

Randall Couch

Apostrophe to Violetta

*Tra voi saprò dividere
Il tempo mio giocondo
—Piave (La Traviata, act I)*

I couldn't help it, feeling like you—
leaving my city friends
for a life I'd stopped hoping for.
Yet there he was, sweet and strange
as a country apple, sound.
After the film at the Varsity
under Zeffirelli's marquee
the lights of Paris dazzled me
and I forgot the Kindly Ones.

I camped a swoon, backhand to brow:
*Would you love me better
if I were consumptive,
a courtesan on a chaise?*

Even now I want to take it back.
God, I knew better. My mother's
pebbled breast—but that's the thing:
I'd always thought it would be cancer.

His answer *No* was perfect.
I've never found disease
 erotic. I loved him for it.
I heard: *Be easy, you are enough*.
And in the lights I hummed
 Libiamo—ah,
I could still sing then.

Don't think the diagnostic irony
 after seven years,
 another city,
was lost on me.

So here it is: *Mycobacterium avium*
 acts on the lungs
like *Mycobacterium TB*—
 except for one or two things,
 except it's rare, except
there are no good drugs.
Medical science has no answer,
 said a dog-eyed doctor
 to the question
 Why me?

Let's get this out of the way.
We had hope, the disease was slow,
 research was enterprising.
But he never reminded me of that swoon
 and I never replayed my line
 or his reply.

Do you know how sweet
his quiet breathing sounds at night?

I write like hell.
I bake. I burrow
 into this life until
 I can't be dislodged.
I don't live sick.
I tell myself it's therapeutic.
It is erotic.

Now that he's learned to give
 injections, he plays
 darts on my ass.
Good for my spirits, but what
 if he starts to enjoy it?
Let's take a weekend away
 down in New Castle, I say.
There'll be time,
 he offers, *in the fall.*

I punch the pillows when *he's not home.*

When I was a child we played a game.
 What would you do
 with six months to live?

I'll cash the retirement funds
 for Paris and emeralds,
 frame my pale skin in opera gowns.

But already I can't sit silent through a single act
and there's no glamour in shame.

Violetta,
were you wise after all
to give your fortune
for a simple season
in a small house?

O come son mutata!

I watch that open face,
what it learns to look at
without hardening.
I have this tube now under my arm,
a fistula to drain the lung.
He opens my blouse
and lifts the gauze pad,
probes the fouled tube
with a clean swab.
All he seems to want is more
of what we have,
the dwindling daily me.

Sometimes I have to turn my eyes
from such tenderness.

—*Open Competition Prize Winner*