Opera has the power to warn you that you have wasted your life. You haven’t acted on your desires. You’ve suffered a stunted, vicarious existence. You’ve silenced your passions. . . . [Y]ou have used only a fraction of your bodily endowment, and your throat is closed.

Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen’s Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire*

From the time I was twelve, my father, a German professor at a small college, took a group of students to Germany every three years for the spring semester, and my mother and I stayed behind in Ohio. My mother was too big, too inwardly alive and desirous, for our small town, and I was filled with the itchiness of puberty. Two restless females, we entertained ourselves together as best we could. Sometimes we drove out into the country just to get away from home. We’d leave our little town to coast through the landscape of cornstalks and flat brown fields. We talked about life. Sometimes we drove past a collapsing gray barn that said “Ma ouch obacc” in faded letters. On a bright day you could make out the missing “i” and “P” from “Mail Pouch Tobacco.” A boy I was in love with lived on the same road as the Ma ouch barn. His father was an air-traffic controller and his mother was an Asian war bride, and Phil was a pimply beautiful boy with a sad face, who trapped animals on the weekend and shot them. When I gazed at him in the school hallway, I felt he was meant for some other destiny, and I wanted to rescue him from his life of dreariness.
and violence. The problem was that he ignored me completely, was only dimly aware of my existence, my great longing.

On Saturday afternoons, my mother and I always listened to the live Metropolitan opera broadcast on the radio. We’d turn it on in the car and continue listening when we got home. We hated to miss any parts of the program, and were particularly fond of the quizzes and synopses between acts. “I remember the opera in Vienna when Papa and I were students,” my mother told me more than once. “He wouldn’t spend a shilling on seats, and we had to stand the whole time. Afterward I wanted to buy marroni—roast chestnuts—from one of the old men selling them in the winter streets, but he always said we couldn’t afford them.” My mother was ashamed of having given in to my father, and couldn’t stop resenting him for making her feel like a beggar. In my mind, I saw him with a long, unhappy face, unable to splurge even a little after watching Mimi die of tuberculosis for two hours. “Let’s try to guess the answers to the quiz,” I said, to cheer her up; and I was amazed at how many of them she got right.

Most of all, I remember the applause at the end of the final act, the continuous shouts of “Bravo!” or “Brava!” with a long, triumphant, trailing emphasis on the second syllable—and the announcer saying, “Now Dame Sutherland has picked up a bouquet of roses. Smiling, she holds her arms out to the adoring audience.” The diva blew kisses, and the applause went on and on like a great dark sea. My mother and I quivered and turned up the radio just for the applause; we were still weeping for the noble, self-sacrificing, gorgeous lady who had just died—who had gone down singing, her very sobs sublime music—and now we wept for the singer, and for the joy of the audience. Singer and audience merged together, their satiety filling our house those gray Ohio Saturdays.

Thirty years later, my mother and I finally attended the Metropolitan Opera in New York City. We were such different people by then! No longer girl and frustrated grown woman, now two women, one elderly, the other verging on middle age. Both of us had brushed against death; we’d been laid open and operated on within six months of one another, each visiting the other’s bedside. We’d traveled to Italy in December of 2001, when no other Americans were traveling, and reveled in the artistic and culinary offerings of Florence. Now we were going to realize a long-held dream. Because my mother’s plane was late—she was coming from Ohio, I from Illinois—we missed the first act of The Marriage of Figaro. We watched what was left of it on the little television downstairs, drank champagne and toasted one another. When we got into the
hall at last, we squeezed hands in *frissons* of delight. Cherubino singing of his multiple loves—poor polymorphic, adolescent Cherubino, who cannot go near a woman without trembling all over—made us laugh and cry at once. The duchess singing “Dove Sono”: oh, we’d been there! The opera’s triumphant finale, with its reconciliation of all opposing parties, filled us with joy—yes, it can be that simple, joy! Afterward, we walked up Broadway in a light, warm rain, sharing an umbrella, looking up at the lights, gazing at the people who passed us, planning our next days in the city.

Two nights later, we went to see the bizarre French opera *La Juive*, cited in Proust whenever Marcel encounters his friend Saint-Loup’s mistress, the Jewish prostitute Rachel. Produced by a Viennese company, the piece was staged awkwardly, tendentiously, and rather stupidly. The bizarrerie of that opera and that production deserves its own chapter, which perhaps someone has written elsewhere. My mother and I were a little tired, and I was annoyed by her strong breath and her continual uncomfortable shifting in her seat; it is quite possible she was annoyed by me, as well. I am well past supposing children aren’t as irritating to parents as parents can be to children, and adult love is often an exercise in toleration. In short, it was an unromantic night at the opera. Instead of a sublime eighteenth-century fol-de-rol, we had nineteenth-century Jewish self-hatred in all its knotty mess, and we felt messy ourselves. The audience around us, at least a third Jewish I’m sure, was confounded. As far as we could tell, Vienna’s black-and-white notions about staging the Gentile-Jewish conflict were not appealing to anyone. The music was pretty, but lacked depth. Only one aria bowled us over, the famous “Rachel, quand du seigneur,” in which the father figure, a Barrabas, sings of his mixed feelings toward his daughter: should she die as a Jewish martyr, or should he reveal her true identity as his adopted Gentile daughter and thereby save her from the burning cauldron? Diva-like, Neil Shicoff had let it be known at the start of the performance that he had a slight cold and would not be singing up to par—and succeeded in making the entire audience feel, “If this is singing below par . . .!” We fulfilled our ultimate fantasy then: shouting “Bravo!” with full throats, weeping with excitement, surrounded by a sea of ecstatic listeners. Not cut off, not insulated in a car in the cornfields, or lonely in a Midwestern house; not far, far away from the world, but *in* the world, at last. Again, we walked home in the rain, talking this time about all the thorny questions the opera had raised—and again, planning the full days and nights in the week that remained to us.

It seems to me that if opera is about anything, it is about longing—longing for the place where life truly happens (“Moscow!”), for the exotic lover, the husband who will bring us the golden fleece, or at least pour *marroni* in
our laps; or for possession of a singular talent. My mother and I are divas disguised as professors at provincial colleges. When we stand—in her case, stood—before the classroom, sometimes an eloquence pours from our mouths that disconcerts the students. They sit in silence, and I can see on their faces, Where did this come from?

Unappeasable longing. And now, these brown fields of Illinois.