

Truces/Treguas

by

Michael Bettencourt

67 Highwood Terrace #2, Weehawken NJ 07086
201-770-0550; 347-564-9998; m.bett@verizon.net

<http://www.m-bettencourt.com>

(Copyright © by Michael Bettencourt)

Truces/Treguas

CHARACTERS

- Margaret Pasqualini, late 30s/early 40s
- Vera Cortez, same age
- Prison Guard, same age

SETTING/TIME

- Prison cell in a women's prison -- present

SET

- Two beds, a footlocker at the foot of each.
- A table and two chairs -- there is always a deck of cards on the table.
- Cortez's bookshelf
- Toilet, sink, trash can

GUARD has a "locker area" which she uses before going to work.

NOTE 1: No attempt should be made to create a "real" jail cell in terms of size or spacing. For instance, if desired, put the beds right up next to the audience -- or in the audience if it can be managed.

NOTE 2: The ends and beginnings of scenes usually use "lights down" followed by "lights up." However, in line with the fact that one of the characters is a photographer, there should be a strobe effect at the ends and the beginnings of some, if not all, of the scenes to duplicate the taking of a "snap shot." Stage business or music/sound can be used to cover if the actors need to make changes between scenes or, where possible, the "snaps" should follow one hard upon the heels of the other.

NOTE 3: If possible, perform the play in the round.

Truces/Treguas

Scene 1

Lights up. Bare stage. MARGARET PASQUALINI, VERA CORTEZ, and GUARD enter carrying various props. CORTEZ has a boom box, which she puts down and turns on: music by Reuben Blades, or something in that vein.

The three set up the "cell" for the play, chatting as they wish, and do so until things are readied. CORTEZ shuts off the music.

They snap their fingers. Lights down.

* * * * *

Scene 2

Lights bump to fluorescent bright. VERA CORTEZ stands inside a prison cell with MARGARET PASQUALINI, wearing a jacket and holding a paper bag. GUARD stands outside.

GUARD

(to MARGARET)

Clock is now ticking officially.

GUARD leaves. The two women face each other.

CORTEZ

Your things go in that footlocker.

MARGARET opens the footlocker, puts her bag and jacket in, closes it. They face each other again.

CORTEZ

This is a small island. Entiende?

MARGARET steps up to CORTEZ.

MARGARET

Puerto Rican?

CORTEZ says nothing. MARGARET holds out her hand. CORTEZ looks at the hand, at MARGARET's face.

MARGARET

Margaret Pasqualini.

CORTEZ does not shake MARGARET's hand.

CORTEZ

Vera Cortez.

MARGARET

Vera.

CORTEZ

Cortez.

(pronounced correctly)

Puerto Rican.

MARGARET

I go by Margaret.

CORTEZ

We'll see.

MARGARET tests her bed, then lies down, her face to the wall.

CORTEZ

No one has slept for all thirty days.

MARGARET doesn't speak or move. Lights to black.

* * * * *

Scene 3

Night time in cell. CORTEZ sleeps fitfully. Suddenly, with a SHARP CRY, she jerks awake, as if from a bad dream. This wakes up MARGARET, and they both breathe heavily to calm themselves.

MARGARET gets up and takes from her footlocker a tee-shirt, tucks it under her pillow.

They both lay back down. Lights to black.

* * * * *

Scene 4

Lights up on GUARD at her "locker." She fixes her shirt, her hair, etc. Next to her is a rolling cart with lunch bags on it.

She takes a notecard from a pocket and moves it back and forth to get it in focus. She scans it, then puts it back, goes back to her preparation.

GUARD

I hate doing the graveyard shift. Because these graves are always ready to pop -- and I don't want to be popped.

(GUARD snaps her fingers)

But it lets my daughters sleep well.

Lights cross-fade to cell. GUARD rolls the cart to the cell as the KLAXON rings.

* * * * *

Scene 5

MARGARET is jolted out of sleep. CORTEZ rises, smooths her bed, stands at attention ready for head-count. MARGARET, looking haggard, does the same.

GUARD

Arise ye unwashed of the earth -- the "a lá carte" cart has arrived.

GUARD hoists two bags. MARGARET shakes her head no.

GUARD

(to MARGARET)

One day is fine -- they expect that -- two days, they get nervous -- three days makes trouble all the way down the line to me.

MARGARET waves the bag away.

GUARD

Take it -- and get 'em off my back. Eat it or not -- I don't care. But I am not going to suffer for you.

MARGARET takes the bag. CORTEZ takes her bag.

GUARD

(touch of sarcasm)

Thank you both so kindly.

CORTEZ

(with a smile)

Don't mention it.

GUARD

Don't encourage her.

GUARD rolls the cart away.

MARGARET puts the bag down. So does CORTEZ. MARGARET takes out crackers, nibbles on them, stares at nothing. She is a mess of tics and jerks.

CORTEZ

Eat more than that, rent check, or you are not going to make it.

MARGARET gives her a blank look.

CORTEZ

"Rent check." Goes out after a month.

MARGARET moves to the table. She toys with the crackers.

CORTEZ

Eat them or throw them away.

MARGARET eats the crackers. CORTEZ reads.

MARGARET

(quietly)

Just -- more sitting around --

CORTEZ

I explained yesterday what "lockdown" means. I explained the bag lunches. You brought stuff to our desert island -- use it.

MARGARET goes to her locker, pulls out a thick book.

MARGARET

I'm used to drinking coffee and cracking jokes and busting somebody's balls if they're not doing the job and this sitting around just drives me nuts.

MARGARET shows CORTEZ the book.

CORTEZ

(reading title)

Technical Certificates of Credit. So fill me in.

MARGARET

I'm working on my welding.

CORTEZ

Why would you do that?

MARGARET

Matthew and I -- my husband, Matthew -- we own a small general contractor company -- a "woman in the building trades."

CORTEZ opens her own bag, takes out her crackers, and eats them.

CORTEZ

You like your husband?

MARGARET

Matthew is a great man.

CORTEZ

"Great" and "man" in the same sentence?

MARGARET

I know so.

CORTEZ holds up her book.

CORTEZ

Who said, "I celebrate myself, and sing myself /
I loafe and invite my soul / I lean and loafe at
my ease."

MARGARET

Walt Whitman.

CORTEZ

So you're not brain-dead yet from hunger yet.

MARGARET

Here's one for you: what's the right size rebar
for --

CORTEZ rustles in the lunch bag and brings out an apple, which
interrupts MARGARET. She gets the apple and takes a healthy
deliberate bite from it. Her face wrinkles in displeasure.

CORTEZ

Mierda.

She tosses the apple. She goes back to reading.

CORTEZ

You were saying.

MARGARET

What's the right size rebar --

CORTEZ

(turning to MARGARET)

And rebar is --

MARGARET spells out, in ASL, lightning fast, the word "rebar."

MARGARET

Metal rods in concrete.

CORTEZ does a mock ASL repeat of MARGARET's "rebar."

CORTEZ
And who's that for, trabajadora?

MARGARET
My son, Alex -- he's mute.

CORTEZ
So --
(making the ASL hand gesture again)
-- rebar.

MARGARET
The right size in a footing for an adobe house?
Half-inch, the footing four inches wider than the
brick. Your turn.

CORTEZ gets up, throws her book onto the table, gestures for
MARGARET's book, which MARGARET gives her. She puts it on the table.

CORTEZ
I want to read you instead.

MARGARET retreats, gives CORTEZ her back.

MARGARET
I don't.

CORTEZ
It's not even "thinking," is it?

MARGARET
Leave me alone.

CORTEZ
Like smoke in your head.

No response from MARGARET. CORTEZ leafs through MARGARET's book.

CORTEZ
I think I'll learn some more about rebar.

MARGARET gets up, rips the book from CORTEZ's hands, goes back to her
bed. Lights down.

* * * * *

Scene 6

Lights up on GUARD at her "locker" doing her preparation. She takes
out the notecard, adjusts it, looks it over, puts it back. She has a
book.

GUARD

If there's a usual smell in this place --
something forever underneath the bleach and
menstrual blood and fumigator's poison -- it's
regret.

(GUARD snaps her fingers)

But my daughters are sleeping well.

Lights cross-fade to cell.

* * * * *

Scene 7

Lights up -- GUARD at the cell, book in hand. GUARD hands CORTEZ the book.

GUARD

We have to cool this for a bit --
(pointing upward)
-- los gigantes -- jamming up any "fraternizing"
-- funny word to use with women -- whole
terrorism thing gives 'em a hard-on --

CORTEZ

That must be interesting.

GUARD

No it's not.

CORTEZ

We'll figure it out.

GUARD

(to MARGARET)

How goes it, Rent Check?

CORTEZ

She has an outside name.

GUARD

This isn't outside.

MARGARET

We talk.

GUARD

Open university with this one. Gotta go -- hard-
ons call.

GUARD leaves.

MARGARET

You give her books?

CORTEZ

She asks for books.

CORTEZ starts to put away the book.

MARGARET

(indicating book)

Can I? Tech Certs is going a little dry on me.

CORTEZ hands MARGARET the book.

MARGARET

Houses of Healing.

CORTEZ

(reciting from memory)

"A Prisoner's Guide to Inner Power and Freedom."

MARGARET

Why would she want to read --

CORTEZ

(indicating the two of them)

The only prisoners around here?

MARGARET thinks about it.

MARGARET

Guards are prisoners, too.

CORTEZ

Said like she thinks she knows.

MARGARET

(indicating book)

Is it okay --

CORTEZ

Read on --

MARGARET opens to the first page, reads. Keeps reading. Looks up at CORTEZ.

CORTEZ

It's good, isn't it?

MARGARET nods, goes back to reading. Lights down.

* * * * *

Scene 8

Lights up on MARGARET on her bed reading. CORTEZ in the cell, jacket on, holding a thick textbook. GUARD stands outside.

GUARD

5 - 1 - 7 - 6 - closed.

GUARD leaves. CORTEZ puts her book down, takes off her jacket. MARGARET sits up.

MARGARET

You're back.

CORTEZ

Like a bad penny.

MARGARET

Where'd you go?

CORTEZ holds up the textbook.

CORTEZ

Math class.

MARGARET

You're taking math?

CORTEZ

Finishing off my bachelor of arts -- your tax dollars at work.

CORTEZ takes papers out of her back pocket and sits at the table. MARGARET holds up Houses of Healing.

MARGARET

This makes me think -- a lot. It makes me think about my son.

CORTEZ

His tee-shirt under the pillow.

MARGARET

Yes.

CORTEZ holds up her papers.

CORTEZ

I would think you'd want to think about your four-year-old son.

MARGARET
How did you know he was four?

CORTEZ
I had time to make the library. "Disorderly
conduct."

CORTEZ waits for a reaction -- gets one.

CORTEZ
What would that phrase mean to you? And
"malicious destruction of property"?

MARGARET
That's me you're reading.

CORTEZ
I told you I wanted to read you.
(tosses printouts on the table)
But who can believe everything they read?

Eyes lock, then MARGARET turns away to read.

MARGARET
I'll be back.

Lights down.

* * * * *

Scene 9

Lights up. MARGARET at the table, her book beside her, playing
solitaire.

MARGARET
-- and it was true that I trashed the photo lab -
-

CORTEZ
It took two cops.

MARGARET
Two police officers -- to take me away.

CORTEZ
(spins one of the papers)
"Picked up for Porn" -- something about nude
pictures of mute four-year-old Alex --

MARGARET plays.

CORTEZ

Is that true?

MARGARET continues to play.

CORTEZ

Another one said you were burying yourself here
for the principle of "artistic expression" -- are
you a radical artist, political prisoner --
(holding up two fists)

-- Zero Zero?

MARGARET

I couldn't take their deal.

CORTEZ

You should've taken their deal.

MARGARET

I couldn't take their deal.

CORTEZ

It was a pretty sweet deal -- probation,
community service --

MARGARET

I couldn't take their deal.

CORTEZ

(ignoring MARGARET)

-- \$300 restitution, an apology -- but here you
sit buried away when you could be home now --

MARGARET plays, says nothing.

CORTEZ

With Alex and Mateo and rebar --

MARGARET

I couldn't.

CORTEZ looks at MARGARET, then looks at the cards.

CORTEZ

You missed the seven.

Instead of playing the seven, MARGARET gathers the cards back into a
deck. She takes her book and goes back to her bed to read. CORTEZ
carefully folds the papers as she watches her. Lights down.

* * * * *

Scene 10

Lights up. GUARD at her "locker." She takes out the notecard, adjusts it, looks it over, puts it back, does her preparation.

GUARD

Over the Visitation Room should be this sign:
"Here you will find all the words that have not
been said that should have been said or need to
be said or were said all wrong or said right but
too late -- it will be no different for you."

GUARD snaps her fingers. Lights cross-fade.

* * * * *

Scene 11

GUARD stares through the "bars" at MARGARET. MARGARET stands stock still, wearing her jacket, staring out through the bars of the cell but not at GUARD. CORTEZ has a book open and does origami, using the printouts and other paper.

GUARD

(to CORTEZ)

Keep an eye.

CORTEZ

Aye aye.

GUARD leaves. MARGARET continues to stare.

CORTEZ

At home -- everything all right?

MARGARET does not answer but simply stares. Then she moves to the other side of the cell, stares. She takes off her jacket and lays it neatly over her arm.

MARGARET

The light never changes in here. Out there to in
here -- over there to over there -- it's all the
same wash. No harbor. Hell for a photographer.

MARGARET turns to CORTEZ.

MARGARET

Matthew is depressed and angry. Alex is drawing
red faces with black tears. No one sleeps well.
As good as can be expected.

MARGARET puts her jacket in her locker. She picks up one of the chairs and holds it at arm length by the legs until her arms shake and she can't hold it anymore, then lets it drop.

MARGARET

Fuck.

Lights down.

* * * * *

Scene 12

Lights up. MARGARET points to what CORTEZ is doing.

CORTEZ

Origami. The guiding principle -- take something ordinary -- a square of paper -- and then --

MARGARET

That's the print-out about me.

CORTEZ

About as ordinary as I have.

(holds up one of her creations)

A metaphor for life. Truly.

MARGARET sits, stares, a mess of tics.

CORTEZ

Do you want to try?

MARGARET gets up, grabs chair again and holds it at arm's length until her arms shake, then she drops the chair.

MARGARET

I felt -- I feel --

(looks at CORTEZ)

What is it? You know what it is.

CORTEZ

Gutted.

MARGARET

Yes.

CORTEZ

And stupid.

MARGARET

And stupid.

CORTEZ folds. MARGARET wrings her hands.

MARGARET

Could they make that visiting room any more heartbreaking?

CORTEZ

It's built exactly to make sure it is exactly not origami.

MARGARET

There wasn't a thing in those pictures I took of Alex that some -- master hadn't put up on a wall in some museum --

CORTEZ

I'm not going to make a very good jury.

MARGARET

(making her case)

I even copied a set-up -- by this guy Caravaggio, of a naked Cupid -- wings, you know --

CORTEZ

You put wings on Alex.

MARGARET

I thought it was beautiful. It was beautiful. What's the matter? It is beautiful.

CORTEZ

Apparently not to everybody.

MARGARET

He wasn't naked in all the pictures!

CORTEZ

You should've done none of them that way. You shouldn't've done Alex --

MARGARET

I didn't "do" Alex --

CORTEZ

A four-year old naked kid up on the wall does not happen by accident.

CORTEZ takes her time to fold.

CORTEZ

He was put there by his mother for all the world
to gawk at.

CORTEZ folds some more.

CORTEZ

That is "doing" Alex. They gave you the trouble
you were asking for.

MARGARET

I was doing -- it -- for a class --

CORTEZ finishes the item, starts another.

CORTEZ

Alex as "assignment." Alex as "art" spread out.
Alex as everything but the child he is.

Neither speaks for several moments.

CORTEZ

What kind of mother would do that?

MARGARET does not answer.

CORTEZ

I asked you a question. I made several
observations.

MARGARET goes to the table, points to what CORTEZ just made. CORTEZ
nods yes, and MARGARET picks it up and proceeds to unfold it out to
the original square piece of paper. Smooths out the paper. She does
it to several more of CORTEZ's pieces.

MARGARET

I'm thinking about what you said.

Lights down.

* * * * *

Scene 13

Lights up to nighttime -- dim. MARGARET sits on her bed and watches
CORTEZ as CORTEZ sleeps.

MARGARET quietly walks to CORTEZ's bed and squats face-level with
CORTEZ to study CORTEZ's face, as if she were going to photograph it.
CORTEZ stirs, agitated, but MARGARET does not pull away, just watches.
Again CORTEZ stirs, and MARGARET moves quietly back to her own bed and
lies down.

A beat, then suddenly, with a snap, CORTEZ jerks awake, as if from a very bad dream. MARGARET, feigning sleep, simply watches as CORTEZ catches her breath and calms herself and falls back asleep. Lights to black.

* * * * *

Scene 14

Lights up. They are both now making origami.

MARGARET
They always wake you up like that?

CORTEZ
If I'm lucky.

MARGARET
What about?

CORTEZ
Maybe later.

MARGARET
Why not now?

CORTEZ
Maybe never, if you push.

MARGARET
It's not like I have newspaper clippings about you.

CORTEZ
You're getting a bit of a mouth on you.

MARGARET
Is that a problem?

CORTEZ
Not yet.

They work in silence.

MARGARET
That book -- Houses of Healing -- I want to thank you --

CORTEZ
You finished it --

MARGARET

Started re-reading it. Which brings me to the deal.

MARGARET gets up, paces as she speaks.

MARGARET

Here's how I have been figuring it.

CORTEZ

A folding or an unfolding?

MARGARET

(thinking it over)

An unfolding. I didn't start as a photographer -
-

CORTEZ

A woman of rebar.

MARGARET

But I did take portfolio pictures of our work.
Then one day -- Out loud it sounds stupider --

CORTEZ

Tell me or not, it's up to you.

MARGARET thinks it over.

MARGARET

The way the light fell across this ratty old
hammer and screwdriver --

CORTEZ

You fell in love.

MARGARET

Something so ordinary could look so beautiful --

CORTEZ

Origami --

MARGARET

Just caught me -- so I caught it -- I took it --
I liked that.

CORTEZ

A new feeling for you?

MARGARET

Feeling what?

CORTEZ

Power.

MARGARET

Maybe --

CORTEZ

It's okay if it is.

MARGARET

It was about that and it wasn't. Ever had
"Property of the Cunt" sprayed across something
you own?

CORTEZ

Missed that pleasure.

MARGARET

When the knuckleheads sprayed "P of the C" across
my locker -- that's power, front and center, like
their dicks -- but this was different --

CORTEZ

From the side --

MARGARET

And underneath.

CORTEZ

For yourself --

MARGARET

And clean -- clean -- mine --

CORTEZ

Click.

MARGARET

Started doing portraits of the women on the jobs
--

MARGARET laughs a genuine laugh.

MARGARET

My first "gallery show" -- in a diner!

CORTEZ

"Hold the arroz."

MARGARET

"Adam and Eve on a raft!" But when they saw themselves up there -- up there -- honored -- that changed something in them.

CORTEZ

And in you.

MARGARET

The change in them changed me. I could do -- I could make -- not just Alex's Mom or Matthew's Maggie --

MARGARET sits.

MARGARET

It's hard -- it's hard to talk with ashes in your mouth.

CORTEZ continues to fold.

MARGARET

It couldn't stop there. Matthew noticed it -- more studio equipment, more classes -- more, more, and more -- I couldn't just look anymore -- like in the beginning --

CORTEZ folds.

MARGARET

"The Human Form" -- the class. Final project: "show an emotional state by using a person" -- I said I wanted to make something to honor Alex's innocence --

CORTEZ
(slowly)

But --

MARGARET holds up her hand.

MARGARET

I thought I could -- but I can't -- chapter one ends here.

MARGARET walks to where the cell bars would be.

CORTEZ

Any different out there?

MARGARET

Nothing different.

Lights down.

* * * * *

Scene 15

Lights up. MARGARET in her own light.

If someone rags on you long enough that your skin is colored blue, you will believe it. If they kiss you when you say "Yes, my skin is blue" -- if they beat you when you say "No, it's not blue!" -- you will believe your skin is blue. For a moment, all the bastards with the dirt in their mouths -- journalists, talk-show hosts, prosecutors -- they turned me into the color of sky -- and I almost betrayed myself, thinking I had done something I hadn't done. But then I remembered Alex, the full colors of Alex -- and all turned right. The camera made us blended -- how he cleaned up my spirit, putting us somewhere in a sweet place, answering only to Alex, and by doing that, owning my own face.

Lights down.

* * * * *

Scene 16

Lights up. GUARD at her "locker." She looks intently into the "mirror."

GUARD

I am past "past my prime" and I still have a zit.
Where is the justice in that?

GUARD straightens her coat, her belt, etc. Takes out the notecard, very briefly looks it over, puts it back.

GUARD

Written over the gate of this House of
Correction: "All ye who enter here -- if what you
did wasn't wrong, something down the road will
be, or was, and all this will be for that." Sin
is democratic.

(snaps her fingers)

Sleep well, my bright children.

Lights cross-fade.

* * * * *

Scene 17

GUARD holds a letter. CORTEZ comes and takes it, does not open it, sits and looks at it.

GUARD

I heard you ate all today.

MARGARET

It all went down.

GUARD

They serve you up for talk at every table.

MARGARET

A slow news day, then.

GUARD

Forgive them -- you're the best we have for a celebrity.

MARGARET

That's really sad.

GUARD

And it only took you a week.

MARGARET

And a half.

GUARD

When my youngest was four, someone said, "I'll bet you're four." And she snaps back, "Four and a half."

MARGARET

My Alex does the same --

MARGARET signs "four and a half" with comic effect.

MARGARET

When you're new to counting, everything counts.

GUARD

Even if you're not new --

(to CORTEZ)

I'm sure it's good news, Vera.

GUARD leaves. CORTEZ looks at the letter, then carefully opens it, unfolds it, reads it, re-folds it, puts it back, puts the envelope into her locker.

CORTEZ
It's good news.

MARGARET
About what?

CORTEZ steps to the bars.

CORTEZ
Margaret?

MARGARET
Yeah?

CORTEZ
You're right about the light.

MARGARET goes to stand next to her.

CORTEZ
Don't.

MARGARET backs away. Lights down. MARGARET exits.

* * * * *

Scene 18

Lights up. CORTEZ alone in the cell. She listens to music on her boom box and dances -- hard, personal. And she dances for what would seem to the audience a long time -- let her sweat. Lights down.

* * * * *

Scene 19

Lights up. GUARD brings in MARGARET, who enters the cell.

GUARD
(into shoulder mike)
5 - 1 - 7 - 6 -- close.

By this time CORTEZ has seen them, but she doesn't stop dancing.

GUARD
(to MARGARET)
Her first days -- she beat misery into that floor.

MARGARET

For what?

CORTEZ breaks into the conversation.

CORTEZ

(to MARGARET)

You want to know about me, read the transcripts.
Don't bother her.

(to GUARD)

If you keep --

CORTEZ pops a dance move.

CORTEZ

If you keep -- come on -- if you keep your feet
moving --

GUARD

If you keep your feet moving --

GUARD pops a dance move.

GUARD

-- they can never put chains on 'em. I'll be
back.

GUARD and CORTEZ share a hand gesture in the air. GUARD leaves.
CORTEZ puts away the cassette.

CORTEZ

This time?

MARGARET puts her jacket in her locker.

MARGARET

Just like that letter you got.

CORTEZ

(not sincere)

That's good.

MARGARET takes a paper from her pants pocket.

MARGARET

And Alex sent me this.

At first CORTEZ does not take it or look at it. MARGARET encourages
her. CORTEZ takes it.

MARGARET
Elephants in the Land of Smiles -- Matthew came
up with the title.

CORTEZ
(handing it back)
Nice.

MARGARET puts the picture away in her locker, takes out two photos,
offers them to CORTEZ.

MARGARET
Alex. And Matthew.

CORTEZ does not even look at them.

CORTEZ
Nice.

MARGARET
Go on.

CORTEZ
(refusing to look)
I said "nice." Now put them away.

MARGARET puts the photos away.

MARGARET
Did I just cross --

CORTEZ
Why'd you trash the photo lab? Why did you fuck
Alex over? Why did you come here? Why were you
so stupid?

MARGARET waits, her body tense.

MARGARET
Any more?

As she speaks, CORTEZ grows angrier and angrier.

CORTEZ
You did what a thief would do -- you take Alex
into your studio, your world, this child who
can't speak -- and you take off his clothes --
and that is all right because he is just a kid --
he is my kid -- mine -- you thought like this,
didn't you? -- an assignment "using" a person --
and la fotógrafa proceeds to invade the little
island all the while whispering to herself

"innocence" and "art" and "principle" and
"everyone will understand" -- and you did nothing
to protect him --

Unseen by either of them, GUARD enters.

CORTEZ

Fuck -- fuck!

As if the choice is either move or explode, CORTEZ moves. She sees
GUARD returning.

CORTEZ

(to GUARD)

Do you believe in sin?

GUARD

You ready?

CORTEZ

Do you?

GUARD

I was brought up to believe in it. Are you
ready?

MARGARET

Where are you going?

CORTEZ

Still believe?

GUARD

Never found it useful.

(to MARGARET)

She's going to her group.

CORTEZ

(indicating MARGARET)

Did she sin coming here?

GUARD

If "sin" means "bad decision" --

CORTEZ

Stupid and brave.

MARGARET

What group?

GUARD
"Growing Together." Houses of Healing. She leads the group.

MARGARET
You lead a group?

CORTEZ goes to her bookshelf and pulls out a book.

CORTEZ
I'm a regular Christ figure around here.

Indicates to MARGARET to catch the book.

CORTEZ
So you won't miss me so much.

CORTEZ tosses the book carefully to her.

CORTEZ
Me busco. Estoy aún en el paisaje lejos de mi vision. / Sigo siendo mensaje lejos de la palabra. Pages 6 and 7. Consider it a transcript. [Julia de Burgos, Songs of Simple Truth, "#2: Intimate," (pp. 6-7)]

GUARD
(into shoulder mike)
5 - 1 - 7 - 6 -- open!

CORTEZ takes a jacket from her footlocker, then exits the cell.

GUARD
(into shoulder mike)
And closed.

GUARD and CORTEZ start to exit. MARGARET picks up the book CORTEZ tossed to her, turns to pages 6 and 7, reads.

CORTEZ turns back, GUARD follows. CORTEZ speaks to MARGARET through the bars.

CORTEZ
Let me see the pictures.

Lights down.

* * * * *

Scene 20

Lights up. CORTEZ alone.

CORTEZ

Me busco. Estoy aún en el paisaje lejos de mi
visión / Sigo siendo mensaje lejos de la palabra.
"I seek myself. I am still in the landscape far
from my vision. I go on being a message far from
the word." Julia de Burgos. She died on a
Puerto Rican Harlem street in 1953 with no
identification. She was taken to the city's
Potters Field, where she was buried in the
standard pine box provided to paupers. There is
a legend that she was so tall that they had to
amputate her legs to fit her in the coffin. I am
haunted by that. I am haunted by that.

Lights down.

* * * * *

Scene 21

Lights up on GUARD and CORTEZ waiting to go into the meeting room.

CORTEZ

Why is the door locked? The meeting room is
never locked.

GUARD

I was told to wait here. With you -- which is
lucky. Now you know as much as I know.

CORTEZ

Zero plus zero.

GUARD

Watch your math.

They wait.

CORTEZ

Sorry.

They wait.

GUARD

The letter?

CORTEZ

Michael got honors.

GUARD

Strange when good news hurts.

CORTEZ

Strange is that I won't be happy about it.

GUARD

It is spring for you --

CORTEZ

It's been feeling like spring almost all the time.

GUARD

Something I need to pay attention to?

CORTEZ

I'll be fine.

GUARD

Okay -- I won't worry about you -- I'll worry about Rent Check.

CORTEZ

Her skin's tougher since she found out her family still loves her.

GUARD

You gonna tell her?

CORTEZ

I'm going to let the universe spin.

They wait.

GUARD

I lied.

CORTEZ

I lied, too.

GUARD

I am gonna worry about you.

CORTEZ

I'm never fine this month.

GUARD

But Michael did get honors.

CORTEZ

At least he's making it through.

GUARD

It'd be good if that could help you.

CORTEZ

Every month his foster parents send that letter,
and eleven out of twelve I can take in his other
life. This month's letter never helps.

GUARD

Rent Check gonna make it?

CORTEZ

She's an odd bird. She kicks out a deal that
would've sent her home.

GUARD

Birds of a feather.

CORTEZ

You think?

GUARD

Maybe she hates home.

CORTEZ

And vacations at Club Dead?

GUARD

Nothing surprises me about human beings.

CORTEZ

She took to Houses of Healing like a nail to
wood. Twice.

GUARD

(thinking)

Twice.

CORTEZ

See what I mean.

GUARD

And she didn't take the deal.

CORTEZ

Like gasoline to fire.

They wait.

GUARD

Maybe I don't need to worry about her.

CORTEZ

It's ironic that you and I are waiting for a locked door to be unlocked. That's all we do all day, every day.

A SQUAWK through the shoulder mike. GUARD listens.

GUARD

Coupla more minutes.

CORTEZ

I wish this month would go fly by.

GUARD

It always goes by.

CORTEZ

For a price.

Sound effect of a door unlocked. Lights down.

* * * * *

Scene 22

Lights up. CORTEZ is in full stride as MARGARET listens.

CORTEZ

I was hot! Imagine the light of 19 years old -- the age of majority -- this beautiful face in a very dangerous time. "Viva Puerto Rico libre!" That's how it was, in my beautiful 19th year. "Viva Puerto Rico libre!" Filled with revolutionary ambition! "It is time to wake up, Borinqueños! Remember El Grito de Lares! Unchain yourself from the clown called Uncle Sam!" But then my family, for my own good, they said --

CORTEZ shifts.

CORTEZ

I don't care, Mamá -- let the fucking F.B.I. take me, I am not going to go live in New York with --

CORTEZ stops dancing, claps her hands together as if she had been slapped. Beat. Starts dancing again.

CORTEZ

Yes, Papá, I am sorry, I should not have spoken -
- No, Papa, I can't tell you who I know! I won't --

Again stops dancing, again a slap. Dancing again.

CORTEZ

(sarcastically)

But Pablo, dearest brother, I know about your investments -- in the companies that butcher --
Enough: I don't want to waste --

Stop, slap.

CORTEZ

"You do not know what my own good is." But -- la
guagua aérea --

CORTEZ makes an airplane motion and sound.

CORTEZ

-- and I am deposited in San Manhattan Juan,
ahora Nuyorican, Ame-Rícan. On the island of the
enemy in the dead country. Mi familia perdida.
And I turn into the lost soul they thought I was
already. Estoy aún en el paisaje lejos de mi
visión.

CORTEZ catches her breath.

CORTEZ

(more quietly)

Estoy aún en el paisaje lejos de mi visión.

CORTEZ, hands on hips, catches her breath, looks at MARGARET.

MARGARET

What vision?

CORTEZ does not answer, just stands and looks at her, hands on hips.

MARGARET

What vision?

CORTEZ

Origami.

MARGARET

Damn -- I wish you hadn't done that! For a
moment the light almost changed in here. Almost,
Cortez. Almost.

Lights down.

* * * * *

Scene 23

Lights full up. MARGARET reads Julia de Burgos. CORTEZ stands holding her math book. GUARD stands outside the cell.

GUARD
(to CORTEZ)

Watch yourself.

CORTEZ makes a dismissive gesture.

GUARD
I mean it.

GUARD leaves. CORTEZ hesitates, then slams the math book down. MARGARET jumps.

CORTEZ
Math -- sucks.

MARGARET
Some women find math hard, Cortez --

CORTEZ
The numbers just jump around -- x, x, x, x, x, x,
x -- well, I can't --

MARGARET
I know I did, on the job --

CORTEZ
I don't care! I can't. Not now.

MARGARET
But if you finish this -- then your B.A., right?

MARGARET signs the letters "B" and "A."

CORTEZ
"B," bullshit, "A" artist.

CORTEZ flips through the book, exasperated. MARGARET continues to read, half an eye on CORTEZ. Finally, CORTEZ slams the book shut.

CORTEZ
I have got to make it stick.

MARGARET
If you relax --

CORTEZ

You -- you said you knew numbers.

MARGARET

(mild irony)

Well, I don't know, Vera -- you keep me pretty busy here. I have to finish the poems of Julia¹ de Burgos, and then --

CORTEZ

Fuck you.

CORTEZ throws the math book at the bookcase. MARGARET is immediately conciliatory.

MARGARET

Wait --

CORTEZ

Fuck everyone like you.

MARGARET

-- just kidding --

CORTEZ

Fuck you all.

MARGARET

Just kidding! Bad timing! Course I'll give you a hand. Let me get the book.

MARGARET gets the book. CORTEZ grabs her by the throat with both hands.

* * * * *

Scene 24

Actors freeze -- strobe effect.

Actors move. CORTEZ backs MARGARET across the cell.

CORTEZ

I don't need irony --

MARGARET

You're hurting me --

¹ Pronounced as an American would, like "Julia Roberts."

CORTEZ
-- from an Anglo kid-fucker bitch --

MARGARET
You're hurting --

CORTEZ
Get away from me! You're useless, cunt!

* * * * *

Scene 25

Actors freeze -- strobe effect.

Actors move. MARGARET knocks away her hands and pushes CORTEZ back really hard. CORTEZ pushes her back.

CORTEZ
The numbers just jump. It makes me crazy.

MARGARET
It makes you mean.

CORTEZ
It makes me feel stupid.

MARGARET
It makes you a human.

CORTEZ
As if that is a benefit -- not this time of year
--
CORTEZ pulls herself up short.

MARGARET
What's spring have to do with it?

CORTEZ
Look, I'm sor[ry] --

MARGARET
Why this time --

CORTEZ
I'm s --

MARGARET
Why --

CORTEZ
That -- all that -- from way back --

MARGARET

Back --

CORTEZ

From the dead country. Put the book down.

MARGARET

No -- I'll hold it.

CORTEZ

I don't want the help.

MARGARET sits.

CORTEZ

What are you doing?

MARGARET

Tell me what keeps you waking me up at night.
You owe me that. You want to show me some sorry,
tell me that.

Something bristles in CORTEZ at the word "owe." She circles MARGARET seated at the table, holding the math book. MARGARET does not move.

CORTEZ

Owe?

CORTEZ grabs her by the hair.

* * * * *

Scene 26

Actors freeze -- strobe effect.

Actors move.

CORTEZ

The dead country.

CORTEZ jerks MARGARET's head to face a different direction.

CORTEZ

The barrio.

MARGARET

Let me go --

CORTEZ puts an arm across her throat and collarbone to hold MARGARET down.

CORTEZ

The liquor store. The empty lot.

MARGARET struggles, and CORTEZ pulls her head back.

CORTEZ

The commuter train that slices the heart.

By this time, MARGARET struggles too hard to be held down, so CORTEZ shoves her out of the chair. The book falls to the floor. CORTEZ grabs her waistband.

CORTEZ

The families dying --

MARGARET pulls away. CORTEZ picks up the book.

CORTEZ

Owe you? You?

CORTEZ throws the book on the table. MARGARET hesitates, then gets it. CORTEZ sits on MARGARET's bed.

CORTEZ

This is mine. This is mine.

MARGARET goes to sit on CORTEZ's bed. CORTEZ pushes MARGARET away.

CORTEZ

No you don't. Mine, too. My space. All mine, all the time. You get none.

MARGARET

Don't get stupid --

CORTEZ

Don't feel privileged.

CORTEZ goes to MARGARET's footlocker and starts piling things on the bed.

MARGARET

Hey --

CORTEZ

Eminent domain.

As much as she wants to, MARGARET does not touch CORTEZ.

CORTEZ

You own nothing that ain't mine. I want it, I take it -- call it Puerto Rico. Oooh, a picture of Alex --

MARGARET

Put that --

CORTEZ

Nope.

CORTEZ puts the picture in her pocket.

CORTEZ

He's mine. All mine. Now what are you going to do, little island?

MARGARET

Give it back. This is not about -- give it back --

CORTEZ

Tú no sabes what this is about.

MARGARET

Give it back --

CORTEZ

Fuck you, "Property of the Cunt" --

MARGARET drops the book and lunges to get her picture back, but CORTEZ easily choke-holds her.

MARGARET

Let me go! You fucking witch!

MARGARET tries to wrestle free, and as she does so she swings her elbows around, one of which catches CORTEZ hard in the temple/cheek/bridge of the nose. CORTEZ falls to her knees.

In half a heartbeat MARGARET grabs the book and looms over her. She raises the book to hit CORTEZ deliberately, really means to do it -- then doesn't.

* * * * *

Scene 27

Actors freeze -- strobe effect. Actors move.

MARGARET

Cortez? Cortez? Cortez?

CORTEZ
You taking roll call?

MARGARET
Cortez -- never done that to anyone.

CORTEZ
Two cops, right?

MARGARET
Well, them -- yeah.

CORTEZ
Should have --

MARGARET
Sorry.

CORTEZ
-- remembered that.

MARGARET
Here --

CORTEZ
Hands to yourself. Man, that hurts! Don't!
Don't! I will survive.

They are at a loss for the moment, wandering.

CORTEZ
Irony.

MARGARET
Irony?

CORTEZ
Irony! That irony act of yours -- "oh, I'm so
busy" --

MARGARET
Meant it to be, you know, friendly.

CORTEZ
You were feeding on Vera Cortez looking weak --

MARGARET
Oh, suck my --

CORTEZ
You took respect from me --

MARGARET

I tried to make you laugh -- remember how to laugh, independentista? Ha ha ha ha ha? Can't someone just want to make you laugh?

CORTEZ, looking at MARGARET as she overemphasizes the syllables of the word, suddenly lets out a genuine laugh -- and the tension breaks. MARGARET gets up to put her stuff back in the footlocker.

CORTEZ

Why didn't you? You know -- the -- book -- up --

MARGARET

Maybe because you're not a cop. Or a lab tech. I don't think I smack things that I respect.

CORTEZ watches MARGARET put her things away, then hands MARGARET the book and sits on her own bed.

MARGARET

I'm not going to push -- the spring, that letter, why you come back from one math class and you're okay, and then this one and you're not -- me busco -- "I seek myself" -- Julia --

CORTEZ

(correcting her)

Julia.

MARGARET

(pronouncing it correctly)

Julia de Burgos -- see, I read everything you give me --

CORTEZ

The word is bruja.

MARGARET

What?

CORTEZ

Witch. You said "witch."

MARGARET

I guess I don't smack witches, either.

CORTEZ hands the picture of Alex back to MARGARET.

CORTEZ

Bruja is also a plant in Puerto Rico. Each leaf has its own seeds, so you can take a cutting and

plant it anywhere and it will grow. It is a tough plant.

MARGARET

So do this, then, bruja: $x^2 + 5x + 6$. Factor it.

CORTEZ figures it in her head, then smiles as she gets the answer.

MARGARET

There is hope for you yet, bruja.

CORTEZ comes over to help MARGARET put away the rest of her things. Lights down.

* * * * *

Scene 28

Lights up -- night in the cell. MARGARET sits on the edge of her bed. CORTEZ sleeps, then jerks awake as if from a bad dream. CORTEZ notices MARGARET.

MARGARET

Beat you.

CORTEZ gets up, goes to the table, takes the deck of cards and starts building a house of cards.

MARGARET

I figured it out.

CORTEZ places a card, then another.

MARGARET

Why I didn't take the deal.

CORTEZ

Ah.

MARGARET

You know how you said having trouble with the math made you feel stupid.

CORTEZ

You said that made me a human.

MARGARET

The kind of stupid I've been doesn't make me feel very much like a human at all.

MARGARET sits at the table.

CORTEZ

Chapter two.

The house of cards falls. CORTEZ starts again.

MARGARET

At first this was it: I didn't take the deal because I wanted secretly to punish myself. The bottom feeders were right, goddamn them: I had somehow violated Alex -- maybe I really was an "Anglo kid-fucker bitch" --

CORTEZ

Sorry about that --

MARGARET

-- even if I'd never touched him -- I talked proud, I talked self-righteous, but maybe I was secretly a pervert --

CORTEZ

You've been hanging around convicts too long.

MARGARET

Made a twisted sense. Commit a crime, you take the fall -- being a pervert seemed pretty much a crime -- and not taking the deal was an easy fall to take.

CORTEZ

Definitely hanging around convicts too long.

MARGARET hands CORTEZ a card.

MARGARET

But the more I thought about that, the more stupid that sounded -- if I'm a pervert, I'm a pretty tame one -- I'm not a very good one, not a very bold one.

CORTEZ

Within normal parameters.

MARGARET

That's me all around, and so the short and the long of it: I didn't take the deal because I was a proud, vain, stupid human whose greed stole Alex's body and innocence and I didn't want to admit that I was puffed up with pride, and that I had brown eyes because I was full of shit up to my eyebrows.

CORTEZ

Within normal parameters --

MARGARET

And so this fog settles in and all sense goes out the window and I end up here making Alex and Matthew pay a price they shouldn't have to pay.

CORTEZ

That sounds pretty human to me.

MARGARET

(thinking)

I suppose it does -- goddamn it.

The house of cards falls a third time. CORTEZ gathers them up.

CORTEZ

If it's any consolation to you, I thought you were brave -- stupid, but brave.

MARGARET

(dubious)

Yeah?

CORTEZ

You fought for Alex -- you fought to make Alex believe nothing bad ever happened.

MARGARET

Do you think nothing bad happened?

CORTEZ docks the cards against the table.

CORTEZ

I don't think Alex was in any danger.

MARGARET takes the tee-shirt from under her pillow, wraps her hands in it.

MARGARET

Then one more thing and I'm done. I liked it. The power part. The taking. I'm not sure I want to give that up. I don't know how to fit that in.

CORTEZ

God lived in a perfect beautiful emptiness -- know this story?

MARGARET

Straight from catechism class.

CORTEZ

Not this part. God was bored with his perfect beautiful emptiness, so by creation he filled it full of trouble called creation -- he filled it full of us. We're in his image, right? Like one of your "snap shots." I don't think we have a choice. You create, you steal. Be an artist, be a thief. Tell the truth and threaten perfection with awareness.

MARGARET muses while CORTEZ arranges the cards.

MARGARET

I think you're wrong, or at least not all right, but I don't know how. I think I'm wrong, too -- mostly. I need a new way to understand all this. My brain is dead.

CORTEZ deals the cards.

MARGARET

They're all facocked.

CORTEZ

There's light in the hallway.

They both lean toward the hallway to see their cards, shifting them around to put them in proper order.

CORTEZ

Give me all your kings.

MARGARET looks over her cards.

MARGARET

Go fish.

CORTEZ picks up a card, then flips it for MARGARET to see.

CORTEZ

Hah. Give me all your twos.

MARGARET hands her a card. They hold a look. Lights down.

* * * * *

Scene 29

Lights up. GUARD outside the cell. CORTEZ, in the cell, paces, jacket in her hand. She throws her jacket into her locker, slams the locker shut.

GUARD

I'm sorry.

GUARD hesitates, exits. CORTEZ opens the footlocker and slams down the lid again. Then slams the lid again. GUARD reappears. CORTEZ slams it one more time, then acknowledges with a hand gesture she won't do it again. GUARD leaves. CORTEZ paces, caged.

CORTEZ

They cancelled the group. For reasons of security.

MARGARET

I'm sorry.

CORTEZ

For ten years -- That group saved -- carajo!

CORTEZ angrily throws herself into a chair, then leaps out of the chair, paces.

CORTEZ

They waited until halfway through -- A memo -- one sentence -- escorted the volunteers away, and ten years just gone -- let you get close, then take it away --

CORTEZ continues to pace. MARGARET goes to speak.

CORTEZ

Shut up.

MARGARET

I was just going to --

CORTEZ

Shut up.

To steady herself, CORTEZ leans on the table and pushes down as if she were going to push it through floor. MARGARET puts a hand on CORTEZ's shoulder, and CORTEZ snaps away as if she'd been burned.

CORTEZ

Not for me.

CORTEZ backs away.

CORTEZ

We were doing the sessions on "victim impact" -- under your pillow -- get it, put it here.

MARGARET takes out the tee-shirt, puts it on the table. CORTEZ goes to her bed, reaches under her pillow, and brings out a piece of colorful cloth, hands it to MARGARET.

CORTEZ

This is a piece of cloth from the funeral dress they made for my dead daughter Tamara. My murdered daughter Tamara. She would be fourteen this month.

MARGARET puts the cloth on the table.

CORTEZ

I'm not here because I was stupid and didn't take a deal.

CORTEZ picks up the cloth.

CORTEZ

This is my santo. Keeps me sane. That's yours -
- keeps you sane. Don't fuck 'em over ever again.

MARGARET

(picking up tee-shirt)

Who murdered your daughter?

CORTEZ

Do your own fucking leg work.

CORTEZ puts the cloth back, then lies on her back staring at the ceiling. Lights shift.

* * * * *

Scene 30

GUARD at her locker. She checks her face in the mirror, notes the zit is gone. She takes the notecard from her pocket, adjusts it, then says the prayer out loud.

GUARD

Prayer of the Prison Guard. Dear Lord. There are nine separate cell blocks here, surrounded by dark woods, hyphenated by razor wire. Here we house the fallen, the sullen, the melancholic, the miserable, the angry, the violent, the victimized, blasphemers, seducers, flatterers, grifters, hypocrites, traitors, murderers -- and we carry them chained across the river -- they come without their coins -- they come with nothing -- their sins on their anguished backs --

GUARD puts the card away, finishes her preparation. Snaps her fingers.

GUARD
Daughters, be safe.

Lights down.

* * * * *

Scene 31

Lights up. MARGARET stands with GUARD, holding the tee-shirt, her body jittering.

MARGARET
What's taking them so long?

GUARD
These new security procedures -- I'm not sure Christ would pass.

MARGARET
I had a good phone call last night.

GUARD
That's good.

MARGARET
It was good. Matthew said someone called wanting to buy my story. What do you think?

GUARD simply looks at her.

MARGARET
I thought so, too.

They wait some more.

MARGARET
Cortez says you have daughters --

GUARD
It's almost time.
(relents)
I have two.

MARGARET
Are they doing okay?

GUARD
They made up the phrase "pride and joy" just for me.

MARGARET
That's good. That's good.

A SQUAWK from GUARD's radio. She leans in to listen.

GUARD
Your husband's here.

GUARD reaches over and takes the tee-shirt.

GUARD
You can't take it in.

GUARD folds it, puts it in her pocket.

GUARD
Don't worry.

Lights down.

* * * * *

Scene 32

Night light. CORTEZ jerks herself awake, which wakes MARGARET. For a moment, in the semi-darkness, they look at each other.

MARGARET
Hey --

CORTEZ does not respond. MARGARET gets up and puts her hand on CORTEZ's forehead.

MARGARET
You're on fire, is what you are --

CORTEZ gently knocks the hand away.

CORTEZ

Go back to sleep. You're leaving. You do not have to care.

MARGARET

House rules have changed, Cortez. S.O.P. has --

CORTEZ

Shut up -- just -- go back to sleep.

They both sit still in the darkness, neither going back to sleep.

MARGARET

Changed -- because I know about you.

The statement hangs in the air.

MARGARET

I had Matthew get our lawyer to read you up.

MARGARET looks at CORTEZ. CORTEZ stares into the darkness.

MARGARET

At first I thought you had killed her. That made my skin creep. But it was him -- all about him beating her to death.

CORTEZ

He was not Michael or Tamara's father. They were my rebellion in exile -- that's why I loved them so much. Of course, my family rejected them completely -- not really their blood -- so I chose to go with that dragon, because he would take care of us. He took care of us. Your lawyer give you details?

MARGARET

You never bothered pleading "not guilty" -- our lawyer said you could've gotten a lot less than life without parole if you'd put up a fight -- but you went straight to "guilty" -- you wanted no mitigating circumstances -- you lost Michael -
-

CORTEZ

Is that all he told you?

MARGARET

No. Six times in his throat --

CORTEZ

T - A - M - A --

MARGARET

Okay --

CORTEZ

(ignoring her)

R - A -- because I couldn't protect my child from his brutal appetite.

CORTEZ gets up and paces.

CORTEZ

How much that shamed me -- shames me still. "Guilty" was a gift, and I took it. I'd take it again. I take it every day, and it's just fine.

MARGARET

How can it ever be just fine? --

CORTEZ takes out Tamara's cloth and rips it in half.

MARGARET

Cortez!

CORTEZ throws the ripped cloth onto the table.

CORTEZ

Every night her thin voice calling me from my sleep -- I cup my hand -- I circle her, un abrazo de mi niña perdida -- each night she gives me one breath -- one space -- where I can breathe this rancid air as a person who has been pardoned. Absolved.

CORTEZ shows MARGARET a face both frightened and hard. Their look that takes what time it needs.

CORTEZ

But not any more. Of late this spring -- I have not been able to hear Tamara's voice. I have lost her voice. Now I see this: Tamara trying to talk to me as she always does but nothing comes out of her. I touch, I circle, I see the need on her face, her eyes scared, big, her mouth moving -- but nothing. Nothing! If I don't have her voice with me, in me --

MARGARET picks up one piece of the cloth.

MARGARET

What is her voice like?

CORTEZ
I took her and cracked her --

MARGARET
What is her voice like?

CORTEZ catches herself, barely keeping control.

CORTEZ
Like a Saturday morning -- she stands in my
bedroom door saying, "Mami, I want breakfast" --

MARGARET
Alex stands there, in just that same way, and he
signs --

(MARGARET signs)
-- "I'm hungry" --

CORTEZ gestures roughly to MARGARET for the piece of cloth MARGARET
holds.

CORTEZ
Fuck all of this. None of this concerns you.
Give it to me. Everything's just fine and I
don't need any forgiveness from you.

MARGARET does not hand back the cloth.

CORTEZ
Give. It. Back.

MARGARET
Did Michael make it --

CORTEZ
Just turned 12. Crime-free foster parents. My
burial? The best mothering he ever got from me.
Now, last time: give it back.

MARGARET stands, fingering the cloth, then hands it to CORTEZ. But as
CORTEZ takes it, MARGARET does not let go of it, so that they stand
there each holding an end of the cloth. Then MARGARET lets it go.

MARGARET
She's telling you something by not talking to
you.

They face each other in silence.

MARGARET
I have an idea.

CORTEZ

That's not a good idea.

MARGARET

Hear me out.

CORTEZ

You're leaving. You do not have to care.

MARGARET gets the tee-shirt, lays it on the table.

MARGARET

Tamara's cloth on top. Go on.

CORTEZ does.

MARGARET

When I get out, I'm going to bring them together
--

CORTEZ cuts her off by taking back Tamara's cloth.

CORTEZ

That is a stupid idea. No one ever comes back by
choice.

MARGARET

Look --

CORTEZ

Enough! You know what you know. Go home.

MARGARET

You can have her voice back.

CORTEZ

It's not your problem.

CORTEZ fumbles with the cloth.

MARGARET

And it'll give me a second chance with Alex and
Matthew. It's not all clear to me -- on the fly
here -- but if you --

CORTEZ

Your famous ambition at work, pendeja?

MARGARET

At least it has some juice, some bite.

MARGARET indicates CORTEZ's fumbling with the cloth.

MARGARET

So that's what ten years of "guilty" does.
That's how "fine" works.

CORTEZ

You should stop saying things you shouldn't say.

MARGARET

From the one who's lost what she says she can't
afford to lose.

A moment of decision about how much farther to go.

MARGARET

From some Boricuan beauty making herself think
that cutting her heart out every day of every day
honors her daughter --

MARGARET stops as CORTEZ shows her irritation and discomfort. But
CORTEZ doesn't cut MARGARET off.

MARGARET

That gets to be no different than some selfish
pendeja using her son and fooling herself into
calling it love.

MARGARET carefully folds the tee-shirt.

MARGARET

All my "mates" on the job -- the locker room
stories about heavy-fisted husbands and
boyfriends -- the dragon is everywhere, and I
think you all need a break.

MARGARET finishes folding, holds it up.

MARGARET

Origami.

CORTEZ

They won't let you come back.

MARGARET

I will.

CORTEZ

They won't let you.

MARGARET

But I will. Because you want me to. You don't
tell me about your mute daughter by accident --

not me. You don't let me leave with that up here just by chance, me who knows a little something about "mute."

CORTEZ rolls up the piece of Tamara's cloth and chucks it hard at MARGARET, who catches it.

CORTEZ

Don't make promises that will rot your soul.

CORTEZ lies on her bed. Lights down. MARGARET gets her bag and simply moves to GUARD's area.

* * * * *

Scene 33

GUARD

You got everything?

MARGARET

All my faculties intact.

Static in the shoulder mike, GUARD leans in to hear.

GUARD

Copy.

(to MARGARET)

Your entourage just came through the gate.

They both stand.

MARGARET

Wish I had something I could give you.

GUARD

Develop your own pictures in your own home -- and keep the clothes on the kid.

GUARD picks up the paper bag.

GUARD

I got to check this one more time.

GUARD goes into the paper bag and pulls out the strip of Tamara's cloth.

GUARD

I know you didn't come in with this.

MARGARET takes the cloth, fingers it.

MARGARET

It's a gift -- sort of.

GUARD takes it, rolls it in the tee-shirt.

GUARD

Out of sight, out of mind. Conversation is now at an official end. Let's go.

MARGARET

Life without parole --

GUARD

Is really life without parole -- unless they invent some new means of resurrection.

MARGARET

She will die in here.

GUARD

She will die in here. Let's go.

MARGARET

"If you keep your feet moving" --

GUARD gives MARGARET a look, then softens.

MARGARET

That is shit worth officially leaving with.

Lights down.

* * * * *

Scene 34

Lights up. GUARD at her locker. She pulls out the notecard, moves it back and forth to focus it. With a sigh and roll of her eyes, she reaches into her shirt pocket and pulls out a pair of reading glasses, which she pops on. She scans the notecard, puts it away, then looks into the mirror.

GUARD

They don't look that bad.

GUARD pulls at her face where the zit was, then takes her glasses off and puts them away.

GUARD

Never thought I'd be vain. But I also like being able to see.

GUARD snaps her fingers.

GUARD

May my daughters prosper.

Lights down.

* * * * *

Scene 35

Lights up. GUARD enters, carrying a portable screen for film projection and a folded canvas backdrop, which she drops on one of the chairs. She also carries a cosmetic case, which she puts on the table, opens, and checks. MARGARET follows quickly, bringing in a camera case, a tripod, and a briefcase.

GUARD

Most sane people stay left when they leave this place.

MARGARET

That's why sane people never get anything done.

GUARD

(pointing to briefcase)

Let me see it.

MARGARET hands it over; GUARD checks it, hands it back.

GUARD

Your husband and kid must really love you.

MARGARET

It's the Christian thing to be kind to crazy people.

GUARD turns to exit.

MARGARET

Hey! Your daughters?

GUARD

As of today, still mine.

MARGARET

Good.

GUARD

Glad you remembered to ask.

GUARD exits. Through the next part of the scene, MARGARET prepares for the shoot: opens screen, drapes canvas over it for a backdrop, puts lens on camera, sets up tripod, etc. GUARD re-enters with CORTEZ.

GUARD

I'm standing right outside.

GUARD exits.

CORTEZ

Didn't you get in trouble for a photography project?

MARGARET

That was definitely somebody else.

CORTEZ

Photographing women in prison and their children.

MARGARET

The grant proposal had a fancier title, but, yeah.

CORTEZ stands perfectly still.

MARGARET

When people ask me "Why bother?" I really believe what I say. About making my photography useful, honest -- especially after Alex. About making people remember that these women -- you -- and her -- are still "part of the family." All of that thanks to you.

MARGARET stops setting up and faces CORTEZ.

MARGARET

Believe it or not.

There is absolutely no response from CORTEZ.

MARGARET

I didn't put this in the letter because it was too late -- I've already signed on a gallery to show the pictures. So they'll get seen. As part --

CORTEZ

A gallery.

MARGARET

-- of a benefit for battered women.

CORTEZ makes an agitated move.

MARGARET

What?

CORTEZ

Nothing.

MARGARET

The pictures will be auctioned off to raise money
-- what is the matter?

CORTEZ circles.

MARGARET

I won't muck through the year of crap it took my
lawyer and me to get back into this place and get
permission to talk to you. You were the person I
thought of when I put this together. I put it
together because of you. I told you I would. I
told you I would come back.

CORTEZ gives her nothing back. MARGARET starts to pack up her
equipment.

MARGARET

I'll just fucking go right now.

CORTEZ puts a hand on MARGARET, and just as quickly snaps it back.

CORTEZ

You can't go --

MARGARET waits.

CORTEZ
(softly)

Don't -- go --

CORTEZ puts out her hand again, and MARGARET touches it. CORTEZ pulls
it back.

CORTEZ

Alex? Matthew?

MARGARET crosses her index and middle fingers to signify "together."

CORTEZ

Good -- good -- Will this work?

MARGARET

Yes.

CORTEZ

How?

MARGARET

I bring light -- you bring voice -- Tamara's voice -- because silence killed your daughter -- the thing that shamed you, wasn't it?

CORTEZ moves around the room, thinking.

MARGARET

Your pictures, your voice -- their pictures, their voices -- a thirty-page grant proposal in eight words -- how's that for a thrift-store redemption.

Still CORTEZ hesitates.

MARGARET

All right -- the heavy ammunition: "Child of mine, bathed by sublime tenderness / I have dreamt you a thousand times, / but where can you be? / Why don't you rebel and burst into the world...?"

CORTEZ looks at MARGARET in amazement.

CORTEZ

You memorized that?

MARGARET

Pages 490 and 491. I considered "Poem to the Child Who Doesn't Arrive" part of your transcript.

CORTEZ

"You will arrive at my arms on a solemn day / when everything at my side will dress in light. / There will be light in the shadows..."

CORTEZ simply puts a hand on MARGARET's shoulder.

CORTEZ

I take the deal.

MARGARET

See? You learned something from me.

CORTEZ

However --

MARGARET

What "however"?

CORTEZ

The gallery thing --

MARGARET

What?

CORTEZ

Don't care for it. Too much of the liberal guilt thing.

MARGARET

So shoot.

CORTEZ

Very funny. Put these pictures in the dead country, too -- here, in a church, a bodega, a school, even just hang them on a fence -- in a diner -- you're good at that -- anywhere but just a gallery. And you have to get the do-gooders to go there.

MARGARET

Still listening.

CORTEZ

Because you need a context to make it. You need charts of ownership and income and health and education. If we want no more Tamaras in the morgue, they need to know the dead country -- they need to cross the borders, not just feel oh so lagrimoso and sensitized. Those are my terms. And if you don't accept them, I'll make sure no one sits for you.

CORTEZ gives MARGARET a little smile.

MARGARET

I agree -- bigger picture, bigger world. So -- still a deal?

CORTEZ

Still a deal.

MARGARET

Call "the deal" Alex and Tamara?

CORTEZ

Tamara and Alex.

MARGARET
Tamara and Alex, it is, then --

An awkward suspended moment: the next step?

CORTEZ
Now what?

MARGARET
Well -- let's take some pictures. Nothing formal. Just to get people used to the camera, to me -- you know, truce-building.

CORTEZ goes over to MARGARET's camera set-up.

CORTEZ
Does this have a timer on it?

MARGARET
Even set the number of pictures you want.

CORTEZ
Focus?

MARGARET
Here. Ready, press here. It beeps to warn you.

CORTEZ
Will it make coffee?

MARGARET
Next model.

CORTEZ
All right. Sit down.

MARGARET sits down.

CORTEZ
Official record.

MARGARET
Tamara and Alex.

CORTEZ
Tamara and Alex.

CORTEZ focuses on MARGARET, then presses the button. CORTEZ sits beside MARGARET.

CORTEZ
This is not going to be easy.

MARGARET

But, man, is it going to be great.

The camera beeps. Strobe pops. Lights out.

* * * * *

Scene 36

GUARD joins MARGARET and CORTEZ. Lights up. Let the actors get their applause. Then the three of them dismantle the stage, reversing what they did in the beginning, and when there is nothing left to take away, they do not return.