

Amy Gerstler

For E.

Pardon me for pretending I might wish
you back into existence so we could chat.
Better yet, I'd remain silent and bask
in the sound of your voice—music I'm
ashamed I can no longer quite call
to mind. I do remember your habit
of chattering your teeth in a cartoonish
manner when you got nervous or
bored. And I'm easily re-seized by how
keenly I once yearned to be your home
away from home, your quiet, tree-lined
street between the park and that old stone
church. But you slipped out of the party
too soon, just as you always threatened
you'd do. Remember being breathless
together on the observation deck of the
Empire State Building? We took the last
elevator up to the 86th floor, at 1:15 a.m.,
inhaled what drugs you had, and damn!
they were good. How dizzily I miss you
this minute in which I find myself so much
older, darling, than you ever lived to be.

An Aging Opera Singer Speaks at Her First AA Meeting

Once I got sober god quit speaking to me.
I miss her strenuously. She was an alto.
Her speech was aria. I'm a soprano. Renee
Fleming says sopranos are happy in operas
for the first five minutes and then it all falls
apart. For better or worse I have tumbled
into love numerous times due to a caramelly
melt or satisfying rasp in someone's voice.
In religion I am equally vulnerable. Sei
Shonagon says priests must be handsome
or no one will like to be pious. Good looks
have affected me less than lovely song
or talk. I like to ride vocal breakers, waves
that flow invisibly yet powerfully out of
the mouth and can carry you for what I'd
assumed would be forever. Are your sins merely
fears? my god would whisper, adding, Why this
craving for forgiveness? Of course, I had no reply.
Why is sobriety so harrowing? So lonely?
Why can't it become some kind of high note,
a fabulous flowering? What wouldn't I trade
to be able to bathe in forgiveness, to wade
in and splash around like I did one summer
in a lake upstate, unafraid of how I looked
in a bathing suit because I was young and
humming to myself like a bird and drunk
on my own voice, its possibilities, range
and sweetness, or the mirage of my future
or who I thought might next wish to kiss me.
Back then I'd stride into a bar and rows
of backlit bottles would throw their gem-like
glow my way, gamely standing in for sacred

flames or a tossed bouquet. Patrons sat
on padded stools, or eased into booths
which swallowed them slowly, like pythons.
People stirred their drinks with fingers or
swizzle sticks or toothpicks on which olives were
uncomplainingly impaled. Conversations grew
legible in cryptic bits. On the muted TV bolted
to the wall in one corner, football players traded
concussions. Paintings of generations of bulldogs,
successive pets of a long-gone proprietor, adorned
one wall. After several cocktails, letters might
appear on a curtain like chalk on a blackboard,
a definitive voice in cursive, instructive, insistent,
as that curtain fluttered, wing like, on its brass rings.
Now even that voice has gone silent. Don't stop me
if you've heard this one before, just listen harder.
A washed-up warbler walked into a bar yesterday,
she being me, just hoping to sit in the dark and let
fragments of chatter, human talk-song loosened
by booze, wash over her. She saw mouths moving
but could hear no sound. I consider this a brutal
kind of exile. Everything veers away from me now.
Where is the victory here? This is what I want to
know: what are you all going to do to forgive me,
to revive that voice in my ear (it seemed sometimes
to emanate from my left temple) and save me?

Storing Up

It will not hold, this whipstitch of peace,
this clock-tick of calm, this brief release
when no one's sick in this house,
and there's a mood of safekeeping,
when no one's pounding the wall or weeping.

Vivid and fleeting the moments flow
(a trite thought from several hours ago...)
Someone yawns. Someone else hacks and rasps.
But it's nothing. All's well,
though this will not last:

that for now all the floors are swept,
and the animals fed and the sabbath kept,
and the meal eaten, leftovers tucked away,
and the world's chaos held at bay,
and those made sleepy by eating put warmly to bed

their heads facing east.... no, it will not last,
this moment of peace. Yet if the earth keeps
twirling, as I trust that she may,
could this blip of grace live in me
if I don't scare it away?



Amy Gerstler is a writer living in Los Angeles. Her books of poems include *Scattered at Sea*, (Penguin, 2015), and *Dearest Creature* (Penguin, 2009).