

COLIN BROWNE / *The Oval*

For Tom Cone

The location for “The Oval” is a sanatorium that once stood across the street from St. Francis Elementary School in Halifax. It was built to house ww1 vets who contracted tuberculosis and was still in operation when I was in grade three. The big, open yard contained an oval like a track-and-field oval. Instead of hundred yard dashes, as they were called at the time, the patients walked, stumbled or staggered around in the dust, or the mud, or the wet snow like men on their way to their doom. Later on, when I first saw Marat/Sade, it brought back the hours I spent fixated, watching these men through the fence while I should have been on my way home from school. I have used the words “contagious hospital” to describe the sanatorium because they’re from William Carlos Williams’ Spring and All, and Tom Cone loved Williams, as you may know.

In the opera, which takes place in the present, a Canadian soldier, Peter, arrives one night at the fence that encloses the oval. (In the story the sanatorium is still standing.) He may not know exactly why he has come to this place, but he has been drawn here, as if a spell has been cast on him. Something happened here. As he stands under the streetlight, a man appears, a Padre by the looks of it, although the place has been abandoned for years and the Padre seems distinctly ghostly/otherworldly. They speak, and the Padre tells Peter he’d better go home. But Peter insists, and the padre relents. Out of the night a woman’s voice is heard, Peter’s long dead mother Miriam.

Music: Eileen V. Padgett

The original performers, on the evening of September 22nd, 2012, were: Megan Morrison, mezzo; Matthew Stephanson, tenor; Alex McMorran, baritone; Peggy Lee, cello; Elinor Harshenin, cello.

Three characters: PETER, A MAJOR
MIRIAM, HIS MOTHER (a ghost)
A PADRE (a ghost)

The location: A FORMER SANATORIUM IN HALIFAX

A man, Peter, illuminated by a streetlight, peers through a tall wrought-iron institutional fence. Its paint is peeling. Like all fences, we're not sure if it's meant to keep insiders in, or outsiders out.

PETER. Hello?

PADRE. My son?

PETER. Do you live here?

PADRE. You could say that.

PETER. I'm looking for the old contagious hospital.

PADRE. What do I call you?

PETER. A brother in arms.

PETER. Now I remember,
it's snowing
I'm four years old, going on sixty,
we stood here on the corner.
I clung to the belt
of my mother's coat.
Men circled an oval,
spitting, coughing
gulping like fish. . . .

MIRIAM. Ah, I see them still. . . .

Peter does not notice the character of Miriam, even when she speaks to his face.

MIRIAM. I should not have brought you.

PADRE. There wasn't a man here
who didn't wish
he'd taken one in the head.
You've been in the sun. . . ?

PETER. My tour of duty's done.

PETER. I'm looking for someone.
Richard Monk.

PADRE. A word of advice:
go home.

PETER. I've forfeited my home.

PETER. Do you remember a woman?

PADRE. Time's up.

MIRIAM. I headed west,
changed my name, and got lost
like everyone else.

PETER. She walked away from me.

PADRE. The heart does break, you know.

PETER. When dawn breaks
I report for my court martial.
What did she want?

PADRE. Monk was our gardener . . .

PETER. Her grandfather . . .

PADRE. A place like this
needs a gardener.

PETER. She brought something to him.

What did she want?

MIRIAM. I called you my sparrow . . .

PADRE. The truth is best hidden in plain sight.
Years ago, a patriotic industrialist
proposed a tomb
for an unknown soldier. . . .

MIRIAM. Wait right here, I said.

PADRE. It was easy work,
finding a boy's bones;
gently were they raised
and gently wrapped
and gently sent to sea,
but parliament wanted to bury the war
not the boy . . .
our gardener had a late night visitor . . .

PETER. What has this to do with me?

PADRE. God's mercy and man's mercy
are cut from the same cloth.

MIRIAM. Love just has it in for some.

PETER. I know what was in her bundle.
I'll go to the police.

PADRE. Tell them you were talking to a ghost!

PETER. You've taken the law into
your own hands.

PADRE. Your law caters to the elect.
We untouchables must
devise our own assizes—
a law that walks on all fours.

MIRIAM. My sparrow. . . .

PADRE. Can you forgive her?

PETER. One must want to forgive.

MIRIAM. I did not stop loving you.

PADRE. Let me show you something.
Put your foot in the stirrup.

PETER. No.

PADRE. Up you go.

PETER. I'm falling.

PADRE. Hold steady.

PETER. No.

PADRE. Hold steady.

PETER. Holding steady.

PADRE. Don't look down.

PETER. I'm falling.

They rise into the air.

PETER. Oh my god,
I'm falling.

MIRIAM. I'll hold you up.

PADRE. Don't look down.

PETER. Oh! Oh my god!

PADRE. Now look down.

PETER. Looking down.

PADRE. What do you see?

PETER. My god,
we must be up a mile.

PADRE. What do you see?

MIRIAM. Bones and tears . . .

He turns to Miriam in surprise. After a moment, he takes her hand in his, and looks at her lovingly.

PETER. Bones and tears . . .

PADRE. What did you think the earth was made of?

PETER. . . . as far as the eye can see . . .

PADRE. From the furrow of the night
to the fallow of the day—

MIRIAM. From the swallow to the sparrow
from the feather to the arrow—

PETER. From son to mother
from mother to boy—

MIRIAM. From joy to sorrow
from sorrow to joy—

PETER. From father to daughter
from mother to son—

MIRIAM. Little sparrow
little one.

PETER, MIRIAM & PADRE. From the furrow to the fallow,
from the swallow to the sparrow,
from the knuckle to the marrow,
from the feather to the arrow,

from the harm to the haven,
from the haven to the heart,
though we're cracked and broken,
bind us eternally
never to part.