

The Mile-Long Opera Libretto & Prose Pieces

Acclaimed poets Anne Carson and Claudia Rankine wrote the text, inspired by real-life stories. These conversations reveal a vast spectrum of feelings and perspectives about life in our rapidly changing city and the misaligned rhythms of its inhabitants.

Sung text by Anne Carson in roman letters
Spoken text by Claudia Rankine in *italics*

1. hello dusk

Hello, dusk. What is dusk? A darkness you can lean against. The moment just before night. The darkest part of twilight, twilight having three parts: civil twilight (the sun 6 degrees below the horizon, stars and planets almost visible); nautical twilight (the sun 12 degrees below the horizon, stars and planets more brilliant); astronomical twilight (the sun 18 degrees below the horizon, astronomers focus your telescopes!). In twilight we use scotopic vision, relying on the rods of the retina, the oldest part of the eye, from back when we were animals or parts of night ourselves. You can also say sunset, sundown, close of day, nightfall, eventide, gloaming, crepuscule. “Dusk” comes from Old English *dox*, meaning “dark,” and *doxian*, “to darken.” Think of a word like “darkling” and how nothing is ever exactly or entirely dark. Dusk is vague, placeless and dissolves you into contemplation, reminding you that “contemplation” means “to enter a temple or sacred space” and generating phantasms that move as fragments of forgotten toast and tea across your mind. Dusk estranges you from your present self into a *hush*.

I'm walking toward what is mute. A neutrality of silences. Silence exists as an object that enables. I walked into it years ago. Now it's fraying, like orange tulips in a mason jar, like various looks, like unopened compassion. Silence is another idea trying to exist, like walking.

She imagines she's walking toward a noisy dinner party, but, more often than not, it's a dinner for one; it's just her sitting in her unbuttoned coat in the chair closest to the kitchen, eating the whitest plate and reading really not reality. In her silences she mostly thinks of an outside beyond any door.

Between us there is in my dreams a big wooden dining table, with chairs along one side and a long bench alongside the other. The table exists to hold. Words pass to an empty chair. I sit here but there is no one.

Or I sit there but there is no one. Maybe the bench is made of teak. It's very bourgeois. It might speak of an orderly urban life. I'll sit at one end of the table, rich with domestic dramas, sip my wine, and wait for my friends who are coming at 7 o'clock, they are coming.

2. I put on my makeup

Seven p.m. I put on my makeup, everything reminds me of my mother, Don't want your skin on me, she used to say, hot nights.

3. no we don't talk

No we don't talk but people get to know each other just by walking past each other all the time.

4. I used to hammer

I used to hammer my own meat hooks when we first opened the shop—it's a beautiful thing, a properly made meat hook—and the metal canopy too, shielding our meat from the sun. That was 30 years ago, there were packing houses all up and down this street.

5. dad comes home

Between us there's the dining table of my childhood which was too long. We sat in descending order, by age. I am the middle child. I could look to my left or my right. When I go home we still sit there. The wood is fading. My father still sits at the head of the table but he doesn't know who we are. When we aren't there the table is covered with photographs he looks at each time with curiosity. I could lie down on it and still have room on either end. I would like to lie down on it.

I've always loved this hour of the day, it's when my dad comes home from work, he comes home and we jump around. He always jumps with his back to us, is he laughing? is he crying? you can't tell.

It starts to get dark about this time, it's when my dad comes home from work,

he comes home and slaps us around, he always has pretty good reasons, is he laughing? is he crying? you can't tell.

I've always loved this hour of the day, it's when my dad comes home from work, he comes home and we jump around. He always jumps with his back to us, is he laughing? is he crying? you can't tell.

I've always loved this hour of the day, sometimes he comes in already drunk, is he whistling? good sign if he's whistling we jump around, he stops whistling, parts of us erase.

Between us there is my dining table from 1924... It was my grandmother's and I moved it from Elkhart to Minneapolis in 1991, then moved it to Chicago, and then moved it to Boston. In Minneapolis I had a bunch of the old leaves to it refinished. What is my relationship to desire? It can be made to be very long this table of mine. In Chicago I had the legs remounted to be more stable by a Polish furniture craftsman. It came with 6 ice cream parlor chairs that we sold in Chicago and we bought six Danish modern chairs to go with the table, and the wood of the chairs matches the color of the maple table. That table tethers me to a past I am almost completely divorced from. I dine in the place of need. I dine in the place of want. Always filling never full.

6. makeshift

Makeshift. Make of, make for, make out, make with, make Latin, make great, make a muddle, make nothing of, make a difference, make a meal, make away, make your bed, make hay, make sail, make a beard, make a hawk, make my day, make or break, make known, make sure, make ready, make oneself scarce, make ends meet, make love, make war, make one's way, make an appeal, what makes you here? make a slip, make a shot, make as if, make off, make good, make together, make up, make an ass of oneself, make fast, make fire, make fun, make merry, make money, make mock of, make way,

make-a-do, make-and-break, make-sport, make-up, make-weight, make-work, make-believe, make-shiftiness.

7. no we don't talk

No we don't talk but people get to know each other just by walking past each other all the time.

Between us there is at the center of my open-plan top floor flat, overlooking the city, my kitchen table. It is the first grown up thing I have ever owned and when I bought it I felt I had a home for the first time. It is large and round and sits six very comfortably and is sturdy enough to lean your elbows on without shaking. It is made from salvaged wood from a railway sleeper and painted over in a light gray wash, giving an unselfconscious shabby antique French feel. Every time I return home I cook a huge bone marrow stew and apple pie and invite my friends to come by throughout the day and evening and I serve them and we talk and laugh well into the small hours and I think how grateful I am as I pick the candle wax that has molded into the crevices of the wood along with my niece's red and blue crayon marks.

Between us there's an 18th century Spanish table in the dining room that isn't comfortable. It doesn't quite fit our bodies. The legs are slightly too short for adults and our thighs touch the underside of the table. You could say the table is a location I learned to walk toward. I never hope it is there; it will be there. You have to push back and away if you want to cross your legs. But I like the short spiral legs and the olive wood at the center. I will always like those things.

Between us there is a small dining table with a leaf. I think it was made for a sunroom because it has a metal base. I got it secondhand. I escaped the table. I ran the blocks to return to my seat: the plate, the wine, the glass, he fine, he fine, fine, we. I think it's from the sixties.

8. parts of us erase

parts of us erase

9. funny how money

Between us mostly we eat on TV trays. That's a whole other generation kind of thing. The table is covered with Time magazines and bills. Paid, unpaid? That's the challenge. I sit there when I'm trying to figure it out at the end on the month. During the holidays we store the presents there. The first wife used the table for meals. Supper in the evening. She was a nice woman. Cultured.

Between us it's simply a slab of wood. There are holes that were in the tree. Food could get caught but we keep it covered with an Indian table cloth. The color is the sunset and each night the night is delayed. Maybe the cloth was meant to be a bedspread but now it's an invitation. The wood has been painted white lacquer but you would never know because of the tablecloth. I like that we are eating on a tree. Most nights for dinner there are only three of us. The trees are outside. They sway with the evening breeze. We sit on the side closer to the kitchen. It's a shorter walk to the stove.

Between us the table is too high to eat around so it serves as a sideboard. It was handmade for me by a friend so I don't replace it. I eat on the couch. When friends come over they hold plates on their laps and serve themselves from what should be the table. Nothing is between us. The table is forgotten. It's thrown the heart out of balance.

Funny how money
changes everything
Funny how money
changes nothing

substitutes for "money":
hope
a work permit
sex
that nice breeze off the river

justice
dirt
a manicure
a broken heart
a dog
drugs
the evidence
night coming on
tears
walking
a glass of really good red wine
construction next door
no L train
mumbling,
being on TV
the dove of peace

10. after rain

I love the way
after rain
the smell of wet cement
will stay
in the streets
all day

11. my friends have moved away

Between us it's an IKEA melamine-top table named the MELLTORP. It is mute and white. The table's neutrality is its silences. It exists as an object that enables. I bought it with four plastic white chairs, also from IKEA, for a sum total of \$100, about eight years ago. Right now, atop the rectangular table there is a fraying beige table runner, some orange tulips in a mason jar, and various books and unopened mail. It is a table across which another idea is trying to exist. I always imagine warm and noisy dinner parties for the life of this table, but more often than not, it's a table for one; it's just me sitting in my unbuttoned coat in the chair closest to the kitchen, eating dinner and reading shelter magazines. I mostly think of food and I think of work when I'm at the table.

My friends have moved away, rent's gone crazy, no grocery store around here anymore, no place to get your shoes fixed. Stand clear of the closing doors.

12. parts of us erase

parts of us erase

13. that new café

That new cafe I don't actually, I can't actually bring myself to go in there, I hold the memory of the old one you know, they used to sell dollar pancakes on Fridays. I went in there on the last day, I had to go, I had to see, the owner's there, she's crying, she says *I don't have any pancakes today I'm sorry*, and I say *Okay what do you have?* and she says *All I have is coffee*, and that was the saddest cup of coffee of my life. She really built that place from scratch. They just cut her last root. I don't know where she went. I don't know what her next stop was.

14. the sun going down

Between us there is one table. It's small and square. Not great. Ha-ha. The better thing is the window behind it. You can see the street. People walk by all night. I eat there at the table sometimes but mostly I eat in my bed where the TV is. When my roommate isn't working we sit at the table and have pizza for dinner. Sometimes he brings food home from the restaurant where he works. Last time it was short ribs. Really good. Chili and polenta last is even better since I am mostly vegetarian. It's been a while. It's seasonal.

The sun going down, a little dark on the street, there's an energy that I am unfamiliar with, a lot of cars idling and tuning from buildings and loud music, it's an energy I associate with trouble because I didn't really know where I am, how to move through the space, you know coming in the daytime you get off the train you follow directions and you're fine but at night there's something different, you're out of place, you could be anything, you could be a cop, you could be a target, you could be anything.

15. call me Lili

Between us from my dining room table I can see the neighbor's dining room table. They have blinds but the shapes of their bodies are recognizable. At 7 o'clock they are rarely home. They're young. When they are up to anything I bring my plate to the other side and sit with my back to them. This table is made of wood. It's been in the same spot for twenty-three years. I don't know how it got there.

Between us there's a narrowness about our table. It's the length of a tree. At the holidays a dozen of us sit facing each other. You can fit plates but not platters of food. The food goes around but eventually someone has to get up and put the bowl on the sideboard. I love that table. You can't really be lonely at it. It holds so many or it's waiting for someone.

Lots of walk-ins. Dirty hands I smile for tip, gambler's hands I smile for tip, hands like a model, hands like feet, know what they want before they see it, clip and file it's all in the rhythm, they call me Lili I smile for tip, speak Vietnamese they can't tell, am I legal? smile for tip, are we happy who's we? hands like a weapon. hands like a child, hands regular, hands special coupon, hands deluxe, call me Lili I smile til eight-thirty.

Between us there is a dark wood, rectangular farmhouse-style dining table at the house. It's blocky with legs at the four corners and it comfortably seats six people with four padded chairs and a wooden bench along the window side.

Always, across it someone is being told to hold, to hold on, to hell, to bend, oh well.

Between us I love my dining room table. It's nothing special but when my friends come by everything happens around it. I get home from work and I open the door and that table is like a promise of life. It's like it remembers the laughter. You think I'm joking, I'm not joking. You should come over.

16. AMBER WILL YOU MARRY ME

AMBER WILL YOU MARRY ME? I used 60 feet of day-glo lettering all along the eastern fence of the tracks—it was just a construction zone then, Amber lived across the street. Boy was she surprised! It's all erased now. Amber too.

17. eighteen rooms

Between us there is, in the oxblood dining room, a Mahogany Georgian-18th century table. O dining table, you carry existence across centuries. You are in judgment of taste. Yours is a pedestal with three leaves wanting to seat eight. Does it matter if your chairs with their three scroll bars and salmon covered Naugahyde seats are filled or empty.

Between us in the apartment there is a Victory Oak gateleg table like the one M'Dear had. Someone did a bad job of refinishing it so it's bumpy. There're leaves that make it big enough to seat eight but I keep it broken down to fit just two. Me and who else? That's been the question of my life! It makes me laugh.

18 rooms
to clean
all alone
I start at dawn
and work til
I'm
done
strip the bed
polish the tables
wipe the plugs
dust the vents
scale the tub
line up the shoes
mop the marble
scrub the sink
bleach the toilet
change the towels
shine the mirror
vacuum the rug
turn down the bed
replace the spring water
take out the trash
watch the clock

check the minibar
tidy the pornography
look at the river
forget Slovenia
don't cry
dust the telephone
dust the telephone
dust the telephone
don't call home
mop the shoes
polish the towels
take out the minibar
bleach the plugs
watch the pornography
turn down the sink
shine the toilet
mop the rug
scale the clock
tidy the river
vacuum Slovenia
unplug the telephone
water the trash
replace the river
forget the minibar
shoe the clock
phone the dust
bar the bleach
towel the river
call the sink
vent the cry
trash Slovenia
don't turn
don't look
don't check
don't spring
don't change
don't dawn
don't phone
don't phone
don't phone
don't pornography all alone

18. pawns. rooks. sharks.

I answered a craigslist ad and when I reached the guy's place it was full of furniture. I gathered from our conversation that he was a failed realtor who'd moved down the ladder to the used furniture market. He was a pro, slightly physically intimidating, and he easily hustled me into paying more than I had planned for a simple, aesthetically nearly neutral maple table. Now we use it mostly for piling up books and papers. I also sit at it

when I make capsules of an herbal supplement I take daily, which might be why, no matter how much I scrub, it's never clean. Even if you scrub it ten times, it will still turn the scrubber dark black-green. You can also feel a layer of grime if you touch it, but the grime is only visible when you scrub. To the eye, the table is still pretty neutral.

Pawns. Rooks. Sharks. Rush hour. The thing about this city, there's a level of anger, no not anger, something, little stabs in the dark, not just survival, not just they all want what they want but *they want you not to have it—*

Between us there is a gloss white Italian rectangle table from the 70's with a hidden leaf in case I make more friends in the country. On top of it right now are two handmade hexagon clay plates, a vase full of yellow mustard from the side of the road, some daffodils that haven't opened and may not open at all, a burned out candle, and a bowl of smoked salt. Oh and a little square of fabric with a photographic thistle print from the goodwill.

19. coffee cups

I think about coffee cups a lot.
All those plastic coffee cups.

20. funny how money

Funny how money
changes everything
Funny how money
changes nothing

substitutes for "money":
hope
a work permit
sex
that nice breeze off the river
justice
dirt
a manicure
a broken heart
a dog
drugs
the evidence
night coming on
tears

walking
a glass of really good red wine
construction next door
no L train
mumbling
being on TV
the dove of peace

21. food deliveries

Seven o'clock you hear buzzers ringing all over the building—food deliveries, what's that about? Everyone getting their food delivered—trucks, deliveries, it's constant, it's insane, no one cooks anymore. Garbage night you can't walk past my building there's so much garbage on the street. We have rats now, never had rats before.

22. no we don't talk

No we don't talk but people get to know each other just by walking past each other all the time.

23. two cars, five cops

I was about eight maybe, I was walking with my aunt on the block, it was around 7 o'clock, sun coming down, summertime, everybody kind of outside and I noticed these two guys behind me and they're walking past my shoulder and I see two cars come to a complete stop in both directions and five cops jump out and tackle them in front of me. It wasn't an area where you can wander around and take cool pictures, like now.

24. parts of us erase

parts of us erase

25. me and Rita

Nowadays it's all lighted like a movie set, but I used to love going up on the tracks at dusk. Watch the night come in. Watch the edges dissolve. That was a darkness you could lean against. That was a darkness you could fold yourself in and hide. Me and Rita used to go up at dusk. No one could see us. She'd put her hands inside my shirt and her hands were so cold I screamed.

Between us, the place I was living in that moment had the table of my life. It was like in the movies. We eat, we make love on the same table. We work there too. At the time I worried it would end and then it ended. But it stays alive in here, in me, no. Alive in my heart, that table. The light was sometimes like red paint blushing in the walls. I still see. I refuse the end. Noise is the first grown-up thing the city ever owned. The city gave noise a home. It is noisy and the noise sits very comfortably and is sturdy enough to lean in without shaking. It is made from salvaged lives and from deep sleep of machines and frustration painted over in a light gray wash, given an unselfconscious shabby feel. Every time noise returns it is the laughter of anyone and the talk of everyone well into the small hours. The city thinks how grateful it is for the sounds molded into the crevices of the trees along each avenue.

26. whatever can happen

Whatever can happen to anyone can happen to us, whatever can happen to a city can happen to this city. The sleeping, the forgetting, the wrecking, the towering, the kissing, the scoffing, the cellophaning, the whirling snow, the sane and insane, the red cliffs, the parades, the names of the bands in parades, the lipstick, the poets in fresh cloaks, the white man's anecdotes of the black man's anecdotes, the icing and the frosting and the defrosting and the deicing, the city cats in city hats, the famished multitudes, the rushing plentitudes, the lonely limits, the silence after ambulances, the silence after living, whatever can happen to a city can happen to this city, whatever can happen to anyone can happen to us. Onward rolls the broad bright current.