

1996

Opera

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Recommended Citation

Buckley, Christopher. "Opera." *The Iowa Review* 26.1 (1996): 160-161. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.4555>

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Christopher Buckley

OPERA

Up-graded from economy class, I'm flying down the freeway feeling rich as God, behind the wheel of a silver, full-size sedan—quad stereo, cruise control, glowing gold digital clock. For a minute I recall an article on the Sultan of Brunei checking out from a hotel and leaving enough money in tips to fund disease research for a year. But I'm more than content floating through a corridor of pines, popping in my tape of Carreras, Domingo, and Pavarotti. A chorus of blue above me, a few arpeggios of clouds to the right, not unlike the sky over the Baths of Caracalla where they're singing—three ancient stories of brick still standing on the edge of Rome. We came across it one summer as workers were erecting the stage and high dusty towers for *Aida*—40 then, and just beginning to listen. . . .

70 mph and I'm transported by the wind-swell of the orchestra, lifted by the violins, brought back to earth by violoncellos, the heart still climbing that white ladder of hope with "Rondine al Nido," and Pavarotti's power surge spiking current along my arms. I let the tape rewind—this is serious, I keep hearing: we are all going to die, hopelessly though, and at last in love with the world. By now, most of my aspirations let go, blown by me like litter along the road, I'm just happy to be breathing, to be soaring in such company, to have a heart thumping its own sprung music.

No one is going to sleep until Pavarotti has an answer to the riddle and claims the starry heart of Turandot—now all three encore "Nessun Dorma," and in the bridge all the angels sing, sodality in the last note of lost air. I too want to fly, to know the ineluctible extravagance of the spirit about to slip out of the tux, beyond the fingertips

into the night sky. But I have to rent a car to hear these tapes punched up to the proper brick-shaking valence. I have to leave town, get away from young friends at parties where the angels all wear red shoes, where I'm told Dwight Yoakam is "Bakersfield Opera," where CDs are stacked up like potato chips—either trash bands like Pilonidal Cyst, Meat Puppets, and Mud Honey, or time fractures from the 70s, Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, and the Chambers Brothers. Nothing close to carrying off the sky like Verdi or Puccini—in heaven, they have to be cooking Italian!

I find friends my age are all listening to opera—Pavarotti's Richter Scale and range proving there's another level, and though the register, like the body, is giving way to gravity, there is something there just above us to reach for.

The astral body

must be like this, all sentience and incorporeal as light. I want some singing about that—all the red and blue bright threads spun out from our hearts, spooled above the background gilt-edged clouds, above the scraps of flesh and diminuendos of ordinary time. I want this feeling of atoms falling out of the crystal orbits of the earth, yet reclaimed by arias, by cavatinas. Carreras recovering from cancer, Domingo's good looks going south, Pavarotti barely able to move—yet each of them lifting past the burning limits of the dark. And conducting everything, Zubin Mehta—surely that has to be an angel's name? But this is serious, we are all going to die.