

Rachel Hadas
TWO SCENES

Haughty and priggish simultaneously,
Ottavio, Donna Anna's fiancé,
orders "Remove that *oggetto di orrore*"
(the bloody corpse of the Commendatore),
whereupon the servants promptly carry
the body offstage. They never marry,
Ottavio and Anna, that we know.
Her heart is with her father down below
or with Giovanni roasting in the fire
of guilt, deceit, insatiable desire.

"Sing sisters, sing, and tell me what has been,
will be, and is," the three grey Norns intone,
mournful beings who, though they know well
the saga, still are subject to the spell
of time and change. Their thread's about to break.
For no one's mortal or immortal sake
does cosmic slippage stop once it's begun.

I sat, then, spellbound, drinking all this in,
childlike in that it was new to me
but also old enough to start to see
the application to our several lives
of runic rules which govern husbands, wives,
sisters, fathers, uncles, cousins, mothers,
dragons, gods, goddesses, dwarves, and brothers.

Widowed, where am I in the story now?
And you, my lost companion, where are you?

Again the houselights dim. Great forms appear.
You're sitting in the darkness; you're not far.
It took your death to blow the mists away.
Your life-thread has been cut, and yet you stay—
invisible, but barely out of reach.
I'm still learning what you have to teach.

Rachel Hadas
SHIRLEY'S LANDSCAPE

Red barn, dirt road, steeple in the distance—
easy to recognize.

The tall blue lollipops I think are trees.

Pale sky, skin cloud cover, no sun,
or else the painter simply didn't know
how to drape these northern hills with light

or capture the distant shimmer of the pond
(notional shimmer only—
no coruscation here).

Without these lollipops
(they could be flowers in a giant's garden)
the painting would be a primitive

making confident use of primary colors.
But the looming shapes endow it
with a monumentality both somber and surreal

and skew the human scale,
though come to think of it
there are no human figures in the scene

rendered by the painter looking out
over a landscape in Caledonia County.
From behind her easel on the porch

she could survey it all:
road, barn, steeple, pond, hill,
the quiet cloak of sunless afternoon.

Rachel Hadas
READING IN THE GARDEN

In the garden of the Hotel Ganesh Himal,
epic shrinks to lyric with a plot.

I pause at a passage I don't remember
having read before, although I must have.

Set in Hell and drawing on Greek myth,
the vignette's fiercely human.

The fallen angels shuttle back and forth
incessantly. What is it they are seeking?

*They ferry over this Lethaeon Sound
Both to and fro, their sorrow to augment,*

*And wish and struggle, as they pass, to reach
The tempting stream, with one small drop to lose*

*In sweet forgetfulness all pain and woe,
All in one moment, and so near the brink.*

That last word rhymes with the verb the thirsty
fallen angels can't achieve. Oblivion,

in Hell's eternity so tantalizing,
terrifies us while we walk the earth.

Accordingly I write the passage down
and read it back into the afternoon

against the quiet bubbling of a fountain
while this walled garden keeps the city out.