

Michael Bettencourt

Full-Length Plays: Volume 1

Block & Tackle Productions Press



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**Amusing Ourselves To Death • A Question Of Color
On The Nature Of The Dark Matter...**

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Block & Tackle Productions Press



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To María Beatriz - always in all ways

Amusing Ourselves To Death

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

A man arrested for painting "hope" in large letters across a street is at the center of a story about betrayal, revenge, and love.

CHARACTERS

- PETER WALDO -- 50s, has been an insurance salesman forever
- ISAIAH -- late 20s/early 30s
- SARAH -- 50s, PETER's assistant and perhaps more
- CHIEF HANNAH BARTLETT -- 65, going on retirement
- HELIOS
- KATHERINE

Inspired by John Gardner's *The Sunlight Dialogues*.

* * * * *

Isaiah stands in the woods. On the ground is a well-stuffed well-worn rucksack with a tent and a sleeping bag attached.

He kneels down in front of a flat rock. On the rock is a cell phone. In Isaiah's hand is a small hammer.

He breaks the cellphone, then carefully picks up the pieces and puts them in a burlap bag.

Next, he puts a laptop on the stump and smashes that. Puts the pieces in the bag. Perhaps even a tablet. Those pieces go in as well.

He shakes the bag, then stands and swings the bag over his head like a dead cat by the tail and lets out a wild whoop -- several, in fact, that echo through the woods. They could be wails of mourning.

* * * * *

Scene 1

The office of Peter Waldo, insurance salesman. Sarah, his assistant, sits on the other side of his desk, appointment book in hand.

SARAH

You did hear what I said.

PETER

No. Yes. I did.

SARAH

Glad the memory's still working.

SARAH

So really?

SARAH

Yes really --

PETER

Hmm --

SARAH

There's someone on your land.

PETER

By the pond?

SARAH

Those heavenly eleven acres.

PETER

Who?

SARAH

Walt.

PETER

Walt. Walt would be in a position to know.

SARAH

Park rangers have a way of knowing.

PETER

Did Walt say anything? Do anything?

SARAH

About "say" -- nothing but tell me. About "do" -- it's not his job.

PETER

True -- Walt's job is to tell you, yes. About Walt --

SARAH

Auto's coming up -- and his boat --

PETER

Thought so --

SARAH

You don't seem worried.

PETER

About Walt? He always pays on time.

SARAH

Come on.

PETER

Should I be? I don't if I should be. So why be worried about what I don't know.

SARAH

That's not a good attitude for an insurance salesman --

PETER

True.

SARAH

-- and I'd like to keep my job.

PETER

Though insurance agent of the year, four years running.

SARAH

And year five --

PETER

Year five -- is -- will be -- year five. Not to worry about what you don't know -- not too bad for life in general, don't you think. At least most days.

SARAH

Everything all right?

PETER

Yeah.

SARAH

Because you're sounding grumpy like the bar guys down at the VFW.

PETER

Nobody can match them, Sarah. No, I feel right as rain, though I have no idea what that saying is supposed to mean.

SARAH

If you're a thirsty plant --

PETER

The lament of the dry riverbed. Is the billing done?

SARAH

Going out today, just as it has always gone out at the time it is supposed to go out. Are you sure?

PETER

I think so.

SARAH

You going to check him out?

PETER

I suppose I should. Did Walt say who he was? Is?

SARAH

Walt didn't get that close, just saw someone from the access road. It's your land. You've got building plans for it.

PETER

What's a day without having your plans?

SARAH

Grump. I think you should go back to eating yogurt -- you had a glow then.

PETER

Just an expensive glass of milk.

SARAH

Just a suggestion. You've got the meeting with the Rotary today and then the Willetts for their new boat.

PETER

Bundle it with the auto, save them a bundle.

SARAH

Let the slogans begin.

PETER

Have never failed us yet.

SARAH

Oh, and by the way --

PETER

What? And why the smirk?

SARAH

Charles Brixton.

PETER

What?

SARAH

So you haven't heard.

PETER

No.

SARAH

I just got news they found Charles Brixton passed away.
You know, got it through my telephone grapevine.

PETER

Charles Brixton?

SARAH

Sitting in his bathrobe at his desk in his mansion on his hill
overlooking his town --

PETER

Don't speak ill --

SARAH

Oh, I was done speaking ill of Charles Brixton long time ago
-- only so many curse words in the dictionary you can apply
to a man like him, a family like that, and I just ran out.

PETER

I can understand, Sarah.

SARAH

You should --

PETER

Your father should've gotten treated better --

SARAH

What Charles Brixton tried to do to my father was
shrimpcakes compared to you --

PETER

But it didn't work, did it, either way -- your father got out from
under, and so did I, and here I am -- here we are -- bundling
things together to make people's lives better.

SARAH

If I didn't know you better, I would've sworn that was
sarcasm.

PETER

Just skimming along the edge.

SARAH

Have to say that my grapevine is a lot better than the Internet
-- better quality outrage --

Sarah leaves. Peter muses. He reaches into his desk, pulls out what looks like a well-thumbed Bible, opens it, reads.

* * * * *

Scene 2

Peter, wearing a classic alpaca coat, tromps across his land and finds Isaiah seated in front of his tent on a camp stool, roll-up variety. Isaiah is writing in a small journal.

The burlap bag is on the ground beside him.

PETER

I own this land, you know.

ISAIAH

You kicking me off?

PETER

I'm just stating the fact for the record, that's all. What're you doing on it?

ISAIAH

What are you doing owning it? What does that mean, for the record?

PETER

Do you know who I am?

ISAIAH

Will that make a difference? He's deciding.

PETER

You must have your reasons. Do I know you?

ISAIAH

Does anyone know anyone?

PETER

You are full of questions, but not the ones I'm asking you --

ISAIAH

It's what I'm giving you back.

PETER

So you don't answer what I ask -- life is still good. Just that if I did know you, I don't recognize you, and so I'm sorry for that. Do you have another one of those stools? These are not shoes made for the woods.

ISAIAH

Should've prepared better.

PETER

Yea, verily, for all times. Do you?

Isaiah reaches into the tent and pulls out another camp stool. He goes to unroll it, but Peter indicates that he doesn't have to do that, and so opens it himself and sits.

PETER

These are pretty nifty. You brought two -- interesting.

Peter unlaces his shoes, loosens them. They muse.

Isaiah reaches down, grabs the burlap bag, and tosses it over to Peter, where it lands with a thump and a rattle.

ISAIAH

Act of contrition. Mine.

Peter looks in the bag, nods in appreciation, closes it, sets it on the ground beside him.

PETER

Right as rain. Do you know what "right as rain" means? Today I said, to a dear friend of mine, that I was right as rain. I don't believe I am. Right, that is. As rain. Walt, the park ranger, was the one who told me about you. The park borders all the lake over there, except for this parcel.

ISAIAH

So your "parcel" kept the whole thing from being a park for everyone.

PETER

You could put it that way. I keep it open -- obviously -- contiguous. Post for no hunting but not for trespassing.

ISAIAH

To you that sounds like doing enough.

PETER

It's worked so far.

ISAIAH

So what does my being here make me?

PETER

Who knows what enough is, what is enough. Right as rain -- maybe that's what you are. Nice to be out here -- I don't get out here enough.

ISAIAH

One thing that makes me is an excuse.

Peter picks up the burlap bag, shakes it.

PETER

Why are you so angry?

ISAIAH

Why aren't you?

PETER

You can't know if I am or not, but -- you are, so your question to me is just, what, grumpiness -- like the bar guys down at the VFW.

ISAIAH

I'm nothing like those leftovers.

PETER

You know them?

ISAIAH

Know of them.

PETER

So why are you deflecting my question with a question -- a verbal en garde of yours, it seems.

ISAIAH

All right, then this: why shouldn't I be angry?

PETER

I heard once that it means you're paying attention -- actually, more than once. Is that true? Is that what you're doing -- trying to do? Pay attention? By now Walt the park ranger has told Chief of Police Hannah Bartlett -- we're progressive, a woman -- tough woman -- tough -- he's told her that you're out here and that I know you're out here. It's not a static situation -- things are in motion, no matter how much you cram into the burlap bag.

ISAIAH

I'm going to bury that bag.

PETER

Doesn't make a difference. Change is afoot, change is abroad. Even out here. Speaking of feet -- time to herd them back in.

Peter re-ties his shoes, checks his watch, stands.

PETER

I have my rounds to keep.

ISAIAH

Are. You. Kicking. Me. Off.

Peter picks up the stool, re-folds it.

PETER

You have your reasons. You have appeared.

Peter offers Isaiah the stool. Isaiah takes it.

PETER

I'll talk to Walt. I'll talk to Chief Bartlett. Don't burn the place down. You'll probably get a visit from the chief -- don't underestimate her, the way you generally seem to be doing with this entire current situation.

Peter turns to go, walks a bit, turns back.

PETER

We should exchange names, now that you're my temporary tenant. You don't have to, but I'll find it out anyway -- Walt, Chief Bartlett, they like to know these things and so, in the due course of time, they will come to find out --

ISAIAH

Isaiah.

PETER

That your given name or one assumed -- I am referring to the burlap bag.

ISAIAH

It's a given name.

PETER

Clever answer. Just don't be clever with Walt or the Chief -- I'm not such a libertarian that I won't stop them from coming on here to take you off if they think it the thing to do.

ISAIAH

Is the shoreline yours?

PETER

And fifty feet into the lake.

ISAIAH

I'm thinking of hygiene.

PETER

Pit privy would be recommended. You have tools?

ISAIAH

I have the means.

PETER

I'll trust you're telling me the truth.

Peter turns and leaves.

PETER

Anger. Careful. Bury it deep. Glad you've got a second stool. Shows hope.

Peter leaves. Isaiah shouts after him.

ISAIAH

Bottom of the privy -- that deep enough for you?

No response. Quiet woods. Isaiah puts the second stool inside the tent, picks up the burlap bag, sets it down by his stool. He gives it a good stomp with his heel, then sits down, picks up the journal, writes.

* * * * *

Scene 3

At the Rotary lunch. Lunch sounds, garbled voice of a boring speaker. Hannah plays with the cutlery.

BARTLETT

You sure?

PETER

I sell insurance, Hannah -- I'm not in the "sure" business.

BARTLETT

Don't be smart.

PETER

Are you in the "sure" business?

BARTLETT

Serve and protect.

PETER

You're being professionally worried for no good reason.

BARTLETT

I can run him off for trespassing.

PETER

It's not posted for that.

BARTLETT

Doesn't have to be posted -- you know [that] --

PETER

Is that what he's doing?

BARTLETT

Technically.

PETER

Letter of the law --

BARTLETT

That's it.

PETER

-- but, really, Hannah, what does that mean, "technically"?

BARTLETT

Something in your chicken that I didn't get?

PETER

Same rubber protein --

BARTLETT

Different kind of rubber in your chicken, then? Because you're not making --

PETER

I am just saying that he doesn't seem to be a threat to public safety.

BARTLETT

Until your woods go up, along with the state park, and then the new developments along the county road. Should I continue to enumerate?

PETER

I don't have a good comeback.

BARTLETT

Let me at least show my face to him.

PETER

I told him you might do that -- so you should go ahead and do that.

Peter makes a sign of the cross.

PETER

I give you my blessing.

BARTLETT

I don't need your blessing.

PETER

I give it to you anyway, free of charge.

BARTLETT

Keep it for someone who wants it. Did he give you a last name?

PETER

Why so grumpy, Hannah?

BARTLETT

Did he give you a last name?

PETER

No, he did not. I don't know if the name he gave is a first name or a last, or even his. Why so grumpy? You're like the guys at the VFW.

BARTLETT

I can't speak about it.

PETER

Even though everyone knows about it -- c'mon -- have gossip, will travel.

BARTLETT

So. You heard about Charles Brixton?

PETER

From Sarah and her grapevine.

BARTLETT

Sent Figaro up there this morning to check it out -- seems like a pure heart failure, no foul play. But King Charles Brixton dies just when -- I can't speak about it.

PETER

Hannah --

BARTLETT

It's just -- "creepy" is the only word -- Brixton kicks off and we get a man who paints the word "hope" in big swooshy letters across the steps of the county courthouse, we take him in, he calls himself "Helios" -- out of a book, he says -- you know what "Helios" means?

PETER

I do.

BARTLETT

I didn't, not until I --

PETER

So he forced to use your computer --

BARTLETT

It's not funny.

PETER

You and computers --

BARTLETT

You don't seem to particularly care about the law today, either.

PETER

Sorry -- I can see -- sorry. Maybe it is the chicken. Is the painting all he's done?

BARTLETT

All that we know about.

PETER

I don't what book he's referring to.

BARTLETT

I don't care about the book -- I don't even care about the painting, though it's defacing public property -- the county courthouse, for God's sake, so there's the sheriff to have to --

PETER

What is it, Hannah?

BARTLETT

What I care about is this feeling I have that -- well --

PETER

Well?

BARTLETT

Shouldn't be talking about this.

PETER

Then let's not talk about it here. We can go -- the desserts are rolling out, and that's usually like the starting bell for the races.

They get up and move off to the side. Peter pulls a snuff box out of his pocket and dollops a little into the palm of his hand. He hands Hannah the box -- she also puts some into her palm and hands back the box.

Together, they snuff their tobacco. They do not sneeze -- they are not beginners at this.

BARTLETT

At least they haven't made that illegal yet.

PETER

Be a shame to have to turn in my grandfather's snuff box.

BARTLETT

So --

PETER

So, Chief --

BARTLETT

So. I'm retiring soon, you know that, and I don't want to have these kinds of feelings in my gut -- I want it smooth, I want to exit with a minimum of -- perturbation -- how's that for a word, eh?

PETER

Helios --

BARTLETT

He makes me feel like there are creatures in the earth coming out that shouldn't be seeing the light of day. And then Brixton turns up dead --

PETER

He didn't "turn up dead," Hannah -- he just died like an old man does.

BARTLETT

You must feel some good about that.

PETER

Mixed, to be honest.

BARTLETT

I, for one, am glad to see his line end, but with him and this Helios and the cemetery vandalism, the dead baby in the chimney flue, two murders -- two, Peter, since when have we ever had two --

PETER

Helios can't be responsible for --

BARTLETT

I'm not saying he is. But these are signs.

PETER

Maybe retirement has you spooked --

BARTLETT

A rash of trouble, like the fabric is coming apart. End-times, you know -- seismic changes -- who cares enough about "hope" these days to paint it and then be arrested for it and then --

PETER

That was a pretty sharp shut of your trap, Hannah -- what did you almost let out?

BARTLETT

You heard about his face?

PETER

No.

BARTLETT

Part-covered in scar tissue, like he'd been through fire. And he knows things. About us. About the city. About Brixton. About me.

PETER

Things.

BARTLETT

Things that would be known only by someone who would know them to tell them. He's a sign, Peter, he's a sign.

PETER

And don't forget we also got a guy named Isaiah wandering the woods -- and smashing up the symbols of modern civilization.

BARTLETT

Hadn't thought of that -- in that way.

PETER

Hannah, it's just an observation --

BARTLETT

But everything is connected.

PETER

Doesn't mean they're connected to each other --

BARTLETT

What else is law enforcement -- what else is my job -- except believing that -- effect and cause and figuring out who pays.

PETER

Sometimes --

BARTLETT

Peter?

PETER

Sorry -- might sound profound but really just silly.

BARTLETT

Your grandfather wouldn't have stopped himself.

PETER

A civil tongue was not the minister's strong suit. It's my bread-and-butter. Let it go. I've got to get out to the Willets.

BARTLETT

Glad we missed the dessert.

PETER

Given your stomach.

BARTLETT

One other thing about this Helios --

PETER

Walk me to my car.

BARTLETT

He's a magician -- good -- he picked Kashinsky's pocket while handcuffed and Kashinsky was marching him to the holding cell --

PETER

That's not magic.

BARTLETT

No, you're right -- feels more like apocalypse.

And off they go.

* * * * *

Scene 4

Hannah at Isaiah's campsite. Burlap bag is still in view. Isaiah is seated on one of the stools, whittling.

Bartlett, hands on hips, watches. Exasperated.

BARTLETT

Okay -- okay okay okay. Again -- why?

ISAIAH

You sure? Sit down?

BARTLETT

No.

ISAIAH

You'd like "why."

BARTLETT

A formality.

ISAIAH

Uh-huh.

BARTLETT

Even though Mr. Waldo says you can stay here, truth is that you're still trespassing, which is my domain, not his.

ISAIAH

Though where we're sitting -- well, you standing -- right here -- this is his domain, right?

BARTLETT

Deed-wise, yes. We're not talking about deeds.

ISAIAH

Why. No -- not yet, at least. Theories?

BARTLETT

None --

ISAIAH

Really, you should sit down.

BARTLETT

I'm fine.

ISAIAH

It's not a short walk to your cruiser over there on the access road. That I know. Let me do you a good deed, even if this isn't about deeds.

Isaiah pulls the second camp stool from the tent and hands it to Hannah. Hannah opens it and sets it down but does not sit.

ISAIAH

At least some water.

BARTLETT

Fine. I'd like to know some facts --

ISAIAH

So would I.

BARTLETT

Stop with the mocking.

ISAIAH

Fact: pit privy is over there, more than 100 feet from the water line, as prescribed by your law --

BARTLETT

How would you know that?

ISAIAH

I read it -- at your library. The other day.

BARTLETT

You don't have the permit to dig --

ISAIAH

Mr. Waldo asked me to make sure -- so, a permit, sort of, right? His domain, deed-wise.

BARTLETT

You walked to the library.

ISAIAH

It's also where I learned more about Helios.

BARTLETT

On-going investigation.

ISAIAH

Aren't they all?

Hannah and Isaiah appraise one another.

ISAIAH

Painting "hope" -- wow.

BARTLETT

Why are you out here? Why have you appeared?

ISAIAH

Fact: I've been living off my own form of MREs, carefully collecting any waste --

BARTLETT

Your "facts" are just details --

ISAIAH

You want "fact" facts. You are a fact-based person, officer of the law. All right -- facts for you.

Isaiah picks up the burlap bag and tosses it to Hannah. Hannah looks at it like it's a snake.

ISAIAH

It won't bite. Bitten me, but that's all the bite it has. Bite is gone. It won't bite you.

Hannah moves the bag with her toe, then picks it up and looks inside.

ISAIAH

All those -- technical marvels -- not a saving grace among them.

BARTLETT

Why?

ISAIAH

Things that don't have any saving graces should be smashed.

BARTLETT

Technically, I could consider that a terrorist statement, according to --

ISAIAH

In your hands I rest our homeland security. I don't blame you -- common-sense is terrorist -- threatening to think straight can be terrorist --

Hannah puts the bag down.

ISAIAH

Still no theories?

BARTLETT

Technology is such a bastard these days.

ISAIAH

These days? What about that technology on your hip, your "side-arm" --

Isaiah clamps up, whittles.

BARTLETT

Something happen about a sidearm?

ISAIAH

That bag -- I keep it to remind me of pointlessness. I am planning to bury it, but it keeps reminding me. That's a fact for you: I have come here because of pointlessness.

BARTLETT

Here.

Isaiah laughs, but without much humor.

ISAIAH

Homeland security. On-going investigation.

Isaiah whittles. Hannah watches.

ISAIAH

Anything else? Any theories?

Hannah looks at Isaiah whittling.

BARTLETT

I'm thinking grief -- anger -- can smell something like that coming off you. Kind of like a pit privy -- even one properly built.

Isaiah tries to act indifferent, but he doesn't mask it well.

BARTLETT

Careful -- medical help'd be hard to come by out here, especially without a phone.

ISAIAH

Thank you for your words of caution.

BARTLETT

Those are the only words I've got for you. My drill -- you've got Mr. Waldo's permission, but I don't have to abide by it --

ISAIAH

Got it.

BARTLETT

Just fact. Grief -- anger -- that's my first theory.

ISAIAH

Enjoy.

Hannah hitches up her belt, gets herself ready to walk back to the access road.

BARTLETT

Grant you -- it's nice out here.

ISAIAH

Good luck with Helios.

BARTLETT

Luck has nothing to do with it.

ISAIAH

Wrong theory.

They give each other the once over. Hannah leaves.

Isaiah whittles a bit more, then stops, muses. He pulls a photo out of his shirt pocket, muses over it, looks off while toying with the photo -- as if the decision he is making and the photo he holds have something to do with each other.

* * * * *

Scene 5

Peter's office, Peter reading from his Bible. Sarah leads in Isaiah.

SARAH

Your tenant.

PETER

Make yourself comfortable. Thanks, Sarah.

ISAIAH

Thanks.

SARAH

Make sure he's got the rent check.

PETER

You keep me honest.

Sarah edges out of the office.

PETER

She doesn't think I'm doing the right thing --

ISAIAH

Obviously. Who --

PETER

Sarah?

ISAIAH

Do you like her?

PETER

Everyone likes her.

ISAIAH

Come on. Come on.

Peter knows what he means, but he won't play the game.

ISAIAH

Unrequited.

PETER

Not about Sarah.

ISAIAH

Then about many things --

PETER

Can't be satisfied all the time.

ISAIAH

Life. Living.

PETER

You could say that.

An active silence. Isaiah fidgets.

PETER

I won't pry if you don't want me to.

ISAIAH

I left my stuff at the tent so your police chief could check it out at her leisure --

PETER

It's her job.

ISAIAH

There are jobs, and there are jobs.

PETER

She told me her theory.

ISAIAH

What's yours? You must have one.

PETER

That Jesus Christ meant what he said -- or at least what the four have him say. Everything after that went the wrong way.

Peter's words agitate Isaiah even more, and he gets up to pace.

PETER

Chief Bartlett thinks Helios is a sign, a sign of things to come or things that are already coming. What's your theory about that theory, since we seem to be in the mode of exchanging theories.

Sarah enters with two glasses of water. She gives one to Peter, the other to Isaiah.

SARAH

It's a long walk, even on a day like today.

ISAIAH

Thank you.

Isaiah takes a sip, then finds that he's downing the whole glass. Peter offers Isaiah his own. Isaiah takes that and drinks it down. Sarah takes the glasses.

ISAIAH

Thirstier than I thought.

SARAH

More?

Isaiah shakes his head no.

PETER

Sarah -- your opinion. Chief Bartlett thinks Helios is a sign -- of things to come or things already coming. What's your theory about that?

SARAH

More?

PETER

I'm good. You?

ISAIAH

Fine. Thank you.

PETER

You sure --

SARAH

The Chief would think of signs -- that's her job, seeing signs.

ISAIAH

-- I'm fine.

SARAH

Helios? Who knows? But you? If there's a sign, I think it's you.

ISAIAH

Of what?

SARAH

That would be for my boss to find out -- it's his land.

PETER

Come on, Sarah -- one theory, at least. Our Isaiah here thinks everyone has them -- right?

SARAH

All right, twist my rubber arm. For me, the apocalypse is always happening, just in slow motion. Takes ages, never finishes, always leaves bones behind. Like a glacier.

Sarah muses a moment, then looks ISAISH square in the face.

SARAH

Don't know your particular secret, don't really care -- yet -- but whatever it is, it drove you to come to this longitude and latitude and not somewhere else to look for bones. I said I don't care, and I don't, but I will care if what you're digging for hurts him. Not theory. Fact. And now --

Sarah does a little curtsey and leaves.

PETER

Out of the mouth of a babe -- sorry, bad joke, not even sure why I said it.

Peter looks at Isaiah.

ISAIAH

What?

PETER

Well, a response. Some reaction.

ISAIAH

It was a mistake to come here.

PETER

That's right, you came here. You walked to this office for a reason, and so far people have cut you slack. You are a sign -- Sarah's or somebody's, I don't know -- but, really,

unless there's something soon, the Chief is going to get her way, no matter what I say.

Isaiah finally speaks.

ISAIAH

I need your help. I want to speak to Helios.

PETER

So ask the Chief. I'm serious. But she'll ask you what I'm about to ask you: why? And unless you can answer that.

ISAIAH

I just need to speak with him.

PETER

And, again, why? You're getting close to having to give a "why" unless you just want to live out on my property until the Chief hauls you away, mission not accomplished.

ISAIAH

I can't say "why" until I talk with him. I just can't.

PETER

You're asking me to trust you.

ISAIAH

"Jesus Christ meant what he said."

PETER

That has no bearing on things at the moment.

ISAIAH

If it's got no bearing, what's the point of a theory about it? And telling it to me?

PETER

The Chief is going to ask me why -- no way around that. If I do this favor for you, I need something on my side going in. Something that says --

ISAIAH

Who is he to me, this strange man, this apparition.

PETER

Something like that.

ISAIAH

Change in request, then. Tell the Chief that you want me brought in for trespassing -- you know, scare me a little, scare me straight. Leave me in there, bail me out, doesn't matter -- but I guess it's time to bring in the law.

PETER

You're sure.

ISAIAH

As sure as my pit privy.

PETER

Thank you for that, by the way.

ISAIAH

I'm leaving. You will?

PETER

I'll -- consider it.

ISAIAH

She's had time to go through my stuff -- at least she'll see I'm not a terrorist -- probably disappoint her.

Isaiah leaves.

PETER

That is not what is going to disappoint her.

Peter taps his Bible. Sarah enters, papers in hand.

SARAH

You're being awfully Christian about this.

PETER

What else can you be to a sign of the apocalypse?

SARAH

Get him off your property as soon as you can.

PETER

I will.

SARAH

He's no reason to bruise your friendship with Hannah.

PETER

He knows something about this Helios -- or thinks he does.

Sarah puts the papers on Peter's desk.

SARAH

Checks, for invoices. Sign 'em. I don't care if he knows.

PETER

But I do. Checks. Okay.

SARAH

Don't forget. That's what the "babe" thinks. I heard.

Sarah gives him a big smile, and for the moment Peter's mood is lightened. Sarah kisses him on the cheek, then backs out, making fun of him with swami hand-gestures.

SARAH

Don't forget. Don't forget. Don't forget.

Sarah turns and goes. Peter moves the checks to one side, opens the Bible, reads.

* * * * *

Scene 6

Helios and Isaiah are in "cells," which take up most of the stage. To one side is an observation room with a video monitor and a speaker system.

Helios is seated in a meditative position. His face is partially disfigured by scar tissue, his suit is dirtied, his hair is wild.

Isaiah watches him.

Peter and Hannah in the room with video monitor.

BARTLETT

I'm not supposed to question him directly -- sheriff wants to do that on his own. But with modern communications --

PETER

Cells are monitored.

BARTLETT

State requirement -- safety of the prisoners. Except we couldn't afford the one-way-mirror -- would've had to knock out the wall --

PETER

He's safe?

BARTLETT

Unless Helios can, well, shrink through the bars.

PETER

You do not sound certain.

BARTLETT

He says things -- does things -- knows things --

PETER

Maybe he's from here.

BARTLETT

He look like anybody ever bought a policy from you? Maybe he's a lost member of the Rotary -- or the Odd Fellows --

PETER

Just looking at the options, Hannah.

BARTLETT

The sheriff is my option, I shall not want. Good to get them both out of here. You are going to press the trespassing, right? Peter?

PETER

I'm considering it.

BARTLETT

Considering? Then why did you have me --

HELIOS

Chief Bartlett? I know you have access to us.

Peter and Hannah clam up, though they know Helios can't hear them.
Hannah turns off the room light, though she knows he can't see them.

PETER

He can't see [us] --

BARTLETT

Sssh --

Hannah paces, lit by the video monitor in the room. Helios sighs.

HELIOS

The law, the thin blue line between -- well, between what
and what? Each "what" must answer. Chief Bartlett, my
local habitation is a big old house on Lowrey Street, where
I dream alone of metaphysics.

Hannah and Peter both act startled

BARTLETT

How's he know where you live? I told you --

HELIOS

As a friend I can tell you: metaphysics can ruin a person
for life.

PETER

Metaphysics --

HELIOS

I'll bet he is mouthing the word.

ISAIAH

She.

HELIOS

He. You think you know but you don't.

ISAIAH

What don't I know?

HELIOS

Where shall I begin? How about this: Requiem aeternam
dona eis, Domine --

Helios continues to say the prayer as Hannah and Peter converse. After Isaiah's line, Helios stops saying the words and simply mouths them while looking at Isaiah, perhaps even making the sign of the cross, but backwards, or in some other loopy fashion.

HELIOS

-- et lux perpetua luceat eis. Requiescant in pace.

ISAIAH

It is you, isn't it?

HELIOS

(mouthing the words)

-- Te decet hymnus Deus in Sion; et tibi reddetur votum
in Jerusalem: exaudi orationem meam; ad te omnis caro
veniet. Dies irae, dies illa solvet saeculum in favilla, teste
David cum Sibylla. Quantus tremor est futurus, quando
iudex est venturus, cuncta stricte discussurus!

BARTLETT

What's he saying?

PETER

The prayer for eternal rest --

BARTLETT

Really?

PETER

Catholic -- requiem, mass for the dead --

BARTLETT

And how would you know Latin?

PETER

Apparently, I know metaphysics, too.

BARTLETT

Doesn't answer my question. Why am I feeling like you're not on my side all of a sudden?

PETER

Hannah --

BARTLETT

I'm gonna move the kid -- and it isn't good he knows where you live --

Everyone is interrupted by a slice of Mozart's "Requiem" that fills the air -- but as if it's playing through the PA system. So short that no one can say for sure they heard it -- though they heard it.

Helios finishes the prayer.

BARTLETT

All right, that's it. That's f[ucking] -- Christ enough already -- sixty-five and --

Hannah swings out of her office into the cell area. Peter, musing, follows.

As Hannah arrives, trailed by Peter, Katherine appears, though only Helios can see her, wearing a simple flame-colored shift. She passes through the cell area like a ghost, which is what she is. She can touch Helios, but Helios cannot touch her. Isaiah watches Helios watch Katherine.

Katherine waits to the side.

BARTLETT

What's your name? What's your goddamn name?

Helios slowly pivots his gaze away from Katherine to Hannah.

BARTLETT

What were you looking at?

Helios looks at Peter.

HELIOS

I am looking at nothing. Peter Waldo was known in history as a pious man who made the mistake of believing the gospels meant what they said.

BARTLETT

What's he talking about?

PETER

Where I come from.

BARTLETT

That tells me nothing. He tells me nothing, you tell me nothing. One more time: what is your name?

HELIOS

Puddin Tane.

BARTLETT

Not in the mood for smart[ass] --

HELIOS

It's my first and second nature.

BARTLETT

You've committed a serious crime. You sensible of that?

HELIOS

The Lord is my sensible, I shall not want.

BARTLETT

Do you have a job? Do you have any means of support?

HELIOS

I am employed by the insurance policy of metaphysics.

Something about this answer strikes Hannah. She pulls the ring of keys off her gear belt and opens Isaiah's cell.

BARTLETT

Come on!

Hannah grabs Isaiah and shoves him into Peter's arms.

BARTLETT

Back out there, now! Go!

Hannah re-locks the cell door, replaces the keys. Peter guides Isaiah out of the area. Isaiah resists but not too strongly, and they end up in the observation room, video monitor still on.

Hannah paces -- at various times, she comes close enough to Helios' cell for Helios to reach out and touch if he wanted to. He will, at some point, slip the keys off her belt.

HELIOS

Why are you shaking?

Katherine settles into Isaiah's former cell. Her light makes her a madonna in flame. Helios sees her -- when they speak to each other, Hannah doesn't hear them.

BARTLETT

You're an intelligent man, obvious --

HELIOS

I am the Lord God of Hosts.

BARTLETT

Smartass intelligent --

KATHERINE

Don't harass her so.

BARTLETT

What was the Lord's purpose, writing "hope" on a courthouse?

HELIOS

The world craves more hope, sister.

(To KATHERINE)

I'm not lying.

KATHERINE

Let it go, sweet --

BARTLETT

More hope? -- more hope? --

KATHERINE

-- let it go.

BARTLETT

Is defacing public property any way to get more hope?

HELIOS

When the spirits say paint --

BARTLETT

Stop talking gibberish.

HELIOS

You ask the wrong questions, you use the wrong vocabulary.

BARTLETT

And "hope" is the right [word] --

KATHERINE

Gentle -- you know how.

HELIOS

It brought the four of us together -- no, five -- no, six --

BARTLETT

Answer my question. Answer my --

HELIOS

I've forgotten what it was.

BARTLETT

What was your purpose --

HELIOS

Why do you keep pacing? Sit down. Relax. You make me nervous.

BARTLETT

I'll decide when it's time to sit down.

HELIOS

No, you won't.

BARTLETT

I won't?

HELIOS

You'll put it off until the last minute and then you'll fall on your sixty-five-year old retirement posterior, calling it "duty." Serving and protecting. Watchdog of society. Why do you tremble so? Answer my question.

BARTLETT

Where do you really live? Just answer my questions.

HELIOS

How should I answer that?

KATHERINE

It's been your question for years.

BARTLETT

What happened to your face?

HELIOS

What happened to yours?

KATHERINE

So much pain.

Katherine gets up to go.

HELIOS

No!

BARTLETT

No?

HELIOS

Requiescat in pace.

KATHERINE

Never, sweet -- none of us.

Katherine leaves.

BARTLETT

What? Who should --

HELIOS

I want to talk with the prophet.

BARTLETT

No.

Hannah backs out of the cell area.

BARTLETT

No. No.

Hannah moves back to the room.

Helios waits -- then Hannah's keys appear in his hands. He unlocks the cell door, steps out, drops the keys on the floor, and exits just as Hannah comes to the observation room.

Peter and Isaiah have seen what Helios did. Hannah looks at the monitor, sees that Helios is gone, feels the empty gear belt, bolts out of the room.

Hannah sees the keys on the floor, just stares at them.

BARTLETT

Punked -- punked --

Hannah looks up where the video camera would be; Isaiah and Peter stare at Hannah in the monitor.

Then Hannah picks up the keys and barrels out of the room to see if anyone in the station saw the ghost leave.

Peter and Isaiah come into the cell area.

PETER

You know who he is.

ISAIAH

No.

PETER

I heard you ask him. I don't think Chief Bartlett heard you.

ISAIAH

I said no.

PETER

Your face says different.

ISAIAH

So don't look at my face.

PETER

It's filling up the room -- hard to miss. We should leave.

ISAIAH

Where am I going to go?

Hannah walks back in -- her face shows that no one in the station saw Helios leave. The three look at each other.

BARTLETT

I'm thinking I should lock you both up.

PETER

I'm sorry, Hannah.

BARTLETT

You're not going to press him, are you?

Peter doesn't answer. Hannah is barely holding in her rage.

BARTLETT

You realize what this means for me? Both of you -- do you realize? Pension, my service record --

Hannah bites her tongue.

BARTLETT

You. Both. Should. Go.

Hannah gives Isaiah a direct look.

BARTLETT

The only reason I'm not arresting you is because I don't want you anywhere near me, near this place -- I want you away and gone -- off his land, out of this city --

Hannah swivels her gaze to Peter.

BARTLETT

And you -- you -- I don't think we're doing another Rotary lunch together. Trust, eh? Trust. Go.

Isaiah leaves. Peter lingers.

BARTLETT

It'd better be for a good reason, Peter.

Peter leaves. Hannah stares.

* * * * *

Scene 7

Peter in his office. He has papers spread out, files open, a box of files on the floor with the top off. He's doing research.

Sarah pops her head in. Peter, startled, turns, sees who it is, sighs in relief.

SARAH

What are you doing?

PETER

What are you doing?

SARAH

I saw the light on -- I was bringing mom home --

PETER

Ah, right, the once-a-week.

SARAH

Surf and turf at the Coach -- never varies.

PETER

Comfort in that.

SARAH

For some -- for her. So, what --

PETER

Charles Brixton --

SARAH

We didn't do his insurances, ever.

PETER

No we didn't. Come in --

SARAH

So what's up?

PETER

Just that your mention of him -- brought something back --

SARAH

With that look on your face -- I should get the scotch.

PETER

Might be a good idea.

Sarah pulls out the office scotch and two tumblers and pours it, neat. She hands him one, takes the other. They sip together.

SARAH

I think you're going to have to start this one off.

PETER

Yes.

SARAH

So?

PETER

What do you recall about the Brixton family?

SARAH

A large brood up on the hill. "A large brood of vipers" is, I believe, the standard way of --

PETER

Not all of them.

SARAH

Maybe. The youngest -- the end of the line -- Kate --

PETER

Katherine --

SARAH

She seemed nice -- she came off the hill, among us commoners --

PETER

Sarah --

SARAH

Can't help myself.

PETER

About Katherine -- what -- what else?

Sarah sips for a moment, then a wave of memory comes across her face.

SARAH

Oh --

PETER

Right.

SARAH

You're thinking about --

PETER

Yeah --

SARAH

Peter, that fire has to be -- twenty years ago --

PETER

Twenty years it is.

They sip as they remember.

SARAH

I do remember that fire --

PETER

The twins' graves are in the Methodist cemetery. Still.

SARAH

That is the nature of graves. Her husband --

PETER

Go on. Go on.

Sarah laughs, raises her glass.

SARAH

You're baiting me.

PETER

I know how you like to get out your pitchfork, storm the castle.

SARAH

And yes, our other lordly family, yon Pruitts, on yon other hill.

Sarah chuckles as she sips and remembers.

SARAH

Calvin. Pru-itt. "If it moves, Pruitt'll screw it." The goat. So horny he'd screw the crack of dawn -- so it was said, not by me, of course --

And Sarah laughs again.

PETER

A mean streak -- you do --

SARAH

It's not mean to tell the truth --

PETER

The dead can't fire back.

SARAH

Even easier -- and sweeter. And you know I'm telling the truth.

PETER

Pruitt blew it -- that's the legacy.

SARAH

Pitied his wife --

PETER

Ah --

SARAH

You know what I'm saying -- having to bear all those kids. Nine?

PETER

Ten.

SARAH

Ten, that we know of. God, the poor woman's pelvis.

They sip.

SARAH

What is this? You just up for an evening of town Jeopardy?

PETER

Samuel Pruitt -- Sammy -- the last son, last of the ten. And then Katherine's husband, as you were saying.

Sarah refreshes their drinks.

SARAH

I can't remember his --

PETER

I couldn't either, so thus this mess. Cameron. Cameron Pruitt was the husband's name, the fifth of the ten.

SARAH

Cameron Pruitt and Kathleen Brixton. And twins. And Charles Brixton. All gone. To those who are gone. To long dead fires.

They toast.

SARAH

Which begs the question of. Why. All. This. For Cameron Pruitt and Kathleen Brixton. And the dead Charles Brixton. And the dead Calvin Pruitt.

Peter doesn't answer, stares at his glass.

SARAH

Fires do not die? Is that it?

Peter looks directly at Sarah.

PETER

And. Here. Is. Why. That is true.

* * * * *

Scene 8

Twilight, with full moon in the sky. Isaiah enters his campground, using an LED flashlight to light his way. As the light moves across the ground, it finds Helios seated on one of the camp chairs, which gives Isaiah a start.

ISAIAH

It's not like they're not going to think about looking for you here.

HELIOS

You're a material witness. Turn off the light. It will help us think through this better.

Isaiah turns off the light. They sit in silence.

ISAIAH

Think what?

HELIOS

Are you choking yet?

ISAIAH

I don't understand.

HELIOS

Your disgust. I don't care about your disgust, but I want to know about your disgust.

ISAIAH

I don't feel any disgust.

HELIOS

You lie. The face --

ISAIAH

I wasn't here to find you -- I didn't come for you -- I didn't even know about --

HELIOS

The blessings of youth.

ISAIAH

I'm not that young anymore, so I don't get the blessings.

HELIOS

You never had much chance to be young -- properly young.

ISAIAH

Don't weep for me.

HELIOS

What was it like? After.

ISAIAH

It was horrible after.

HELIOS

Burnt wood in the wet grass, the air blinded by the smoke
of sacrifices --

ISAIAH

That wasn't the horrible part --

Katherine appears, same flame-colored dress.

KATHERINE

Don't take it out on --

HELIOS

I'm not --

ISAIAH

Is she here? I want to see her.

HELIOS

You can't.

KATHERINE

Shared pain --

ISAIAH

I loved her, too --

HELIOS

Private pain.

Katherine puts her finger to her lips.

ISAIAH

My ass, private -- you want to know the horrible part --

HELIOS

Quiet. Quiet!

The stabs of a flashlight's light in the darkness, sound of footsteps. Helios
melts away. Katherine dims.

Isaiah turns on his own flashlight.

ISAIAH

Who is it?

There is no answer, just the closer approach of the footsteps.

ISAIAH

Who is it?

Sarah comes in to view, breathing heavily. She and Isaiah look at each other in the flashlights.

ISAIAH

What?

SARAH

Do you have something I can sit on? I don't fancy rocks or dirt.

Isaiah pulls out the second camp chair, also pulls out an LED lantern and turns it on. Sarah sits.

SARAH

Can't toast a marshmallow over that thing.

ISAIAH

Don't want to be known for burning down the state forest.

SARAH

That's not what you'll be known for.

Sarah pulls a metal flask out of her pocket and takes a sip, offers it to Isaiah, who declines.

SARAH

At least not only that. Ah -- that hits the spot that needs to be hit.

Katherine becomes more visible. Sarah puts the flask away.

SARAH

No, that's not what you'll be known for, even if you do burn down Peter Waldo's property and everything around it. I heard you talking.

ISAIAH

How? You were crashing like a bear.

SARAH

I'll assume you mean that as a thing of prowess. I repeat, I heard you talking. Not Hannah Bartlett, clearly, and not to Peter Waldo, clearly --

ISAIAH

So? He's gone. What are you doing here?

SARAH

He's not gone -- well, maybe from --

Sarah speaks in a sarcastically loud voice.

SARAH

Our. Immediate. Vicinity.

Sarah cups her ears, as if waiting for a response, then laughs.

SARAH

But he's not gone -- Chief Bartlett's sign of the end-times is most definitely not gone.

ISAIAH

Then I'll go -- I'll go right now --

SARAH

Sit down and stop being dramatic.

KATHERINE

Samuel -- Sammy --

Isaiah stops. Sarah notices him staring into the middle distance.

SARAH

Someone else? I didn't hear --

ISAIAH

Sshh!

Isaiah listens intently.

ISAIAH

Please, again -- please, again -- again -- please --

Sarah watches Isaiah. Katherine goes to Isaiah and touches him on the cheek, then drifts away. Isaiah responds to the touch as if it were both electricity and divine comfort. He turns and turns looking for the source of the touch, but of course Katherine is gone -- and she is a ghost, after all.

Finally, Isaiah returns to the land of the living, notices Sarah watching him.

SARAH

There is already a dragnet out for Helios. Dragnet -- I don't even know if they use that word anymore, but whatever they use -- APB, BOLO -- they're doing it. Tromping through this forest pretty soon.

ISAIAH

You come to warn me?

SARAH

I'm concerned about the pain you're causing Peter Waldo.

ISAIAH

I don't even know the man.

SARAH

You hear about Charles Brixton? In all your trips to our public library, open to one and all?

Isaiah doesn't answer -- doesn't do anything. Sarah pulls out the flask, sips.

SARAH

I can wait.

Isaiah gestures for the flask. Sarah passes it to him. He sips, hands it back.

ISAIAH

What is that --

SARAH

Rye whiskey. Nobody drinks rye whiskey any more, which is why I drink it. What would that make you to Brixton?

ISAIAH

What?

SARAH

You heard me.

ISAIAH

I don't know who Brixton is.

SARAH

You do, you do, you do. This family relationship thing is tricky --

ISAIAH

Shut up.

SARAH

Whatever you were staring at is gone.

ISAIAH

I know! Shut up.

SARAH

Co-brother-in-law would be my choice. Helios!

Perhaps a faint echo.

SARAH

I know you'd know. Helios! A.k.a. --

Before Sarah can finish, Hannah's voice comes through a bullhorn. Suddenly, the darkness is alive with flashlights.

BARTLETT

Do. Not. Move.

Sarah stands up, hands in pockets. Bartlett tromps in, followed by Peter. Air crackles with radio chatter, lights bathe the campsite.

Hannah looks very tired.

BARTLETT

What the fuck are you doing here?

PETER

Sarah --

SARAH

Hannah, I'm doing my part to retard your apocalypse.

BARTLETT

Where is he?

ISAIAH

I don't know.

BARTLETT

He was here.

ISAIAH

And then he left when she walked in.

Sarah shrugs her shoulders.

BARTLETT

Anyone else show up for a chat? Beelzebub? Nostradamus?

Hannah pokes the flashlight into the tent, then looks around her. She brings the bullhorn to her mouth.

BARTLETT

Fan out -- he's not here.

The lights disappear, footsteps walking away.

BARTLETT

Are you all sensible that when Helios -- should I use his real name, but what the fuck does it matter? --

PETER

Hannah --

BARTLETT

Shut up. He took a service revolver with him. With bullets, in case you're wondering about his thoroughness. Now why would he do that?

ISAIAH

I didn't see him holding it.

BARTLETT

Because -- and this is just a feeling I fucking have -- people do not see what they do not want to see about him. Such love.

Hannah turns to Peter.

BARTLETT

You're pretty quiet about all of this.

PETER

I've got a good right to be. Like anybody else, I wish the dead would stay dead.

BARTLETT

Let's hope that's all that happens. Just keep Charles Brixton in mind, Sammy.

Hannah stomps away.

ISAIAH

What did she mean by that?

PETER

I told you not to do anything.

SARAH

You're not my parents or my husband. If I had one.

PETER

We should get out of here. Men with guns are walking around in the dark.

SARAH

I don't want to go home.

PETER

Then we'll go to my house. And you're coming, you're not staying here.

ISAIAH

I have to wait for him.

PETER

You won't find him -- he will find you. He hides -- he seeks, you seek, he hides -- get it?

SARAH

Clever.

PETER

I'd do better if I weren't so --

SARAH

So what?

But Peter doesn't finish the sentence, just turns and goes, stabbing his flashlight into the dark. Sarah grabs Isaiah and pulls him along. Isaiah pulls back for a moment, turns off the lantern, then joins Sarah.

Katherine floats into the darkness, inexpressible sadness on her face.

* * * * *

Scene 9

Light goes on. Helios in Peter's house, holding the gun on them as they enter. KATHLEEN is there as well. A simple living room: some chairs, a table, divan.

To one side are two ladders with a plank between them, about three feet up, dropcloth on the floor: Peter had been doing some plaster work on the wall.

HELIOS

It is time for the time of our resolutions.

But Peter doesn't respond with anything. He takes off his coat in a slow deliberate fashion, folds it over the chair back, straightens his clothes. Only then does he face Helios.

PETER

At least let them leave.

HELIOS

Can't.

PETER

I'm responsible for their safety.

HELIOS

And you're practiced at that sort of thing.

PETER

Used to be.

ISAIAH

What are you two talking about?

PETER

Can they at least sit down?

ISAIAH

What are you two --

HELIOS

Sit them down all you want -- but they don't leave.

Peter gestures, and Sarah sits down. Isaiah does not.

ISAIAH

I want to know --

Helios pivots ever so slightly with the gun. With his free hand, he makes a silver dollar appear -- a bit of sleight of hand to make it appear, then not appear -- then tosses it to Isaiah.

HELIOS

For your pains.

ISAIAH

You're cruel.

HELIOS

Excellent tutorials.

ISAIAH

You can have --

Isaiah goes to toss the coin back.

HELIOS

Ah, ah, ah -- look at it.

Isaiah looks at it, and he softens -- just a bit, but enough to show. He speaks without rancor.

ISAIAH

You bastard.

HELIOS

But of a very specific lovable kind. Sit down.

Isaiah sits.

SARAH

Lovable?

HELIOS

Tell her.

ISAIAH

A keepsake.

HELIOS

I do have feelings.

SARAH

What of him are you keeping sacred?

ISAIAH

Life with a chance for [parole] --

HELIOS

Sentimental-session over. It is time, I said, for the time, I said, of our resolutions.

PETER

Is that what you said to Charles Brixton?

Gun pivots ever so slightly.

HELIOS

I didn't say anything to Charles Brixton.

PETER

That thing carrying bullets?

SARAH

Wondering the same.

HELIOS

Hard to tell, given the uncertain texture of the universe.

PETER

"Yes" or "no" is not uncertain.

HELIOS

As a great man once said, "The world's a hospital."

ISAIAH

Cam -- please --

HELIOS

Shut. Up.

A big theatrical sigh.

HELIOS

Are we all all-knowing here?

PETER

About some of the past.

HELIOS

That's all anybody gets, even in the best of times slash worst of times. Let us banish the past tense --

PETER

It's not your past only.

HELIOS

Please.

ISAIAH

Cameron.

Helios turns his gaze to Isaiah.

HELIOS

Sam.

ISAIAH

Cameron --

HELIOS

Sammy.

ISAIAH

What are you doing?

HELIOS

I'm doing what I've come to do.

ISAIAH

I know why.

KATHERINE

He does, Cam --

ISAIAH

It's the same reason for me.

HELIOS

Not the same for you. At all.

KATHERINE

Cam, show him, show them all some mercy --

HELIOS

Mercy?! Mercy?!

Everyone is startled by the outburst, since it's not said directly to any of them. Helios does not drop his guard.

Katherine's response is equally unexpected: she screams out her words.

KATHERINE

Mercy! Mercy, Pity, Peace --

They stare at each other. Everyone else is frozen.

KATHERINE

Why are you teaching yourself to forget it all?

They hold their gaze. Helios speaks to the rest of them.

HELIOS

A hospital, did I say a great man said? A hospital -- when you think about it, the world is more like the jailhouse than the hospital. We're chained in place by our illusions --

KATHERINE

Don't add suffering to them --

HELIOS

-- hoping for the Great Lawyer's cleansing arrival -- are they following me?

To the three of them.

HELIOS

Are you following me?!

PETER

The gun --

Helios takes a deep breath. Katherine sits herself on the cross-plank.

HELIOS

But. At the end of it all -- instead of bail for the sufferers --

KATHERINE

Accident, Cameron --

HELIOS

-- pfft, the crush of fire against us, flames in our throats --

KATHERINE

Accident --

HELIOS

-- and the hands of strangers gloved in latex --

Sarah points at the gun.

SARAH

Peter --

PETER

Stop waving the gun.

HELIOS

Oh. Oh. An interruption. Am I waving it?

SARAH

Yes.

HELIOS

Oh. My. It seems to have a life of its own.

PETER

There is no one in this room who is an enemy.

HELIOS

Such confidence.

PETER

You painted "hope" on a courthouse.

ISAIAH

I didn't know you'd be here, when I came --

HELIOS

How did you hear?

PETER

The gun --

HELIOS

Oh, all right, Mr. Protector.

Helios places the gun in his lap, though still in his grip. He faces Isaiah.

HELIOS

Now -- how did you --

ISAIAH

Air is thick with -- data -- I smashed everything afterwards
-- what was the point afterwards?

HELIOS

I didn't know I'd be here. I mean, where was I anyway, who
was I, a nudnik, a nothing, and then --

Helios turns to Katherine.

HELIOS

I have to say to you all that I have been a little -- mad.

SARAH

Twenty years mad, Cameron Pruitt. Just to slip in something
edgewise.

HELIOS

I still have business to do.

SARAH

Twenty years of madness is --

ISAIAH

Why are they here? They don't have anything to do with
our --

HELIOS

Your cue -- and then I really must start the apocalypse
countdown.

PETER

Not my story to tell, Cameron. Helios. Yours, his --

HELIOS

Peter Waldo is so -- humble.

PETER

You're the one who painted "hope." That makes it
Katherine's, too.

Helios erupts, a volcanic cry of pain. Katherine matches his outburst, and they trade outbursts until it gets silly. She gestures for him to come close and sit beside her. He does. She lifts off the scar tissue, and for the moment they are young.

KATHERINE

I do.

Isaiah is in tears.

SARAH

You might as well say it.

PETER

Neither Charles Brixton nor Calvin Pruitt wanted the marriage.

Helios shrugs.

HELIOS

Eh.

PETER

Why?

HELIOS

Eh -- not interested. But Peter Waldo --

PETER

In those days I advised both families on planning their estates.

SARAH

Really?

PETER

Oh yes -- once upon a time I cut a wide figure.

HELIOS

So many skeletons rattling in closets.

PETER

Which I used to make sure neither of you, of them, were disinherited.

ISAIAH

You blackmailed my father?

PETER

Equal opportunity blackmailing, Sam, both sides.

HELIOS

For our love. For our hope.

Helios takes the scar tissue from Katherine's hands and replaces it.

PETER

To give them a chance to breathe.

SARAH

You old radical, you.

PETER

And prices to pay.

Helios rises, brandishes the gun again. Katherine wraps her arms around herself as if bound in a strait-jacket, loses all glow, all warmth.

ISAIAH

There's me, too -- you won't leave me out. What do you think it was like being the ten-year-old tail-end of the Pruitt line, with a father as old and dry as the moon? You were the most father I had, ever had -- Katherine was comfort.

SARAH

And then the fire -- is that right?

HELIOS

Ashes, ashes, all fall down.

ISAIAH

Stop it. Stop it. I had to go back to that --

PETER

It was Chief Bartlett who told me that Katherine had died -- in the same asylum they'd stuffed her away after the fire, the death of --

ISAIAH

I never stopped looking for her.

PETER

I never knew they'd done that.

SARAH

Talk about twenty years of madness --

PETER

Charles Brixton, another of his secrets, paying for her long slow tortured [death] --

HELIOS

Why should anything have changed him? Too much sentiment, Peter Waldo --

Isaiah kneels by Katherine's suffering, shivering, unresponsive body and gazes at her with great sadness. Helios watches them. This can take as long as it needs.

HELIOS

The universe -- not hospital, not jailhouse -- not asylum, even -- it's a machine-gun -- bam bam bam bam bam -- you build, build, build, but the cats eat the birds in the birdhouses and the fires eat the faces of the innocent and stupid alike -- go -- go! --

Helios gets Isaiah to rise and go back to his chair.

HELIOS

-- and nothing is left but bones and ashes, otherwise known as the soul. She's dead. She's dead. She's dead. Are we now done with the maudlin and memory?

Katherine unwinds herself into the luminescent Katherine, stands on the plank.

PETER

And you? Might as well ask you the same question, Sam.

ISAIAH

I'm not dead. I'm not giving up.

HELIOS

Ah, youth these days -- so ungrateful with all their "hope."
Don't understand irony at all.

SARAH

What was the coin? The coin you gave him -- he gave you?

HELIOS

This is all enough.

ISAIAH

Magic tricks -- what ten-year-old kid doesn't love magic
tricks? Love his brother for magic --

The gun, which had disappeared for a while, now re-appears -- steady.

HELIOS

Are we done?

PETER

Cameron?

HELIOS

Helios.

PETER

What happened with Charles Brixton?

HELIOS

Nothing.

PETER

According to the police report --

HELIOS

Tyranny of data.

PETER

-- it wasn't long after Brixton died that you showed up painting "hope" on the courthouse. Using a can of aluminum roof-paint ordered especially for --

HELIOS

Like all tyrannies, data must be resisted.

With one hand, Helios pulls plastic handcuffs out of his pocket. He gives two of them to Peter.

HELIOS

Useful stuff at a police station. Her, behind the back, to the ladder. Him, behind the back.

Peter cuffs Sarah, then Isaiah.

ISAIAH

Why --

HELIOS

Be grateful. Now you.

There is a moment as Peter decides whether he should resist or not, and Helios knows this, sees this.

HELIOS

The original Peter Waldo would never taint his soul with violence.

PETER

He did believe in justice.

HELIOS

Which protected him like a fart.

PETER

True.

Helios points the gun at Sarah.

HELIOS

So, will it be blood or gratitude on your hands today?

Still, Peter is not compliant.

HELIOS

You want to say something to him?

SARAH

I run his office, I don't run him -- I'd like to keep it that way.

HELIOS

Sit.

Peter puts his hands behind his back and sits, and Helios cuffs him to the chair. Gun is back in his hand.

HELIOS

You two will figure out how to release yourselves before long, so I don't have much time left. Apocalypse can be so demanding!

Helios leaves, pulling Isaiah along. Katherine drifts away.

SARAH

Got any sharp instruments on you?

* * * * *

Scene 10

In Peter's basement. Helios sits Isaiah down, tucks the gun in his pants, starts gathering materials: wood, cloth, and so on.

ISAIAH

What are you doing? What are you doing?!

HELIOS

I have to meet my confessor --

ISAIAH

Stop it. Stop it!

Isaiah begins crying. Helios stops, but he looks more annoyed than compassionate.

HELIOS

Let me add in my "stop it."

ISAIAH

I'm sorry. It's like you have no heart.

Helios goes back to picking up materials.

ISAIAH

No memory.

HELIOS

You're still ten years old.

ISAIAH

You should try it.

HELIOS

You wouldn't want my first decade.

ISAIAH

Do you even know what they did with her body?

This brings Helios up short.

ISAIAH

You couldn't do anything about that, could you? No magic for that.

HELIOS

The body's nothing.

ISAIAH

Then why come back at all?

HELIOS

It wasn't to taste the ashes again.

Helios begins packing up the materials and some tools.

ISAIAH

Then why?

HELIOS

Why did you?

ISAIAH

Because I was thick with grief -- I can't help it. And because I was hoping you would come.

HELIOS

Definitely ten years old. I have to go.

ISAIAH

Are you even glad to see me?

HELIOS

What -- you want to save my soul?

ISAIAH

Yes -- of course, Cam -- if not both, at least one. Of course.

This strikes Helios as incredibly absurd and deeply touching.

ISAIAH

You should turn yourself in. Peter will help --

HELIOS

The hint half guessed, the gift half understood --

ISAIAH

What? What?

HELIOS

Peter has done his lifting. He owes no more, he pays no more. Besides, although he and Hannah Bartlett were once -- in -- love -- after tonight, that will carry no weight with her about me.

ISAIAH

I can't follow --

HELIOS

It doesn't matter --

ISAIAH

Turn yourself in.

HELIOS

That's your offer? Your big redemption? Remember, like a great big machine gun.

ISAIAH

Then after, you and I can --

Helios makes the sound and movement of a machine gun.

HELIOS

Spend your time where it counts the most, brother of mine. And that is not on me. Now, I do have to go.

Helios grabs his materials and tools, turns to go.

ISAIAH

You are still worth it, Cam.

HELIOS

Without Katherine? Seriously?

ISAIAH

Yes.

HELIOS

For years it's been just brute habit, Sammy, and the pleasure that comes from being mean. The hint half guessed, the gift half understood -- like I said.

Helios turns to leave. Isaiah scuttles after him. Helios turns, gun in hand -- it moves around.

HELIOS

Oh my, look how it waves around -- you really should stay still.

And with that, Helios is really gone. Isaiah stares at his absence.

ISAIAH

Katherine. Katherine.

But Katherine is not there. And Isaiah knows this.

* * * * *

Scene 11

The Presbyterian Church at midnight -- a dim light over the entrance. A wooden ladder as the pulpit, a single chair as a pew.

On the sidewalk is a hopscotch diagram.

Hannah, in uniform, with her holstered gun, pulls out what looks like an invitation and reads it under the light.

BARTLETT

"Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace: A Confab" -- yeah? Well, fuck you, Helios.

Hannah shoves the invitation back into her pocket.

BARTLETT

And in a church -- a fucking church. Fuck. You. Yeah. That feels good.

Hannah steps into the cool darkness.

In the dimness she can see the dark hump of the pulpit. Hannah tries to calm her breathing.

SOUND: An enormous WHOOSH!

Hannah raises her hands to protect her face, perhaps even lets out a small sharp cry. Then it's gone.

Hannah slaps her holster, comes up empty-handed.

BARTLETT

Son-of-a -- son-of-a-bitch!

Almost immediately, a stirring from the pulpit, and a resonant voice, full of anger and pride, leaps out.

HELIOS

So -- you have arrived.

Hannah, startled, slides into the pew.

HELIOS

Pay attention! We have much to discuss.

BARTLETT

There's nothing to discuss.

HELIOS

We share two murders.

BARTLETT

We don't share a thing -- wait, two --

HELIOS

Truth is always the first to suffer. Then why are you here?

BARTLETT

To arrest you. You said "two."

HELIOS

Do you think Charles Brixton exited his wretched life of his own accord? You have the paint.

BARTLETT

No sign of trauma.

HELIOS

You can scare people to death. You can shout death into the ears of a defunct old man.

BARTLETT

Heart attack, said the EMTs.

HELIOS

An attack of the heart will do that. What would your men think about doe-eyed Hannah Bartlett sitting here, with me, alone, in the dark? Or former lover Peter Waldo? What is the truth, Hannah?

BARTLETT

If you're a murderer --

HELIOS

Is that what fascinates you about me?

BARTLETT

I'm not fascinated, I'm just --

HELIOS

Liar, liar, pants on fire.

BARTLETT

It's important to know --

HELIOS

Liar, liar --

BARTLETT

-- the criminal mind --

HELIOS

-- pants on fire -- especially when there's a thrill to be enjoyed for the knowing, when the criminal may be the one wearing the uniform.

Hannah jumps up, angry -- indistinguishable from being excited.

BARTLETT

That's stupid! You said two --

Hannah moves toward the pulpit.

BARTLETT

I am not responsible for you --

SOUND: Another enormous WHOOSH!

Hannah drops to her knees, shielding her face. Whatever it is whizzes past.

Helios's voice booms from another part of the church. Hannah crouches like a fighter.

Helios snaps on a flashlight held under his chin, his face swathed in nylon. The upward light paints him a complete ghoul.

HELIOS

Try your holster.

Hannah pulls out a flashlight.

HELIOS

I constantly astound you, don't I?

BARTLETT

You sicken me.

HELIOS

Pants on fire. Turn it on, hold it like mine -- and remember who has your gun. Guns.

Wreathed in darkness, they square off with the flashlights under their chins. Shadows leap to the vaulted ceiling.

BARTLETT

What do you want with me?

HELIOS

To humiliate you, your regime.

BARTLETT

You've done a pretty good job of that.

Step by careful step, Helios moves toward Hannah.

HELIOS

Soon you will lose everything -- and then you and I will be even closer.

BARTLETT

You broke the law.

HELIOS

I don't care about the law. I want to humiliate the law. I care about justice.

BARTLETT

Justice!

HELIOS

That puzzles you. I tell you about Charles Brixton, and I show not one sign of remorse.

Helios stands close to Hannah.

HELIOS

It's the monsters that make us pay attention.

Helios reaches out with his left hand to touch Hannah on the cheek, just hovers the fingertips without touching.

HELIOS

I have nothing left to lose, and that gives me complete freedom. Doesn't Hannah Bartlett ache for the same freedom from the law, from obligation, from "should" and "have to"?

Hannah's head inclines toward Helios's hand, as if to lay her cheek in his palm and give over to his offer.

HELIOS

Aren't you feeling blood crash through parts of your body you thought had died?

Hannah grabs Helios's wrist and pulls -- and out pops a fake hand.

At the same instant, Helios pops off his flashlight and the pulpit geysers out a plume of smoke.

Hannah spins to look, when she whirls back, Helios has disappeared. Hannah's stabbing flashlight beam finds nothing.

Hannah moves toward the pulpit.

BARTLETT

I know you're still here!

At the pulpit, Hannah waves away the smoke. She puts down the rubber hand, picks up a wooden box wrapped in heavy rope, and shakes it: a loud clunk.

Hannah exits the church, carrying the wooden box, the fake hand, and the flashlight.

Outside the church, Hannah kneels and, using a pocket knife, cuts through the rope. She opens the box and pulls out her gun, which she holsters, then puts the hand in the wooden box.

Hannah scouts around her, then stares at the sidewalk. She notices the hopscotch diagram. She picks up a stone and pitches it into the first box.

She begins to hop.

* * * * *

Scene 12

Police station. Hannah, box under her arm, joins Peter, Sarah, and Isaiah.

BARTLETT

Are you all all right?

SARAH

He must have known we wouldn't take that long -- the kitchen, a knife -- voila!

BARTLETT

Yeah, well, a regular jokester is our Helios -- a real crack-up artist. Want to see what my evening was like?

Hannah opens the wooden box and takes out the rubber hand.

BARTLETT

Sixty-five, getting ready to retire, and this is my tribute.

Hannah waves it around like a baton.

BARTLETT

Rah, rah, rah.

ISAIAH

How did --

Hannah pulls out the invite, hands it to Peter, who scans it.

BARTLETT

Mayor will take everything away when he finds out that I was having a confab with a known criminal in a fucking --

PETER

Hannah --

BARTLETT

-- church --

Hannah grabs the invite and throws it down, throws down the hand. Isaiah picks up the invite, looks at it, hands it to Sarah.

BARTLETT

-- shut up -- Presbyterian, and I'm a fucking Methodist -- a confab --

SARAH

About what?

PETER

Sarah -- Hannah, look --

BARTLETT

Can't you read?

SARAH

But about what?

PETER

Sarah --

SARAH

Why are you so angry, Hannah? Peter, stop. The man -- Helios, or Cameron Pruitt, or whatever you want to call him --

BARTLETT

Fucker --

SARAH

He is in anguish. Anguish.

Sarah points to Isaiah.

SARAH

Ask him -- he probably knows better than any of us.

BARTLETT

That gets him a pass?

SARAH

I don't know what it gets him.

BARTLETT

Show me somebody who isn't in anguish --

SARAH

It should still get him something.

BARTLETT

Should I give your brother a pass? Have you given him a pass? He broke the law!

SARAH

And who of us has entirely clean hands, Hannah? Especially if you have a rubber one? I'm sorry, Hannah -- I couldn't help it -- it's been a strange night --

PETER

Hannah -- Sarah, put it down --

SARAH

Rah, rah.

But Sarah puts it down.

PETER

Hannah, listen to me -- how will the Mayor know you were even there?

BARTLETT

What?

PETER

How will anyone know you were there, except for us?

BARTLETT

You want me to lie?

PETER

Did I say that?

BARTLETT

I told you he was the sign of the apocalypse.

PETER

Hannah -- Hannah -- what is the apocalypse but what we already know is coming?

BARTLETT

They'll ask me to investigate.

PETER

So investigate. Hoodlums.

SARAH

Hoodlums.

BARTLETT

He said he didn't care about the law. He wanted to humiliate the law. That he cared about justice.

Katherine glides in, unseen, of course -- except that Isaiah senses something in the room.

BARTLETT

What was he like, your brother?

ISAIAH

What?

BARTLETT

What was he like?

ISAIAH

My brother? A prince, my brother -- to me, to Katherine.

BARTLETT

Law-breaker?

ISAIAH

No -- not Cam -- unless you call having a big heart the same thing. He took me in. They took me in. Cam was Cam because Katherine was Katherine. They were the right family for me, for each other.

BARLETT

Was he like that -- they like that?

PETER

Why do you think I did what I did?

BARTLETT

And then he kills Charles Brixton.

PETER

No evidence of that.

BARTLETT

He was there.

PETER

We don't know anything about what happened there.

BARTLETT

And now he's saying that it's the monsters that make us pay attention. I'm sixty-five and ready to lie my way into retirement -- maybe he's right. Brixton was a monster for sure --

PETER

Katherine deserved better.

SARAH

And then he paints hope on courthouse. Talk about the futile gesture.

ISAIAH

Wasn't.

SARAH

Convince me.

Hannah stares at the box, the hand, the invitation.

BARTLETT

What is it that we really know? Eh?

Helios enters, gun in hand, and Hannah pulls her revolver. Helios is tilting crazily as if his shoes were nailed to the floor. He wears a crazy smile and his face is slick with tears.

PETER

Hannah!

BARTLETT

Shut up. Put it down.

Helios holds the gun and does a funny wave with his hands as if to say that he is surrendering, but Katherine bends his arm down so that the gun points toward the group.

BARTLETT

Don't. Don't.

Helios gives Katherine a smile. Katherine smiles back.

KATHERINE

Soon, love.

Katherine moves away. Helios goes back to his mad dance, and at some point, one of his gestures becomes too threatening, and Hannah shoots him through the heart.

Hannah kneels by the body.

BARTLETT
(without rancor)

You fucker.

Hannah looks at the three of them.

BARTLETT

First time I ever fired the goddamn thing in the line of service. First goddamn time.

What else is there to say?

* * * * *

Scene 13

Peter, in funeral garb, stands. Beside him is Isaiah.

PETER

What a gorgeous day.

ISAIAH

I put in a special request.

PETER

To whom?

ISAIAH

Just let it fly up and out.

PETER

Seemed to work.

ISAIAH

We're free to believe whatever we want.

PETER

No -- but yes.

They stand in silence.

ISAIAH

You noticed no one came from either family.

PETER

Then they aren't family.

ISAIAH

Who was left but us to come here today?

PETER

"Paying respects" -- what an odd phrase.

ISAIAH

The two side by side. Cam got what he wanted.

PETER

If you don't laugh, the grief will kill you.

ISAIAH

Blessed are the meek.

PETER

They are going to need it.

ISAIAH

Even if you do laugh, it can kill you.

PETER

Amen.

ISAIAH

Amen.

They turn away to leave.

PETER

If you want, you can build something out there. I'll get you the permits. You can be Thoreau by the pond.

ISAIAH

It's worth a thought. Wait, wait, I'm thinking that thought.

PETER

Let me know when you're done with it.

ISAIAH

Wait, wait -- thought I had the answer. It's going to take a little while longer.

PETER

Just thought I'd offer.

ISAIAH

It won't be for now -- other parts to see first. Maybe later.

Sarah comes in, takes Peter's hand.

SARAH

You off?

ISAIAH

I think so. Think I have to be. Though he did offer me a cabin by the pond.

SARAH

Because that's what he's always wanted.

ISAIAH

So why not?

PETER

No good answer.

ISAIAH

Find one.

The three of them look at each other, at a loss for words. Isaiah finally nods and turns to go. Sarah puts a hand on his arm, smiles. Peter smiles. Isaiah leaves.

Sarah and Peter look at each other, look back at where the graves would be.

Lights to black.

A Question of Color

Based on A Question of Color by Sara Smith-Beattie
(The author has granted permission for this work)

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many states in the South had laws making miscegenation a crime. At that time, "miscegenation" broadly meant illegal marriages between whites and non-whites (though lesser liaisons than marriage also often came under the statutes). Blacks, Native Americans, and other groups could intermingle all they wanted -- no one really cared if they "mongrelized" their bloods. But it was a crime to dilute the purity of white blood.

In A Question of Color, two people, John Wicks (white) and Susan Morgan (black), defy this prohibition in early 20th-century North Carolina and get married. The play follows Susan and John as they struggle to live under the shadow cast by color and prejudice. The story, in its essentials, mirrors the current and historical American obsession with color and proves that W.E.B. Dubois' comment that the great problem of the 20th century would be the color line will also be the country's great problem of the 21st century.

CHARACTERS

Singing: All the ACTORS must have the ability to sing in chorus.

Accent: No attempt is made here to recreate a North Carolina regional accent in the writing, and it is not necessary to do so (unless the director wishes to use a dialect coach). The play takes place in the Piedmont section of North Carolina. People interested in accents can hear them on the Alan Lomax recordings used here for the music. Otherwise, a soft gentle Southern accent (however that is defined) will suffice.

- SUSAN MORGAN, African American. Wife of JOHN.
- JOHN MORGAN (née Wicks), Caucasian. Husband of SUSAN.
- PETER GRIER/GROVER BOLLING, Caucasian. As GRIER, petty tyrant. As BOLLING, a dissolute moonshiner.
- COLONEL GOFORTH, Caucasian. Largest white landowner in the county.
- MRS. GOFORTH, Caucasian. Wife of the largest white landowner in the county.
- AUNT BECKY (REBECCA CALDWELL), African American, mid- to late-60s. The woman who takes in JOHN and SUSAN.
- DEACON BELL, African American, mid-50s. An overseer for

GOFORTH.

(TOTAL: 3 women [2 African American, 1 Caucasian], 4 men [1 African American, 3 Caucasian]) -- if wanted GRIEF, BOLLING, and MR. GOFORTH could all be played by the same actor.

TIME

- The first four decades of the 20th century.

STAGING

The staging will be simple, with props and costumes as well as characterizations and lighting changes defining the movement back and forth across time. ACTORS will stay on stage at all times, sitting upstage or to the side when not in a scene. Around the stage, strategically placed, are the costumes people will use to change characters and times. Costumes should be simple: a basic outfit will be overlain with simple pieces, such as SUSAN's shawl or JOHN's headband. All props are onstage, and ACTORS will move things as needed. All set/scene changes should be done smoothly and, if needed, with choreography/music.

Though not detailed in the script, it would also be good to have levels on the stage. One thought is to have props hidden in any boxes used for staging. The act of taking out props is akin to the play's intent about hidden things being exposed. But this is only a suggestion.

Directors are free to invent any other means to tell the story (through movement, song, slides, pictures, etc) as long as the staging remains simple, uncluttered, and direct.

MOVEMENT

Wherever appropriate, movements should have a choreographed look and feel to them. The preference is for directed movement as opposed to a "natural" style of acting -- wherever possible, gestures, movements, etc. should be shaped and specific. Also, where possible, the ACTORS' bodies should be used to create the scene; for instance, when JOHN and SUSAN come to BECKY's house, BECKY can hide behind the ACTORS with her broom. ACTORS can also be used as the forest when JOHN runs away from GRIER, as the river when SUSAN first meets JOHN, and so on.

MUSIC

The songs in the plays are done a capella. (Lyrics are appended; the music is taken primarily from Alan Lomax's recordings)

The writer's preference is to use music as often as possible as long as it does not take away from the action. Directors are free to substitute music, but it must match what is suggested here, including mood, emotion, and region (as close to North Carolina as possible). Preferably, the music should be in the public domain to control production costs.

PROPS

The only set pieces needed are a wooden table, several wooden chairs, and two rocking chairs. In addition, the ACTORS will need a few simple wooden boxes around for general use that can be used for sitting, standing, different levels, and so on.

Note: The easiest way to get a prop list is to jot down the props mentioned in the script and then add to them as the director and actors wish.

* * * * *

Prologue

In the darkness the ACTORS enter singing **Northport [Southern Journey, Vol. 4, Track 11]** as the lights come up. They finish and speak.

SUSAN

Come gather and listen.

JOHN

Come listen and see.

MRS. GOFORTH

In the year of our Lord 1875 --

BELL

In the tar heel state of North Carolina --

BECKY

In one of the original thirteen colonies --

GOFORTH

That once declared itself for freedom --

MRS. GOFORTH

And the right of all to be equal --

ALL

Equality for all!

JOHN

And that four score years later --

SUSAN

In the most uncivil Civil War --

BELL

Fought for the right of all to be made unequal --

ALL

First in flight, North Carolina!

GOFORTH

A law was passed in 1875.

BELL

Beware when the legislature is in session.

SUSAN

General Statutes, Vol. 2A, Part II --

JOHN

Chapters 51 and 51-3.1 --

BECKY

That stated the following.

THE WOMEN

Listen.

THE MEN

Closely.

GRIER

"All marriages"

ALL

All.

BELL
"Between a white person"

ALL
White.

BECKY
"And a negro"

ALL
(emphasizing both syllables: "nee-grow.")
Negro.

JOHN
"Or between a white person"

SUSAN
(emphasizing "negro" again)
"And a person of negro descent"

MRS. GOFORTH
"To the third generation inclusive"

ALL
In. Clusive.

BECKY
Including mulatto.

GOFORTH
Quadroon.

BELL
Octoroon.

SUSAN
Cascos.

JOHN
Sambo.

GOFORTH
Mango.

MRS. GOFORTH

Mustiffee.

BELL

Mustee.

GOFORTH

Mustifino.

MRS. GOFORTH

Pardo.

BECKY

Loro.

SUSAN

Mestizo.

GOFORTH

All shall be prohibited.

ALL

Prohibited.

All ACTORS clap, as if a period on a sentence.

SUSAN

Come gather and listen.

JOHN

Come listen and see.

SUSAN

In 1907, Susan Morgan, with the light ocher skin of her African father and the angled cheekbones of her Indian mother, married one John Wicks from the mountains.

JOHN

John Wicks, a Piedmont mountain boy as white as white could be made white in those colored times. As a sign of his love for Susan, he took her last name as his own and became John Morgan.

SUSAN

All this was dangerous.

JOHN

All this was love.

SUSAN

And their journey is not yet finished.

JOHN

Scene 1 -- By The River.

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Scene 1: By The River

The banks of a river. JOHN is splitting wood.

JOHN

One mother hot day, one motherloving melt-the-brain-pan
hot day -- my brains will drown me if I don't do something
cool and soul-saving soon.

In a separate pool of light: GRIER. He holds a bugle or a trumpet and blows
a short, sharp blast. JOHN responds.

GRIER

Keep chopping my wood, boy! Chop, chop!

Another blast of the trumpet as GRIER laughs. Lights out.

JOHN

Dog bastard Peter Grier -- off my back! A few more cords
-- and then his money in my hand. And then -- north! As
fast as a fart out of a full-fed cow.

JOHN looks where GRIER stood.

JOHN

Blow yourself, old cock -- enough brow-sweat for now. It is
time for me to gather myself to the river.

The ACTORS half-whisper/half-sing "Let's All Gather At The River."

ACTORS

"Let's all gather at the river / The beautiful, the beautiful
river / Let's all gather at the river...."

JOHN takes off his shirt. SUSAN enters carrying a fishing pole (mimed) and a bag. She takes out a small rag doll from the bag and sits it beside her. She then casts into the water. SUSAN does not see JOHN. SUSAN hooks a fish, brings it in.

JOHN

Who? Who? I have never spied the likes of someone so
beautiful. Fishing good?

SUSAN is startled; she has hooked another "fish," but it falls off and gets away.

JOHN

Oops -- that one got away. I'm chopping wood -- for old man
Grier. Over there. Know him? Catfish got your tongue?

SUSAN hesitates, then moves to leave.

JOHN

Don't! I want to make your acquaint[ance] --

JOHN wades into the river. At SUSAN's cue, several ACTORS become the "undertow," pulling him down and roiling him around -- as if the river were rising up in SUSAN's defense. JOHN struggles back to the bank.

SUSAN

What do you want, white man?

JOHN

River work for you?

SUSAN

White man, what do you want?

JOHN

I want to know.

SUSAN

Know what?

JOHN
Know you.

SUSAN
Know me?

JOHN
Know all.

SUSAN
No chance.

JOHN
No to your no.

SUSAN
Sun brained you, white man?

JOHN
When you say "white man" --

SUSAN
Yeah?

JOHN
Like you're hawking to spit.

SUSAN hawks a gob, perhaps even vocalizes "white man" as she does it.

SUSAN
Like that?

JOHN
I have a name.

SUSAN
You are truly lucky.

JOHN
My name is [John] --

SUSAN
If I want it, I will ask! You gonna leave?

JOHN
No chance.

SUSAN
You got wood to cut.

JOHN
I got time to spare.

SUSAN
But not much brain.

JOHN
That remains to be seen.

SUSAN
See that rock there, then?

JOHN
Yeah.

SUSAN
You can go to it.

JOHN
(uncertain)
Yeah?

SUSAN
Touched with fear, are we?

JOHN
Afraid of nothing.

SUSAN
That's a lie -- a little white lie -- I'll let it pass. Pass on.
White man.

One ACTOR sets a box for a "rock" in the river. JOHN wades out to it carefully and sits.

SUSAN
Haven't you ever seen a woman?

JOHN

Not like you.

SUSAN

Your ma's titties, and that's all, I'll bet.

JOHN

You have a filthy mouth.

SUSAN

God's comfort for my empty pockets.

JOHN

You don't know what you're saying.

SUSAN

What?

JOHN

My mother is dead --

SUSAN

How long dead?

JOHN

Father, too.

SUSAN

How long?

JOHN

Dirt of their graves still under my nails.

SUSAN

And not from the flat lands around here.

JOHN

I came off the mountain -- after -- leaving the dirt --

SUSAN

Well, we all got a cross nailed to our shoulder, don't we, orphan white man? And you be living where now?

JOHN

Over there.

SUSAN

With the sodomite?

JOHN

Chopping wood for Grier –

SUSAN

He got himself another --

JOHN

What? What's a sodomite?

SUSAN

He's crazy --

JOHN

Not that bad --

SUSAN

Paid you yet?

JOHN

At the end of twelve cords.

SUSAN

Any money yet?

JOHN

He said at the end of twelve.

SUSAN

White man, white man --

JOHN

Can you stop saying that --

SUSAN

-- looking at you as you look now, you do not have many good prospects in your favor.

JOHN

I got a lot more than you know.

SUSAN takes out her rag doll.

SUSAN

How is it out there?

JOHN

Snug as bug in a braided rug.

SUSAN

Butt not going numb?

JOHN

Nope.

SUSAN

Sun not frying your edges?

JOHN

Double nope.

SUSAN

Yeah?

JOHN

Nope.

SUSAN

Good.

(speaks to the doll)

Wouldn't want him to feel he's got "nope" choices. You said you had a name.

JOHN

I do.

SUSAN

Tell me now --

JOHN

Now you want to know.

SUSAN

I want to know if you're worth knowing -- first name first.

JOHN

John.

SUSAN

Last.

JOHN

Wicks.

SUSAN

John Wicks, white man.

SUSAN repeats it for rhythm, says it to the doll.

SUSAN

John Wicks, white man.

(still in rhythm)

John Wicks, white man, coming off the mountain.

She pronounces it "moun-tan," to rhyme with "man."

JOHN

Yes.

SUSAN

Orphan John Wicks -- an only child now of God, our mother father.

JOHN

Have no interest in that.

SUSAN

Not afraid for your soul?

JOHN

Two things I know about God.

SUSAN

Yes?

JOHN

He is truly mysterious --

SUSAN

Praise His name.

JOHN

And He never put bread on our table.

SUSAN

Such a short opinion of what He can do.

JOHN

Just matching my opinion to His opinion of me.

SUSAN

And not afraid for your soul?

JOHN

Can't be afraid for what I believe I don't have.

SUSAN

So you have no soul?

JOHN

I have my heart.

SUSAN

And how is this heart of yours?

JOHN

It beats with a full face.

SUSAN

And that's the face it shows?

JOHN

Yeah.

SUSAN

Hmmmm --

JOHN

You don't like my face?

SUSAN

It's not a pig's face -- that's a plus.

JOHN

You like to mock.

SUSAN

White man, you're sitting in the middle of the river on a rock with the sun frittering your brain and your backside number than your skull --

JOHN

My skull ain't numb --

SUSAN

-- talking to a black woman with no reason to trust you and every reason to thrash you and even more reason to avoid you --

JOHN

I'm not --

SUSAN

-- be quiet! -- talking to her about your heart and your face like you think she even has an interest in your fallen flesh -- and, phew, papa, I can smell you from here! -- moaning about his dead parents and jawing her about his unbelief and you don't deserve at least a little mockery?

The words hang on the air. SUSAN speaks to the doll.

SUSAN

And yet he sits there. Sits there still.

JOHN

That's admiration in your voice.

SUSAN

Then I must closer guard my tongue. Not going to leave, are you?

JOHN

When I got so much admiration washing over me from over there? Not on the life of Lucifer.

SUSAN

Well, then, white mountain man John Wicks, I guess I have to offer you that I, too, have a name, Christian and family.

JOHN

How kind to let me know.

SUSAN

Go ahead and ask me.

JOHN

I'm not sure now I want to.

SUSAN

You're weakening, I can see.
(to the doll)
He does want to know.

JOHN

It'd just be a common courtesy.

SUSAN

Courtesy would be in your favor, common man.

JOHN

What do they call you when they're not calling you devil?

SUSAN

Those with affection for me, orphan John Wicks, call me Susan Morgan.

JOHN

Susan. Morgan.

SUSAN

Don't think you can own it.

JOHN

Susan Morgan.

SUSAN

Sun warm enough for you?

JOHN

Cool as a cave.

SUSAN

Butt numb?

JOHN

Double nope.

SUSAN

Then what a manly man you are!
(to the doll)

Isn't he?!

JOHN

Isn't he.

SUSAN prepares to leave.

JOHN

Wait!

SUSAN

Why?

JOHN

We were just getting to know enough to start knowing!

SUSAN

Twelve cords I thought you said. Best sharpen your blade.
You crippled? You can go.

ACTOR grabs box, upending JOHN who moves back to shore.

JOHN

When will I see you again?

SUSAN

High-handed to think of an "again."

JOHN

Orphan boy common white man John Wicks wants to see you again, Susan Morgan. Some fine angles, don't you think?

SUSAN

Like I said, it's not a pig's face.

JOHN

From what little I know of you, Susan Morgan, not being matched to a pig is a major accomplishment.

SUSAN

More accomplishment than most, I'll admit.

JOHN

And a lot of cords of wood have come out of these arms.

SUSAN

I was able to see that clearly from the beginning.

JOHN

So can't you see your way through to offering me an "again"?

SUSAN

I am over there if you can make it to here, white man.

GRIER blows his trumpet.

JOHN

And I'm offering you the first of a thousand thanks.

SUSAN

Don't get ahead of yourself on the count.

GRIER blows his trumpet again.

SUSAN

Don't let him know when the twelve cords are done until you get your promised money up front.

JOHN

You mean he won't pay me?

SUSAN

Keep your door locked at night.

JOHN

What do you know about --

SUSAN

You got halfway across this time. Choice is yours. Look at your feet.

JOHN

Three fish. Three fish.

JOHN kneels down to touch the "fish," stroking them as if precious gifts.

SUSAN

For sustaining your body and soul in what lies ahead. Go.

SUSAN exits.

JOHN

Miss, the odds and ends are in your favor -- at the moment.
But I will know you more than your name.

GRIER

Boy!

ACTORS begin to set table and chair and bucket of blackberries.

JOHN

Damn!

GRIER

Where are you?

JOHN

What does that flapping hog-jowl want now?

JOHN re-dresses himself.

GRIER

Are you trying to spite me? Are you trying to cheat me?

JOHN scrambles to GRIER's house.

* * * * *

Scene 2: Grier's Kitchen

ACTORS set table and chair. A metal bucket of blackberries sits in the middle of the table.

GRIER

You run like a coon with a dog licking its ass. I swear you come slower than an old man stroking himself --

JOHN

Been chopping your wood.

GRIER

Been swimming, too, looks like.

JOHN

That, too, a little.

GRIER

On my time.

JOHN

It's hot.

GRIER

Not when it's my money. My wood?

JOHN

I am close to twelve cords -- but not there yet.

GRIER

Well, tuck your shirt in and start my dinner.

JOHN

I will.

JOHN finishes dressing and faces the audience: he is at a stove and mimes cooking on it.

GRIER
Why are you grinning?

JOHN
I'm not grinning.

GRIER
You're a bad liar.

JOHN
That big, huh?

GRIER
Why the grinning?

JOHN
As the Lord promises Paradise --

GRIER
What are you blathering about?

JOHN
-- I think I found Paradise today.

GRIER
Cutting my wood.

JOHN
By the river. A girl.

GRIER
No girls around here.

JOHN
Not so.

GRIER
You don't want a girl.

JOHN
Susan Morgan's definitely one to want.

There is an ominous silence.

JOHN

What?

GRIER

Why are you living in my house?

JOHN

What does that have to do --

GRIER

Why are you living in my house?

JOHN

You took me in.

GRIER

I took you in -- watch my dinner! -- believed you about your parents dying -- watch the dinner! Felt sorry for you, gave you shelter. And work, too, paid work --

JOHN

Haven't paid me yet --

GRIER

Food. A bed.

JOHN

I understand.

GRIER

No -- you don't.

GRIER rises and steps to JOHN, carrying his chair.

GRIER

If you're seeing Susan Morgan, you are not seeing to your best advantage.

GRIER thrusts the chair against the back of JOHN's knees, forcing JOHN to sit. GRIER looms over him. GRIER moves the food off the heat, raps JOHN on his head.

GRIER

"Advantage" is not with the colored bitch.

JOHN

I will not take --

GRIER grabs JOHN's hair, pushes his face close to the hot stove; JOHN resists.

GRIER

Your ignorance could endanger your soul.

GRIER lets him go; JOHN remains seated.

GRIER

Susan Morgan's father was a nigger pig -- slave's son -- and her mother a Cherokee sow. We purged these bastards. Our one mistake? We didn't spit the piglet.

GRIER puts his arm across JOHN's chest and slides into the seat behind him, in effect having JOHN sit in his lap.

GRIER

Wouldn't want you to run yourself to the foul side, John -- some laws we need for civilizing -- sooner learned, sooner best for all.

GRIER strokes JOHN's hair and face gently.

GRIER

Now, wouldn't it be better to stay with me, the man paying you your money?

GRIER bucks JOHN off his lap and moves his chair back to the table. JOHN stands stock still, terrified.

GRIER

Careful of the stove.

GRIER takes a blackberry from the bucket.

GRIER

Blackberries, John, fresh -- sweet as an angel's fingertip.

GRIER takes one and mashes it against JOHN's shirt, right over his heart.

GRIER

Keep that in mind. You do that kind of keeping in that kind of mind.

Sudden change of light, isolating JOHN. As JOHN speaks, an ACTOR helps him change his shirt. GRIER watches him from the shadows.

JOHN

I will burn this, I will. Touching me like that. Like that! Like I was a beast!

GRIER speaks from the shadows.

GRIER

You done cutting my wood?

JOHN

He can't know -- how much, how little, how far, how close.

GRIER

The payment --

JOHN

My money!

GRIER joins him in the light.

GRIER

The payment will be special, young man. Unforgettable.

JOHN, in panic, runs out of the light into the shadow by the table. GRIER turns and watches him. JOHN takes the bucket of blackberries. GRIER exits from the light while ACTORS strike the table and chair. The light changes to a night blue. JOHN circles around until he comes to the bank of the river, now in such great fear that he does not see his own woodpile -- in reality, two ACTORS -- and runs into it, sprawling him on the ground. Slowly he recovers his wits and waits; the light slowly but steadily changes from night blue to dawn: he has spent the night by the river.

When the dawn light comes, JOHN makes a gesture. As he does so, small circles of light come up -- stones across the river. As he quickly crosses the

river, the spots of light go out. In the meantime, ACTORS set up SUSAN's "house": two rocking chairs, side by side, and an axe.

* * * * *

Scene 3

JOHN

Susan?! Susan?!

SUSAN, who has heard him approach, hides. As JOHN passes, SUSAN knocks him down, then kneels on his neck. JOHN protests, but SUSAN pushes his face into the dirt to shut him up, then scouts around to see if anyone has pursued him.

JOHN

John Wicks --

SUSAN

Quiet, fool!

SUSAN finds no pursuit. She releases JOHN and notices his condition.

SUSAN

You told him, didn't you? Didn't you? And then bam! right to me.

JOHN

I had no other place.

SUSAN hits him.

SUSAN

Dizzard -- lunkhead -- danger! A mooncalf even to let myself taste --

JOHN does not fight back, simply stands and listens. This confuses SUSAN. She notices the bucket.

SUSAN

Bring your lunch?

JOHN

Took all night to figure things out.

SUSAN

How to kill me off?

JOHN

No, ma'am.

SUSAN

Ma'am? And that -- at the end of your manly arms.

JOHN

Blackberries.

SUSAN

You're flying your ass away and --

JOHN

Needed a gift for what I want to do. I am not completely unchurched.

SUSAN gapes at him, then stalks away. JOHN follows.

JOHN

Wait!

SUSAN

You can't do what you want to do!

JOHN

Why not? Why not? Answer me.

SUSAN

Orphan man, you don't know what you don't know. Leave!

SUSAN walks to her "house," and JOHN follows. SUSAN pushes JOHN away roughly.

SUSAN

I told you to leave!

JOHN looks around, then sits in a rocking chair. SUSAN tries to tip him out. JOHN immediately re-seats himself. Again, but JOHN holds on. SUSAN changes tactics, moves to the side of the chair and tries to dump him out. Suddenly, JOHN gets up and snatches the chair from SUSAN. He fixes his eye on her steadily as he slams the chair down, sits, picks up the bucket. They glare; then, without taking his eyes off SUSAN, JOHN slowly eats a blackberry. Offers her one.

JOHN

They have been known to settle the heart.

JOHN slaps the chair next to him for SUSAN to sit. SUSAN, glaring, takes the chair and moves it several feet away, with her back to JOHN, agitated: foot banging the porch, etc.

JOHN

I have a cure for that twitching.

SUSAN makes an obscene gesture.

JOHN

A cure for that, too.

JOHN takes his chair and moves it next to SUSAN's.

JOHN

A cure from my mother -- a sweet physic to ease one's pains. She put it right on my tongue. Like this.

JOHN sticks out his tongue, puts a blackberry on it, and folds it back into his mouth.

JOHN

Did your mama ever do that?

Against her will, SUSAN looks at him stick out his tongue, put a berry on it, and slowly draw it into his mouth.

JOHN

Didn't care for the molasses she used -- but the sweetness of her touch -- ah -- that was the real physic.

JOHN offers SUSAN a berry. Both wanting and not wanting to, she goes to take it. JOHN pulls it back, indicates for her to open her mouth and stick out her tongue. SUSAN does so, and JOHN puts the berry on her tongue like a communion wafer.

SUSAN

We can't --

JOHN

Works, doesn't it?

(gives one more)

Sweet.

(takes one more)

Physic.

SUSAN jumps up and stalks around.

SUSAN

You have to go.

JOHN

You drew me across the water, and here I've landed.

SUSAN

I do not want to care about you, scarecrow.

JOHN throws his arms out like a scarecrow.

JOHN

Oh, well.

Suddenly, JOHN grabs his head, in pain.

JOHN

Oh, man!

SUSAN does not go directly to him. JOHN has blood on his hand and forehead. Exasperated, SUSAN goes into the "house" -- that is, an ACTOR will hand her a bowl of water and a rough cloth. She returns to JOHN.

SUSAN

How conveniently you bleed.

SUSAN washes JOHN's wound.

SUSAN

How'd this happen?

JOHN

No moon, woodpile, running hard to find my purpose in life
-- bam!

SUSAN

Be'd better to gag you with this and drown you. There.

JOHN sticks out his tongue.

JOHN

Physic?

SUSAN wrings out the cloth, then deliberately drops the cloth into the water for maximum splash. She puts a berry on JOHN's tongue, then slaps him not too hard on the cheek.

JOHN

Now I am completely healed.

SUSAN

That apple tree --

JOHN

Yeah.

SUSAN

Next to it.

JOHN

A cross.

SUSAN

Next to that.

JOHN

A pile of stones.

SUSAN

It's a cairn. Say it.

JOHN

Cairn.

SUSAN

The cross is Mama. When she died, Papa wood-cut for Grier, for money to school me. But when he went to collect -- c'mon --

JOHN

Grier wouldn't pay him.

SUSAN

And Papa, proud man in a black skin -- he beat Grier.

JOHN

That's why he said --

SUSAN

Grier cried "Sheriff!" and the sheriff cried "Lynch!" and running for his life, my father ran out of his life when he tried to cross the river after the rains. And Grier sold every cord, that wood soaked in my papa's blood.

JOHN

He won't be giving me the money.

SUSAN

What he wants to give you is hard, boy, but it won't be cash, and he won't be putting it in your pocket. Your money -- pfft! You're just his newest nigger.

GRIER steps out of the shadows, carrying his trumpet. He inspects the ground, looks in the direction of SUSAN's house. He watches through the next scene.

JOHN

Yeah, well, maybe my money is gone, maybe not, but he still owes me, and I will collect.

SUSAN

Righteous man trash talk -- just like Papa --

SUSAN jumps out of her chair and grabs the axe. JOHN follows.

JOHN

I've got plans --

SUSAN

-- trash talk about honor, just like Papa --

JOHN

Not your Papa --

SUSAN

-- thought he could do.

JOHN

I'm not your papa --

SUSAN

Gets himself killed --

JOHN

Listen to me!

SUSAN

And now you -- no, no, no --

JOHN

Listen to me!

SUSAN

-- not on my time, not on my porch, not with my life --

JOHN

Listen to me!

SUSAN

-- I am not going to lose again --

JOHN

If -- if you might let this lunkhead mouth flap for a moment
instead of yours --

SUSAN faces him, axe in her hand.

SUSAN

Are you telling me to shut up?

JOHN

Much as it pains me to say it -- I am telling you to shut up.

JOHN reaches out and turns away the axe-blade.

JOHN

The money is for me what it was for your papa -- for freedom
-- and I am thinking this, too: for us.

SUSAN

You are stupid to the bone, white man.

JOHN

For wanting my money, or for wanting you?

SUSAN

For thinking, white man, that you can ever really have this
hand.

JOHN

Well, colored girl --

SUSAN

Watch your direction!

JOHN

-- you talk a strong game --

SUSAN

No death sentence of color hanging over you --

JOHN

But I've been nigger'd by Grier --

SUSAN

You can still go white --

JOHN

If I had a mind to go white, which I don't --

SUSAN

What are you saying?

JOHN

I hereby give it up.

SUSAN

You can't give it up!

JOHN

I hereby give up what doesn't make sense.

SUSAN

Not making sense is right!

JOHN

I give up what splits me from you. I give up what I never asked for in the first place.

SUSAN

You can't just give it up! It stains you, just like mine does me --

JOHN

Susan -- Susan! -- if there is enough love --

Both are astonished at the word.

JOHN

You meet a person, you cross the river, you sit on their porch with the smell of blackberries in the air, and you talk out the loneliness. "Color" in that? Do you feel it? Answer me -- do you feel it?

SUSAN

My mama's people gave up on her.

JOHN

Answer me!

SUSAN

Out there won't --

JOHN

Answer me!

SUSAN

I'd like -- What does it matter what I like?

JOHN

Like it!

SUSAN

Why are you forcing me?

JOHN

Spit it out!

SUSAN

Color darkens everything --

JOHN

Answer.

SUSAN

Papa said color is a nail through the hand --

JOHN

Answer. Me.

SUSAN

You are so ignorant. You are too dangerous, Orphan John, from off the mountain, out of the clouds. Your heart is too dangerous.

JOHN

Answer me.

SUSAN

I fear the words will burn me.

JOHN

Let me draw off some fire, then.

JOHN kisses her, lightly.

JOHN

Now answer me.

SUSAN

There are all these ghosts --

JOHN

Let me draw again.

SUSAN resists him.

SUSAN

They smell of knives and whippings and old hard stories of Africa -- long chain of chains, long pain of pains -- Your --

SUSAN touches his lips.

SUSAN

Not enough.

JOHN

Yet.

JOHN goes to kiss her, but SUSAN stops him.

JOHN

Just one thing, then: would you like me to sit on your porch?

SUSAN

I would like to have you sit on my porch.

JOHN

Then we will deal off the ghosts one by one.

SUSAN

You are so dumb.

JOHN

The lunkhead's saving grace.

SUSAN

Against my better judgment, I am having a better judgment
of you.

GRIER blows his trumpet.

JOHN

Well, I guess Gabriel knows when to blow.

JOHN gets the bucket, hands it to SUSAN, and sticks out his tongue.
SUSAN puts a berry on his tongue.

JOHN

Then go away no more.

JOHN turns and leaves. SUSAN goes to the porch and waits.

* * * * *

Scene 4

Back in GRIER's kitchen: table, chair.

GRIER

The prodigal son. How were her thighs?

JOHN

You owe me money.

GRIER

Got to sell the wood first.

JOHN

That wasn't the contract.

GRIER

Contracts change.

JOHN

I know you got money.

GRIER

What a handsome fire in you!

JOHN

Stop that.

GRIER

All defending what you're owed. And probably in love, too.

JOHN

I said --

GRIER

What a long night spent waiting can bring to the day, huh?

GRIER reaches into his pocket and brings out a leather bag, with a sun figure stitched on it. GRIER points to it.

GRIER

Go on. Take it. You win -- can't beat you -- so strong and strapping! Got to play fair.

JOHN takes the bag and goes to open it, but GRIER stops him.

GRIER

Eh, eh, eh -- now it's different. Now you are in my house when I don't want you here. A "trespass" -- the sheriff could shoot a body for a trespass. You had better go.

JOHN pockets the bag and exits.

GRIER

You have broken the law, boy; you have robbed an old man. The sheriff will hear all about it. In fact -- is that the sheriff I hear now coming up the drive? Could be. I did send him an invite to meet the mongrel that wants nigger on his breath.

* * * * *

Scene 5

JOHN

Susan! Susan! Susan! I got the money! I got the money!
I got the money!

SUSAN

Grier gave it to you?

JOHN

I got it!

SUSAN

Did he give it, or did you take it?

JOHN

What's the difference? I got --

SUSAN

It makes all the difference!

JOHN

I don't know the difference!

SUSAN

Did he put it in your hands?

JOHN

No --

SUSAN

Did he write you out a note?

JOHN

I doubt the man can write --

SUSAN

Pay attention!

JOHN

No, he didn't! He just put the payment --

SUSAN

Where? Where?

JOHN

Just -- out. Where I could take it!

SUSAN

And you took it.

JOHN

I took it!

SUSAN

So -- open it.

JOHN opens the bag. Inside is a ruby pendant and two gold rings.

JOHN

This isn't money!

SUSAN

Something new added to you every minute --

JOHN

Necklace, rings --

SUSAN

John -- you are now a thief!

JOHN

I didn't steal -- No! He didn't!

SUSAN

It was never much of a home anyways.

JOHN

He --

SUSAN

Oh, stop it. What did you expect, mountain man? We have to go.

JOHN

I can't go.

SUSAN

The sheriff already rides us down.

JOHN

I can't go. He still owes --

SUSAN puts her hand gently but firmly around his throat.

JOHN

What are you --

SUSAN

Rope around your neck --

SUSAN tightens her grip.

SUSAN

He will say what? Think!

SUSAN releases her grip when she sees JOHN understands.

SUSAN

He has said it already. Time to go. Grier is waiting very much to be hard upon you.

SUSAN takes a shawl, which she puts on, and her bag with the doll in it, and then a leather headband -- no feathers or decorations.

JOHN

That's all?

SUSAN

My mother's grandmother gave her this when my mother left home. The doll my mother gave me. My mother's hands -- what else would I need?

JOHN

Gun would be nice --

SUSAN

Never had one --

JOHN

Matches, food --

SUSAN

I'm ready.

JOHN

Even the Israelites took food out of Egypt --

SUSAN

I am prepared where it matters most -- and I won't be taken like my father.

Susan tosses the headband to JOHN.

SUSAN

Wear this. You now have to be what you aren't --

JOHN

I can't wear --

SUSAN

Isn't about choosing now, John.

JOHN

I can't be --

SUSAN

If you want us, then you be what they mark you, or else we will bend a tree like Judas. You want us, you wait. Choices've been made for us. Are you still willing to choose me?

JOHN adjusts the headband.

JOHN

Your mother?

SUSAN

Made it for my father.

JOHN

Ever wear it?

SUSAN

Once, for pleasing -- that's all she wanted.

JOHN

What tribe? Wait -- I know. The johnwicks.

SUSAN

Must be new --

JOHN

Old race -- here since the dawn-times.

SUSAN

And will stay until the sun-downs?

JOHN

What I have heard. I will be what we need.

SUSAN

I was hoping that's what your tribe believed.

JOHN

And we go where to find new land?

SUSAN

Down the river out of Egypt.

JOHN

I love you, Susan Morgan. There hangs no question about that.

SUSAN

We must leave before "too late" is here.

JOHN

Can you say it?

A trumpet blast from GRIER as lights change. Frightened, SUSAN and JOHN leave.

* * * * *

Scene 6

The "escape" of JOHN and SUSAN is done to a rhythmic vocalizing and clapping. JOHN and SUSAN are following an old Indian path through the forest, at night. The terrain they cover is moving down a mountainside, following a creek, and finally ending up in a clearing. The journey is guided by the actions and shapes the ACTORS take, and those actions and shapes should be on several levels, i.e., JOHN and SUSAN could be moved overhead, carried in certain ways, etc. The particular choreography will be worked out by the director and ACTORS. At the end of it, SUSAN and JOHN find themselves in a clearing, dazed but escaped. They are sleeping apart but close. JOHN wakes up, finds SUSAN, and snuggles up next to her. Lights change to dawn. A few beats of silence, then SUSAN wakes up and sees JOHN next to her. She slowly but deliberately untangles herself and sits several feet apart from him.

JOHN
Why did you move?

SUSAN
I liked it too much.

JOHN
Reason to stay.

SUSAN
Reason to slip away --

JOHN
Come here --

SUSAN
Take that hand back.

JOHN
It's harmless.

SUSAN
Put the snake back in your pocket.

JOHN

Any idea where we are --

SUSAN

Old Indian trail by the river to the other side of the mountain.

JOHN

We're on the other side?

SUSAN

Yes.

JOHN

Without going over?

SUSAN

Without going over.

JOHN

You surely have magic, Susan Morgan.

SUSAN

I have burned up all my magic, John Wicks. Now you can go.

JOHN

Go?

SUSAN

Go. Go.

JOHN

This was together.

SUSAN

Go. You're free. You're safe -- sheriff won't come to here -- different county. So -- north, like you said you wanted.

JOHN

"Go" means "go" with you, whatever part we reach.

JOHN moves closer to SUSAN, who gives him a shove strong enough to throw him on his back.

JOHN

You're kicking me away.

SUSAN

We're out of danger. I am out of magic. No obligations.
Who needs you?

JOHN

Look, I'm not going to go.

SUSAN walks around the clearing, looking for something.

JOHN

What are you looking for?

An ACTOR hands SUSAN a stout piece of wood, and she threatens JOHN with it.

SUSAN

Two days ago I had -- today I have not. And whose fault is that?

SUSAN jabs JOHN with the wood. JOHN tries to back off.

JOHN

I am so tired of being damaged by wood.

SUSAN jabs him again.

SUSAN

Oh, really?

JOHN

Put it down.

SUSAN jabs him again, and continues to jab him. JOHN protests.

SUSAN

Should have done this two days ago!

JOHN

Stop it.

SUSAN

Then I'd still have a house! And a bed to sleep in -- alone!

JOHN

Ow!

SUSAN

And not lug an iron ball called "johnwick" clapped to my leg!

JOHN

That hurts!

SUSAN

All because of a stranger from the river!

With a wind-up and a heave, SUSAN really whacks JOHN.

SUSAN

No more strangers!

JOHN

After what we've been through --

Hits him again.

SUSAN

No more lies!

JOHN

I didn't cross the river to --

Hits him a third time, which knocks him to the ground.

SUSAN

No more riiivvveerrrrss!

SUSAN drops the stick, breathing heavily. On the ground, JOHN edges warily to grab the stick, then edges away.

SUSAN

I don't know who you are, johnwick. I have given my heart to someone I do not know. Can you understand if I find that a touch -- a touch -- confusing?

JOHN uses the stick to help himself get up.

JOHN

You said some hurtful things.

SUSAN

I intended them to hurt. I aimed deep.

JOHN

I don't know if I can come back.

SUSAN

What?

JOHN

I am a man with feelings, Susan --

SUSAN

Wait a minute --

JOHN

-- and they have been questioned.

SUSAN

What's with that hang-dog look?

JOHN

It's sorrow, Susan.

SUSAN

I am not going to feel sorry for you!

JOHN

Damaged, Susan -- what can I say? I am going to have to take your advice. I am going to have to leave.

This brings SUSAN up short.

SUSAN

What?

JOHN

I think you're right.

SUSAN

Never take advice given with a stick.

JOHN

Dried oak does not lie. I'll go north.

SUSAN

North?

JOHN

Going there anyway when Grier's money came through.

SUSAN

You would leave me now?

JOHN

We'll let things air out -- you know. See if maybe we can just be friends.

JOHN readies himself and grabs what is now his walking stick.

JOHN

Well, I'm off! See you around, maybe.

JOHN goes about twenty feet, then stops and inhales.

JOHN

Ah -- Ah --

SUSAN

What are you doing?

JOHN

The air is better up north! Smell that --

SUSAN

That's as far as I get to get rid of you?

JOHN

Already my brain is clearing! Now, who was that colored gal --

SUSAN

Colored gal?

JOHN

-- who fancied herself so highly? Susan! I guess I was just too looowwww for her!

JOHN moves slowly toward SUSAN as he speaks.

JOHN

Guess she couldn't have confidence in a "white man," especially one that wanted to earn her money and become a whole new Indian tribe just to have the pleasure of her company till the trump of doom. Almost lost my heart on her -- good thing I didn't. Now I can be an up-north orphan and free all by my airy lonesome self! Or maybe not.

SUSAN swoops her shawl in a wide circle, settling it back on her shoulders. A whoosh of wind.

JOHN

I find it much warmer down south.

SUSAN

It is much warmer. Enough for the johnwick to stay?

JOHN

Yes.

SUSAN

He will stay?

JOHN

Yes.

SUSAN

He will not leave?

JOHN

Only in his coffin.

JOHN moves to SUSAN.

JOHN

We've gone through an engagement of fire.

SUSAN

Yes.

JOHN

And bruises.

SUSAN

Deserved ones.

With a flourish, JOHN hands the walking stick to an ACTOR.

JOHN

No more, then. Not "wife" yet --

SUSAN

Not "husband" yet --

JOHN

But it seems we could --

SUSAN

Johnwick --

JOHN

Ancient johnwick wisdom, yea verily: Safety in, danger out.
Big walls.

SUSAN

Thick walls.

JOHN

Tall walls.

SUSAN

Walls solid and signified.

JOHN

Will that do? Will that do, Susan Morgan?

SUSAN

Yes -- yes it might --

JOHN

But?

SUSAN

But I fear -- I fear --

JOHN

Fear what?

SUSAN

I fear how easily these solid walls can turn into a box -- I've seen it happen -- a box that buries you away --

JOHN

Then we must raise the roofbeam high -- high, even higher than -- than --

SUSAN laughs as John exaggerates his reach.

JOHN

-- so that we can always breathe whatever air we please.

SUSAN nods yes.

JOHN

What do we do now?

SUSAN

Hungry?

JOHN

Don't happen to have a full breakfast in there --

SUSAN

Out of magic, I told you. Smell.

JOHN

Chimney smoke. Cooking smoke.

SUSAN

Sending your belly a smoke signal.

JOHN

How proper for an Indian.

JOHN kisses her and gently puts his hand on her breast. SUSAN, still kissing him, just as gently removes it. From another part of the stage we hear BECKY begin singing **Sheep, Sheep, Don't'cha Know The Road?** softly [**Southern Journey, Vol. 6, Track 1**].

SUSAN

We ain't done "now I pronounce" yet --

JOHN

Well, then, if not the honey yet, I'll just have to take biscuits and bacon instead.

SUSAN

Honey for dessert when the time comes ripe for honey.

JOHN

Then I count on time moving forward quickly.

* * * * *

Scene 7

There is no transition between scenes except for a light change as JOHN and SUSAN walk into the area that is BECKY's property. BECKY's singing gets louder, but when she sees JOHN and SUSAN enter, she hides behind several ACTORS, picks up a broom, and sticks it out.

JOHN

Hello? Anyone to home? Did you hear singing?

SUSAN

I thought so.

JOHN

Hello? Stopped. The smoke --

SUSAN

But no body.

JOHN

Ghosts?

SUSAN

Ghosts can't hold matches.

BECKY

Hands to God, knees to the ground!

JOHN turns to look at BECKY, just enough to see the "gun."

BECKY

Back around!

JOHN

(whispering to SUSAN)

Gun.

BECKY

Go on! Or I will drill you through your hearts! Send you to fetch me some brinestone!

They raise their hands and kneel.

BECKY

From Grover Bolling, aren't you?

JOHN

Who?

BECKY

Bullyrag me some more.

SUSAN

We don't know him.

BECKY

All knows Grover Bolling.

SUSAN

Us, by the river around the mountain --

BECKY

Bolling not send you.

JOHN

Sent by hunger, ma'am. Saw your smoke --

BECKY

Around the mountain, you said?

SUSAN

Yes.

BECKY

Hands down -- but stay on your knees -- be good for you.
That rag on your head?

JOHN

I'm Indian.

BECKY

You the whitest Indian --

JOHN

From the johnwick tribe --

SUSAN

John!

BECKY

Johnwick?

JOHN

From over the river's other side --

BECKY

Say that again.

JOHN

What?

BECKY

That name.

JOHN

Johnwick. Not many left of us.

BECKY

In fact, you may be the only one, right? -- the johnwicks, my sweet eye-tooth. Eyes straight, wick! You, girl.

SUSAN

Ma'am.

BECKY

You ain't full colored --

SUSAN

No, ma'am -- Indian mama.

BECKY

A "johnwick" mama?

BECKY laughs.

BECKY

Johnwick -- johnwick slick, you are.

JOHN

Can we stand up?

BECKY

Christian? Saved?

JOHN

My knees are whining.

SUSAN

Saved when I was ten, fused with the Lord.

JOHN

You didn't tell me that.

SUSAN

Dark continent, I am.

BECKY

You?

SUSAN

When we fellowship, he will ask for his soul.

BECKY

I suppose even a heathen "johnwick" should be saved.
Stand up. Pray!

SUSAN begins; JOHN stumbles, not knowing the prayer. BECKY comes out from behind the ACTORS holding the broom.

SUSAN

Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name --

BECKY

Enough said. Can feel it. Turn.

JOHN

That's a broom.

BECKY

My "gun."

JOHN

A broom. Snookered with a broom.

BECKY

Power of visions.

JOHN

Power of a lie.

BECKY

This from the "johnwick"?

SUSAN

Best to button it.

BECKY

She's wise. You said hungry?

JOHN

Whole body hungry.

BECKY

Trade food for names.

SUSAN

More fair to us than you.

BECKY

How do you know what I want? I am Aunt Becky to everyone around here -- now you. Name.

SUSAN

Susan Morgan.

BECKY

You feel good, my mulatto. Name of Aunt Becky includes you, too, if you aim to stick with her.

JOHN

That's what John Wicks aims to do.

BECKY

John Wicks – johnwick. He do that kind of thing too often? You two aiming for a marriage under God?

SUSAN

"So that he bringeth them into their desired haven." [Psalms, 107:30]

BECKY

Psalms!

JOHN

Yeah?

BECKY

Mister johnwick, you have a jewel here. "The lips of knowledge are a precious jewel." [Proverbs, 20:15]

SUSAN

Proverbs.

BECKY

More proof, if proof was needed.

SUSAN

Are you a preacher?

BECKY

Been called to deliver his word.

JOHN

Women can't do that.

BECKY

I was mistaken -- he surely looked smart enough for you.

SUSAN

Sometimes his mouth runs on --

BECKY

Run with this, johnwick. God's colors come out a lot of mouths, titties or not, and you had better get used to that. Kneel down -- it's time.

JOHN kneels. BECKY hands him one end of the broom.

BECKY

Now, you.

BECKY hands SUSAN the other end of the broom, and then gingerly sits on the broom, balancing herself by holding onto their shoulders, and lifts up her feet.

BECKY

Who-wee -- steady me! -- you all strong enough! This broom is God's word, lifting me off -- but the word of God is steep, and I got to hold to them that lives around me. Color don't matter -- only the love of willing hands and willing shoulders. Put me down. Now rise -- and don't let go.

When they stand, BECKY grabs the broom midway between their hands.

BECKY

When I was sanctified, a window shut over my eyes. Now all I see is souls, which got no color except the color of heaven. Your law outguns the man's law that says they can't make a life together, and in that I bind them, full of your love, till death carry them to your mansion. Now, Susan, you is known as Susan Wicks.

JOHN

Becky?

BECKY

Yes?

JOHN

It was Susan gave me life back back there by the river on the other side of the mountain. I want to honor her --

BECKY

Yeah?

JOHN

I want to honor her with the taking of her name for mine.

SUSAN

That's not done.

JOHN

Supposedly this isn't, either, but we just did. And a lady preacher.

BECKY

With a broom.

JOHN

So why not keep on?

BECKY

Susan? New from old?

SUSAN

Do you know how deep in you are?

JOHN

Susan -- I know the danger square.

SUSAN

I know you know.

JOHN

You know I know.

SUSAN

John Morgan -- you are cracked crazy with grace.

JOHN

Finally! So, Becky, I take her line. Now pronounce us.

BECKY

It's done. You is married. Now, put the broom down and jump!

JOHN

Jump a broom?

SUSAN

Jump into a new life.

JOHN

Well, okay.

They jump. BECKY jumps.

BECKY

And you can kiss her, too, you know -- just don't use her up all at once!

JOHN

Honey time?

SUSAN

Later.

JOHN

Well, then, breakfast time!

BECKY

Just like a man -- the stomach leads. First you sign the Bible to make the record: John and Susan Morgan, July 19, 1907. Then we eat to celebrate.

SUSAN

Becky -- who is Grover Bolling?

JOHN

Can we talk about this over breakfast?

SUSAN

John -- Aunt Becky?

BECKY

Let me give you the short chapter: Bolling's a moonshiner, and one of the men who killed Jake, my husband.

SUSAN

One of the men?

BECKY

(ignoring her)

Verse 1: Gave Jake easy money and liquor to look out for the sheriff. Verse 2: Jake looked out for the sheriff -- and looked out not for me. Verse 3: The liquor --

BECKY holds back on saying something, not wanting to tell either a lie or the truth about JAKE.

BECKY

Told you it was a short chapter. Bolling comes to plague me, or he sends someone over to plague me, whenever his liquor liquors him up cloud-high 'cause he thinks I'll patch the sheriff to his ass and land his ass in jail. Got no interest in his ass, the sheriff, jail, or any combination of the three. My Trinity sits elsewhere and elsewhere.

SUSAN

But did you ever talk to the sheriff?

BECKY

Genesis showed us how not-good it was to talk to snakes.

JOHN

Sounds like Grover Bolling and this sheriff need to be punished.

BECKY

Let it go.

BECKY jumps over the broom.

BECKY

Old life -- new life. You two have always got to live what you want -- and I know what you want, so let me make that breakfast for two newly harnessed and celebrate what's just walked into my life.

SUSAN and JOHN exit.

BECKY

Jake -- I will do right by them. Right for them. I will keep the danger away from them. I will not let any lie darken their new light. I miss you so much.

BECKY picks up the broom and sings as the lights go to black **God Loves His Children [WPAQ]**, one verse, one chorus, slower tempo, with back-up from the ACTORS. The song should finish several beats into the black.

* * * * *

Scene 8

Three months later, BECKY's kitchen. BECKY is seated with a coffee pot and three cups; she is drinking coffee. JOHN and SUSAN enter as she recites to herself; she hears them enter.

BECKY

"In this wicked, sinful world / When trouble takes its shot / I grind these beans and pour 'em out / Heat water good and hot / I smell a smell like Africa / Black and strong and free / Long as I got coffee / then I know my Lord loves me." Come join me.

JOHN

Becky, we have something to --

BECKY

Been doing my praying over coffee like I do every day --

JOHN

Becky --

BECKY

You done your praying?

SUSAN

Both soft and hard, Becky, just like you.

BECKY

You?

JOHN

We said we would --

SUSAN

Not so fast --

BECKY

You should try praying. Especially with coffee. You two all right?

JOHN

Becky -- Becky -- Susan, it's time.

SUSAN

Think twice, speak once --

JOHN

I'm trying.

BECKY

I hear distance in your trying.

JOHN

Becky --

BECKY

I hear "away" -- I hear "leave."

JOHN

Mind's been planning --

BECKY

Your thick johnwick walls.

JOHN

We got to --

BECKY

With a roofbeam as high as --

JOHN

We got to get going, Becky.

BECKY

Over the roofbeam and gone -- gonna leave Eden and go to live in that box out there called the world!

JOHN

We got to be on our own.

BECKY

What does that mean?

SUSAN

John thinks --

BECKY

What does "your own" mean when your own fits this place -- fits me?

JOHN

We can't take any more from you. We got to get going.

BECKY

Already said that, johnwick. You get wired some wealth I didn't hear about? You been packing away God's manna over the last three months?

JOHN

You know exactly what we have.

BECKY

What you don't have, you mean, and you don't have any scratch for traveling. So, if it ain't bound for glory you're bound for, then bound for where? Where?

SUSAN

Becky, John feels --

BECKY

What does Susan feel?

SUSAN

Becky --

BECKY

What does Susan feel?

SUSAN

I like it here --

JOHN

Susan --

SUSAN

I do!

JOHN

Susan --

BECKY

Don't you cut her off! Don't you dare be the "man" with her!

JOHN

I wasn't --

BECKY

Are you "man" enough to have what you need to make Susan safe? To make your wife safe?

JOHN

No.

BECKY

No you don't. No you don't! You are strong, John Morgan, and honest, and I'll give you that, but you will kill us all if you let your greed for walls --

JOHN

Ain't greed.

BECKY

Is greed! Is pride -- "his mind hardened in pride!" [Daniel, 5:20]

SUSAN

Becky -- easy --

BECKY

You can't let walls become your pride for being, or they'll box you up like a coffin!

SUSAN

Becky!

BECKY

Land and money will not salvation you or her or anybody!

SUSAN

Becky -- this is my husband.

BECKY

A good one. Which is why I'm busting his chops.

JOHN

But --

BECKY cuts him off.

BECKY

Ah -- ah --

BECKY catches his eye.

JOHN

All right.

BECKY

Good -- now I can get off this pulpit -- it's uncomfortable up there. John, she likes it here. Why ain't what she likes your compass? Why are you so prided up about accepting an old lady's offer of luck? Susan, you think color's a problem?

BECKY grabs her own crotch.

BECKY

Thinking too much with this man-part --

JOHN

Becky -- Becky --

BECKY

-- makes just as many problems --

JOHN

Let go of yourself --

BECKY starts clomping around the kitchen like a "man."

JOHN

Becky --

SUSAN starts laughing.

BECKY

You shocked, last living male member of the johnwick tribe?

SUSAN mimics BECKY's crotch-grabbing gesture and laughs even more.

JOHN

Susan --

BECKY

Grover Bolling makes a brain-rotting liquor, but it can't match that stupid-making liquor called "manliness."

JOHN

Now, look --

BECKY stomps around again like a "man," and SUSAN joins her, and then even JOHN -- a little -- and they laugh until the tension goes.

BECKY

Look, my sweaty son of Adam, you got no place to go and no money to go there with, so let me list your "prospects" in this world: a tight roof and someone to pray for you. Does that about cover it? And -- if my mother-sense ain't worn out, you now have two where one used to be.

SUSAN

Becky!

BECKY

John Morgan, you can't afford to be your kind of particular man at this particular moment.

SUSAN

How did you know?

JOHN

True?

SUSAN

Think so. I'm late --

JOHN

Why didn't you tell me?

SUSAN

Been late a couple months now.

JOHN

You're late telling me.

SUSAN

Threw up the other day.

BECKY

A quiet thunder in the wedding bed.

SUSAN

Is it true?

BECKY

What say your womb?

SUSAN takes JOHN's hand and places it on her abdomen.

SUSAN

What testimony?

JOHN

I feel the quick.

BECKY

Too early for that -- just your own heart. What testimony, John Morgan? She's waiting.

JOHN

We have a home here. And here.

BECKY

And you'll stay?

JOHN lays his ear against SUSAN's stomach.

JOHN

What testimony, little Morgan? We're waiting.

JOHN looks at SUSAN and BECKY, nods yes.

BECKY

We are all orphans no more. We have safety in the world.

JOHN

I'm going to need work.

BECKY

You gonna need work --

JOHN

Need all I can get -- get started now!

BECKY

I know where to get it for you.

JOHN

Leave me a little "manly" dignity, eh, Becky -- say "You know where I could find work."

BECKY walks away from them, obviously agitated.

JOHN

(confused)

And where might that be, Aunt Becky?

BECKY

With Colonel Goforth.

JOHN

The drunkard up there?

BECKY

Now get yourself ready.

JOHN

You're friends with the richest white man around here -- the richest drunkard --

BECKY

-- with a drunkard's wife -- she married the bottle --

JOHN

I hate drunkards.

BECKY

Tuck your shirt in.

JOHN

It's in. And why would he do you a favor?

BECKY

Deeper -- you got two to tuck in for now.

JOHN

Becky --

BECKY

Slick your hair.

JOHN

It's lined up. I can pull up my own pants! Becky, enough.
You're as nervous as a horsefly at a bullfrog wedding.
Answer me my questions.

BECKY looks at SUSAN, who immediately understands.

SUSAN

John, just let this go. Oh, Becky.

JOHN

What?

SUSAN

Don't --

BECKY

It's okay, Susan --

SUSAN

Becky --

BECKY

A test, Susan --

JOHN

Don't what?

BECKY

Listen to me, Susan. This is a test --

SUSAN

No, Becky --

BECKY

Listen! -- you two -- a test of my heart, test of grace. That's
why you were sent.

SUSAN

You don't need to do this --

BECKY

Susan, stop! Child, stop!

JOHN

I got to say I'm up the creek here --

BECKY

Susan, I'm old enough and scarred enough to know what better is best. Trust me?

SUSAN

Yes.

BECKY

This way, no one gets left behind.

SUSAN

Then give me your hand as we walk.

BECKY

John?

JOHN

Yeah, Becky?

BECKY

You're standing there looking at an angry woman.

JOHN

You?

BECKY

Anger hot enough to murder -- I am going to make you feel the knives of what I'm bringing you into and bringing myself back into.

JOHN

If it causes this much trouble --

BECKY

John, listen sharp!

SUSAN

Listen, John.

BECKY

You ever wonder how poor slaves like Jake and me ended up owning land, outright, not just "share-crapping" it, like my Jake used to say? You wouldn't.

NOTE: In the following scene, the director, in essence, must choreograph a dance that blends the telling of BECKY's story with movement (and music, if appropriate), and he or she is free to use any devices, props, movement with the other actors, etc. to expand visually and aurally BECKY's story.

BECKY

Susan knows -- least she suspects. We was share-cropping it then, for the young Goforths. But it was -- still is -- all her land and all her money -- and when we first met the Goforths you coulda been stone blind and still seen how her owning made him burn with envy! A complete half a man, Jake called him, watching him do this little bantam [two syllables: "ban-tam"] rooster thing when we went to pay. Well, he drank himself into a debt he couldn't get out of, and one day, he just shows up. Our dirt on his boots rather than the other way around.

GOFORTH

I have a proposition for you.

BECKY

Jake didn't know the word -- but I did.

GOFORTH

You work this land hard.

BECKY

He wanted to sell it to us --

GOFORTH

For a modest price.

BECKY

We had a little money saved --

GOFORTH

How much?

BECKY

-- and that's what he took.

GOFORTH

Should be enough.

BECKY

His debt put the deed in our hands.

GOFORTH

May it serve you well.

GOFORTH looks at MRS. GOFORTH.

GOFORTH

Management, my dear.

SUSAN

But not all, was it, Becky?

GOFORTH's rape of BECKY only needs to be minimally suggested.

BECKY

He came back one day, when Jake was in the field.

GOFORTH

To see how things were going.

MRS. GOFORTH

His -- management.

GOFORTH

My duties.

BECKY

He put his face next to mine. The liquor -- Then a hand on a hand. I took away the hand. And then a hand there, and I moved, and then a hand again, moved again -- my mouth afraid to say what my heart screamed, just trying to make it nice -- "yes, Mr. Goforth" -- "no, Mr. Goforth" -- "don't say, Mr. Goforth" -- but like begging to a snake's dead eyes. He asked if I loved Jake.

(to GOFORTH)

I love my Jake.

GOFORTH

I envy you --

BECKY

Go back to your wife.

GOFORTH

No escape there -- escape here -- aren't you willing, Becky?

BECKY

He wanted to make me willing --

GOFORTH

Not even a little, Becky?

MRS. GOFORTH

He'd lost his willing with me.

BECKY

But I loved my Jake.

GOFORTH

So, unwilling -- that's no problem --

BECKY

I could only do nothing -- so my mind took me to Jake in the field --

MRS. GOFORTH moves closer to watch what GOFORTH does.

MRS. GOFORTH

His appetites --

GOFORTH

Becky, you needn't do a thing.

MRS. GOFORTH

-- were what drew me in.

GOFORTH

Love Jake -- won't matter to me.

MRS. GOFORTH

Then sickened me --

GOFORTH

I love your skin --

MRS. GOFORTH

-- when he had appetites for everything but me --

GOFORTH

Skin deep and deeper --

MRS. GOFORTH

-- and made me build an appetite for hatred.

GOFORTH

And deeper, and deeper.

GOFORTH finishes with BECKY. GOFORTH and MRS. GOFORTH step back but do not exit.

JOHN
(softly)

Damn! Grier.

BECKY

And each time --

JOHN

More than once?

SUSAN

"Power" means more than once, John.

BECKY

And then one day, home early, to surprise me -- Jake knew
-- little ban-tam Goforth --

JOHN

Goddamn -- Becky --

BECKY

No pity, because I am tired of carrying the sickness of this alone! Jake's heart --

BECKY makes a gesture/sound of breaking.

BECKY

He believed he couldn't protect me, John --

JOHN

How'd Jake and Bolling --

BECKY

Bolling brought Goforth his whiskey --

JOHN

And so he asked Bolling to take on Jake? He felt guilty?

BECKY

We were starving --

JOHN

I thought I'd seen darkness in Grier --

BECKY

So Jake sat -- and he sat -- and then one day -- one day Jake decided: No more. Manliness kicked in -- kicked him upright, kicked his tongue in gear -- and in mid-curse Bolling shot him with less concern than he showed for his mash. I buried Jake myself -- never went to the sheriff.

SUSAN

No good going anyway.

BECKY

Except Bolling thinks I still will --

JOHN

And he comes to remind you.

BECKY

When his liquor flames his head. "Grover Bolling!" But
when Jake died, my words died, John. Broken heart broke
my heart.

A hesitation. Then BECKY reaches into her bodice and pulls out a leather
sack hung from a thong around her neck. From the sack she pulls out a
scrap of blue blanket.

BECKY

There's more that even you can't imagine.

An ACTOR hands MRS. GOFORTH a blue shawl the color of the scrap of
blanket. As she walks slowly into the scene, MRS. GOFORTH puts the
shawl on her head like a hood.

BECKY

Here's a bitter kicker: Jake died even as I had life inside me.
Eight pounds at birth with Goforth skin, and nothing like that
stays secret for long.

SUSAN

And Mrs. Goforth must have --

MRS. GOFORTH

She knew, all right.

BECKY

At night, wearing a shawl to hide her face --

MRS. GOFORTH

Sheriff, take it --

BECKY

I wished I'd fought harder --

MRS. GOFORTH starts to go, but BECKY grabs the shawl, stopping her.

BECKY

But it took nothing for the sheriff to take him out of my arms.

BECKY lets go and faces MRS. GOFORTH. She takes the blanket scrap
and rubs it gently on MRS. GOFORTH's cheeks.

BECKY

This was all I had left -- I'd rub his face with it to keep him from crying.

In anger MRS. GOFORTH grabs BECKY's wrist and stops her, then twists away and exits. GOFORTH follows. BECKY puts the scrap back in the leather pouch.

BECKY

I don't know where he is -- I don't even know if he's alive. He'd be about your age. So, there it is -- all the knives.

JOHN

And you would ask --

BECKY

Yes.

Both JOHN and SUSAN are stunned. BECKY looks at them, pities them.

BECKY

Because I don't need to love my own pain any more.

JOHN

You said "murder"!

BECKY

I did.

JOHN

But you're asking us to swallow --

BECKY gestures, and an ACTOR hands BECKY a broom.

BECKY

You jumped the broom, didn't you?

SUSAN

Yes ma'am.

BECKY throws the broom onto the ground. Then she rears back and wails, a sharp keening sound.

BECKY

I have made a show of my grieving --

BECKY pulls her hair and beats her breast.

BECKY

I have wailed to Jake in my loneliness --

BECKY boxes with the air.

BECKY

I have cursed with an endless tongue! I am grief made flesh! I am vengeance made to flash! And you know what all that loving of my pain has gotten me? Nothing.

BECKY lets silence hang for a moment.

BECKY

A whited sepulchre -- beautiful tomb full of bones -- that was me until you two walked out of the woods and jumped. Jumped me right into a choice. C'mon. C'mon!

BECKY steps over the broom, then gestures for JOHN and SUSAN to join her. Then BECKY, with a sly grin, actually jumps over the broom, and JOHN and SUSAN also jump.

BECKY

That's what changed it. Between old family and new. Between dying and being bright.

BECKY hands the broom back to an ACTOR. She then takes their hands, and they stand in a circle.

BECKY

We go together.

SUSAN

Then orphans no more.

JOHN

None one left behind.

BECKY

We have safety in this world.

JOHN puts on the headband, and BECKY, JOHN, and SUSAN prepare to go to the GOFORTHs.

* * * * *

Scene 9

As the GOFORTHs enter and take their places, BELL sings a work song, **Sink 'Em Low [Southern Journey, Vol. 1, Track 15]**. GOFORTH is drunk but controlled. MRS. GOFORTH embroiders the figure of a phoenix. BECKY, JOHN, and SUSAN enter; BECKY indicates to them to wait, then approaches the "porch." BELL stops

GOFORTH

If it's not our African Eve --

BECKY

Colonel Goforth.

GOFORTH

Cleopatra on her barge. With servants.

BECKY

Mrs. Goforth.

GOFORTH

Will you offer nothing, dearest chuck?

MRS. GOFORTH looks up from her stitching, then just as studiously looks away without saying anything.

BECKY

It has been a hot day, Mrs. Goforth.

GOFORTH

A call for refreshment. Deacon Bell --

GOFORTH motions to BELL, who moves to bring GOFORTH a flask. MRS. GOFORTH, without any hesitation, jabs her needle into the back of BELL's

thigh. When BELL stops in pain, she casually wipes the tip of the needle on her dress and continues stitching.

GOFORTH pulls a second flask out of his pocket, opens it.

GOFORTH

In reserve. To my dearest partner of greatness -- the milk of human kindness to you all.

Everyone except MRS. GOFORTH watches GOFORTH take a long painful draught.

MRS. GOFORTH

My caretaker.

GOFORTH

I am suddenly very tired of you.

MRS. GOFORTH

Not a good attitude for a caretaker.

GOFORTH

Go, if you want. Now, Becky -- them?

BECKY

This is John and Susan Morgan.

GOFORTH

What relation to you that you bring them to me?

BECKY

Kin.

GOFORTH

To you?

BECKY

John's wife, Susan -- cousin.

GOFORTH

Wife?

BECKY

From the other side of the mountain.

GOFORTH

Wife? Come here. Come here! The --

BECKY

Indian.

GOFORTH

I assume you own your own tongue.

JOHN

Like Becky says --

GOFORTH

That your story?

JOHN

It's the truth.

GOFORTH

Eh?

BECKY

Sir.

GOFORTH

Heed her.

JOHN

Sir.

GOFORTH

Indian of any known species?

JOHN

Some of all: Tuscarora, Catawba, Cherokee.

GOFORTH

And some white, it seems.

JOHN

Hard to escape that tribe -- I hear. Sir.

GOFORTH

(to BECKY)

Sure he's not your son? He's got your mouth. The truth here, Indian, is this: a drop of "other" turns your white to dark.

BECKY

All got some dark in their blood, Colonel.

MRS. GOFORTH stands.

MRS. GOFORTH

You won't be staying long.

GOFORTH

Becky has her business.

MRS. GOFORTH

And then you go.

GOFORTH

Eventually she will go.

MRS. GOFORTH

"Eventually" is not acceptable.

BECKY

It'll take no time, Mrs. Goforth.

MRS. GOFORTH

Make sure it takes no time at all.

MRS. GOFORTH exits.

GOFORTH

Management -- when she takes her leave like that, she takes everything -- them, right?

BECKY

Just John -- he needs work.

GOFORTH

Not your dark kin.

BECKY

She stays with me, Colonel.

GOFORTH

Ever the protective angel.

BECKY

No need for temptation.

JOHN

I do need work.

GOFORTH

I got work. Would it be work an Indian would like?

JOHN

I work hard at all kinds of work.

GOFORTH

Then it should work out fine.

JOHN

It will work out fine -- sir.

GOFORTH

I have a soft spot for Becky -- family -- sort of. Right?

BECKY

You have your way with words, Colonel.

GOFORTH

My way, yes. Work this afternoon, John Morgan? Deacon Bell!

JOHN

Rest of the day'd be fine with me.

GOFORTH

Deacon Bell -- your new employee. My overseer -- my right hand at my right hand. What falls from his mouth are my words.

BELL

Don't need more hands, Mr. Goforth.

GOFORTH

However, not those words. Deacon --

BELL

Least not hands like his.

GOFORTH

Deacon. Are you saying -- no, I cannot be hearing right --

GOFORTH holds up the flask, shakes it by his ear.

GOFORTH

Might it be this? Nope, sounds fine to me -- then it's you, Deacon. Are you saying "no" to me?

BELL

Looking out for your best interests.

GOFORTH

And yours?

BELL

Mine is yours.

GOFORTH

Afraid of a little competition? John here looks like he could outwork you --

BELL

Afraid of no man.

GOFORTH

Then spare some Christian kindness for your own kind.

BELL

Them?

GOFORTH

Becky. And the Indians' Negro wife.

BELL

Like I said -- I know my interests.

GOFORTH

Then you'll be interested in doing what I say, and I say, a hand's a hand when it comes to work, Deacon, and we have work, that much I know. And I say I expect to see both of his employed fruitfully for the rest of the day.

GOFORTH waves the flask like a bell.

GOFORTH

Clear as a bell, Deacon Bell?

BELL

Yes sir.

GOFORTH

Clang, clang, Deacon Bell?

BELL

I still don't like --

GOFORTH

Deacon -- shut up.

BECKY

Thank you, Colonel Goforth.

GOFORTH

Those that have should share -- as my sloe-eyed wife has reminded me.

JOHN

I am ready to start.

GOFORTH

I'll take that as a thank you.

JOHN

Thank you. Sir.

GOFORTH

Susan?

SUSAN

Thank you. Sir.

GOFORTH

I don't care what you call yourself. Just work hard for me,
and things'll be safe enough for you.

GOFORTH goes to drink again, decides against it.

GOFORTH

Safe enough.

JOHN

Thank you.

GOFORTH exits.

BELL

What the fuck are you doing back here?

BECKY

Wait --

BELL

I'm not going to wait --

BECKY cocks her ear.

BECKY

I knew it -- the shit in the barn calls out for its brother. You
better answer.

BELL

Why go to the barn? Enough shit in your head to bury us all. Go take it back home.

BECKY

Mr. Bell's family in slave times was birthed by the Goforths --

BELL

Shut up.

BECKY

He's got Goforth blood in his veins -- how well your kin treats you -- high, dry, and gelded.

BELL

You know why he gave you a job?

JOHN

We know.

BELL

You told them?

BECKY

Everything. You knew he was doing it -- you knew -- and you never offered comfort or protection -- spiteful and arrogant even when they stole the child -- I figured he did nothing because he was so used to having it done to him. Only a handful of times with me, Mr. Bell -- he's been having at your tail for years.

BECKY makes a masturbating gesture.

BECKY

His "right-hand man"!

BELL

You just bought him digging shit for the day --

BELL leans in close to JOHN.

BELL

And, boy, the shit here runs on forever. I do have one regret, though.

BELL moves to stand very close to SUSAN.

BELL

I wish you were going to be around. Someone with your face and other -- favors -- would be very welcome here.

(a warning voice to JOHN)

Don't even think.

(to SUSAN)

I wouldn't listen to Becky too closely about "high and dry and gelded." What I have functions just fine. Thought you should know the truth.

BELL hovers over SUSAN just long enough to establish who's boss.

BELL

The barn -- five minutes. And get your back ready, tusca-tawba-erokee, because I am going to crack it.

BELL turns to BECKY.

BELL

It ain't good to see you. A snake'll have legs and walk man-like before it's ever good to see you again.

(to SUSAN)

Yeah, it is a shame. But, you know, things do change over time.

BELL stalks off. BECKY makes an "S" motion with her hand.

BECKY

Sssss -- slithering back! Put it away, John -- I know what you're feeling.

JOHN

What Goforth does to him --

BECKY

He's gonna practice on you. Every low dog needs a lower dog to kick.

JOHN

A complete half a man.

SUSAN

Two of 'em.

BECKY

The Siamesest of twins!

JOHN

(taking off headband)

I have a lot of work to do.

BECKY

Don't fuss about Bell -- the Colonel will be watching you.

JOHN

I don't know if that's good or bad.

BECKY

Just get through the day -- real family are waiting for you at home.

BECKY kisses him lightly, as does SUSAN.

SUSAN

I will be waiting for you.

JOHN watches them leave. Transition music comes up as lights go to black.

INTERMISSION

Scene 10

To call the audience back to their seats, the ACTORS sing **Corn Bread and Butterbeans [WPAQ]**. Finished, the lights go to black.

Lights up. BECKY, SUSAN, and JOHN are at BECKY's kitchen table in a tableau, holding coffee cups and smiling, as if they are in the middle of a funny conversation. BOLLING enters into his own, carrying a shotgun and quite clearly drunk.

BOLLING

Bring your black Satan's ass out here, Becky!

Gunshot -- the sound of broken glass. Lights come up. BECKY, JOHN, and SUSAN come to life. JOHN takes SUSAN roughly out of her chair and forces her to the floor hard. She cries out in pain. BECKY dives to the floor.

JOHN

Who the hell is that?

Another shot, more broken glass.

BOLLING

It is time, time, time, Preacher, to be reminded again -- you're breeding new bastards, and we just can't have things go that way.

JOHN

Becky, down!

BECKY

Down as I can get.

BOLLING

Cmon, Becky -- I know you been talking me up to the sheriff.

BECKY

Bolling.

JOHN

Keep your goddamn head down!

SUSAN

I know where my head should go!

BOLLING

Doing my arithmetic, Becky --

SUSAN

Ahhhhhh!

BOLLING

Wouldn't mind adding a couple three niggers to the score.

BECKY

John --

BOLLING

Up to you, Becky -- tell me I'm wrong so I can sleep the peace of babes.

JOHN

And all you got --

BECKY

All I got is a broom.

BOLLING fires again. SUSAN grabs her stomach, but JOHN and BECKY do not see it.

BECKY

Try nothing! He'll go away.

JOHN

No, he won't. Stay here.

JOHN moves upstage; as he does so, he takes the broom from an ACTOR. BOLLING puts down the gun and begins to move in a contorted way, as if doing an exorcism: stylized lunatic movements. BOLLING is muttering to himself, occasionally bursting into words.

BOLLING

I am the angel of vengeance -- revenge -- aaahhhhh!

As he does more movements, JOHN quickly circles behind him.

BOLLING

I am going to suck out the other demons in this house!

BOLLING picks up his gun to fire again.

BOLLING

Harlot -- bastards -- the end-times is drawing near -- drawing nearer --

JOHN, behind him, presses the broom-end against his neck.

JOHN
Put it down!

BOLLING
A voice. Hard voice.

JOHN
Down, now.

BOLLING
Very hard.

JOHN
Becky!

BECKY
We got problems here.

While JOHN deals with BOLLING, SUSAN collapses in pain and is helped by BECKY. JOHN sees none of this.

JOHN
Put the gun down. Now, now, now! Don't turn around!

BOLLING puts the gun down; JOHN picks it up and drops the broom.

BOLLING
Smart for a nigger.

JOHN
Go!

BOLLING
Gun.

JOHN
Go!

BOLLING
Gun.

JOHN
No! Straight -- out. Go!

BOLLING pivots, and for a moment they face each other. SUSAN cries out, then another scream from SUSAN. BOLLING moves toward JOHN, but JOHN pops the barrel-end against his forehead, knocking him back. JOHN then runs to the house, and one of the ACTORS takes the gun from JOHN. BOLLING, listening to the screams, rubs his forehead and smiles, then does a little exorcistic dance, takes the broom, and leaves.

SUSAN

Losing the baby, John!

JOHN

What can I do?

SUSAN

Losing the bay, losing the baby --

The lights focus immediately on the tableau of JOHN, BECKY, and SUSAN: the losing of the baby -- it is a sad mimicry of the Christ scene in the manger. The ACTORS gather in the darkness and sing **Whole Heap of Little Horses [Southern Journey, Vol. 2, Track 25]**. JOHN, BECKY, and SUSAN will hit a series of tableaux, as if slides were being shown, each held for only a few seconds, and each one a progression in the losing of the baby. The final tableau should coincide with the ending of the song.

When the song ends, the ACTORS will need to have the following items for SUSAN, BECKY, and JOHN.

SUSAN

- A white dress, rough cotton
- SUSAN's shawl
- SUSAN's doll

BECKY

- A white dress, rough cotton
- Her Bible

JOHN

- A white shirt, clean pants, shoes
- The two gold rings in one of the pockets
- The ruby necklace

They will also need a bowl of water and several rough towels.

ACTORS will take off items no longer being used.

JOHN

It's all right, honey, it's all right, it's all right --

SUSAN

This cannot happen --

BECKY

We have to take off your dress.

SUSAN

No!

JOHN

We have to take off the dress --

SUSAN begins pulling the dress closer to her body.

SUSAN

No!

BECKY

You need to be washed.

SUSAN

I will not lose --

BECKY

Child, he's lost.

JOHN

Susan --

BECKY

He's gone --

SUSAN

You will not take my child away!

BECKY

He is already away, Susan.

SUSAN violently pushes JOHN and BECKY away and falls to her knees breathing heavily -- she wants to no help from anyone. The ACTORS hand JOHN the bowl of water and BECKY the towels. After several beats, SUSAN stands.

SUSAN

What is left that's worth the living?

SUSAN roughly takes off her dress and uses the towels and water to wash her legs and pelvis; she does this very roughly. When she's done, she will put on the white dress of rough cotton.

SUSAN

If he's gone -- if he's already away -- then let's get him gone for good so that he doesn't have to put up with the murderers and drunkards and rapists and moneychangers and all the filth that's choking me! Goddamn! Goddamn it all! Let me wash him away so that he does not have to suffer for love. I am sick -- of love.

SUSAN dips her fingers in the water and flicks at JOHN and BECKY.

SUSAN

Is this the water of life that I am supposed to welcome?

BECKY

Let the waters come down and cover your pain --

SUSAN

I'd rather drown like my father -- that would cover my pain.

SUSAN should be finished dressing. BECKY and JOHN can give the bowl and towels to the ACTORS.

SUSAN

Let the waters come now -- I've got no more waiting to do -- my blood is all wasted.

An ACTOR hands SUSAN's doll to JOHN, then puts SUSAN's shawl on SUSAN. JOHN hands the doll to SUSAN. SUSAN responds to these kindnesses. An ACTOR also hands JOHN the ruby pendant. JOHN holds up the ruby pendant. The ACTORS can retreat for the moment. JOHN and BECKY speak to SUSAN.

SUSAN

A drop of blood.

BECKY

Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies. [Proverbs, 31:11-31]

JOHN

It's my blood, Susan -- to you.

BECKY

The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her.

JOHN

That child had mixed our bloods, Susan. This is for our grief.

SUSAN

It burns my hand.

JOHN

This is for our new mixed blood.

BECKY

Strength and honor are her clothing.

SUSAN

I can feel its heart.

JOHN

Can you?

SUSAN

Yes.

JOHN

Then we still have life in us.

BECKY

In her tongue is the law of kindness.

JOHN

We still have more life in us, Susan.

JOHN puts the pendant on SUSAN.

SUSAN

But I feel so dark, John.

BECKY

Her candle goeth not out by night.

SUSAN

Have we been punished?

JOHN

No one can punish love.

BECKY

(to her God)

What rule of Yours have we broken?

JOHN

Everything is still left for us to do.

BECKY

What law have we disobeyed?

JOHN

Now live.

SUSAN

Live with me.

JOHN

Always with you.

BECKY

What would You have me do now?

JOHN and BECKY step into their own lights so that JOHN, SUSAN, and BECKY are now in separate pools. As they speak, one ACTOR will hand JOHN a change of clothes: a white shirt, clean pants, shoes. The two gold rings should be in one of the pockets. He hands the ACTOR the old clothes. The same will be done with BECKY, who will be given a white dress and the will.

JOHN

My heart is hard.

SUSAN

My heart is hollow.

BECKY

My God -- so hard.

JOHN

Each moment more hard.

BECKY

I still believe in Your wisdom.

JOHN

Bloody thoughts.

BECKY

But this pain goes beyond wisdom.

JOHN

Each moment bloodier.

SUSAN

Each moment more empty.

JOHN

The lie -- each moment deeper. I will not let it win.

BECKY

I still believe in Your plan.

JOHN

I will not let it win.

SUSAN

What can protect us, I will find it.

JOHN

Land, money -- I will earn it.

BECKY

But I see no plan for me here.

SUSAN

Never again being at the mercy.

JOHN

There is no mercy there, on either side.

SUSAN

The lie shades all our love.

BECKY

I do not disbelieve.

JOHN

Never again.

BECKY

But I have lost Your way.

The lights on JOHN and SUSAN fade, and they join the other ACTORS, leaving BECKY in her own light, holding her will.

BECKY

(in a great voice)

Eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani. My God, my God, why hast thou --

BECKY stops.

BECKY

Jake, my call has come. I have done what I can do -- and I am undone by what I can't do to keep my children safe. Praise Him for the giving of life -- but to everything turns a season, and my season has run. I have lost my way, and I am far from home. So, with your blessing, Jake -- and Yours as well -- I am passing on the land to Susan and John. It's all the value I have left to give. Then -- wherever you are, Jake -- there am I going. Wherever you are, there is home.

BECKY, pained and resolute, begins stomping rhythmically, at first slowly, then with more force: her own dance of death.

BECKY
(rhythmically)

There is a home that welcomes me -- into your hands -- into
your hands --

BECKY continues chanting the phrase in a lower and lower voice until she is simply mouthing the phrase as the ACTORS beat in the same slow rhythm and the lights fade to black on BECKY. When dark, for several beats, the dancing/stomping and clapping go on, then abruptly stop. In the black, BECKY, as she did earlier, lets out a long keening wail that trails off to silence.

* * * * *

Scene 11

BECKY's kitchen. SUSAN holds BOLLING's gun.

SUSAN
People will be here soon for their Sunday with Preacher.
Not any more. No more dead magic in this house.

JOHN
Susan --

SUSAN
I will tell them to lose their faith and stop being idiots. You
will teach me how to use this.

JOHN
Susan --

SUSAN
Now, I am going to cook us a meal. Then we go to Goforth's
to settle the papers. A sign on that door will be good enough
for everyone else.

JOHN
Susan, we can't --

SUSAN tosses the gun to JOHN, hard. Moments pass in tense silence.

SUSAN

If you feel like being useful, find the gold rings you filched from Grier. And leave the gun by the door -- from now on, always by the door.

JOHN stares at SUSAN as the lights shift to the GOFORTHS' house. JOHN and SUSAN walk into the light, JOHN with the gun.

* * * * *

Scene 12

GOFORTH is quite drunk, though not dissolved.

GOFORTH

You said there was -- damn it! -- something else.

MRS. GOFORTH walks into the scene wearing a shawl.

MRS. GOFORTH

You're still here.

BELL

They got their paperwork, Mr. Goforth -- I can ride them out --

GOFORTH

Gold rings -- you said gold rings --

BELL

(hoarse whisper to SUSAN)

Take your shit --

GOFORTH

Sell me gold rings --

BELL

They don't have --

GOFORTH

They said they had --

MRS. GOFORTH
Reducing yourself to a pawnbroker?

GOFORTH
What?

BELL
(to SUSAN)
You are done here.

GOFORTH
If people would just be quiet --

MRS. GOFORTH
Or would a pawnbroker be a step up?

GOFORTH
No more than half price -- goddamn it!

BELL
They don't have --

MRS. GOFORTH
In either case, not in my house --

GOFORTH
No more than --
(to MRS. GOFORTH)
Just be quiet --

MRS. GOFORTH
Take this out to the --

GOFORTH
Just be --

MRS. GOFORTH
-- hog trough --

GOFORTH
-- just shut --

MRS. GOFORTH

-- where it belongs.

GOFORTH

Just shut that goddamn mouth of yours!

The sudden viciousness of GOFORTH's words strikes everybody dumb, even GOFORTH, who seems stunned by his action. Everyone, that is, except MRS. GOFORTH.

MRS. GOFORTH

My, my, my.

MRS. GOFORTH goes to GOFORTH and sniffs him, several times.

MRS. GOFORTH

Your paperwork -- did he do it properly?

JOHN

It's all done.

MRS. GOFORTH sniffs him one more time.

MRS. GOFORTH

That's good -- one more swig and you might not have been so lucky -- you know, like a glass of water tight to the brim -- one more drop and then -- a mess -- don't bother yourself, dear -- let me. The subject in play is gold rings.

SUSAN

I have two of them to sell.

BELL

If she does, she stole them.

GOFORTH

Come on, you can give them to me.

MRS. GOFORTH

Dear -- be still -- one drop and --

MRS. GOFORTH gives him an unaffectionate rub of the shoulders.

MRS. GOFORTH

Susan, is it?

SUSAN

Susan Morgan.

MRS. GOFORTH

Ma'am.

SUSAN

Ma'am.

MRS. GOFORTH

Good. And how does Susan Morgan come to own two gold rings?

JOHN

Maybe we should go.

MRS. GOFORTH

Now, that sounds like a distinctly guilty tone of voice.

SUSAN

We didn't steal them.

MRS. GOFORTH

That's good to know -- there's enough thievery in this house already. I have been told that he took your name -- was that a theft? Answer me.

JOHN

I asked for it.

SUSAN

I gave it.

MRS. GOFORTH

So I trust that means your marriage is secure?

SUSAN

You can trust that, Mrs. Goforth.

MRS. GOFORTH

You agree?

JOHN

We have one mind on that.

MRS. GOFORTH

One mind. One mind.

(to GOFORTH)

Did you hear that?

(to BELL)

Deacon. Deacon! When I say "Deacon" like that, it has "come here" written all over it.

BELL

Yes, ma'am.

MRS. GOFORTH

His pet but not mine. Take Mrs. Morgan's rings.

JOHN fishes the two rings out of his pocket and hands them to BELL. MRS. GOFORTH gestures for BELL to give her the rings. BELL hands the rings to MRS. GOFORTH, who weighs them in her palm, looking back and forth from them to SUSAN and JOHN. MRS. GOFORTH points to a spot a few steps in front of JOHN.

MRS. GOFORTH

Mrs. Morgan -- would stand right there? Are these real?

SUSAN

Nothing but.

GOFORTH

Ask her where she got --

MRS. GOFORTH

What would you do with the money?

GOFORTH

Ask her where --

MRS. GOFORTH

Dear, that glass of yours is so close -- answer me.

SUSAN

We'd use the money to earn our own way.

MRS. GOFORTH

Keep your marriage secure.

SUSAN goes to answer, but MRS. GOFORTH stops her.

MRS. GOFORTH

You've had several losses -- that's a statement, not a question. Loss can -- crack a marriage. Especially the loss of a child.

MRS. GOFORTH turns to GOFORTH, all innocence.

MRS. GOFORTH

Wouldn't you agree, my lamb? Though Mr. Goforth and I have never had children together, we can imagine -- true, my pet? -- how such a loss would hollow out one's heart. We can -- sympathize with that. Couldn't we? Money would hardly begin to fill it.

SUSAN

Money would never fill it. But life goes on.

MRS. GOFORTH holds up the rings, looks through, examines them.

MRS. GOFORTH

The brute habit of living. Where do they come from?

GOFORTH

Doesn't he have a tongue?

JOHN

She can speak for me.

GOFORTH

It seems the women are taking over.

SUSAN

In the family. Passed down.

MRS. GOFORTH

From?

SUSAN

They belonged to my great-grandmother. She -- worked -- and lived -- not far from here.

MRS. GOFORTH

Not far from here, you say?

SUSAN

Yes, ma'am.

MRS. GOFORTH

Great-grandmother -- that would've been --

SUSAN

Before the war.

MRS. GOFORTH

Our uncivil war. Gifts to her, then.

SUSAN

The only way.

GOFORTH

Ah -- for his favorite --

MRS. GOFORTH

There is no need.

GOFORTH

His favorite, his favorite --

BELL

More brass than brains. Let me throw them out --

MRS. GOFORTH

Deacon, you may belly up to our table because he lets you think you're not who you are -- but I know who you are. Shut. Up. Why sell what cost your great-grandmother so much? I want an answer.

SUSAN

You think, ma'am, she thought those were beautiful? That love came attached? Ma'am. She knew better. My grandmother and mother knew better. I know better. You know better. Ma'am.

GOFORTH

We don't need the rings -- Deacon --

MRS. GOFORTH

(to GOFORTH)

My pet --

(to BELL)

You [stay] --

(to SUSAN)

You'd think I would know better. Great-grandmother's dead --

SUSAN

And the giver of those rings --

MRS. GOFORTH

Becky's gone --

SUSAN

And so is my child --

MRS. GOFORTH

And so is -- the child --

SUSAN

And this is what I know: nothing's left but what's now. And "now" always takes money.

MRS. GOFORTH

Deacon, now you can move.

BELL comes.

MRS. GOFORTH

Much better.

MRS. GOFORTH hands the rings back to BELL. She indicates for him to hand them to GOFORTH.

MRS. GOFORTH

Pay them what they need.

GOFORTH

Full price?

MRS. GOFORTH

Is there any other?

GOFORTH

That's not good management --

MRS. GOFORTH

I cannot bear that word in your mouth.

GOFORTH

Deacon -- back into my office.

GOFORTH gets up but stumbles, and JOHN and BELL have to catch him.

GOFORTH

I just think my glass got that one drop too many --

JOHN hands the gun to SUSAN. As the three exit, GOFORTH turns.

GOFORTH

I didn't hear a "thank you." I said --

MRS. GOFORTH

Consider it said. Go do what you do best.

GOFORTH turns, his hand on BELL, and the three exit into the office.

SUSAN and MRS. GOFORTH catch each other's eye -- the gun does not go unnoticed -- but they do not let each other go. Until, of course, they have to. MRS. GOFORTH exits. SUSAN stands with the gun, now professionally balanced in the crook of her arm.

JOHN enters to find SUSAN, but who he sees is, and is not, the woman he met by the river. They exit.

* * * * *

Scene 13

BOLLING is kneeling in his yard working on his still when, suddenly, the sound of a brisk breeze comes up out of nowhere. He looks around, sees nothing but sniffs, as if an animal testing the wind.

BOLLING

Who is it? Who is it gliding by?

SUSAN enters with the gun, walks right up behind BOLLING.

SUSAN

Grover Bolling.

GROVER turns on his knees and finds himself staring into the business end of the gun.

BOLLING

I know you.

SUSAN

Yes you do.

BOLLING

I know you because you got no eyes.

BOLLING goes to put his index finger and middle finger into the two holes of the barrel.

BOLLING

You got dead eyes.

SUSAN rams the gun forward, knocking BOLLING's hand back against his face. But BOLLING hardly reacts to the blow. He closes his eyes, licks the ends of his two fingers, and wipes them down his eyelids, leaving a smudge in the dirt on this face.

BOLLING

(laughing)

Dead eyes for Susan Morgan --

Suddenly, BOLLING flashes out his hand to grab the barrel, but SUSAN, anticipating this, simply drops the barrel down and takes a large step backwards so that BOLLING ends up falling onto his hands and knees. She then deliberately swings the gunstock against the side of BOLLING's head, knocking him over. The blow hardly seems to faze him.

SUSAN

Never watch the snake's eyes.

BOLLING

Takes a snake to know a snake -- takes dead eyes to see --

But before BOLLING can finish his sentence, SUSAN straddles his back and drives the gunstock against the back of his skull with a short, sharp crack. BOLLING drops, stunned but still conscious.

SUSAN

No more will garbage like you waste my time. Remember this.

BOLLING

What?

SUSAN

Becky, my husband, me, and my child. And before that, Jake.

BOLLING gathers his wits for a moment, then gets ups, smiles, and does a bit of the exorcistic dance he did in front of BECKY's house.

BOLLING

That? "Get your black Satan's ass -- " That? And Jake? Swatting a fly. Heh. And now you think you got Grover Bolling in a barrel of fish.

SUSAN

Becky, my husband --

BOLLING

I heard your nigger names.

BOLLING, unsteady but with unmistakable purpose, strides toward SUSAN.

BOLLING

You think you are going to kill something already dead?

BOLLING moves even more quickly toward SUSAN, but instead of retreating, SUSAN moves toward him and to the side. Using the gun like a bayonet, she catches him under the chin, knocking him to the ground.

SUSAN

Said to the rocks, fall on us.

BOLLING gets up, this time in real pain, and moves forward. SUSAN drives the gunstock into his knee, upending him.

SUSAN

With honey out of the rock.

BOLLING, now in great pain, moves toward SUSAN again. She slams the gunstock against the small of his back, knocking him forward. BOLLING cries out in pain.

SUSAN

A joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.

BOLLING scrambles to get up, but before he is fully erect, SUSAN rocks him in the solar plexus. BOLLING gags as he tries to catch his breath, and his labored breathing echoes in the stillness.

SUSAN

Upon this rock I will build.

The wind picks up, and without taking her eyes off BOLLING, SUSAN lets out a wail of anguish, just like BECKY's. The wind dies. SUSAN squats down so that BOLLING can see her but is out of his reach. She stares at him steadily.

BOLLING

What do you want?

SUSAN

I cannot hear you.

BOLLING

What do you want?

SUSAN

What can an ass-up piece of moonshiner trash give me?

BOLLING

I have nothing.

SUSAN

That's not how I see it when I look around me.

BOLLING crawls painfully onto his knees, then sits back on his heels.
SUSAN stands. They stare at one another for several beats.

BOLLING

You can't have my property.

SUSAN

I will.

BOLLING

You can't take my land.

SUSAN

Not take it. Buy it.

An ACTOR throws a dollar coin on the stage.

BOLLING

A dollar.

SUSAN

You will sign it over to me and to my husband.

BOLLING

No I won't.

Before BOLLING can react, SUSAN moves behind him and jams the gun against the nape of his neck.

SUSAN

The idea is coming hard upon you, Grover Bolling, that I have nothing to lose -- my dead eyes have nothing to lose. I am more dead than even you. Sell the land to me or crack

rock in the county yard forever under the sheriff's whip.
Squealer's choice. Gavel down once -- twice --

Lights change. BOLLING exits, and JOHN and SUSAN move into another area, their "house."

* * * * *

Scene 14

SUSAN

Going to talk to me ever again?

JOHN hesitates, then grabs the gun. For a moment SUSAN does not let go of it, though she does not resist JOHN, then she does let go of it, and JOHN hands it off to an ACTOR.

JOHN

Now maybe it's safe to talk to you.

SUSAN

You have something dangerous to say?

JOHN

Never felt the truth with you was dangerous -- is it now?

SUSAN

No.

JOHN

So then tell me the truth -- what was all that about?

SUSAN

It's simple -- so simple, even you said it once: if you ain't got color, you can always get money and land.

JOHN

Now we got money and land -- and a warrior in the house!

SUSAN

At least we have one.

JOHN

You telling me I'm weak? Can't measure up to the warrior?
Well, I don't feel more protected. I feel like our walls just got
a lot smaller. The box a lot tighter.

SUSAN is looking at him, but her attention is not completely on him.

JOHN

Where are you?

SUSAN

I'm right here in front of you.

JOHN

No, you're somewhere I'm not.

SUSAN

I couldn't be more here than I am!

JOHN

But not with me.

SUSAN

I am not dead to you.

JOHN

Yes you are -- stone all in your face -- Grier all in your face!

SUSAN

Then stay out of my face!

JOHN

What you did takes a mean, hard hunger. Like a white man.

SUSAN

Shut up.

JOHN

White man -- that gun --

SUSAN

Shut up!

JOHN

You love it more than me.

SUSAN

More dependable --

SUSAN bites off the word, but it is too late.

JOHN

I think I am going to go back to being an orphan.

JOHN moves into another area, which would be outside the house, where there are two rocking chairs moved into place by ACTORS. SUSAN hesitates, pulled toward following, pride keeping her back, then joins JOHN. JOHN gets up and goes to leave.

SUSAN

Tell me about your mother again.

JOHN

My mother?

SUSAN

Tell me again what made it so you had to come to the river.

JOHN

Come to the river.

SUSAN

Yes.

JOHN

Come to you.

SUSAN

Yes.

JOHN

Sorrow -- my mother died of sorrow, Susan, because she was lashed to my father who was nothing but thorns and nails --

SUSAN

Tell me again.

JOHN

-- a drunk, a moonshiner --

SUSAN

Just like Grover Bolling.

JOHN

Deserter. Child killer. Up on the mountain my mother bled out sorrow because she had no protection! Because I couldn't protect her. I know the shame that Becky's Jake felt. Her only freedom came when she died. I buried her in a dress of cheap yellow cloth.

SUSAN

Wrapped in cheap yellow.

JOHN

And my father --

SUSAN

Drunk in his own misery --

JOHN

Because he had no one left he could make to suffer --

SUSAN

He burned to death --

JOHN

When the house exploded from a kicked-over lantern. Or maybe it was just his dried-out life. I remember also telling you --

SUSAN

Telling me --

JOHN

That I'd make sure no fire would ever take us down. No one would die in cheap yellow. I have not done well.

SUSAN touches JOHN.

SUSAN

Your face. My face. How hard we have become.

JOHN touches SUSAN's face.

JOHN

Susan, we can't. Because that's just the thing that makes us just like them. The river --

SUSAN

If we are not hard --

JOHN

-- brought me to you.

SUSAN

-- we will die. I don't know any other way.

JOHN

Yes you do.

The air around them is suddenly filled with the sound of flowing water. JOHN puts a soft hand on SUSAN's head.

JOHN

Forget this for right now.

JOHN puts a hand on SUSAN's breast-bone. The hard mask of SUSAN's face breaks as she feels the pressure of JOHN's hand against her chest.

SUSAN then takes JOHN's hand and puts it on her stomach.

SUSAN

I want another.

JOHN

I want what you want.

SUSAN

River flows --

JOHN

We go.

SUSAN

River has always been good to us.

JOHN

River flows, we take it.

JOHN tries to sing but has a croaky voice. The verses are from **Fly Around My Blue-Eyed Girl [Southern Journey, Vol. 2, Track 17]**. JOHN does not need to sing -- he can recite the lyrics.

JOHN

"Fly around my blue-eyed girl -- "

SUSAN

Ain't got blue eyes!

JOHN

"Fly around my daisy -- "

SUSAN

(playfully whining)

Don't sing --

JOHN

"Fly around my blue-eyed girl / You almost run me crazy.
/ I wish I have some pretty little gal / To learn my secrets
true..." I do. I do. I do.

SUSAN

Good words.

SUSAN growls playfully; JOHN growls back; they laugh.

SUSAN

What, johnwick?

JOHN

You meet a person, you cross the river, you sit on their porch with the smell of blackberries in the air and you talk out the loneliness.

SUSAN

John Wicks, white man --

TOGETHER

Coming off the "moun-tan."

SUSAN

This box is so hard.

JOHN

But we are not alone.

ACTORS move the two rocking chairs to center stage. JOHN and SUSAN are handed clothing to indicate a change in time and a rise in their prosperity. As the ACTORS sing **Borrowed Land [WPAQ]**, JOHN and SUSAN strike two or three poses as if they are having a picture taken. There is a brief strobe burst to indicate each photo taken. If possible, a placard/slide that says, "John and Susan Morgan, 1914." When finished, they sit on their "porch."

* * * * *

Scene 15: Seven Years Later

As song ends, DEACON BELL arrives. SUSAN is embroidering.

JOHN

Well, if it's not the right hand of the master going forth into the world.

SUSAN

(surprised)

Deacon Bell.

BELL is silent, sullen.

JOHN

I assume you came here for a reason.

BELL

I find no pleasure having to come to the Morgan "plantation."

JOHN

But you have to come, and for what?

BELL

I don't know why he would want to --

JOHN

Who, Deacon?

BELL

Mr. Goforth.

JOHN

He wants to what?

BELL

He wants to see you.

JOHN

He sent you to me.

BELL

Not like I had a choice.

JOHN

Right now?

BELL

He said "now" -- if it would be convenient.

JOHN

Convenient -- he said "convenient"?

BELL

He said "convenient."

JOHN

Did he say about what?

BELL

He didn't say "what" to me.

JOHN

He wants to talk to me about something that he won't talk to you about?

BELL

It's not like we're friends.

JOHN

Though you've known him for years. And he trusts you -- at the right hand.

BELL

Are you coming?

JOHN

What's it been like in the Goforth household?

BELL

I don't tell tales.

JOHN

Peaceful, as always?

SUSAN

John, stop picking at the man.

JOHN

I'm just trying to see the knives of the invitation. Any landmines I should be wary of?

BELL

Not for me to say.

JOHN

That's right -- you and he ain't friends.

BELL

And neither are we. Are you coming?

JOHN

Tell Mr. Goforth that I will be there in an hour -- after I've spent a little time on my porch with my wife and two children

-- they're playing inside over there -- and the new house rising in the near distance. That would be "convenient."

BELL

And if he ain't there when you get there?

JOHN

It's a nice drive -- no time wasted.

BELL

An hour?

JOHN

Starting from the moment you leave. Go forth!

BELL starts to exit, then turns to speak.

BELL

Even brass balls melt if the fire gets high enough.

JOHN

That what happen to you? The hour begins when you leave.

BELL exits.

JOHN

Don't --

SUSAN

Wouldn't think of it.

JOHN

Don't start.

SUSAN

On what -- your manners -- or the gleam in your eye?

JOHN

It's probably nothing.

SUSAN

"Subtle" is not you. You have your ear to every ground around here --

JOHN

I heard at the bank the other day.

SUSAN

You tell me!

JOHN

I heard his bank notes are due -- "liquidated" -- and she doesn't know.

SUSAN

He drank her life away.

JOHN

Heard say.

SUSAN

I feel for her.

JOHN

And I feel -- I feel possibilities --

SUSAN sniffs deeply.

SUSAN

I think --

JOHN

What?

SUSAN

Yep --

JOHN

What?

SUSAN

I think I smell "white man" --

JOHN

Susan -- let us think about this for a moment --

SUSAN

Thinking this way does not make me feel safe.

JOHN

There's no danger here, not any more.

SUSAN

You're as simple as the day I met you.

JOHN

If I'm so simple, then why would Goforth want to see me? Tusca-tawba-erokee me? Because we're not boxed in anymore. We have made our land way, our money way, our "new house" way, "new car" way, out! The only color Goforth sees in me is green!

SUSAN

Green.

JOHN

That's not how I meant it.

SUSAN

Sometimes I think you are my fourth child.

JOHN

I am going to go there.

SUSAN

I know you are.

JOHN

No loss in talking to the man.

SUSAN

Never said not to.

JOHN

Then what?

SUSAN

Just don't be completely green.

JOHN

I hate it when you're sarcastic.

SUSAN

Only use it when I'm scared.

JOHN and SUSAN share a long look, then JOHN smiles broadly.

JOHN

I'm reaching past myself, aren't I? Again?

(sniffs)

Yep -- I'm all over the air.

SUSAN

Seems to run in this family. Just reach past yourself and hold me so that I can confess something, johnwick --

JOHN embraces her.

SUSAN

I do forget, sometimes -- I do. I want to.

JOHN

Me, too.

SUSAN lets him go.

SUSAN

You should get ready to go.

JOHN

I am already ready.

SUSAN

Then --

JOHN takes the ruby and kisses it, exits. BELL and ACTORS set up GOFORTH's "house."

* * * * *

Scene 16

BOLLING appears to BELL, in much decline.

BELL

I've heard that plagues come back every seven years.

BOLLING

You wanted to see me.

BELL

You have been talking trash about John Morgan.

BOLLING

I have been hearing things.

BELL

What's the dung beetle been hearing that would bring him back to the scene of his finest hour?

BOLLING

I got to get something for what I know.

BELL

That means nothing for nothing because you probably know nothing.

BOLLING

I know something!

BELL

He's on his little high horse!

BOLLING

John Morgan? Naw. John Wicks. White man. That much I know.

BELL

As certain as you stink? What do you want?

BOLLING

I need a gun. Hurt them. Kill her.

BELL

So simple with you. Not her.

BOLLING

She stole --

BELL

Not her! You want blood-lust, take him.

BOLLING

I need a gun.

BELL

You need to leave so I can ponder this.

BOLLING

I'll go right to Goforth --

BELL plants a big hand in the middle of BOLLING's chest.

BELL

There is no way to God but through me. Besides, I have a gun. While you do not.

BELL sniffs deeply.

BELL

And it wouldn't be hard to find you to use it.

BELL gives him several rough pats with his hand.

BELL

All things come to he who waits. Even to scum like you. You'll get your taste.

With a final shove, BELL pushes BOLLING away. BOLLING exits.

BELL

Not her. Maybe it's time to think more kindly about "my own kind."

JOHN appears in the GOFORTH house -- BELL notices.

BELL

Clang, clang, goes Deacon Bell -- he clangs for thee.

GOFORTH enters, now with a cane, and throughout the scene he is racked by a bloody cough, a very sick man.

GOFORTH

(taps his watch)

Within the hour -- Deacon, you have business in the barn.

BELL

All the tasks have been assigned --

GOFORTH

I just know something needs to be attended to. I can just feel it, Deacon. You had better check.

BELL

If you need me --

GOFORTH

I have always needed you, Deacon. But right now -- no. Go.

BELL exits but circles back so that he can eavesdrop.

GOFORTH

A remarkable man, you are, John. Remarkable. I've never known any one colored to be so -- well, you are the exception that breaks the rule. Flattery wasted, I see. All right -- to the hunt. The bank has given me two weeks to pay off money I needed for -- If I default -- well, you know how this works -- We have done business before -- and I have never questioned your -- ways --

JOHN

Ways.

GOFORTH

Becky's land -- Grover Bolling -- who I hear is back -- I'd be careful --

JOHN

I never did dishonest.

GOFORTH

Let's say a good -- eye for business.

JOHN

Let's say.

GOFORTH

So I'm offering something for that good eye to look at. I want to sell you this land. Straightforward transaction between me and you.

JOHN

I thought the land belonged --

GOFORTH

Fact is, I've had power of attorney for years --

JOHN

Does she know?

GOFORTH

The offer is not without -- conditions.

JOHN

I guess not.

GOFORTH

One of which is secrecy. Absolute and total. You will pay off my mortgage; I will deed the land to you. But Mrs. Goforth and I will continue to manage the land until our deaths. We have no heirs -- no surprises in the closet. When we die, the land is yours. But nothing -- nothing! -- makes its way to Mrs. Goforth's ears. Only you and I and the bank will know -- the unholy trinity --

JOHN

So I can't take possession until you both die -- even with the deed in hand?

GOFORTH

Mrs. Goforth should be allowed to go forth -- ha, ha, ha!
-- secure that the land she walks on, until she's buried
beneath it, is hers.

JOHN

That's the condition.

GOFORTH

You might not want to refuse.

JOHN

I can't do that --

GOFORTH

Thought you might say "can't" -- you know the land is good
-- you've worked it.

JOHN

I know its qualities, but --

GOFORTH

But still not tempted --

JOHN

Tempted -- well --

GOFORTH

Tempted, yes.

JOHN

But disadvantage myself, my family -- I can't --

GOFORTH

Before you deny me the third time, John -- before we end
this pleasant little exchange on a sad but necessary note
-- we will have a brief -- discussion -- of your prospects.

JOHN

My prospects.

GOFORTH

Your prospects. And here they are, very briefly -- in fact, in a single word. Do you know what "miscegenation" means? Let me state the brief. In this glorious state of North Carolina, there is a law that says -- in its pith -- that any white person married to a black person is a criminal. Convicted, that person can be sent to jail. Property seized. Reputation consumed. It's a foolish law, I think -- foolish. Conjoin any way you want to. But what does what I think matter? Law is law, fact is fact -- I'm pledged to both. A really smart man does not want to run to the foul side of this law. Wouldn't you agree? I mean, if you found yourself in a situation like that -- what could you do?

A cough racks GOFORTH.

GOFORTH

The bank needs an answer from me soon. In fact, I told them I'd have one today. Do I have your yes?

JOHN

I have done nothing to you.

GOFORTH

I have no hard feelings against you -- I have no feelings at all, hard or soft, according to Mrs. Goforth -- could be true. Though I have admired you -- from afar -- for the way you've made your way along the outside. But, in the end, you're just a -- crutch -- for this old man who's got "the mark of cane" on him. Nothing personal at all -- just necessity. Some have a great talent to kill off what gives them life, what gives other people life, too. I am thus talented. Can you can tell me, John -- not that this will change your inevitable "yes" -- but can you tell me why some people end up being such beasts? Can you tell me that secret, John-tusca-tawba-erokee? John?

JOHN is frozen, as if GOFORTH is a cobra and JOHN watches it ooze toward him, unable to escape.

GOFORTH

John -- an answer for the sake of conversation? No? Well, son, we should go --

JOHN

Son.

GOFORTH

What?

JOHN

You called me "son."

GOFORTH

Purely conversational. Let's go.

JOHN

You wanted an answer.

GOFORTH

Not any more -- let's go --

JOHN

Why I'm not a killer like the killer you are.

GOFORTH

I'm no longer interested in --

JOHN

Because I am Rebecca Caldwell's son. That's why. I am
Becky's only son.

GOFORTH sits.

JOHN

You figure it in age and years, with your head for numbers.

GOFORTH

You. Can't --

JOHN

Skin color --

GOFORTH

We -- got rid -- you can't --

JOHN

Did you see it done?

GOFORTH

No -- Mrs. Goforth --

JOHN

Why do you think we came to Becky?

GOFORTH

We got rid [of] --

JOHN

Make more life out of life --

GOFORTH

What?

JOHN

That's what Becky taught me --

GOFORTH

Talking circles --

JOHN

Not be a slave like you -- son of an owner of slaves, slave to your whiskey, slave to sucking everybody dry.

GOFORTH

Circles and --

JOHN

I may be colored, but I am a good son.

GOFORTH

Circles.

JOHN

Are you a good son to anything, white as you are? A good father to anything, powerful as you are?

GOFORTH

You're trying to --

JOHN

Look into your heart --

GOFORTH

Just circles! Just confusion! Saying anything is possible to a dying man.

JOHN

"Son" --

GOFORTH

It won't work -- it won't! -- you won't make it work! I will not let you go. I cannot let you go, even if it is true-- even if you are --

JOHN

Even if?

GOFORTH

Even if! Even if! Are you going to give me my "yes," or am I going to have to drill you --

JOHN

Do that, wouldn't you?

GOFORTH

Yes!

JOHN

And never think twice.

GOFORTH

Not even once!

JOHN

Like with Rebecca --

GOFORTH

This is done! You are done! No! No! No!

JOHN slowly backs away from GOFORTH to downstage.

GOFORTH

So -- so -- to prosperity and long life -- not too long, though, eh? The bank has already drawn up the papers -- It is not that hard -- We will go to the bank now. It is not that hard to kill off -- You can understand why haste is -- It is not that hard to kill off what sustains you! Some of us have done it every day of our lives.

JOHN, downstage, is joined by SUSAN. Lights slowly fade on GOFORTH as JOHN speaks.

JOHN

Susan, I couldn't do anything. If I didn't accept, he'd tell the sheriff. But the deed is worthless -- Mrs. Goforth will never accept it. She'll fight it in court. She'll get it back. If he knew, then she knew -- all she has to do is threaten, and I'll tear up the deed in the middle of Main Street while dancing a jig. Susan, I reached too high -- I reached too high. This box, this box, this box!

BELL enters.

BELL

Not bad being here this time --

JOHN

What do you want?

BELL

-- because I get to tell you such good bad news: Goforth has gone to meet whatever made him.

SUSAN

That can't be true!

BELL

Dead as the dust on his office carpet, where they found him -- actually, not long after the two of you left. 'Tis a great shame when the mighty fall --

JOHN

Mrs. Goforth --

BELL

Goforth's body's already to the hospital morgue. Which means Mrs. Goforth has plenty of time on her hands right now. And speaking of hands -- is that some blood I see on yours? If I were you? Dig myself a storm cellar and not come up till God separates the goats from the sheep. You, on the other hand -- you could be saved. A shame to waste --

BELL stops, looking at the stunned pair.

BELL

Yassuh!

JOHN and SUSAN exit as BOLLING enters and is joined by BELL.

BELL

You ready?

BOLLING

Gonna tell her on my own. Don't need you --

Like a snake, BELL grabs BOLLING by the throat.

BELL

In case your rusted brain forgot, you came to me -- yes?

BOLLING

There was a time --

BELL

Time. Moves. On. Dead man. This nigger is your only ticket in. Are. You. Ready?

BOLLING nods "yes." BELL does not release him right away but squeezes even harder, to make a point. Then he lets BOLLING go. BOLLING massages his neck.

BOLLING

Just get me what I said I need, like you said you could.

BELL

We'll see which gods answer which prayers today. Goats from the sheep, yassuh!

MRS. GOFORTH, BELL, and JOHN are at GOFORTH's. BOLLING stands off to the side, and the scenes will alternate between JOHN and BOLLING.

MRS. GOFORTH

You will never own this land.

JOHN

Your husband --

MRS. GOFORTH

Don't foul his name in your mouth!

JOHN

Your husband deeded the property to me for paying off his mortgage. He had a copy of the transaction --

MRS. GOFORTH

Not found in his papers because he would never do that! This land is mine, and no nigger will ever own it. No greedy nigger --

JOHN

I am not a nigger.

MRS. GOFORTH

You've never been anything but a nigger, and no nigger will ever own a foot of this soil!

JOHN

Then we're going to court.

MRS. GOFORTH

Just "hell" by a different name -- I am used to that.

JOHN moves away from the scene but is still on stage.

MRS. GOFORTH

I never thought I'd have to see you again.

BOLLING

I have something to sell.

BELL

He does.

MRS. GOFORTH

I don't need any rat poison. Get him out.

BOLLING

"John Morgan" is not his real name --

MRS. GOFORTH look up sharply, suddenly attentive.

BOLLING

What do I know about John Morgan, not-his-real-name?

MRS. GOFORTH

What do you know?

BOLLING

For a price.

MRS. GOFORTH

I have no money.

BOLLING

I don't want money.

BELL nods to BOLLING, who points to a rifle on the wall, which is the gun held up by an ACTOR.

BOLLING

That. John Morgan stole mine.

MRS. GOFORTH

For killing another nigger sharecropper?

BELL

Mrs. Goforth?

MRS. GOFORTH

What?!

BELL

He may have some -- other need for it.
(hissing, to BOLLING)
Quickly!

BOLLING

On the mountain, I heard tell of a man named John Wicks who killed his mother and father -- burned 'em up. He ran away -- a white boy, not an Indian -- and they say he ran with a nigger woman.

BELL

Make the story work out true for you.

MRS. GOFORTH

Would you say John Morgan killed you?

BOLLING

Yes.

MRS. GOFORTH

Like he did my beloved husband. How should people protect their honor?

BELL

(sotto voce)

Exactly.

MRS. GOFORTH

I have never needed that gun.

BELL gets the gun. The ACTOR remains.

BOLLING

And bullets.

The ACTOR hands BELL a box of bullets. He stands with the gun and box. A moment as the three of them look at each other, then BOLLING takes the items and leaves. BELL and MRS. GOFORTH exchange looks.

MRS. GOFORTH

To think -- life has raised me high enough to be a eunuch and a liar like you.

BELL

Don't it feel just grand? Clang-clang, Mrs. Goforth.

Scene shifts to JOHN and MRS. GOFORTH, with BELL in the background.

MRS. GOFORTH

So you killed your mother and father.

JOHN

What?

MRS. GOFORTH

Burned them to death.

JOHN

Who told you that --

MRS. GOFORTH

You take me to court, I'll not only have you for marrying outside your race and killing my husband, I will have you up as the murderer of your family! The heavens will fall on you hard! Crush you!

MRS. GOFORTH exits.

BELL

Is the fire high enough now? Can you feel that brass melting away? She will make a fine widow, don't you worry.

BELL exits. SUSAN enters.

JOHN

I don't know what else to do!

SUSAN

We can't go to court, John!

JOHN

Gotta fight --

SUSAN

"Court" is the sheriff on us again!

JOHN

I don't know what else to do!

SUSAN

We will lose in court, John.

JOHN

Have to fight this --

SUSAN

John, John --

JOHN

It's mine!

SUSAN

We leave, John --

JOHN

Have to fight!

SUSAN

We leave like we always said we'd do.

Suddenly, JOHN falls to his knees, breathing heavily.

JOHN

Susan, I can't breathe!

SUSAN

We leave now.

JOHN

I can't breathe!

SUSAN tries to calm him, but it appears that JOHN is strangling, laboring heavily to breathe.

SUSAN

We leave now -- take what money we have and leave the rest behind -- listen -- it's only trash, John, just stuff rusting -- We'll take the children and go north -- easy, easy -- like we always said we'd do -- soft, soft -- start fresh, like we

always wanted -- slowly, John, slowly -- we don't have to
fight anymore --

BOLLING enters, with the shotgun.

BOLLING

I will render vengeance to mine enemies. [Deut. 32:41]
Like the ring of that. I'm going to cut your eyes out.

JOHN

You are supposed to be gone.

SUSAN

Let's leave!

BOLLING

(levels the gun)

Nuh-uh. Mine enemies.

JOHN

You didn't get cheated -- Susan, get out of here!

BOLLING

I'm dead. Tooth for tooth.

JOHN

Susan!

BOLLING

Dead eye for a dead eye.

BOLLING fires. The ACTORS lift JOHN straight up and then let him fall
back into their arms. The group pivots and tilts JOHN so that he is "raked"
for the audience to see, and then slowly lowers him so that his head rests
on SUSAN's lap, who during this has knelt on the stage. They cover JOHN
and SUSAN.

* * * * *

Scene 17: Epilogue

A single light comes up on SUSAN, seated, wearing her shawl.

SUSAN

The lie won. Color killed. The walls -- not thick enough. High enough. Tight enough. White enough. And John Morgan's body lies a-moldering in the grave. The ironies -- Thinking she was doing right, she'd set up the man to come back and kill John. That guilt nearly crushed her. Nearly. And it left her standing. She went after Mrs. Goforth. She won. She let Mrs. Goforth stay -- and not out of kindness. She let her die shrouded by her misery. As Susan was shrouded in her own. They were sisters in sadness -- no color line in that. And Mrs. Goforth died darker than she had ever lived.

Two ACTORS bring out an old ledger book and hand it ceremoniously to SUSAN. SUSAN opens the book, reads briefly, and then speaks.

SUSAN

The river ran through her from the first page. Rivers had always been good to them.

GOFORTH

"This is the journal of Susan Morgan."

SUSAN

She told herself the story over, then over again, to make sure it had not been a dream. The title first.

MRS. GOFORTH

"A Question of Color."

SUSAN

And a dedication.

BELL

"Dedicated to John Morgan. 'And he showed me a pure river of the water of life, clear as a crystal.'"

SUSAN

And prologue.

BECKY

"May all of my following generations draw the simple lesson from these pages -- "

SUSAN

"That the question of color -- "

Out of the darkness comes JOHN with the bucket of blackberries. SUSAN rises from the chair, clutching the journal. They simply hold hands.

JOHN

" -- should always be faced down with outrage and love, love and outrage, until it is answered -- answered completely -- "

SUSAN

" -- with the simple truth -- the simplest truth, really -- "

JOHN

" -- the simple truth of our common humanity."

SUSAN

"Amen."

JOHN

You meet a person, you cross the river, you sit on the porch with the smell of blackberries in the air and you talk out the loneliness.

JOHN feeds a blackberry to SUSAN, and then one to himself.

JOHN

Amen.

SUSAN

Amen.

They face the audience holding hands as the lights fade to black and the rest of the cast sing **I'm On My Journey Home [Southern Journey, Vol. 4, Track 22]**.

Lyrics for Songs

The songs are taken primarily from Alan Lomax's recordings, titled Southern Journey. Several songs are also take from the CD WPAQ: The Voice of the Blue Ridge Mountains. All songs are in the public domain. They will be arranged, with sheet music, for the actors.

Required

Northport Southern Journey, Vol. 4, Track 11

Jesus my all to heav'n has gone. Glory! Hallelujah!
He whom I fix my hopes upon! Glory! Hallelujah!
I want a seat in paradise. Glory! Hallelujah!
I love that union never dies. Glory! Hallelujah!
I want a seat in paradise. Glory! Hallelujah!
I love that union that never dies. Glory! Hallelujah!

* * * * *

Sheep, Sheep, Don't'cha Know The Road? Southern Journey, Vol. 6, Track 1

Sheep, sheep, don'tcha you know the road
Yes, my Lord, I know the road
(2x)
Don'tcha you know the road
by the playin' of the song?
Yes, my Lord, I know the road.
Don'tcha know the road
by the singin' of the song?
Yes, my Lord, I know the road.

* * * * *

God Loves His Children WPAQ -- One verse, one refrain, slower tempo, with back-up from the ACTORS

I was a stranger, brother, full of sin
Didn't even have a love of God within
But now I've found the man I'm glad to say
"I love my Savior each and every day"
Refrain:
God loves his children, brother, yes, I know
He will protect you anywhere you go
Just call upon him, he will hear your prayers

God will protect you, brother, anywhere

* * * * *

Sink 'Em Low Southern Journey, Vol. 1, Track 15

If you want to

Please your captain,

Sink 'em low, boys,

Raise 'em high,

Sink 'em low, boys,

Sink 'em low,

Sink 'em low,

Raise 'em high.

I ask the judge

What might be fine, boys,

He said, "If I don't hang you,

I'll give you ninety-nine.

I'll give you ninety-nine."

He said, "If I don't hang you,

I'll give you ninety-nine."

Act II

Corn Bread and Butterbeans WPAQ

Refrain:

Cornbread and butter beans and you across the table

Eatin' beans and making love as long as I am able

Hoeing corn and cotton, too, and when the day is over

Ride mule, a crazy fool, and love again all over.

Goodbye, don't cry, I'm going to Louisiana

Buy a god and a big fat hog and marry Susy Anna

Sing-song, ding-dong, gonna take a trip to China

Cornbread and butter beans and dirty Carolina

Refrain

Wearing shoes and drinkin' booze is goin' against the Bible

A necktie will make you die and cause you lots of trouble

Street cars and whiskey bars and kissing pretty women

Old man that's the end of a terrible beginning

Refrain

Can't read and don't care and education's awful

Raisin' heck and writings that ought to be unlawful

Silk hose and pretty clothes are just a waste of money

I can see how glad you'll be to marry me, my honey

Refrain

* * * * *

Whole Heap A Little Horses Southern Journey, Vol. 2, Track 25

Go to sleep, go to sleep
Go to sleep, little baby
When you wake, get some cake,
And ride them pretty little horses.
Black and a bay, sorrel and a gray,
Whole heap a' little horses.
Black and a bay, sorrel and a gray,
Whole leap a' little horses.
Little old horse, little old cow,
Ambling around the old hay mound.
Little old horse, he took a chew,
"Darned if I don't," said the old cow too.
Whispered: Sshhh.

* * * * *

Borrowed Land WPAQ

I'm living, living down here
I'm living down here on borrowed land
I'm living down here on borrowed land
I'm living down here on borrowed land
You gonna wait my mother
You gonna wait my father
You gonna wait my Lord
Refrain:
We gonna wait on, wait on, wait on the rising son
I'm praying down here on borrowed land
I'm praying down here on borrowed land
I'm praying down here on borrowed land
You gonna wait my leader
You gonna wait my tenant
You gonna wait my Lord
Refrain:
We gonna wait on, wait on, wait on the rising son
You're dying down here on borrowed land
You're dying down here on borrowed land
You're dying down here on borrowed land
You gonna wait my sister
You gonna wait my brother
You gonna wait oh my Lord
Refrain:

We gonna wait on, wait on, wait on the rising son

* * * * *

I'm On My Journey Home Southern Journey, Vol. 4, Track 22

Oh who will come and go with me?

I am on my journey home;

I'm on my journey home.

O come and go with me,

O come and go with me,

O come and go with me,

For I'm on my journey home.

Other Songs That Might Be Used

Feed Me Jesus WPAQ

Corn Dodgers Southern Journey, Vol. 6, Track 9

Three Nights Drunk Southern Journey, Vol. 1, Track 8

Mama's Gonna Buy Southern Journey, Vol. 1, Track 4

See That My Grave Is Kept Clean Southern Journey, Vol. 4, Track 14

On The Nature Of The Dark Matter...

Full Title: On The Nature Of The Dark Matter That Dominates The Present
Mean Mass Density Of The Universe

DESCRIPTION

Four characters become caught up in an academic controversy involving a charge of "liberal bias" by a group dedicated to a conservative agenda, a charge that also becomes mixed with questions of racial identity.

CHARACTERS

- LILLIE PERKINS, professor - white with African ancestry
- HANNAH MORGAN, student - white with African ancestry
- MITCHELL PALMER, student - African American
- LAWRENCE BOALS, Perkin's literary agent - white - British/Irish

Perkins, in most scenes, will have a stand-up leather briefcase, with the opening at the top.

* * * * *

Scene 1

Perkins' classroom, first meeting of the class. Palmer and Morgan seated upstage. Perkins stands at a lectern downstage.

PERKINS

Welcome to your class on Contracts and Property, otherwise known as "The Bottom Line." That was a joke -- they don't come often, so I encourage you to groan when they do. In this cross-disciplinary class -- and by "cross-disciplinary" I mean reading more than the dull text of your dull textbooks -- you will learn those "laws" of contracts and property that are required by your station in life -- but you will also learn --

Palmer raises his hand holding a textbook.

PERKINS

-- that far from being "sacred writ," these "laws" are also a mythology that people have used to cover up the sins created by power, race, sex, and greed.

Palmer's hand still up.

PERKINS

I see I already have a question on deck. Yes, Mr. --
(consults seating chart)

-- Palmer?

Palmer stands and comes downstage, faces the audience.

PALMER

Professor Perkins?

PERKINS

We've established that.

PALMER

This is a course on contracts and property?

Morgan comes downstage on the opposite side. She has Palmer in her sights.

PERKINS

Yes.

PALMER

That is what we are being tuitioned for, right?

PERKINS

These questions lead to something?

MORGAN

Who is that man?

PALMER

Because we just heard you declare "mythologies" --

MORGAN

Sharp --

PALMER

I thought maybe we had wandered into a class on fiction.

MORGAN

-- sharp-tongued --

PALMER

It's not a class about fictions, is it, Professor Perkins?

MORGAN

Obnoxious --

PERKINS

Just my luck.

PALMER

Because if you teach us that the free-enterprise system that conserves our liberty --

MORGAN

Handsome --

PALMER

-- and keeps professors like you employed is a mythology --

PERKINS

The rough beast slouches -- my very own conservative watch-dogs have arrived.

MORGAN

No, toothsome -- "toothsome" he is.

PALMER

If you mean Students for a Free Academics -- then, yes.

PERKINS

It's only the first class, Mr. Palmer --

MORGAN

Too bad he's got --

PERKINS

-- at least give me time to set my liberal ducks in order --

MORGAN

-- shitty politics --

PERKINS

-- before the SFA takes its standard wild gunshots --

PALMER

We are not trying to impose --

PERKINS

"Ingénue" is not your group's strong suit, Mr. Palmer.

MORGAN

-- what a handsome face -- but damn!

PALMER

We don't want to interfere --

MORGAN

I am desiring --

PERKINS

Then go back to your seat --

MORGAN

-- what should dry me right up --

PERKINS

-- because you're interfering right now --

PALMER

But we are here to keep a watch on you, and we do want to hear the truth.

PERKINS

You'll hear what's right.

MORGAN

But wet and in a sweat am I over him!

PERKINS

And they'll all hear it when the honored member of the Students for a Free Academics goes back to his seat.

Palmer does not move.

PALMER

Not the color of their skin but the content of their character
--

PERKINS

What are you talking about?

MORGAN

What is he talking about?

PALMER

We know about your mixed-raced background, Professor --

PERKINS

It's not exactly a secret --

PALMER

-- the liberal "white-black" woman --

PERKINS

So that invalidates what I say?

PALMER

-- you have it in your textbook -- mixing laws and
"mythologies" -- an example of what the SFA sees as liberal
bias --

PERKINS

It's your past, too --

MORGAN

Her past is like my past and his --

PALMER

And that is where you're wrong -- that past ain't mine, never
was mine -- we live different, we won't need it to get our
jobs.

MORGAN

Then I don't want none of it either!

Palmer shoots Morgan a "look." Morgan does not look away.

PALMER

Not the color of their skin but the content of their character
--

PERKINS

If their character had any content --

PALMER

Let's all stick to the real truth.

MORGAN

You make my thighs hum!

Palmer backs up to his seat. Perkins turns and catches Morgan staring up Palmer, which startles Morgan, who moves back to her seat. Perkins faces the audience.

PERKINS

Let me tell you all a story.

Transition.

* * * * *

Scene 2

Perkins in Boals' office.

PERKINS

He wasn't rude -- exactly.

BOALS

So you told him about --

PERKINS

Told them --

BOALS

-- about the memoir?

PERKINS

-- the memoir --

Boals hands her a scotch.

PERKINS

-- thanks -- all of them -- not just him.

BOALS

Of course all of them. But about the memoir --

PERKINS

And humans as property and corrupted contracts --

BOALS

In the first minutes of your first class --

PERKINS

I was a little -- provoked --

BOALS

Because the memoir comes in, if I remember, in lecture six,
on the coat-tails of --

PERKINS

I know the sequence --

BOALS

And it also comes out later --

PERKINS

Point taken -- he just -- pushed my --

BOALS

Lillie? Hey -- you couldn't have been that surprised --

PERKINS

No.

BOALS

The dark ooze of conservatism --

PERKINS

I just didn't think they would --

BOALS

Because you are Lillie Perkins?

PERKINS

Of course.

BOALS

The Lillie Perkins.

PERKINS

The --

BOALS

But didn't they just so-to-speak piss on the shoes of an emeritus at the school? A prize-winner, award-gatherer -- a bigger fish than you, and yet the president --

PERKINS

"Liberal bias" is bogus --

BOALS

So what? These guys don't shy away from shitting on the altar, so why would you think they'd --

PERKINS

Because.

BOALS

Because you are --

PERKINS

The Lillie Perkins.

BOALS

To the Lillie Perkins, then!

PERKINS

All right, so I wasn't that surprised -- but I don't have time for being defensive.

BOALS

Or the skill.

PERKINS

No?

BOALS

Lillie Perkins is not as hard-boiled as she thinks. You're not. Then how'd he get to you so easily? Your house, your rules -- and he's, bam!, got you telling them about great-great-great-grandfather William and great-great-great-grandmother Ellen --

PERKINS

All right --

BOALS

-- and their escape from slavery --

PERKINS

All right --

BOALS

How did that happen to such a tough gal?

They drink in silence.

PERKINS

I'd prefer to talk about --

BOALS

Lillie?

PERKINS

Yes?

BOALS

Lillie?

PERKINS

What?

BOALS

Your face is not finished with this business.

PERKINS

You're watching my face?

BOALS

It's a good face to watch.

PERKINS

All right -- a woman -- sitting near him --

Morgan steps into a light.

BOALS

Picture the seating chart --

PERKINS

I can't -- remember -- but she had glued her eyes to him.

Palmer steps into a light.

PERKINS

And he ignored it. At first.

BOALS

And then?

PERKINS

He locked onto her. And she did not look away.

BOALS

And?

PERKINS

That stuck with me. He's black and she's white.

Morgan and Palmer circle each other.

BOALS

White-looking.

PERKINS

Yes.

BOALS

Because you are the expert in that.

Boals puts down his drink.

BOALS

Don't tell me -- show me. I'm this Mitchell Palmer. You are the nameless she.

Perkins puts down her drink. They look at each other.

Morgan and Palmer come together, move together.

BOALS

What was she thinking?

PERKINS

I don't know.

BOALS

You must have estimated --

PERKINS

I don't know.

BOALS

Think of the chart.

PERKINS

Hannah Morgan.

Suddenly Perkins pulls back, though she doesn't take her eyes off Boals.

BOALS

What do you know?

PERKINS

That can't be right.

BOALS

Lillie?

(kiddingly)

Lillie?

PERKINS

Jealous.

BOALS

That must have been unexpected.

PERKINS

I brought it out as anger.

BOALS

Your authority undercut.

PERKINS

So I marked my territory.

BOALS

And while being righteous --

PERKINS

Lust marks its own territory.

BOALS

And there you are, lectern-bound, being so adult.

PERKINS

And serious. Logical.

BOALS

Selling that memoir.

PERKINS

And coming up dry.

BOALS

And how hard-edged did you say Lillie Perkins was?

Morgan and Palmer stop moving.

Perkins and Boals move apart just slightly, and this "just slightly" breaks their gaze.

Morgan and Palmer do the motions as Perkins describes, and they mimic what Boals and Perkins do.

PERKINS

At the end of class she put her hand on him.

BOALS

Show me.

Perkins puts her hand on Boals' arm.

PERKINS

He noted it -- go ahead, note it. Then he gently picked it up
-- go ahead -- and gave it back to her. And she --

Perkins puts her hand back on Boals. Boals goes to do as before, to lift the hand off.

PERKINS

No. He picked it up, yes -- but then he -- brought it to his mouth --

Palmer gently nips the flesh on Morgan's knuckles.

Boals does not do anything with Perkins' hand.

Perkins takes her hand back.

Morgan takes her hand back.

Perkins picks up her drink, turns away from Boals.

Morgan and Palmer exit out of their lights.

PERKINS

You'd have thought they were a couple --

BOALS

Their own seating chart.

Perkins sips, fidgets.

PERKINS

Lawrence, you said you had something --

BOALS

Good time for a shift. And something it is I have for you.
Why are we drinking my expensive single-malt? Hmmm?

PERKINS

No.

BOALS

Yes.

PERKINS

You have a contract?

BOALS

For the woman in contracts. To be celebrated with
matchless gaiety.

PERKINS

It's real?

BOALS

Your memoir will be --

Shift of lights. Perkins addresses the audience.

PERKINS

The memoir will be published. Fucking A. Finally!

Boals addresses the audience.

BOALS

She already has several best-selling books -- in contracts
and property, that is --

PERKINS

They're so gripping!

BOALS

She's famous in a small circle.

PERKINS

But new editions each year, updates --

BOALS

Bring in its own pretty penny.

PERKINS

But the memoir -- that comes from the heart.

BOALS

That realm of dark matter.

PERKINS

You cynic!

BOALS

You mean someone in his right mind.

PERKINS

Not all hearts -- and not my heart.

BOALS

She really wants to tell about her memoir. Now liberated by a contract.

Boals smiles, raises his glass. Light out on him, stays up on Perkins.

PERKINS

My memoir.

Palmer and Morgan appear as William and Ellen, the main characters of Perkins' memoir. They will also speak other voices.

Palmer is dressed in a torn shirt and pants, shoeless. Morgan is dressed in a simple torn dress, shoeless. Think of a scene from some edition or a melodramatic theatre production of Uncle Tom's Cabin.

PERKINS

My great-great-great-grandparents -- my primal sources. William. And Ellen.

PALMER [AS SLAVEMASTER]

I'll show you how to give a white man respect!

PERKINS

She, white; her husband, black --

MORGAN

Please, please, kind sir, don't hurt my husband!

PERKINS

But her white was a dark white --

PALMER [AS SLAVEMASTER]

Quiet, wench, or you'll regret the day you were born.

MORGAN

(eye-roll to heaven)

I already do!

PERKINS

A slave bred by the master --

Morgan now mimes as if "the master" is fucking her from behind.

MORGAN

Ah, ah, ah, ah --

PERKINS

-- but nothing else from the "master" -- except the constant lash and the occasional fuck.

"The master" finishes with Morgan.

PALMER

Don't give them no cause to strike you, my angel --

MORGAN

I am dirt!

PALMER

God will find us a way. I can suffer this man's lash --

MORGAN [AS SLAVEMASTER]

We'll see about that!

Morgan and Palmer fall as if thrown to their knees.

PERKINS

They couldn't take anymore.

PALMER

I can't take no more, Ellen.

MORGAN

I got no heart left, William.

PERKINS

Only the two choices every slave had.

PALMER

We leave --

MORGAN

Or we die. That's it.

PERKINS

They did not die.

Boals brings on a pair of green sunglasses and a hat for Morgan and a carpet bag for Palmer. They stand as if in a diorama -- white master, subservient slave.

PERKINS

They lived by an ingenious illusion. She pretended to be his white master --

Under Perkins' words, Morgan and Palmer begin to sing to the tune of Stephen Foster's "De Camptown Races."

[From FOSTER'S Plantation Melodies, No. 3. "Gwine to Run All Night," or De Camptown Races, <http://www.pdmusic.org/ministrel.html>]

MORGAN & PALMER

De coon dogs, dey be lickin' our trail -- Doo-dah! doo-dah!

PERKINS

She wrapped herself in bandages, pretended to have weak eyes --

MORGAN & PALMER

Break our bones and t'row us in de jail -- Oh! doo-dah day!

PERKINS

Traveling to Philadelphia with her "property."

MORGAN, PALMER & PERKINS

Oh! day-doo-dah day!

Morgan and Palmer do a shuffle/cakewalk move, then stop, hold pose.

MORGAN & PALMER

Gwine to run all night!

PERKINS

They used property and contracts to free themselves --

They do another shuffle/cakewalk, then hold the pose.

MORGAN & PALMER

Gwine to run all day!

PERKINS

Loved that irony!

Morgan and Palmer suddenly break out of their pose.

MORGAN & PALMER

(screaming)

And what we really wanna do is tear out their fucking hearts!

They immediately snap back into their pose. Perkins breaks out of her "professorial" pose.

PERKINS

I really wanna tear out their fucking hearts too!

Perkins snaps back into her "rational" pose.

MORGAN & PALMER

(singing)

Gwine to run all night! Gwine to run all day!

MORGAN, PALMER & PERKINS

I'll bet my money on de bobtail nag --

Somebody bet on de bay.

Everyone holds a final "button." Palmer and Morgan take a pose.

PERKINS

And they made it -- they actually made it --

A strobe/snapshot. Palmer and Morgan undress. Boals brings them contemporary clothes and takes their shed clothes.

PERKINS

Eventually to England to escape the Fugitive Slave law,
then back here, and so on and so on and so on down to me.

(touching herself)

This skin?

(shows it around)

All this time you thought it was -- and that I was -- I get that
all the time!

Morgan and Palmer are now as they were at the top of the show. Boals comes back into the light. Morgan and Palmer move to their seats in the class.

PERKINS

So when do I sign?

BOALS

As soon as the papers arrive.

PERKINS

At our price?

BOALS

Yes. It's not a sin to want the money.

PERKINS

Such confidence.

BOALS

You own what you know and you can parlay that into
anything you want --

PERKINS

Intellectual "property."

BOALS

Why do you think we call them "properties" around here? In my business, the word "contract" --

Boals with an open hand.

BOALS

-- should never mean "contract."

Boals makes a fist. He gives Perkins the sign of the cross.

BOALS

Enjoy. I know someone's in there who can do just that.

Perkins muses for a few moments, then looks up and give Boals a big-thank you smile, which he returns. Transition.

* * * * *

Scene 3

Morgan at the café: table, chairs, a coffee cup. Palmer, wearing a backpack, stands, not leaving, not sitting.

MORGAN

It was just by chance --

PALMER

By chance --

MORGAN

I swear --

PALMER

That our paths would cross right here.

MORGAN

Most every day I come here for tea and study --

PALMER

And I have a class right over there just about this time.

MORGAN

That so?

PALMER

That's so.

MORGAN

What a coincidence.

PALMER

Why do you know my schedule.

MORGAN

Who says I know about "schedule"? Is this how you treat a body who simply says hello to your oh-so-serious face?

PALMER

"Ingénue" is not your strong suit.

MORGAN

You should see how grim you look.

PALMER

I have reason.

MORGAN

You're thinking I'm a snake in the grass.

PALMER

We are not the most belov'd around campus.

MORGAN

Hard work keeping that SFA party line pure.

PALMER

I don't think you're a snake in the grass.

MORGAN

You should try trusting a little more like that, Mitchell Palmer -- it'll keep that high dark forehead of yours wrinkle-free.

Palmer slings off his backpack, puts it on the empty chair.

PALMER

All right --

MORGAN

What?

PALMER

Let's call it coincidence.

Morgan raises her hand to display her knuckle.

MORGAN

You bit my knuckle. See, I haven't washed it -- not that you could see it from that far away -- not a snake in the grass at all. So why not sit?

PALMER

Costs nothing to sit.

MORGAN

Treat me to a chai.

PALMER

You laid that hand on me -- maybe it's me who'd like a chai out of your pocket.

MORGAN

Is something out of my pocket what you'd like?

Palmer mimes putting a hand on an arm.

PALMER

Why did you --

MORGAN

Your attention -- to know more about what you were doing.

PALMER

With Perkins?

MORGAN

With all of it.

PALMER

"It" is big and indefinite.

MORGAN

So let me be more specific.

PALMER

I have five minutes before class.

MORGAN

I have three minutes of what I want to say. Did you like doing what you were doing to Perkins today?

PALMER

It needs to be done.

MORGAN

"It" is big and indefinite.

PALMER

Then this: arrogance made to answer for its arrogance -- blindness made to see.

MORGAN

Your forehead just got really smooth.

PALMER

Did you like what I was doing?

MORGAN

All that "not the color of your skin but the content of your character" -- really?

PALMER

I'm not stupid -- my skin gets me things -- I trade off it --

MORGAN

And they trade off you -- a black conservative --

PALMER

I've got it under control. But it's not just the politics -- not just the hunt --

MORGAN

Because you got a core, right?

PALMER

Because I got a core -- right.

MORGAN

A heart.

PALMER

In which I believe. And I got a class.

Palmer gets up, grabs his bag.

PALMER

Tea here every day?

MORGAN

But can't guarantee it -- things get changeable. Be better to set a time.

PALMER

A date.

MORGAN

Improves the odds.

PALMER

I still don't trust you.

Morgan holds up her hand.

MORGAN

I will not wash 'til we meet again.

Palmer points to her hand.

PALMER

I'm not sure why --

MORGAN

I'm glad you're not sure.

They lock eyes.

MORGAN

Tomorrow would be good.

PALMER

Tomorrow, then.

Transition.

* * * * *

Scene 4

Palmer sets the classroom for the next scene -- chairs, lectern -- talking or singing verses from "Walk, Jaw Bone." (See below)

Boals, wearing a white half-mask and dressed as a Master, grabs Morgan and takes her from behind. When he is done, Boals discards Morgan, who falls to her hands and knees. Boals turns his back on her and sits in a chair to get himself ready to leave.

Perkins watches the scene. Perkins steps forward, wearing a black half-mask and carrying a knife. She caresses Morgan's face, then stands over Boals, knife raised. Morgan, seeing this, rushes to embrace Boals, to protect him. This confuses Perkins.

But Morgan, without Boals being able to see her, gestures to Perkins to hand her the knife, which Perkins does. Morgan slides it in between herself and Boals, and the expectation is that she will stab Boals.

However, Morgan kills herself, and her body slumps to the floor at Boals' feet. Boals pushes Morgan away with his foot and then spins and catches Perkins' wrist, holding her tight. Perkins pulls out another knife.

BOALS

I think, my dear, that we could use a contract.

Freeze. Palmer, finished setting up, takes off Perkins' mask, unlocks Boals' grip on Perkins, takes off the props. Then he and Morgan take their seats.

[From "Walk, Jaw Bone" (1844) -- pages 210-211 from "Minstrel Songs, Old and New" (1883)] -- <http://www.pdmusic.org/minstrel.html>]

PALMER

Dey made me a scar-crow in de field.
And a buzzard come to get his meal,
But in his face I blowed my bref,
An' he was a case for ole Jim Death.

Next come a hungry eagle down,
Oh! gosh thinks I, dis nig's done drown;
But he winked an' cried "I'se de bird ob de free
And won't eat de meat ob slabery."

Den down de bank I see'd de ship,
I slide down dar on de bone ob my hip;
I crossed de drink an' yare I am,
If I go back dar, I'll be damn!

Transition.

* * * * *

Scene 5

Perkins at the lectern, briefcase beside her. Palmer and Morgan are in their seats, Palmer with his hand raised. He holds a notebook.

PERKINS

And that concludes our work for today. Do your reading,
and don't forget to think about it!

Palmer beelines to Perkins, trailed by Morgan.

PALMER

Why didn't you call on me, Professor?

PERKINS

Because you make the same point in every session.

PALMER

Are you saying I don't have the right to say --

PERKINS

I'm saying we have a syllabus.

PALMER

But you constantly shift off the subject --

PERKINS

If you have more complaints, you know my office hours --

PALMER

So that's how you would silence me.

PERKINS

Mr. Palmer --

PALMER

I have a right to voice --

PERKINS

But you don't have the teaching contract to teach.

PALMER

Isn't there a contract between teacher and student -- in fact
-- you said as much on --

PERKINS

Did I?

PALMER

You did.

(flips some pages)

And contracts -- not to be broken -- the resulting bad faith --

PERKINS

Destroys trust --

PALMER

Your words.

Perkins appraises him, then turns to Morgan.

PERKINS

Agree?

Palmer goes to say something, but Perkins puts up a hand to hold him off.

PERKINS
(to MORGAN)

Do you agree with him?

Palmer ignores the hand.

PALMER

In a class about --

PERKINS
(to PALMER)

You are in favor of free expression --

PALMER

Of course.

PERKINS

Then let Ms. Morgan express.

PALMER

Not until --

PERKINS
(to MORGAN)

Seems some tongues have more privileges than others.

PALMER

Sarcasm isn't --

PERKINS

Mr. Palmer, let go of the bone because I am not going to debate you right now.

PALMER

It's exactly the time and [place] --

PERKINS

It's exactly not. I'm on to you, Mr. Palmer, you and the Students for Free Academics, but this is still my house and still my rules.

PALMER

So you deliberately cut off a student in mid-sentence --

PERKINS

When we've all heard that sentence several dozen times interrupting.

PALMER

So you'll ignore an opposing argument.

PERKINS

Not if I hear an actual argument.

PALMER

So now I don't know how to argue.

PERKINS

An argument with reason -- but I'm not hearing that -- I'm just hearing complaints.

PALMER

So academic freedom's not a "rule" in your house?

PERKINS

I have a rule against whining.

PALMER

And anyone who disagrees is a whiner --

PERKINS

Mr. Palmer, you may be disagreeable, but don't flatter yourself that you or your SFA are actually disagreeing, with me or anyone else, because I haven't heard one well-seasoned, cool-headed intelligible rebuttal to anything the class has to offer. You and the SFA act just like arsonists --

PALMER

Now were criminals --

PERKINS

Because you set things on fire, kill off whatever's inside, then come back to sift the trash.

PALMER

You know, Professor, you're right -- this is not the time and place because you won't debate me. Dismiss me, belittle me, cut me off -- but go face-to-face, explain your actions, tell us why you continually hate the traditions that have made this country great -- I'm sorry for having taken up your time.

PERKINS

So that's how the peacock looks in full bloom. Somehow I don't think you're sorry at all.

Palmer turns to exit, looks at Morgan.

PERKINS

(to MORGAN)

You didn't answer my earlier question.

Morgan looks at Palmer, then back to Perkins.

MORGAN

(slight hesitation)

Yes. Of course I agree.

PALMER

Let's go.

Palmer and Morgan exit.

Abrupt shift into harsh downlight. Perkins pulls a knife out of her briefcase and raises it, and from her comes a low growl, her body tensed to kill. Palmer and Boals gather on either side of her.

PALMER

Do it.

BOALS

Don't do it.

PALMER

Do it.

BOALS

Don't.

As they continue this back and forth (they can ad lib the "good angel/bad angel" routine), the low growl ratchets up into a scream, capped off by a suddenly downward stab of the knife, and then silence.

PALMER & BOALS

You've just cut your own throat.

PERKINS

It didn't feel that bad.

Perkins examines the knife, licks the edge, then puts the knife away, regains her composure. Palmer and Boals exit.

Transition.

* * * * *

Scene 6

Morgan moves to catch up with Perkins.

MORGAN

Professor Perkins?

PERKINS

Ah.

MORGAN

Look, I'm --

PERKINS

Hannah Morgan. Middle name Susan.

MORGAN

Right. Look, I just wanted to -- you know, back there --

PERKINS

I shouldn't have --

MORGAN

Look, I own something I think you'll find -- interesting. Given what you've mentioned -- about --

PERKINS

I've mentioned a lot.

MORGAN

About the -- memoir -- family background --

PERKINS

You're actually interested in that.

MORGAN

Whether I wanna be or not.

PERKINS

I don't know what that means, but all right. I've got a meeting with the Dean --

MORGAN

I'll make an appointment.

PERKINS

Make it soon.

Perkins moves on. Morgan moves to follow.

MORGAN

He's really very nice -- Mitchell --

PERKINS

You know about his group?

MORGAN

Yes.

PERKINS

They've caused a lot of problems.

MORGAN

Yes.

PERKINS

And trashed --

MORGAN

Yes.

PERKINS

And that they get their checks cut from some deep conservative pockets --

MORGAN

He's not all wrong in what he says.

PERKINS

He's very wrong if he thinks "liberals" run this capitalist farm we call a law school. My fear? His conservative rant's got no legs. My fear is that Mr. Palmer is just a black face being used by nasty people for nasty purposes.

MORGAN

That's not fair to --

PERKINS

Maybe not fair but may be right -- he wouldn't be the first -- and that really gets under my skin, no matter what he sells. I have great patience with challenge, with fair and open exchange -- but not with indictment, not with diatribe and accusation and name-calling --

Perkins' vehemence has frozen the air between them.

PERKINS

I will be late to my meeting.

MORGAN

And I need to --

PERKINS

This week would be fine -- if you still want --

MORGAN

I do.

PERKINS

Good.

MORGAN

And you will definitely find it interesting.

PERKINS

A mystery -- all right, then, this week.

MORGAN

Yes.

Morgan moves off. Perkins watches her.

PERKINS

Lillie -- gotta put a lock on. "Do not plunge thyself too far in anger." A closed mouth will gather no feet.

Transition.

* * * * *

Scene 7

Perkins and Boals. Boals hands Perkins a drink.

BOALS

So he did show up -- here --

PERKINS

Thanks -- by the book. Made an appointment. Wore a tie. And his heart upon his sleeve. He is a believer.

BOALS

In things you don't believe.

PERKINS

I don't need to share the beliefs to see he's got heart.

BOALS

That dark matter.

PERKINS

(overlapping)

-- dark matter -- all you cynics are just boiled-over romantics.

BOALS

Cynic or not, the man with heart has you in his cross-hairs.
The man with heart works for snipers, is a sniper.

PERKINS

It's not just me.

BOALS

No, it's the "liberals."

(raises his glass)

To the liberals, then. But you still have his bulls-eye on you.

PERKINS

This month. Maybe next month they'll go after disabled
Wiccans --

BOALS

Crippled witches.

PERKINS

-- and they should really call themselves "crippled," who are
they fucking kidding calling themselves "differently abled" --
not to mention, though we will, over and over and over, their
fucking anti-Judeo-Christian fucking paganism --

BOALS

Lillie, when you get pissed, your face goes all cubist.

PERKINS

"Piss"casso'd? Sorry.

BOALS

We are celebrating, Lillie --

PERKINS

I know, Lawrence -- but you really don't know --

BOALS

I give you two more minutes for non-celebratory matters.

PERKINS

These guys are like -- locusts. The guys behind Palmer. To be honest, I don't know what they want when they talk about getting more "conservative" people -- it's not like I'm avant-garde.

BOALS

You are a white-looking woman with dark Africa in her DNA -- you're a "white/black," a hybrid, an eraser of categories.

PERKINS

And unmarried, so ergo lesbian?

BOALS

And, if I remember correctly, you have wagged that tongue of yours against certain contracts and property-law faculty that believe all human affairs can be whittled down to buying and selling and the tender mercies of the marketplace.

PERKINS

Because I value the human heart. Well, I do.

BOALS

And that apparently has made you some enemies.
(gentle mock)

You liberal, you.

This does not perk up Perkins.

BOALS

Come on, Lillie -- you have one handsome contract -- and one handsome agent, if I don't mind saying so -- this is going to be grand for you. The memoir's got just the right pinch of everything in it. Including great writing. And a story that just hooks --

PERKINS

A relief not to have to explain the statute of frauds yet again.

BOALS

I am sure.

They fall silent for a moment.

BOALS

Come on. We have reservations. Shall we?

PERKINS

Can I take a rain check?

BOALS

Lillie --

PERKINS

I -- have -- prep --

BOALS

Prep -- sounds like a mild bronchial condition. Well. Rain check it is.

They stand. Perkins drains her glass and hands it to Boals. Boals drains his glass.

PERKINS

I'm sorry. Thanks. Thank you. For everything.

BOALS

Just don't forget to help me spend my commission when I get it.

They pause. They shake hands. Transition.

* * * * *

Scene 8

Perkins and Morgan in Perkins' office.

PERKINS

Your -- link with Mr. Palmer --

MORGAN

Do I believe, you mean -- like you asked?

PERKINS

Yes.

MORGAN

Am I a snake in the grass?

PERKINS

Exactly.

MORGAN

Let me show you my answer.

Morgan digs into her backpack and pulls out a slim weather-beaten wooden case, slightly larger than a book. A small hook-clasp holds it shut, and the hinges, instead of being metal, are made from leather.

MORGAN

It won't explode.

Perkins doesn't open it right away. She rubs her hands over the rough grain, smells the leather hinges.

PERKINS

Something from your family.

MORGAN

Yes. An heirloom.

With a flick of her thumbnail, Perkins unhooks the clasp and opens the case. Inside is a metal and more modern-looking metal case.

MORGAN

Open that.

Perkins opens it and brings out a tintype.

MORGAN

By the edges -- please.

PERKINS

A tintype.

Perkins turns it over, reads.

PERKINS

"John and Susan Morgan, July 19, 1907."

Perkins looks at the tintype, then at Morgan.

PERKINS

Her face.

MORGAN

Yes. My great-grandmother.

PERKINS

I can see her face in yours. But him?

Boals comes out as John Morgan, dressed as in the picture, wearing an Indian headband and holding a shawl and a single flower. Sits. Morgan comes to sit by him. Boals hands her the shawl, then the flower.

MORGAN

My great-grandfather.

PERKINS

Susan Morgan -- your middle name. But she's as black --

MORGAN

And Cherokee.

PERKINS

-- as he isn't. And as you aren't.

Boals and Morgan prepare for their photo.

MORGAN

A white man from the mountains, as white as could be made white in those colored North Carolina times.

PERKINS

They couldn't marry.

MORGAN

As illegal as murder, and thought even worse.

A strobe flashes: the picture. They adjust themselves.

PERKINS

So how?

MORGAN

Because John Morgan pretended to be an Indian. Tusca-
tawba-erokee, he called himself. The headband.

Second strobe. They prepare for one more.

PERKINS

And they made this work?

MORGAN

I'm sitting here.

Third strobe. Morgan rises, hands Boals the shawl and flower. Boals exits.
Morgan joins Perkins.

MORGAN

I know -- my white skin. Like yours -- like your book.

Morgan picks up the wooden box, taps it with her finger.

MORGAN

As a kid, I used to imagine them in that photo --

PERKINS

And?

MORGAN

And what?

PERKINS

Did you? Feel what they felt?

Morgan takes the photo. She puts it in the case, the case in the box, and
the box into her bag.

MORGAN

I know I really wanted to.

PERKINS

But?

A moment of tense silence.

PERKINS

Is there anything else you wanted to talk about?

In answer, Morgan holds out her hand, which Perkins realizes Morgan wants her to shake, which she does. Morgan rises and turns to leave.

PERKINS

Why do you have that with you, here? Why risk it?

MORGAN

In our family, the one on a journey gets to take the picture.

PERKINS

Any journey?

MORGAN

Going to the Bahamas is not a "journey."

PERKINS

But a young white/black woman coming to law school connected to a conservative black man -- that's a journey.

MORGAN

I have Contracts reading to do.

PERKINS

So do I.

MORGAN

So I should --

PERKINS

So should I. But we still have the question we started out with.

MORGAN

Snake in the --

PERKINS

Am I wrong for asking the apparent girlfriend of the one student in my class who seems bent on [leading] --

MORGAN

Bent on what? What is Mitchell "bent on," according to you?

PERKINS

At the moment not interested in that. I want to know your bent, in coming to show this to me.

MORGAN

You asked me if I was --

PERKINS

I'm still asking.

MORGAN

And I told you I'd answer your question, and I showed you the picture.

PERKINS

But the picture was an answer to something, Ms. Morgan, before you even walked in here. Did you think of the simple showing as a contract? Have we agreed to something, one white/black woman to another? My contracts are a little tougher than that. I know what the picture shows -- but I don't know what it means. To you. To your "journey." Because when I asked you, you couldn't -- or you wouldn't -- tell me.

A moment of suspension.

PERKINS

So tell me.

A moment of suspension.

PERKINS

Have you shown that picture to Mitchell Palmer?

MORGAN

I have my reading to do. Goodbye.

Morgan leaves. Perkins muses. Transition

* * * * *

Scene 9

Morgan and Palmer having coffee, Morgan with a print-out in her hand. To the side, in a separate light, stands Perkins.

PALMER

I tell you, we didn't do that. We didn't.

MORGAN

Your crew --

PALMER

We wouldn't do that. It's not about that -- I'm not about [that] --

MORGAN

It's so fucking nasty!

PALMER

I didn't do it.

MORGAN

But you know who did.

PERKINS

The security guard dropped the envelope on my desk.

Perkins holds up an envelope.

MORGAN

I can't believe you'd want to protect those fuck-ups.

PALMER

They're not mine -- I don't know who --

PERKINS

(opening it)

I opened it.

Perkins makes an "opening letter" sound effect as she takes out the same printout Morgan holds.

MORGAN

Don't lie to me.

PALMER

Don't think I'm lying to you.

Morgan shoves the paper close to Palmer's face.

MORGAN

Because no human being deserves to be treated like this.

PERKINS

I typed in the URL --

(make "clickety" keyboard sounds)

-- and up pops my faculty picture --

MORGAN

(pointing)

"The new 'massah' in town"!!

PERKINS

And the cartoon balloon pinned to my mouth says --

MORGAN

"I'se gonna get me some conservative white meat to eat!"

PERKINS

Caption reads, "This is one species -- "

MORGAN

"-- that should be made extinct." Extinct? Are you and your buds going to hunt her down? Get yourself some coon?

PERKINS

The glories of free speech.

PALMER

It's free speech.

Perkins dances while she sings "Jim Crow." [From "Jim Crow" (1829)

Words and Music by Thomas Dartmouth ("Daddy") Rice, 1808-1860 -- <http://www.pdmusic.org/minstrel.html>

PERKINS

I sit upon a hornet's nest,
 They dance around my head;
They tie a viper round my neck
 And send me off to bed.
Wheel about and turn about and do jis so,
Eb'ry time I wheel about I jump Jim Crow.

Light out on Perkins.

PALMER

Are you taking her side?

MORGAN

I'm not taking anyone's --

PALMER

Not even mine?

MORGAN

And which is that, Mitchell?

PALMER

Which do you think, Hannah?

Palmer touches her face softly.

PALMER

Which side do you think I want to be on?

MORGAN

Just don't pun me that you're on "the right side."

PALMER

We didn't put that rag out. We have a job, but not that.

MORGAN

It's so nasty.

PALMER

I don't disagree.

MORGAN

I want to believe you.

PALMER

And I want to believe you.

MORGAN

But what?

PALMER

I know that you went to see her, in her office.

MORGAN

How do you know that?

PALMER

I know.

MORGAN

There's a lot to talk about in that course. That's all we talked about.

PALMER

Now here's where it comes down to the nub, Hannah: I believe you as much as you believe me. You believe me about that paper -- I believe you about Perkins.

MORGAN

I do.

PALMER

Then I do, too. And so that makes us both fully believed, don't it?

MORGAN

I hope so.

PALMER

Know so. We haven't known each other long, but I do know this: I hate it when --

MORGAN

I hate it, too -- about myself, about --

PALMER

Makes me feel a thousand miles away.

MORGAN

It does?

PALMER

Yes.

MORGAN

That true?

PALMER

Yes.

MORGAN

Because it makes me feel double that.

PALMER
(smiling)

Always gotta one-up on me.

MORGAN

I like being one-up on you.

PALMER
(pointing to paper)

We didn't do that.

MORGAN

Okay.

PALMER

You sure?

MORGAN

Mitchell, the SFA -- I just don't think it's your way.

PALMER

It's not mine, Hannah -- but I have got a problem.

MORGAN

So tell me.

PALMER

(points to paper)

That's part of it. I have the "name" of SFA president -- but there's -- God, it wasn't supposed to be about this --

MORGAN

There's what?

PALMER

There's a -- push -- by some of the deep pockets to --

MORGAN

Act like assholes?

PALMER

Up the "voltage."

MORGAN

Like an electric chair --

PALMER

It wasn't supposed to be like that.

MORGAN

You're getting scammed, aren't you? You suspect --

Morgan caresses his cheek.

MORGAN

Because you have such a convenient black face for them.

Morgan keeps touching his cheek. She then gives his cheek a sharp but not hard slap.

MORGAN

Don't let them use [it] --

PALMER

There's only one person I'm liking getting used by.

MORGAN

Don't you even think about giving me a slap.

PALMER

Wouldn't do what I'm not thinking about doing.

MORGAN

What are you thinking about, then?

PALMER

See if you can read my mind.

They read each other's mind. Transition.

* * * * *

Scene 10

Perkins and Boals. Boals has a bag of nuts or chocolate coffee beans.

PERKINS

I don't want this to -- I don't want this to fuck-up the contract.
I don't want this to --

BOALS

The contract will be signed, sealed, and delivered.

PERKINS

Have you seen the full-court press on me?

BOALS

I have because you've told me about it.

PERKINS

I just don't want --

BOALS

You have an agreement to a contract. Is Contract Woman losing her faith in contracts? Besides all this has been pretty in-house anyways, hasn't it? Tempest in a tea-pot sort of thing?

PERKINS

It's not a tea-pot. This is about academic freedom --

BOALS

Of course.

PERKINS

But?

BOALS

Well, I've been thinking about that -- whose?

PERKINS

Mine!

BOALS

And so should you have yours -- but isn't the freedom for both sides --

PERKINS

Whose side are you on?

BOALS

I'm always on the side of my bread and butter.

PERKINS

This is serious --

BOALS

Can that tell from your serious face.

PERKINS

Then treat it as serious -- treat me as serious.

BOALS

As if I haven't been.

PERKINS

Not if you take that -- Brit piss-off attitude about something that just cuts at me --

BOALS

"Brit piss-off" --

PERKINS

You know, that little -- thing --

BOALS

Thing.

PERKINS

Mannerism --

(badly imitating)

"I'm always on the side of my bread -- "

BOALS

I'll tell you what.

PERKINS

Tell me what.

Boals sticks the bag in his pocket.

BOALS

Let us do "serious," just for the sake of calming Lillie Perkins.

PERKINS

Now you are pissed off.

BOALS

Let us do serious. You begin. Begin.

PERKINS

No.

BOALS

Begin.

PERKINS

If I can't teach because some conservative knucklehead --

BOALS

Or earnest student -- heart on his sleeve, remember --

PERKINS

I am not "liberal" -- I just try to talk some common sense into them.

BOALS

And what's so common about your common sense? What makes your common sense more common than his?

PERKINS

It's my class. My name's on the syllabus.

BOALS

Which means they shut up?

PERKINS

It's about courtesy and respect --

BOALS

Which means on your terms?

PERKINS

No, on the terms for any civilized discourse --

BOALS

"Civilized discourse" --

Boals bows in mock servility to Perkins.

BOALS

(mock Southern accent)

Beg yer pardon, mistress, but with great respect and courtesy --

PERKINS

What are you doing?

BOALS

-- we would like to take over this here plantation because of the radical inequalities --

PERKINS

What are you doing?

BOALS

Imagine William and Ellen going up to their owners, in
civilized discourse --

PERKINS

Mitchell Palmer and his -- crew -- are not oppressed!

BOALS

They feel oppressed --

PERKINS

They can feel what they want, but they are not --

BOALS

Feel they have to change the rules.

PERKINS

These -- vandals are not interested in revolutionary
liberation!

BOALS

And who says revolutions have to liberate?

PERKINS

What good is a revolution that doesn't? Look, "the new
'massah' in town" is not discourse, it's not revolution, it's
insult --

BOALS

"Insult" is what free speech is about, or it's not about
anything.

PERKINS

Are you being purposefully pig-headed?

BOALS

I am purposefully taking you seriously.

A moment of suspension.

PERKINS

You are, aren't you?

BOALS

You asked me to. I do what I'm asked if I like what I'm asked to do.

Boals takes out the bag, offers. Perkins demurs.

PERKINS

Your bread and butter. It's just so frustrating!

BOALS

When they don't play by the rules.

PERKINS

But here's how it works in my in-house. I've got "I'se gonna get me some conservative white meat to eat!" coming out of my cartoon mouth -- and I get a call from the Dean to come in for a "chat."

BOALS

Really?

PERKINS

As of nine a.m.

BOALS

Tomorrow?

PERKINS

In all its petty pace.

BOALS

Is this something "official"?

PERKINS

In my world, "chat" means a tiny warning shot across the bows. Then it can bump up to "a little talk," then a "discussion" --

BOALS

But not across their bows -- this Palmer and his --

PERKINS

The accuser gets the leverage, not me.

BOALS

But Lillie, clearly, with your accomplishments -- why are you smiling?

PERKINS

I so enjoy seeing how naïve you are.

BOALS

There you go. I am living up to our agreement. In clause 17-dash-c of our contract, it declares that I am to provide a kind of clownish entertainment by affecting a charming naiveté -- good work?

PERKINS

So far.

BOALS

Relief supplied.

PERKINS

My record, you said --

BOALS

Exemplary, I'm sure.

PERKINS

Well, maybe at some point it might help -- but at the moment, fingers are pointed, and that gets the poo-bahs nervous.

BOALS

But this is not front-page-of-the-Times stuff. Professors get smash-mouthed every day, and it hardly makes a ripple, right? Would you like some?

PERKINS

I don't have much news value, so, no, I don't get the front page, or even an inside. No, maybe you're right --

BOALS

In all my naiveté --

PERKINS

This is a tempest in a teapot --

BOALS

A tempest is a tempest, though.

PERKINS

Just ride it out.

BOALS

I'm sure your colleagues -- you're smiling again.

PERKINS

Why do you think I'm here telling you and not coffee'd-up with my colleagues? My department chair? Crowned with supportive emails?

BOALS

Beyond this literary agent's charm.

PERKINS

Because they're all scared -- the tar-brush can swing wide.
And I am not universally liked --

BOALS

I didn't realize it would be so --

PERKINS

And I am taking up the valuable time of my ace literary agent.

BOALS

Don't worry about the publisher -- what we have will be signed, sealed --

PERKINS

(overlapping)

Sealed and delivered -- yes -- good.

BOALS

I'm sorry to see you so fretful.

PERKINS

I keep my routine, make light -- I just don't want the memoir
--

BOALS

Repeat after me: it will soon be signed, sealed, delivered.
That's your mantra.

A silent moment between them.

BOALS

I was just playing devil's advocate, back there -- and a bit
of an ass --

PERKINS

I asked for it -- you were honor-bound to deliver.

BOALS

The ass part?

PERKINS

The advocate. Believe me, it's more honesty than I've
gotten lately -- I need to remember that this does swing
both ways --

BOALS

Don't you give in to the crap, though.

PERKINS

I promise to remain un-crapped-on!

BOALS

Good.

Another silent moment between them.

PERKINS

I'd better go --

BOALS

And I do have calls --

A hesitation, then Boals pops a candy into Perkins' mouth. Perkins goes
to shake Boals' hand. Instead, Boals gives her his fist, and they bump
knuckles. Transition.

* * * * *

Scene 11

Perkins in her own light. Boals drops an envelope at her feet and exits. She picks it up, opens it, and Perkins responds with fear and loathing. She holds it face-out so that the audience can see it. Perkins is now speaking to the "administration."

PERKINS

It's a death threat! Can't you see that? And through my emails now as well. See what it says! I've got others. One says that "niggers" should be sent back to Africa, especially for barbecue. At least change my email address, keep it private. At least give me a parking space near my classroom, let me have all my classes in the same building -- Can't? Won't, you mean. The email address is "public" -- and -- let me get this straight -- access to it is a "freedom of speech issue" -- I see. I don't see, but I see.

Perkins tosses the death threat to one side, sits on the floor, trembling, alone.

PERKINS

Damn damn damn damn damn --

Palmer appears as he did before, as William, and he inches toward Perkins.

PALMER

Ellen? Ellen?

Perkins looks up, sees him.

PERKINS

William? What am I saying? William?

PALMER

Ellen -- we're safe.

Perkins jerks away.

PERKINS

Get away from me.

PALMER

What's the matter?

PERKINS

Get away from me!

PALMER

This is me, William --

PERKINS

No, it's not --

PALMER

This is William --

PERKINS

It is not!

PALMER

-- and I am telling you we are safe. We are free.

Palmer goes to touch her face. Perkins pulls back.

PALMER

We just crossed the Philadelphia city line, Ellen. We're free.

PERKINS

No, no, no!

Boals enters, wears the white half-mask. He carries in a costume that he slips over Perkins which transforms her into a "plantation mistress" but also in the style of a dominatrix, complete with a short whip or quirt. Think of Scarlett O'Hara in spike heels.

Boals then clamps Palmer into a set of chains clearly made out of something like links of black construction paper. He also slaps Palmer's face a few times until Palmer gives him the "proper" eye-rolling frightened Negro face.

PERKINS

Good.

The scene is now set and should be played for the maximum humiliation of Palmer. Director and actors are free to come up with actions that show this, in addition to or in place of the actions listed below.

Perkins places a foot in Palmer's crotch, grinds it gently.

PERKINS
Is it true?

PALMER
What ma'am?

PERKINS
Say it again.

PALMER
Ma'am.

PERKINS
(with relish)
Ma'am -- that niggers got big ones?
(a little more grind)
I ain't feeling anything.

PALMER
I don't know, ma'am.

Perkins grinds a touch harder. Palmer yelps, cuts it off.

PERKINS
Still ain't feeling much.

PALMER
I got what's I got, ma'am -- can't make it no bigger than it's
got a mind to get.

PERKINS
I would not use the word "mind" and "you" in the same
sentence, you ignorant muthafuckin' jungle bunny. My, my,
listen to my language!

Perkins moves her foot from Palmer's crotch to his stomach and briefly stands on him as she walks across his body. Boals stands Palmer up and

straps onto him a huge soft sculpture black penis. Palmer is absolutely terrified.

PERKINS

Ah! Maybe I was wrong after all -- the porch monkey's got
a mind of a kind after all.

Perkins stands in front of Palmer with her back to him several feet away, bends over, and lifts her skirt. Boals begins to sing as much as he can of the following song underneath the action.

["Twinkling Stars Are Laughing, Love" (1855) Poetry and Music by John P. Ordway -- source: pages 33-35 of "Minstrel Songs, Old and New" (1883), <http://www.pdmusic.org/minstrel.html>]

Twinkling stars are laughing love,
Laughing on you and me;
While your bright eyes look in mine,
Peeping stars they seem to be.
Troubles come and go, love,
Brightest scenes must leave our sight;
But the star of hope, love,
Shines with radiant beams tonight.

CHORUS

Twinkling stars are laughing love,
Laughing on you and me;
While your bright eyes look in mine,
Peeping stars they seem to be.

Golden beams are shining, love,
Shining on you to bless;
Like the queen of night you fill
Darkest space with loveliness.
Silver stars how bright, love,
Mother moon in thronely might,
Gaze on us to bless, love,
Purest vows here made to night.

CHORUS

PERKINS

Come on, nigger lad -- plowing time.

Palmer, frozen, does not move. Perkins shuffles backwards a step or two towards Palmer, her hips lifted.

PERKINS

I said, boy, the time is now, boy --

Still, Palmer does not move. Perkins takes another step back.

PERKINS

Come on, darky --

Palmer does not move. Perkins takes another step back. She is very close.

PERKINS

Come on, jigaboo --

Palmer goes to back away, but Boals, still singing, stops him. Perkins backs up until she is almost touching the penis. Palmer looks away. Boals, in a classic interrogation move, forces Palmer's head forward and lifts open his eyelids so that he is forced to look.

But instead of backing into Palmer completely, Perkins stands up, spins to face him, and grabs the penis. With a sharp tug, she pulls the penis free.

PERKINS

You will not be needing this any more.

Perkins whacks Palmer a couple of times with the penis, then tosses it to Boals. Boals wraps it around Palmer's neck -- a noose -- and jerks it upward.

BOALS

We got ourselves a wind chime!

Perkins and Boals laugh, then they cut the laughter off. Boals pulls the penis away.

Perkins moves in close, looks Palmer straight in the face. Boals lets him go. Perkins and Palmer stare at each other. Perkins abruptly turns away, rips off the dress, rubs herself down as if she were wiping off slime, grunting

in disgust as she smoothes everything away. Boals gathers up everything and exits with Palmer.

Perkins picks up the death threat that had been tossed to one side, She looks up and around -- waits.

PERKINS

Where is it?

Keeps looking -- waits.

PERKINS

The punishment? Where is it? When does it come, for these, my bloody racist thoughts?

Looks -- waits.

PERKINS

Nothing.

Boals appears in the shadows.

PERKINS

Nothing.

Boals moves toward Perkins.

PERKINS

It felt --

BOALS

What?

PERKINS

Can I even say this?

BOALS

Say what you want.

PERKINS

It felt --

BOALS

What?

PERKINS

I'm ashamed to say this.

BOALS

Only shame in hiding what you know from yourself.

PERKINS

All right, then. It felt --

BOALS

Yes?

PERKINS

Good. Hard. Bitter. Good.

Perkins holds up the death threat like a chalice.

PERKINS

A strong hatred -- the best light to bear in our hands as we cut through the dark matter of life.

BOALS

Are you surprised?

PERKINS

Absolutely!

BOALS

By what?

PERKINS

How clean it feels, to slice off what we are commanded to respect -- like "civilized discourse" --

Perkins folds then tears the death threat to pieces.

PERKINS

Hatred really is a kind of grace.

BOALS

Pain can be a privilege sometimes.

Perkins finishes, turns to Boals.

PERKINS

Will be signed, sealed, and delivered, you said.

BOALS

I did. This contract will become a contract.

Perkins stares at Boals, and then, without preface, she kisses him, hard, long. Boals does not pull away, then pulls away -- slowly. He cups his hands; Perkins puts the torn letter in them.

INTERMISSION

Scene 12

Palmer and Boals come on in half-masks to sing. [From "Balm of Gilead" (1861), arranged by H. T. Bryant. Pages 108-111 of "Minstrel Songs, Old and New" (1883), <http://www.pdmusic.org/minstrel.html>]

PALMER & BOALS

Oh, we aint, going home any more,
Oh, we aint, going home any more,
Oh, we aint, going home any more,
Down't the peach blow farm.
Balm of Gilead,
Balm of Gilead,
Balm of Gilead,
Going home no more.

* * * * *

Scene 13

Morgan and Perkins at the café: table, chairs, coffee cup.

PERKINS

But there was something else?

MORGAN

But it seems so small against what you're --

PERKINS

And what what is that?

MORGAN

The -- letter -- letters -- and emails --

PERKINS

The grapevine's pretty active --

MORGAN

Everyone's wired --

PERKINS

Look, I'm open for business if you want to talk, but I've got a department meeting coming up, which is not going to be pretty, so let me try this for speed: it's about the memoir and your picture --

MORGAN

And Contracts --

PERKINS

And Mitchell Palmer --

MORGAN

And pigment.

PERKINS

Pigment?

MORGAN

Discoloration.

PERKINS

(with accent)

"Dis cuhlah [color] nation" --

Morgan gives Perkins a strange look.

PERKINS

I'm channeling. "Color" -- that's new. Let's start there. Just jump in. Go on!

MORGAN

You're fine with being white/black --

PERKINS

And you're not --

MORGAN

No I'm not. I never have. And I don't want anyone to know.

PERKINS

But you've told me. I asked if you had showed Mitchell Palmer the picture.

MORGAN

I wish I hadn't.

PERKINS

Let's put to one side. The problem with your "cuhlah" is --

MORGAN

The "problem" with my color is that I don't want my "cuhlah."

PERKINS

But you are "cuhlah'd."

MORGAN

No I'm not.

PERKINS

Yes you are.

MORGAN

I won't be stuffed into a category.

PERKINS

But you can't be a nothing. And what's wrong with the category?

MORGAN

I see me as moving into being an everything -- an everything bagel --

PERKINS

Just bleach it away.

MORGAN

Get me some Clorox!

PERKINS

The problem with young people --

MORGAN

The problem with old people is them bitchin' out young people about "their ancestors." My family's always got me "rememberin'" and "witnessin'" to the glorious past of them that died to carry on --

PERKINS

Like John and Susan Morgan --

MORGAN

I am so sick of "carrying the torch." Professor, I just wanna be the mongrel I am, the mongrel everybody really is. I don't want black because I've seen how that word just grinds people up --

PERKINS

But you can't deny --

MORGAN

And I don't want white because I don't want to guilt myself about privilege -- let me finish -- and I don't want liberal and I don't want conservative and I don't want any of these strait-jackets --

PERKINS

Then what do you want?

MORGAN

Past it all -- that's what I want. Pass it all to go past it all, just past it all, above -- around -- beyond it all. I want no more

-- fucking labels patched on to me -- sorry -- I don't even
want family telling me --

PERKINS

But, Hannah, a real identity --

Light up downstage.

MORGAN

Shut up! Shut the hell and damnation up!

Morgan stalks into the light.

MORGAN

Link:

the transnation of the older generations
carries me in its histories from Afric ["ah-FREEK"]
to this empire's bantustans,
where even now our unasked-for emperors hold
their colored death grips.

Fuck it!

We are the new mestizo of the hyphen-nation.
Born in the desires that inhabit this borderland between the
emptinesses of destin(y-n)ation --
we are the postmodern, we are the
"land of all of us," pan-everything,

Mix-cegenation is the core of the new carbonation
of the new non-nation, our bodies the location
of this postmodern archipelago, each of us double-helix'd
by DNA of fax and phone and email and texting
and the universal declaration of the human right to human
rights
and that we will be divided and conquered, fucked and
fucked-over,
extracted, redacted, burned, twisted, packaged, and
forgotten
no more, no more, no more, never again.

We float confused, contradictory, ambiguous, ambivalent,
torqued, tidal, multi-tongued, lunar-mad --

But we are also large, we include multitudes,
feel them in your nostrils, look for us under your feet,
hear the stars beat out the very pulse of the universe,
all of us universal, all of us at home in the in-between.

Link:
End.

Light out. Morgan moves back to Perkins.

MORGAN

See --

PERKINS

Quite some journey your tintype is on.

MORGAN

Like a noose around my neck. I thought you could help me
-- but maybe you're stuck, too.

At that moment, Palmer appears.

PALMER

I thought we had our 11 o'clock.

MORGAN

We do.

Perkins stands.

PERKINS

I'm sorry -- I didn't know --

PALMER

That's all right, Professor -- we have tea together pretty
much every day at 11.

PERKINS

Really?

(to MORGAN)

Right here? Every day?

Morgan looks Perkins straight in the eye and says nothing.

PALMER

Yes, here.

PERKINS

Well, I was just going anyways.

A moment of awkwardness as Morgan gets up.

PERKINS

(to MORGAN)

I hope I have been of use to you.

Perkins moves away, and Palmer and Morgan sit. As Perkins watches them, they argue hard in silence. Then Morgan and Palmer catch Perkins watching, and another moment of awkwardness among the three of them. Hard. Transition.

* * * * *

Scene 14

The classroom: Morgan and Palmer seated. Perkins is not yet there. Palmer fidgets. Perkins enters, takes her position.

PERKINS

Welcome. Today --

Palmer stands, a paper in his hand. Perkins sees him, waits. Palmer waits.

PERKINS

Either you have something to say or you don't, Mr. Palmer.

Morgan stands, rips the paper from his hand.

MORGAN

This is what he wants to say.

PALMER

(hissing)

Sit down.

Morgan ignores him, keeps the paper from him.

MORGAN

The -- ESS -- EFF -- A -- gets a kick outa having everything written out, like the good little fascists they are. All for the archives.

PALMER

Sit down.

Morgan does not sit down.

PERKINS

Sit down.

Morgan still does not sit down.

MORGAN

Don't you want to hear their razor intellect at work?

PERKINS

I don't --

MORGAN

It's all about you.

(rounds on PALMER)

Don't!

Palmer sits.

MORGAN

The ESS -- EFF -- A -- wants to move him out. Didn't know that, did you? They've used him up and now want to throw him away. So he's making his big play --

(reads)

"The Contracts and Property class of Professor Lillie Perkins should be avoided as a 'toxic intellectual site'" -- listen to that! -- "since she clearly is not interested in intellectual diversity."

(to PERKINS)

There's lots more.

PERKINS

I think you should stop --

MORGAN

(exaggerated)

"The -- ESS -- EFF -- A -- has filed a complaint with the university against Professor Perkins based upon the following indictments -- " Such a long word!

(to PALMER)

I told you to leave me alone!

(to PERKINS)

I'm going to go on -- this is so fascinating!

PERKINS

No you're not.

MORGAN

"The use of extraneous material, like personal family history -- "

PERKINS

Ms. Morgan --

MORGAN

" -- her so-called 'memoir,' to divert students from the proper study of the law."

PERKINS

Ms. Morgan, I want you to shut up.

MORGAN

There's more.

PERKINS

You need to work this out somewhere else and some time else. Do you understand me?

Morgan very deliberately balls up the paper.

PERKINS

Mr. Palmer can post that on the website -- or nail it to the church door, I don't care. What I want is for you to sit down now.

As Morgan sits, she drops the paper into Palmer's lap.

MORGAN

Consider it all worked out, Professor.

PERKINS

Consider yourself warned for the last time.

A tense silence. Boals steps up behind Perkins.

BOALS

I wouldn't do it.

PERKINS

"Extraneous material," was it?

Perkins pauses, gathers herself.

BOALS

You might not want to.

PERKINS

(to BOALS)

Shut up.

(back out)

This memoir that has your -- knickers twisted --

BOALS

This is not your better nature.

PERKINS

(to BOALS)

Fuck off.

(back out)

I use it to show how stupid it is for anyone of good faith to hold anything sacred if "sacred" also means injustice, pain, lies, smugness --

BOALS

Which cuts both ways --

PERKINS

-- and if the study of the "sacred" property laws shows us anything, it shows us that the more liberal we become, the better we become as people.

(to PALMER)

I want you to stand up.

BOALS

Are you sure you want to --

PERKINS

Without a doubt.

BOALS

Don't do things without a doubt.

PERKINS

(to PALMER)

Stand up, without your paper, and face me. In fact, come down here -- step out of the safety of the herd.

BOALS

Never argue with a fool in public, Lillie --

PALMER

I will not be mocked.

BOALS

People won't be able to tell who is which.

PERKINS

Asking you to face me isn't mockery -- it's just asking for some guts.

BOALS

You will lose --

PERKINS

Come here.

BOALS

-- even if you win this.

PERKINS

I don't care. It's time not to care.

BOALS

It's never that time.

Palmer moves downstage so that Perkins can face him directly.

PERKINS

Step closer.

BOALS

The dark heart rises.

But so impatient is Perkins that before Palmer can move, Perkins moves closer to him.

PERKINS

Mr. Palmer, since this university now considers each student a "consumer/purchaser of educational commodities," you and your compatriots can stay and "consume" what I have to offer or go. I prefer you stay.

PALMER

I can't -- I have to --

PERKINS

Then do it.

PALMER

I'm sorry for the website -- the SFA had nothing to do --

PERKINS

Neutrality and apology just feed the beast, Mr. Palmer. The point is, the rough beast needs killing.

Palmer leaves. Morgan follows him out.

PERKINS

I wish I had enough ego for arrogance without regret.

BOALS

But all you have is a heart.

Perkins turns back to begin the lecture.

PERKINS

Anyone else? Good. Property -- Contracts -- Binding relationships -- where shall we begin?

Transition.

* * * * *

Scene 15

Palmer and Morgan, Palmer with the balled-up paper in his hand. He turns and bounces it off Morgan. Morgan picks it up.

MORGAN

You want something harder.

PALMER

Give me your fucking heart, then. It wasn't your show --

MORGAN

Because I despise what they want to do to you -- the ESS-EFF-fucking-A --

Palmer rounds on her with a gesture so uncharacteristically menacing that it brings Morgan up short.

MORGAN

They're just using you -- back off -- you said so your[self] -- back [off] --

PALMER

You are such a goddamned liar.

Palmer snatches the paper out of her hand.

PALMER

You have forfeited.

MORGAN

I saw your hands shake, Mitchell -- I know that you --

PALMER

Don't, don't, don't!

MORGAN

I didn't want to see you --

PALMER

(into MORGAN's face)

I told you to shut up!

Eyes level with each other until Morgan looks away.

PALMER

I have been touched by the "mulatto" -- oh look at that face!
-- look at that face! -- is the sterile mule, the Hannah Morgan
half-breed having a twinge?

Palmer unbuckles his belt and snaps open his pants.

PALMER

Does the mulatto want to finish hacking them off?

MORGAN

Can't lose what you don't have.

Palmer reaches into his underwear.

PALMER

Wrong -- as usual. Always thinking you have what you don't
really have.

Palmer stretches his underwear, speaks into his crotch.

PALMER

No worry, huevos -- she ain't getting near you again.
(to MORGAN)

They're happy.

MORGAN

At least something is.

PALMER

No thanks to you.

Palmer buckles up.

PALMER

What I don't have -- is what I thought I had but which I now know I don't have -- which is you covering my back. You make me sick.

MORGAN

Maybe you need to be sick like this more often --

PALMER

Shut up.

MORGAN

At least you're talking in your own voice.

PALMER

And at least the ESS-EFF-fucking-A are honest in being dishonest with me. Shut up. You lied about why. You don't despise them, really -- the only thing you despise is --

MORGAN

You.

PALMER

See how easy that is.

MORGAN

It's true.

PALMER

Why else would you humiliate me?

MORGAN

It felt --

PALMER

Don't give me "it." You felt --

MORGAN

I felt -- sharp -- saying --

PALMER

"Sharp" so you could cut off [my] --

MORGAN

Yes, of course.

PALMER

Not for my own good.

MORGAN

Completely not for your own good.

PALMER

At least now [you're being] --

MORGAN

Completely. God, it feels --

PALMER

You feel --

MORGAN

I feel mean and selfish and -- clean. This -- un-Christian
rush --

PALMER

The way that mulatto brain works.

MORGAN

Don't call me that.

PALMER

Calling out your mulatto thinking --

MORGAN

Don't call me that.

PALMER

You feel clean, so aaaalllllll God's chillun gotta feel clean
like you --

MORGAN

Is that supposed to be --

PALMER

-- because what Hannah Morgan feels --

MORGAN

-- your "black" voice -- the one they want to steal?

PALMER

(even more exaggerated)

-- has gotta trump what aaaalllllll God's chillun feel --

MORGAN

(echoing)

Testifyin' in his best "black" voice.

PALMER

(laughing)

Black voice? Black what? This is just one mulatto talkin' betrayal to another. We two are so far from being "black." We've been "mix-cegenated" till we're nothing but shadows --

MORGAN

For you, maybe --

PALMER

But isn't that what you always wanted, Hannah banana? To be nothing like that tintype photo of yours? Well, you have made it, girl. You're clean, and mean, and bleached like a ghost and sterile as a scalpel -- and shy of me.

MORGAN

I gave you a gift --

PALMER

You gave me pain.

MORGAN

That was the gift.

PALMER

You come along to "do me good" --

MORGAN

You won't get used anymore --

PALMER

By you or anyone else, which makes me now a complete half a man -- yassuh!

(in his best black voice)

And why would the cleansed one over there want to stay with a mongrel like that? Like me? Hmm? I thought so.

Transition.

* * * * *

Scene 16

Perkins and Boals. Umbrellas.

PERKINS

I was out of line.

BOALS

Be more specific.

PERKINS

I'm not sure I want to be.

BOALS

I want you to be.

PERKINS

I'm not sure I can.

BOALS

Denial does not flatter you.

PERKINS

I want to tell you about what happened in class today.

BOALS

But you just said you came to tell me you were out of line.

PERKINS

Now that I'm here I'd rather tell you --

BOALS

Not interested.

PERKINS

You've been interested before.

BOALS

You pay me to have interest -- I'm your agent. But don't you have deans for this?

PERKINS

They're being useless at the moment.

BOALS

Have you kissed them as well?

PERKINS

You're saying my kiss would make them useless?

BOALS

You never know when intellectuals connect with sex and power.

PERKINS

You're being cruel.

BOALS

Until you tell me why.

PERKINS

Did my kiss make you useless?

BOALS

I'm not an intellectual.

PERKINS

So it made you what?

BOALS

Your kiss --

PERKINS

Made you what?

BOALS
It gave me --

PERKINS
What?

BOALS
Pause.

PERKINS
That's a denial.

BOALS
Don't flatter yourself.

PERKINS
Why not if you won't.

BOALS
This is going to go nowhere.

PERKINS
"Pause" --

BOALS
Lillie, you should go.

PERKINS
What is this "pause" my simple kiss gave you?

BOALS
You want to think the "pause" is desire, but it isn't. Look --

PERKINS
Look at you --

BOALS
I don't want to [talk] --

PERKINS
If it wasn't "desire" for me -- just a "pause" -- that's so little
-- so stingy --

BOALS

So you want to know?

PERKINS

Yes.

BOALS

I "paused" -- and I did think -- desire -- perhaps why not?

PERKINS

Use her.

BOALS

A little twinge. A weakness.

PERKINS

You've given in before?

BOALS

With regret.

PERKINS

But at the moment of the giving in --

BOALS

You think you know, but you don't.

PERKINS

I was going to say you felt pleasure at giving in.

BOALS

You would have guessed wrong because you think the regret comes after the giving in.

PERKINS

It does for most people.

BOALS

Because most people lie to themselves. They think the pleasure of the moment is, well, a pleasure and go on from there.

PERKINS

You don't like pleasure.

BOALS

I don't like being lied to -- and pleasure is a cheat.

PERKINS

That's an ill-conceived [thought] --

BOALS

What's ill-conceived and as common as grass is conceiving that pleasure protects us from life's bent for misery and defeat -- gives us an antidote -- a protection --

PERKINS

You'd prefer to be miserable.

BOALS

I'd prefer to be honest with myself. And with you.

PERKINS

So I get included?

BOALS

Because I am not so much the fool as to throw away what might be uncommon.

PERKINS

Me.

BOALS

You.

PERKINS

Which is why I get the "pause"?

BOALS

Before I regret again -- and ruin --

PERKINS

What?

BOALS

I don't want to be part of a story about the intellectual who discovers a body below the latitude of her neck.

PERKINS

That's cruel.

BOALS

Exactly.

PERKINS

And that's cruel as well.

BOALS

They don't call it a sharp tongue for nothing.

PERKINS

Too bad the mind doesn't match. You really think I'm just a brain with an unfed cunt? I know what lies below this neck.

BOALS

We --

PERKINS

"We"?

BOALS

-- only have your word for that.

PERKINS

You should stop sucking on your "royal we" and regret and take my word for it -- even you might be pleased at what you'd learn if you'd let yourself. Or maybe Lawrence Boals is just afraid. Maybe it's just common-as-grass performance anxiety and Lawrence Boals can't admit to being common --

A moment of suspension.

BOALS

Everything must be clean between us if there is anything between us. A kiss, fumbling in the dark, a spasm -- not my idea of a good idea.

PERKINS

Your idea of a good idea stinks.

BOALS

And yet, there it is, laid on the table.

PERKINS

At least something got laid.

Perkins is unsure whether to stay or go.

BOALS

It's amazing what a kiss will reveal, isn't it?

PERKINS

You said "if."

BOALS

Did I?

PERKINS

Don't play dumb unless you are.

BOALS

I did say "if."

PERKINS

"If there is anything between us." Why did you say that?

BOALS

What do you think that means?

PERKINS

From you? I don't know.

BOALS

You don't trust me.

PERKINS

In your -- our -- business, yes. With this --

BOALS

You don't.

PERKINS

More like, what I expected to happen didn't happen when I
kissed you -- well --

BOALS

And?

PERKINS

And so now I don't know how to know what to expect.

BOALS

You don't know your own want.

PERKINS

No. I don't.

BOALS

That's good -- because neither do I. Mine, that is. Or yours.

PERKINS

Which leaves us --

BOALS

In a much better position.

PERKINS

Why doesn't it feel better?

BOALS

Which would you rather feel, better or honest?

PERKINS

I'd rather feel them both at the same time.

BOALS

That's our "much better position" -- "honest" and "better" is
now much more possible.

PERKINS

"If there is anything between us."

BOALS

If there is anything between us.

PERKINS

Other than just air.

BOALS

And a "maybe."

PERKINS

I am going to kiss you again.

They kiss.

PERKINS

That is goddamn amazing.

BOALS

Tell me about your class.

Transition.

* * * * *

Scene 17

Morgan in her room. On the floor, in its own light: the tintype. She circles it, kneels -- finally picks it up, stares at it.

MORGAN

Damn damn damn damn damn damn --

Boals enters as John Morgan, wearing a headband and dressed for a photograph. He carries a shawl and a flower.

BOALS

Don't.

Boals kneels down to her.

BOALS

Don't cry.

Boals puts the shawl around Morgan, gives her the flower, takes the tintype from her and pockets it. Then he pulls a small mirror and a handkerchief out of his other pocket. He holds up the mirror for Morgan and hands her

the handkerchief. When Morgan looks, she recoils at what she sees, which startles Boals.

BOALS

What?

Instead of answering, Morgan grabs the mirror and stares into it. Then she examines her hands and arms, goes back to the mirror.

MORGAN

My skin -- my color.

BOALS

I like your skin. And your color.

MORGAN

You're white.

BOALS

And you're not. And that's a strange thing to say. And besides I'm not white.

Boals points to the headband.

BOALS

Tusca-tawba-erokee -- remember? C'mon, we got to get ready.

MORGAN

For what?

BOALS

This is not like you, to be so forgetting.

Boals helps her to her feet, then puts the handkerchief, mirror, and tintype in his suit pocket.

BOALS

(pointing)

Right there -- the photographer. Remember? Wedding picture? Remember you're stuck with me?

Boals helps Morgan pose.

BOALS

Gotta hold it still. Put your arm through mine -- tuck in close.

They pose, hold it for a few seconds. Strobe flash.

BOALS

'Nother one.

They take a second pose for several seconds. Strobe. They take a third pose. Strobe.

BOALS

That's all the money we got.

Boals turns Morgan to face him.

BOALS

It ain't about the money, anyway.

They embrace. Boals lifts her, carries her over the "threshold," puts her down. They embrace again.

Palmer enters, carrying a metal bucket holding blackberries, gives it to Boals, then exits.

MORGAN

He brought me blackberries for courting -- a bucket of blackberries.

BOALS

Sweet physic, I called them.

MORGAN

Sweet as an angel's fingertip.

BOALS

We sat on your porch eating them.

MORGAN

You meet a person, you cross the river --

BOALS

You sit on their porch with the smell of blackberries in the air, and you talk out the loneliness. "Color" in that?

MORGAN

(echoing, smiling)

Color in that?

BOALS

Amen.

Palmer enters wearing the white half mask holding a rifle.

PALMER

I will render vengeance to mine enemies. [Deut. 32:41]
Like the ring of that. I'm going to cut out your eyes.

Aims at Boals. Perkins enters, pulls a long red ribbon from the end of the rifle towards Boals and Morgan. Just before the ribbons reaches Boals's heart, everyone freezes. Transition.

* * * * *

Scene 18

Perkins, wearing latex rubber gloves, speaks to the administration. She holds up her hands. Her open-top briefcase sits next to her.

PERKINS

I did what you told me to do so you could "lift latents" off the letter -- and still I'm getting the letters, and still my mailbox is jammed every day -- how long does this go on?

Perkins peels off the gloves.

PERKINS

"Work their way through the system." Uh-huh. And you have every confidence in me. Uh-huh. I'll tell you what -- it seems to me that this system's rigged for the persecutors. I hope you haven't hurt yourself bending over backwards too much.

Perkins drops the gloves into the briefcase.

PERKINS

Sorry. You can understand my anxiety -- I have no training in protecting myself from assassins.

Perkins picks up the briefcase.

PERKINS

Yes, you've said that already -- you have every confidence in me. And what do I do about students who disrupt my class? My best. Just like you.

Lights shift: Morgan. Perkins sees her.

PERKINS

I can't talk to you right now.

MORGAN

Your secretary said you'd be here.

PERKINS

Let me be more exact. I don't want to talk to you [right now]
--

MORGAN

I've been waiting.

Perkins moves off. Morgan follows.

MORGAN

Something amazing has happened. Please.

PERKINS

Tell me why I should. After what happened.

MORGAN

I don't have an excuse -- I was out of line.

PERKINS

You were more than that.

MORGAN

Whatever "more" that is, that's what I was. And even more.
And I'm sorry.

PERKINS

Which still gets you nothing.

MORGAN

Look, I just wanted to tell you that something amazing
happened. Would a "vision" count as amazing? Of John
and Susan Morgan? That would count, wouldn't it?

They look at each other. In the shadows appears Palmer, with a camera.
They do not see him.

PERKINS

Tell me.

MORGAN

I was Susan.

PERKINS

You were Susan?

MORGAN

I know, wrong color -- now -- but then, just like the picture.

PERKINS

You, who doesn't want to be black?

MORGAN

Apparently I'm open.

PERKINS

Or opened.

MORGAN

Or opened.

PERKINS

Does this have anything to do with Mr. Palmer?

MORGAN

Do you have time for a tea?

Perkins appraises her.

PERKINS

I don't know. Because I don't know if I can trust you.

MORGAN

It's just a tea. I'll treat.

PERKINS

I'll pay for my own.

Perkins continues to appraise her.

PERKINS

I'm on pause.

MORGAN

Are you thinking about "yes"?

Perkins puts her arm through Morgan's arm.

PERKINS

I am thinking of giving you some more time to convince me.

They walk off. Palmer snaps several pictures -- several strobe bursts.
Transition.

* * * * *

Scene 19

Boals in his office. Perkins on the opposite side of the stage. Morgan upstage. All in individual lights.

BOALS

Did you see it?

PERKINS

They forwarded it to you?

BOALS

Yes.

PERKINS

Those bastards --

BOALS

My email address is on the company website. The pending contract is hardly secret.

PERKINS

I'm sorry --

BOALS

I'm actually pleased -- not with the lesbian theme --

MORGAN

"Arm in arm they go / The liberal white-black dyke and her white-black ho." Christ!

BOALS

How's your student -- what's her name?

PERKINS

Hannah Morgan.

BOALS

How's she taking it?

PERKINS

I don't know.

BOALS

They reamed her out pretty good.

MORGAN

"Hannah Susan Morgan's got nigger blood in her veins."

BOALS

Is that story true?

PERKINS

She's got African in her background, just like me.

MORGAN

Only two people aside from me know that story. My story.

PERKINS

Why are you pleased?

BOALS

No bad publicity. The controversy can be spun into a good spin for the book. Embattled professor, freedom of speech, the tragedy of race in America --

MORGAN

Fucking sold me out.

PERKINS

The race cards --

BOALS

I'm just suggesting --

PERKINS

I'm not disagreeing -- I'm angry enough --

BOALS

Then no.

PERKINS

What?

BOALS

We should let it sit.

MORGAN

"Watch the two niggers passing like the wind."

BOALS

Nothing decided in anger.

MORGAN

"Mongrel" was right.

PERKINS

"Anger" from here feels fine to me.

BOALS

See how it feels in the morning.

MORGAN

His goddamn fears have made him a fool.

BOALS

I just wanted to check in with you.

PERKINS

You did?

BOALS

I did.

PERKINS

You're sweet to do that.

BOALS

Yes I am.

PERKINS

No regrets?

BOALS
(laughing)

It's amazing what a second kiss can reveal.

Lights out on Perkins and Boals. Morgan remains lighted. She fidgets, then strides downstage. She peers into the audience as if peering into a mirror.

In the shadow Perkins appears holding a jar of facial cleanser named "Dead Sea Black Mud." Perkins opens it, and Morgan scoops out a gob and smears it across her face. She keeps on doing it until her face is covered in black grainy mud.

In the shadow to her other side appears Boals holding a towel and, if needed, a bowl of water.

Morgan examines herself in the mirror: a face black but also minstrel black. She tries several large-toothed smiles, mugs, rolls her eyes and other minstrel moves.

Then Morgan takes the towel from Boals and wipes off the mud, using the water if needed, until her face comes back to its original state.

MORGAN
(smiling broadly)

Thought so. I just thought so.

Morgan hands back the towel, and Perkins and Boals exit.

Morgan speaks into the air.

MORGAN
Mom? Hey there -- Dad around? I want both of you on the phone -- it's time to give you all a travel update.

Transition.

* * * * *

Scene 20

Morgan and Palmer.

PALMER
I am fighting them.

Morgan does not respond.

PALMER
I am not weak.

Morgan again does not respond.

PALMER
I am not going to let a bunch of white guys think that they can get one over on me, kill off what I believe.

Morgan still does not respond.

PALMER
This is a fight I have [to make] --

MORGAN
(interrupting)

Don't blow smoke up my ass. You saw the website.
Savaged -- both of us.

PALMER

That's right.

MORGAN
(mocking)

"That's right." Even if I don't agree with her, I respect her --

PALMER

Stop it --

(equal mock)

-- "even if" -- now who's blowing smoke -- of course you
agree with her -- two birds of the same mulatto feather --
sisters of the "mix" -- you showed her the picture, after all.

MORGAN

I showed her the picture because of her --

PALMER

Don't play me "stupid," Hannah! You showed her the
picture because were collecting your "crew." Just like you
were doing with me. So you could tell mama and papa and
everyone else to fuck off on "carrying the torch" and let you
be your "universal you" -- Hannah beyond --

MORGAN

That doesn't make it open season --

PALMER

You had no intention of sticking with Perkins past her
expiration date. Or with me.

Palmer waits for a response.

PALMER

I am not hearing rebuttal. I am not hearing retort.

Palmer gets none.

PALMER

You just didn't think my expiration date would last this far -- Hannah self-righteous, Hannah in control who can just throw things away when she wants to. Everybody was using everybody else in this dance, so what's your problem now?

MORGAN

Because I don't want to end up like you.

PALMER

You could do worse --

MORGAN

Being you would be all the "worse" I could take --

PALMER

You could end up like Perkins, smug and "oh poor me." But -- I momentarily forgot -- that is you -- at least that's the Morgan narrative for today for the Hannah who comes to shame me.

MORGAN

I'll take that over heartless and gutless.

PALMER

So much smoke -- you're a fog machine! If anything comes out of this, child, you might learn to stop making up fairy tales and just try on being straight-out with yourself about yourself.

MORGAN

How about you being straight-out with me?

PALMER

You sure?

MORGAN

Where did they get that information about me? From whom --

PALMER
(echoing)

From whom --

MORGAN

-- did they get all that low down? And the pictures, arm-in-arm?

PALMER
The same place as "the new massah" "conservative white meat" stuff --

MORGAN

I'm not talking about that one.

PALMER

I am -- that was mine.

MORGAN

You swore it wasn't.

PALMER

I lied. Flat out.

MORGAN

You betrayed me.

PALMER

I only did what you were doing to yourself -- to me -- it does take two to tango. And our dance didn't feel all that bad -- or if it felt bad to you, you faked your pleasure like a real pro, had me believing you really wanted it.

MORGAN
(unconvinced)

I am not like you.

PALMER
Dawn comes late to Marblehead.

A momentary suspension.

PALMER

Who said revelation would comfort? You didn't come here to find out if you were staying or going -- your self-righteous mind was already made up. You just came to mix in the demons you need to justify that new chapter in your "journey" called "betrayed by love and Mitchell." Or is it, "I have re-found my niggerness"? What you didn't expect -- don't like -- can't deny -- we're still a pair.

MORGAN

Not anymore.

PALMER

Oh yes we are.

MORGAN

No.

PALMER

So go away and start making me hideous. You won't find it hard. Go.

Morgan hesitates.

PALMER

You can go.

Morgan stays.

PALMER

You can go.

Morgan still stays.

PALMER

You can go.

MORGAN

All right! I was a coward.

PALMER

That's not the word I'd use.

MORGAN

You've already used "marblehead" and smug and --

PALMER

Here's the word: when you read that paper to Perkins, in class, I knew then I was in the company of a careless person. I have been finding out it's not healthy to hang with a careless person who feels herself as clean and sharp as a scalpel.

MORGAN

And what does it say about you that you would fight to take over an organization that uses up your black face on things that don't care two shits about black people?

PALMER

It says this about me -- that I like power -- getting it, using it, getting it back. Without it, my black face will get used up. With it, I get a voice for what I believe.

MORGAN

What you believe sucks.

PALMER

That shows how much you don't understand.

MORGAN

It'll rot your soul.

PALMER

That's a sentimental wrong idea said by people who don't have any power.

MORGAN

There it goes already.

PALMER

I will not make a virtue out of feeling that when I am on my knees I have kept my integrity intact. That's just a synonym for spineless. I got a spine -- I got spine to spare. But this is not the conversation I want with you, as philosophically interesting as it may be -- I want to know this: you staying

or you going? You in or you out? You up or you down? You
this side or that side? You --

Morgan motions for him to stop.

MORGAN

I'm not going to insult myself by offering you any forgiveness.

PALMER

I promise to do the same for you.

MORGAN

And your principles still suck.

PALMER

Why don't we ask John and Susan Morgan what they think
about them?

A momentary suspension.

PALMER

Do you want to get some tea?

Palmer offers her his arm.

PALMER

And maybe something after the tea as well.

Transition.

* * * * *

Scene 21

Perkins' office. Perkins stares off into space. Morgan enters, carrying the
wooden case holding the tintype.

MORGAN

I'm sorry -- I didn't mean to startle [you] --

PERKINS

I thought you were someone else.

MORGAN

But you did ask me to come.

PERKINS

I've asked several to come.

MORGAN

(showing box with tintype)

And bring this.

Perkins turns away, stares back into space. Morgan, not sure what to do, sits down.

PERKINS

Sit down.

Morgan, already seated, remains sitting.

PERKINS

Not that long ago you were telling me that you wanted nothing to do with being "black," being anything, just do your work and pass by -- and all of a sudden they have you up on lesbian charges on the website and in chat rooms -- and you refuse to duck and cover.

(Perkins faces Morgan)

Whazzup?

Morgan raises the box.

MORGAN

I have been having more visions.

PERKINS

I am not in the mood.

MORGAN

Okay. Then I've been talking to my parents some more, trying to get them to remember for me -- help me remember.

PERKINS

Because you lack a memory?

MORGAN

Because I'd forgotten -- for a moment -- that what was good about all of that can die off with me -- because of me -- and what is [bugging you] --

PERKINS

A change of heart.

MORGAN

You sound like you don't believe me.

PERKINS

That's because I don't.

MORGAN

Why wouldn't you?

PERKINS

Because you have no heart to change.

MORGAN

Why did you call me to come here?

PERKINS

Not because I love hypocrites.

MORGAN

Then why?

PERKINS

I just named you heartless -- you staying or you going?

Perkins waits for Morgan to make a move. Morgan doesn't make a move.

PERKINS

She stays. Angry. But -- what? Still believing that she is a nice girl, re-calling "what was good about all of that" -- nice words -- good liberal sentiment -- heartfelt, eh? -- tell me, then, how do you stand the self-hatred? Who gave them the information about you for the website? Of the two of us who knew, who gave it to them? I know I didn't.

Morgan sits tight.

PERKINS

But what do I see walking yonder across the quad but Mitchell Palmer glued to Ms. Hannah Morgan. I think it was you. I think it was he. Was it?

MORGAN

Yes.

PERKINS

And from where do I espy their arm-in-arm happiness? From the steps of the administration building where I have just been reamed out by the President and the trustees, in no small measure because of Mr. Mitchell Palmer's esteemed S-F-A, under his new management. He, by the way, did some "testifyin'" at the meeting. Did you know that?

MORGAN

Yes.

PERKINS

You knew he was going to do that?

MORGAN

Yes.

PERKINS

And you said nothing to me. And you met him after he left me behind. Anything?

MORGAN

You walk your road, I walk mine.

Perkins waits.

PERKINS

That's it.

MORGAN

It didn't end well for your people, did it?

PERKINS

How do you know that?

MORGAN

I've been reading.

PERKINS

You've been reading.

MORGAN

I have been doing my assignments.

PERKINS

No, it didn't end well. They lost everything at the end: the farm, the school, their good name.

MORGAN

And John Morgan was murdered for lying about his whiteness -- oh yeah -- shot down by a moonshiner who thought he was keeping the race pure.

PERKINS

And Susan Morgan?

MORGAN

Susan went on -- and on and on and on.

PERKINS

Such a waste.

MORGAN

I agree. On both sides. Mitchell's got ideas that will work. He's not stuck in the myth.

PERKINS

He's not stuck in the myth.

MORGAN

He is all about moving forward.

PERKINS

Well, you have got yourself on a bullet train, don't you?

Perkins checks her watch.

PERKINS

We're done.

Perkins stands, hands folded in front of her, peering at Morgan. Perkins gestures for the wooden box.

PERKINS

May I? Before you go. My last time.

Morgan hands over the box. Perkins opens it carefully, takes out the tintype, stares at it.

PERKINS

Such a waste, Hannah.

Perkins takes the tin-type and puts one edge against one palm and the other edge against the other palm. Without much effort, Perkins could bend it in half.

PERKINS

You are a fucking traitor, and they all deserve better.

MORGAN

You wouldn't.

Without hesitation Perkins bends it in half.

PERKINS

So much for civilized discourse.

Perkins tosses it on the floor. Morgan drops to her knees to pick it up, carefully unbends it.

Boals enters.

PERKINS

Right on time.

BOALS

I'm sorry -- I'm interrupting --

PERKINS
(checking watch)

Not a thing -- right on time --

BOALS

I came as soon as I --

PERKINS
Lawrence, this is Hannah Morgan.

BOALS

Hannah Morgan.

(to MORGAN)

What are you --

(to PERKINS)

Why is she --

MORGAN
(getting up)

I'm fine.

PERKINS
Ms. Morgan, my agent Lawrence Boals.

BOALS

Lillie -- the Professor -- has talked about you. Only good things.

PERKINS
(to BOALS)

You all right?

BOALS

Nice to meet you.

(to PERKINS)

I'm fine.

PERKINS

You don't look fine.

BOALS

We'll talk later.

PERKINS

Something tells me we should talk now.

MORGAN

I was leaving --

PERKINS

Yes you were.

Perkins ignores Morgan. Perkins and Boals look at each other, and an understanding passes between them. Morgan watches.

PERKINS

There's trouble.

BOALS

It can be worked out.

PERKINS

Because of everything --

BOALS

If not this one, we'll get ourselves another one -- and there are legal reme[dies] -- Lillie -- Lillie -- we'll get another publisher --

PERKINS

(to MORGAN)

You said that Susan Morgan had gone on and on --

MORGAN

Why should I answer you?

PERKINS

You said --

MORGAN

She started a school, an academy, just like --

PERKINS

Just like my people did --

MORGAN

Named after John Morgan.

PERKINS

Funny how we think schools will make us smarter.

MORGAN

And books.

Palmer enters in shadow, wearing a something like a trench coat.

BOALS

Imagine how much worse if --

PERKINS

And how good would you call it now, Lawrence -- all the barbarians --

Transition moves seamlessly into the next scene. Boals and Morgan exit.

* * * * *

Scene 22

Perkins walks up to Palmer. Light as if coming from a streetlight.

PERKINS

-- are at the gate, and waiting --

PALMER

Who's at the gate? Which gate?

PERKINS

Of Paradise. Would you like to fuck me?

Palmer stares at her.

PALMER

Rephrase it.

PERKINS

Right -- of course -- I would like you to fuck me.

PALMER

Could be better.

PERKINS

I want you to fuck me.

PALMER

Why?

PERKINS

Because it's the closest I'll get to tasting what a winner tastes.

Palmer stares at her.

PERKINS

You pause.

PALMER

I could let you have a taste.

PERKINS

Somehow I knew you wouldn't disappoint me.

PALMER

I wouldn't want you to have yet another disappointment in life.

Perkins moves into a different light. Palmer exits.

PERKINS

We did "it" in my office -- late -- I wanted a record of his coming and his going left with the security guard. I knew he couldn't resist -- Hannah or no Hannah -- that's the way an appetite for power works. After he left, I summoned up a facility I did not know I had for playing the aggrieved victim of a rape. I was good. It worked.

Behind her, in a dim light, Palmer, now looking like William (ragged clothes, terrified), appears with a noose around his neck.

PERKINS

Some things just never change.

Boals joins Perkins.

BOALS

How are you doing?

PERKINS

I'm fine.

BOALS

Good.

PERKINS

I'm going to write another book.

BOALS

You will need to get yourself a different agent. I can't. Not after --

Perkins gives Boals a vicious shove out of the light. Light on Palmer out.

PERKINS

Some things just never goddamn change, do they?

Blackout.

About Block & Tackle Productions

After more than a decade of projects together, Michael Bettencourt and Elfin Frederick Vogel joined forces to form Block & Tackle Productions. In addition to producing Michael's plays with Elfin directing, B&T Productions also looks to collaborate with other playwrights and directors and explore different media for dramatic narrative, such as live-streaming theatrical productions, recording radio-play podcasts, and creating short films.

Whichever project B&T Productions pursues, it will create theatre narratives focused on our present times and where every part of the production - design (set, lighting, sound, media), performance, script, the brand of beer sold in the lobby, and the pre-show music - relates to and nourishes every other part. As often as possible, B&T Productions will do this in collaboration or conjunction with like-minded theatre-makers.

Elfin Frederick Vogel (Producer/Director) -- Elfin has directed over thirty productions in New York City and regional theatres, from classical plays (among others, *Othello*, *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Measure for Measure*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Three Sisters*, *The Cherry Orchard*) to 20th-century plays (*Six Characters in Search of an Author*, *The Real Thing*, *Exit the King*) and new plays, among them *Only the Dead Know Brooklyn*, *Excerpts from the Lost Letters of Hester Prynne*, *No Great Loss*, *Four Plays*, *The Sin Eater* (all by Michael Bettencourt), and *Moral and Political Lessons on "Wyoming"* and *Reckless Abandon* (by Vincent Sessa).

Michael Bettencourt (Producer/Writer) -- Michael is an award-winning playwright and screenwriter. As always, special thanks to María Beatriz. All his work can be seen at www.m-bettencourt.com

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PRODUCTIONS

www.blockandtackleproductions.com

