

Aria

by Brenda Cowe

Vivit anima contenta casti amoris sola spe...

The soul lives tranquilly seeking only chaste love...

Sed occulto tactus ore homo demens in amore...

But secret touches to a man mad with love...

Fugiamus fugiamus ridentum...

Let us flee, flee this confusion...

Alleluia.

- from "Nulla In Mundo Pax Sincera"

by Antonio Vivaldi

I wait in my car, wait for the rain to end. It pours gently over the roof, down the windshield in rivulets and waves and slithers off the hood. There is a thunderstorm on this wedding day. I listen to a favorite CD and sing, *vivit anima contenta casti amoris sola spe*, up to the highest A easily, alone in the car as I wait for this rain and day to subside. A lethal bolt of lightning flashes down to the water in front of me. I think of what it must be like to die, and shudder at the loss of my body, the ceasing of my heart. Oh what if we are all wrong, nothing but energy that dissipates and forgets itself. This thought is what makes my heart pump, adrenaline causing my skin to flush. Then remember I am safe, sitting in my car at the edge of the Niagara River, waiting like a shuddering sparrow, fearful of being washed away.

Moisture begins to form in a thin layer on my forehead. I have chosen a sleeveless black dress, fluttering around my ankles in two layers of crepe, for his wedding. I do not attend the ceremony, instead spend those hours before this reception shaving my legs three times over, plucking eyebrows, applying silver nail polish. I adjust and rearrange my gray silk scarf, beaded and sequined tentatively at the edges, over my shoulders and bare arms, secure it finally with a tiny rhinestone pin below my breastbone.

Today must be perfect, because it is not. I sit waiting in the seclusion and humidity of my fogged up car, singing to myself,

blando colore oculos mundus deceptit, in my most fluttering baroque voice. The translation of the aria surfaces in my consciousness like a bubble, *beguiling colors deceive the eyes of the world*, reminding me of our first meeting, that first rehearsal. It will only be minutes before I can slip out of this shelter, but time has suspended itself like a web over the sky. I look up and see a break in the clouds moving north from the furthest tip of Lake Erie. Rain turns to drizzle, other guests arrive together in twos threes fours. I approach the ramp alone, where we will all board The Niagara Clipper that waits to take us on this cruise. Inside, votive candles light each crisp, white clothed table. Silver and pink balloons rise like clouds from each centerpiece. Musicians follow close behind me, toting black double bass case on one's back, a violin in another's hands, part of the string quartet.

Despite my attempt to accept, I cannot. Our conversation of two evenings prior, remains embedded in my brain like a shunt, releasing secretions of his words. *I don't know why this has happened, I thought once that maybe you were sent to me as a gift from God, I don't know.* I remember the groom's pale face and thin arms that surrounded me that night. How I had gasped for air, begged to be let go from his grip, his love, his need. I whisper to myself a curse about the rotten god who is surely laughing now. One musician darts me a quizzical look, then turns lightning quick away. *This isn't how I'd planned things, you must believe.* And I did.

I catch a sliver of their polite smiles as I push through the fancy crowd separating us. Her wedding dress is pale pink, it flows off her like the rain, in layer after layer of princess-seamed airiness, but still it cannot completely conceal. Her belly is a mound, a hill of burgeoning life; she carries fate inside her flesh. I wish to see the thing that has separated us, to glimpse the life that has taken away the old one, to witness its birth, writhing and crying it will be brought into this world. There is no going back, this I knew well before his wedding day, but now must face the irrevocable truth. I cringe at the pain; it is like a toothache pulsing in my head. The riverbank falls away, moving faster as the small craft releases its

anchor and begins to increase velocity. I do not look back at them until dinner, and then place myself facing string instruments instead of their discreet head table.

Thank you for coming, he squeezes my hand, for too long. I whisper to myself *sed occulto tactus ore homo demens in amore*, finishing the words in English, *often taste like honey*. He is muscular, his flesh warm, the sun is setting into the rushing river, transforming the gray water to melon. I smell seaweed, cigarettes, piney cologne, and long to be gone from here. Must love despite love, I tell myself, and stay through dinner. I have no choice; I am trapped floating, among these couples, wondering why I came. Was I a gift from God, were we all, or not? Perhaps just meaningless eruptions of energy, drawn together in spasms to create new life and then die.

After dinner there is joyful swing, clinking of champagne glasses, laughter. The Clipper rocks dancers off-balance. There is pink cake to be sliced and eaten, a bouquet to be tossed. Bride sweetly asks me to step up with the other girls, to clamor for the tiny daisies encircled by ribbons. They fly through the air as I clasp my hands tightly in front of me. I watch the blossoms careening, as if in slow motion, over wooden dance floor, sailing to me. They drop to the floor in front of my feet. I am anxious, waiting for the garter, the photos, think of myself preserved within their lacy white album for all eternity, or not.

Outside on the deck I watch waves splash in the darkness, their silver crests glittering. I will wait out this painfully languorous trip, near the water, which is my friend. I hang over the cold rail of the stern shivering, my hair billowing, as the moon casts a yellow harvest glow across the wake behind me. I waltz forward to the bow, the place where the river rises up to meet us, and still it does not. I stare and sing the line that has become my mantra, *fugiamus fugiamus ridentem*. I sing the final *alleluia* as waves splash and spray me, cascading away every time.

