

Vale atque Ave

by James Como (November 2015)

In the beginning of our idyll, away from the Projects and concrete,
right in front of our new home with a lawn near a street still unpaved,
without curb or sidewalk, she planted a willow, and violets beneath.

A small tree, though not compared to me, she
a dark-haired, bright-eyed, slender, smiling Slavic beauty,
all of us still young. The violets blossomed almost overnight,
and I could see she was overcome.

And so
was I, with her, for her.

When it rained I jubilated, dressed in my yellow slicker and rain boots,
the kind you clip across, and when the school bus dropped me off,
she waiting just outside the door, then rushing with an umbrella as I
stomped and splashed in puddles, water water

everywhere, on the ground and in the air, scooping me up, squeezing me to
her

with one big kiss, once inside drying me off and wrapping me in a towel,

'Summertime' playing on the Victrola.

She would sing along.

Now there was comfort, safety, love unconditional, Heaven

for a lifetime, one would suppose. The willow didn't mind the rain,
and as for the violets, they seemed happier even than I.

The whole world a rich, never-ending, joyful text.

The headaches struck with quantum stealth. How ferociously
death turns all to predatory gloom. Lawns, comic books, a tree, a toy,
the rain. A boy. I was seven.

Her head lowered, gripped tight by those kind fingers, my last sight of
her.

The world outside – it kept its color all right,
inside dim, unfocused, a solitary strife, as though a heavy blanket,
too too heavy and thick for the weather and for me,
far bigger than I, had been poured, like cement,
and I lay still beneath, blighted, able only to peek out.

Six decades later I have no interest in willows or their weeping.

Let them weep. That's their job.

But not
violets.

Now their fresh and fetching luminescence opens a path to that other
Heaven, bringing me to her, as her great-grandson plays in puddles.

I love the rain, again, and am thankful for it. I know now,

Yes, enough for a time of life, this one and the next.

James Como is professor emeritus of rhetoric and public communication at York College (CUNY). His latest book is [here](#).

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