, albeit in different ways although it may seem to us if conversations around the topic have stopped."

"So is there a possibly that there is a generation of innocence out there? Or does that still need to happen? Maybe once we get a vaccine," Sven asked, "which may be on the horizon as a novel vaccine, totally preventative in nature is on trial phase and being tested in South Africa and the United States."

"Well, I would say that I you were born in 80s you were from a somewhat better decade in terms of your late-90s sexual awakening as we were so close to prep and the AIDS cocktail." Bob said. "When I met Todd—he'd eventually become my husband in 1993—he was always hyper-aware and concerned with staying healthy and physically in peak condition and we had several scares like when he got pneumonia, but honestly, it was also not as if we were overly concerned. Todd

eventually took a complex cocktail of meds every day. It made him feel sick, but it also kept him alive."

"I knew guys who never got tested, and suddenly, one day, showed a symptom, were sent to hospice a few days later and within weeks or months they were dead. So I envy the guys born in the late 90s or early 2000s who have no concept, right?"I said. "Because they have the luxury—the privilege— of having to carry limited knowledge of AIDS, aside from it being a treatable chronic disease."

"But it's not as if it's not a thing, at all," Sven said. "Kids can and do still get infected. We can just deal better with the disease today. And the medication is more effective. But we are still caught in a health crisis. But todays kids will get old, unlike the men who immediately preceded me."

"I know few gay men over 70." Bob said. "I was at at bar on Sunday and I looked at the crowd and thought that there were old gay men here. I haven't seen old gay men in 20 years unless they were survivors or they were lucky enough to escape it. Like Marvin."

"But in some ways—for some—loneliness is the setting for playing this game. When I came out, he first thing I heard that was I need to keep safe, and that my mother was crying for me, not because she was happy but because, as she put it, being 'like that' is such a lonely life."

"Same and I have to say, that at various points our legebetequa history has been shunned, blamed, and vilified for a plethora of reasons, given rights at one point, only for it to be snatched away as we saw with the US Supreme Court website and wedding cake rulings. So many of us now live in a kind of truce-like stance, tolerated—indulged—by our betters." I recently saw a TikTok where someone said legebetequa and I was there for it.

"I think we see less survivor guilt nowadays as it seems that we are getting further away from what it means to be gay and having to come out during a plague. Although, post-Aids and post-covid, the arrival of Monkeypox was highly triggering," Bob said. "Remember that small pimple I had on my arm? I called the doctor and I was told to enter the building at the side entrance, where I

was put in a waiting room while the doctor was wearing what looked like a hazmat suit. It was crazy. I felt so dirty.

"What happened?" I had another sip of wine.

"It was just a pimple. Tests were negative. But I went home that night and cried. It was humiliating and extremely triggering," Bob said. "But even more than that, I felt intense loneliness. And its not just the normal kind of city loneliness and disconnect. It had a melancholy, disheartened tone that for many of us is part of life from the outset, a legacy of rejection. And it's the loneliness that comes from not really having family, the Normal Rockwell kind, and when we do, we have a strained relationship with them beauses some of them secretly think I deserved Monkeypox and that AIDS was, for sure, God's punishment."

"I know what you mean," Sven said. "It's the kind of loneliness that has us do mental gymnastics as we convince ourselves that somehow we are lucky because we have 'chosen family' just so we're not left pumpkin pie-less and suicidal on Thanksgiving. Big fucking whoop."

"If anyone only listens to one opera in their lives, La Traviata is a pretty good option," Sven said.

"On the operatic spectrum from Violetta to Mimi via Antonia in Tales of Hoffman because they're all sides of a misunderstood tuberculosis coin but it's with Violetta we find a lot to sink our teeth into because, when Violetta has tuberculosis, during Verdi's time, few cared. The disease is seen as one of high sexuality and beautiful women, which is why Violetta is surrounded by many people at her opening party, all flirty and stuff, hugging and kissing and by Act II she lives in the countryside dresses in florals and Alfredo is none the wiser," Bob said.

"But, by the time Mimi has TB the world has realized through medical advancement that the disease is actually transmitted, and so, almost by definition, she has to be a different profile. The TB beauty goes from glamorous extravert to introverted, lonely, and a little mopey. She it feels like Mimi

conveys, from the start, a more dire persona. One of death," I said. "While Violetta gets there, over the course of the opera, but during Act 1, she is literally the belle of the ball."

"Mimi knows that, given what we know about tuberculosis at that time, nobody would want to touch her," Sven said. "I feel as if Violetta never has that particular worry. Maybe later on, but not initially..."

"—she is entirely lovable. Scared and apprehensive but not like Mimi who feels, essentially, unlovable." Diego said, looking pensive.

"Funny you say that," I said. "I always think if that song—"Unlovable"—by The Smiths, as being the spirit of Mimi, if she was a punk especially when he sings he wears black on the outside because that's how he feels on the inside, I mean, that line made some much sense in 1987, wearing black and wanting to burn it all down."

"Mimi meets a man who dares touch her hand and her world comes to an end," Bob said. "But when you think about it, so does Violetta. I'd say there isn't really a lot of light between these two, maybe from a thematic point of view or from a historic or medical perspective and all the way back to where we are now. The untouchability of the plague victim, in Mimi's case, and maybe when we meet them both the first time, but as time goes by, they do resemble each other. Final act Violetta and Mimi have much in common."

"And then everything changes in the 1940s when they find a cure for TB and—suddenly—it's a different world. It does intrigue me though, this line running from *La Traviat*a to *La Bohème* to *Rent*," Sven said.

"I'm particularly interested in the Callas *Lisbon Traviata,* because it's this landmark moment," I say. "So enshrined is Callas mythology that Terence McNally writes a play about that and I get it because it is a gut punch of a recording when Callas sings, because almost more than any other recording in opera, this is where the singer takes total ownership of the role."

"It's not Verdi's anymore, it's the Callas *Traviata*. She owns it," Diego said.

"But then, there are these relatively unknown singers, like Gilda Cruz-Romo, recorded live at the *Palacio de Bellas Artes* in Mexico City, sometime between 1965 and 1984—that's how obscure this is, there is no record of the date, or even the conductor," I scroll around my app and check to see if I have access to Sven's Bluetooth connection and soon the first notes start. "But this soprano, Cruz-Romo, who doesn't get half the notes, whose runs and trills are non-existent and on top of that, whose pitch is at various points more than just a little sharp, sings the shit out of Violetta and blows our minds. I mean it is… it is just beautiful to listen to and a perfect counterpoint to Callas."

I pause the recording for a second. "Cruz-Romo is a Mexican icon by the way, who sang with a young Pavarotti, but essentially went unrecorded except for these few live recordings at the Palazzo de Bellas Artes in Mexico City, where, incidentally, Callas first sang the same role. And to me that's like the kind of thing I really love to zone in on. So this recording is a little wild, and closer to real life, to what you may hear at a concert hall, it's almost a rehearsal-style snapshot, the kind of thing that makes an impression precisely because it is so imperfect. Last night, before I went to bed, I found a TikTok of Cruz-Romo and I just had to listen to her Violetta again because she really blows me away." I press play again.

She comes off a little unsure and all over the show and yeah the pitch is not secure and occasionally the voice is exposed because its live and she doesn't have the benefit of the studio but you know, there is this sense that you are rooting for her and you hope she—and Violetta—are gonna get through this thing. And for a second, based on the "*È strano! È strano!,*" it feels a little as if it may be best if she moves on. It's all a little pointless and underwhelming. Besides, we know how this is going to end—we've been here. And then, by golly, as she carries on, as the emotion grows, she becomes more and more confident. Gilda Cruz-Romo gains in strength as much as Violetta does from this process. That if they just let go, this thing may just work, and I'm beginning to think that she may very well not know what the hell she's doing here, you know, from my perspective, that

is your life—your role—and forgetting about what's comes at the end, for the moment this thing looks as though to may just have a shot.

"I strongly feel that this is *her* party and she got the guy and sure, she's coughing up blood, but now, here, she is just fine," Sven said.

"Well, in that *Sempre libera,* there is no doubting her," Bob said. "She is, for now at least, 'always free.' It's as if every high note is a scream for life and the sheer beauty of her sound—this has got to be the few outrageously free and unguarded versions of *Sempre libera* one will ever hear, right?"

"But it does follows a diabolically bad "*È strano*," I said.

"Yes. But it's all kind of human shaped. Natural. Real people singing. Not "diva" with a capital D," Diego said.

"The Natalie Dessay version of *La Traviata* is heartbreaking, even when comparing it to Callas or, well, any of the other readings, that version is just so stark. The way the set is rounded, white, minimalist, and lit in this soft blue light," I said.

"The prelude of the Dessay sets the scene in a way that few operas do. We are under no illusion—Violetta is dying and in some way working on how to accept that. Part of her process is her embracing the gaiety of single life—her 'freedom' as she refers to it—and relentlessly pursuing joy. And then she meets a man who fucks that up," Bob said.

"Perhaps the most telling moment in the entire version, and one of the most telling non-sung moments in live opera is the moment of hesitation—the flash of silence—at the end of 'Follie. follie!…', and which really serves as a jumping off point for the repeat of the bravura cabaletta. 'Sempre libera,' and therefore setting off the action for the rest of the work." Bob said.

"The Dessay on the Met OnDemand?"

"Exactly—it's all like that. In that version, Dessay is stretched to capacity by the demands of the role but she looks the part and acts it too. You feel that where Callas inhabits the world of

Violetta vocally on the live recordings from Mexico City and Lisbon, Dessay somehow is Violetta from a dramatic perspective," I said.

"Can you find it? I'd love to see," Diego said.

Bob fumbled around on his phone, typing away. "Met OnDemand is not responding but lemme check YouTube. Is that a smart TV? Can I mirror with that?"

I nodded and turned on the TV. A few seconds later Bob was in.

Dessay's voice is exquisite. The large clock to the side of the stage is a constant reminder that time is, especially for her, not on her side. Or any of us. And that makes her reaching for the clock even more visceral and even more so as she sings about joy. Dessay inhales audibly. A taboo for a singer, but in this case, her desperate gasp for air not only transmits her condition but also her mental state—a realization that, perhaps this is her second chance, a last chance.

The direction in this version does something extraordinary. At the end of the first part of the "*Sempre libera,*" Alfredo rushes into the salon. Violetta, Dessay, is visibly shocked and reacts by looking way, almost stumbling as she tries to get through the coloratura on the word "gioir," a word that in this opera takes on an especially loaded meaning. Violetta's joy takes a specific route. It explodes — after that fractional pause—into a repeat of the "*Sempre libera,*" a piece Verdi notes as a waltz, and has been even been published as a polka, but here takes on a less showy quality, instead foreshadowing the end of the opera, as if Violetta knows. She knows there is so freedom that lasts forever nor joy that supplants all pain. And that, at best, this is the best—the only—option right now to make that stab at some sort of last joy.

"It reminds me, and don't think I'm crazy, of the Commendatore in Don Giovanni. And the scene in Amadeus where the man in the black cloak—supposedly Saliere in real life—commissions Mozart to compose the opera, and the sight of the black cloak acting as a sort of specter of his death. I get that here. Violetta knows that this man, who claims to love her, will be the last," Bob said.

"There is much to be said for the 1991 New York City Opera production that had Violetta die of AIDS," I said. "Viewed historically, Violetta as sexualized infected woman has much in common with the idea around the early period of AIDS awareness that the disease has a stigma rooted in sexual indulgence and much of the visuals around HIV shared the bleakness of *La Traviata's* tearful reunion and her essentially lonely death. It was the stuff of nightmares that shaped gay culture for at least two generations and we are still dealing with the fallout from that."

"It's not hard to see the connection, in the mid-1800s, medical texts suggested that TB is linked to sex and questionable morality (Smith, 26). To me, it seems that just how polite society portrayed and labeled 'fallen' women with TB has some relevance today and is worthy of reflection," Bob said.

Susan Sontag observes, in the light of AIDS cultural positioning as a "gay problem" sets up a systemic illness metaphor that in the end causes patients who are already depleted physically with the burden of existential guilt and blame: "Nothing is more punitive than to give a disease a meaning . . . invariably a moralistic one" (Sontag, 60).

"It's the most thought-provoking version in that it clarifies and crystallizes this moment of ultimate defiance with it's perfectly poised coloratura," I said, "and in the video from the Metropolitan with Dessay the brilliance of that staging had me wonder why nobody had done that move before?"

"The opening?" Sven had an another sip of wine.

"The end of Act 1. Alfredo is, as usual, standing outside her window for the duration of his "*Croce e delizia al cor*" and then, out of the blue, he is is the room and where she does the first part of the "*Sempre libera*" for her own peace of mind, throwing her glass against the fireplace as most do. But then, she turns around and Alfredo is in the room. This is never done. But now, because he is there, she tells him directly through the same words, 'Always free, don't do this to me, I want my freedom,' and her demeanor changes—it's almost unbearable to watch—she sings to him directly

reminding him that she is free but also, she knows what's going to happen. That this is her last shot at love."

"And she knows, probably, that this love is just not going to work, because the prognosis for someone in her position is not encouraging," Sven said.

"And this moment of absolute intimacy adds a layer to that scene that makes sense—one that I have probably not seen in another version." Bob said. "And it's because I think, as gay men, who lived through the 80s, we've kind of been there. We know—or at least our dead friends knew—how this story goes, thinking 'you fucker—I know what you're going to do to me, but hey, It's all going to end anyway."

"But that is also a universal realization." Sven looked a little uncomfortable. "I think we all reach that point. Disease or not. At my age, I wonder sometimes. How many rounds of this do I have left in me."

The music had ended and a brief silence fell over the room. It was clear that we were all in one way or another affected by the music, the conversation, and possibly the wine.

yakhalin'khomo[4]

From where I am sitting I just don't hear it

maybe I choose to ignore—perhaps—not hear

the sound of the bull, slaughtered

From where I am sitting my innocence is free

I struggle to hear—I suspect—deliberately

From where I am sitting the saxophone is sweet and

syncopated over brushed drums and a walking bass that just won't quit

—It's beautiful. I still don't hear the bull

—Listen. It's there. It's cry is for the death in you.

[4] yakhalin'khomo represents the interplay between traditional culture and modernity in an African context. The intersection of death as sacrifice or slaughter as ritual is part of African tradition. The song by Winston Mankunku Ngozi refers to the sound of a bull that is slaughtered.

The La Traviata Listening List

- *È strano! & Sempre libera,* Giuseppi Verdi, *La Traviata*. Maria Callas, Ghione, recorded live at Teatro Nacional de San Carlos Lisboa, 1958.
- *È strano! & Sempre libera,* Giuseppi Verdi, *La Traviata*. Gilda Cruz-Romo, live at Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City, between 1965 & 1984.
- *È strano! & Sempre libera,* Giuseppi Verdi, *La Traviata*. Natalie Dessay, Luisi, Metropolitan Opera House, 2012.
- *Unlovable*, The Smiths, "Louder Than Bombs," 1987

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Sven.

We were at a nightclub in Israel—near Masada—on the shores of the Dead Sea. I was past of a small group and we were dancing to the music having a lot of fun. It was the mid 70s. I was so young and so very naive.

I decided to leave what in retrospect was a some sort of disco. Donna Summer has just released "Love to love you baby" and it was so hot. I remember that so clearly and people loved it so much, they would play it every second track. The other big hit was "Brazil" by, I think, The Ritchie Family and it was all kinda wild and so I decided to go to the outside to have a cigarette and to just recover from the dancing.

I was in a weird headspace. My grandparents had both just died and it felt as if connective tissue was missing in my life. It was a weird, and at that point, deeply unexpected feeling. I always felt a sense that there was nothing I could so that would have alienated those two people—you know when you see a granny interviewed about her serial killer grandkid and they still stoically refuse to believe a bad word about what has turned out to be a monster? That was my grandmother.

So while I was outside on the terrace, there was a handsome young guy who looked at me, made eye contact, and started talking to me. We commented on the music and how much we loved "Love to love you baby," which the DJ decided to play again. He said he was from Milan. I said I was from a small town, Ängelholm, and he was quick to mention to me that he liked Ikea, which I thought was a strange thing to say and I remember thinking that he said that because he wanted me to like him and so I just smiled and told him how much I liked pizza, hoping that that would please him too. He suggested we take a walk on the beach—the town area was called Ein Gedi — and it

incredibly beautiful, in a biblical way. It was late at night, and aside from Donna Summer at the hotel disco, almost too quiet.

We decided to sit on the beach and look at the water when he touched my hand and he leaned in to kiss me. I wasn't expecting that and I remember there was a lightning bolt that went through my body. He took me by surprise and I was, in fact, shocked. I mean, we were kids! But I knew I liked it. And I remember thinking that *this* was who I was. It was as if a light went on in dark room. And up to that point, I've only kissed girls from my small town and never like this, never with this sense that my heart was about to explode and never without feeling distinctly awkward doing it. This was a new me.

In fact, until recently I had been somewhat upset about the fact that didn't really feel anything and that somehow I was not doing the right thing. Shortly before my gran died she walked in on me trying to kiss one of the village girls and she gasped a little and excused herself but when I turned around and looked at her, she had this grin on her face and she looked amused. Later that day she did not look like an old woman who caught her grandson about to impregnate some local teen and she said something to the effect of "Du kommer att klara dig. Det kommer att bli svårt men du kommer att klara dig," which sort of translates that I'll be ok, and it may be a tough road but I will be fine. I think she knew.

And so there I was, feeling that we were both very comfortable doing this. Me with a gorgeous young guy—my age—from Italy who barely spoke English. But, boy, he made himself understood. Nothing else mattered in that moment. It was great to be alive. We fumbled around, exploring each other's bodies—nothing serious—just innocent, what did we know, and in the corner of my eye I saw a familiar figure heading directly our way. I knew it was this guy who was traveling with us, Ragnar was his name, he was a bishop's son whom I shared a room with on the trip, and just generally a kind-hearted buffoon. He was clearly looking for me, but he was walking with somebody.

I squinted, trying to get better a look which unnerved Piero who also looked, and jumped up saying that it was his brother. I felt as if I had been punched in the gut.

Suddenly they were right there and Ragnar pulled me away telling me that I was in deep shit now while the bearded brother, in aggressive tones and what seems like sharp words, said some things to Piero, grabbed him by his arm, gave me a dirty look and frogmarched Piero away.

"I think the dad is going to beat him up," Ragnar said. I wished I was dead.

I felt guilty and responsible. And that we were doing something wrong. And so that was my first real experience of gay love and other's reaction to it. Somebody telling me that I was the other. I've gone from that, to now knowing deeply who I am, what I want, what I like, everything—no, most things— makes sense and I have come to realize that sooner or later, there will always be something that somebody objects to in some way, and have a opinion on, because that's what people do. The key, in the moment, was that for an hour or two I felt like I was supposed to and if that wasn't quite enough for someone else, I was fine with that. I still am.

We, Ragnar and I, walked back slowly to the room. He made a comment that if I really wanted to kiss a guy I could have kissed him. Until today I think that was the most shocking thing about the evening, to me, at least.

The next day I woke up and I knew I probably won't see Piero, and Ragnar was quick to report that he just saw the Italians leave and I was relieved that Piero was alive. We left at noon for Tel Aviv where we would spend a few days before flying back to Sweden. I spent the next few days in in a haze, looking up and down every street, on every corner, in every cafe, every restaurant, beaches—everywhere—shops, to see if I could find the cute Italian that would always be the one who got away. Nothing.

We flew home, landed. I thought about my grandmother a lot and sort of channeled her when I told my mom that I made a really interesting friend, but that I didn't get his address. I tried

to underplay the role of "fun friend," but I doubt I succeeded as, caught in the flurries on my first affair, as Cole Porter said, I was mad about the boy. I tried giving my interest in this guy a slight academic angle, which I thought would work with my mom and told her he was on his school debating team. She suggested I wrote the hotel and simply ask.

So, I wrote. I wrote that they were a a family and that one of the two brothers was older and that they were travelling with their father, and I wrote that they were from Italy, and they had come to Ein Gedi via Bethlehem where they stayed just before and attending an open-air mass on Christmas eve and I wrote that, specifically, they were there on the 28th, because that's when we were there. I didn't write that I had had fallen in love.

Time went by slowly, it was the beginning of a new year, new school year, of course, Ragnar told more than just one person about my escapade and so I was officially outed as the guy who made out with a guy on the beach in Israel, which sounded salacious to most except for me who was proud of how it sounded, and proud of who this made me.

Then, one day, there was a letter in the mail from Ein Gedi. They were happy to hear from me. They were glad I liked Israel and had fun at their hotel. And that Rachel, the person at the hotel saddled with writing me remembered the family well. And, in fact, she had heard from an Italian recently, recounting a similar meeting and she was sure we meant each other.

I mean, this was before email. Can you believe that? Can you imagine? This was true snail mail. How many lives are ruined because of shoddy mail service prior to email? How many spinsters are there simply because, you know, mail?

But the fact remained that he had written but the hotel thought nothing of it and threw away the letter.

I was devastated, heartbroken. Miserable. Violetta Act 3. For a while I felt as if something in me had died. I think I may have, actually.

At the same time, I was relieved that this was how the story would end. Because in way he was a memory—like someone who died—he would always be the perfect somebody, the eternally beautiful 16 year-old Italian so full of promise who would never a disappoint me. And, because of our connecting, I was sure to not get stuck in a straight marriage, living a lie, as so many did, instead I knew who I was, and I think I'll always be, in my mind's eye at least, the eager lad on the shore of the Dead Sea a week before a New Year.

I recently heard this song by a group I didn't know "Cigarettes After Sex," and I went ice-cold. I was suddenly there. I remember so clearly how it felt. And I had retained this image in my head of Piero, after all these years, he is just as clear as he was in that 70s nightclub and just as I pictured him on the beach in the moonlight and I still feel exactly the same way today: that he is the one. Was the one. And although we didn't have sex we didn't need to as I knew right there that my life will never be the same again, and it wasn't, and maybe there could have been another Piero if her wasn't the one but the point is that once or twice in a lifetime—sometimes—something so big, so unexpected, and so utterly amazing happens that it can sustain you. Piero was that for me.

still got riz

let my aging hands light your way
it is our closeness that gets me
because you took notice of me
when I thought no-one did anymore
because you came over and offered to
buy me a coffee and you commented on the book
I was reading—Houellebecq, btw—and you
gave me a flyer to a square-dance event at Charlies
"really? do *our* people do that here?" I asked

you laughed and then loved me
you held me against your body, your legs
wrapped around mine ignoring my muffin top
and other signs that I don't care—as much—anymore

I light your way because you walk with me
and smile at my fucked-up playlists
and you're interested in my music trivia obsession

you wait for me when I pet strange dogs and

order us margaritas at the bar on the corner

without me asking you if you wanted one

you put your arm around me

without me asking and you breathe in and sigh

because I make you feel safe—and I suspect you

have been bullied (emotionally) by men and so

when we met we just knew we were ok with all of this

you get it when I withdraw a little

and pull the covers over my eyes

look how my light flickers for you

because of you

The Sven Listening List

- *Love to love you baby,* Donna Summer, "Love to love you baby," 1975.

- *Brazil*, The Richie Family, "Brazil," 1975.

- *K,* Cigarettes After Sex, "Cigarettes After Sex," 2017.

- *Dancing Queen*, ABBA, "Arrival," 1976.

- *Arrival*, ABBA, "Arrival," 1976.

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5 The plague —with (in)—us

ASCHENBACH

Ah, Tadzio, the charming Tadzio.

That's what it was.

That's what made it hard to leave.

(The boys run off. Aschenbach lifts his hands in a gesture of acceptance)

So be it- so be it.

Here I will stay.

Here dedicate my days to the sun

And Apollo himself!

Death in Venice, Benjamin Britten, 1973.

Based on the novella, *Death in Venice*, by Thomas Mann and a libretto by Myfanwy Piper, the opera was was first performed at Snape Maltings, near Aldeburgh, England, on 16 June 1973.

I pressed pause. Sven held up his hand in a polite way, but it was clear he had something weighty to say.

"It is impossible to even talk about *Death in Venice* without the images and music of the Visconti film coming to mind," Sven said. "It was so divisive in its day and we can barely comprehend the outrage some of the haters felt on its release, mostly because the film has made explicit what the novel at most only suggested."

"As far as it goes, both Visconti and Britten stay reasonably faithful to the book," Bob said.

"I have never seen or read any of it, nor do I know this opera so what exactly are we talking about here?" Diego was less enthusiastic about this evening's selection and he texted me a few days prior to say that he had some misgivings about the work and that he found it hard as there wasn't a detectable entry point to the music. I told him that it was less important—to me, at least—to adore each work, or even just like it, and that there was a social value in the work that, maybe, we can take something away from.

"Let me just set the scene a little. Benjamin Britten is, at the time opera's composition, quite ill, I think with aortic valve disease," I said, "and his boyfriend—husband, for all practical purposes—Peter Pears, for whom Britten wrote most of his work, including this one, was especially suspicious of *Death in Venice*, on occasion saying that the writing of it is killing Britten."

"So, in short, Gustav von Aschenbach is a somewhat dour Bavarian artist vacationing on the Venice Lido where he catches a glimpse of a young man—a boy really—and almost instantly becomes obsessed," Bob said. "And you can imagine, this very theme is potentially triggering for a lot of people even without considering the text or work in the context of AIDS or death per se."

"Aschenbach stays at the Grand Hôtel des Bains, a belle epoque beauty," I say. "And the boy is called Tadzio, I do love that name."

"So, von Aschenbach hangs out in the gilded opulence of the hotel a lot, with the sole intent of seeing this young object of his desire—Tadzio. And he watches Tadzio at the beach cabanas and through the city which the film especially portrays in a labyrinthine way…" Sven said. "I found that image of the city as labyrinth somewhat of a metaphor for the mental labyrinth von Aschenbach finds himself." He pauses for a moment. "And that has helped me quite a lot in trying to connect with the opera a little more."

"Meanwhile, to add to the mess, there is death in the city. Venice is suffering from a severe cholera outbreak and due to some baggage issue, von Aschenbach is forced to stay longer and, of course, his mind and body are more and more affected by fever—cholera, and more than just a little lust for the boy— then, on the day Tadzio and his family leave diseased Venice, Aschenbach dies on a beach chair overlooking the sea, the boy drifting away seeming to beckon him," Bob said.

"That's tragic," Diego said. "I mean, the story is a lot. I watched the film…not a fan… it's slow. I mean, it's from a certain period and so it feels a little pretentious and slow."

"I'll just ignore that." Bob said. It was sometimes hard to tell if he was genuinely irate with a dissenting voice or if he was joking. "It's unforgettable and, honestly formative—at the time, very little was shown in a movie that had a gay subtext or was even halfway flattering, the Fellini *Satyricon* or that French movie with Brad Davis, what was that called…"

"Querelle," Sven said. "Fabulous film," and then, winking and pointing at Diego, he said, "don't bother with that one, I seriously doubt you'd like it."

"But the *Death in Venice* movie did made the Mahler Fifth's *Adagietto* the showpiece of the soundtrack and, kind of linked it with death forever and if I'm not wrong, Mahler wrote that more as an ode to his wife, Alma," I said.

"One of the issues I have with how the book is viewed is how, as a result of generation on generation of critics who have gone out their way to frame von Aschenbach's ruinous obsession with Tadzio and their eye-opening connection—for the older man at least—with a cis-het logic

around what the boy represents, the thrill of youth and the promise of innocence but in a Greek Philosophy sense," Bob said. "They totally take the taboo out of it. It has been sanitized when in fact, the book and the opera speak to something that both author and composer struggled with and, is at the root of so many low-hanging insults and insinuations that are—still—randomly thrown at the LGBTQ community."

"Agreed, and that this boy represents something at the root of the great intellectual's eventual undoing," Sven said. "And almost any critique of the work still tries to frame it as some cautionary tale. But, to be fair, the novel is far from incisive and clear, and I read it in German. And you are right, Bob. Mann *does* seem to identify with von Aschenbach's lovesickness and only occasionally paints him as somewhat delusional."

"Well that's why the film was such an bombshell," I said, "and Visconti leaned into the ambiguities presented by the story and where the book dwells on von Aschenbach's gawking, the film does not, and so his little looks and glances come across as somewhat leery and, even a little sad-old-queenish, do you know what I mean?? We have all seen that look in the bar when its 11 o'clock and the sugar high from pudding night at the home has worn off."

"You're not wrong, I mean, this is central to one of the main objections that hetero society have always thrown at the gay lifestyle. Exactly this. That gay desire is less than, but then, beyond the homoerotic, this middle-aged man longingly glancing at an absurdly pretty boy, barely out of puberty was a bridge too far," Sven said.

"But to your point, I do think that is the other thing society and young gays have a problem with," Diego said. "Exactly that leery late-night thing but it's so problematic precisely because it is such a gay trope. The lonely life, and how tragic old gays have to be. As if there aren't lonely married people or straights. As if gays own misery."

"Ir's true, and as someone who is on the wrong side of sixty, it's not true," Sven said. "You figure it out. Look at Marvin. He had a fucking Grndr profile."

"Yes but to be fair, it was more to piss off Thomas and the tight-ass church types and, to say the least, we created fake profiles to flirt with him," I said.

"No, you did not." Sven was shocked. "Did you two know?"

There was a silence in the room that indicated that, indeed the answer to Sven's question was that, yes, we all knew.

"Well, you would have told him, or at least, have said something to Marvin," Bob said.

"Exactly, and this was really to just get him to feel happy and take his mind off the fact that the was getting more and more sick," Diego said.

"We did God's work," I said. "Those random dickpics and brief sexts did the job. He was fine."

"Not to change lanes here. But, just to get back to the issue at hand, I think one of the reviews of the book said that Mann's *Death in Venice* had as much to do with homosexuality as Kafka's *Metamorphosis* had to do with entomology, or something like that." Bob paused. "But the point was, that Visconti's film was making gay desire clear to see, and now there was a line of questioning from this film right back to the novel and even beyond, to the very origin story of what makes us, well, us."

"Just a quick note, the film portrays von Aschenbach as a version of composer Gustav Mahler, where the original novel has him as a writer. And of course the film is heavy with the Mahler Third and Fifth and the music, I thought, was most effective against the cinematography as it feels so languid and dense and almost asphyxiating with the fading opulence of the city, its elegant decay, almost magnified," Sven said.

"I think I read somewhere that Thomas Mann's diaries revealed a lifelong attraction to young men and even boys that there is no evidence he ever acted on and that Mann himself took a trip to the Lido with his family where he, believe it or not, also became fixated with the beauty of a very young Polish boy," Bob said.

"And to add to that point, Visconti was gay, although not entirely open about it, and he was in a relationship with Austrian actor, Helmut Berger who was quite the sex symbol of European cinema in the 1960s and 1970s," Sven said.

"And despite all this, there is nothing here that can realistically be viewed as any sort of representation of positive queerness, the main achievement of what is truly a landmark film from a queer perspective, that at a time when sexual infatuation and brooding obsession was the exclusive domain of the heterosexual experience, along came a paunchy pederast who showed that we, too, can do that," I said.

"Whether book, film, or the opera, this is a work that haunts and stays with you forever," Bob said. "It captures something. It is so self-assured as a creative work and what gets me every time is how we feel at once part of Aschenbach while also viewing him in a deeply critical way. It's clear than Mann is serious about art and literature while not above satirizing the very arts he is so entwined with."

"Given our recent history," Sven said, "as men who have lived through and in some cases, survived the age of AIDS, before antiretroviral drugs and before we could even dream of something such as being undetectable, we have lived our formative years—our sexual awakening—in a climate where the very expression of that sexuality was possibly a death sentence, and so, are we that far away from Aschenbach's buttoned up attitudes around desire, desire, and death?"

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> "The observations and encounters of a devotee of solitude and silence are at once less distinct and more penetrating than those of the sociable man his thoughts are weightier, stranger, and never without a tinge of sadness. Images and perceptions which might otherwise be easily dispelled by a glance, a laugh, an exchange of

> comments, concern him unduly, they sink into minute depths, take on significance, become experiences, adventures, emotions. The fruit of solitude is originality, something daringly and disconcertingly beautiful, the poetic creation. But the fruit of solitude can also be the perverse, the disproportionate, the absurd and the forbidden."
>
> Thomas Mann, Death in Venice, p 278.

Susan Sontag uses *Death in Venice* (and Andre Gide's *The Immoralist*) as an example of societies problem with disease and subsequent death though she pauses with more detail at Laclos's *Dangerous Liaisons* a work that lays bare Madame de Merteuil's great crime through disfigurement and in that case, disfigurement due to smallpox—and shame—are the fruit indiscriminate choices in need of a divine punishment. One has to look no further than HIV and AIDs, and more recently, the sudden flare-up of Monkeypox, to see the effect physical manifestations make on those with the diseases.

Of cholera, the disease afflicting Venice at the time of Mann's story Sontag writes that "In one fiction, disease (cholera) is the penalty for secret love; in the other, disease (TB) is its expression" (Sontag 37). She writes that cholera uncomplicates the sufferer in the eyes of the public, thereby rendering someone who is a moral lesson for a public greedy for punishment.

From the start *Death in Venice*, Gustav von Aschenbach is shown as a man with a dualistic nature. His name was altered, adding the "von" so as to add aristocratic cachet, we learn it was bestowed on him by the Prince, a reward for literary excellence. After a disagreeable afternoon walk and a run-in with a strange man in the cemetery von Aschenbach decides to go away as he has"a fervent youthful craving for faraway places, a feeling so vivid, so new or else so long outgrown and forgotten" (Mann, 5). Mann uses specific language when discussing the upcoming trip called Aschenbach's need to get away as consuming him "like a seizure"(Mann, 6) while he dreams of

exotic landscapes with animals who bear "misshapen" body parts (Mann, 7). And while He dreams of far-off adventure, he settles on Venice, a mere overnight away by rail.

He chooses Venice for its "fairy tale-like" aspects (Mann, 26). When he sees the same man from the cemetery on the boat ride to Venice, von Aschenbach questions his own sanity and perhaps no surprise to the reader, he finds his health declining very soon after arriving. Von Aschenbach views Venice now as "an impossible and forbidden destination" (Mann 68). He is caught, as Mann describes it, in "conflict between the soul's inclinations and the body's capabilities" (Mann 69).

Von Aschenbach questions his decision to be in Venice to begin with and wrangles with the possibility of leaving and only after catching a glimpse of Tadzio does he commit to remain in the city that he is convinced is making him sick. It's interesting to note that Mann and Gide provide young boys for their respective afflicted protagonists to obsess over, with Tadzio specifically resembling the highest form of humanity in Von Aschenbach's eyes: that of Classical Greek sculpture. In a move that can only be thought of transference, Von Aschenbach firmly believes that Tadzio is ill and "will probably not live long" (Mann 62). This realization somehow calms his nerves as it seems to prove to him that perfection has a limited shelflife and so, Von Aschenbach feels somewhat better about the things he had not achieved in life himself.

It is fair to say that Von Aschenbach is overwhelmed both by Tadzio and Venice and as he comes around to the idea of staying there, he is faced with a new reality that is both seductive and potentially deadly. Visitors to Venice are warned to not touch or come in contact with "canal water" (Mann, 99). It is a preposterous warning as the city is ostensibly constructed around canals with the main mode of travel using the very canals and so this basic aspect of the city—its water—is the very thing that has turned deadly.

At this point a merger of sorts occurs, a caution-to-the wind moment that translates as a form of thrill. The plague that is descending on the city, to Von Aschenbach predicts "every

loosening of the fabric of society" (Mann 100) and even more exciting to him is that fact that the city's "nasty secret [...] had merged with his own innermost secret" (Mann 100). His feelings around Tadzio are causing Von Aschenbach to come undone.

But unlike the classical—expected—opinion, that the epidemic was a punishment of sorts, Von Aschenbach does not link his interest in the boy to the calamity at hand, a calamity that was well under way before his arrival, but, instead, he is aware of the scent of antibacterial cleaning agents that was now filling the city with its clean stench and with it, demonstrating "the city was diseased and was concealing it out of cupidity" (Mann, 104).

Later, Mann identifies the disease as "Indian cholera" (Mann 119). Von Aschenbach is surrounded by the exotic, from the Indianness of the cholera to Tadzio's Polishness, and therefore fully seduced by the foreign—the other—and the potentially fatal.

Both novel and opera offer long detailed—accurate—accounts of the situation that was unfolding in Venice:

> In these last years, Asiatic cholera has spread from the delta of the Ganges: to Hindustan, to China, Afghanistan and thence to Persia. They thought it would travel westwards by land, but it came by sea, to the southern ports — Malaga, Palermo… Last May, two dead bodies were discovered here in Venice with signs of the plague. It was hushed up. In a week there were ten more—twenty—thirty.
>
> A guest from Austria went home and died; hence, the reports in the German news-papers. The authorities denied it—the city had never been healthier, they said. Sir, death is at work, the plague is with us. It flourishes, redoubles its powers. It is violent, convulsive, suffocating, few who contract it recover. The *Ospedale Civico* is full. The traffic to San Michele is continous. And Sir, the authorities are not moved by

> scruples, or by international agreements. They fear for their pockets—if there should be panic or blockade… Meanwhile the city is demoralised. Crime, drunkenness, murder, organised vice—evil forces are rife.

That Mann selected cholera as the disease of choice was perhaps as a result of the sheer vastness if the disease at the time and the fact that the Italian government went to extraordinary lengths to deny its very existence and certainly on that issue, Wolfgang Leppmann writes that "although the disease had been endemic for a number of years, especially in southern Italy, the [Italian] government had steadfastly denied its existence" (Leppmann 69). Added to that was the modus operandi of the disease and the way it struck so quickly and without discrimination while, at the time of publication, the methodology of cholera control was woefully inadequate.

And of course, much as TB in La Traviata, cholera presented a potent symbolism. Given a choice, having contracted cholera, death was the preferred option and the very lucky would slip into a coma never to rise again which was, by contrast the exact opposite of TB.

Over the next few days Von Aschenbach considers warning the Polish family to leave immediately—he doesn't warn them—and ends up loathe to give up the small increments of access he has to Tadzio, and he reaches a pivotal juncture, one that perhaps seals his fate as he decides to not extricate himself from the situation and instead, remain in this imagined space where he doesn't belong, yet paradoxically, it presents a better option than going home where"his drudgery" of a career seems equal to "sobering up" and "was so abhorrent to him that his face twisted into an expression of physical revulsion" (Mann, 125).

All the while Von Aschenbach falls deeper under the spell of Tadzio and Venice and even initiates a few changes to himself, a trip to the barber, for example, where the barber recommends "a man like you, sir, has a right to his natural hair color" (Mann, 131). Now there are few restraints. There a few differences between the articiclay and the authentic and by extension, he has the means

to fool time and pull one over on nature especially under the cheerleading of his barber's opinion that his body be as young as his spirit.

Von Aschenbach, on leaving the barber is aware of his condition and that he is essentially "condemned" (Mann 133), and "tainted by infection" (Mann 133), unable to leave. As he further descends into illness he feels "dizzy spells that were only partially physical" (Mann, 138). He is lovesick, dying of cholera, and anxious, his only symptoms as he dies on the beach staring at the very ocean from where Tadzio and his family are leaving.

In many ways Von Aschenbach's death is easy and uncomplicated leaving him reasonably well preserved and without disfigurement and perhaps he dies fully aware of an unnameable desire that he had not known before and one that since it was now revealed would only serve to make him an outcast and so, as for so many gay men before him, death really is the sweetest taboo as he spends the last of his moments gazing at one whom he could have loved. And possibly did.

Sontag charts a certain metaphorical significance in diseases and writes that "any important disease where causality is murky" is tagged with the worst attributes of that disease " as decayed, polluted, corrupt"and so "disease itself becomes a metaphor." Sontag is particularly interested in tuberculosis and but she does refer to Mann and cholera and for her, disease and quarantine forms the metaphor and by extension a symbol for the "social disorder" that acts as the locus of the disease. Should, as in this case, the disease have origins in India, the way the disease is viewed and discussed will intersect with discussions around the colonized space in terms of its disorder, its lack of supervision, it's poor medicine, and lack of recgognizable modernity. Note in *Death in Venice*, under the strain of this diseased space the narrator discusses Venice and its attempts at quarantine:

> In early June the quarantine barracks of the hospital had been filling silently, in the two orphanages there was no longer enough room, and a horrific traffic developed

> between the city and San Michele. But the fear of general damage, regard for the recently opened exhibition of paintings in the municipal gardens, for the enormous financial losses that threatened the tourist industry in case of a panic, had more impact in the city than love of truth and observation of international agreements. Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice* p. 46.

The unwelcome appearance of cholera in 1800s Europe reignited a culture of fear and social blame that had not been seen since the plane and would not appear on the opera stage until the 1900s. Cholera also linked disease with sexual activity, the point of differentiation being that now the expressions of sexuality linked to disease took place between members of the same gender: Aschenbach's desire for Tadzio, for example, or Alban Berg's *Lulu* which features a heady mix of cholera, luridness, and same-sex attraction. Director William Kentridge saying in an interview with the Guardian about *Lulu*, that "it's about saying: the object of desire doesn't have to do with that first level of striptease and sexiness," and continues that "it has to do with all sorts of other things that trigger obsession: sometimes indifference on the part of the object of desire. That can be the most irresistible thing. What do you have to do to try to break through that barrier? So playing cold can be as obsessive-making and as desirous as playing hot."

But *Death in Venice* plays on a specific set of moral triggers when it comes to plague and its representation. It presents a romanticized social order operating by moral compass thrown into disorder and alienation by a disease and linking the unfolding drama with a story about same-sex attraction.

Historian Charles E. Rosenberg, the The Cholera Years, looks at the range of theological attitudes to cholera and points out that certain Christians saw cholera as divine punishment especially on degenerate individuals, a view in keeping with the rise of Puritanism since the 1700s. A

definite connection was made between disease and sin, while collective disease indicated collective sin, in the same way that as personal disease indicated personal sin (Rosenberg). The result was a more aggressive public discourse around sexual conduct and immortality combined with an expanded surveillance of private lives.

When health inspectors called on the poor who were being decimated by cholera they found problematic sanitary conditions combined with overcrowding the combination of which encouraged sexual habits and values that shocked the European and American elite. This news created a sort of new plague model, reminiscent of the syphilis response and its linking a vengeful God with the wages of sin and sexual impropriety, but with the addition of bias again the class of the sufferers, and how that may impact treatment, public perception, funding, and privacy. And basic human rights. It was a response and model that characterized much of the AIDS challenge.

When it comes to opera—and the stage general—it is hard to romanticize cholera since its effect on the patient is not exactly spellbinding or attractive: vomiting and diarrhea make for less erotized viewing compared with, say, TB and Violetta. And so, we find allusions to the disease, both actual and metaphoric that helps the narration and portrayal of moral and physical disintegration. For Aschenbach, it is his increased rejection of, and resistance to, the standards of bourgeois society that had so defined him. Mann had used the contagion/gayness matrix before.

Harry Somers and Rod Anderson's 1992 opera *Mario and the Magician* based on Thomas Mann's 1929 novella *Mario und der Zauberer* comments on aspects of contagion, autocratic oratory, and the place of the individual in a complex society. Author John Pistelli writes that "fascism for *Mario and the Magician*, then, is not only an absolute ruler's claiming to embody and thereby control an ethno-national population," and continues that, here, "fascism is also the invasion of the complex and rational European soul—of the bourgeois father—by irrational energies that are southern and eastern, Oriental and African, queer and feminine" (Pistelli).

While there is no correlation between cholera and AIDS, the contemporary audience is nonetheless triggered by works such as *Death in Venice* especially since AIDS has not yet been presented in a major opera for the conventional opera theater, a gap in the repertoire that will soon enough close as we have seen significant musicals, plays, and films deal with the subject, many of them with the broad arc of opera. The musical, *Rent*, based on *La Boheme* comes closest.

But AIDS is different and its complex telos of politics, spread, geography, sexual orientation, treatment, survival, and trauma means that the representation of the disease and aspectd of life we associate with the disease, provide textures in meaning to various audiences. Rosenberg writes that as a disease "that combines sexual transmission with a terrifyingly high mortality, AIDs was bound to attract extraordinary social concern" (Rosenberg 84). When it comes to opera, stories like Aschenbach's looks a little too familiar to many and his story, too loaded for comfort, and while we wait for the first great AIDS opera to appear, works such as *Death in Venice,* had paved the way forward.

> Some minutes passed before any one hurried to the aid of the man who had collapsed into one corner of his chair. He was brought to his room.
> And on the same day a respectfully shocked world received the news of his death.
>
> - Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*.

"Of course, much of *Death in Venice* is about the clash of impulses and the tension between seemingly opposite forces," Bob said, walking back into the room, a fresh bottle of red in hand. "There is firstly this question over what codes we are being sent—at what point. And then the specter of haunting beauty—what it means, fundamentally—and the irresistible force of youth, and

then on top of that the issues that hang in the air." He walks around the ground, pouring evey glass to the brim. "Think about it: sickness and isolation."

"Thanks—love the wine—but also, just to add to you point, the tension one senses here between obsession and the imagination," Diego said.

"And added to that, and yes—codes, wow, we forget that this is a different time—but just look at this clash between Apollo and Dionysus," Sven said "and I see them as representing impulses—bit codes work too. But, again, with this opera—with this whole work—there is, to me, this possibility that we—that Britten—is skating close to the edges of pretentiousness. Or is that because for a gay man to refer to gay desire in any form meant doing so in complex codes, as you say?"

"I've always thought so. The worst thing I ever saw was *The Rape of Lucretia* by Britten put on by a student cast in Pretoria, and I thought I was in hell. And so, I have always thought Britten and Pears to be that sort if classical gay, you know the types—queens who love Greek sculptures and Laura Ashley, who just adore *Maurice* and get turned on by fantasies of headmaster rituals. But, I think, it's a trope—a type—that has largely gone away. We're in an era of bears and electronic music, the ultra-refined gay has been largely abandoned for a new types."

"It's a good question. The prissy gay has seen a transformation—but they are still with us. Thomas, from the funeral for example, prissy as fuck," Bob laughed. "You can just tell. The wispy hair, the starched collar, the way she clutches her iPhone like a purse."

"Well it's easy to criticize or feminize someone by calling them 'she' but the larger gay psyche is still affected by persecution and the constant judgment from a society that, not so long ago, gave us the Lavender Scare, and tries to re-introduce conversion therapy and it simply still feels that our sexual orientation for some, is an imposition. And so, to lessen the risk of offense, some of our people self-inoculate by becoming absolutely beholden to etiquette and a sanitized, classical stance." Sven's voice betrayed his mild annoyance at Bob's comment. "And so, in the case of this opera, there is this suggestion that Aschenbach is a little prissy, but given the time of first the novel and then the

opera, I think its a reasonable snapshot of an age that views these issues in a starkly different light to us."

"Agreed and then added to that is how the city is woven into the work as the extra character," I said. "Venice is this powerful force that shapes the story as it is, in a weird way, now after Covid 19, and our very real experience of such things, heading to a lockdown. I mean, in a real way, we will recognize it as such. And perhaps in ways that future generations maybe won't."

"I'm sure Mann or Britten would not have, nor their audiences," Sven said, "and in that way our lived experience makes work we see more meaningful and real. I think it was Foucault who specifically positions the viewer or the audience in the position of making meaning and he essentially believes we should muzzle the artist for fear of polluting our minds with their unwelcome opinions."

"I'm sure it's the wine talking—and it's very good by the way—but I do get that. Certainly I know nothing of Venice at the time of the book's writing nor the opera's composition, or for that matter, during the 1980s and the AIDS crisis but I know something about Chicago at the turn of the 2020s and how we dealt with a threatening environment," Diego said. " And I made some choices to deal with it."

"Exactly, Venice is sick," I said. "People are keeping a suspicious distance. From each other and from the city itself. And the water—it's just being there."

"And so, yes, the gondola ride is, I think, weirdly static and alienating," Diego said. "In fact, the whole opera, when I compare it to *Dido and Aeneas* or *La Traviata*, has an internal structure that its there from the first note and never relents. There are few set pieces or diversions, the only thing that is there and constant is the sense of mounting tension." He took a sip of wine and seemed pensive for a moment. "It's really all there is the name. There's an impending death and it will happen on Venice. There is nothing will-he-or-won't-he about it and this anticipatory aspect, this

watching Aschenbach's slow death, give the work the feel of a *tableaux vivant—pintura viviente* as we would call it—and it's beautiful. But unsettling."

"And even the view from the hotel, the way it is described, is more in line an oil painting—more representative—than real. Also, Aschenbach's visions of wider horizons are bleak and, depressingly even, somewhat final in tone," Sven said.

"I remember as a kid, visiting my grandmother." Diego said, "After my grandfather died she continued to live in her small house on the edge of a pyramid-shaped mountain, outside Guanajuato. We knew she was ill with cancer and she had little time left. She insisted we put an armchair on a small ridge near the house and evey day she would walk to that chair and sit there, staring, and so we would take her tea and *conchas* in the morning, and pulque in the afternoons. She just loved sitting there. And often I would stand in the kitchen and look at her, all content, having her tea or pulque, waiting to die. That image of her, the anticipation set against a constantly changing landscape is still so vivid."

The mood had shifted somewhat in the room. As if all this talk of passively watching death made us anxious to snap out of it. That this was not what the group was meant to be.

"Just a word about Aschenbach," Bob said. "I don't find the role particularly challenging, vocally, but it does feel as if it's demanding. As if Britten wants Aschenbach to sound physically tired at the very end. I mean, it has the usual constricted sound that he has—it may just be Peter Pears—but still, it's not a huge singing challenge, and if I think about it, there is a world-weariness to it."

"I think the character is somewhat displaced," I said, "and I feel he does not truly understand the space that he finds himself in. At all. From that perspective the character and the way he is sketched reads in a recognizable touristic kind of way."

"Having said that, it's a role that wildly favors the declamatory over the lyrical and when Britten allows him a luminous moment, it is truly lovely," Bob said. "It may not be everyone's taste but this opera is criminally overlooked by opera houses or touring companies and it is a fully realized composition."

"When you compare the opera and the film, Aschenbach's obsessions with youth feels more philosophical than romantic almost as if, near death, Tadzio is an echo for Aschenbach of youth—maybe of what's lost—and the opera specifically blurs those boundaries between reality and imaginings, and even legit obsession," Sven said.

"…and between illness—cholera—and possibly substance abuse, and that makes it feel as if we are witnessing something that is somehow out of focus, if you know what I mean," Diego said.

"I think I know what you mean. It's not surreal. Just blurry in parts and out of focus in others as if the whole is never quite known to us," I said.

"Nor Aschenbach, I think," Diego said. "And that is the problem for him. Things only appear to be in focus or real sporadically and then, suddenly he loses that focus."

"There is this overly simplistic view out there," Bob said, "and certainly not in this room, that in this opera Aschenbach is a helpless figure caught between a godlike Tadzio and a pervasive plague, and while that's not entirely wrong it only begins to consider the depth of the quandary he finds himself in."

"So, quick note, the way Britten gets around the fact that the Polish family never speaks, only among themselves, is by casting them as dancers and Aschenbach, when he sees Tadzio and the family, interprets and understands them through movement. In the book the only thing Aschenbach hears them say is the word Tadzio and so across all the versions of the story there is a great deal of obsession and inferred meaning going on," Sven said,.

"I'd go a step further and say that Aschenbach is possibly delusional, wanting to believe he is seen more than he actually is and that sense I think he represents a core gay dilemma and almost structural fear in our community," I said.

"Not being seen and then, when we are, often for reasons we are not comfortable with," Diego said.

"In the opera at least, they come from different worlds, as in life actually, Aschenbach is a singer, and Tadzio a dancer and even though they spend a brief moment in time in a shared place, there is little that connects them," Bob said.

"And even the rippling quality of the sound worlds each inhabit could not be further apart, with Tadzio's instrumentation being percussive—a vibraphone and a gamelan—and when greater forces are required they too are percussive," I said.

"And despite the sounds created here, the gondoliers crying out and the bells ringing, and some of the harmonies that sound, well, a little curdled, the opera is unmistakably lyrical and those percussive elements add to the overall tension of the work," Bob said.

"And to go back to the earlier point, it is astounding that disease and the city are the other—silent—characters and they have a powerful hold over not just the plot, but the characters, and us as the audience," Sven said.

"It's one of the most fascinating aspects of the work—that both versions are heavily based on medical reports of the time, the dankness of Venice's lagoon water as source of the disease and not as some at time tried to frame cholera as linked to miasma, or what we would think of as the vapors or the smell. It was the water itself," I said.

"Am I right in assuming that the book and opera both link the disease with sexuality, so for example when Aschenbach sings of his love for Tadzio he refers to the fever he is suffering, clearly referencing his disease but also the boy? I also find it weird interesting that Aschenbach so clearly

objectifies the boy and aligns his own decline with what he imagines to be Tadzio's decline," Diego said.

"Venice is the perfect setting for this story." Sven said. "It is secretive and seductive and, more than, anything incredibly sexy—Wagner composed the love music from Tristan and Isolde there in 1833—and perhaps most tellingly, it is deeply ambiguous since it blurs boundaries with everything it does and stands for. The land and water, light and dark, corruption and church, piety and sexualized abandon,"

"And it's a link between the west and the east." I said "But,also, north and south—Aschenbach, being German, finding himself in the south of Europe."

"And to follow on that, it's *what* Tadzio represents—the other—to Aschenbach, who is restrained and, dare I say, a little anal, but he becomes increasingly aware of an impulse he has difficulty speaking about," Sven said.

"Just getting back to the the music—Britten stays remarkably close to the novel in the music itself vacillates between emerging passion, creeping disease, and the presence of death. He developed what some calls a fate motive or even a page motive, just four notes—D-C-E-Dsharp—that repeats and reappears helped along by this incredible libretto that simply does not let up. And this motive seems to inform both Aschenbach's physical decline and emotional shifts," Bob said.

"I'm not a musician but I feel a shift between major to minor that feels uneasy and, dare I say, doomed? There is an end-of-life(ish) quality here or, at least, an end-of-the-line feeling. And the orchestration is somehow tribal at times. The traveler's music, for example, sends signals that Aschenbach is either oblivious to, or is consciously trying to ignore," Sven said.

"I think Britten brings elements, or one can even say specific gay triggers, into the music," Bob laughed. "The Elderly Fop, for example is sung in falsetto and becomes a somewhat macabre combination of age, youth, and effeminacy, while he says deeply sexual things, allusions to the sexual promise that Venice holds and referring to 'pretty little darlings' and it has to be said, music—opera

—can add these psychological aspects to a work that a play that are otherwise not so easy to add. I mean, film does too, but it so easily goes the other way, becoming too obvious and gaudy."

"And by the same token, Tadzio's music—it's orchestration—seems to become richer as the opera progresses and goes from being somehow 'other' or even 'foreign' and into the truly 'exotic' or Dionysian," I said.

"It's interesting that Aschenbach's feelings for Tadzio are essentially dramatizing a Nietzschean theory around the warring gods of order and restraint, Apollo, and that of excess and passion, meaning Dionysus. It does feel a little 'German intellectual' pretentious," Bob said.

"It's a Greek tragedy on some ways," Sven said. "And the opera specifically leans into that but I think Gilbert Adair wrote a late 20th century version as well, *Love and Death on Long Island,* that was interesting. What you call pretentious…"

"German *intellectual* pretentious…the worst kind…" Bob laughed again.

"Indeed, that for sure, but it is an engrossing story and it does manage to captivate readers and maybe its because he moves so deftly between styles, especially as at first it does seem to be a prime example of realism—a snapshot of belle époque society at the edge of war," I said.

"I do find some aspects of the work also to be funny." Diego said. "Aschenbach is, yes, hopelessly overwrought and full of angst while descending into moral and physical decline but he has some truly humorous moments. He is, by our standards, somewhat of a prissy queen. His artificial composure desperately at odds with the unfolding health catastrophe and it has to be said, the barber exchange is humorous while also profoundly sad."

"Maybe that is the key. That Aschenbach is us," I said, "and we get older, we get sicker, we negotiate with the world to make us younger and fitter and more desirable but over time it gets harder and slowly the knowledge descends that this is all futile. And you find yourself at the bar, propping up a table having another drink pissed off at being ignored while finding solace in the fact the one day every one of these twinks—the ones who make it—will also know what this feels like."

Now, without you here, my days are leaner
—weeks turn into months and soon, a year—
and more brittle, like dry brush without rain
when wind barely makes dried grass shake.

Now, without you around, my days are bleak
—bleached like words faded by relentless light—
and with each passing day, another memory of us
layers on top of all the ones that came before.

Now, without you next to me, my heart is hollowed out
—dry like a fruit, drained of juice and blood—
Come around again. Once more. One last time.
So I may heal. So I may get my strength back.

Lay your words on me and make my heart live again
—that I may regain something restorative. Like faith—
Now, without you, my days are empty.
And time stands still with little left that resembles hope.

The Death in Venice Listening List

- *Chaos, chaos and sickness,* Benjamin Britten, *Death in Venice*. Sir Peter Pears, Bedford, English Chamber Orchestra, 1974.
- *The wind still blows from the land*, Benjamin Britten, *Death in Venice*. Sir Peter Pears, Bedford, English Chamber Orchestra, 1974
- *Adagietto. Sehr langsam*, Gustav Mahler, *Symphony No. 5*. Solti, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, 1970.
- *Poco adagio. Ruhevoll,* Gustav Mahler, *Symphony No. 4*. Solti, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, 1984.
- *III. Feierlich Und Gemessen, Ohne Zu Schleppen*, Gustav Mahler, *Symphony No. 1 in D*. Solti, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, 1983.
- *Oft denk' ich, sie sind nur augesgangen!*, Gustav Mahler, *Kindertotenlieder*. Dame Janet Baker, Barbirolli, Hallé Orchestra, 1967.
- *Love Will Tear Us Apart,* Joy Division, "Substance 1977-1980," 1988.

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Diary after Walter's death

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On a warmish day in late August 2014, I opened the classical music section of a local South African website with daily updates on news and events on the theater front. I never visit the obituary section but for some reason, that day, I clicked on the link and for a minute the world—my world—stopped. It was a death announcement for Walter Visagie, a man who had been many firsts on my "done that" list. My first real boyfriend. My first real love. The first baritone I could actually listen to and not want to fall asleep—because I loved him. And he had the most beautiful voice. He was the first man I thought I could spend my life with. Because of him, for the first time, I felt the dizziness that comes with the thought of losing someone when you have an argument. Because of him, for the first time, I felt pain. The kind of pain, I'm sure, my mother wished I would never feel. Deep, empty, gnawing, self-loathing, edge-of-suicide kind of pain. He was my end of innocence. But also with him, I discovered sex, and desire. The kind of desire and sex, I suspect, my mother also wished I would never feel.

With Walter, everything was made of hope—for a while at least. There was little thinking, or more accurately, we were so young, and so new to this, that being in the moment was a given and nothing else mattered: except flesh and the moment. And the other. The uncertainty of 80s homosexuality gave our time together an unbridled, chaotic intensity. I know, now, that it could never last. It was a politically explosive time and the country had just woken up to an AIDS epidemic that made everything worse.

When I read about Walter's death from cancer the sense of loss at someone who died so young, and represented so much of young(er) me, inspired me to keep a set of notes—a short and raw diary of sorts—scribbled in a Filofax, a fossil of a thing that lay unread and used for nearly ten years, only to be found, quite by accident recently while inspecting a set of old luggage for a trip to Mexico.

Recently, while preparing notes for this work, I heard "Au fond du temple saint" the tenor and baritone duet from Georges Bizet's 1863 "Les Pêcheurs de Perles," at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City. It set me off—the duet of devotion and the blending of the voices. And the melody. The yearning it captures. On my return to Chicago I reread my Filofax notes on Walter, his death, and our meeting. I decided to bring them to light. Words committed to paper that express and represent the sensation and spirit of the moment of their writing have a unique you but not you anymore quality but, I felt, they are as ephemeral yet irreversible as time itself. They—and scattered memories—are all the evidence I have that I was there.

August 31, 2014

I just read the news about your passing. Wow. All I can think about now is when I saw you the first time—I remember your face so clearly—it was a warm February afternoon. We were settling in at WITS in Johannesburg to study music. We'd been cast in Puccini's "Gianni Schicchi." You came out of Michael Strauss' coaching room—I was listening at the door—I'll never forget seeing you that first time. A funny looking man—a boy, really, with blonde hair and amazing smile—you lit my world—I knew I loved you.

September 1, 2014

Now that I think about it, I loved you from the moment I heard your voice—even before seeing you. I *fell* in love—lust—with you minutes later when you came storming out of coaching. You kinda scowled. It was your favorite schtick—the angry young man. Very James Dean. I knew we'd be lovers. I knew I would always love you. I also knew that we wouldn't—couldn't—last

because we were eighteen and life is long and we were just stupid horny kids. I have always been an old soul who knew things. I knew for example that life *was* ahead of us, except it wasn't. Not really. We didn't—couldn't—last. And you died yesterday. Why am I so angry at you?

September 2, 2014

Sometimes I can still see your face, but only for a moment. There, now—I see it—and then, I lose it again. I know the shape of your head and your face, your lips—to me you looked like Michelangelo's David—and I still want you to the point of crazy. I think we thought we had found perfection in a fucked up place. It's OK. We tried.

September 3, 2014

It's late at night and can't sleep. I was listening to *Vier Letzte Lieder* earlier—Schwarzkopf—I remembered how much I hated your sense of superiority: your pretentiousness about having perfect pitch, and your going on about baroque music having to be double-dotted even when the score indicates only one dot. Your overuse of the word "progression" to describe how music should never drag. And yet… I loved your confidence—how you came across a little distant—I sensed you had a hard life. It made me love you more. Oh—I also listened to *Erwartung* today: *Gehe ins Leben, dich lockt die Andre—Schau, schau und erkenne*. Why did you never vacate my memory? Why have I never moved on? I thought I did, when we were over. I realized this week I had not.

September 4, 2014

Tired. I overate. I had a Milky Bar AND a tub of ice cream. I feel so fat. I met someone tonight—online—a forgettable fuck. I thought about you. I think I did it because of you. When we were at the Conservatory I knew older men hung around campus looking for young love and that some of them adored you—you were exactly what those guys liked— and I loved that you were

mine. I think I always knew I had to make the most of the time we had. It was funny when we went to Café Garbo in Hillbrow—broke, sipping water, sharing a plate of chips—we scoured the pages of Linda Goodman's "Love Signs" to to see if we had a shot. Linda thought a Virgo/Capricorn match was OK. It was enough for us. We laughed when some old queen said it's only a matter of time when lovers consulted Goodman. Fuck him. He was right, after all.

September 5, 2014

I never knew what to make of you—you were so rude. You did such weird things. I love-hated how, at recitals, you would sit and listen and conduct while everybody else just watched and you kept raising one hand in the air as if putting a finger up to speak. And then you'd put you hand down again, quickly, while the other would carry on conducting. I loved when you explained that responsible musicians identified their mistakes and that it was better to raise your hand and own up to your error so the conductor knows you know.

September 7, 2014

It's nine. They called for last rounds at the pub down my street. I was restless today and kept thinking about how time flies and how we cannot detach from this body until we die and then, when we do, how we can't reattach in some miraculous way. It is what it is. Death. Life. What it is.

September 8, 2014

It's hard to work after a night like yesterday's. I am unable to forget. It's kinda my thing. Most people say I have a memory like an elephant and laugh but I hate the way I can't move on. The way I dwell. I soak up the moment and then replay it at various times over and over. It's the ADHD. That's something you didn't know about me back then. Neither did I.

September 9, 2014

I live in Cape Town now. Did you know that? Did you ever follow up what what happened to me? I remember you in our student productions of *Brigadoon* and *Gypsy Baron*. We weren't even friends yet. You were so uncomfortable around me. You always avoided eye contact. You didn't have anything to say to me. And sometimes when I asked you a question you'd turn around and walk away, and ignore my question, so I knew that thought it was not going anywhere. It was weird that a girl we both knew saw us in one of these situations and said she thinks you were in love with me. I thought she was crazy.

September 12, 2014

It was funny that Joyce cast us in Rossini's *Il Conte Ory*—me as the count, you as my travel companion—and even more funny dressed as nuns hiding in the cave before I emerge in character and had to sing the first aria, "Astro sereno brilli di gioia." I loved that, hiding in that cave, you kissed me while the orchestra played the overture, our love hidden in a hastily constructed cave, behind velvet curtains, hidden from the orchestra, the rest of the cast, and from the audience. Yet, in midst of hundreds each day, hidden in backstage twilight, we were there, kissing. Falling in love.

September 13, 2014

It was awkward working closely with you. We spent hours rehearsing different things. It was a lot of time to spend together. I learned to trust you, and I learned about your years at the Drakensberg Boys Choir—how a teacher seduced you. In "Gianni Schicchi," I remember being backstage, looking at you every time our Lauretta, a lesbian with a mullet from somewhere in the west of Johannesburg butchered "O mio babbino caro." It was fucking magical.

September 16, 2014

This morning I'm meeting an asshole client at an Italian coffee shop in Cape Town—OMG I get so tired convincing clients that I know what I'm doing—but that is my life now. This restaurant reminds me of our intimate dinners at small Italian bistros in Hillbrow. I loved that in big aggressive Johannesburg, somehow, we found soft places to land. I wonder—is it just me?? — Johannesburg was crazy gay friendly. How did South Africa in the 80s turn out to be so gay friendly? Do you remember my friend João—the ex-model from Paris—who used to dress up? Did he actually go to the club in a Lawrence of Arabia robe and tunic with a metal birdcage wrapped on fabric for a hat that one time, or did I dream that? I definitely remember a group of really hot Hare Krishna devotees in saffron robes at the club swirling to "Orinoco flow" by Enya. One of them, Medhavi Das, flirted with me and you got so upset. It was the night you first told me you loved me.

September 18, 2014

Been thinking a lot about us living together in Rose Court near the campus. I remember that one night in early winter. It was May or June. My mom called. She said I have to come home because my dad wanted to put antifreeze in the car's radiator as it was going to be well below freezing that night with snow expected on the mountains. She was making dinner and invited you as well, "Tell Walter to come, he can't stay there alone, it's going to be too cold," she said. There was no arguing with my mom. She was small and what she lacked in stature she made up for in mettle. And so we drove back to my parents house where my dad took care of a car. Afterwards we had dinner with my parents.

September 19, 2014

I just remembered my mom said she'd fixed the guest bedroom that night, "so you guys, when you're tired, can go to a warm bed," she said in Afrikaans of course. You spoke Afrikaans

without any hint of accent and although you seemed heavily Anglicized, your perfect Afrikaans suggested a familial connection to the culture. You never spoke about that though.

I walked up the passage and saw my mom had made the guest bed with fluffed pillows on both sides, the duvet was rolled down, both bedside lamps were lit, and a little mint chocolate on each side of the bed. I never asked her if she knew, or why she did that. Or if she suspected anything. She just did it. I remember feeing that things had changed in the time I was at college. I was, that night, a guest with his partner, and I like to think that she knew but that it wasn't really anything that we needed to discuss. It was just how and what it was. And she was fine. I think I was lucky.

September 21, 2014

Woke up at half past five and thought about how much I hated your birthday. And how things felt weird. And how you seemed distant, and how often it felt as if you were acting up. I thought we were easing into the thing we were having. Maybe it was because you were revealing more of yourself and you wanted to take a few steps back—we did, after all, sign a lease on a new flat. For me it was exciting that we would officially be living together. We were a couple. I loved you. And (I thought) you loved me too. I think you loved me. And we did the kind of things one does when one loves: we had little arguments, made up, had sex, quarreled, made up, had sex, screamed at each other, made up, had sex and repeat. I thought that was what one did. Gays don't get much training on coupling.

September 22, 2014

Tonight I have a party to go to. My ex will be there. An other ex. Ordeal.

Why *did* we drift apart? Why did you test me by asking me if I'd be jealous if you told me that your ex was coming over? Weird shit like that. I felt you weren't being very nice and I found

your little games pretty fucked up. You would tell me elaborate stories about how you loved having sex with older men when you were at school and I was upset about that because I wondered of the grown up men knew they were being seduced by a child, one who knew their weaknesses and knew instinctively how to manipulate them. That was pretty triggering stuff. Very French—I think during the late 1960s, a letter was signed by Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, along with Sarte and De Beauvoir insisting that we need to reevaluate how we deal with sexuality in younger people[5]. I remember being shocked at how normalized some of what you had been through seemed to you.

September 23, 2014

I have to note re the last days of our being together. I felt threatened. Betrayed. To me, you were a monster.

September 24, 2014

Still a little triggered by the last few days' recollections.

I hated that we started looking like Taylor and Burton. That we would get drunk. And fight.

We were kids. Was that normal??

I kept feeling I was pushed to the max. By you.

September 27, 2014

Today's big disappointments.

1. I think I hate my life.

2. My sister is not doing well. I worry about her but I can't seem to get through,

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[5] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/feb/24/jonhenley

I also realized that I need to figure out what to do with my life. Your very inconvenient and premature death has brought this sharply into focus. Sleep, yes.

September 29, 2014

One gets fever. I get it. I am trying to understand.

When we are consumed by sickness—viral— fever's not caused by virus but instead, the immune response, a heating up to kill a virus and when we get a shot to develop an immune reaction of a limited nature, for a brief period, we get sick, but not the sickness of the virus—it's the sickness of an immune system developing immune cells. It's the way the immune system works—once we produce an antibody to fight something it will fight and keep multiplying to fight as fast as possible. And when things are gone, we go into remission—a reprieve—and a handful of cells hang around ready to pounce if the thing ever shows up again.

I feel like things are concave.

The thing is—I've never known anybody actually dealing with disease.

I knew a woman—a neighbor—who started having shingles. She got sick, and it really never looked so you know her husband told me recently, she still gets it, it's not.

I don't get why you had to die.

September 30, 2014

Do you remember the flat we were considering getting on the ground floor with the beautiful windows and the balcony? It was going to be our first place together. We'd bought some furniture, we'd been given some things for his birthday. And it was going to be so nice. And for some reason, you picked a fight and picked up a bag of gifts when one of the wine bottles broke right through the bag and dropped on the floor, spilling red wine everywhere splashing up the wall

and over furniture. It was everywhere. And you stood there just looking. And I burst out laughing because you were so surprised. I know you hated me laughing at you.

November 1, 2014

The cycle begins again. New month. I am OK with everything.

Ours was a simple story—everything about us had become textbook. I felt you drifting away. I was losing you. We were a slow motion car crash and I was in it with someone I loved. Whom I still love.

When we spoke the last time you said that maybe the time wasn't right. You told me you loved me. You thought we should be together and maybe, after a while, we'll see if this thing work, but in meantime, we needed to let go.

November 3, 2014

After the breakup I would walk up your street every day, ok, a few times a day. I walked slowly, hoping to bump into you, or catch a glimpse of you through the window. I thought that maybe if you could see me you would get over this "break up" thing, invite me up, and ask me how I was, and would tell you how much I missed you.

I would tell you my body felt hollow and broken since you left and that I'm sure we are the real thing despite being so young and not knowing what the real thing is meant to feel like but that this felt like it.

November 5, 2014

Do you know I listened to Sinead O'Connor for years after you died.

Nothing compared to you.

November 7, 2014

I knew you'd left for Europe. You'd become a monk, someone said, or, they thought, you were training choirs. I never really knew. I stopped looking out for news about you.

Then on some website, I saw that you were back in South Africa and training a choir.

November 8, 2014

I saw you died. Lymphatic cancer.

All I could hear in my head was you singing "bella siccome un angelo."

I was angry because I was right, we were never going to get back together.

November 10, 2014

Is this even a life? I am happy. I have a good life. I have a nice car and live in a beautiful place—we have dogs and cats. We. I am married now. I am writing these notes to you to quiet the voice in my head. To fill the void and tie up some loose ends.

I double dot as well.

I stick up a finger when listening to concerts when I hear a bad note or raggedy entry.

I'm sorry I laughed when your birthday wine bottle broke.

The Walter Listening List

- *Beim Schlafengehen,* Richard Strauss Vier Letzte Lieder. Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Szell, Radio Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, 1966.
- *Au fond du temple saint,* George Bizet, *Les Pêcheurs de Perles*. Jussi Björling, Robert Merrill, Cellini, RCA Victor Symphony Orchestra, 1954.
- *Das Mondlicht...nein, dort,* Arnold Schoenberg, *Erwartung.* Sara Jakubiak, Gardner, Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra, 2020.
- *Bella Siccome un Angelo*, Donizetti, *Don Pasquale*. Mario Basiola, Mariotti, Orchestra del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, 1965.
- *O Mio Babbino Caro*, Giacomo Puccini, *Gianni Schicchi.* Montserrat Caballé, Mackerras, London Symphony Orchestra, 1970.
- *Nothing Compares 2 U*, Sinéad O'Connor, "I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got," 1990.

Diego

"It's been all panic. No disco."

Since the very start of this decade like some biblical epic nightmare, Diego felt that we have been compelled to reflect, and take sides, and get all political on ordinary people who succumbed to coronavirus, passing away in clinical loneliness at times, their voices replaced by the monotone humming of a ventilator.

He thought we had been witnesses to the heartbreaking final moments of a man, *his* breath slowly extinguished under the weight of a police officer's knee.

So now, more than ever, our capacity—the very possibility—that some of us may be able to craft and convey a final message has taken on the dubious mantel of privilege, he thought.

And perhaps that is why he was drawn to opera, because this artform has within its ample capacities also the ability for us to declare a final, if somewhat extended, farewell. One that is elevated, and complicated, and glorious, and lipsync-friendly but also, one that with potential to prod us toward more thoughtful and even introspective conversations on mortality.

And rather than a site of alienation, the artifice of opera mesmerizes and provides a unique lens through which to explore profound human experiences from the comfort that distance provides. We get to immerse in the lives of others, who, when we squint may resemble aspects of

ourselves, the transformative processes that unfurl in protracted untidy ways afflicting others caught in a heightened world compressed into concise operatic scenes. But, and this is the interesting part, emotional and intellectual triggers within us, often fleeting and unexamined in reality, are slowed down and even amplified within the music.

"Why do love it? What do you get out it?" I asked one night over cocktails when it was just us, away from the group.

"There is this sense of distance," he said, "and yet, also a sense I get that I am—intensely—experiencing this event in almost unparalleled proximity

It's an empathy hack. Hardwired, we have to do nothing for a moment, except give in. It's this dual perspective bringing us closer to experiencing a specific emotion, but we are ensconced in the safety of distanced perception through a prism of artistic representation."

A few months prior, at Chicago's Harris Theater, Diego and I heard American diva Joyce DiDonato sing "Dido's Lament" from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*. The scene's aria section comprises only two lines:

When I am laid in earth, let my wrongs create no trouble in thy breast.

Remember me, but ah! forget my fate.

The music was measured—solemn—with a searching vocal line, DiDonato's "remember me" elevated the aria making it assertive and impassioned, only to waver on "ah," the melody collapsing into a melismatic sigh. DiDonato captured a moment of steel and dread, her upright body buckling only for a moment as if yielding to vertigo. That scene, her singing, echoed in me for days, especially when visiting a critically ill friend a week later. He had been ailing for a while, confined to his bed with advanced dementia, unable to express himself or use recognizable gestures. I sat, my hand gripping his, and thought of Purcell's Dido—my pity now tinged by envy. I thought about the clarity of Dido's departure from life, the grace of what she suspected, her last words. Contrasted with the inarticulate incoherent twilight of Alzheimer's, Dido's end—like many in opera—seemed unfairly lucid.

After DiDonato's concert we went for a drink. "There was this pivotal moment, for me." I said. "I was much younger, when I had an HIV test done and in those days you had to wait for two weeks to get the result and those became the most tortured days one could ever live through. I listened to Monteverdi's "*Lamento d'Arianna*" which starts with the words "*Lasciatemi morire*" ("Let me die"), and somehow, listening to the aria, reading those words, I made peace with whatever was next. I remember breathing out, for what felt like the first time in a while, you know, just really exhaling, and thinking that this was something that was happening to me. I had to deal. It was tough."

The good thing, I thought, was that death in opera happens in multifarious ways: jumping of castle walls, stabbing, disease, burning, or by being dragged to hell, so the range of options to identify with is wide, and the settings too. You may see yourself alone, or in a crowd, surrounded by family, or in the embrace of a lover in a pyramid as the air runs out.

While ordering another cocktail, I rambled on about Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, that has a final aria in which Boris settles old scores, issues some final commands, and mixes up some personal stuff within broader historical contexts. Characters such as Boris, I said, reflect on their roles in society, their place in history, and what they leave behind—it's the greater good way of thinking while Brünnhilde, at the end of Wagner's "Ring cycle," rides her steed into a flaming funeral pyre to be with Siegfried, albeit in death, but the resolution is so profound, and also so useful as it brings some closure to multiple narrative threads.

"But, under the grandiose, the expressive, and the very long operatic farewell we find, I think, a core truth," Diego said. "It seems to me to be that the evil side of us—the worst version of ourselves—will, and must, plead for forgiveness, and that, no matter what, love overcomes whatever calamity had been hurled at the unsuspecting character. And these basic truths will resonate, despite the pomp or the excessive style."

"Agreed," I said. "One of the most searing and heartbreaking moments in all of opera happens at the very end of Puccini's "*La Bohème*," where the lovers are reunited mere moments before Mimì dies of tuberculosis. She, overtaken by the moment, realizing the imminence of her death, sings that she owes so much to Rudolfo, and then she backtracks a little saying, no, actually its just one thing: but that one thing is deep and endless like an ocean, and that one thing is that he is her love. Her life. It's this intense moment that is timeless and just so true. She was better and more fulfilled because, well, him."

"That's really beautiful. And so sad." Diego looked suitably morose.

"Just to bear in mind that at the time, the death of an unexceptional person, like Mimi, from a common disease, was pretty much a rarity on opera at the time. Most earlier opera suggested that an early death was related to a fatal flaw. And the Enlightenment gave us operas where death was meted out as just retribution to the wicked, think of Don Giovanni. And the audience was encouraged to be under the impression that death and morality are linked."

Which is why '*La Bohème*' and '*La Traviata*,' presenting death as natural and random—the kind of thing that just happens, indiscriminate and callous, were so important.

Death as arbitrary and unremarkable, a facet of existence, is actually more common in religious settings such as Bach's cantatas while art songs such as Mahler's "*Ich Bin Der Welt Abhanden Gekommen*" provide an almost packaged, meaning economical and concise, but almost unbearably contemplative moment that speak directly to fact that life sucks and that, if you want to check out, no-one is going blame you.

"I think I love opera," Diego said, "with its drama and its formality and spacious musicality, because it provides us with a safe access point from which to temporarily dip our toes into a death experience."

Opera makes us look and think, it allows us to gauge how we feel, and provides us with this stylized lens that has us glance, and sometimes face, some of life's bigger questions. The ones that give life meaning.

The Diego Listening List

- *Lamento d'Arianna* "*Lasciatemi morire,"* Claudio Monteverdi. Anne Sofie von Otter & Jakob Lindberg, 1998.
- *Ich Bin Der Welt Abhanden Gekommen*, Gustav Mahler, *Rückert-Lieder.* Anne Sofie von Otter, Gardiner, NDR Symphony Orchestra, 1996.
- *Ich Bin Der Welt Abhanden Gekommen*, Gustav Mahler, *Rückert-Lieder.* Kathleen Ferrier, Walter, Vienna Philharmonic, 1952.
- *I Know It's Over*, The Smiths, "The Queen Is Dead," 1986.

A two-cocktail kinda lunch

My political patience with American democracy ran out a while ago. I can tell you the exact date: June 30, 2023, around eleven central. Having another morning coffee while mindlessly scrolling, news broke that the Supreme Court of the United States, by a 6-to-3 vote, sided with Colorado web designer Lorie Smith, who opposed same-sex marriage and challenged Colorado public accommodations law, by asserting the state was unconstitutionally compelling her to serve everyone equally.

In his opinion, Justice Gorsuch felt that since Smith may be asked by possible potential clients—she had not designed a website, let alone an LGBTQ+ one, at the time of her filing the case in 2016—to contribute to their wedding creatively, she could expect to be constitutionally shielded from such participation. Naturally, this issue of selection and refusal to work for fear of endorsement and moral compromise goes both ways; remember when Marc Jacobs and Tom Ford refused to dress Melania Trump for the 2017 inauguration? But this felt different. This was legislated. This felt like a repeat of the Colorado wedding cake case, which, in turn, felt like when Red-state governors dragged their heels legalizing marriage equality in 2015, which felt like, well, an entire history of queer second-class status.

"Let me be clear," Bob said on the phone the night the news broke which was strange as we never call—no-one does anymore, but this was such a shocking turn of events, that something old-

school, like a phone call was called for. "American democracy is dying. It's on a form of life-support, the kind we use for coma patients the same way we kept my mother alive after her stroke. Breathing, intravenously fed, but essentially unresponsive and wasting away. It's how "democracy" is done in countries like Poland and Hungary. Very little in the way of pro-democracy legislation is passing Congress. The Supreme Court is blatantly showing itself more sympathetic to ultra conservative causes. I'm done. It just gets so tiring to have to deal with this stuff over and over again."

"And a former US president has, at last count, been indicted three times for, amongst other charges, orchestrating an insurrection using collaborative media and conspiracy-based online platforms," I said. "Just think about that. I mean just saying it, it sounds outrageous. Now consider that the very same indicted president is actively seeking another term, that he is the frontrunner in securing his party's nomination, and polling among voters suggests he is within reach of getting re-elected to the very office he betrayed."

But we were not exaggerating. When democracy declines—or dies—it seldom recovers. Instead, it reanimates, neutered, into a zombie-state that performatively holds elections, while limiting the number of polling stations; it denounces opposition victories as rigged and vilifies the "other" stopping short of criminalizing and persecuting them (for the time being); and it replaces the press with propaganda.

I've never been party to the belief that significant social change had to be transformational on a personal level for everyone, and I lived through the end of Apartheid, which says a lot. Instead, I've always strongly suspected that, for some, life barrels ahead while they just get on with stuff, untouched and untethered viewing those who say otherwise as worrywarts who obsess over things like finding fun seitan recipes online, which, incidentally, I did as well, during my 2018 vegan stint.

But here we were. And so, and not to sound la-di-da or anything, I thought about Nietzsche, specifically something I came across years ago while studying Richard Strauss' tone poem, *Also Sprach Zarathustra,* a work more famous for being the dum-dum-dum-da-dum bit in *2001: Space*

Odyssey (1968) than the fact that it is based on the book of the same name by the German philosopher. In an early 1870s essay, eventually to be published in *Philosophy and Truth,* Nietzsche asks, "What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: In short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding."

He continues that "truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions—they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins." I remember making a mental note to go find that quote on Google and bookmark it for when I feel ready to ponder the state of truth, online engagement, democracy, and how we got to this place. But what then *is* truth? And what about truth in an accelerated society? And where do we even start?

Not one for the doldrums, I wondered what those who came before us would have done. Harvey Milk. Bayard Rustin. James Baldwin. Allen "America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel," Ginsberg. Well, that's as good a place to start as any, I thought.

A few days later a text interrupted my doomscrolling through a morning blend of Facebook, TikTok, and links to news sites I find triggering yet riveting. It was from, Bob: a link to a new Tiny Cedric TikTok. Tiny Cedric is a diminutive Chihuahua with a floppy tongue that cannot be contained and a shrill squeal where other dogs have a bark. In other words, he's adorable and the subject of highly shareable content. Today, Tiny Cedric was being groomed to go on a date with his girlfriend Lou, another Chihuahua, albeit long-haired. The Cedric and Lou brand of cute is saccharine, and the level of doting on a pint-sized fleabag beggars belief, but I nevertheless found myself considering life with a Tiny Cedric of my own.

Me: Do you think Cedric is easy to travel with?

Bob: Yes! He's the definition of pocket-sized.

… … …

Bob is always at me to get a dog, especially a Chihuahua, which is interesting as he knows I want an Old English Sheepdog or an Irish Wolfhound.

Bob: You should get one.

Me: 😳. I'm over 6'. Built like a rugby player. NOT one-night-in-Paris Hilton.

Bob: You would look great with a Tiny Cedric in a tote at customs.

Bob: BRB.

… … …

Bob's texts about Tiny Cedric made me marvel at how TikTok, rather than a mere device to detached scrolling, was clearly adept at hardwiring pre-existing yet dormant feelings of inadequacy, and how much occasional near-maniacal gleefreshing resembled a sugar rush.

Bob: OK—just heard from Diego and Sven who is bringing a date, Glanson. Let's meet at Broken English Taco Pub in Old Town? Noon?

Me: Great.

Bob: It's a two-cocktail kinda day, I think.

"Nice to see you, boys—wow—*this* is a fun place. And for lunch! A refreshing change from screaming over karaoke and cocktails at Boystown bars," Sven said, hugging each of us. "Do you know Glanson?" Both Diego and I nodded and smiled and hugged Glanson whom I'd seen around and from the way Bob squirmed it seemed he already knew Glanson in a more personal—biblical—way.

It's been a few months since we last met up for lunch and somehow life has kept us all busy in a good way. The modes of communication between us—everyone nowadays really, come to think about it—are absurd and besides group chats we use WhatApp, iMessage, Telegram, Facebook Messenger, and various social platforms (some dating-based), all depending on who's traveling and what's being shared, leading to a sense that we're inhabiting walled gardens, each its own ecosystem. Except actual phone calls. Because no-one does that anymore. And so, over shares and comments, we've become more conscious of the need to monitor our progressively more volatile political landscape and be more engaged, meaning that we take time to share—sometimes text—about it.

"So what do you think about this." Bob opened a TikTok he'd shared with me days earlier. He pressed play and we watched the TikTok of drag queen Thorgy Thor from RuPaul's Drag Race Season 8 doing something that had us rewind the scene to ensure we weren't missing something.

As part of a quick-fire challenge with a Mexican theme, the very premise of which veered dangerously close to cringe tropes, stereotypes, and cultural appropriation—think big earrings, sombreros, and shrill "*¡Ay, caramba!"* yelps—Thorgy dressed up as Frida Kahlo, replete with unibrow, huipil, embroidered skirt, gold hoop earrings, and oversized flowers on her head.

Thorgy's Frida was confused, jerked around, flailed, and finally fell to the ground raising one leg at a time, indicating God knows what: sexual arousal, stupor, or maybe a comment on Kahlo's myriad health issues, including the amputation of a leg in later life. The Drag Race queens loved it. RuPaul yelled with mirth, while Mexican-American singer, AB Soto, whose song "Cha Cha Bitch" provided the soundtrack for the challenge, clapped hands and laughed. It all felt a little off.

"I don't think much online anymore speaks to the gay community all that much." Bob, like many older gay men, finds our zeitgeist alarming. "I think the queer community, for the most part, just sees everything first as another reason for dragification. We are fundamentally out of touch with the reality of the world and our culture is reduced to an easy jumping-off point for talentless drag queens like Thorgy Thor." He took a sip of his mezcal-based Margarita.

By coincidence, Broken English—the restaurant we were meeting at—had a small poster on the door with a Pride flag and a QR code to a site populated with pics from events with LGBTQ+ people. It was a crude thing, homemade, reeking of well-intentioned "let's just do something because it's Pride and gays are known to get tetchy." By coincidence, the little Pride poster had a sketch of Frida Kahlo making a "cool" gesture with both hands crossed in front of her while, underneath her, the tagline "Taco Wasted" was meant to mean something. At least the tacos tasted delicious, and there were pictures of hot *luchadores* on the walls.

My phone pinged and everyone reached for their phones since the cachet of a Grndr alert is now ne plus ultra among gay mating calls. At any gathering such as this, the happy sound of the Grindr ping will have an entire table hastily check devices, some more clandestine for fear of appearing desperate while others act blasé in anticipation of unsolicited dick pics or the apogee of sex-positivity: the dick vid. And while the act of checking out of the conversation with friends to be cyberflashed is socially side-eyed, the currency held by the Grndr alert is nevertheless huge.

Excited and a little apologetic, I felt around in my backpack.

ChuckRhymesWith: Sup

Me: Hey

… … …

ChuckRhymesWith: Nice profile

Me: Thanks.

… … …

ChuckRhymesWith: Looking?

Me: …just meeting friends. Lunch. Maybe later?

… … …

ChuckRhymesWith: Into?

Meh—I mean—what *do* you say? How did it happen that our entire sexual experience has come to be condensed into an app—a profile—a few lines of banter, and a hastily arranged tryst? Not for nothing, the proliferation of social media has coincided with the rise in pre- and post-exposure medications such as PrEP and PEP. But, for now, ChuckRhymesWith is not on the agenda.

Me: … … …

ChuckRhymesWith: Guess not.

"I see several posts of all sorts by entitled Gen Z kids on TikTok because they think they have nothing to be concerned about and that this has just always been like this," Glanson said. He moved to Chicago from Florida when, as a Black gay man, he felt his rights were threatened after Ron DeSantis was elected governor in 2018. HIV+ and undetectable, Glanson had to negotiate his way around stigma on various dating apps, leading him to adopt a somewhat guarded persona. "There is this sort of naive Gen Z righteousness and referencing of certain, often gay, iconography without much consideration given to our history. And, of course, gay culture gravitates heavily to Black culture. But it's an open question whether cis-het Gen Z has our backs as an LGBTQ community or, for that matter, if LGBTQ Americans care about the issues about the cultures that they, in turn, emulate and appropriate."

"Word, Glanny!" Bob nodded in approval. "The younger generations have the luxury of gaining access to a ready-made gay universe through a very diluted lens with very low risk of embodying any of the things that those who have gone before them have gone through, much less respecting the process of trauma and hardship we endured despite our perceived rebel stance."

"Padam!" I added. "It's about the feels. And by the way, that song is trending far higher on TikTok than anything about gay rights or toxic Floridian crapola. On Facebook however, there is a continuous stream of outrage, so it seems like its a platform and age thing."

Diego smiled. "Interesting you say that. Pop stars and music are way more influential with Latinx," he said. "The kids I know, my nieces and nephews, don't care much for politics or news, mostly because it's not something that they feel part of. But they do gravitate to everything Gloria Trevi, or some electro-cumbia group like Mexican Sound System, so we need those type of artists to be more active on platforms and spread the word."

"But," I said, "there is just about nothing more fake and off-putting than some star who whines about getting out and voting. I think the best thing is for those kind of influencers—high level ones—to aggressively take part in discussions and make formal statements. When Taytay endorsed Joe Biden in 2020, that was a big deal and he was dragged over the finishing line, amongst others, by her fans."

"In what I think of as a hyperconnected world, issues that affect our community," Diego said, his finger moving in a circle indicating our group, "if we can really call us a community, are more visible than ever before and even though this heightened visibility may appear to foster or anticipate acceptance, it exposes us to elevated scrutiny with potential backlash from less tolerant groups,".

"Social media encourages the construction of idealized personas," I said, "which kinda leads to a significant disparity between what we present and reality. For gay men, the pressure to conform to societal beauty standards can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and inadequacy. It's at the core of us. It's a sort of usness that has always been there but now, for better or worse, has brought with it a unique set of challenges."

"Exactly," Bob sighed, "and this usness that you talk of, with all its memes and viral stuff and social media, shapes our collective identity and culture. And of course they can—and do—

perpetuate stereotypes and misconceptions about us as LGBTQ+ people, leaving some, in specific real-world locations, alienated and frustrated. The rise of dating apps has changed how we form connections, and for us these apps are both blessing and curse, because they tantalizingly suggest a possibility of a meaningful relationship as we chat away while at the very same time inducting us into a hookup culture that runs counter to the meaningful relationship we think we want."

All this talk of apps and meaningful connection reminded me to check my email, and, seeing none, I checked Facebook. Predictably, I was almost instantly outraged by a post announcing that the Florida State Board of Education will henceforth teach students how some Black people benefited from slavery because it taught them valuable skills—part of new African American history standards—a move that the state teachers' union, and frankly everyone with a modicum of shame, had since blasted as a "step backward." The 2023 Florida curriculum also "advocates teaching about how Black people were also perpetrators of violence during race massacres."

Buoyed by Chablis, I responded to a comment by a Floridian troll.

Me: De Santis is a dickhead.

Solano_75: Screw you Libtard.

Me: Is your sister too busy?

I felt better. For a moment, I wondered why it was so good, all this online yacking at a profile littered with flags and Semper Fi memes and whether, perhaps, it really *was* me.

I wondered if, maybe, THAT was the big deal with social media. How it acted as some sort of self-healing or a mirror into the soul—the modern version of hurling a lowball at the wall and finding release in the shattering. When I sat back and looked at the exchanges and barbs, I felt better about Florida, having said my piece at the specter of a De Santis reign. Like I was doing something.

I wondered if, perhaps, I should thank Solano_75 from Coral Gables. What *was* it with the Cuban vote, I wondered, and made a mental note to search for information on shifts in Latin voting patterns and how hyphenated identities shape voting patterns. I took another sip of wine.

"You've got the look of someone who just read a bitch on Facebook," Bob said.

"I should thank Solly Solano for the pleasure of letting off some steam," I smiled.

"I'm sure he knows. Is he even real?"

"You never know these days," Glanson added. "Everyone knows everything and we usually put it there. My dad would have died if anyone saw him naked, but I have pretty raunchy pics of me posted across many platforms. And I did it."

"Yeah we know—we've all seen," I said. "But it doesn't stop with the risqué stuff. If you check the time for the Presbyterian Friday Fish-fry, Facebook knows. If you pause for a second too long on a keto recipe posting, TikTok suddenly feeds you endless diet adverts."

"And in a time where Tennessee is forcing a hospital to hand over records of patients who need gender reassignment," Bob said, "and Texas wants to prosecute the driver of the car that takes someone to an abortion clinic in a blue state, is anyone really safe? Are any of our online searches and interactions just a Supreme Court decision away from being, essentially, self-incrimination?"

From where I was sitting I could swear Bob had a tear in his eye. I looked away for fear of embarrassing him but made a mental note that just snapping at Solano_75 from Coral Gables on Facebook possibly wasn't enough. And that we needed to do more, but what, I wondered.

And so, this issue around usness and online personas, along with the code-switching implied by multi-platformed lived experiences, seemed to be a question of control, and more to the point who had it. It's what Gilles Deleuze has in mind when he claims in his 1992 essay, "Postscript on Societies of Control," that modern societies—and their surveillance mechanisms—have transitioned

from Foucauldian "disciplinary societies," characterized by physical confinement and omnipresent overseers—a reworking of Betham's panopticons of watchers and the observed—that form rigid hierarchies, to societies of control where individuals are subjected to continuous surveillance and manipulation. And we don't have to look far for evidence to see how we now live in virtual sociotechnical panopticons.

Michel Foucault's theory of the panopticon was that society is more concerned with control than discipline, and so, modes of observation and scrutiny have morphed from that of mere proctoring, suggesting a government-like or institutional entity, to comprehensive and ubiquitous social orthodoxy: each member of society cast simultaneously as supervisor *and* the supervised.

Professor Emerita at Harvard Business School, Shoshana Zuboff, warns in her book, "The Age of Surveillance Capitalism," that Silicon Valley and other players mine user data to anticipate and control their behavior. During a chat with The Harvard Gazette, Zuboff says that "surveillance capitalism's "means of behavioral modification" at scale erodes democracy from within because, without autonomy in action and in thought, we have little capacity for the moral judgment and critical thinking necessary for a democratic society." She continues that surveillance capitalism knows "everything about us, but we know little about them. They predict our futures, but for the sake of others' gain. Their knowledge extends far beyond the compilation of the information we gave them." It's a nefarious kind of control.

Deleuze, as far back as 1992, identified that "control societies" rely on algorithmic mechanisms to monitor and predict individual behavior, thus exerting subtle forms of control, and Zuboff makes it clear that online platforms utilize complex algorithms to curate content, creating echo chambers that reinforce users' existing beliefs and preferences. This personalized control fosters a polarization of society, with individuals increasingly isolated within their ideological bubbles, amplifying the effects of memetic tug-of-war, if not full-scale combat.

In the online ecosystem, hacktivism, the use of technological skills for political ends, may be viewed as a form of resistance against control mechanisms and hacktivist groups like Anonymous have carried out operations targeting powerful entities, using memes and digital tactics to expose corruption and advocate for social justice. But most of that feels reactive and quickly gets vilified by the very perps of surveillance capitalism who have our likes and dislikes and search histories.

But "Societies of Control" also emphasizes a certain fluidity and flexibility of modern social structures, and, for gay men, this has translated into a constant negotiation with identity, as they code-switch their way around online spaces and social contexts, and for good reason as Deleuze's notion of surveillance is particularly pertinent within the LGBTQ+ community where increased visibility on social media can lead to exposure to hate speech, online harassment, and threats to personal safety. A study by the Trevor Project (2021) found that LGBTQ+ youth who experienced discrimination online were more likely to report suicidal ideation and feelings of loneliness while another by Pew Research Center (2020) revealed that LGBTQ+ individuals are more likely to engage in self-censorship and limit their online activities due to privacy and safety concerns.

This blurred line between realities is addressed in "Simulacra and Simulation," a 1981 philosophical treatise written by French sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard in which he explores the concept of simulacra—something that replaces reality with its representation—and its profound implications on contemporary society, culture, and reality. Baudrillard feels that in modern times, reality has been replaced by a hyperreality characterized by simulations and copies, and he argues that we live in a world where representations and images have become detached from their original referents, and, he suggests, this has led to to a blurring of the boundaries between reality and the simulated. In this hyperreal world, Baudrillard argues, images and signs circulate freely, reproducing themselves endlessly, without any reference to an underlying reality. The result is a society where simulations, copies, and signs take on more significance than the actual reality they are

meant to represent. Baudrillard uses a fable on cartography by Jorge Luis Borges to explain what he means with the simulacra.

It does lead one to wonder if today, Instagram, for example, is the ultimate simulacra? The act of online posting is fraught with considerations around what someone else will think of the post. And how the user can get other users to have specific impressions after viewing the post. "If I go with A rather than B, do I look better there? Do my surroundings make me look better?' And so users set about constructing identity over many postings around an Insta-identity that is being curated with a user response in mind based on a representation of the self—a simulacra—where the real self is not visible on the platform, only curated glimpses meant to represent the self.

And specifically for LGBTQ+ individuals, the pressure to present idealized versions of themselves on social media often lead to further disconnect. A survey by GLAAD (2020) found that 55% of LGBTQ+ adults aged 18-34 reported feeling the need to present a curated image of themselves on social media, further contributing to feelings of frustration and alienation. And so we post, fearing that no one will love an old-fat-femme-whatever queen.

But you know," Bob said, "Just looking at the events in the news and balancing it with what I see on the internet reveals a disconnect between being gay, or Black, or a woman, and the need to protest. It seems as if we lack true social justice zeal or that societal challenge gene that young people had in the 60s and 70s. I feel that the revolutionary spirit used to be part of our DNA, which started to fizzle in the 80s when it became all about conspicuous consumption. The only thing that kept a gay protest flame alive was the AIDS crisis because young gay men were dying and watching their friends get sick, which informed ACT UP. But by the 90s, I feel like all of that was passé, and, well, here we are." Bob lived through the AIDS crisis. For him, current societal shifts and trends are too disconnected from those we lost.

"We've yet to find our voice from a social justice, wealth inequality, political corruption standpoint, including, this country's appetite for things like Desert Storm, the Persian Excursion, and 911 revenge," I added. "And the current appetite for fabricated culture wars. The post-Trump world reminds me that some of us gaze at ourselves, wondering just how the fuck we got here."

My phone pinged again.

Masc4Masc: hey nice profile

Me: Thanks. You too.

Masc4Masc: thanks

… … …

… … …

Me: You there.

Me: ?

… … …

I was immediately annoyed at the profile name. Why are some gay men so obsessed with the construction of masculinity? A quick scroll through TikTok shows myriad men at ease with fluidity and camp while dating apps severely lack anything that even approaches that level of self-expression —let alone humor—making the dissonance in the gay male construct as viable sex partner versus the gay male as a social creature, more transparent.

It is a miracle that anyone on a dating app actually ever gets out of the house and, you know, hook up, I thought. I was also irritated by the lack of punctuation in my possible paramour's hastily constructed repartee.

It made me wonder whether this was normal or if we had entered a highly voyeuristic, disconnected era. Whether our online personas, exposed and more divulging of our innermost secrets, have spawned a society of sweaty lurkers for whom IRL connections were anathema.

After a lull in the conversation, Diego sighed. "I think some young gays—and straights—have no connection with any kind of struggle. We don't know how. And the apps make it all look so normal out there. And fun." Diego was too young to be directly affected by the AIDS era and too shielded to be affected by the current migrant crisis, his parents having left for the USA in 1990, but he was always mindful that he stood on the shoulders of those who preceded him.

"Pride is not what it used to be," I said, fully aware of just how 'get off my lawn,' that sounded. "Have a look at this, I actually bookmarked the scene because I'm so annoyed by it. It's from *Glamorous*, the new Netflix show that pushes hard against gender and orientation boundaries and I found this gem." I search the beginning of episode five until I find the scene. "In this bit, the main character, Marco, who is gender non-conforming, speaks with drag queen, Dizmal, about Pride, its meaning, and corporate exploitation," I said, pressing play on my iPhone.

Marco: What about representation, inclusivity?
Don't you think Pride should mean something?

Dizmal: Anyone here got a brick? We got us the next Marsha P ready to start Stonewall all over again.

Marco: Oh my God. Okay. I just think pride should mean something.

Dizmal: Maybe it did back in the dial-up era but look around the world has cashed in. I know I have, because I am a whore, darling. We all are.

"I don't even watch that show and I hate it" Diego said. "I wonder if our disconnect is because there are unresolved issues in our dealing with stages of survival and acceptance. Art—or online stuff—seldom address and deal with pain."

Bob cleared his throat and took another sip. "I hate these kids." He shook his head. "I guess I like that Dizmal is so clear-eyed and ready to game the Pride machine. I think you are right. And I don't want to change the conversation but as a result of the tone of our online ecosystem I feel constant pressure to curate my life to present an image of unending positivity—like I'm super-blessed and thankful for my Instagrammable Ugandan coffee from Trader Joe's in this special little mug from who-knows-where in Mexico, sitting at a tiny table in my kitchen overlooking the brick wall against which drunk students piss every weekend when they leave the bars."

"The Uganda coffee Insta thing may—I think—be one of the expressions of fetishized sight," I said, "although to some the wall visible from your place, and the guys, are it's own fetish but that's not what Marx had on mind, I'm sure, and certainly not the paper I'm referring to." Everyone laughed, and I paused for a minute. "So, the way I apply 'fetishized sight' to what you're saying is that Instagram, for example, hinges on our fixation or over-focus on single objects that we're sharing in the hope of validation and acceptance. So, in effect, it forms a highlights reel—a showcase—of 'best moments' that conceals personal struggles and challenges through a curated representation that makes up this myth of perpetual happiness—a myth that makes all of us feel inadequate or ta least discontented with our lives."

"But it's just a cup with coffee. And a pretty kitchen with a shitty view but it's gritty and kinda sexy," Glanson said. "And not everything is always meant to be *curated*, as you say."

"The fact that we self-curate so naturally when engaging with Insta is exactly the problem I am highlighting," I said, "and the price of admission to the app is a "good vibez only" mentality that ignores the origin of the coffee in that cup and that Uganda is considering executing gays while *we* look past the fact that Trader Joe's is tacitly supporting that country, by doing business there."

"I do find that hugely triggering," Diego said, "that whole 'just be positive' or 'good vibes' culture, where online users are peer-pressured into ignoring any hint of negativity and focus myopically on presenting an almost medicated outlook." He paused. "And I often close Insta

because I feel that I'm not good enough. Actually, that I am not white enough, because the platform feels overwhelmingly white cis-het, which I guess, is why Black Twitter started."

"Exactly. A community within the community for users that feel marginalized and ignored—invisible—to that elite or host community," Glanson said. "Isn't Musk South African?"

"Unfortunately," I said. "In fact, he was born in the same hospital as me in Pretoria, the HF Verwoerd, which in turn was named after the architect of Apartheid. And I hate to say it, but some South Africans are douchebros."

Glanson leaned over and ruffled my hair. "It's OK. We love you. But just a last thing about Black Twitter. A lot of Black users are planning to migrate to a new app, Spill, which is about to launch. It has Black founders who left X when too many in the community had issues with what seemed like a lack of hate-speech moderation on Twitter which seems somewhat toxic under your countryman's leadership," he said with a nudge in my direction.

"We do love suffering misfits," Glanson continued, staring out the window, "and particularly if they come in the shape of an over-the-top woman at the end of her rope."

"Like," Bob responded, "why do you think we love Liza?"

"And Britney," Diego laughed.

"And why do old opera queens gravitate to Madam Butterfly and tragic train wreck operatic heroines?" Bob shrugged before continuing. "It's as if it takes our less-than-bougie suffering, elevating it to something epic, on an operatic level."

"That's interesting. I think *we* are operatic," Glanson said. "Our lives are dramatic. Our look is part costume. We are inherently artists. We are in some form of constant conflict with society, and afflicted by childhood traumas and finally, after mentally amputating the worst bits and clinging to chosen family, we die, alone, and many of us, unloved. That's some opera-shit right there."

"It's who we are," I said. "I was 10 when I wrote the Afrikaans word for gay—moffie—on a piece of paper which I stared at for a while, hating it and me and not knowing why. Now, years later,

I know that as queer folk we play corrected copies of ourselves, we develop a new grammar and modulate our voices, and try to blend as a mechanism to soften moments of embarrassment and discrimination. And the hard thing is that we'll spend most of our lives trying to figure out which bits of us are authentic and which bits are part of an emotional exoskeleton."

"I'll walk with you to the Redline stop," Bob said, as I left Broken English. We walked in silence for a block, the busy neighborhood somewhat overwhelming as most of the bars and restaurants were filled to capacity with students and rowdy Northsiders making the most of the good weather. Chicago really celebrated whatever heat and sun it gets.

"You know, I think it boils down to the possibility that we'll never make it until we learn to say "pussy," Bob said. "We are so scared of offending we play such advanced semantic hide-and-seek that we end up essentially impotent. Just look at how the left has never been able to say "pussy," and that is one of the most damning things to attach to Trump. I mean, if that was Biden or Hillary…"

"You'd never hear the end of it," I said. It was funny because it was true. Bob was referring to the Access Hollywood video that surfaced in the lead up to the 2016 Election, when Donald Trump in conversation with Billy Bush, the Access Hollywood anchor at the time, said, "when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything." Bush says, "Whatever you want," to which Trump famously replied, "Grab them by the pussy. You can do anything."

"Now, just to follow up from our conversation earlier," Bob replied, "if we *are* to engage in memetic warfare, and at the time of that video we were buried under anti-Hillary stuff and Pizza-gate, let alone the collective Republican meltdown over Hillary's use of the word "deplorable," the best the left could do was bleep out the word pussy while tut-tutting and rolling their eyes."

"True," I said, "and is it any wonder that, given the language and blatant misogyny, not to mention the very definition of toxic masculinity so evident from that Access Hollywood language

and how the left keeps merely fanning themselves in the face of nuclear-level heat, it any wonder that Roe vs. Wade was struck down? And that the best we can do is vent on TikTok."

We walked silently for a block. Sometimes one just needs to be quiet—us against the world. I wondered if we—all the bits that make us *us*—will be ok, or if this was just how things will be from now on.

Saved from my rabbit hole was a familiar ping.

Masc4Masc: Sup?

… … …

Me: Hey…Not much. Bored.

Masc4Masc: Looking?

… … …

"*Somebody* is getting noticed," Bob said. "This is me. Have fun."

I looked at the message again. Oh well. YOLO.

Me: Sure.

A Two-Cocktail Listening List

- *Cha Cha Bitch*, AB Soto, 2015.

- *Also Sprach Zarathustra,* Richard Strauss. Solti, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, 1976.

- *Ábranse perras*, Gloria Trevi, 2019.

- *México*, Mexican Sound System, 2012.

- *Madam Butterfly (Un bel di*) Malcolm McClaren, 1984.

- *Un bel di vedremo,* Giacomo Puccini, *Madama Butterfly*. Mirella Freni, von Karajan, Wiener Philharmoniker, 1974.

- *Por una cabeza*, Carlos Gardel, arr, Lenehan. Nicola Benedetti, 2012.