

Aero

“Aereo.” The nun spoke to me from her pale, wooden chair as she gestured to the winged metal cylinder gliding overhead. Her accent was thick like syrup, and just as rich. It coated my ears. A delicate wind played with the flowers and vines in the golden courtyard. I filled my lungs with the crisp Roman air, somehow easier to breathe than that of suburban Maryland. My grandmother, in her typical elegant fashion, had resolved that the extended family would spend a week in a secluded villa in Luca, and my mother, with her typical adventurous spirit, decided that she, my sister, and I would go a week early to see Rome.

I’m not sure what inspired my mother to settle on the convent instead of a hotel, but here we were in a colorful, orange building filled with kindhearted women who spoke no English. I’d only known Sister Amelia for a few days, but somehow my eight-year-old charm won the affection of the oldest and wisest nun. I ran through the welcoming halls as I pleased, prayed with the nuns in the chapel, and sat in the courtyard with Sister Amelia whenever the opportunity presented itself. Most often, silence engulfed the space between us. Silence—not emptiness.

Sister Amelia and I studied together: the thick, sunken tiles that lay on the dirt, the spiraling vines that climbed the outer walls, and most of all, the sky. I spoke no Italian and she spoke no English, but somehow we saw the same world, full of love, full of sadness, full of potential. It is interesting to think that such a strong connection can be forged without a single word. And yet, the lack of language was never felt. We communicated through other means. Hugs, gestures, symbols, gifts.

My moments with Amelia gave me an understanding which I bring to my art: something deeper than language connects us all; bonds are not built on words themselves but meanings. When I write, I let the moment carry me, ride the feeling I am immersed in to the shore, where it finally can disperse, as the journey is done. When I play piano, I let the universe tell me which notes are right in the moment, drift through the music as I please. And when I’m on stage, with seven blinding suns glaring unavoidably in my face, and the reassuring solidity of spike tape beneath my feet, I let myself feel. The air between me and those around me sings a song of joy and candor, and I breathe it all in, like the air in Rome. Rich with color, connection and clarity, like Sister Amelia’s voice, it completes me.

I wonder if my audience, those wild sets of eyes staring back at me, understands that our connection is not only found in the meaning of my words; rather, they feel my pain, our pain, the pain spoken by every ugly duckling turned swan who came before me, before us. The Greeks recognized this as catharsis, an inspired release of someone’s pain through art.

Catharsis—I feel it in music. A deep stirring that somebody *felt* to create such beauty. The suffering that can be read between the lines of even the brightest, seemingly lighthearted pieces, surpasses the winter’s steady numbness. I sing it in opera, the ache, blaringly apparent to me

even in playful songs like *Sole e Amore* and *E'Luccelino*, framed in the language the devout lady spoke to me all those years ago. I understand now. With a maturing ear, I listen for the hopeful catastrophe I so swear is in every masterpiece, and unfailingly it resounds: a comprehension across cultures and time, an infinite sky full of potential, a connection between the woman I am becoming and the little girl I was, looking up from the walls of a convent as a single airplane flies overhead.