

The Medical Woman

by Kate Pitt

*... trying to stop my hunger with FOOD
is like trying to appease thirst
with ink.*

Ellen West is a chamber opera-theatre work about a young woman's struggle to make peace between her body and her soul. With music by Ricky Ian Gordon and based on what the composer describes as "a poem in the form of a play" by Frank Bidart, *Ellen West* is based on the true story of a woman who suffered from severely disordered eating.

Ellen West was a real person but that name is not her actual one; rather, it is a pseudonym that Swiss psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger assigned to his patient when he published a case study of her condition in 1944. Ellen was born to an immigrant family in 1888 and lived most of her life in Europe. As a young adult, she developed an intense and crippling fear of gaining weight which led to a series of destructive behaviors. She took hundreds of laxatives per week – sometimes up to sixty or seventy packs per day – and suffered severe diarrhea, vomiting, and a miscarriage as a result. By age thirty-two, she weighed only ninety-two pounds.

The opera *Ellen West* vividly imagines the world through the dual perspectives of both Ellen and her doctor. We experience the ways in which their perceptions about her condition diverge and the opera exists, in the poet's words, "in the space between them." For Ellen, experiences that may be pleasant to others seem repulsive and even dangerous to her. A couple sharing food in a restaurant disgusts her because she cannot imagine herself feeding another person or allowing herself to be fed.

A double perspective exists in the chronology of the opera as well. Ellen meticulously describes the changes she observes both in her own body and in the bodies of others, including evaluating opera singer Maria Callas' dramatic weight loss and its effect on her voice. While the historical Ellen died in 1921, Maria Callas did not make her professional debut until 1941. The opera therefore offers multiple frames of both time and perspective through which to view Ellen's life.

Ellen describes her fear of eating as "childish" but acknowledges that she "WILL NOT ... cannot" overcome it. Her doctors diagnosed her with multiple disorders including schizophrenia, melancholia, anorexia, and bulimia but her disease was beyond all medical cure. She was released into the care of her husband and died by suicide at age thirty-three.

Ellen cares for her disease in a way she is unable to care for herself. She nurtures her hunger, preserving and guarding it against those who would seek to sate it. While her body wastes away, her appetite grows and becomes literally all-consuming. Ellen believes that her true self is thin, and that by keeping her belly empty, she may will her self full. She is her own whetstone and wears herself away – body, heart, and soul.

Composer Ricky Ian Gordon on *Ellen West*

What drew you to this story?

I lost a partner in 1996. In the abyss of grief, I found that poetry would help pull me out of where I was and one of the poets I found was Frank Bidart. I was first drawn to a poem of his called "The Yoke" and as I read deeper I found "Ellen West." It was one of the most astonishing things I had ever read. The

way that he entered the inner life of someone who has that kind of relationship with their body and their sexuality blew me away.

Why tell this story through poetry?

Poetry is not a popular art form but it should be. People today fear poetry because they are afraid they won't understand it. We have a culture now where, because everything is so accessible, it is harder for people to accept an art form that requires digging and research. That's how I grew up. I grew up in libraries. I used to go to the Lincoln Center Library and listen to every piece of music they had. When I was little my three sisters would put me to sleep by reading poetry to me. Some people are intimidated by poetry but for me it has always been a balm – a lullaby. Poetry is powerful. Whole civilizations are born and destroyed in a line of poetry.

When I was grieving, poetry helped put me back together. Grief is a violent country to be thrust into and it felt like I couldn't gain any sense of who I was. But when I found a poet who spoke to me, I could organize the chaos of my life. Frank is one of those poets.

How did you turn this story into an opera?

In 2015, I decided it was time. I was dealing myself with some of the issues in the poem and I wrote [Frank Bidart] a long letter telling him what I wanted to do. He wrote back very soon after and said “absolutely.”

This is the first time he has collaborated on a piece like this. The poem begins with the line,

*I love sweets, —
 heaven
would be dying on a bed of vanilla ice cream ...*

which is startling and beautiful. I wanted people to know the history of the text and I had a strong feeling that the opera needed a prologue and an epilogue. Frank's poem “Hymn” became the epilogue and we have a new prologue featuring the baritone as the poet – as Frank.

The score has a kind of strangeness to it. It feels like I wrote this piece early in the morning and between everything else. It has an intensity that shocked me.

What is Ellen hungry for?

I was taught that food is love. I thought food would give me a sense of wholeness and completion, joy and satisfied sexuality. I was always hungry. But it wasn't true. Food was a traitor. It would make me fat, or at least, I thought so, and if I was fat, I was weak, painfully fallible. Thinness, I thought, was armor. Vulnerability is unbearable, dangerous, so I needed armor. The world was dangerous.

There is most probably nothing outside ourselves that will bring us this sense of wholeness. There is a concept in Buddhism of “the hungry ghost,” a creature with a huge stomach and a tiny neck, that can never get enough and will always be unsatisfied. Ellen is like that. She desires what she cannot find and she suffers the disparity between what she is born as and a crippling inner ideal to be more, a soul that wants perfection. She is desperately hungry for the feeling of love, both outside and inside herself, for connectedness. But love must be earned, begged for, and she goes to war with her own body to satisfy this need. She is consumed by shame for what she feels she lacks. She is not enough.