

Postmortem Beauty

I find that there are two ultimate sources of beauty: truth and timelessness. Every beauty can be derived from these two roots. The beauty of true love is drawn from the comfort of a truly trustworthy person and the intense passion that can resonate in love stories for millennia. People who find beauty in their work find truth in it, especially with artists: their work is so beautiful because they *create* what they interpret to be truth, and their work is forever.

What is not beautiful — ugly or evil or whatever the antonym of beauty may be — is that which attempts to undermine either a truth or a balanced, lasting system. When relationships end in spite, that is not beautiful. When people sabotage out of anger, that is not beautiful. When cheating and maligning become means to “get ahead,” that is not beautiful. Jealousy corrupts truth and war ravages ageless civilizations.

Sure, the *legacy* of war in the form of Homer’s epics or the lessons learned can be beautiful: they last forever, fill in the gaps of truth left by lies. And often this is the case, truth filling in lies, beauty coming from the lessons of ugliness.

But we often associate beauty with the arts, such as music. Not with the ugly, untruthful.

In the novel *Bel Canto* by Ann Patchett, Roxanne’s singing always leaves the entire room in awe. In their minds the singing is indefinite. Much else is whimsical and pointless: when Beatriz holds up a gun at Ruben, when Ruben is punched in the face, when Ishmael plays chess. But when Roxanne or Cesar sing, or when Mr. Kato plays the piano, the entire group — hostages and terrorists alike — stop to wade in its beauty.

What is the beauty in it, exactly? From whence does it come? To the characters in the book, it appears impossible to explicate: to Cesar Roxanne’s singing elicit romantic thoughts, the idea that “music was a separate thing that you could ... make love to” (225). To Mr. Hosokawa “true life ... was something that was stored in music” (5). The men and Roxanne “listen ... to Kato with hunger and nothing in their lives had ever fed them so well” (127). As if music was a form of living, tangible vitality. While it is physical undulations of the air in Roxanne’s phalanx cause a sound that is euphonious to the human ear based on the complex mathematics of noise, the human reaction to these are many and dramatic. To name a few:

- ❖ She earns the respect of the terrorists towards both herself and towards the other hostages.
- ❖ She befriends several of the “terrorist” children, as do Gen and some of the other adults.
- ❖ Her singing preserves the sanity of everyone present.

The idea of balance is key to these ideas — it is the preservation of peace that fulfills the second requirement of beauty. Art is clearly centered around this idea of balance. Painting is concerned about a harmony of colors and textures; the performing arts about the display of grace and strength. Music is the careful play between melody and harmony and rhythm and dynamics, never one dominating the others. To combine so many elements into one moment so cozily — to have the crazy human invention of fusing noise and time together into what we call music *endure* all its components — shows the beauty of music to *endure*. It is timeless. Every moment lasts a lifetime with its plethora of musical elements.

Music is also beautiful in its ability to discover truth. The fact that the hostages still have the luxury of listening to opera gives a sense of the childishness in the situation. This portion of the beauty comes from the fact that it exposes the absurdity of the circumstances. The singing makes the men and terrorists into people of a higher society in an extended party, playing chess and teaching each other and proposing to each other and developing romantic relations with each other and being served by the vice

president and receiving free food and demanding the government for changes. There is no real danger to the hostages— there never was. The music of Roxanne's voice discovers that truth because it *creates* it— it creates the humane community, limited only by the facade of violence.

But of course beauty can be found in less obvious parts of life. Outside of music.

The truth is that Gen loves Carmen. Gen thinks constantly about that china cupboard, that “he did not need to ask her again” (209) when he teaches her, that she will fall asleep with him during the 2:00AM lessons, even despite the hostage situation. The truth is that Mr. Hosokawa loved Roxanne. Is it not heartwarming, is it not beautiful, that Gen could teach his shy captor Carmen; that he could make love with her, make up all of their differences and even desire to make her his wife? Or when Mr. Hosokawa meets the opera idol of his lifetime, only to find out that his respect for her is matched by her love for him?

These are all simple truths that settle comfortably in one's heart. It feels so *happy*. These couples exist together, making secret peace between the dispirited terrorists and their imprisoned captives. As with Roxanne's singing, these relationships are beautiful in their ability to relate to the couples that they were truly happy.

That despite the entire world, hushed outside and believing that the hostages are hurt, scared, confused, anxious, deprived, traumatized, they are in love. That is the truth. The world is wrong.

Until—

Mr. Hosokawa is shot. Killed. Balance is gone. His attempt to save Carmen is in vain. A last-ditch attempt to protect the eternal peace that had just ended, the truth of the friendship in the situation. His death was beautiful, romantic — beauty outside of music, snatched from the smirk of Defeat. But his accidental murder was ignorant and savage.

But then the beauty returns again with the wedding between Gen and Roxanne. While it may seem inappropriate for Gen and Roxanne to marry each other in place of their fallen loved ones — Carmen and Gen, respectively — they marry for “the love of each other and the love of all the people they remembered” (318). In other words, they marry to preserve the timelessness of the hostage situation, to keep the truth of the memory alive in wedlock.

The comments, “I'm happy” (316) and “It's a beautiful city” (316), mean nothing. The wedding in and of itself means nothing. They are not beautiful; they are just empty words and a symbolic wedding. But to make up for the “brightness [Roxanne, Gen, and Ruben] lacked” (315) from their tragic past and to make permanent the memories of lost ones is something incredible.

When Jonathan Safran Foer claims that “Nothing is beautiful and true,” he is missing a key source of beauty. While it is true that the physical world is often full of lies and injustice — our lives will never end like a fairy tale, will they? — there is a gaping falsity in his statement. To believe that beauty can only be conjured up by lies is a misconception by those who take the world for granted.

His assertion that “[beautiful songs] aren't true” is also cringeworthy. Beautiful is incredibly true and always true. Always serving as the lens to something greater, always discovering.

And there is so much beauty hidden not only in the obvious, artistic pieces, but also in the aftermath of every mistake, the rainbows after the heavy storms. To realize what these truths mean and how they can apply to one's life — well, that is the Eureka!, the part that cannot be missed. It needn't take Prince Charming and Cinderella to find beauty, but simply a blunder and an open mind.