

Steven Monte

Romeo and Juliet at the Met

The stage is all their world. And they are merely singers
in this condensed romantic version of a play
already operatic: they're the kind that lingers
debating larks and nightingales till break of day

and that dies, after making speeches, in a tomb.
Music won't save them, but the opera lets us see
the couple die together, with breath enough and room
to sing a duet that defies reality.

The stage is all awlirl, at least in this production
where zodiac signs and the heavens they inscribe
offer their warnings or ambiguous instruction
as they revolve around the scenes they circumscribe.

Jealous, indifferent, Fate looks on. Or the reverse:
Love reveals harmonies within this universe.

*
* *

Whether it is the lovers' music or the spheres',
the instrumental passage opening Act 2,
plaintive and delicate, fades out, then reappears

following the balcony scene and its adieux
as if ascending through the moonlight to the sky.
How many balconies have we looked from or to,

having had our heart's strings plucked and said goodbye
with words like theirs — *jusqu'à demain!* — said every day,
and still, in spite (because?) of that, let out a sigh?

Like youthful love, the orchestra seems far away
even as gently rising phrases bridge the span
of stage and hall to where we sit and hear it play.

At the end, I can almost feel a camera pan
past our balcony. To heaven. *Jusqu'à demain.*

*
* *

That act is hard to follow, and yet it isn't hard,
astonishingly, to believe their love is real —
at first sight, even. For beyond the sure appeal
or excuse of youth (hearts that haven't yet been scarred),
beyond the music, we, at least, can't disregard
that they will die soon: it's a fate they can't un-seal.
— and beyond that, they represent what we can't feel,
something that we long for and from which we seem barred.

And so, in Act 4, when their bed becomes unmoored
from time and space, and all the stars become untracked
(as though heaven disavowed the deaths it's pointing toward),
we feel their love more in their freedom not to act,
and whether a real world is embraced or ignored
we will only think to ask during the entr'acte.

*
* *

Some questions simmer nonetheless. A change of scene.
Crowds mill and mull. "What did that floating mattress mean?"

"Did you like Juliet?" "The music's gorgeous, no?"
"But will this opera ever find its Romeo?"

Good question. We seek out each other through the crowd.
"Better than *Traviata* . . ." (pause) ". . . Is that allowed?"

We meet, exchanging glances. Another point of view:
"Oh, I don't know, I found it sugary. And you?"

I was moved, even knowing it was a cliché
(is *that* what love is?) and they would face no next day.

Why must we measure love by bliss or if it lasts?
Consider all the shadows their tomorrow casts.

They would love intensely and never be time's fool.
It's just that time is short, their dream too beautiful.

*
* *

You and I, uncoupled now, slowly drift apart
as we descend, fatigued, relieved, and smiling,
opposite stairways curving vaguely like a heart,
then reunite, drawn back together by some string.

In just a matinée we have lived out their life.
"Bliss isn't meant to last, nor joy. Not even sorrow."
(So they tell us.) Yet a thread cut by Juliet's knife
dangles: what if they (we) had made it to tomorrow?

Wozzeck is waiting for the evening in the wings.
The set, mostly menacing walls, more than implies
a world where something other than love pulls the strings —
a world where the couple come to see a red moon rise

standing at odd angles with their backs to each other
like members of a rock band on an album cover.

❧

Winter has thrown off its coat (After Charles d'Orléans)

Winter has thrown off its coat
of wind and cold the whole day through,
and wears loose lace from foot to throat —
sunlight, glistening in dew.

There is no bird or creature who
will not proclaim or sing this note:
“Winter has thrown off its coat.”

The springs and brooks, and rivers too,
wear silken clothes, in waves that float
with threads of silver-gold on blue.
The whole world's dressed in something new:
Winter has thrown off its coat.

