

**Michael Bettencourt**

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**One-Act Plays: Volume 3**

Block & Tackle Productions Press



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**The Sin Eater • A Round Of Slaughter  
Still Small Voice • Stimulus • The Business**

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**Block & Tackle Productions Press**



**Co-Founders Elfin Frederick Vogel and Michael Bettencourt**

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**To María Beatriz - always in all ways**

# **The Sin Eater**

## **DESCRIPTION**

Margaret Pasqualini, a professional photographer, is arrested at a photo lab for taking nude pictures of her son. Rather than agree to a plea bargain in her subsequent conviction for malicious destruction of property and disorderly conduct, she instead chooses to go to jail for 30 days. There she meets Vera Cortez, serving 25 years for being an accomplice in the murder of her own child.

## **CHARACTERS**

- MARGARET PASQUALINI, photographer, mid-30s
- VERA CORTEZ, prisoner, mid-30s, originally from Puerto Rico
- GUARD, African American female, mid-30s.

## **TIME**

- Before the advent of digital photography

## **SETTING**

- Women's prison

## **MISCELLANEOUS**

- Two beds, a footlocker at the foot of each.
- A table and two chairs
- A deck of cards
- A small boombox
- A small bookcase, overflowing with books
- Ornament: posters which indicate Puerto Rican pride, small Puerto Rican flag, diploma (associates degree in communications)
- An area for GUARD -- her "locker," with a small table
- A shoulder mike for GUARD

**NOTE:** No attempt should be made to create a "real" jail cell in terms of size or spacing. For instance, put the beds in the audience if it can be managed or perform the play in the round or do it a big space like a gym.

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## **Scene 1**

**SOUND:** Selection from opening of Lou Reed's "Busload of Faith" from "New York."

Bare stage. MARGARET PASQUALINI, VERA CORTEZ, and GUARD enter set up the "cell" for the play. They snap their fingers.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Scene 2

**SOUND: Music morphs into the background sounds of a prison.**

CORTEZ is asleep. GUARD stands with MARGARET PASQUALINI. MARGARET wears a light jacket and holds a paper bag.

GUARD

You okay? You got your stuff.

To each statement MARGARET shrugs -- what can she really say?

GUARD

You've been given thirty days, not thirty years, so head down but head up, too -- passes quicker that way, though it's gonna feel like a glacier no matter what. And don't forget to remember it's all good even when it isn't and that the world you have outside never disappears. All right, now I'm going to call for the door to open, and whatever happens, just keep cool -- head down, head up, all right?

GUARD speaks into her shoulder mike.

GUARD

5 - 1 - 7 - 6 - open.

**SOUND: Squawk/static from the shoulder mike.**

**SOUND: Metal door pounds open.**

GUARD guides MARGARET into the cell. CORTEZ jerks awake.

CORTEZ

Tamara?

GUARD

It's not --

Tamara? CORTEZ

It's not Tamara. GUARD

Tamara -- CORTEZ

It's not Tamara -- GUARD

What -- CORTEZ

It's the dream. Again. Need aspirin? GUARD

I can take care of it myself -- CORTEZ

Always tough coming out of the dream. GUARD

You done with your analysis? CORTEZ

If you're ready to play nice. GUARD

So this is she. CORTEZ

This is her. GUARD

The new beef. CORTEZ

Don't be nasty. GUARD

CORTEZ

The virgin territory.

GUARD

Better but not by much.

GUARD guides MARGARET into the cell.

GUARD

Clock is now ticking officially. She doesn't bite. I've had her tested.

GUARD steps outside the cell.

GUARD

5 - 1 - 7 - 6 - closed.

**SOUND: Door slams closed.**

GUARD gives MARGARET a "look," then leaves.

CORTEZ

That footlocker is yours -- open it, put your stuff in. That bed is yours, so sit down on it -- as she says, I am not known to bite. Standard operating procedure, so that things start right right off. I am tired, and I am going to get some sleep, so I do not want to be disturbed. You are only here for a month -- I live here, Boricua prisoner of war -- you are just a radar blip, so --

MARGARET

Thought you wanted to sleep. You said you were tired, so -- you say you want to sleep, so you should take your sleep.

CORTEZ

The rules of the house are what I say they are.

MARGARET

Goes without saying.

CORTEZ

I will say it anyways.

MARGARET

I'm just a blip of beef.

CORTEZ

Not even that. Now I will sleep.

But before CORTEZ can lay down, MARGARET lays down and faces the wall.

CORTEZ

No one has slept away the whole thirty days.

MARGARET

Wanna bet?

CORTEZ

What are you willing to bet?

MARGARET ignores her. CORTEZ lies down to sleep as well.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Scene 3**

**LIGHTS: Night in the cell -- dim, indirect.**

CORTEZ sleeps.

MARGARET rolls out of bed. She creeps over to look at CORTEZ's face, studies it until CORTEZ stirs. MARGARET leans back, then leans back in to study the face. She frames it in a "shutter" made by her hands. She "snaps" a photo by closing and opening the "shutter." CORTEZ stirs again, and MARGARET sits back on her bed. CORTEZ jerks out of her sleep.

CORTEZ

Goddamn it! Goddamn it!

CORTEZ moves around the cell, waving away the demons.

CORTEZ

Leave me alone -- leave me alone -- Tamara -- Tamara --



CORTEZ stands there, staring into the dark, then becomes aware that MARGARET is watching. They lock eyes. MARGARET gets up and takes from her footlocker a child's tee-shirt, tucks it under her pillow. They both lay back down. The night continues.

\* \* \* \* \*

#### **Scene 4**

GUARD at her "locker." She fixes her shirt, her hair, etc. Next to her is a rolling cart with two lunch bags on it. She takes a notecard from a pocket and moves it back and forth to get it in focus.

GUARD

Goddamn getting older sucks.

She pulls glasses out of a shirt pocket and puts them on. She scans the card, perhaps even reciting along with it, then puts it back.

GUARD

All right. Looking good. Daughters of mine, I hope you're sleeping well. You know I hate doing the graveyard shift. Because these graves are always ready to pop -- and I sure do not want to be popped. And it ain't like it's Lazarus re-born that comes out if and when they do --

GUARD snaps her fingers to the words.

GGUARD

-- pop pop pop open. But I do it because it lets you both sleep well in your own beds in your own rooms in our own house.

GUARD rolls the cart to the cell as a klaxon rings.

**SOUND: A wake-up call, prison sounds.**

\* \* \* \* \*

#### **Scene 5: The First Degree**

MARGARET is jolted out of sleep. CORTEZ rises. MARGARET, looking haggard, does the same.

GUARD

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

GUARD hoists the two bags.

GUARD

You are my last -- and my testament says that the last shall be last.

MARGARET shakes her head no.

GUARD

One day is fine -- upstairs, they expect that -- but after two days, they get nervous -- three days makes trouble all the way down the line which means all the way down to me. Take it -- and get 'em off my back. Eat it or not -- I don't care if you turn it into trash through your mouth or chucking it out. But I am not going to suffer for your suffering.

CORTEZ

Take the bag.

MARGARET takes the bag. CORTEZ takes her bag.

GUARD

Thank you both so kindly.

CORTEZ

Do not mention it.

GUARD

Don't encourage her, all right? Show her some part of your good side.

CORTEZ, in jest, sticks some body part forward as her "good" side.

CORTEZ

That's my best good side.

GUARD does not smile, but does a little, then rolls the cart away.

MARGARET takes out crackers, nibbles, stares, a mess of tics and jerks.

CORTEZ

Eat more than that, rent check, or you are not going to make it. "Rent check"? Goes out after a month. Eat them or put them back.

MARGARET eats the crackers.

MARGARET

Just -- more sitting around --

CORTEZ

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

CORTEZ takes a thick book to read.

MARGARET

Not used to sitting so still --

CORTEZ

No hurry to be in a hurry around here.

MARGARET

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

MARGARET's leg bounces.

CORTEZ

Chill.

MARGARET

Sorry.

MARGARET taps her fingers on the table.

CORTEZ

I said --

MARGARET paces.

CORTEZ

I told you, no parades.

MARGARET sits and fidgets.

CORTEZ

You do have the scorpions --

MARGARET

Just --

CORTEZ

Just what?

MARGARET

Just -- thinking.

CORTEZ

Just control it.

MARGARET

Can't just turn it off --

CORTEZ

Just have to. It gets very close in here.

MARGARET's leg jumps up and down.

MARGARET

I'm trying!

CORTEZ

Not hard enough.

MARGARET

So --

CORTEZ

So --

MARGARET

So -- you seem to give a lot of advice.

CORTEZ

Those scorpions make you deaf to advice --

MARGARET

Yeah?

CORTEZ

Because they force you to face without the chance to look away that you are a loser --

MARGARET

Is that what your scorpions do to you at night? "Tamara, Tamara" -- shit! sorry, I'm sorry --

CORTEZ puts down her book and moves toward MARGARET.

CORTEZ

You need some self-discipline.

CORTEZ sits in the other chair and simply places her hand on MARGARET's jumping leg. MARGARET's leg goes still.

CORTEZ

I told you you could do it. Now offload what you are thinking.

MARGARET

Wouldn't even call it thinking, all right -- all jumbled --

CORTEZ

Like smoke up in your head --

MARGARET's leg shakes. CORTEZ calms it.

CORTEZ

Smoke, jumbled --

MARGARET

My son -- it's my son I'm thinking about --

CORTEZ

Son's name?

Alex.	MARGARET
Age?	CORTEZ
Four.	MARGARET
Married?	CORTEZ
Alex?	MARGARET
You, <u>tonta</u> .	CORTEZ
I am married.	MARGARET
Have a name?	CORTEZ
Matthew.	MARGARET
He treats you well? Your husband, not Alex.	CORTEZ
Yes.	MARGARET
Cheat on you?	CORTEZ
Not that I know about --	MARGARET
Yell at you?	CORTEZ

MARGARET

No.

CORTEZ

Hit you?

MARGARET

Never.

CORTEZ

Provide for you?

MARGARET

We've got -- we run -- a small construction company together.

CORTEZ

Equal down the middle?

MARGARET

I go out on the jobs -- he makes sure the money makes it into the bank account.

CORTEZ

So you are a "woman in the building trades."

MARGARET

Apprenticed my way through a shit-storm of men to become that.

CORTEZ

That makes you proud.

MARGARET

I've earned all my certificates, earned all my chops, and though the word is "foreman," I get to be the boss -- and that is sweet.

CORTEZ

A little revenge.

MARGARET

For having had "Property of the Cunt" sprayed across my locker? Yeah -- who wouldn't -- for all the -- but it seems stupid now --

CORTEZ

Who can tell, forewoman? So, nice son. Husband who treats you human. Entrepreneur. A life composed.

MARGARET

Not that it's all --

CORTEZ

It is never all that, is it? -- but it does not sound bad.

MARGARET

No, no, it's not bad at all.

CORTEZ

So what would make you go away from what is "not bad at all" and bury yourself here with me? Notice your leg?

MARGARET notices how still it is.

MARGARET

Huh.

CORTEZ

And without my hand.

MARGARET

Huh.

CORTEZ

Not about me wanting to know -- about you wanting to tell. Unless I read you wrong.

MARGARET

My leg.

CORTEZ

Yes -- the world is full of signs.



MARGARET

Huh. It's just -- all so stupid --

CORTEZ

"Stupid" is trying to sleep through it all --

MARGARET

You were right [about] --

CORTEZ

That I learned on my apprenticeship. Look, just start.

MARGARET

What would make me leave. Okay -- okay. Disorderly conduct. Plus malicious destruction of property. I damaged a photo lab. I fought a police officer -- two -- forewoman resisted arrest --

CORTEZ

Did it take more than an hour to print your pictures?

MARGARET

No --

CORTEZ

Then they did a bad job.

MARGARET

No! It wasn't [anything like] -- they wouldn't give me back what was mine when I asked for it. And they called in the police --

MARGARET falls silent. MARGARET's leg jumps. CORTEZ points at it. MARGARET controls it.

CORTEZ

So these pictures needed a police escort.

MARGARET

It was nothing.

CORTEZ

Will not wash. Pictures of whom?

MARGARET

Of Alex -- my son, Alex. I didn't do anything wrong.

CORTEZ

You wrestled with police officers.

MARGARET

I didn't do --

CORTEZ

You "damaged" property --

MARGARET

-- anything wrong.

CORTEZ

What do you think you did?

MARGARET

It's what they did.

CORTEZ

You are the one in here.

MARGARET

They were just pictures of Alex.

CORTEZ

Not "just," obviously --

MARGARET

For a photography class, a project for a class -- but people said they saw -- things --

CORTEZ

You gave them some reason.

MARGARET

No reason! I knew what I knew, solid --

CORTEZ

So, just the mama lion defending her cub --

MARGARET

Against all their filth --

CORTEZ

They offer you a deal?

MARGARET

I could've taken a deal. Eighteen months of probation, 50 hours of community service, \$300 in restitution, and a written apology.

CORTEZ lets MARGARET's refusal hang in the air, as if it were the stupidest thing CORTEZ had ever heard.

MARGARET

I couldn't, I really --

CORTEZ

But you would be at home right now -- but those pictures, amiga -- maybe in here is where you should be, a mother who abandons her child --

MARGARET

Did not abandon -- I protected --

CORTEZ

You chose principle --

MARGARET

Yes!

CORTEZ

With your whole family hungering for you to stay.

MARGARET

Alex Alex Alex! My principle is Alex! How hard is it to understand that.

CORTEZ

That question is not about me. Can he? And when. And how.

MARGARET

He'll understand because I'll tell him, that's how. When he grows up.

CORTEZ

I am sure the anticipation of that keeps a smile on his four-year old face. Come on, say it, this is really all about you, yes?

MARGARET

About me for him -- so he'll know -- so he'll know that nothing ever happened.

CORTEZ

Except that you disappeared on him for a month.

MARGARET

He'll see that was a small price --

CORTEZ

Such faith.

MARGARET

I'm tired.

CORTEZ

Principles and selfishness combined --

CORTEZ lays out a game of solitaire.

CORTEZ

I read about you. When she told me you were coming. That is why I wanted you in here. The prison librarian gave me articles.

MARGARET

My tax dollars at work --

CORTEZ

Yeah.

MARGARET

If you know, then why are you jerking me [around] --

CORTEZ

Because the prison librarian's articles did not give me the information I want.

MARGARET

The dirt --

CORTEZ

"Dirt" is not what I want -- but we will get to that later.

MARGARET

I want to get to it now.

CORTEZ

We will get to it later. For now, you get this about all this: lines, Margarita Pasqualini. On a tiny island like ours, lines mean everything. Keeping them clear, making them straight --

MARGARET

And what info can I get for some lines that'll keep you off my back?

CORTEZ

I can give you my name.

MARGARET

That's it?

CORTEZ

I know you have not read about me.

MARGARET

That's it?

CORTEZ

That is it.

MARGARET

So read me your name.

CORTEZ

Cortez. I have a first name -- Vera -- but do not use it. I go by Cortez. You, I am calling Pasqualini.

MARGARET

No.

CORTEZ

Pascua, the feast -- Pasqualini, the little feast --

MARGARET

No.

CORTEZ

So read your right name to me.

MARGARET

I go by Margaret. Not Pasqualini, not a little feast. Definitely not Margarita.

CORTEZ

Say that again.

MARGARET

Which part?

CORTEZ

"I go by -- "

MARGARET

I go by Margaret? I go by Margaret.

CORTEZ

Now we have some lines.

MARGARET

On our little island.

CORTEZ

For the turn of a moon.

MARGARET

You like this all the time?

CORTEZ

No -- sometimes, Margaret, I talk a lot.

MARGARET

Even in your sleep.

CORTEZ

That -- that is good -- I can respect that.

MARGARET

Means you shut up now? You missed the seven.

Instead of moving the seven, CORTEZ gathers the cards together, shuffles, and sets up a new game.

CORTEZ

My mantra: In for a dime, in for the dollar.

MARGARET

I didn't do anything wrong.

CORTEZ

I think you still come up ninety cents short.

CORTEZ continues to play. MARGARET musses up the cards, then goes to her bed and lies down. CORTEZ rearranges the cards, sets up a new game, continues to play.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **Scene 6**

GUARD at her "locker" doing her preparation. She takes the notecard from its pocket and moves it back and forth to get it in focus until finally, with a little exasperated sigh, she pulls glasses out of a shirt pocket and puts them on: getting older still sucks. She puts it back and picks up a book, leafs through it.

GUARD

Daughters of mine, if there's a usual smell in this place -- something forever underneath the bleach and menstrual blood and fumigator's poison -- it is regret. It's something I'd love to keep you from feeling -- but you're gonna feel it

anyway. That's why I wear a fresh uniform every day, why I drive you crazy about doing my wash. I want to wear the smell of life outside when I arrive here on the inside and let it cover me as long as it can.

GUARD snaps her fingers.

GUARD

Sleeping daughters of mine -- you are why I have so little regret in life.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Scene 7: The Second Degree**

GUARD hands CORTEZ a book through the cell doors.

GUARD

Here's your book. We have to cool doing this for a bit --

GUARD points heavenward.

GUARD

Los gigantes -- cracking down on any "fraternizing" -- funny word to use with women, isn't it.

CORTEZ

I am cracking up about it like the dawn.

GUARD

Whole lockdown thing always gives 'em a hard-on --

CORTEZ

That must be interesting.

GUARD

No it's not. But by the end of business today it's going to be over.

CORTEZ

We always manage to figure it out.



GUARD

How goes it?

MARGARET

We talk.

GUARD

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

CORTEZ

I wonder what the sound of that is like.

GUARD

One hand slapping?

This actually gets CORTEZ to smile as GUARD simulates masturbation.

CORTEZ

You better not let your daughters --

GUARD

You know I am the best of mothers to them.

GUARD leaves. CORTEZ watches her.

MARGARET

You give her books?

CORTEZ

The "best of mothers" asks for my books.

MARGARET

Can I?

CORTEZ hands MARGARET the book.

CORTEZ

You may.

MARGARET

Houses of Healing.

CORTEZ recites as if from memory.

CORTEZ

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

MARGARET

Why would she want to read [this] --

CORTEZ

Think about that for a moment. You thinking? Think this:  
you think we are the only prisoners in here?

MARGARET thinks about it, nods, realizes. She holds up the book.

MARGARET

Is it okay --

CORTEZ

Read on -- good, yes?

MARGARET nods. CORTEZ starts to play solitaire.

CORTEZ

You ate today.

MARGARET

You mean I got it all down.

CORTEZ

Only took you a week.

MARGARET

Incarceration as my diet plan. When do we do something  
other than sit around?

CORTEZ

Soon, from what we just heard -- I suppose they finally  
found who and what they wanted to find. And I can go back  
to my class.

MARGARET

A class?

CORTEZ

Not important. More important is, I have a question for you:  
what is it like, being famous?

MARGARET

Is that what you call it?

CORTEZ

You were -- you were known. A known person. Maybe you  
still are.

MARGARET

Wouldn't call what crapped on us as being "famous."

CORTEZ

You had your picture in the papers --

MARGARET

Cat in a tree can get that --

CORTEZ

News at six, again at eleven --

MARGARET

Same with the cat --

CORTEZ

Reporters mucking in your garbage --

MARGARET

My bones and egg shells --

CORTEZ

You have another definition?

MARGARET

It felt like being raped.

CORTEZ

Ever been raped?

MARGARET

No.

CORTEZ

Then it did not feel like that. Try again.

MARGARET

You read what the prison librarian gave you -- you tell me.

CORTEZ

And as I told you, the public record never gives me the right details. You do have the right to remain silent.

MARGARET

No, no, it's just -- nature specials, on the public television station --

CORTEZ

With the lions --

MARGARET

With the lions eating the antelope that isn't even dead yet. "Picked up for child porn." The perp walk. The radio talk shows where I'm pegged as the demon mother.

CORTEZ

Daughter of Satan, I heard.

MARGARET

The bitch of Beelzebub. Everyone ripping out a hunk and carting it off.

CORTEZ

The papers did draw you up as a real bitch --

MARGARET

Anything can and will be used against you --

CORTEZ

The way you refused the cops, the way you decided to come here. One said you were burying yourself here for "artistic expression" -- a radical artist -- Political Prisoner --

CORTEZ holds up two fists.

CORTEZ

-- Zero Zero.

MARGARET

Which is just a double nothing, a big double [nothing] --

CORTEZ

Did they get the bitch-part right?

MARGARET

What does all your detail-reading tell you?

CORTEZ

I have not seen it in you yet --

MARGARET

Maybe because I'm malnourished, eh? -- underjuiced -- a quiet volcano --

CORTEZ

No, it is not that --

MARGARET

Then what?

CORTEZ

I think closer to the lion than the antelope.

MARGARET

You think I'm ready to kill something? Really?

CORTEZ shrugs in a way that says, "Well, aren't you?" MARGARET doesn't answer. CORTEZ indicates her solitaire game.

CORTEZ

Am I missing anything?

MARGARET

The six.

CORTEZ

Right. I miss so much sometimes.

MARGARET

Yeah, sure.

CORTEZ

Would you like to make a living out of taking your pictures?

MARGARET

I'd like to do that. Look, I am not ready to kill somebody --

CORTEZ

Not a cheap dream to pursue --

MARGARET

I am not --

CORTEZ

I heard you, consider yourself heard -- you are the undernourished volcano --

MARGARET

Red queen to black king.

CORTEZ

Ah --

MARGARET

No, it's not cheap -- the photography. Matthew made sure I had the money to pay.

CORTEZ

You were taking a class --

MARGARET

Called "The Human Form."

CORTEZ

I have one of those.

MARGARET

The class --

CORTEZ

You can laugh at my joke!

MARGARET

That was a joke?

CORTEZ

The words, man, not my human form!

MARGARET

I thought it was a proposition.

CORTEZ

To you?

MARGARET

I'm not worthy?

CORTEZ

No taste for leather belts with tools in them.

MARGARET

There're worse things to have around your waist.

CORTEZ

The ball peen hammer is all yours to play with.

MARGARET

But the pleasures of the wrench --

MARGARET makes a "wrench" motion and sound.

CORTEZ

As I said, all yours.

CORTEZ makes the "wrench" motion and sound back to MARGARET.

CORTEZ

The class.

MARGARET

The class. The class.

CORTEZ

You're staring into space.

MARGARET

The class. Thought it was the best thing that ever happened to me.

CORTEZ

You should see your face.

MARGARET

You should see my face from this side! No, it was great -- made me, you know, stretch. Eeelllastic. Re-think things.

CORTEZ

The wrench.

MARGARET

The wrench. We got this assignment: photograph an emotional state of being using a person.

CORTEZ

The word was "using."

MARGARET

A person, yeah, using a person -- as an example, you know, a representation, an -- an image of. See, I didn't start off as a photographer.

CORTEZ

Woman in the building trades.

MARGARET

Just doing useful stuff, you know -- I mean, I'm building, right, slapping things up. But that's how the pictures even got started, of Matthew's and my work, so we'd have, you know, a record, a portfolio. Then one day -- I gotta move around.

CORTEZ

Approved --

MARGARET

So, yeah, one day -- the sunlight, laying across an old hammer and screwdriver against each other on a bench, you know, just bunged up, bitten -- they, I don't know, they



struck me -- just, you know, solid -- heft. I had the camera around my neck, so, snap, snap -- really, just useless pictures -- the building trades and everything --

CORTEZ

But they gave you pleasure.

MARGARET

Yeah.

CORTEZ

Doing that gave you pleasure.

MARGARET

Yeah -- that, and that something so -- regular -- became -- unregular -- with just some light laid across it -- average sunlight -- that -- touched me. So snap, snap -- I took the feeling with me, and I liked that I could take it, you know, like smuggle it out, all mine. "Taking" --

CORTEZ

A new feeling for you?

MARGARET

Which one?

CORTEZ

The big one, of course: power.

MARGARET

Maybe -- it's --

CORTEZ

It is okay if it is.

MARGARET

When the knuckleheads sprayed "Property of the Cunt" right across my locker -- fucking stencil letters -- they had to plan that -- that's power, front and center, just like their dicks --

CORTEZ

But different.

MARGARET

But this was different --

CORTEZ

From the side --

MARGARET

And underneath.

CORTEZ

For yourself --

MARGARET

And clean -- clean -- mine --

CORTEZ

So click.

MARGARET

And in the darkroom -- Cortez, when I saw the negatives on that first roll of film I developed myself, and then the first print, like, blooms in the developer tray -- at first there's nothing, and then it's there -- something I took --

CORTEZ

Smuggled out.

MARGARET

Whew! I was hooked. Closest thing to joy I'd felt since -- since --

CORTEZ

Since whatever.

MARGARET

Since whatever! Nothing compared to it. All by itself.

CORTEZ

All yours.

MARGARET

Yeah. So I started taking pictures of people on the site -- just like with that hammer and screwdriver -- the light -- comes

across -- the regular turning into -- but in them, something in them that they never saw they had. But I could see it. The light could see it. Me and the light -- we partnered.

CORTEZ

First real laugh that has come out of you.

MARGARET

I had my first "gallery show" in a diner!

CORTEZ

"Hold the arroz."

MARGARET

"Adam and Eve on a raft!" Food was good, come to think of it. But when people saw themselves up there, you know, in a frame -- special -- and then they saw other people seeing them and liking what they saw -- even buying some of the pictures -- that changed something in them.

CORTEZ

Because you had changed.

MARGARET

The change in them changed me.

CORTEZ

Changes all around.

MARGARET

I could do -- I could make -- not just Alex's Mom or Matthew's Maggie --

CORTEZ

You were becoming unregular yourself.

MARGARET

It's always been best when I just -- I don't know -- when all of me is just like a lens, letting the light through. Just like that first time, with the tools. No thoughts, just eye.

CORTEZ

Who can forget their first time, eh?

MARGARET just shrugs, goes silent. CORTEZ keeps playing.

CORTEZ

Okay, you got the easy stuff out --

MARGARET

I know --

CORTEZ

-- but you still need to finish this dollar --

MARGARET

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

CORTEZ

But it is not impossible.

MARGARET

It's like I'm spraying across my own locker. So.

CORTEZ

So.

MARGARET

So. Slowly -- real slow, but steady -- seeing things this way sucks you in -- sucked me in -- let's keep it straight. I got -- greedy. Studio equipment, more classes -- I got ambitious.

CORTEZ

We come to The Human Form.

MARGARET

And that drained -- it was so expensive --

CORTEZ

Matthew was okay with that?

MARGARET

I can't say that he was -- but him being him, he --

CORTEZ

And then the pictures.

MARGARET goes to say something, but then doesn't.

CORTEZ

"Using" a person -- "taking" a person -- those were your chosen words.

MARGARET

I -- looked at Alex, and I thought, Innocence.

CORTEZ

And so you wanted to take that --

MARGARET

I wanted to capture --

CORTEZ

No, I think you said "take" and "use."

MARGARET

Capture -- what it felt like when I gave him a bath and smelled his skin, read his books to him, when he says "I love you."

MARGARET makes the ASL for "I love you." CORTEZ signs "Thank you."  
MARGARET makes the sign for "Wow!"

CORTEZ

I have deaf people in my family. Now you have another thing about me. And you have a little mute boy.

MARGARET

That in your articles?

CORTEZ

Margaret -- everything except your tit size was in the articles.

MARGARET

Glad they left me one thing.

CORTEZ

Only because they had no use for it.

MARGARET

This wasn't in the papers, so you wouldn't know this -- my "state of being" with Alex -- Alex, Alex in innocent italics. So I talked it over with Alex --

CORTEZ

With a four-year-old --

MARGARET

I asked him if he'd like to get his picture taken, which he loves anyway. And I had this idea -- this flash --

CORTEZ

The genius of the "no clothes on" -- Margaret --

MARGARET

There wasn't anything that some -- master hadn't stuck up on a wall in some museum -- in one I even have wings on him, like a cherub -- from a set-up by this guy Caravaggio, of a naked Cupid -- a master -- so why would anyone think --

CORTEZ

You say you saw Innocence --

MARGARET

That's what I saw --

CORTEZ

But you say that this ambition of yours is like a lion --

MARGARET

He wasn't naked in all the pictures!

CORTEZ

Most likely you should not have "done" Alex that way at all.

MARGARET

I didn't "do" Alex --

CORTEZ

A four-year old naked child up on the wall does not happen by accident. He was put there by his mother for all the

world to gawk at. Yes? That is "doing" Alex. They gave you the trouble you were asking for.

MARGARET

He liked it --

CORTEZ

You knew this how.

MARGARET

I'd done it before -- I mean, taken pictures of him before, naked --

CORTEZ

In the bathtub, right --

MARGARET

And in his bed --

CORTEZ

Right there -- click, click --

MARGARET

He got a kick out of it --

CORTEZ

Not important -- what kind of mother would get a kick out of doing that? Eh? You have fallen silent.

MARGARET

I'm -- not -- sure -- what --

CORTEZ

In here, anything is possible.

MARGARET

Forget it -- done, we're done.

CORTEZ

Are you that kind of mother? You are a figure of importance and I want to know how a figure of importance thinks. What really happened? Answer me, Margaret. What happened that day?

MARGARET

Nothing "happened."

CORTEZ

You have Alex thinking this was going to be fun -- yes?  
Come on, answer me.

MARGARET

We set up the pic[ture] --

CORTEZ

We?

MARGARET

Matthew and I.

CORTEZ

Bathtub?

MARGARET

In my studio.

CORTEZ

Your studio. Your place.

MARGARET

I took my son -- into the studio --

CORTEZ

Your studio --

MARGARET

Alex and I had a great --

CORTEZ

Into your studio, this child who cannot talk --

MARGARET

This is --

CORTEZ

Wait, Margaret -- the two people he loves the most -- and  
take his clothes off --



MARGARET

This is foul --

CORTEZ

-- doing this is fine -- he is my child -- spread him out for all these stranger's eyes -- for my class, my ambition --

CORTEZ pretends she's doing the photo shoot with ALEX, mock-taking pictures, interspersed with the "ka-chick" of a photo being taken.

CORTEZ

Another point of view, another viewfinder -- "Lindo, smile for me" --

MARGARET

Twisting --

CORTEZ

"Look adorable, honey pie" --

MARGARET

-- it --

CORTEZ

This is the POV of Alex as a little island in the sea of your studio.

MARGARET

That's not --

CORTEZ

"Oh, my sweet cheeks."

MARGARET

That is not --

CORTEZ

Invade the little island with love. "My little angel" --

MARGARET

You shit!

CORTEZ

Do this. Raise that. Extract the riches. Lift. Spread. Steal it, use it, take it all away.

MARGARET tries to knock the "camera" from CORTEZ's hands.

CORTEZ

Whoa! What sort of mother did the photo lab see?

MARGARET knocks the "camera" out of CORTEZ's hands.

CORTEZ

Can't stop it that way.

MARGARET

Keep your filth away from him!

MARGARET bellies right up to CORTEZ during the next lines. CORTEZ is passive, letting MARGARET do this -- clearly CORTEZ's choice to do this.

MARGARET

How could you know, how could you kn[ow] --

CORTEZ

Would you kill me?

MARGARET

-- how could you know anything --

CORTEZ

Would you kill me --

MARGARET

-- about what Alex and I had that day --

CORTEZ

Kill me --

MARGARET

How could you? If you were a mother, you'd know --

CORTEZ

Would you kill me right now --

MARGARET

-- bottom feeder --

CORTEZ

-- right now if you could?

MARGARET

You're just like them, just like them all --

CORTEZ

Would you kill me to protect Alex?

MARGARET

I did not let them take away anything anything and not you not you either not any of the blood-suckers and bottom feeders and dickheads with spray paint --

CORTEZ

That is a long line of people to kill --

GUARD comes around, and MARGARET backs away.

GUARD

I am assuming this is a high-level intellectual discussion that's echoing down the hallway here.

CORTEZ

Margaret was doing some explaining for me.

GUARD

Inside voices, you know -- even my daughters understand that much. You all right?

MARGARET gestures that she's fine. GUARD exchanges a look with CORTEZ, lingers for a moment, then leaves.

CORTEZ

So you would do it.

MARGARET

What?

CORTEZ

Kill me -- kill me, kill me right now, if you could.

MARGARET

Kill you?

CORTEZ

To protect Alex.

MARGARET

Kill you?

CORTEZ

You are on fire.

MARGARET

You -- stay -- aw[ay] --

CORTEZ

You would do it --

MARGARET

Back off --

CORTEZ

The power you have --

MARGARET

Just back off.

CORTEZ

Something so loved it drags the beast up to the light -- snap  
snap --

CORTEZ makes a "shutter" with the thumbs and index fingers of each hand -- a square -- and puts it up against her own right eye.

CORTEZ

If you do not make really, really, really clear lines --

CORTEZ squeezes the fingers shut, then open, as if they were a shutter.

CORTEZ

-- you end up hurting the people you are supposed to protect -- all of us are islands, Margaret, all of us need the lines -- you have that power --

MARGARET

Always -- always -- the right lines with Alex --

CORTEZ

Always.

MARGARET

Always. Clean. Clear. Straight. Straight. Straight. Lines.

CORTEZ

Well, Margaret, he got lucky then with you. Because he was being chased by someone with artistic ambition -- the center of the universe. Lines do not matter much to people like that -- just doing a transcription of your testimony. He got a lucky cut of the cards.

MARGARET watches CORTEZ play the cards.

MARGARET

A cut of the cards --

MARGARET makes the "shutter" with her own fingers and looks at CORTEZ.

MARGARET

Look at me. Look at me.

CORTEZ looks up. MARGARET snaps the "shutter."

CORTEZ

You see --

MARGARET

I just took a "mate" I know nothing about. Here's what happens next.

MARGARET makes believe she's taking a print out of a tray and holding it up, letting it dry.

MARGARET

Is this all I got? Is this you?

CORTEZ

Your lighting is dim.

MARGARET looks at the "print."

MARGARET

I'll tell you what I see.

MARGARET mimes hanging the "print" up to dry and stands in front of it inspecting it.

CORTEZ

Careful, shape-thief -- do not steal my [soul] --

MARGARET

I see -- right in here -- an island -- a face floating like an island --

CORTEZ

Isla is not hard -- laced in my delicious accent. Anything else?

MARGARET

Words. "Shape-thief," "turn of the moon" -- poet, maybe. Poetry to me, at least. Sounds good enough.

CORTEZ

Still looks dim.

MARGARET

So how about we do a little touch-up -- bring out the shadows? You know, just a notch.

MARGARET holds her thumb and index finger apart to indicate "notch."  
CORTEZ looks at MARGARET as if deciding something, then gathers the cards together and neatens the pile.

CORTEZ

I can give you your notch.

CORTEZ takes the hanging "print" and rips it up. To MARGARET's surprise, CORTEZ begins to dance to a song in her head.

CORTEZ

I was hot! Hot! Imagine the light of 19 years old -- the age of majority -- this beautiful face in a very dangerous time. "Viva Puerto Rico libre!" That is how it was, in my beautiful 19th year in Ponce. "Viva Puerto Rico libre!" Filled with revolutionary ambition! "It is time to wake up, Borinqueños! Remember El Grito de Lares! Pedro Albizu Campos, and our mother, Lolita Lebrón! Free Los Quince. Unchain yourself from the clown called Uncle Sam! Wake up, boricuas, commit the sin of memory!" But then my family, for my own good, they said --

CORTEZ shifts.

CORTEZ

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

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

CORTEZ

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

Again stops dancing, again a slap. Dancing again.

CORTEZ

(sarcastically)

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

Stop, slap.

CORTEZ

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

CORTEZ makes an airplane motion and sound.

CORTEZ

-- and I am deposited in San Manhattan Juan, ahora Nuyorican, Ame-Rícan. On the island of the enemy in the dead country. Mi familia perdida. And I turn into the lost soul they thought I was already. Estoy aún en el paisaje lejos de mi visión. [Julia de Burgos, Song of the Simple Truth, "#2: Intimate," (pp. 6-7)]

CORTEZ catches her breath lowers her voice.

CORTEZ

Me busco.

MARGARET

Looking for what? What are you looking for?

CORTEZ

Estoy aún en el paisaje lejos de mi visión.

MARGARET

What vision, Cortez? You know me, I'm all about vision.

CORTEZ does not answer.

MARGARET

What vision are you looking for?

CORTEZ

And that is how I came to reside in the dead country -- my own dead country.

MARGARET

What's your vision?

CORTEZ

Since then, so much blood has just -- evaporated.

MARGARET

What do you mean? I don't understand.

CORTEZ

You would not. Could not.



MARGARET

You don't know that. I've earned all my certifications, don't forget.

CORTEZ

Enough.

MARGARET

Not yet.

They look at each other. CORTEZ gathers the cards.

GUARD re-enters on her rounds.

GUARD

Everything all right?

MARGARET

Yes, ma'am -- right as rain.

GUARD

Whatever that phrase means.

MARGARET

It could be the coming of water to feed the land -- see, she's rubbing off me.

GUARD

Cortez?

CORTEZ

We were actually talking about nature specials on public television.

GUARD

Uh-huh.

MARGARET holds up the book.

MARGARET

And I'm starting to do a little light reading.

CORTEZ

Like you said, we have a very high intellectual level in here.

GUARD

It smells like that and it smells like something else. But right as rain?

CORTEZ

Like the photographer said -- a summer shower.

GUARD goes to leave.

CORTEZ

You know --

GUARD turns back.

CORTEZ

Maybe you should write a book about us. That is the only way some of us are ever going to get out of here.

CORTEZ gathers up the cards, builds a house of cards.

GUARD looks at the two of them, turns, leaves.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Scene 8**

GUARD at her "locker" -- it's the end of her shift. She goes through the notecard routine. Then she does something different.

GUARD pulls out a small voice-recorder and looks at it. She glances around to see that she's alone, then she begins recording something.

GUARD

I am going to write a book. This is for my daughters.

GUARD stops, pauses the recorder. She stares for a moment, composing her thoughts, then starts again.

GUARD

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

GUARD stops, turns off the recorder and puts it away.

GUARD

That's a pretty good start.

GUARD snaps her fingers.

GUARD

My daughters, may you continue to be well tonight. I will be home soon.

\* \* \* \* \*

### Scene 9

GUARD stares through the "bars" at MARGARET. MARGARET stands stock still, wearing her jacket, staring out through the bars of the cell but not at GUARD.

CORTEZ is on her bed, book in hand.

GUARD

5 - 1 - 7 - 6 - closed.

**SOUND: Metal door slams shut.**

GUARD

Keep an eye.

CORTEZ

Aye.

GUARD

You know how easy this isn't.

CORTEZ

Aye aye.

GUARD leaves. MARGARET continues to stare.

CORTEZ

At home, Margaret -- everything all right at home?

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

MARGARET

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

MARGARET turns to CORTEZ.

MARGARET

Could they make that visiting room any more heartbreaking?

CORTEZ

That is what it is supposed to do.

MARGARET

Matthew is depressed and angry. Alex is drawing red faces with black tears. No one sleeps well. Guard said it was as good as could be expected.

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

MARGARET

Fuck.

MARGARET puts the chair down.

MARGARET

I don't know why they call it the visitation room. Not like you'll ever have any visitations in there. No fucking angel in its right mind would visit there. No fucking annunciations would make it through the metal detector.

CORTEZ

Does this mean that you are going to not eat again?

MARGARET looks at CORTEZ and decides to let the humor in.

MARGARET

It's all good even when it isn't and the world outside never disappears. And I'll eat. And I won't try to sleep it all away.

CORTEZ

Who is saying the angel did not arrive?

MARGARET lies back on her bed, hands behind her head.

MARGARET

Thank you for not beating me up about it. I already had your voice ringing in my head.

MARGARET closes her eyes. CORTEZ reads. Lights fade.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Scene 10: The Third Degree**

MARGARET on her bed reading, one book in her hand, one on the bed.  
GUARD enters with CORTEZ, who is carrying a math text book.

GUARD

5 - 1 - 7 - 6 - open.

**SOUND: Metal door pounds open.**

GUARD guides CORTEZ into the cell.

GUARD

Watch yourself.

CORTEZ makes a dismissive gesture.

GUARD

I mean it. 5 - 1 - 7 - 6 - closed.

**SOUND: Metal door slams shut.**

GUARD half-leaves. CORTEZ hesitates, then slams the math book down. CORTEZ and GUARD lock eyes, then GUARD leaves.

MARGARET reads the spine of the book.

MARGARET

Ah, your algebra.

CORTEZ

Math -- sucks.

MARGARET

Some women find math hard, Cortez --

CORTEZ

The numbers just jump around --

MARGARET

I know I did, on the job --

CORTEZ

Like a -- goddamn knife stuck in my eye --

MARGARET

If you finish this -- then your degree, right?

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

CORTEZ

Bullshit. Artist.

MARGARET

Bachelor of Arts. Vera Cortez, B.A. More than I've done.

CORTEZ

Not now. I cannot. Not now.

MARGARET

All right. Sure. Just trying to --

But MARGARET doesn't finish, seeing how agitated CORTEZ is. CORTEZ flips through the book, exasperated. MARGARET continues to read, half an eye on CORTEZ. Finally, CORTEZ slams the book shut.

CORTEZ

I just -- cannot -- get it to stick!

MARGARET

Let it rest --

CORTEZ

You do not underst[and] -- I have got to make it stick.

MARGARET

It'll stick, it'll stay -- if you relax, it'll come --

CORTEZ begins to pace.

CORTEZ

You --

MARGARET

What?

CORTEZ

Forget it.

MARGARET

You're pacing. Chill.

CORTEZ

Are you any good at this?

MARGARET  
(bad DeNiro)

You talkin' to me?

CORTEZ

What?

MARGARET

Are you talkin' to me? Sorry, bad --

CORTEZ

What the fuck was that --

MARGARET

Sorry. Joke, small -- very small --

CORTEZ

Well?

MARGARET

I used to hack my way through math.

CORTEZ

Yes?

MARGARET

Yeah.

CORTEZ

Well?

MARGARET

Well, I don't know, Vera -- you keep me pretty busy here.  
Have to finish the poems of Julia de Burgos which you gave  
me to read --

CORTEZ

Fuck you --

MARGARET

You know, me busco and all that --

CORTEZ

Fuck you.

CORTEZ grabs the book and slams it on the table.

MARGARET

Wait --

CORTEZ

Fuck everyone like you.

MARGARET

-- I was just kidding --



CORTEZ

Fuck you all.

MARGARET

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

MARGARET gets the book. CORTEZ grabs her by the throat and backs her across the cell. MARGARET drops the book, grabs her wrist.

CORTEZ

I do not need irony --

MARGARET

You're hurting me --

CORTEZ

-- from an Anglo kid-fucker bitch --

MARGARET

You're hurting --

CORTEZ

Get away from me! You're useless!

CORTEZ lets her go, steps back. They glare at each other.

MARGARET

But in not very many days I get to leave.

CORTEZ goes for her throat again. MARGARET knocks away the hand and pushes CORTEZ, hard. It catches CORTEZ unaware.

MARGARET

Enough!

CORTEZ

You are a fucking pervert.

MARGARET

And you're an idiot.

The GUARD walks in and surveys the scene.

GUARD

What's the state of the state here?

CORTEZ

Could not be better.

GUARD

And nothing but the truth?

CORTEZ

So help me.

MARGARET

Yes.

GUARD

Keep it that way.

MARGARET

We are maintaining. Right?

CORTEZ pivots away from MARGARET. GUARD leaves.

CORTEZ

You do not know, so back off.

MARGARET pushes CORTEZ, not hard, just enough to make CORTEZ take notice.

MARGARET

I'm in for a dollar.

CORTEZ

In for a doll[ar] --

CORTEZ laughs.

CORTEZ

Ditz rolls the dice --

MARGARET

You in?

MARGARET stands there defiant. CORTEZ looks around to see if the GUARD will come back, then retreats with a dismissive gesture.

CORTEZ

You are not worth it.

MARGARET picks up the book.

MARGARET

So -- why?

CORTEZ

Go read.

MARGARET

I asked you why!

CORTEZ

Your neck?

MARGARET

So why?

CORTEZ

Your neck?

MARGARET

Fine. So why?

CORTEZ

The numbers, I told you -- they jump --

MARGARET

You crack my throat because --

CORTEZ

I cannot nail them down.

MARGARET

So nail me instead?

CORTEZ

You do not know --

MARGARET

How do you know what I know?

CORTEZ

It makes me crazy.

MARGARET

It makes you mean.

CORTEZ

It makes me forget.

MARGARET

It makes you a human being.

CORTEZ

I do not need -- not this time of year -- I do not need --  
not from you, not from anyone -- I do not need people --  
anything -- telling me "no" --

MARGARET

What does spring have to do about it --

CORTEZ

Look, I am sor[ry] --

MARGARET

Why this time --

CORTEZ

I am s[orry] --

MARGARET

Why --

CORTEZ

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

MARGARET

Back --

CORTEZ

From the dead country.

MARGARET

I want to help you --

CORTEZ

Put the book down.

MARGARET

No -- I'll hold it.

CORTEZ

Stop wanting to help. Give me the book -- what are you doing?

MARGARET

Nothing.

CORTEZ

What?

MARGARET

Way back.

CORTEZ

Give me the book.

MARGARET

Dead country.

CORTEZ

Not where I want to go.

MARGARET

You really want to show some sorry?

CORTEZ

I never said the word --

MARGARET

Tell me --

CORTEZ

I never say the word --

MARGARET

Tell me what keeps you waking me up at night. You owe me that.

CORTEZ circles around her. MARGARET does not move.

CORTEZ

Owe you? Owe you?

CORTEZ sits on MARGARET's bed.

CORTEZ

All right. This bed -- this is mine. This is mine.

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

CORTEZ

No. Mine, too. My space. All mine, all the time. You get none.

MARGARET

Don't get stupid --

CORTEZ

Do not feel privileged.

MARGARET

Privi[leged] --

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

MARGARET

Hey --

CORTEZ

Eminent domain.

As much as she wants to, MARGARET does not touch CORTEZ. She puts the book on the table.

MARGARET

Hey --

CORTEZ

Subtraction. Division. You own nothing that ain't mine --  
call me Puerto Rico. Oooh, a picture of Alex --

MARGARET

Put that --

CORTEZ

Nope.

CORTEZ puts the picture in her pocket.

CORTEZ

Mine. All mine. Now what are you going to do, little island?

MARGARET

This is not about --

CORTEZ

Tú no sabes what this is about.

MARGARET

Give it back --

CORTEZ

Fuck you, "Property of the Cunt" -- owe you? You are the  
dead country I do not want to go back to.

MARGARET

This dead country is not me, it's you -- give me back --

MARGARET lunges to get her picture back, but CORTEZ easily choke-  
holds her.

MARGARET

Let me go! You fucking witch!

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

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

MARGARET

Cortez? Cortez? Cortez?

CORTEZ

You taking roll call?

MARGARET

Cortez -- never done that to anyone.

CORTEZ

Two cops, right?

MARGARET

Well, them -- yeah, but never on the [job] --

CORTEZ

Should have --

MARGARET

Sorry.

CORTEZ

-- remembered that.

MARGARET

Here --

CORTEZ

Hands to yourself. Man, that hurts!

CORTEZ gestures MARGARET to back off.

CORTEZ

I will survive.

CORTEZ mockingly repeats the line a lá Gloria Gaynor. Then they are at a loss for the moment.



CORTEZ

Irony -- fuck, that hurts! --

MARGARET

Irony?

CORTEZ

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

MARGARET

Meant it to be, you know, friendly.

CORTEZ

You were feeding on Vera Cortez looking weak --

MARGARET

Oh, suck my --

CORTEZ

You took respect from me --

MARGARET

Like I said, suck me. I tried to make you laugh -- remember how to laugh, independentista? Ha ha ha ha ha? Can't someone just want to make you laugh, dickhead?

CORTEZ, looking at MARGARET as she overemphasizes the syllables of the word, suddenly lets out a genuine laugh -- and the tension breaks.

MARGARET goes to put her stuff back in the footlocker.

CORTEZ

Why didn't you?

MARGARET

What?

CORTEZ

You know -- the -- book -- up --

MARGARET

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

CORTEZ watches MARGARET put her things away.

MARGARET

I'm not going to push, all right -- spring, why you come back from one math class and you're okay, and then this one and you're not -- me busco -- "I seek myself" -- Julia [pronounced like "Julia Roberts"] --

CORTEZ corrects her.

CORTEZ

Julia.

MARGARET

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

CORTEZ

The word is bruja.

MARGARET

For what?

CORTEZ

Witch. You said "witch."

MARGARET

I did say "witch." I guess I don't smackdown witches, either.

MARGARET motions to CORTEZ. CORTEZ hands the picture of Alex back to MARGARET.

CORTEZ

Yerba bruja is also a plant in Puerto Rico.

MARGARET

Yeah?

CORTEZ

Each leaf has its own seeds, so you can take a cutting and plant it anywhere and it will grow.

MARGARET

And that's supposed to be you.

CORTEZ

It is a tough plant.

MARGARET

Yeah, well, maybe, but you have obviously never carried pipe with fat-assed thugs who hate you just because you lack a prick and who would just as soon chuck you off the scaffolding as drink their coffee -- while they're drinking their coffee. Yerba bruja never had a chance.

CORTEZ

Never thought getting algebra-tutored would be so hard on the body.

MARGARET

A bruise is like a negative.

CORTEZ lays down on her bed.

MARGARET

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

CORTEZ figures it in her head, raises her arms and, using sign language, says "x plus 2 times x plus 3."

MARGARET

Bueno, bruja. There is hope for you yet.

MARGART sits at the table and opens the math book.

MARGARET

Now, where do you want us to start?

CORTEZ sits at the table, pivots the book to her, turns to a specific page, and pivots it back to MARGARET.

CORTEZ

This is what gave me the witch.

MARGARET

Ah.

MARGARET reads as lights go to black.

MARGARET exits.

\* \* \* \* \*

### Scene 11

CORTEZ pops a tape into her small boombox; out comes tinny Puerto Rican dance music.

**SOUND: Good Puerto Rican dance music, but tinny.**

CORTEZ begins to dance.

The GUARD escorts MARGARET back. They watch CORTEZ dance. She sees them, but she keeps on dancing.

GUARD

Her first days -- she beat misery into that floor.

MARGARET

For what?

CORTEZ breaks into the conversation.

CORTEZ

You want to know about me, read the transcripts yourself.  
Do not bother her.

CORTEZ shifts her focus to GUARD.

CORTEZ

If you keep --

CORTEZ pops a dance move.

CORTEZ

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

GUARD

If you keep your feet moving --

GUARD pops a dance move.

GUARD

-- they can never put chains on 'em.

CORTEZ

Yes!

GUARD

5 - 1 - 7 - 6 - open.

**SOUND: Metal door pounds open.**

MARGARET steps into the cell.

GUARD

5 - 1 - 7 - 6 - closed.

**SOUND: Metal door slams shut.**

GUARD and CORTEZ share a hand gesture in the air. GUARD leaves.  
CORTEZ stops the music.

CORTEZ

This time?

MARGARET takes a paper from her pants pocket.

MARGARET

Alex sent me this.

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

MARGARET

Elephants in the Land of Smiles --

CORTEZ tries to hand it back, but MARGARET is busy taking off her jacket  
and putting it away.

CORTEZ

Nice -- here --

MARGARET

Matthew came up with the title.

MARGARET still doesn't take the paper.

MARGARET

Good, huh?

CORTEZ pushes the paper towards MARGARET.

CORTEZ

I said "nice."

MARGARET takes the paper and puts it away as CORTEZ hits "Play" on the boombox and starts dancing again. She makes her way to MARGARET and begins showing her the steps; MARGARET does her best to follow, eventually sort of getting it. For a few moments they dance together, awkwardly but with determination and even amusement, though there is an edge to CORTEZ's movements.

MARGARET then indicates for CORTEZ to wait a second, and MARGARET goes to her footlocker and gets a tape. She swaps out CORTEZ's tape for hers: 1930s/1940s swing music, Glenn Miller-ish.

**SOUND: Good Lindy music but tinny.**

CORTEZ

You came to jail with that?

MARGARET

Matthew and I like to Lindy.

MARGARET starts dancing a few steps of the Lindy. CORTEZ looks at her, puzzled. MARGARET encourages CORTEZ to do the steps. CORTEZ does, and then MARGARET partners her as well until they do the Lindy together. MARGARET, on a whim, spins CORTEZ out and back.

Then CORTEZ stops the tape. CORTEZ begins to dance a combination of salsa and Lindy, combining rhythms. MARGARET picks up on it, and for a moment they dance a hybrid dance, in silence until lights fade to black.

CORTEZ and MARGARET get into their beds.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Scene 12

GUARD at her locker. She checks her face in the mirror.

GUARD

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

GUARD puts on her glasses. She holds the voice recorder in one hand and the notecard in the other, then turns on the recorder and says what is on the card.

GUARD

Prayer of the Prison Guard. Dear Lord. There are nine separate cell blocks here, surrounded by dark woods, hyphenated by razor wire. Here we house the fallen, the sullen, the melancholic, the miserable, the angry, the violent, the victimized, blasphemers, seducers, flatterers, grifters, hypocrites, traitors, murderers -- and we carry them chained across the river -- they come without their coins -- they come with nothing -- their sins on their anguished backs -- most stay lost and crush their hearts -- but some find ways. It's the damndest thing to see a lifer steal hope from the garbage, to see the criminal steal peace from the punishment. But let's not forget -- we all do this time together because there but for the grace of God or the luck of the draw, goes my motherfucking ass. Amen.

GUARD turns off the recorder, puts it and the card away, then snaps her fingers.

GUARD

Daughters, I am trying to keep you safe.

GUARD straightens her uniform, puts away her glasses, one last look in the mirror.

GUARD

And a zit. Who says God doesn't have a sense of humor?

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Scene 13: The Final Border Crossing**

Night in the cell. MARGARET sits on the edge of her bed. CORTEZ murmurs in her sleep.

CORTEZ

Tamara -- Tamara -- Tamara -- Tamara --

CORTEZ jerks awake.

MARGARET

Beat you.

CORTEZ pulls herself upright.

MARGARET

Hey --

CORTEZ

Fine --

MARGARET

Need aspirin?

CORTEZ

I am fine, I said --

MARGARET

Who's Tamara?

CORTEZ

What do you care?

MARGARET

You were saying it just now. Over and over like you've done every night ever since I got here --

CORTEZ

As I said --

MARGARET

On fire, in your sleep -- the name, over and over again --  
Tamara --



CORTEZ

And I ask you again: What do you care?

MARGARET

Because it's Cortez who's saying it.

CORTEZ

You are freed tomorrow -- you do not have to, nothing making you, so go back to sleep.

MARGARET

House rules have changed.

CORTEZ

Because Cortez said it?

MARGARET

Because Cortez has been saying it.

CORTEZ

And you think your thirty days has made you ready?

MARGARET

I am ready.

CORTEZ

Yes?

MARGARET

Yeah. Yes.

CORTEZ

You are sure?

MARGARET

I am ready.

CORTEZ

Then go ahead. Ask.

MARGARET

Vera Cortez, why are you here?

CORTEZ

I am here, Margaret Pasqualini -- you find me here -- because I helped kill my daughter. I helped kill my daughter. You, my Americanita, have been dancing with a murderer.

MARGARET's body has just taken a blow.

CORTEZ

You called for it -- time for our border-crossing. Spring is the cruelest time for me because Tamara -- my Tamara, my lost daughter -- would be fourteen this month.

The following must be delivered with little sentimentality and to MARGARET. It should not be staged in a separate light or as if time were suspended or using any other kind of monologue trick.

CORTEZ

I had a family. In the dead country. I had three children -- now there are only two. I cannot say "I have" any more.

He beat them. My daughter and son -- Tamara and Michael -- Tamara three and Michael just a year old. They were not his. I had had them with two other men -- my rebellion in exile on the island of strangers. Of course, my family rejected them completely -- not their blood -- so I went with him because he said he would take me in. My savior -- but really my colonizer.

To show you how the fear had turned my mind to ice -- I even had a child with this man -- Jawanza -- calculating changes, hoping for softness, figuring he would not beat one of his own. But I had just given him fresh meat.

He had this "thing" about Tamara -- it seemed to inspire him for pain. One night, drugged, he started belting her. "Thirty nine lashes" he kept yelling. Locked in the bedroom with Jawanza and Michael, both of them trying to crawl inside my ribs, I -- could not -- move.

Then it stopped. He dragged a chair. Tamara screamed -- screamed once, just once -- then quiet. Waited. Waited. Then opened the door -- and I wanted to tear my eyes out. He had tied Tamara to his chin-up bar -- her arms slung

over it so she hung from her armpits -- just like a little Christ rag-doll. I remember my eyes -- straight to her right hand -- I watched a drop of blood bead up and then fall. Then another. Then one more. By the fourth one I had cut her down. El Señor Muerte had passed out on the table, hissing like a dragon.

And what did I do? I took her into the bathroom and washed her off and put her to bed -- such a good mama! The dragon hissed. I waited.

The next day, I went to wake them for day care -- I had a job. No breath. I held this hand just over her mouth, as I did sometimes at night, to feel their breaths. Nothing. I screamed, just once, like Tamara. The dragon came.

"You're gonna help me," it said -- and I obeyed. And here is what we did. We dropped Jawanza and Michael off at day care, like the good parents we were, then we dumped her body in the rough grass by the side of the highway -- his decision, not mine, but mine because I did nothing to stop it. I watched everything from the side view mirror, numb as stone. Then we found a police officer and told her that Tamara had disappeared -- maybe even kidnapped! Two days later, they found her, and he started playing the kidnap for all his worthless self was worth. But I knew they would find the truth. And even if they did not, how could my heart hold any peace? I had held my dead daughter in my arms, helped trash her body. Peace? What island could offer me that asylum?

So while the dragon steamed in his sleep, I called the detective who had given me her card, from the corner phone, one dime to my name. Dialed and hung up, dialed and hung up, and when I finally did connect, I was ready to cut it off in half a breath. She knew, she knew, because at one point, my mouth so thick with shame I could not speak, she said to me, "In for a dime, in for a dollar." I told her everything. I paid. She was kind.

And when the police came, and the social workers took Michael and Jawanza for foster care, and they cauterized the dragon, and I could feel the cuffs embrace my wrists -- it

was the first time in a long, long time I felt safe. I was finally back on an island: lines were drawn; the monster drowned; and I could begin my shame.

I took twenty-five on a plea bargain. He got sixty. Tamara would be fourteen this month.

CORTEZ lifts up her pillow and takes out a piece of colorful cloth.

CORTEZ

This is from her funeral dress. Under my pillow, just like your tee-shirt.

CORTEZ hands it to MARGARET.

CORTEZ

That's my dollar. So. Nothing to say? You always have something to say.

MARGARET

Um -- I can't -- I think we -- should -- go back to sleep --

CORTEZ

You said you were ready. You said you were ready.

MARGARET's voice comes out in a hiss.

MARGARET

You helped kill your child!

CORTEZ

Yes.

MARGARET

Not just "helped" -- you killed your own child.

CORTEZ

It comes to that.

MARGARET

All that -- swill about protecting Alex -- that spew about oppression, about "lines" and "keeping people safe" -- she was never safe with you --

CORTEZ

She's gone, which makes her the only safe one around here.

MARGARET

No.

CORTEZ

Did not think it was going to end this way, did you?

MARGARET

No no no no --

CORTEZ

You thought, whatever I had done, we would be in solidarity, de mujer a mujer, con un corazón grande y calido. But now you have something much more complicated than that, much more -- rich -- than that.

MARGARET

I am not under[standing] --

CORTEZ

That cloth -- keep it close, it soothes you. Listen.

MARGARET

I don't understand.

CORTEZ

Here is what comes before her name escapes from me each night. Just when I may have slipped over the border into peace, or at least emptiness, I am called -- sounds like lost voices draw me to this bright light -- which I know is Tamara but with no body, just this knife-white light. I reach, but it slides -- here, then there -- but it never disappears. And then, always, there is a moment -- when it allows me to arrive.

**LIGHT: A bright light bathes MARGARET.**

CORTEZ

I shape my hand --

CORTEZ puts her hand up to MARGARET's face but does not touch it.

CORTEZ

-- I circle it, un abrazo de mi niña perdida --

CORTEZ circles her arms around MARGARET but does not touch her.

CORTEZ

-- and for one breath -- one breath -- I feel pardoned. She tells me I can now get rid of hope and shame: I do not need hope and shame. She offers me a truce. Una tregua.

**LIGHT: The bright light goes out.**

CORTEZ

And just when I think, finally!, at last!, peace!, she leaves -- and the truce -- dissolves. I wake up on the rough edge of the road -- here -- still breathing, still caring, still shamed. And then the first bell rings. And then the day breaks open.

MARGARET

And you expect me --

CORTEZ

Do not get ahead of yourself --

MARGARET

I am not going to be --

CORTEZ

How do you know what you are going to be or not going to be?

MARGARET

I know I won't --

CORTEZ

You are in a strange country now, Margaret -- house rules have changed again -- who knows?

MARGARET

(holding up cloth)

You killed your daughter --

CORTEZ

We need to move on.

MARGARET

It's like you don't have any --

CORTEZ

What I do have, Margaret, is a vision -- of life -- all my political about the borders and lines and power -- that has been my life. But it is not just Puerto Rico, "libre, libre," Lebrón, Lebrón, Lebrón -- that is just one step, just one step toward reaching the border that heals us.

MARGARET

But you killed your daughter.

CORTEZ

All I need -- to cross that last border -- into the peace the truce can bring -- is Tamara. But she will not guide me, be my coyote. And why?

MARGARET

Because you killed her!

CORTEZ

Every night she tells me why she will not guide me.

MARGARET

She denies you peace -- good for her --

CORTEZ

You are doing such good work, Margaret --

MARGARET

What are you talking [about] --

CORTEZ

That cloth under my ear, the one you grip so hard, so righteously, whispers, "Mami, how you can come in to this new day, this new way, if you cannot trust some one person enough to tell them the whole story?"

MARGARET

Come on.

CORTEZ

That is what it says.

MARGARET

You've never told anyone? I don't --

CORTEZ

Never the truth whole.

MARGARET

I don't believe that.

CORTEZ

Bits, junk, lies -- never "and nothing but the" because those I have shaken awake in that bed would either try to one-up me in pain or shut me out. And I have come too far over this ocean to let anyone or anything deny me.

MARGARET

So why me --

CORTEZ goes right up to MARGARET's face and peers into it.

CORTEZ

Do not bend -- stay with me. You have gone this far. Keep looking. Tell me what I have seen in you that lets me say all this. This is your final test.

MARGARET

Final test?

CORTEZ

Tell me.

MARGARET

Test?

CORTEZ

Tell me. Come on.



MARGARET

You saw --

CORTEZ

Go on. Go.

MARGARET

You saw I would take Tamara's side.

CORTEZ

Defend the oppressed.

MARGARET

I would give you no shadows to hide in.

CORTEZ

Like Tamara's light in my dreamwalk.

MARGARET

And you saw --

CORTEZ

Go on --

MARGARET

You saw I would not feel sorry for you.

CORTEZ

You would bring me an eye bitter and acid. To see myself whole.

CORTEZ breaks off the eye contact.

CORTEZ

I knew I could count on you to be my coyote.

MARGARET

Forgive you --

CORTEZ

Forgiveness?

MARGARET

Isn't that what you want?

CORTEZ

Forgiveness is not required. Forgiveness is never required of the sin-eater.

MARGARET

The sin-eater?

CORTEZ

You, my sin-eater. That is you, what you are.

MARGARET

Sin. Eater.

CORTEZ

You do not know?

MARGARET

I know what a sin-eater is -- I'm Italian!

CORTEZ

So -- what you have been tested for.

MARGARET

Tested?

CORTEZ

Yes.

MARGARET

To eat your --

CORTEZ

To take it on --

MARGARET

All those humiliations --

CORTEZ

I had to see if you could take it on, take it in. From the day I started reading about you, I wondered -- you are no common mother, you.

MARGARET

What do you feel right now?

CORTEZ

A soft peace.

MARGARET

I don't.

CORTEZ

The sin eater is not supposed to.

MARGARET

I get to carry these -- images -- this sin --

CORTEZ

You are doing what it is in your nature to do --

MARGARET

It's not enough. Not enough for you to tell just me. She's not some discard. She is your daughter.

CORTEZ

Was.

MARGARET

Is. Is! You think the slate's clean just because -- to a stranger? If you don't keep faith with your child every day --

CORTEZ

Chulita, we have gone all past judgment, past "paying my debt." I have paid. In full. Now it is on to the next: life with Tamara after Tamara. Or, in another word -- oh, the Italian is not going to like this! -- redemption.

MARGARET

Redemption. For you.

CORTEZ

I have that -- ache.

MARGARET

For you?

CORTEZ

Not the dead Tamara, the gone Tamara, the sin you squeeze so precious, that cloth you clutch. Keep the cloth! Dance with the dead all you want! The Tamara who redeems me will come when we all change the lines that now turn us into our lowest devils. Listen to me --

MARGARET

I can't --

CORTEZ

Listen to me -- women on every building site, huh? you can understand that -- all colors, all shapes, not attacked! Can you understand that?

MARGARET

Yes!

CORTEZ

That is Tamara.

MARGARET

That's bullshit!

CORTEZ

It is the better world you want.

MARGARET

Not this way --

CORTEZ

Who says you get to pick the way? Children born to parents who want them, like Matthew and Margaret, with shelter, food, dignity. That is Tamara.

MARGARET

It's just more bullshit!

CORTEZ

No more tribes about language or pigment or power or violence. No more Puerto Rico -- blinded by wanting a nation -- what is a nation except another way to keep the outsiders outside? -- no more "property of the cunt," but citizen of a better world! All that in the word "Tamara." I give you the old so I can raise my new daughter.

MARGARET

You leave me with knives in my eyes, this picture of you --

CORTEZ

It will take time --

MARGARET

They can hack out all my organs while I'm still alive if I have to turn as cold and as acid as you to be this new kind of human being --

CORTEZ

It will take time.

MARGARET

All this new world mouth music makes me sick to my stomach. You make me sick to my stomach.

CORTEZ

Tamara --

MARGARET

Stop it --

CORTEZ, with gesture and body, commands the stage, so to speak, and grabs MARGARET's attention. Her next lines are in the nature of a dance performance.

CORTEZ

Link:

the transnation of the airplane, la guagua aérea,  
carries me from the montañas of the jíbaro  
to the capital of the empire, Nueva York, city of Harlem  
bantustans,

Gringolandia perforated by sub-dermal pop-rockéro frequencies,

where the world's oldest colony is a suburb of Brooklyn,  
and San Manhattan Juan is a jazz riff of diaspora,  
and our unwanted emperors hold their death grips.

Bam!

The plane touches down.

Bam!

We have jumped the pond.

Bam!

Immediate Nuyorican.

Bam!

Instant Ame-Rícan,

Bam!

The new mestizo of the hyphen-nation.

Bam!

Born in the desires that fall between acá and allá.  
In the plane we Puerto Ricans inhabit this smeared-edged  
borderland,

a frontera between the emptinesses of destination,

we are the postmodern, we are Tamara,

the "land of all of us," pan-everything,

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

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, nunca más.

We float confused, contradictory, ambiguous, ambivalent,

torqued, tidal, multi-tongued, lunar-mad --

But we are also large, we include multitudes,

and Tamara is a new world between acá and allá --

feel it in your nostrils, look for it under your feet,

hear the stars beat out ritmos de bomba y plena

in the very pulse of the universe,

all of us universal, all of us at home in the in-between.

Tamara.

CORTEZ finishes, breathless. MARGARET stares, then grabs the tee-shirt  
from her under her pillow and hugs it. They hold.

CORTEZ lies on her bed.

\* \* \* \* \*

#### **Scene 14**

GUARD at her locker. GUARD does the notecard routine.

GUARD

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

GUARD snaps her fingers. MARGARET grabs her bag and jacket from the footlocker.

GUARD

Sleep well, my bright children.

\* \* \* \* \*

#### **Scene 15**

MARGARET waits with GUARD.

MARGARET

What's taking them so long?

GUARD

These new security procedures -- I'm not sure Christ would pass. You got everything?

MARGARET

All my faculties intact.

**SOUND: Static in the shoulder mike.**

GUARD leans in to hear.

GUARD

Copy. Your entourage just came through the gate.

MARGARET

Cortez says you have daughters --

GUARD

Time is over.

MARGARET

Not till I'm out the gate.

GUARD relents.

GUARD

I have two.

MARGARET

Are they doing okay?

GUARD

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

MARGARET

That's good. That's good. Wish I had something I could give you.

GUARD

You'll be in my book. And develop your own pictures in your own home -- keep the clothes on the kid.

GUARD takes the paper bag.

GUARD

I got to check this before we go in.

GUARD inspects the bag and pulls out the strip of Tamara's cloth.

GUARD

I know you didn't come in with this.

MARGARET takes the cloth, fingers it.

MARGARET

It's a gift -- sort of.



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

GUARD

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

MARGARET

Twenty-five years -- a quarter-century --

GUARD

Are you saying that's how long it felt to you?

MARGARET

I am prone to exaggeration.

GUARD

Maybe parole will be her resurrection. Let's go.

MARGARET

"If you keep your feet moving" --

GUARD gives MARGARET a look, then softens.

MARGARET

That is shit worth officially leaving with.

MARGARET and GUARD exit.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Scene 16

CORTEZ alone, playing solitaire. She gets part of the way through the game, then stops. Stands. Stares. Then she moves to the other side of the cell, stares.

CORTEZ

You are right. The light never changes in here. Out there to in here -- over there to over there -- it is all the same wash. No harbor.

CORTEZ sits back down, picks up the cards, but doesn't continue. Stares from one side to the other.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Scene 17**

GUARD enters carrying a photographer's portable frame for hanging a backdrop, which will be set up in front of the "cell." She sets it down, exits.

Several seconds later, GUARD returns carrying a chair, a canvas backdrop, and a cosmetic case. She puts them down, exits.

Several seconds later, GUARD returns, MARGARET following with a camera case, a tripod, and a briefcase.

GUARD

Most sane people stay left when they leave this place.

MARGARET

That's why sane people never get anything done.

GUARD points at the briefcase.

GUARD

Let me see it again.

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

GUARD

Your husband and kid must really love you.

MARGARET

It's very Christian to be kind to crazy people.

GUARD turns to exit.

MARGARET

Hey! Your daughters?

GUARD

As of today, still mine.

MARGARET

Good.

GUARD

Glad you remembered to ask.

MARGARET

And the book?

GUARD

Each day is a page.

MARGARET

Maybe we can make it part of what I'm doing here.

GUARD

I won't say no and I won't say yes.

MARGARET

I can work with "maybe." I'm good with "maybe."

GUARD

Then maybe it is.

MARGARET

I guess I'll take it from here. Thanks.

GUARD exits. MARGARET brings over two chairs and starts to hang the backdrop; as she does, CORTEZ enters with the GUARD. The GUARD leaves. As MARGARET speaks, she prepares for the shoot: puts lens on camera, sets up tripod, etc.

CORTEZ

Well.

MARGARET

Hello.

CORTEZ

Hola.

MARGARET

You got my letter.

CORTEZ

Obviously.

MARGARET

So what do you think?

CORTEZ

A photography project.

MARGARET

Yes.

CORTEZ

Is that not what nailed you the last time?

MARGARET

And look what that got me. As I said in the letter -- I received --

CORTEZ

For photographing women in prison.

MARGARET

Yes. Abused women -- women who have killed their children --

CORTEZ

Why?

MARGARET

I say a lot of things when people ask me that. And I really do believe what I say. About making my photography useful, after trying to make Alex into something he wasn't. You pointed that out to me, thank you very much. But that's all second. You know why I'm here.

CORTEZ

I do not have to do this.

MARGARET

Didn't see you being dragged in here. Leave. But you'll leave knowing why.

CORTEZ

I will hang -- for the moment -- it gets me out.

MARGARET

I didn't put this into the letter because it was too late -- I've already arranged to have a gallery show the pictures. Part of a benefit for battered women. Auctioned off to raise money.

CORTEZ

Really.

MARGARET

Book and website to follow.

CORTEZ

Your cut?

MARGARET

Everything out of pocket. And the grant.

CORTEZ

And the goodness of your heart.

MARGARET

Actually, Señora Cortez, dead wrong about that. I'm doing all this out of the coldness of your heart.

CORTEZ

You should be careful with your words.

MARGARET

As careful with you as you were with me.

CORTEZ

Revenge?

MARGARET

Don't flatter yourself.

CORTEZ

You are not making any money at it.

MARGARET

So it isn't greed. Or ambition. Or lust, sloth, gluttony, envy -- what's to envy?

CORTEZ

I guess I will say "ouch."

MARGARET

C'mon, Vera -- you know: only one sin left.

CORTEZ does not respond.

MARGARET

All right, then, Vera -- straight and simple anger. At you.  
For being a coward.

By this time MARGARET has finished her set-up. She has set two chairs in front of the backdrop.

MARGARET

I was not going to let you get away with it.

MARGARET hands CORTEZ the piece of cloth from Tamara's dress.

CORTEZ

I think I will leave.

MARGARET

Sit. Please. Por favor.

CORTEZ

We are finished.

MARGARET

I called you a coward. I named you. Where's your dollar now?

CORTEZ

I am fresh out.

MARGARET taps her breastbone.

MARGARET

Right here -- it sticks. I can't get it past. This whole little star called Tamara hangs right here and explodes, every day. I try to catch the pieces and smash them back together and I can't do it! I am filled with sadness and [defeat] --

CORTEZ

The condition of the sin eater, the human condition.

MARGARET

So. I'm not going to do this "it" alone. You are going to help me.

CORTEZ

No, I am not. I am done. Use somebody else.

CORTEZ moves to get the GUARD.

MARGARET

"Poema al hijo que no llega." [Julia de Burgos, Song of the Simple Truth, pages 490-491.]

CORTEZ turns slowly to face MARGARET.

MARGARET

"Poema al hijo que no llega."

CORTEZ

Speaking Spanish now? Not well, I have to say.

MARGARET

I learned something. For you. Ammunition.

CORTEZ

So you have come as the warrior.

MARGARET

"Poem to the Child Who Doesn't Arrive." She came to me in a dream and fed it to me.

CORTEZ

In a dream.

MARGARET

Why not? Things came to you in dreams all the time. "No sé cuándo ni dónde / pero sé que vendrás." Come on!

CORTEZ

"I don't know when or where -- "

MARGARET

" -- but I know you will arrive." "Child of mine, bathed by sublime tenderness / I have dreamt you a thousand times, / but where can you be? / Why don't you rebel and burst into the world...?" Listen to me, Vera! "You will arrive at my arms on a solemn day / when everything at my side will dress in light. / There will be light in the shadows..." That's why I'm back here: it's up to me to bring the light to the shadows so that she is not abandoned. And not alone. You are going to help me finish eating this sin.

CORTEZ

And how did your grant proposal --

MARGARET

By having you be the first voice out of the shadows. By being Tamara's voice.

CORTEZ

You are giving communion now.

MARGARET

Very simple equation, Vera: you killed your daughter with silence. Like I said, a coward. And a fool, too, expecting some droopy-assed middle-aged white chick sin-eater to shift the universe for you. Sloppy, sloppy, sloppy. This is what I bring -- this "eye" -- but the shadows need your voice from underneath -- you don't do this, you kill off Tamara, old and new, for good. But if you speak out -- do now what you should have done then -- then maybe no more Tamaras get fed to the dragons. That's my new world. That's my half-assed attempt at redemption -- I remembered your word.

CORTEZ

You want a truce.

MARGARET

I want your coöperation. Your pictures, your voice -- their pictures, their voices -- a thirty-page grant proposal in eight words --

CORTEZ

You want more than my coöperation.



MARGARET

I would love to make you pay -- but I did learn something from you, after all, about keeping our eyes bigger, our hearts large -- that's what brought me back, to you.

CORTEZ

To me.

MARGARET

So we could work together.

CORTEZ

So, a truce, then --

MARGARET

A truce is for combat.

CORTEZ

You brought the ammunition.

MARGARET

True, but --

CORTEZ

If I agree, I come opposing everything you think and feel is right. So it will be a truce.

MARGARET

Are we that divided?

CORTEZ

Your -- sentimentality, your kind of righteousness -- so sweet, so weak --

MARGARET

If it doesn't come from the heart --

CORTEZ

Tamara's death punctures my heart every day.

MARGARET

I sometimes think your heart's a stone --

CORTEZ

My heart is atoned -- you don't understand that.

MARGARET

No, I don't.

CORTEZ

I did not give you Tamara -- she will never leave me. You never had her. What is in this --

CORTEZ shows the cloth.

CORTEZ

-- is that endless loop of breast-beating you seem to find so inspiring. I am done with the smell of burned skin. Time for me to prepare for my release.

MARGARET

So you're not big enough to face --

CORTEZ

Stop it! Stop it. I wish you could see your face right now -- not the good, strong, open, scared-into-life face that was here a year ago, that was my coyote, that helped me cross the border. No, now it is a judge's face. Here is another Julia for you: "But I was made of nows..." "Nows!" Hear that, Margaret -- dragging no more corpses around! "But I was made of nows / and my feet level...would not accept walking backwards..." Hear that -- not backwards! "...and I went forward, forward, / mocking the ashes to reach the kiss / of the new paths." [Julia de Burgos, *Song of the Simple Truth*, "I Was My Own Route," #20 (pp. 56-57)]

CORTEZ, standing near MARGARET, kisses her.

CORTEZ

New paths, querida -- that is where Tamara and I are going. Do you want to come?

MARGARET, to her surprise, seems pacified by the kiss.

MARGARET

I don't want Tamara repeated -- new paths, too. And I'm going to tell the story.

CORTEZ

You go, girl! I am just not convinced the liberal guilt thing is the way to do it. All of us here own our own shame -- fully vested. No one here needs to be wept over. But if you are set on that, then you need some balance, some frame for your picture -- a bite of the pepper with the sugar.

MARGARET

What?

CORTEZ

The gallery, the benefit --

MARGARET

Yeah?

CORTEZ

Too clean. Too much of the liberal guilt thing.

MARGARET

So shoot.

CORTEZ

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

MARGARET

I'm listening.

CORTEZ

You need a context. You need charts of ownership and income and health and education. If you want no more Tamaras in the morgue, they need to know how much of the dead country they own -- they have to own up. They need to cross the borders, not just feel oh so lagrimoso and sensitized. Those are my terms. And if you do not

accept them, I will make sure no one sits for you. That is my ammunition.

MARGARET

I agree -- bigger picture, bigger world.

CORTEZ

Bueno.

MARGARET

So do we have our truce?

CORTEZ

That is up to your anger.

MARGARET

My anger -- to one side. Partnership, then, for the moment.

CORTEZ

Peace along the fronteras.

MARGARET

We'll call the truce Alex and Tamara.

CORTEZ

Tamara and Alex.

MARGARET

Tamara and Alex, then. The name of the truce. Anything else?

CORTEZ

Ask me formally if I want to do this. You have asked everyone else -- now ask me.

MARGARET

Vera Cortez, would you like to participate in this project -- in the name of Tamara?

CORTEZ

In the name of Tamara, yes.

Things get quiet.

MARGARET

Now what?

MARGARET

Sit down.

CORTEZ

You are going to take the pictures now?

MARGARET

Nothing formal. I'll come back out later for the set-up shots. Now it's just to get people used to the camera.

CORTEZ

I do not even know what I look like. According to you, I have devil's horns.

MARGARET

The only horns you have is because you haven't seen a man in a long time.

CORTEZ

For a white piece, you do have a mouth.

MARGARET

Here's a mirror.

CORTEZ

A mirror. A brush? It has been so long. No brush, no make-up. Just my game face. What now?

MARGARET

Get comfortable. Just look at the camera and pretend there's no one behind it.

CORTEZ

That is easy to do.

MARGARET

For a brown piece, you do have a mouth. We have lots of time. Now, try a smile out on me. And talk to me.

CORTEZ

About?

MARGARET

Tell me about Tamara.

CORTEZ

Tamara.

MARGARET

What was she like? Go ahead -- it's all right.

CORTEZ

Tamara liked to sing. She had a bird voice, breathy, almost like a whisper.

CORTEZ takes a pose.

CORTEZ

Did that work?

MARGARET

Whatever feels natural.

CORTEZ

"Natural" is easier said than done.

MARGARET

You're doing fine. Tell me more.

CORTEZ takes some poses.

CORTEZ

She liked to sing to herself. I would stand outside her room and listen. She made up words -- she could rhyme well -- and tunes. Barely a whisper sometimes.

CORTEZ stands up and moves toward her.

MARGARET

What are you [doing] --

CORTEZ

How do you work this thing?

MARGARET

What?

CORTEZ

Show me.

MARGARET

Press this down halfway -- that's the autofocus. Then just pop it.

CORTEZ

Sit down. Sit down.

MARGARET sits down. CORTEZ pops a picture by accident.

CORTEZ

Sorry, sorry. Okay, get yourself settled -- is that the right thing to say? I want you to talk to me.

MARGARET

You bruja!

CORTEZ

Talk to me about Alex.

MARGARET

This is so strange. I've never sat here.

CORTEZ

Talk.

MARGARET pauses to take poses. CORTEZ takes pictures at those points.

MARGARET

Alex. He's mute, so he can't sing, like Tamara. But he draws a lot. And he loves to swim. He's a lot like us -- he likes to build things. How I'm doing?

CORTEZ

You will learn. This have a timer on it?

MARGARET

You can even set the number of pictures you want.

CORTEZ

Focus?

MARGARET

Press here to set it. When you're ready, press this button.  
It beeps to warn you.

CORTEZ

Will it make coffee?

MARGARET

Next model.

CORTEZ

All right. Sit down.

MARGARET sits down.

CORTEZ

A truce gets an official record.

MARGARET

Tamara and Alex.

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

CORTEZ

This is not going to be easy.

MARGARET

But, man, is it going to be great.

**SOUND: Camera beeps three times.**

Three successive pictures.

\* \* \* \* \*



## Scene 18

**SOUND: Music from Lou Reed's "New York"**

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

# A Round of Slaughter

## DESCRIPTION

The conflict between artists of different purposes.

## CHARACTERS (in order of appearance)

- SIGNET
- OLEAGE
- SILL
- BALKIS
- CICISBEO
- CINCHONA
- DISMAS
- SECULOR
- CISTA
- GRIG
- ANZAC
- SPUR
- GROAT

**NOTE:** Spur and Groat can be played by the same actor.

## SETTING

The stage is divided into four playing areas: SIGNET's writing studio, with a long workbench and some stools; the bedroom, with bed, small table, and a clothes-pole; OLEAGE's office, with desk and chairs; an open space used for various other scenes.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Scene 1

SIGNET, in a separate light reading a letter, wears a long overcoat or duster with pockets, camouflage-style pants, pull-over shirt, heavy shoes. OLEAGE, dressed officially, in a separate light, recites what the letter says.

OLEAGE

-- having rendered the most extraordinary service that any  
one person can give to one's country --

SIGNET

Wait! Wait!

SIGNET reads silently. After a moment, OLEAGE repeats.

OLEAGE

-- having rendered --

SIGNET

Wait!

OLEAGE pauses briefly, then begins.

OLEAGE

-- having rendered the most extraordinary service that any  
one person can give to one's country --

SIGNET

He is such a bucket-shitter.

SIGNET reads silently. After a moment, OLEAGE starts.

OLEAGE

-- the service you have rendered as a playwright, as an  
artist of the stage, often in defiance --

SIGNET

(reading with OLEAGE)

-- the service you have rendered as a playwright, as an  
artist of the stage, often in defiance --

(to herself)

A shite-spreader.

SIGNET reads silently. After a moment, OLEAGE starts.

OLEAGE

-- but service always rendered with authority and as our  
public conscience.

SIGNET walks into OLEAGE's light, and OLEAGE turns to her.

OLEAGE

Of course, our recent history has been unkind to artists like  
you --

SIGNET

Such buttery crap, Citizen Oleage.

OLEAGE

Unkind to artists unappreciated for their power and purpose.

SIGNET

Spread it around.

OLEAGE

(smiling)

But given our state's remarkable and recent translation to democratic rule --

SIGNET

The barbarians spreading it around --

OLEAGE

-- we can now think -- what had once been unthinkable.

SIGNET

Had been made unthinkable.

OLEAGE

Thus our invitation to you -- nay, our solicitation, our suit --

SIGNET

You want me back.

OLEAGE

We want you back, Citizen Signet.

SIGNET

You want me to whitewash the blood --

OLEAGE

We want you to bloody the whitewash.

SIGNET

I'll start with a quart of blood from you.

OLEAGE

Taken by teeth or needle?

SIGNET

As if those were my only bloodletters.

OLEAGE

Let me get back to --

SIGNET

By all means.

OLEAGE

(back to the "officialese")

Our solicitation -- our suit --

SIGNET

By all means necessary.

OLEAGE

Our solicitation -- our suit -- for you to return to the land of your home so that you can, through your craft, grace the ears and eyes and hearts of your compatriots --

SIGNET

I am free to rollick on home.

OLEAGE

Yes.

SIGNET

Yes.

OLEAGE

Grace us with your incomparable works of the stage as well as the fullness of your heart.

SIGNET circles OLEAGE as he speaks. Within a few steps he turns and offers her his hand, and, palm to palm, they continue to circle as if dancing.

OLEAGE

Therefore -- in great anticipation -- your reply.

SIGNET

I have already winged it.

OLEAGE

Now we can arrange our common lives --

SIGNET

I begin today.

OLEAGE

-- so that the affairs of state and the affairs of art speak in a parallel language.

SIGNET

Is that likely?

OLEAGE

Join your words to us as we shape the future.

SIGNET

We shall see. Close your eyes.

SIGNET licks her thumb and makes the sign of the cross on each of OLEAGE's eyes.

SIGNET

I will make you all see so much better.

OLEAGE

And now you.

SIGNET closes her eyes. OLEAGE does the same thing to SIGNET but makes an "X."

OLEAGE

For us, "X" marks the spot where we put the funeral coins.

SIGNET shoves OLEAGE away, who smiles and exits.

Hard music for transition.

SILL enters naked and gets into bed -- his clothes hang on the pole.

SIGNET takes off her clothes and throws them into the bedroom area, runs and jumps into SILL's arms, and they fall onto the bed wildly. Music stops, and so do they.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Scene 2

Bathrobes for SIGNET and SILL hang on the clothes-pole.

SIGNET

Let me get the letter.

SILL

Don't get up -- don't break the moment --

SIGNET gets the letter from the coat.

SILL

Then while you're up, throw me that.

SIGNET throws him the robe while looking over the letter. She takes her own robe and puts it on.

SILL

(referring to the robe)

I can't believe you kept this.

SIGNET

(half-hearing him)

Why not?

SILL

It would require sympathy on your part.

SIGNET

They will re-publish everything.

SILL

Is that what it says? That's very good.

SIGNET

Everything.

SILL

You deserve it.

SIGNET

Even material not yet published. Yet conceived.

SILL

Not enough?

SIGNET

It's fine -- it's fine fine fine -- in the midst of this so-called "winning" -- my winnings -- perusing this offer of "enough" while rotting in my city of exile -- what is my first thought -- my first pulse -- when I think about touching our blessed soil?

SILL

A rhetorical or actual [question] --

SIGNET

Is it a fast hand held out to my scarred fellow writers, those who stayed and resisted?

SILL

Subject for a tedious breakfast -- come back to bed --

SIGNET

To re-visit geographies of anguish and bliss?

SILL

There's no need --

SIGNET

No. None of those my first pulse.

SILL

Then what, your first pulse?

SIGNET

It is to bed you --

SILL

Well, why not?

SIGNET

In swift and pounding savagery --



SILL

Signet's signature -- the flying buttress. Come back. I am a fellow playwright -- so that's one checked off -- and a scene of bliss, yes? That's another. This pounding feels so old-hat and welcome.

SIGNET

I'm not finished.

SILL

No, of course not.

SIGNET

My first thought -- my first free thought -- is, in swift and pounding savagery, to bed the one whom everyone here and not-here has named "coward." Even as they're pouring gifts into my lap -- you. Whom everyone has named.

SILL

Named --

SIGNET

My lap did not feel the weight of the gifts -- just the wetness of your name.

SILL

Not cowardly to stay in the way [I stayed] --

SIGNET

Give -- your robe -- give it to me.

SIGNET takes hers off, takes SILL's. SILL puts hers on.

SIGNET

Better. Holed up in that dreary rain-soaked city called "asylum" we all read your -- work --

SILL

The gossipers in exile --

SIGNET

We could get your -- work -- yes -- we monitored. How many repeats of the same official formula, we wondered --

SILL

Wondering from safe nurseries --

SIGNET

How many of those polished bootlicking plays, we mused, would Sill the laureate write before his fingers rebelled? We worried, we did, about the health of our country's laureate.

SILL

No idea, Signet -- you have no idea -- what it was like here to be here.

SIGNET

Not the Sill we knew -- had known.

SILL

No idea.

SIGNET

But even closer to me -- because it is always me, Sill -- closer to the question actually --

SIGNET grabs SILL's crotch.

SIGNET

-- at hand --

SILL

Stop it --

SIGNET

-- that's not how you wrote when I was climbing you -- when we all gathered --

SILL

Hiding like animals --

SIGNET

-- ideas and spit flying like swallows feeding -- what we would use, remember, you and me -- spit --

SIGNET takes SILL's hand and spits in it, rubs their palms together.

SIGNET

Writing and fucking all abusing the same fluids. Remember?  
Many nights, fingers buried between my legs and then my  
smell littering the pages as I wrote after coming, licking my  
fingers to get the taste of the loose words spilling on the  
page the way you spilled onto me. Do. You. Remember?

SILL

I remember. I remembered.

SIGNET grabs his crotch again.

SIGNET

I can feel your member remembering -- good.

SILL

Stop it. So I stayed here -- and that plagued everyone?

SIGNET

(shrugging)

That hardly matters now --

SILL

Did it plague you?

SIGNET

(ignoring his question)

The exiles-coming-home are sharpening their tongues --

SILL

Did it?

SIGNET

-- for slitting Sill's ribs. Righteousness intoxicates them --  
they're all now as smug as Lazarus risen.

SILL

But you? You were with them. What is in your mouth?

SIGNET

(laughing)

What is in my mouth? Sill, I know better what is better.  
Memories of Sill's composition, of that Sill before this Sill.

This is why I oozed -- because I remembered. In this mouth, you ask? Then here it is: I am going to bring Sill back to Sill -- I am going to save him. It is what you need.

SILL

Returned to save me?

SIGNET

With the gut of this letter, Sill -- not publications, not recognition, but a commission -- a commission from -- the people!

SILL

Commission?

SIGNET

A play for a command performance -- any subject I want. On the occasion of their one-year self-congratulation for joining humanity, yes. Stage, actors, dramaturds --

SILL grabs the letter, reads.

SIGNET

By all means, read.

SILL

I cannot believe --

SIGNET

My dearest chuck --

SILL

I cannot believe this --

SIGNET

Is that venom on your lips?

SILL

Nothing.

SIGNET

That's nothing with fangs.

SILL

That -- that -- meant to be mine. Promised to me!

SIGNET

You could not do this, Sill. You couldn't. Not now. Not without some deep scourging. They know that.

SILL

I am better than you are --

SIGNET

I am home --

SILL

Better craftsman --

SIGNET

-- and you are thinking "better"?

SILL

-- better thinker --

SIGNET

"Better" hardly matters --

SILL

Because I had -- have -- the discipline of the art! Not like you -- you -- giving in to impulse and this lavender exquisiteness -- sensual beyond any thought of how to control -- and then ambitious, yes, and immodest in your ambition --

SIGNET

Because I want to be heard -- that is the point, after all --

SILL

Oh, the people hear you, all right!

SIGNET

And that means nothing to you? Eh? They hear me because I give in to the impulse to sniff their soles of their shoes and smell the fear on their breaths and hate the cowed yipping of their voices and their gray clouded eyes and word all of

it so that even a deaf-mute -- even a politician -- even a laureate! -- would be smacked down and enraged --

SILL

And they all love you.

SIGNET

Except those with the guns and the hearts of leather -- the ones who loved you up.

SILL

And now the guns give you commissions --

SIGNET

And don't love you anymore. My thought --

SILL

That was mine --

SIGNET

My hope was that we could work this together. My way to save you.

SILL

Save me so I can feel their thrust, the same way they're thrusting it to you?

SIGNET moves away.

SIGNET

Guess what, Sill?

SILL

I'm sorry.

SIGNET

Guess what, laureate? I am no longer wet and in my saving mood. Leave.

SILL

I'm sorry.

SIGNET

No you aren't, even if you are. Get out.

SILL

I don't want to argue --

SIGNET

We will not argue. You have suddenly run out of room.

SIGNET violently, pushes SILL out of the bed. As she speaks she takes SILL's clothing and smacks him with each piece as she hands it to him.

SIGNET

Take your spite and stuff it into your classical forms -- churn out more pristine crap. The commission is now mine. Why did I even think to think of you? A stupidity that love of an old love pukes up. Well, friend, I am cured. Get. Out. Now.

Enter BALKIS, who stamps on the floor to simulate knocking on the door. He wears clothing similar to SIGNET's, including the overcoat.

BALKIS

I am here, Citizen Signet.

SIGNET

You drain my spirit, you starve my heart, I will not ever stop loving you, but I will love you no more. So much for welcome, and so much for home. Go!

SILL leaves, brushing past BALKIS, who politely does not notice SILL's state of undress.

SIGNET

Tectonic plates grind --

BALKIS

Citizen Signet?

SIGNET

Grind and grind -- what point is the effort? what point is a heart?

BALKIS

Citizen Signet?

SIGNET

Do I look older to you?

BALKIS

We all look older because we are older. Every day.

SIGNET

Yes, but from when I used to be here.

BALKIS

I never knew you were here when you were here, so --

SIGNET

Who are you?

BALKIS

Citizen Balkis.

SIGNET

Citizen Balkis -- what grinds your heart to ambitious dust?

BALKIS

Nothing.

SIGNET

Why?

BALKIS

Because I have purpose in life.

SIGNET

And what's your purpose today?

BALKIS

To speak to you.

SIGNET

I don't even know who you are.



BALKIS

You summoned me. "Come at ten," you said.

SIGNET

Yes. Yes. The --

BALKIS

Interview, you said.

SIGNET

Yes.

BALKIS

Something about a play --

SIGNET gets the journal from the overcoat and pulls out a chair.

SIGNET

Yes.

BALKIS

Though I don't go in for them much.

SIGNET

Interviews?

BALKIS

Plays.

SIGNET

Neither do I. Sit.

BALKIS

Now, it's only been recently that my talk has been allowed about what we are going to talk about, so naturally I am a bit nervous about speaking as to the likes of you.

SIGNET

You don't like my likes.

BALKIS

Also, there is a cost for the presentation.

SIGNET

You charge.

BALKIS

Freedom to make contracts as one desires -- in the new Constitution. And since naturally I have no talents beyond this particular display --

SIGNET fishes coins out of the overcoat and drops them in his hand.

SIGNET

Will this do?

BALKIS

This is worth at least a double take. Thank you.

SIGNET

Well?

BALKIS

I must warn you --

SIGNET

Warn me.

BALKIS

It is not for the faint.

SIGNET

I have never been one of "the faint."

BALKIS

I can give you your money back now -- but not after.

SIGNET

Not to be rude, citizen, but shut up and show me your contract freely entered into. And talk to me while you enter said contract -- ignore me while I take notes.

BALKIS takes off his coat; under his shirt, on his back, are two noticeable lumps. He takes off his shirt and two white angel wings pop into view -- small, clearly unable to lift him, but otherwise perfect. SIGNET quickly jots notes, sketches.

SIGNET

Talk to me, Citizen Balkis.

BALKIS

Medical experiment, they said --

SIGNET

To do --

BALKIS

They never said why or what. To me, at least.

SIGNET

What did they do?

BALKIS

For the new state, the doctor said -- made no sense to me.  
But the money was good --

SIGNET

Food?

BALKIS

Enough for a year -- full family.

SIGNET

They bought you.

BALKIS

I was ready to be bought by those who had brought me low.

SIGNET

"The new state" you said -- turn a bit --

BALKIS

As they laid me down on the table -- new state, new state  
of man, bring down the angels, lift up the slime of human  
nature -- to be honest, Citizen Signet --

SIGNET

By all means, be honest --

BALKIS

I could scarcely hear them through the medicine -- all I remember is "angles" -- "angles" -- bring down the "angles" --

SIGNET

And when you woke up? A bit more -- excellent.

BALKIS

When I woke up --

SIGNET

Lift your arms -- When you woke up --

BALKIS

I really did feel different.

SIGNET

I'm sure. Put them down.

BALKIS

No, not in that way.

SIGNET

Then how?

BALKIS

I felt. Chosen.

SIGNET

Except that the wings couldn't lift you up.

BALKIS

Of course not -- too small.

SIGNET

May I?

BALKIS

Included in the price.

SIGNET fondles and pulls on the wings, occasionally taking notes.

BALKIS

You're not sickened?

SIGNET

By other things, not by these. So beautiful and so useless.

BALKIS

True -- no lift.

SIGNET

And can't be moved?

BALKIS

They didn't promise much.

SIGNET

Useless.

BALKIS

And beautiful, like you said.

SIGNET

I will tell you why they did it.

BALKIS

That would be nice.

SIGNET

I will tell you why you are going to be central in my play.

BALKIS

Central.

(indicating his shirt)

Are you finished?

SIGNET

No -- a double take, remember?

BALKIS

All right -- but it is cold.

SIGNET

The new man -- you, Citizen Balkis. Twisted into a horrible useless beauty.

BALKIS

Not that horrible. I'm chilled.

SIGNET

Not the shirt.

BALKIS

You are being cruel.

SIGNET

I paid for it. Citizen Balkis, as accepting as a sheep's throat to the knife.

BALKIS

I had family --

SIGNET

Go ahead -- try to move them.

BALKIS

You know I can't. Could you close your robe?

SIGNET

Family -- the eternal excuse, isn't it?

BALKIS

Your robe.

SIGNET

"I had family." And you? No dignity?

BALKIS

I actually believed --

SIGNET

Ah -- they got you because you "actually" believed. They made you a freak because you "actually" believed.

BALKIS

I am cold.

SIGNET

That's why you will be the icon of my play, Citizen Balkis.  
The belief that twisted men into "angles" perverse.

BALKIS

I'm honored -- it's cold -- my shirt --

SIGNET

No.

BALKIS

You're hard.

SIGNET

Go ahead -- move them.

BALKIS

I can't.

SIGNET

Aren't you disgusted with yourself? No anger at those who made you a monster?

BALKIS

I make a good living --

SIGNET

(hissing)

I'm sure your family loves the support of a freak. You're no different than the Sons of the Republic! -- The Angelic Heroes! -- who died in the meat-grinding wars. No movement yet.

BALKIS

They can't!

SIGNET

Every sideshow needs a freak, and you are going to be mine. Not yet. The "new man" of the new society -- ecce homo! -- our ideal cripple, our crippled ideal --

BALKIS

I have tried to do my best --

SIGNET

My play is going to bury you --

BALKIS

My shirt --

SIGNET says nothing. BALKIS fumbles to put on the shirt but struggles with it -- arm wrong-side out, etc.

SIGNET

And you aren't the only one, Citizen Balkis --

BALKIS

(muttering)

I've got to put on my shirt --

SIGNET

You're just one of an army of freaks -- whole battalions of trussed-up, crook-backed, club-footed, contorted-six-ways-from-Sunday "new men" --

BALKIS

Goddamn this shirt!

SIGNET

All are going to be in my play! Citizen Balkis -- what do you have to say to those who did this to you?

(looking at the wings)

Not yet.

BALKIS does not reply, gets the shirt on.

SIGNET

You can say it in my play. You can tell them what you think about what they did to you --

BALKIS

Stop this!



SIGNET

The freaks shall inherit my earth!

BALKIS

I've got a nice life!

SIGNET

The rachitic angel -- the failed experiment -- what a destiny!

BALKIS

Don't -- don't --

BALKIS looks at SIGNET in deep distress, and SIGNET faces BALKIS, searching. Then BALKIS' face changes to a mixture of surprise and fear: the wings have moved a little.

SIGNET

What?

BALKIS turns his back to her; there is a slight quivering under the cloth of the shirt.

BALKIS

Look.

SIGNET

I can see.

BALKIS

Look.

SIGNET

You are coming to terms, Citizen Balkis. Like all of us.

BALKIS

What am I supposed to do?

SIGNET

What do you think Gabriel did when he first flexed his wings?

BALKIS

I don't know. Your heart does not bleed.

SIGNET

Oh, it bleeds all right, Citizen Balkis, but not without training  
-- you will have front-row seats on opening night.

BALKIS puts on his overcoat.

BALKIS

They won't stop twitching.

SIGNET

Mine never do, either.

BALKIS

I do not feel as peaceful.

SIGNET

That's why you want to go home to your family and get out  
of my company.

SIGNET digs more coins out of her overcoat.

SIGNET

For your extra service.

BALKIS

You are cruel to make me feel so unpeaceful.

SIGNET

Hold off on that opinion -- I hope to change the adjective  
for you.

SIGNET touches his face.

SIGNET

Go home, broken angle. Your extra service has shown me  
a way.

BALKIS leaves. Music: rock and roll. SIGNET dresses as OLEAGE moves  
into his office. OLEAGE holds a sheaf of manuscript pages: the first draft.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Scene 3**

OLEAGE

It has all your marks.

SIGNET

But I see no marks upon it.

OLEAGE

I wouldn't want to limit your draft that way.

SIGNET

I don't draft, Citizen Oleage -- I just write. You can criticize whatever and whenever you want.

OLEAGE

Whatever your name for what you do, Citizen Signet, this is -- well --

In OLEAGE's moment of hesitation, SIGNET grabs the script out of OLEAGE's hands and goes to rip it in half. OLEAGE takes it back from SIGNET before she can do it.

OLEAGE

Ah, ah, ah. Citizen Signet, move over there -- I prefer a little distance from someone so fully loaded. Good. What did you think I was going to say?

SIGNET

I was going to destroy it before you did.

OLEAGE

Then you'd be destroying a very unusual -- and delectable -- document. Eh? Not complete -- it is a draft --

SIGNET

It is a work.

OLEAGE

Whatever the name, it is remarkable.

SIGNET

Who can trust a bureaucrat's "remarkable"?

OLEAGE

I'll say it again -- remarkable --

SIGNET

Repetition is not proof.

OLEAGE

-- remarkable so far -- one thing I do want to point out -- but in a moment. This reminds me of that one you wrote --

SIGNET

No recitation of my past works, please --

OLEAGE

Many all ready for proofing -- as promised.

SIGNET

I'm not fond of the "proofing."

OLEAGE

No typos, misprints, must --

SIGNET

I don't need to autopsy myself.

OLEAGE

If you want them, I can get you assistants.

SIGNET

I want them --

OLEAGE

Consider them approved. Good -- now I feel our temperature dropping. Polarities reversing.

SIGNET

What is it you want to say to me?

OLEAGE

Some positive feedback? On your work. I've heard that writers like that sort of thing?

SIGNET

So feed me back.

OLEAGE

Let's begin at the beginning. Right from the top, you make me focus with the descent of the angel -- I can see right away you're trying to match what you've gone through --

SIGNET

Been put through --

OLEAGE

What you've come through.

SIGNET

We weren't there by choice! It wasn't a pilgrimage!

OLEAGE

Citizen Signet -- the polarities rising again. Unnecessarily. You. Can. Let. Go.

SIGNET

So can you.

OLEAGE

So can we all.

SIGNET

It's just hard to hear that all of the torturing you -- the junta of the corpses!-- now chooses to be as soft as the wool between a lamb's eyes -- that you want art.

OLEAGE

A difficulty easy to understand.

SIGNET

And my blood roils at that easy understanding of yours. Don't pretend to know.

OLEAGE

Fair enough.

SIGNET

Just because lies come out softly now doesn't stop them from being lies.

OLEAGE

That's why we expect our artists to keep the times honest. What?

SIGNET

Do you ever fear that your tongue will fall off from sheer embarrassment at the things that come out of your mouth?

OLEAGE

Embarrassment comes from being powerless, Citizen Signet. Therefore, I am never embarrassed.

SIGNET

Ah.

OLEAGE

Let's just make your work our common ground -- for the moment. As I was saying, this opening -- the descent of the broken angel. The "crooked angle," as you name him. Name "it." As our guide. I can see the shafts of light on the descending body, the hush of the audience palpable. Who else would prepare us like that? Not Sill. Not Sill, eh? No.

OLEAGE flips more pages.

OLEAGE

And here -- I think the re-creation of the Last Great Battle by the amputees in the veterans' hospital -- prosthetic arms and legs lobbed like incoming artillery -- "a shin at twelve o'clock high!" -- I laughed and choked at the same time!

SIGNET

I spit all over those words -- to give the scene its proper smell.

OLEAGE

And it smelled to the high heaven you wanted it to smell. All of it so superb in execution -- even for a draft. Excellent work.

SIGNET

Have I passed? What?

OLEAGE

Just curious.

SIGNET

About.

OLEAGE

Why you didn't respond --

SIGNET

To?

OLEAGE

To my mention of Sill.

SIGNET

Is this for extra credit?

OLEAGE

You know we almost gave this to him.

SIGNET

I had heard almost.

OLEAGE

I like Sill. He is respected --

SIGNET

Yes.

OLEAGE

In his way.

SIGNET

You have used up his "way" until he has only talent left to offer you.

OLEAGE

Plenty of talent -- skill, aptitude -- marksmanship. But he is very much the artisan -- do you know what I mean? I think

you know what I mean. Now, he would begin in realism  
-- the unities --

SIGNET

Any artist can begin any way he wants.

OLEAGE

Subject, of course, to the need of the people for art to offer  
them something useful in their lives.

SIGNET

Your tongue is still attached -- amazing. What would be  
useful for "the need of the people," Citizen Oleage, would  
be for the junta of corpses to stop telling the people what  
they need that would be useful in their lives.

OLEAGE

All right -- we have reached that moment, Citizen Signet,  
where the phase of positive feedback has ended -- where  
your circle now becomes just a bit tighter. I like you, Citizen  
Signet, have always respected -- a pull, of sorts, between  
-- and you should know, if you already don't, that I was the  
Archimedes that levered you back here to retrofit the new  
regime. And you certainly know I crave theatre -- thank  
God you will straighten its spine! But don't mistake any of  
this or that for affection. At this moment you do not have the  
brevet to banter with me.

SIGNET

The spread of the butter on the bread?

OLEAGE

The beds that one has made -- and unmade. So, just to  
finish the discussion: I was asking you if you knew why we  
hadn't given this to Sill.

SIGNET

(indicating the manuscript)

I'd prefer to continue the autopsy.

OLEAGE

He wanted it too much.



SIGNET

I prefer --

OLEAGE

And wanting it too much, he would have done everything just right -- and it would have smelled -- talking about smells -- like the forty-seventh version of his first play. Sill has served his purpose -- at least for us. This is now what is ascending as the angel descends. This. Your play. Our play. New voices. It is important to keep that in the forefront --

(tapping his forehead)

-- up here. Now, we just need to add one more thing. Our finest writer has one more thing that needs her -- attention. The President -- our leader, the President -- there has to be made room. The audience more than just overhearing his name. His exploits.

SIGNET

He is there.

OLEAGE

The dedication. Very economical. But not -- drawn in -- throughout.

SIGNET

You said a play that would honor the struggle --

OLEAGE

Yes --

SIGNET

That would acknowledge, finally, our fall into sanity.

OLEAGE

Yes --

SIGNET

And that is what I am doing.

OLEAGE

Good.

SIGNET

When that angel drops into sight, I want the audiences' lungs to collapse.

OLEAGE

And they will.

SIGNET

When the old patriotisms about "singing of arms and the man" are bodied in the wooden arms of war cripples crashing to the hospital floor, I want their stomachs to wrench at the sight of these living fag-ends of "dulce et decorum est" dancing like the puppets they were -- they are --

OLEAGE

Spit and polish -- always has been your method.

SIGNET

To keep the free mind safe and alive --

OLEAGE

The mirror, as it were, up to nature.

SIGNET

Up to your nature -- up to all of theirs -- up your nature -- up yours! -- and then crack!

OLEAGE puts a hand on SIGNET to stop her moving.

OLEAGE

All of that is very true. Very nice. But. Something more of him before I bring something to him for a read. More of him towards the beginning.

OLEAGE hands the manuscript toward SIGNET, who refuses to take it. OLEAGE smoothly moves behind her and, with his right arm over her shoulder, grabs her by the left breast and pulls her against him.

OLEAGE

There has been suffering. And mistakes. In the name of "for reasons of state." But now, you -- you -- are a "reason of state" -- an "affair of state" -- you, yes -- and that, I firmly believe, bodes well. We need truth, Citizen Signet, yes --

as medicine. We also need what makes us proud. I am sure you can make a double star of both.

SIGNET grabs OLEAGE's wrist.

SIGNET

Funny -- no sign of a heartbeat.

OLEAGE

None?

SIGNET

I would have sworn you had a heart.

OLEAGE

Funny how the heartless find one another out.

OLEAGE releases SIGNET, not roughly, not softly.

SIGNET

I will find a way to kill you next time.

OLEAGE

Show me your next -- version -- show it to me soon. And what is it that actors say? "Use the energy"? Use your bile well -- I expect no less from our defender of broken angels.

\* \* \* \* \*

#### **Scene 4**

Musical transition as SIGNET crosses to her writing studio and OLEAGE exits.

Papers attached everywhere: floor, walls, even from clips attached to the ceiling. Also hanging, perhaps even like wind-chimes, are dozens of flensing and filleting knives. Prominent is a large long chart that SIGNET uses to track the narratives. She has filled it with signs, lots of handwritten notes, etc., and at times she needs to get up on a small stool or ladder to read. Also prominent is a small tower of thick manuscripts: the galley-proofs. The studio should look like the writer's version of a crowded and working painter's atelier.

SIGNET

(going down the chart)

If this tracks to here, and the angel's story to here -- the Lazarus parade shows up here at the veterans' hospital -- then this has to follow --

CISCISBEO and CINCHONA enter and stamp on the floor as if knocking on the door. At that same moment, SIGNET has a full-bodied sneezing fit, only managing sentence fragments between sneezes.

SIGNET

Come in -- goddamn this. Goddamn. Who are -- Shit.  
Who are you? Enough already -- enough!

SIGNET sneezes for a few seconds more, then stops -- paused, as if waiting for the attack to come back.

CISCISBEO

It's cold in here.

CINCHONA

More like chilled.

CISCISBEO

I would agree with "chilled."

SIGNET

It's an old slaughterhouse converted -- what else would you expect?

SIGNET waits for other sneezes. None come.

SIGNET

Good.

CISCISBEO

I wouldn't expect much from a slaughterhouse.

CINCHONA

Except slaughter. It's good for that.

CISCISBEO

Well-designed.

CINCHONA

Is that why they've put you here --

CICISBEO

To chill you?

SIGNET

I chose this place -- my choice. Isolated so I wouldn't be bothered -- so who are you bothering me?

Pointing at each other as they speak.

CICISBEO

Cinchona.

CINCHONA

Cicisbeo.

SIGNET

Again. This cold stiffens my eardrums.

CICISBEO

Cinchona.

CINCHONA

Cicisbeo. Your assistants.

CICISBEO

Government funded.

SIGNET

Citizen Oleage selected you?

CINCHONA

Asked us.

SIGNET

Are you his spies?

CINCHONA

Of course not!

CICISBEO

Of course not!

CINCHONA

We're here to work.

CICISBEO

We're here to serve.

SIGNET

At government expense.

CICISBEO

More money for you.

CINCHONA

It is cold in here.

CICISBEO

We agree on that.

SIGNET

I like it cold -- hardened nipples keep my mind sharp.  
(pointing to her nipples)

Gun turrets.

CICISBEO

(pointing to hers)

Spear-points.

CINCHONA

(pointing to hers)

Thumb-tips.

SIGNET

My mind must be very sharp at the moment.

CINCHONA

(to CICISBEO)

Now, that is a measure we haven't considered.

They touch each other's nipples as if to test the theory and nod, agreeing with something between the two of them.

SIGNET

Watching you do that suddenly made me feel warmer.

CINCHONA

You have a mountain of papers.

CICISBEO

A mess of a mountain.

SIGNET

It's how I work -- it's how my thoughts think themselves!  
Thought comes in -- then, like Athena, leap out -- slam! -- to  
here. Up it goes.

CICISBEO

How do you find anything?

SIGNET

They find me -- they hunt me down like Diana, running me  
to ground. How well can you read?

CINCHONA

Test me.

SIGNET hands her the top fat volume of galley-proofs. CINCHONA opens  
it and begins to scan lines with her index finger. Suddenly, her body gives  
a small but definite chill.

CINCHONA

Misplaced modifier.

SIGNET

Not mine.

CINCHONA

Wouldn't think so -- you're so above them. What would you  
like?

SIGNET

Unmisplace it.

CINCHONA

Good. Where, where, where --

SIGNET hands her a pencil and CINCHONA corrects the error. While CINCHONA makes the correction, SIGNET turns to CICISBEO.

SIGNET

Do you do -- that?

CICISBEO

No, I do this.

CICISBEO makes a distinctive gesture. SIGNET hands her a galley-proof. CICISBEO reads, then makes the gesture and shows SIGNET the book.

CICISBEO

Comma splice.

SIGNET hands CICISBEO a pencil.

CINCHONA

Then unsplice it.

CICISBEO

Done.

CINCHONA

Do we pass?

SIGNET

(repeating their gestures)

How did you come to this and that?

CICISBEO

Our fathers -- both grammarians.

CINCHONA

Both teachers -- relentless drilling.

CICISBEO

His drills would have made an oil company --

CINCHONA

Or a dentist --



CICISBEO  
Or a Marine --

TOGETHER  
Envious.

CINCHONA  
Old joke.

CICISBEO  
Our fathers had us read your plays. Even when we weren't  
supposed to.

SIGNET  
Brave -- or foolish -- men.

CINCHONA  
Neither -- they didn't like them.

SIGNET  
Well --

CINCHONA  
But they knew greatness --

CICISBEO  
Their word.

CINCHONA  
-- when they saw it. They were brave --

CICISBEO  
Not foolish --

CINCHONA  
-- about that. Greatness had to be honored.

CICISBEO  
Has to be honored -- present tense.

CINCHONA  
Yes.

CICISBEO

So here we are.

SIGNET

In a slaughterhouse.

CICISBEO

I want to ask you more about that --

SIGNET

Take a deep breath. Do either of you smell the old blood?  
Do you?

SIGNET hits several of the knives to make them chime, sniffs.

SIGNET

I do all the time. Turns my nipples to iron. See this.

CINCHONA

Clearly.

SIGNET

This is the score of the song that I am going to sing. And  
see this, where it begins? Right there at the beginning?  
See that figure there. Cinchona, what is it?

CINCHONA

It is a bloody knife.

SIGNET

Sporting -- Cicisbeo?

CICISBEO

Sporting a bloody head.

SIGNET

Severed head. Head on a spit. That's the presiding icon of  
the days to come. You look -- what's going on behind those  
[faces] --

CINCHONA and CICISBEO look at each other.

CINCHONA

I think my nipples have hardened.

SIGNET

Does that mean you want to stay?

They both nod yes.

SIGNET

Each of you -- galleys. Get the crap out of the way so we can get on with the gut-work. Go find a place to work -- I think you're both quite capable of making yourselves comfortable.

SIGNET talks to herself as she peruses her chart. CICISBEO and CINCHONA each begin to read, gesturing as they come across mistakes and then correcting them.

SIGNET

This stinking archeology -- this is what you have asked for, unpulsing Oleage -- and when the curtain rises -- whose head piked on the knife there? Whose head will it be? I always work out of a slaughterhouse -- it is always my point of origin. Healing, celebration, what you've said you want -- we'll see, we'll see -- the angel travels there, then to the village of one-eyed widows grieving -- go, my Hermes, go, go swiftly --

The three women continue working as the lights cross-fade to the bedroom. CINCHONA and CICISBEO exit.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **Scene 5**

SILL enters the bedroom, stands. SIGNET hits the knives so that they ring like chimes, then crosses to SILL.

SIGNET

Look at me, Sill.

SILL

Why did you ask me here?

SIGNET

Look at me.

SILL

Why would you want me h[ere] --

SIGNET

Look at this flesh -- does it still riddle you? It riddles me.

SILL

I am always riddled by you.

SIGNET

It is a poor, poor instrument, isn't it? Look at it.

SILL

Why have me come here when your broken angel can bless you hourly?

SIGNET

I am tired of the arc of the angel. I want you.

SILL

Whom you don't respect.

SIGNET

Great respect. Greater understanding.

SILL

Why do you want me here?

SIGNET

Because -- as I said -- this too, too sullied flesh is tired of her angel.

SIGNET steps across the bed and begins to undress SILL, who neither resists nor helps.

SIGNET

The angel has drained the flesh, Sill -- you, mirror, as it were, up to nature -- solid -- is what I need. I feel extracted -- I need infusion.

SILL

Your play infuses you.

SIGNET

Confuses me. I am gripped in ways I cannot even give tongue to.

SILL

Why hold me?

SIGNET licks him.

SIGNET

Thirsty for your salt. In ways you cannot imagine. Everything comes to me now as grist.

(SIGNET grabs his crotch)

Your mirror, as it were, is what I need.

SIGNET goes to unbuckle his pants, but SILL stops her and moves away.

SILL

You only call me back to move yourself forward --

SIGNET

Forward me, please!

SILL

Just because you're -- extracted -- and --

SIGNET

And?

SILL

Lonely.

SIGNET

And you?

SILL

And I? I come because I cannot stay away if unsheathed  
Signet says come.

SIGNET

And come is what I want you to do!

SIGNET starts to push him playfully.

SILL

There is nothing but this play for you, Signet.

SIGNET

Enough! Tonight, forget!

SILL

No room for anyone else --

SIGNET

I am making room for you -- come, conqueror! Rut! Rout!

SILL

And yet I still come to you -- like a puppy --

SIGNET

Give me your dog!

SILL

So that I can watch you leave me behind.

SIGNET

I like your behind!

SILL

When it is time to return to yourself.

SIGNET

You are too serious!

SIGNET wrestles SILL to the bed and climbs on top of him. As she does, DISMAS enters OLEAGE's office, takes a chair, comes downstage, and sits.

SIGNET

Much too long-faced -- both of us -- too restrained -- I need a bruise -- will you bruise me?

DISMAS

Ahem.

SIGNET looks up, tries to ignore.

DISMAS

Ahem.

SIGNET

Go away.

SILL

What?

SIGNET

Not you.

SILL

Then --

SIGNET

Nothing.

SILL

Who's onstage now?

SIGNET

I was hoping that you here would have -- expelled him by now.

SILL

Lover as septic system --

SIGNET

Stop it.

SILL

It's a role. Who?

SIGNET

Dismas.

DISMAS

I have come.

SILL

You spoke with The Butcher?

SIGNET

Today.

SILL

That explains everything.

SIGNET

Oleage thought I should. I shouldn't have.

SILL

You shouldn't have at all -- better to have two scorpions dance on your eyes.

SIGNET

But he knew I had to.

SIGNET puts on her coat, takes out her journal and a pencil, and walks into OLEAGE's office. SILL, both rejected and fascinated, watches as SIGNET interviews DISMAS.

SIGNET

I knew I had to. The Butcher sitting there like a squat toad. Venomous. Citizen Dismas. Is it the place? The time? A woman?

DISMAS

The "honorific."

SIGNET

"Citizen" -- I think it's a wonderful -- lubrication.

DISMAS

Hmm.

SILL

You always prick.



SIGNET

(a sliding gesture with her hands)

A social grease that mashes up the classes --

DISMAS

Grease is something you would like -- from what I have heard.

SIGNET

Yes, I would --

(to SILL)

-- grease made me think of you --

(to DISMAS)

-- yes, I would, from what I know.

DISMAS

Oleage -- "Citizen" Oleage -- said you wanted to interview me. That is not my way.

SIGNET

We are all in chartless waters here.

DISMAS

But he thought my consent would lend -- weight.

SIGNET

It is ponderous work we do.

DISMAS

So I gave consent.

SIGNET

Which brought you here.

DISMAS

Also know that I moved to kill your commission.

SIGNET

I appreciate your disdain -- and also for not carrying the day, which now allows me to eat!

SILL

Signet --

DISMAS

You need nothing from me. We are done.

SIGNET

Could not let him off so easily. But how can I not interview the President's brother? You loom -- large in our recent history. You shall loom equally large in my play -- centrally large --

DISMAS

You make it sound -- grander than it was. I did my duty.

SIGNET

A duty of such large proportions.

DISMAS

Duty is duty, large or small.

SIGNET

But if pressed -- I'm pressing you --

DISMAS

I see myself as part of a historical necessity.

SIGNET

You mean bones scalded in quicklime --

The air is filled with the feeling that if DISMAS thought he could get away with it, he would gut her on the spot for that remark.

DISMAS

You think of that image because it fits one fit to live in a slaughterhouse.

SIGNET

I work in a slaughterhouse.

DISMAS

A typical empty artistic gesture.

SIGNET

Any artist with a grain of soul knows he works on the killing floor.

DISMAS

All gesture -- all bloviate. A slaughterhouse! Maudlin and cowardly and liberal. You were not here when the real work needed to be done.

SIGNET

Real work executed by you --

SILL

Executed -- Signet --

DISMAS

You think you know -- but all known from your fashionable exile. Resistance! Rebellion! Death! That was work? They don't call it a "play" for nothing -- a sport for children in playpens. What?

SIGNET

(pointing to her temple)

I am watching that large vein there.

(to SILL)

Burst!!!

DISMAS

You are vulgar.

SIGNET

It is imperially inflamed.

(to SILL)

Spew!!!

DISMAS

Vulgar -- and suicidal.

SILL

Listen to him, Signet.

SIGNET

A writer, Citizen Dismas! Of "necessity" vulgar, mob-like -- isn't that how we act now -- the mob our master, the crowd our conscience?

DISMAS

Enough! Are there specific questions?

SIGNET

Will there be specific answers?

DISMAS

Do you have any specific purpose at all?

SIGNET begins to prow! around DISMAS.

SIGNET

When arms blown off from soldiers in the Last Great Battle go arching through the air because they obeyed Citizen Dismas to slam their bones against a wall that his generals warned had no strategic worth -- when pride and arrogance detach arms and send them arching -- then I am purposed to write the words "arching" and "arm" and "blood" and "bastard" and "executed" because those are the words the vulgar slaughterhouse writer requires. I have more.

DISMAS

Why did they ever select you?

SIGNET

Misplaced paperwork is my guess. Too late now -- I've got the thing half done. In my play -- you will understand this -- in my play I have a man who owns a slaughterhouse. He sings songs of utopia -- perfection -- to his butchers as the carcasses swing down the line. They hack while he tries to blind their hearts to the meat at the ends of their knives -- they all hate him. They may meat-hook him by the end of the play -- I am not sure what transcendence he will reach. Any resemblance to the living or the living-dead is completely coincidental.

SIGNET moves back to the bed, taking off her coat.

SILL

He will have you quartered and re-drawn.

SIGNET

He will make pieces out of me -- the same thing I want to make out of him.

SILL

I marvel at the stupidity of your courage.

SIGNET

I marvel at the courage of my stupidity.

SILL

Come here. Come here.

SILL takes her chin and moves her head as if looking for something.

SILL

Soft.

She slaps his hand away.

SIGNET

What?

SILL

I want to see if there is any Dismas left.

SIGNET hesitates, then offers her face again. He gently moves it.

SILL

Tilt this way -- then that --

SILL brushes her cheek softly.

SILL

He seems to have left behind only a little ash.

SIGNET

My face, Sill.

SILL

Yes.

SIGNET

It is not a beautiful face.

SILL

Not at peace, no.

SIGNET

Watching that toad today --

SILL

That would take its toll --

SILL goes to touch her face again, but SIGNET shakes her head no.

SIGNET

Not what you think. Not taking a toll. Not only that.

SILL

Then what?

SIGNET

Excited --

SILL

Excited?

SIGNET

Yes.

SILL

By that?

SIGNET

No, by this: that he, this envenomed toad, had to sit there and let me hover over him like a fly he couldn't eat -- this compressed power couldn't move until I moved --

SILL

If he had wanted to move --

SIGNET

I know --

SILL

-- he would have moved, Signet -- with a crush.

SIGNET

I know that! But for a moment -- a moment -- he couldn't  
-- constrained -- by me -- and in that moment --

SILL

What? What?

SIGNET

I felt what Dismas must feel often --

SILL

Brutal? Nothing?

SIGNET

Power. Having. The power. To make the word or the  
gesture stick!

SILL

Between someone's ribs.

SIGNET

In their eye if you have to!

SILL

Please!

SIGNET

What writer wouldn't want it?

SILL

That is an ugly thought.

SIGNET

Not you?

SILL

Never.

SIGNET

Never?

SILL

Have you forgotten I saw your toad total up the corpses into the quicklime?

SIGNET

Not forgotten that you prospered by staying.

SILL

Which at least let me give people some comfort.

SIGNET

Some healing. Some beauty.

SILL

And that's not for you?

SIGNET

I have never believed in beauty, Sill. Once you aim for beauty, then a deadness blooms in the brain -- "sweetness and light" take over, and then -- pfft! Happiness! Followed by betrayal!

SILL

And you think what -- you felt -- in that room -- with --

SIGNET

Go on, spit it out!

SILL

That you felt life?

SIGNET

What else is it?

SILL

I couldn't --

SIGNET

Speak truth to power, Sill -- you think that takes beauty -- comfort?

SILL

It doesn't take --



SIGNET

With beauty, you get to be -- laureate -- but that's as far as  
--

SILL

At least not a beast --

SIGNET

What does it take, Sill? Do you have any idea?

SILL

(pointing to her face)

Too much hate. It's twisting you.

SIGNET dances while she speaks, in a greater and greater frenzy.

SIGNET

It's not hate, you beautician -- it is rage! Fury! Don't you ever feel it? Don't your guts eat themselves alive every minute in this country? Don't they? You -- you think I want to be Dismas -- don't be dense! I don't want him -- I want his freedom! I want his capacity so that my words will purge the earth of his filth -- my gestures grind their bones to dust -- my spit like thunder, my shit like artillery, annihilate the whole damn corruption! Apocalypse fucking everything! Everything, Sill! Everything! Everything! That's not hate, Sill -- that's a blessing for us all!

SIGNET stops dancing, exhausted. SILL waits.

SIGNET

A blessing.

SILL

Look at you.

SIGNET

"Look at you." "Look at you": his comforting response! All you can offer the exhausted one? Look -- he stares at the beast; that look does not comfort me. And now he looks away -- so accommodating. Sill, Sill, why aren't you with me on this, Sill? Why aren't you writing this with me?

SILL

I can't --

SIGNET

You should, Sill -- you can, still -- Why are you backing away?

SILL

I need -- to breathe --

SIGNET

Don't! Don't!

SILL

Stay -- away --

SIGNET

I don't -- I don't mean you -- no, no -- Sill -- I am exhausted -- I am exhausted -- by -- doing -- being -- alone -- this is not why I wanted you to come here --

SILL

Get Sill to give you a good reaming -- that's why!

SIGNET

That's not why --

SILL

Stay -- back! Pneumatic Sill -- the laureate's piston -- gives you a good cleaning out so you can plow on to your next execution.

SIGNET

Sill, forgive me -- my only refuge -- not you included in --

SILL

Harder -- you're much harder -- like a rock against me -- destroy everything to save it -- crush -- me --

SIGNET

Sill --

SILL

I can't -- I can't -- There was a time --

SIGNET

There is always "there was a time" -- but what now?

BALKIS, as a vision, enters.

BALKIS

He's already said he can't, Signet. He won't. Don't waste your time. He has to leave.

SIGNET moves in closer to SILL, as if to ignore BALKIS.

BALKIS

There is no time to bring him back. There is only time for me.

SILL looks up and sees BALKIS. Their eyes meet.

SILL

Signet --

SIGNET

Don't talk.

BALKIS

(to SILL)

You know she has to.

SILL

(to BALKIS)

Let her rest.

SIGNET looks up in surprise, seeing that SILL has spoken to BALKIS.

BALKIS

There's rest enough in the grave.

SIGNET

You see him.

SILL  
(to SIGNET)

I'll stay.

BALKIS  
You can't. He can't. It will be a betrayal!

Slowly, painfully, SIGNET extricates herself from SILL and goes to BALKIS, clearly unwilling, just as clearly determined to leave.

BALKIS  
Thank you -- you helped her get empty enough to get back to me. How pneumatic of you.

In the studio, in a ghost light, CICISBEO and CINCHONA enter and move the knives so that they chime. SILL responds to the noise.

SILL  
Signet. Answer me this before you leave: Will the butchers meat-hook the owner or not?

SIGNET  
What?

SILL  
Of what kind of utopia does he sing to them? Why would they be angry to have in their ears a world without pain when the meat weighs so heavily on their bones? Unless they are in love with pain -- but why would any sane heart be like that? And yet -- there are such hearts with such a love. I know exactly their feel and pitch, their weight and fall. Because I know Signet.

SILL leaves but does not completely exit; he turns and looks at SIGNET, as if through a closed door. SIGNET crawls into the bed and pulls up the sheet. SILL hesitates, then completely exits. BALKIS comes to the bed.

BALKIS  
Broken angels always come first.

BALKIS kisses SIGNET on the temple, and exits. The knives chime.

\* \* \* \* \*

SCENE 6

The studio, with SECULOR, the leader of the church, and CISTA, the leader of the university, as well as GRIG, ANZAC, and SPUR, the three actors.

SECULOR

Where is she?

GRIG

She is not here.

SECULOR

And who are you?

GRIG

Actors.

SECULOR

Why are you here and she is not?

GRIG

To act, of course.

ANZAC

Is this like the catechism, Father? "Who is God?"

SECULOR

Act what?

ANZAC

"Why did God make me?"

SECULOR

Quiet!

ANZAC

I'd like to know.

SECULOR

Act what?!

CISTA

Bishop --

GRIG

The final draft --

SPUR

Version --

GRIG

Version, yes -- of the play.

SECULOR

Final version?

CISTA

She always uses "version," Bishop, not draft.

SECULOR

(referring to GRIG)

I was speaking to him.

CISTA

But now you've heard it from me.

SECULOR

I don't want to hear it from.

CISTA

That doesn't matter to me.

SECULOR

Actors and intellectuals --

CISTA

Theatre began in the church, Bishop Seculor.

SECULOR

Not in my church.

CISTA

It is not really your church.

GRIG

He is a hard --

ANZAC

-- row --

SPUR

-- to hoe.

SECULOR

My church, my rule. Look around you -- a slaughterhouse!

CISTA

I understand her point --

SECULOR

Her point is to lie. A laboratory for lies.

CISTA

And your church has never lied.

SECULOR

And they --

SPUR

Look at that finger!

SECULOR

-- are nothing but liars.

ANZAC

No Christ-like humility in that finger.

CISTA

The certainties of your Church must be so comforting.

SECULOR

Certainty provides no comfort -- because infidels --

GRIG holds up his index finger like a sword and does a pretend sword-fight with SECULOR's finger -- but does not actually touch SECULOR's finger.

GRIG

That un-Christly finger again!

SECULOR

-- never rest in their attack --

GRIG

En garde!

SECULOR

-- on faith.

GRIG

Back! Back!!

SECULOR grabs GRIG's sword-finger and would, if he chose, break it. GRIG freezes. Everyone freezes.

SECULOR

Shut. Up. You. Idiot.

CISTA comes over and disengages them without actually touching SECULOR, eases GRIG back.

CISTA

And the faithful must always feel persecuted to remain faithful -- is that the subtle point you wanted to make to the younger generation?

CISTA and SECULOR face each other, SECULOR wanting to say, but won't, "Don't you ever do that again," CISTA wanting to say, but won't, "Don't be such a buffoon."

SECULOR

Because we are now more than ever in the time of infidels.

CISTA

(indicating actors)

Him? Them? Hardly. I doubt they can spell "infidel" much less act like one. I would be more cautious around the ones wearing the political ties and policy suits than these children.

SPUR

I-N-F-I-



ANZAC whacks SPUR to shut him up. CICISBEO and CINCHONA enter SIGNET's bedroom. They help SIGNET get up and move her to the studio.

GRIG

I thought we could now speak freely without being crisped  
--

SPUR

And bone-broken --

ANZAC

As heretics.

SECULOR

One of the more toxic illusions in the days of infidels --

GRIG

What do you want of her?

SECULOR

I would tell you?

SPUR

Telling us is as good as telling her.

CISTA

Citizen Oleage told us that he thought we should talk to her  
-- about our views. It's not a state secret.

SECULOR

Everyone already knows our views.

CISTA

Knows your views --

SECULOR

And not yours?

CISTA

It is easier to understand the things that never change.

SECULOR

Like your being a gunsel.

CISTA

Much better than a bully.

ANZAC

Bishop, your views haven't changed since God whizzed in Paradise --

SECULOR

I'm leaving -- we're obviously not important enough for her to be prompt.

SPUR

We'll tell her you were here.

GRIG

Her areolas will be very hardened at having missed you.

As SECULOR and CISTA leave, SIGNET arrives.

SECULOR

Well.

CISTA

Citizen Signet.

SIGNET

(ignoring them, to the assistants)

Have you prepared everything?

CICISBEO

We have brought you the actors.

CINCHONA

We have made the copies of the scripts.

CICISBEO

The space is set.

CINCHONA

The time to run is ready.

SIGNET

Then let's get started.

SECULOR

Citizen Signet --

SIGNET

You're not needed.

SECULOR

Citizen Oleage --

SIGNET

I already know what I need to know about you both. It's not that hard.

ANZAC

Said so.

SECULOR

We've heard certain rumors --

SIGNET strikes the knives; they chime.

SECULOR

Citizen Signet!

CISTA

We are in a slaughterhouse, Bishop --

SIGNET

If you are so eager to contribute, then riddle me this, both of you, our institutional leaders of soul and mind: why did you -- why do you both still -- in the name of the patria, fuck over the beliefs you say you hold dear to those beating chunks you call hearts?

CICISBEO

Hit most --

CINCHONA

Palpable.

SIGNET

Time's up! Do not even bother to answer because I have already signed off on the answer -- you will hear it when the

wind blows it through your bung-holes on opening night.  
Go.

SECULOR goes to strike SIGNET but is restrained by CISTA -- this time,  
CISTA touches SECULOR.

SIGNET

A putrid certainty spews out --

THE THREE ACTORS

Spews.

SIGNET

-- at the speed of wrath --

CINCHONA & CICISBEO

(with an emphasis on the "r" sound)

Wrrrrath.

SIGNET

-- when uncertainty lances the boil.

CICISBEO

Certainty recoils from --

CINCHONA

The prick of truth.

SIGNET

Spur, you played a priest once --

SPUR

(to SECULOR)

I did play a priest once. In a play.

(indicating CISTA)

At the university. I did.

SIGNET

How many penances?

CISTA

(to SECULOR)

Let us go.

SPUR

A mess of 'em to atone for the mess. Goodbye.

CISTA

Now.

ANZAC

God bless!

GRIG

Good speed.

SIGNET

Let us move on to the opening night.

SECULOR and CISTA move to OLEAGE's office and sit.

ANZAC

Was that smart?

SIGNET

Anzac, if I had ever thought about "smart," I would have stayed in exile.

ANZAC

And deprived us of our mother's milk?

CINCHONA

It's always about breasts.

CICISBEO

And those that want them.

GRIG

What's wrong with breasts?

SPUR

And mother's milk?

SIGNET

There will be plenty of mammaries later if this works out.  
Are you all ready to suffer the slings and arrows?

DISMAS joins SECULOR and CISTA in OLEAGE's office.

GRIG

That "One for all" stuff?

SIGNET

It's not a joke -- we hang together or we hang separately.  
Cinchona, the scripts.

CINCHONA and CICISBEO go to a pile of thick manuscripts and hand them out, two of them to SIGNET, for a total of seven.

SIGNET

This has a short fuse. Its shrapnel is merciless and loving  
-- though they'll miss the part about "loving." Those two still  
carry weight, even if it is dead-weight. Now, actors --

SPUR

Saltimbancos --

ANZAC

Gammoners --

GRIG

Mountebanks --

CINCHONA

Charlatans --

CICISBEO

Artists --

SIGNET

Kindling for the bonfire -- let us begin

\* \* \* \* \*

## **Scene 7**

Lights crossfade out on the writing studio -- all exit, leaving the scripts there except for SIGNET, who takes one with her -- and up on OLEAGE's office. OLEAGE and SILL join the others, SILL standing just to the outside of the group.

SECULOR

Can you do nothing? Will the President not this?

OLEAGE

What, precisely, are you referring to?

SECULOR

Oleage -- functionary --

OLEAGE

"Minister," Bishop, never func[tionary] --

SECULOR

-- let me ask again.

DISMAS

It is all a disaster.

SECULOR

We heard it's finished!

OLEAGE

Almost finished.

SECULOR

You don't know?

OLEAGE

It has been the policy not to interfere --

CISTA

And the President -- he's been reading?

OLEAGE

What I pass on to him.

SECULOR

What you pass on to him? Not everything?

OLEAGE

He does not have time for everything --

CISTA

He's approved --

OLEAGE

What I have passed on to him.

CISTA

Word is, Citizen Oleage -- you know how these things get around -- that she has written something very disturbing --

OLEAGE

It has its -- theatrical -- elements.

CISTA

Not entirely respectful.

OLEAGE

Entirely theatrical.

SECULOR

Cista, shut up --

CISTA

It sounds very interesting --

SECULOR

You mince around like an arthritic mouse.

CISTA

Says the gout-ridden cat.

SECULOR

This play will serve up falsehoods and rumors in the service to what this tramp thinks is truth, and it will not celebrate us.

CISTA

We called her back in order to celebrate her --

SECULOR

So that she would celebrate us -- we've hired the whore, and she should --



CISTA

Your charity is astounding.

SECULOR  
(to DISMAS)

What is your brother going to do? Even he is not immune.

DISMAS sniffs several times.

SECULOR

What?

DISMAS

Did I just smell treason?

CISTA

He meant not immune to the poison of her pen -- his gout sometimes slurs his thinking --

SECULOR

Yes, of course -- civil unrest, the people encouraged to reach beyond themselves -- it will all flow from this play.

DISMAS

If it is seen.

SECULOR  
(to OLEAGE)

Is there an effort to do -- that?

DISMAS

It is more a matter of what he has already done.

SECULOR

Oleage? "Minister."

OLEAGE

The President was not entirely -- flattered by --

DISMAS

By what the state's money had bought for itself. You speak far too slowly.

OLEAGE

He, of course, wants to honor the society's artists -- he recognizes their importance to the on-going commitment to our democracy --

SECULOR

Enough of the speaking!

OLEAGE

No -- if I can be, for a moment, forward about the President's thoughts because they are his thoughts and thus important to us all.

DISMAS

My brother really does believe the tripe Oleage is going to say.

CISTA

Here, here!

SECULOR

But what does it matter?

DISMAS

Are you -- again -- implying that my brother does not matter?

SECULOR

No, no -- but what does it matter if a decision has now been made?

OLEAGE

The President honors artists of all kinds.

DISMAS

He does.

OLEAGE

He sees them as valuable citizens.

DISMAS

Believe it or not.

OLEAGE

But they should also realize that they are citizens as well  
as artists --

SECULOR

Ah -- now I see the groundwork --

OLEAGE

Yes.

CISTA

This is not -- appropriate.

SECULOR

Cista thinks he has to uphold academic freedom -- as if you  
ever had anything worthwhile at that nursery you run over  
there --

CISTA

This is not how it had been discussed.

DISMAS

Times change -- rapidly.

OLEAGE

In the affairs of state.

CISTA

So what is going to be done? Is the whole thing to be  
cancelled, after all the announcements?

DISMAS

Oleage.

OLEAGE steps out of the office and signals to SILL, who enters.

SECULOR

Ah! Well!

DISMAS

My brother, in his infinite wisdom, has taken a different path.

(to SILL)

You know why you are here?

SILL

Citizen Oleage --

DISMAS

You can drop that.

SILL

Yes. It was explained to me.

DISMAS

How quickly can you write? You know our timeline -- our deadline --

OLEAGE

The President is willing to shift the commission -- as you have already guessed.

SILL

There is not that much time --

DISMAS

How quickly, Citizen Sill?

SILL

Quickly enough for the purpose.

SECULOR

Will you start today?

SILL

Yes, of course.

SECULOR

Tell me --

SILL

Tell you what?

SECULOR

Why is she the way she is?

SILL

I wouldn't know.

SECULOR

Come, come -- you sleep with her. Slept with her, for years.  
Or are you saying that it is better not to know someone like  
Signet too well in order to sleep with her? I imagine she  
may exhaust a man rather quickly if he gets too close.

SILL

My feelings have nothing to do --

DISMAS

This is irrelevant -- if you want details, Seculor, go stick your  
eye to the keyhole. We have a disaster here we need to  
correct -- the people require that we do right by them, by  
all the sacrifices that they have made to bring to bear the  
freedoms we enjoy. Those are my brother's words, by the  
way. Not mine. Me? Throw her in jail, rape her a time or  
nine -- you can watch, if you want -- all right with you, Sill?  
-- and then shut off the light.

OLEAGE

We should also add that the President still wants to honor  
an artist --

DISMAS

Punctilious --

OLEAGE

That the people so clearly honor themselves --

DISMAS

He doesn't want riots, in other words.

OLEAGE

So her plays will be printed, the festival will bear her name  
--

SECULOR

But not her play.

OLEAGE

Not in its present form. It will be the laureate's play.

DISMAS

Act one in a week from the laureate.

SILL

In a week.

SECULOR

This is only appropriate -- she has forfeited her chance because she decided to follow her own path rather than the one offered her. An artist should be free, of course, but not too free -- otherwise, the memories all get twisted and the people become confused.

OLEAGE

I think we can probably leave it there.

DISMAS

In a week, Sill. And it better be good.

SILL leaves and walks downstage center, in darkness.

SECULOR

Think he's safe?

CISTA

He will produce the product. But it won't be very good.

DISMAS

No wonder he wants to empty himself into her -- hope to suck up a little of her fire by swimming in her muck. She does have fire, that much is clear. Right, Oleage? I've heard you champion her to my brother. "Brilliant," I think I heard you say. "Challenging." I wonder at your motives.

SECULOR

The thing about jail --

CISTA

I thought we were through with doing that.

SECULOR

She does seem to be asking for the -- honor.

CISTA

What pretext could we have now?

DISMAS

We have plenty of left-over pretexts, Cista. "Misuse of public funds," for one. "Reasons of state" always works. Look, she wants to demean us one way or another. Prove her superiority. It is ever thus with people like her -- she feels empty unless martyred. So let's oblige -- at least for a week or two. We'll chalk it up to the problems with transitioning into a democracy -- a hold-over from a former state of being troglodytes. We'll apologize profusely.

SECULOR

We can't overlook her offense.

CISTA

She's done nothing but speak her mind.

SECULOR

As if that were nothing. How soon --

OLEAGE

The President's signature has already dried.

DISMAS

A week or two -- for the show of it. If we are going to be called the sons of whores -- and we are -- we might as well act out our natures. It makes everything easier all the way around for everybody. Wouldn't you agree?

Lights crossfade from OLEAGE's office to downstage center on SILL. All exit except for OLEAGE, who goes to the writing studio, collects the left-behind scripts, and remains there. SIGNET joins SILL.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **Scene 8**

SIGNET

(slamming the script into his body)

Here.

SILL

It's finished.

SIGNET

And so am I. Read.

SILL

(opening the script)

"The stage: bare. In black. Descending, in a single light, is the angel, the 'broken angle.'"

SIGNET

Continue.

SILL reads silently. As he does, SIGNET moves as SILL reads. After several moments of this, SIGNET stops and looks at SILL, who looks at her with a mix of pain and amazement in his face.

SIGNET

Yes?

SILL nods.

SILL

Yes.

SILL begins the same dance, and for a few moments they dance the play together. There is a pause as they look clearly and cleanly at each other, then SILL exits reading. Lights crossfade to the writing studio as SIGNET enters.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **Scene 9**

OLEAGE

Are these all of them?

SIGNET

Yes.

OLEAGE

Is that true?



SIGNET

You question my honesty?

OLEAGE

If you were I, you would question me exactly the same.

SIGNET

Probably. Yes, those are all the copies extant.

OLEAGE

Everything here will be burned -- notes, notes on notes --

SIGNET

What is it with heretics and fire?

GROAT, the jailer, enters the writer's studio.

OLEAGE

Go.

GROAT tucks SIGNET's arms behind her and roughly escorts her downstage, OLEAGE carrying the scripts. GROAT tries to force SIGNET to kneel, but she resists until GROAT, with more force than he wants to use, gets her to buckle, and she falls on all fours.

OLEAGE

Don't force his hand -- it irritates him.

SIGNET slowly lifts up one leg, like a dog going to piss.

OLEAGE

Groat.

GROAT takes a script from OLEAGE and whacks SIGNET on the back of the head so that she is pitched forward.

GROAT

Disrespect like that irritates me.

SIGNET

Groat, is it?

GROAT

I don't have a last name, and only certain ones get to use my solo name, and you ain't one of them listed.

SECULOR, DISMAS, and CISTA enter. OLEAGE hands GROAT the scripts.

OLEAGE

You have made life so difficult.

SIGNET

I intended to.

DISMAS

What did you think you were doing?

SIGNET

Ah, The Butcher. Simple -- truth.

SECULOR

What you say is the truth?

SIGNET

I say what I feel, I say what I see -- what other truth is there?

DISMAS

Objective truth. Proper truth. Useful truth. You were commissioned --

SIGNET

To write the truth.

DISMAS

And not your sickness. Executions? Broken angels? A ballet with skeletons?

SIGNET

I wrote what I saw.

SECULOR

And all you saw was death? What does that say about you?

SIGNET

When everything has been built on the stumps of mass graves --

SECULOR

And who anointed you the desert's baptist?

SIGNET

Perhaps I was stupid to believe --

SECULOR

We wanted you to honor the progress we have made --

SIGNET

Truth is not an honor? A progress?

DISMAS

She will never understand -- egotistical beyond all warrant.

SECULOR

Clearly thinks a breed apart.

CISTA

She's simply saying --

SECULOR

Shut up.

CISTA

She's simply saying that she's acting the way we say we want to be about -- openness -- light --

SECULOR

Who ever said that what we say is what we want? That's for them, to keep their bellies quiet. And even she doesn't believe what she's saying. With ambition as spread-eagled as hers, you think she'll settle for being "the voice of the people"? Humbly vocalizing for the "little ones"? She likes the grind and bump of power as much as any of us -- why do you think she came back?

CISTA

Seculor, stop this.

SECULOR

You were going to teach us about truth and reconciliation  
-- well, we are all reconciled about the truth of you, and it's  
this: the new whore has to start at the back of the line.

CISTA

Seculor!

SIGNET

Apoplexy gives you some color.

GROAT raps her on the back of the head.

GROAT

Was that all right?

SIGNET

So -- inquisition over. What happens now? I suppose you  
won't just let it go forward as it is and let the people make  
up their minds --

DISMAS

That is not going to happen.

SIGNET

Everyone is expecting something --

DISMAS

And it will be "something" they will get -- we've already  
taken care of that.

OLEAGE

Citizen Dismas, perhaps not --

DISMAS

(over-riding him)

Perhaps yes. Sill will write what you should have written.

SIGNET

Sill?

OLEAGE

He's been commissioned with your commission.

SECULOR

Note the dismay of betrayal!

DISMAS

The people have no taste anyways --

SECULOR

Crestfallen!

DISMAS

-- they'll eat whatever's on the plate for that day. If it weren't Sill, they'd get hard for bear-baiting.

SECULOR

Do you notice how, deflated, she does not even try to argue with us, use her superior reasoning to bring us kneeling next to her?

SIGNET

Why bang my hips against a dry root?

SECULOR

I suppose that could describe Sill, now, eh? Citizen Signet, one last inquiry: I'd really be interested in knowing why you think artistic irresponsibility should be exempt from civic responsibility.

SIGNET

I refuse to be the mouse.

SECULOR

Dismas?

DISMAS

(to GROAT)

Break what you have to.

SECULOR

Crack, crack. Preferably in halves, quarters, and minces.

(to SIGNET)

Snap your pelvis like a wishbone.

SIGNET

As it was in the beginning.

SECULOR looks around and begins to laugh. DISMAS looks disgusted, CISTA dejected.

SECULOR

Now she's angling for sainthood. Careful, she might sprout wings at any moment! I can take the stink of rats -- but such stupid self-pity? I'd have thought a truth-teller would be more honest with herself.

SECULOR exits, followed by CISTA.

DISMAS

I told you. There is power, and then there is power. You have the right, if you want to call it that, to speak truth to it. Just don't be surprised when it bites your head off in return.

SIGNET

I thought this was the new democracy.

DISMAS

Just a different set of teeth.

DISMAS exits.

OLEAGE

You see what I am up against. I fought for you as much as I could.

SIGNET

And then you stopped.

OLEAGE

There was only so far to go.

SIGNET

That is the difference between us.

OLEAGE

Are you scared?

SIGNET

Only when your half-masted love of art stands so close to me. Then it's more sick than scared.

OLEAGE kneels on one knee next to her.

OLEAGE

You flatter yourself that I would even be half-risen for you. When you were our "official outlaw" dancing in my office, then you had some rough beauty about you -- slack-bodied as you were, I could imagine a squirt or two across your face. What would you think of that, Groat?

GROAT

Two-day old bread.

OLEAGE

Yes -- she is a stale. No smart remark? That is very smart of you.

OLEAGE rises and crosses slowly behind SIGNET to her other side, then kneels again. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small round gold container, perhaps with a jewel on its lid.

OLEAGE

Secular gave this to me -- supposedly ancient, but he needed a favor, and so easily parted with -- it contains chrism --

SIGNET

Oil and balsam --

OLEAGE

For the anointing of sacraments, yes -- hold her arms.

GROAT holds SIGNET's arms back, but she struggles so strongly that GROAT ends up putting his arm across her throat in a chokehold.

OLEAGE

Hold her head still.

As GROAT immobilizes SIGNET, OLEAGE opens the container and puts a small quantity of the chrism on his thumb.

OLEAGE

Did you forget?

OLEAGE, using the chrism, draws a large "X" across SIGNET's face, and then on her eyes, an echo of the "X's" he put on her eyes in Scene 1. Coloring could be in the chrism to make the mark visible on SIGNET's face.

OLEAGE

Was it sainthood you wanted? Well, then -- anointed be. Groat, something funny as well -- this is also how we mark condemned and decrepit buildings. How strange the world of symbols. Let her go.

OLEAGE and GROAT stand.

OLEAGE

As good as a squirt or two across the face, hey? She's yours if you want her.

GROAT

I prefer fresh bread.

OLEAGE

Well, then.

OLEAGE does a slight, mocking rendition of SIGNET's dance, then exits.

GROAT

When I leave, you will have no light.

SIGNET

Over-rated.

GROAT

The rats will gnaw at your fingertips, the floors are damp and never dry, you will hear screams the likes of which you will not want to remember -- that's the truth.

SIGNET

Do they pay you enough to do this work?



GROAT

To see the come-uppance of many has sometimes been salary enough. I hate pretenders.

SIGNET

Did you fight in the wars?

GROAT

I went where I was told. I was born to do as I was told. And I've been told to leave you be. So leaving you be commences now.

GROAT exits with the scripts.

SIGNET

Don't leave! I can still write in my head -- I can sketch it all out and remember it point for point if I concentrate, if I don't think -- This is the proper payment for telling the truth -- remember it all! Don't lose a detail, a stitch, a scintilla of meaning! I have done what I could do, more than kept faith with faith -- It is so dark -- it weighs -- Sill -- betrayed -- I will not bend!

(SIGNET breathes heavily)

I will not bend! I will not be bent. I will not -- I will not --

Light fades to black as SIGNET looks around her in great fear: it is the first time in the play we see her actually afraid.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Scene 10

SILL, CINCHONA, CICISBEO, GRIG, ANZAC, SPUR, and BALKIS, wings uncovered, gather center stage. In a ghost light, SILL arranges the actors to do the prologue of SIGNET's script. BALKIS stands on the stool, arms outstretched, and when the action begins, GRIG and ANZAC will lift him firmly under his arms and hold his outstretched hands so that he looks as if he is both suspended and crucified. SPUR, CINCHONA, and CICISBEO take up their positions. Suddenly CISTA joins the group -- there is a moment of hesitation, then SILL replaces ANZAC with CISTA. SILL begins gesturing as if encouraging people to gather around, and then indicates to the actors to begin. BALKIS is lifted and carried in a circle, then lowered to the floor. The remaining actors gesture and mouth lines. When done, SILL gets up on

the stool and tells the crowd what has happened to SIGNET; he overlaps the words with the people in the studio -- this can be timed so as not to interfere with each other.

All during this, DISMAS, SECULOR, and OLEAGE meet in the writing studio. The dumbshow takes place while they speak and ends when they end.

DISMAS

What do you mean that there was an "unaccounted for" script?

OLEAGE

Sill has it.

SECULOR

Sill is working for us.

OLEAGE

Sill is working for love.

SECULOR

Where is Cista?

DISMAS  
(to OLEAGE)

What do you mean?

SECULOR

Cista?

OLEAGE

Sill has taken actors and is going to the street corners doing the prologue -- part of it anyway. Then tells the story of Signet's signal punishment for the telling of the truth.

DISMAS

Stupidity of love. Love of shame.

SECULOR

I told Cista to be here.

OLEAGE

He is with Sill. There will be others. There already are.  
The crowds get bigger as the word of mouth lengthens.

SECULOR

What does your brother say?

DISMAS

What does my brother say?

OLEAGE

Your brother is an eminently practical man.

SILL

You all know her you all have come to respect her and --

OLEAGE

He knows the power of a rising popular opinion.

SILL

Know how she's fought on your behalf -- and now she's --

OLEAGE

Her name is known.

DISMAS

Fools to do any of this.

SILL

-- locked away by the state for the --

OLEAGE

He is pledged to the people.

SILL

-- crime of telling the truth, for trying to--

SECULOR

Can we jail Sill?

SILL

-- tell your story openly --

OLEAGE

Afraid the old days and ways are gone.

SILL

Demand freedom, demand --

OLEAGE

The President thinks the truth just might work.

SILL

-- to see the play!

SILL and all the others exit, off to another street corner.

OLEAGE

The script is out. Apparently Sill will not be fulfilling his commission. It has already, shall we say, gone into rehearsals. The writer may not be redeemable, but the situation is. I am going to tell the President that there is a unanimous opinion to go forward with the play as planned. That we have seen the error of the old ways. That the will of the people should always and forever be the touchstone of --

DISMAS

Enough.

OLEAGE

As a round of slaughter goes, this one is fairly benign. Shall I have her released?

DISMAS gestures assent. Lights go to full black. A tight spot opens on BALKIS center stage. SILL and the actors enter downstage in darkness. SIGNET walks into her own light.

BALKIS

Oh, yes, I'm the one she based that opening scene on, the "broken angle," she called me -- she called me that from the first day when I talked with her. I found her a bit forward, but I never doubted that she was going to do this play, and do it just the way she wanted it done. Actually, no, they were never supposed to move, but now they can, thanks to

Citizen Signet. Oh, I've had many offers -- which is good, given the way things have been going. My life is changed.

SIGNET

Did they like the play, Balkis?

BALKIS

In the beginning, standing in the courtyard waiting to get in, buzz-buzz, you know -- elites over there chittering away, the "salt of the earth" somewhat stunned by it all, most of them used to no more than jolly songs and rip-farting farces. Hard to say what was readily changeable.

SIGNET

But during it --

Lights come up on SILL and the actors.

SILL

They gasped.

SIGNET

Did they?

SILL

As if their lungs had collapsed.

SPUR

I heard sobbing from where I was on the stage.

SIGNET

Sobbing --

ANZAC

I smelled fear and release swirling off the loges.

SIGNET

They were raked.

BALKIS

Even the elites couldn't ignore anymore.

SIGNET

And after?

GRIG

Much can happen to a soul in three hours, Signet.

CINCHONA

Their hands burned in applause.

CICISBEO

Their eyes steamed.

SILL

Signet, their hearts changed.

SIGNET

How?

SILL

Who knows? Who cares? Every new direction is a new direction.

OLEAGE enters. BALKIS joins SILL and the actors. SIGNET stands alone.

OLEAGE

Congratulations, on behalf of the President.

SIGNET

I am sure he had a more comfortable seat than I did.

OLEAGE

For which he apologizes.

SIGNET

I have been dealt quite enough of his admiration.

OLEAGE

He wanted me to convey his gratitude at your having created exactly the art the people needed.

SIGNET

When all else fails, I suppose, let us tell the truth.

OLEAGE

Or at least a truth -- one that convinces people that they have heard the truth. It's a fairly exchangeable commodity, wouldn't you say?

SIGNET

Not to me.

OLEAGE

That statement in itself is not entirely true -- but in the afterglow we can let that pass. Of course, in thirty years, people may remember how this play felt to them -- they may talk about what it was like to be at its premiere -- even those who were never there but who want to borrow glory! -- but in thirty years no one will be moved by it. Now is the time to enjoy the moment when a society admits that it has grown up enough -- grown humble enough -- to accept its blemishes as the trumpets of its redemption. You -- the people's voice -- take your rewards now! Which brings me to a pleasant duty. The President is having a dinner in your honor, and I am here to invite you to his table. He is full of praise for what you have done. Will you join him?

SIGNET exchanges a look with SILL, and then the others.

SIGNET

Yes. I will join him.

OLEAGE exits, followed by SIGNET, who does not look back. SILL and the others look at each other. CINCHONA and CICISBEO take pencils out of their pockets and break them in half. Lights to black.

# Still Small Voice

## DESCRIPTION

A writer comes to the end of his latest literary production.

## CHARACTERS

- ROBERT WALSER, writer
- LISA WALSER, his sister/NURSE
- DOCTOR/CARL SEELIG/OFFICER 1
- ATTENDANT 1/INMATE 1/OFFICER 2
- ATTENDANT 2/INMATE 2/OFFICER 3

## SETTING

Small rooms in two asylums. A field covered in snow.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Scene 1

A small room in an asylum. An imaginary door to stage left, with an imaginary window in it. A desk, a chair, a bed, a dresser. A man at the desk: ROBERT WALSER. On the desk, writing paper and an artist's pencil sharpener. WALSER is hunched over the paper, writing in pencil. Everything he writes is in a very very small hand.

Observing him from the other side is DOCTOR and LISA WALSER, his sister. ROBERT stops, sharpens his pencil, continues.

SOUNDS of asylum can be heard: echoing voices in echoing corridors lined with tile, movements of equipment, etc.

LISA

Is this -- What is it that he's doing?

DOCTOR

It appears to us to be writing.

LISA

"Appears"? Have you checked?

DOCTOR takes a page from his pocket, unfolds it, hands it to LISA. LISA scans the sheet.



DOCTOR

It may be words, it may be code, we can't tell because, as you can see, he has drafted it so incredibly small.

They look at each other. DOCTOR gestures for its return. LISA hands it back.

LISA

It -- appears -- so -- painful --

DOCTOR

Whenever he handled a pen, his right hand -- his writing hand -- write/right -- heh! --

LISA

Please --

DOCTOR

Why does it matter? His right hand, his writing hand, cramped up --

LISA

Why --

DOCTOR

I have no idea -- I don't have time to be a writer. In any case, the pencil appears to leave his hand intact -- and we don't have to worry about ink this way.

LISA

He does this --

DOCTOR

All day. Every day.

LISA

Is he -- is Robert -- I must use his name --

DOCTOR

Is he what?

LISA

Is Robert ever --

DOCTOR

Come on.

LISA

Is he disruptive? I'm sorry for so many questions, it has been [a while] --

DOCTOR

They're of no concern to me. Up to now you have been his only visitor. No, there was one other -- no matter. By your question do you mean does he manifest --

LISA

I suppose I mean that.

DOCTOR

Then no. Quite the opposite.

LISA

And that would be --

DOCTOR

He often shows nothing. He's quite easy to handle.

LISA

So then why --

DOCTOR

It really has nothing to do with him. New management of the asylum and all -- he is just going to have to move because they want him to move, that is the order.

LISA

But do you think he should? In your pro[fe]ssional] --

DOCTOR

I am not of management, Miss Walser -- I'm just a doctor -- thus, no one will listen [to me] --

LISA

But in your professional opinion -- please -- it would be helpful --

DOCTOR

You know your brother's diagnosis.

LISA

It was I who brought him here --

DOCTOR

So then [you know] --

LISA

I did the paperwork --

DOCTOR

Ah --

LISA

Such endless -- signing -- and -- humili[ation] --

DOCTOR

You shouldn't upset [yourself] --

LISA

I've never believed it. The diagnosis.

DOCTOR

It's more or less the standard one we're asked to supply at Waldau --

LISA

Passive voice --

DOCTOR

You have caught me out.

LISA

You sound --

DOCTOR

I am -- I have never liked it or the passive voice --

LISA

Then why [do you] --

DOCTOR

I like food on my table as well as the next.

LISA

But in your professional opinion -- please -- it makes a difference --

DOCTOR

No it won't, not in times like these --

LISA

To me, it will [make] -- please --

DOCTOR

Well -- it seems to me --

LISA

Yes?

DOCTOR

It seems to me he suffers -- has suffered -- more from unhappiness than from anything else. Perhaps something in the family --

LISA

Our eldest brother died at fifteen.

DOCTOR

Ah --

LISA

You asked.

DOCTOR

Rhetorical -- not expecting an answer --

LISA

Another actually ended up here -- years ago -- now gone -- yet another --

DOCTOR

You should save this for the next --

LISA

Yet another did himself in -- Robert said he "did himself a good turn" -- how the body at the end of the rope --

LISA makes a "turning" gesture.

LISA

He's a writer, after all.

DOCTOR

I understand he was published --

LISA

Always the good child, Robert -- always polite -- even when he hates or angers --

They watch him scrawl.

LISA

How much [time] --

DOCTOR

You have a few days. He --

LISA

Robert.

DOCTOR

Robert has a few days.

LISA

No chance?

DOCTOR

Not under this new management.

LISA

May I?

DOCTOR pushes open a door -- the SOUND of an opening door. ROBERT does not look up.

DOCTOR

Come see me afterwards -- perhaps I can -- we can --

LISA

I do remember that you are not management.

LISA steps through. DOCTOR lets the door shut -- SOUND of shutting door. DOCTOR leaves.

ROBERT writes, truly unaware of LISA's presence. Perhaps we hear the SOUND of ROBERT's writing amidst all the other sound. LISA waits. Waits. Finally.

LISA

Robert.

The pencil pauses, held barely above the paper.

ROBERT

I believe I know who you are.

The pencil point touches the paper. ROBERT writes another line as he speaks.

ROBERT

But I am also choosing not to believe anything. Holding both beliefs at the same moment. That is freedom.

ROBERT scrawls some more, then stops, lays down his pencil.

ROBERT

There. I apologize for my rudeness, but you've come to Judas me, haven't you? I'm sorry -- that [was not] -- I am not ready for visitations that I have forgotten were coming --

LISA

I don't what to say, Robert. What to do. The owners have pled necessity --

ROBERT

I am not in this place to write but to be mad.

LISA

And that has cost the rest of us a great deal.

ROBERT

I told you none of that cost would come from me.

LISA

As if we could have let you stay in those filthy rooms, drunk, embarrassing --

ROBERT

Sometimes love, concern, and interest have eaten me up -- everyone so worried --

LISA

I'm very tired -- could you --

ROBERT

Of course, of course -- how coarse of me to not stop the course of --

ROBERT brings his chair to LISA, places it behind her.

ROBERT

Please sit --

LISA sits.

ROBERT

Did you notice how butler-like I placed [the chair] --

LISA

You say you're trying to be mad, but you are writing.

ROBERT

That -- yes -- it's --

ROBERT stares at the desk, then walks to it and writes another line.

LISA

The doctor showed some of it to me. I couldn't read --

ROBERT

I let him take a sheet because he is an autumn wind with sticky fingers. Well, it is what it is. Whatever it is -- it reminds me --

ROBERT goes silent.

LISA

Yes? Of?

ROBERT

That I am, frankly, a Chinese -- I am not going to go.

LISA cries -- not wails, not sobs.

ROBERT

If it knew how things would end, fruit perhaps would have little desire to ripen.

LISA

(drying her eyes)

Always the cryptic one, Robert.

ROBERT

Not like Mama.

LISA

I have not thought of her in a long time. I haven't. Have you?

ROBERT

I prefer to sit here in the simplicity of my wants. I have gotten good at that -- I have perfected -- Remember, I am a Chinese.

DOCTOR enters. He looks at them through the door. They do not notice him.

LISA

Robert --

ROBERT

No.



LISA

Robert --

ROBERT

This is my job application -- well, not really, but in my book -- do you remember this story in my book? You read my book, right? Right?

ROBERT holds himself as if reciting.

ROBERT

"Esteemed Gentlemen" -- that's how we had to address the managers of the bank when I worked there -- "Esteemed Gentlemen" -- though they really weren't -- never mind --

LISA

You cannot imagine how much pain --

ROBERT

"Esteemed Gentlemen" -- I always put everything in my writing that happened to me -- "Esteemed gentlemen... Large and difficult tasks I cannot perform, and obligations of a far-reaching sort are too strenuous for my mind.... Assuredly there exists in your extensive institution, which I imagine overflowing with main and subsidiary functions and offices" --

LISA

We have to make --

ROBERT

Ssh -- I'm applying -- "Assuredly there exists in your extensive institution work of the kind that one can do as in a dream? Yes?" That has always been my job application, Lisa.

LISA

Robert!

ROBERT

(ignoring LISA)

"Esteemed gentlemen, I am, to put it frankly, a Chinese; that is to say, a person who deems everything small and modest

to be beautiful and pleasing, and to whom all that is big and exacting is fearsome and horrid."

ROBERT and LISA lock eyes.

ROBERT

I will not go.

Two ATTENDANTS join DOCTOR.

LISA

You will go whether you want to go or not. They will make you go [whether you] --

ROBERT kneels in front of LISA, picks up her right foot, takes off her shoe.

ROBERT

You have such small feet -- always -- they hardly make a dent on the skin of the earth -- not like mine -- big knobby parentheses --

ROBERT takes her other foot, takes off the shoe.

ROBERT

And this one -- on foot is always the best way to travel -- stay close, not go far -- though, with enough time, everything is within walking distance -- though one doesn't have to --

LISA just stares at ROBERT.

ROBERT

That -- that is a Mother look.

(lets her foot go)

Rage mixed with sugar and then squeezed in a garlic press until the very piss of it eats away the lock to the family mausoleum and all secrets are made to move away.

ROBERT replaces the shoe on one foot, then the other. He holds the feet in the palms of his hands.

ROBERT

These are feet worth making a new world for. Don't be angry with me.

LISA delicately lifts her feet out of ROBERT's hands and puts them on the floor. She touches his cheek.

LISA

Never angry, Robert -- given all we've -- everything we've  
-- but for those of us who have to live in the world that you  
don't like --

DOCTOR knocks on the door -- a SOUND like doom. ROBERT and LISA look up. The two ATTENDANTS stick their faces in the window. DOCTOR knocks again. LISA goes to the door, opens it. They enter. ROBERT remains kneeling.

DOCTOR

What has he decided?

ROBERT

You can fling your words at me directly, if you'd like -- here,  
look at me -- my complacent burrs will catch every syllable.

DOCTOR

(ignoring him)

What has he decided?

LISA

You barely gave us time to [discuss] --

DOCTOR

What was there to discuss? The management --

ROBERT

Lisa?

LISA and DOCTOR look at ROBERT. ROBERT holds up his hand in a "halt" gesture.

ROBERT

(to LISA)

"Esteemed gentlemen" -- eh? -- you know, "esteemed  
gentlemen" -- perhaps I could make my job application to  
them.

DOCTOR

What is he talking about?

ROBERT

I am talking about Chinese, of course.

DOCTOR

Look, the decision has already been made -- I told you that  
-- it's a matter of moving forward, not [back] --

LISA

He will go, it's just that --

ROBERT again holds up his hand in a "halt" gesture. He rises. The two ATTENDANTS take a step forward. ROBERT sits at his desk, picks up his pencil, hunches over, and writes -- all done in movements both deliberate and robotic.

No one moves -- they watch ROBERT write.

ROBERT

(looking up)

I would prefer not to.

ROBERT goes back to writing. DOCTOR makes an gesture to the ATTENDANTS. They flank ROBERT. ROBERT writes. They grab him under the armpits. Like a spasm, but also with calculation, ROBERT embraces his papers against his chest and clutches his pencil, clamps his arms against his side. The ATTENDANTS work to lift him out of the chair.

ROBERT

Wait!

LISA

Let him go.

The ATTENDANTS look at DOCTOR, who nods. They let him go. ROBERT lands back in his chair. ROBERT puts down his papers, arranges them neatly. He picks up the pencil sharpener and, with choreography, puts it in his pocket.

ROBERT

This is my muse.

ROBERT picks up his papers, clamps them against his chest, clamps his arms against his sides, and assumes a fearful expression.

ROBERT

I would prefer not to, but -- all right.

The ATTENDANTS hesitate. To encourage them, ROBERT loosens his arms a bit so that they can, if they choose to, replace their hands under his armpits. DOCTOR gestures impatiently. The ATTENDANTS grab him again and lift.

ROBERT resists, but not really -- he fights, but without any real hope of winning. He VOCALIZES his grief, but while part of the grief is honest, part is also feigned -- a show of grief. In short, the "dragging of Robert from the room" should be choreographed to feel both tragic and comedic -- in other words, opera.

ROBERT is removed from the room. DOCTOR and LISA do not speak at first.

LISA

You didn't [have to] --

DOCTOR

Important to make room for the truly ill --

LISA

My brother is --

DOCTOR

Is what? Ill?

DOCTOR takes ROBERT's writing out of his pocket and hands it to LISA.

DOCTOR

This is your brother. Who can read that? It looks like code or just hen-scratchings. Artists.

DOCTOR puts an unwanted hand on LISA's shoulder.

DOCTOR

Perhaps you need some comfort after all of this --

LISA grabs DOCTOR's hand and mashes it really hard against her breast. He tries to pull away, but she will not let him. Finally he manages to get his hand back. He grabs her by the throat, but before he tightens his grip, she drives the heel of her hand against his forehead, between the eyes. He lets go. The SOUNDS of their struggles and breathing are amplified by the bareness of the room.

LISA

Comfort?

LISA blows her nose into her hand and wipes it on his jacket. DOCTOR leaves, the SOUND of the banging door like doom finished. LISA wipes her nose clean with the sleeve of her coat, reaches inside her coat to adjust her clothing.

LISA

Comfort.

LISA looks over the sheet of ROBERT's writing. She tears off a small corner of it, places it on her tongue, chews it, swallows it. The SOUND of a voice-filled wind fills the room.

Transition.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Scene 2

The common room at Herisau asylum, 1936. A desk, a couch, a dresser, chairs. A window, perhaps indicated by a hanging frame. Draped on the couch is a coat and hat.

On the desk, brown paper lunch bags and any number of other craft items -- pipe cleaners, beads, etc.

SOUND of branches knocking against a window and wind outside. SOUND of radiator pipes knocking, hissing steam, footsteps in echoing hallways.

ROBERT stands in the middle of the room. INMATE 1 and INMATE 2, both wearing dirty white lab coats, loose dark pajama trousers, and slippers, watch him. At first ROBERT is still, then he flings his right arm over his head and falls to the floor on his back. SOUND of a body falling on hard ground. ROBERT doesn't move.

ROBERT  
(from his back)

That won't do.

INMATE 1  
Why or why not?

ROBERT  
The right arm -- I cannot appoint the right arm toward Biel in  
the proper fashion if I --

INMATE 1 points to the west with his right arm -- which is not the direction  
of ROBERT's arm. He leaves his arm extended.

INMATE 1  
His appointed pointing -- see what a compass I am.

INMATE 2  
So just squiggle your body around.

ROBERT  
What?

INMATE 2  
Squiggle. Your. Body. Arm's gotta go where the body falls.  
Physics of your basic [type] --

ROBERT  
No the arm doesn't.

INMATE 2  
Yes the arm [does] --

ROBERT  
(sitting up)  
But even if yes the arm, such post-fall recalibration will not  
serve my point.

INMATE 1 bends his outstretched arm to touch the top of his head.

INMATE 1  
The only point you come to comes at the top of your head --

INMATE 2

And what would your point be, asking the most boring of follow-up questions.

(to INMATE 1)

You can bring it to rest.

INMATE 1 rests his right arm in his lap, as if it were broken. ROBERT gets up.

ROBERT

I was never able to make a proper noose for myself. So, this must be the way.

ROBERT flings his right arm up over his head again, but this time falls at the angle indicated by INMATE 1. SOUND of a body falling on hard ground. INMATE 2 goes to the window, looks out, looks at ROBERT, looks out again.

INMATE 2

You threw it more west this time, more Biel-ish.

INMATE 2 continues to stare out the window.

ROBERT

(from the floor)

How was the form?

INMATE 1

Do such outward shows matter [to you] -- if you do it in the depths of alone, who [will see] --

ROBERT

How was the form?

INMATE 1

You looked exactly like a man condemned.

INMATE 2

Like an unsequenced old building in the town of Biel.

ROBERT

My sister persists there. In Biel.



INMATE 2

It is a rabid day out there. So forcefully "day."

INMATE 1 points upward with his left arm. SOUND of an arm pointing upward.

INMATE 1

Sun up.

Points to the floor with this left arm. SOUND of an arm pointing downward.

INMATE 1

Sun down.

Points up again with his left arm, but this time with less energy and a smaller SOUND.

INMATE 1

Sun up.

INMATE 1 rests his left arm in his lap, as if it were broken. SOUND of an arm being retired.

INMATE 1

That's it for this arm. I'm into my amputee regime for the moment. If you have any clues about that, I'd be happy to eat them out of your hand. Whenever you wished to offer [them] --

ROBERT sits up, his right arm pointing upward. INMATE 2 is staring out the window. INMATE 1 stares at ROBERT.

ROBERT

(drops his arm)

Doesn't feel right. Doesn't feel like the proper noose yet.

ROBERT gets up.

ROBERT

(to INMATE 1)

None, I'm afraid. But I appreciate your continued call for. It's been a while since I've been audienced. I'll try it again anon.

(to INMATE 2)

Shall we?

INMATE 2

(staring out the window)

Does that ever appeal to you?

ROBERT rummages around the material on the desk.

ROBERT

"That" out there? Or do you mean Biel? Where is my --

ROBERT picks up a pencil and a pencil sharpener. He sharpens the pencil.

INMATE 2

I mean anything outside a window. Meaning outside a window.

INMATE 1

Not again.

ROBERT

Doesn't exist --

INMATE 1

Here we go --

ROBERT

-- as far as I've been able to recollect any of what others call "outside." Shall we?

INMATE 2

It has been, of late, to me. Appealing.

ROBERT lets his head fall. INMATE 1 shakes his head.

ROBERT

Don't.

INMATE 1

Don't.

INMATE 2

The day is being so hard the day out there, how can I not?  
I have memories.

ROBERT

Fight memories.

INMATE 1

They're just viruses, over-stimulated algae --

INMATE 1 shakes out his arms -- SOUND of arms being shaken out.

INMATE 1

Regime of the amputee over.

(turns to INMATE 2)

Now --

INMATE 2 turns to them, and they see he is crying -- not wails, not sobs.  
Neither ROBERT nor INMATE 1 make a move.

INMATE 1

Language has turned into liquids.

ROBERT

Come here.

INMATE 2 walks to ROBERT.

ROBERT

Roll it up.

INMATE 2 rolls up his right sleeve. His forearm is wrapped in a strip of torn white sheet covered in writing. ROBERT takes the arm and reads it until he sees what he wants.

ROBERT

Ah. "Freedom demands you be nothing to anybody. All freedom asks is that the only thing to which you offer your obedience is freedom. In everything else, obedience turns you into a xylophone for terror and a soft-tissue adjunct to machinery."

ROBERT looks at his words for a moment, dots an "i" or crosses a "t" with his pencil.

ROBERT

Roll it down.

INMATE 2 rolls down the sleeves. He wipes his eyes on the sleeve.

ROBERT  
(to INMATE 1)

Open it.

INMATE 1 opens INMATE 2's lab coat. SOUND of buttons going through cloth.

INMATE 2's torso is swathed in a torn sheet covered by miniscule writing. ROBERT circles it until he finds what he wants, dots an "i" or crosses a "t" with his pencil.

ROBERT

Can we do more today?

INMATE 2 shakes his head no. ROBERT gestures to INMATE 1, who re-buttons the coat. SOUND of buttons going through cloth. ROBERT puts the pencil in his pocket. Then, without warning, he flings up his left arm and falls to the ground. SOUND of a body hitting.

INMATE 2

Perfect.

ROBERT  
(sitting up)

All it needed was the left arm to free it up.

INMATE 1

Form was good, too.

ROBERT does it again just as CARL SEELIG enters, hat, coat, and briefcase in hand. INMATE 1 and INMATE 2 retreat to the desk, where they make hand puppets out of the papers bags and other materials.

SEELIG

Robert? Robert?

ROBERT

I'm not dead. I am doing cartography -- finding the latitude  
of my longitude --

SEELIG puts down his briefcase, takes a pencil and a pad of paper out of  
his pocket, and writes something down.

ROBERT

(from his back)

I am setting in motion the last of my last will. Is he writing?

INMATE 1

Yes.

INMATE 2

The vulture has landed.

ROBERT

Ah. Carl?

SEELIG

Um, yes?

ROBERT

I will pretend not to notice that you are recording things  
issuing forth from this fossil. Nor will I make fun of you for  
wasting your life. And now --

ROBERT sits up.

ROBERT

"The city was fine and void."

SEELIG writes.

ROBERT

"How quickly that is said!"

From his seated position, ROBERT flings up his left arm and falls back.  
SOUND of a half-body falling back.

ROBERT

"The world was as full of life as ever and as fair as in its fairest hour. Gently I crept away and went out onto the street." My amanuensis?

SEELIG

Wait -- yes --

INMATE 1 and INMATE 2 get up from the desk with paper bag puppets on their hands and walk toward SEELIG. The puppets speak.

INMATE 1

(in a voice)

I hear the futile untesticled Robert Walser is in Herisau.

INMATE 2

(in a voice)

I hear the leeches have gathered to feed in chorus.

SEELIG

Really --

INMATE 2

And they know how to write.

INMATE 1

Such smart leeches.

SEELIG

Robert -- Robert --

ROBERT sits up.

ROBERT

In an asylum, you take your company however it comes, Carl, cooked or crudités.

INMATE 1 and INMATE 2 circle SEELIG.

INMATE 1

Look at him suck it in.

INMATE 2

Do you think he'll record our deathless loopings?

INMATE 1

No.

INMATE 2

Because we won't be able to afford him a legacy that comes with food and contracts.

INMATE 1 turns his puppet to ROBERT.

INMATE 1

(pointing to window)

Do you have any idea what is going on outside?

INMATE 2

(in SEELIG's face)

Heil!

SEELIG

How would you know?

INMATE 2

Heil!

SEELIG

Stop that!

INMATE 1

Just because I'm a paper bag doesn't mean that newspapers don't make it past the window sashes. My button eyes can read.

SEELIG

Then why are you here if you're so well-[informed] --

INMATE 1

Heil!

SEELIG

Now you stop --

INMATE 2

With cartography being Hitlerized, with Mein Kampf stuck in their teeth, can you tell me where windows start and end, where lunacy remains unleaking, sewn shut in a cramped diagnosis --

INMATE 1

-- and deposited in bare locked rooms that wear our names?

INMATE 1 & INMATE 2

Robert! Practice!

As if on cue, ROBERT throws his left arm in the air and falls back. SOUND of hundreds of ravens flying away.

ROBERT

(from his back)

"The window is there for a reason -- it prevents families and dictators from killing you with their compassion -- "

SEELIG hesitates, but only barely, before he scribbles in his notebook.

ROBERT

(from his back)

Is he --

INMATE 1 & INMATE 2

Warning, warning, literary executor in hot pursuit with the fang of his pencil poised to wreak posterity on the world!

NURSE enters, taking short steps, looking around. She comes into the common area. Everyone looks at her except ROBERT, who is on his back. INMATE 1 and INMATE 2 take their puppets from their hands, retreat to the desk.

NURSE

I'm sorry -- I heard --

SEELIG

It's nothing --

ROBERT sits up.



ROBERT

Lisa?

NURSE

No -- no -- who is Lisa? Is everything all right?

SEELIG

It's fine.

ROBERT

You could be Lisa.

NURSE

But I'm not. I just started today --

SEELIG

We're all right here --

(to ROBERT)

I have to talk [with you] --

ROBERT ignores him, walks to NURSE.

ROBERT

What is happening out there?

NURSE

Out there? That depends on which "out" and "there" --

ROBERT

So multiples.

NURSE

Well, that goes without saying.

ROBERT

But I just said it.

NURSE

Which is, perhaps, why you are who you are.

ROBERT gets two chairs, sets them down. He sits. He indicates for NURSE to sit, which she does. SEELIG kneels in back of them, pad and pencil in hand.

ROBERT

You are sure you are not Lisa.

LISA

Quite. Sure.

ROBERT

Do you know who Lisa is?

LISA

I don't know who you are. As I said --

ROBERT

Let me compose an erratic but moving aria that will sift your spirit but not prick your heart around.

ROBERT gives NURSE a wry face, indicating SEELIG in the background. NURSE smiles. SEELIG is ready. INMATE 1 and INMATE 2 exchange puppets, put them on, mime a conversation.

ROBERT

"From out of the dimness of the common room came the esteemed poet, accompanied by the nurse. I was struck by his childlike expression, red-flushed cheeks, blue eyes, and trim, golden mustache. He was already turning gray at the temple. His well-worn collar and necktie were set somewhat crookedly, his teeth not in the best condition. When the nurse wanted him to button the top button of his vest" -- go, do it --

NURSE

"Sir, would you button the top button of your vest?"

ROBERT

(fling up left arm)

"When the nurse wanted him to button the top button of his vest, Robert rebelled: 'No! The top button must remain open!' He spoke in a melodious Barndutsch, as he had no doubt spoken in his youth in Biel."

(whispering to NURSE)  
How's he doing?

NURSE  
(looking at SEELIG)  
He's a very busy man.

ROBERT  
Fighting against the faultiness -- saltiness -- of memory.  
You could be Lisa. You have her look.

INMATE 1  
It's his sister!

INMATE 2  
Who lives close by and never comes!

INMATE 1  
A --

INMATE 1 & INMATE 2  
-- bandoned.

ROBERT  
That's not --

INMATE 2  
Liar.

(to SEELIG)  
Hey, Pencil! How's it feel to have your face deep in the  
trough, tongue-up the lady's skirt, open-mouthed down the  
man's trousers --

INMATE 1, bag puppet on hand, runs to SEELIG and circles him as he  
shouts.

INMATE 1  
Heil! Sieg Heil! Heil! Sieg Heil! Heil! Sieg Heil! Heil! Sieg  
Heil!

SEELIG takes a swipe at INMATE 1 but misses him. NURSE half-rises  
to intervene, but ROBERT holds out a hand to stop her. INMATE 1 and  
SEELIG continue their dance.

INMATE 1

Heil! Sieg Heil!

ROBERT

It's your first day. Don't spoil it by being official -- not yet, at least --

INMATE 1

Heil! Sieg Heil!

NURSE

A thing a brother might say. But I am official, even if I only [started] --

ROBERT

Your noose, then.

NURSE rises. Her voice surprises in its strength.

NURSE

Stop it. Right. Now.

INMATE 2 stands up at the desk, puppet on hand, the puppet's face agape. INMATE 1 and SEELIG look at NURSE.

SEELIG

Thank you --

NURSE ignores him. She holds out her hand, waggles her fingers: give me the puppet. INMATE 1 hesitates -- or makes a show of hesitating -- then slinks to NURSE, places the puppet in the palm of her upturned hand. NURSE examines it, then puts it on her own hand.

NURSE

Have you no manners?

INMATE 1

Not while I'm here --

NURSE

Don't sass me! Just because you're committed doesn't mean you don't have a human layer.

ROBERT

They are all too human.

NURSE turns the puppet to ROBERT.

NURSE

Brother, please --

ROBERT smiles. NURSE turns back to INMATE 1.

NURSE

Just because you're diagnosed does not mean that  
"civilized" deserts you. Let your dreams use up the terror --  
inside the window, you will speak not like the ape you came  
from. Do we have an understanding?

NURSE makes the puppet purse its lips. When INMATE 1 does not answer,  
NURSE raises the puppet up, directs its attention to INMATE 2.

NURSE

Do we?

INMATE 2

(through the puppet)

Yes!

NURSE

Good.

INMATE 1

Yes! I said it first, I meant to say it first!

ROBERT

There go my carefully crafted rebels --

NURSE

Brother --

(to INMATE 1)

And sorry as well to --

NURSE indicates SEELIG.

INMATE 1

But for that I'm not.

NURSE

Then you are the ape you think you're not.

INMATE 2

(ape sounds)

Oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo--

NURSE

Maybe you should be up a tree -- maybe we should use you  
for an experiment --

INMATE 1 looks at ROBERT, who shrugs, then at SEELIG. He indicates  
to NURSE to hand him the puppet, which she does. INMATE 1 puts it on.

INMATE 1

(through puppet)

Sorry.

INMATE 1 moves to the window, where he and the puppet stare outside.

INMATE 1

(in a whisper)

Sieg Heil, Sieg Heil --

SEELIG

Thank you --

NURSE

(to ROBERT)

I have to go -- I'm not supposed to -- and I'm also supposed  
to --

ROBERT

Visitations are so rare --

NURSE

I hope your sister --

ROBERT

My sister also hopes -- I assume --

INMATE 2  
(from puppet)

I'm not an ape!

NURSE  
(to INMATE 2)  
Then my work here is done.  
(to ROBERT)

I have to [go] --

ROBERT  
Lucky are all the others, then.

NURSE leaves; ROBERT watches her leave. The puppets of INMATE 1 and INMATE 2 watch her leave.

SEELIG  
Robert -- Robert --

ROBERT stares at where the NURSE left, does not look at SEELIG. INMATE 1 and INMATE 2 also stare.

SEELIG  
Robert --

ROBERT  
Yes --

SEELIG  
You know I've been gathering --

ROBERT  
Like a pack rat -- *neotoma cinerea*, I think -- shiny worthless objects -- And?

SEELIG  
Do you have any more?

INMATE 1 and puppet turn back to the window.

INMATE 1  
(whispering)  
Sieg Heil Sieg Heil Sieg Heil Sieg Heil --

ROBERT  
Of?

SEELIG  
Could you look at me?

ROBERT  
I like what I'm seeing.

SEELIG  
You're not looking at [anything] --

ROBERT  
Annunciations.  
(looks at SEELIG)  
That's why you are doing what you do.

SEELIG  
All right --

ROBERT  
(back to staring)  
That's the answer I would expect.

SEELIG  
Do you? Have?

ROBERT looks directly at SEELIG.

ROBERT  
Writings?

SEELIG  
Yes -- yes --

INMATE 2 drifts toward them, puppetless.

ROBERT  
I told you -- I have stopped that nonsense -- I'm not here to  
write but to be mad --



INMATE 2 drifts in closer. INMATE 1 continues to whisper, perhaps even marches a little back and forth. ROBERT shoots INMATE 2 a look. INMATE 2 stops.

SEELIG

You're absolutely sure? I have only your interests at heart --

ROBERT

If I had an epitaph tattoo'd across the small of my back --

SEELIG raises his notebook.

ROBERT

-- don't you dare --

INMATE 2 lifts the notebook out of SEELIG's hand. SEELIG goes to retrieve it, but INMATE 2 keeps it out of reach.

ROBERT

-- most likely would have to curve around my love handles

-- thank you -- and probably across the top of my gluteus

-- are you listening? --

SEELIG faces ROBERT. INMATE 1 stops whispering. He puts the puppet on the desk and joins INMATE 2. INMATE 2 rips a page out of the notebook and hands it to INMATE 1, who tears it up into intricate bits with precise movements. ROBERT does nothing to stop INMATE 1. SEELIG's body language shows that he wants to stop this, but he does nothing.

ROBERT throws his left arm in the air but does not fall.

ROBERT

"I would wish it on no one to be me. Only I am capable of bearing myself. To know so much, to have seen so much, and to say nothing, just about nothing." It would not have to be a large headstone.

SEELIG can stand it no more. He rips the notebook out of INMATE 2's hands. He puts the pencil to the paper and struggles to write, puts down a word, maybe two, but nothing more comes.

SEELIG  
(to ROBERT)

Could you [repeat] -- please --

ROBERT lets his left arm fall.

ROBERT  
The race is over. You have to go. The winter has come.

SEELIG  
Please --

INMATE 1  
(ape sounds)  
Oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo--

INMATE 2  
Stay outside the window.

ROBERT  
Sorry. Winter.

SEELIG  
Yes -- yes -- it the nature of geniuses to be difficult -- it is the  
difficulty that makes this work so --

ROBERT  
Not all over my headstone, please -- leave it for the galley-  
proofs when I have been sanitized. And thanks.

SEELIG gathers his materials, readies himself to go.

SEELIG  
You may not want it --

ROBERT  
Who says?

SEELIG  
-- but I will make sure you get it --

ROBERT

It will be too late and stale -- but that will not bother you in the least, will it, since you trade in what you borrow.

SEELIG stares at ROBERT, then can't constrain himself. He drops his briefcase and pulls a small notepad and pencil out of his pocket, scribbles down ROBERT's last words, stows them away, leaves.

ROBERT and the INMATES say nothing. ROBERT walks to the couch, puts on the hat and coat lying there.

ROBERT

I have to go outside the window.

INMATE 1

But -- sieg heil --

INMATE 2 takes off his lab coat and trousers. He is entirely swathed in ROBERT's writing. ROBERTS looks at him with what can only be called affection.

ROBERT

All right.

ROBERT pulls a pencil out of his coat, kneels, finds an empty space near the left ankle, and writes something. He puts the pencil away, rises. INMATE 2 re-dresses himself.

ROBERT

Finished, then --

Without preface, INMATE 2 embraces ROBERT, then moves away.

INMATE 1

The window is not for everyone.

ROBERT

"No! The top button must remain open!"

They laugh.

Transition.

\* \* \* \* \*

### Scene 3

Winter. Light of a winter's afternoon. A field covered in snow. ROBERT dressed and standing. Staring. Breathing in and out.

Then strong pain crosses his face.

ROBERT

Annunciation --

More pain. He fights it off, goes back to staring. Pain again. He fights it off. He takes off his hat, stares. And then it hits. ROBERT throws up his left arm, hat in hand, and falls. Three OFFICERS in dark coats and hats enter; one OFFICER has an old camera. They catch his body and lower it in a slow arc to the ground. SOUND of a long exhale. His left arm is thrown over his head; his hat lies a meter away.

When ROBERT's body is at rest, two OFFICERS pull out notepads and take notes of the death scene. The third OFFICER takes pictures.

NURSE enters, wearing a cape. She is cold, shivers, but does not take her eyes off ROBERT.

OFFICER 1  
(to NURSE)

You have anything to say?

NURSE

I'm here to claim -- he was one of ours --

OFFICER 1

That'll make identifying easier --

NURSE

The ambulance will be here --

OFFICER 1

We all have our duties.

OFFICER 1 yells to OFFICER 3.

OFFICER 1

Don't waste the film --

OFFICER 3

Not many pictures in life of dead writers in the snow -- I can probably get some money [for this] --

OFFICER 2

Can't -- police property --

OFFICER 3

There's always a way.

NURSE

Stop it.

OFFICER 1

Yes, stop it. He was a son of somebody --

OFFICER 3

So that obligates some weeping?

OFFICER 1 points to ROBERT.

OFFICER 1

That'll be you someday, so just shut up.

OFFICER 3 looks directly at OFFICER 1, and without looking at ROBERT, snaps one more picture of the corpse. OFFICER 1, face displeased, turns to NURSE.

OFFICER 1

Poor bastard.

SOUND of an ambulance bell, ravens flying off, crunch of feet in snow. NURSE looks up, throws back her cape. She flings her left arm over her head. But she does not fall. And she stares at her raised hand. OFFICER 2 circles the body writing notes.

End.

# Stimulus

## DESCRIPTION

Laurel and Jewel (war veterans), along with Deke (a survivalist) and Nub (Laurel's husband), decide to kidnap their political representative, Albumen, to buy him out so that he'll work for them directly.

## CHARACTERS

- LAUREL, a worker
- JEWEL, a worker
- NUB, a husband
- DEKE, a survivalist
- ALBUMEN, a politician

\* \* \* \* \*

## Scene 1: A Theory of Labor Relations

LAUREL, pistol in her right hand. JEWEL, burlap bag in hand.

JEWEL

You can't.

LAUREL

Bastard.

JEWEL

Yes, but --

LAUREL

Bastards.

JEWEL

Shouldn't, really -- can't --

You just can't -- shouldn't --

Not these days.

Not any days, really, but -- especially -- these days --  
homeland security --

LAUREL shivers in rage.

LAUREL

Then what? Then what?

JEWEL

Don't know.

LAUREL

Then what?

JEWEL

I said don't know.

LAUREL

Then what I want to do  
is as good a thing to do  
as anything anyone can do  
when they do what they  
have done to us --  
are still doing -- are planning to do --

LAUREL raises her right arm, fires the pistol into the air. Plaster dust falls.  
They both seem a bit surprised by this.

LAUREL

Hell to pay for that.

JEWEL

Better -- feel bet[ter] --?

LAUREL

The time for making believe is done.  
Five shots readied, waiting.

LAUREL pauses.

LAUREL

No, not better, not really.

JEWEL

A plan, then?  
To get inside --  
To get past --  
To get to --  
He won't be alone --  
Bosses are never alone --  
Only five shots.

LAUREL

I don't want just him -- he's nothing --  
Garbage.  
What he sits at the head of --  
What he commands --  
All catpiss-rotted --

JEWEL

The whole shebang --

LAUREL

But he'll do  
Because of what he did  
To me to us --

JEWEL

Your plan, then, is to --

LAUREL fires four shots into the air. Even more plaster dust. Even more surprise on their part. As dust rains down, JEWEL moves behind LAUREL.

LAUREL

Now one left --

JEWEL pounces on LAUREL, putting the burlap bag over her head, wrestling her to the ground, kicking away the gun, pinning her.

LAUREL does not put up much of a struggle.

JEWEL

I can't let you.  
Not what you and I  
Went over there  
To fight for --  
Two tours --  
If you do this  
People will get --

LAUREL

I'm done --  
Take it off.

JEWEL slips the bag off LAUREL's head.



JEWEL

People will get  
The wrong idea --

LAUREL

And what idea  
Is the wrong one  
That they would be getting?

JEWEL

The feeling of assassination  
Feeling so good  
To do away with --

LAUREL

What would feel so good  
Is the feeling of it  
Feeling so right.

LAUREL struggles -- sort of -- but JEWEL will not let her up, continues whispering into her ear.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **Scene 2: On The Origin of a Chain's Links**

NUB, DEKE, JEWEL -- all seated. Plaster dust around.

JEWEL

Only time my military training  
Came in useful.

NUB

The ceiling --

JEWEL

Had to use it on a fellow soldier.

NUB

Original horsehair plaster --  
Original to this house --

DEKE

How'd the burlap bag figure [in] --

NUB

Original to our home!

JEWEL

I knew --  
Ever since she got the pink slip --  
We all got the pink slip --  
Written all over her --  
Everyone could read it off her --

NUB

Why do you think she --

JEWEL

I think betrayal --  
I think it was the sense  
Of betrayal --

NUB

She's never done --  
Never acted like --  
The ceiling --  
I don't know --  
She wasn't really going to  
Was she?

DEKE

The bag.

JEWEL

She asked me to bring it.  
"Just in case," she said --  
A case of "just in case."

A moment of silence.

DEKE

That's her.  
She wanted to make sure  
You made her chicken out.

JEWEL

Maybe --

She could've shot me --  
I don't know --

NUB

She wasn't the only one --

JEWEL

She didn't have a plan --  
I think --

NUB

Not the only one who  
Got fired --  
So "why" I gotta keep asking --

DEKE

Gotta have a plan always --  
Gotta have a plan because  
They always have plans --  
Plans spinning within plans --  
You think them closing the plant  
Wasn't part of a plan?  
Dismantling it, packing it off to  
Cheap worker heaven  
Wasn't part of a plan?  
Plan plan plan --

JEWEL

Stop -- just stop --  
She had your gun  
In her hand.

A moment of silence.

DEKE

She knew where I kept 'em.

JEWEL

Not the point.  
Did you give it to her?

NUB

Did you give it to her?

DEKE

I always say, Knowledge is power.

NUB

I should hurt you.

DEKE

You won't.

NUB

I should.

DEKE

Where is it now?

JEWEL pulls it from her belt, hands it to DEKE. LAUREL enters, holding the burlap bag.

LAUREL

I did have a plan.

I did.

NUB

Honey --

LAUREL

I call "apocalypse" a plan.

JEWEL

That is not a good attitude --

DEKE

Works for God

He employs it steadily.

LAUREL

Anyone --

Tell me what attitude

Would be a good attitude.

NUB

You weren't the only one let go --

LAUREL

To me, I am the only one.

NUB

The union is going to fight [this] --

DEKE

Union --

JEWEL

You shouldn't badmouth the union --

LAUREL

I'm not gonna fix the ceiling.

I am not going to fix the ceiling.

Understand?

Nothing fixed.

LAUREL and NUB look at each other, then NUB confronts DEKE.

NUB

I know where your guns are, too.

DEKE

I think it's time to find

A new place

To put my guns.

NUB

I think it's time

You either put up

Or you shut up.

LAUREL kneels by NUB.

LAUREL

Yes.

LAUREL puts the bag over NUB's head.

LAUREL

Welcome to the club

The prisoner club

They got us all  
You comin'?

JEWEL

We did that to prisoners --  
Dumb fucks --  
When we were over there.  
It has a meaning.  
It has an intention.

NUB pulls the bag off.

NUB

This isn't where  
I want to go.

DEKE

Your five shots?  
You grouped 'em nice.

LAUREL

I didn't even look --  
That's how dangerous close I came.

LAUREL tousles NUB's hair.

LAUREL

Except for you.

JEWEL

I'm not sure you're undangerous.

NUB

You shouldn't've given her the gun.

DEKE

It all worked out.

NUB

You wanted her  
To do your dirty work.

LAUREL

No not his --  
My own  
For us --

LAUREL touches NUB's hair again.

LAUREL

I have some distance to go  
But I will go that distance --

NUB

I'll fix the ceiling.  
Even if it means nothing  
To do it.

LAUREL

Because that's you.

NUB

This is all new words for us.

JEWEL

The bag pulled over the head has meaning.  
The bag pulled off the head has meaning.  
New words -- yup, new words.

DEKE

Includes me?

JEWEL

We are thrown together now  
Like rocks in a downstream rush.  
Right?

LAUREL

Right.  
Rush.

NUB

But to where?

JEWEL

Someone asked the centipede  
"Which leg do you move first?"  
Couldn't walk after that.

LAUREL

She means the answer comes  
Before the question.

DEKE

Thinking --  
That's what they want you to do.  
Thinking's the enemy.  
Action!

NUB

You said  
We should always have a plan.

DEKE

That too.

NUB

Do you have any idea --

LAUREL

No I don't.  
First time in my life.

DEKE

Action!

NUB

I'm doing the plaster  
First.

LAUREL

You do that.

NUB

I will.

LAUREL strokes his hair.



\* \* \* \* \*

### Scene 3: In the Cloud

ALBUMEN on a swing. Flag pin on his lapel. Red politician tie.

ALBUMEN

These are hard times.  
Economically.  
No doubt about it.  
We need to be active in  
Helping the less fortunate.  
We also have to make sure  
The fortunate stay fortunate,  
Give them the relief they need  
To feel relieved.  
Things will pick up --  
The fundamentals are sound --  
But in the meantime --

ALBUMEN stops swinging.

ALBUMEN

I think I've said enough for today  
To keep my position secure.  
The contributions  
Have rushed in like rocks  
Tumbling down a stream.  
Altogether a good day's work.

LAUREL, NUB, JEWEL, and DEKE, hooded or masked, creep onstage and kidnap ALBUMEN. The burlap bag goes over his head. They hustle him off.

DEKE gives the swing a push. It sways.

\* \* \* \* \*

### Scene 4: Contra-Dictions

ALBUMEN, bagged, bound to a chair under a light.

LAUREL, NUB, JEWEL, and DEKE, still hooded or masked, around him.

JEWEL pulls the bag off his head.

ALBUMEN

What do you want?

LAUREL

We want to buy you.

ALBUMEN

Are you a constituent of mine?

Any of you?

DEKE

Shut up.

The only constituents

You listen to have

Numbers to the left of

The decimal place.

ALBUMEN

Not true.

JEWEL

True.

LAUREL

Say it.

Say "true."

ALBUMEN

All right, so true.

So what?

LAUREL

That's why we want to buy you.

So you'll work for us.

ALBUMEN

You can't afford me

All you can do is

Vote me in or vote me out

Assuming the voting machines

Say what you tell them

To say.

DEKE

And you got that covered.

ALBUMEN

I have that base covered.

NUB

Put the bag back  
On the bastard's mug.

JEWEL puts the bag back on ALBUMEN's head.

NUB pulls off his mask. So does LAUREL, who gives NUB a significant look.

JEWEL and DEKE take off their masks.

LAUREL

You never swear.

NUB

I fixed the goddamn  
Horsehair plaster in the ceiling

JEWEL

He never swears.

DEKE

He's swearing now.

NUB

I made it right  
After what you did

LAUREL

And what I did was wrong?

NUB

I thought so.

NUB points at ALBUMEN.

NUB

Now I don't think so.

DEKE

What're you saying?

LAUREL

What're you saying?

NUB

I don't know  
What I'm saying  
Only that I need  
To say it

A moment of silence.

ALBUMEN

What are you all talking about?

NUB

We're talking about  
Your fate.

DEKE

I wouldn't hope for much.

NUB

It's about repairing the plaster  
It's about repairing anything  
At all  
What's the point  
The fucking point  
Is what it's about --

NUB rushes toward ALBUMEN with intent to do harm. JEWEL intercepts him, wrestles him to the ground, in the process knocking ALBUMEN over as well.

ALBUMEN

I am completely helpless here!

JEWEL holds NUB down, speaks to ALBUMEN.

JEWEL

Sorry about that.

That's when JEWEL looks up to see LAUREL holding a gun on her.

LAUREL

Let him be.

JEWEL

You'd do that?

ALBUMEN

What the Christ is going on?

LAUREL

I don't know  
What my proclivities are  
These days.

JEWEL

Deke!

ALBUMEN

You've let me hear your voices  
You've used one of your names  
How do you think  
This will end?

JEWEL

Deke!

DEKE goes up to LAUREL with his hand out for the gun. LAUREL buries the barrel-tip of the gun in his palm.

LAUREL

You lookin' for  
Nail holes?

DEKE pulls a gun out that had been tucked in his belt against the small of his back. He doesn't point it at LAUREL.

DEKE

Put up or

Shut up, Nub,  
You said.

ALBUMEN

Deke and Nub!  
Deke and Nub!

DEKE

Shut up.  
Puttin' it up now, Nub.

JEWEL

I'll let him rise.  
Let's turn the swords  
Into ploughshares, shall we?

LAUREL and DEKE put their guns away. JEWEL whispers to NUB.

JEWEL

Not now, amigo.  
Not yet, amigo.

NUB gets up, sets ALBUMEN upright.

NUB

Are you afraid?

ALBUMEN

I'm always afraid when  
Undecided people hold guns.

JEWEL

Except you support gun ownership.

ALBUMEN

May have to reconsider.

JEWEL

Maybe we just need to decide.

JEWEL looks at LAUREL and NUB.

JEWEL

It seems you two  
Are driving the oncoming train.  
Say what.

LAUREL kneels in front of ALBUMEN.

LAUREL

We can't buy you?

ALBUMEN

I am already bought.

LAUREL

Then what handed are you?

NUB

Which hand do you use  
For the bribes?

ALBUMEN

Right.

LAUREL nods to NUB.

LAUREL

Untie it.

DEKE

This is what you call a plan?

JEWEL

Improvised explosive device.

DEKE

Those are three words  
I'd prefer not to be near.

ALBUMEN's right hand is free. LAUREL puts her gun into it, raises it so that the barrel is pressed against her temple.

LAUREL

Do you know

What you are doing  
At this particular  
Moment?

ALBUMEN drops his hand. NUB puts it back into place, puts his face an inch away from ALBUMEN's.

NUB

Don't. You. Dare.

LAUREL

Do you know  
What you are doing  
At this particular  
Moment?

ALBUMEN

I know what I'm doing  
Physically  
I don't know why I'm doing it --

LAUREL

You get money  
From the company  
That just cut out  
Our hearts.

JEWEL

With a pink slip  
Except it wasn't pink  
It was just a  
"Get the fuck out  
Your job is going to China  
You're not  
Get the fuck out now" slip.

NUB

That color is blood.  
Those words are bloody.

LAUREL

And you voted for --



ALBUMEN

All right!

DEKE

Blowback.

JEWEL

Yep.

LAUREL

Voted to give them a tax break  
For breaking our backs --

DEKE

Blowback up your ass  
It seems.

ALBUMEN

All right!  
My arm is tired.

LAUREL

So pull the trigger  
And finish the job  
The company started --

NUB

Defend yourself.  
We are thieves in your house.

DEKE

You did say that  
Snot-breath  
"Gun-owners have the right  
to defend themselves" --

LAUREL

You're working for them  
So finish the job.

DEKE puts his gun against ALBUMEN's temple.

JEWEL

What're you doing?

DEKE

Improvised explosive device.

ALBUMEN

I just shit my pants.

DEKE

Yes you did.

NUB

So? It's in your hand.

Standoff. Standoff. Without warning, ALBUMEN leaps up, the chair still attached to him. DEKE is knocked back, LAUREL's gun drops from his hand, and ALBUMEN dances the crazy dance, screaming and flinging himself around until he stands exhausted, heaving, slobbering.

DEKE sidles up to him, gingerly unfastens the other hand so that the chair drops away, and steps back.

DEKE

IED.

Everyone waits.

LAUREL

That's how it feels  
Every day --  
Pressed against the brain.

NUB

Being the good people  
The salt of  
The folk  
The ones who get up every day

DEKE

How many times in your  
Speechifying have you  
Praised the common man --

NUB

Being the good people  
Has turned us into fools.

DEKE

Blowback.

JEWEL

We should hose him down.  
He's gone feral.

ALBUMEN takes off the hood, surveys his accusers.

ALBUMEN

I am beginning to have  
No memory of this  
I am beginning to acquire  
Amnesia  
It's one of the things  
We do best  
I do well.

NUB

Survival skill.

In the distance sounds of police sirens.

ALBUMEN

I also have  
A radio chip  
At the base of my neck  
Implanted  
I always want to be found.

Sirens grow louder.

DEKE hands LAUREL his gun, which she points at ALBUMEN. DEKE goes to ALBUMEN to check this out, nods yes to everyone. He reaches into a pocket, pulls out a small pen knife. NUB hugs ALBUMEN from the front, pinning his arms, while DEKE quickly cuts out the chip.

DEKE tosses it to JEWEL.

DEKE

Toss it into the canal.  
Meet us back at the house.

JEWEL leaves. Everyone waits. The sirens come closer, then trail off.  
LAUREL still holds the gun on ALBUMEN.

DEKE

What are we going to do with you?

ALBUMEN

You can't buy me off.  
But I could buy you off  
All of you.

NUB

With what?

ALBUMEN

What you all want most.  
A job.

DEKE

And suck off the  
Same tit you do?  
No thanks.

LAUREL

Now that we hold the snake  
We only have one choice  
Because snakes can only  
Be trusted to be snakes.

LAUREL walks closer to ALBUMEN.

LAUREL

The only question left  
Is how to kill  
The snake in question.  
And for that  
We need to take him home.

\* \* \* \* \*

### Scene 5: Tweet, Tweet, Tweet

A barrage of images of a trussed-up ALBUMEN, hooded, with two naked women and two naked men, all hooded as well, all released into the cloud -- accompanied by the appropriate hard-edged music.

\* \* \* \* \*

### Scene 6: Plan

LAUREL and JEWEL in a hard downlight. They are equipped with snipers rifles and all the appropriate gear.

LAUREL

Finally my army training  
Comes in for something useful.

JEWEL

Mine too.

LAUREL

Any CEO of any  
private or public corporation  
who gets a salary bonus --

JEWEL

Unjustified by reason or morality --

LAUREL

We take them out.

JEWEL

Because they are nothing but thieves.

LAUREL

Let's go.

LAUREL and JEWEL exit. NUB and DEKE in hard downlight wearing sblack business suits, white shirts, and thin black ties. And sunglasses.

NUB

We provide logistical support.

DEKE

We provide the cyber assault.

NUB

We make sure that they're secure.

DEKE

We do our small part

To rage against the machine.

The appropriate music rises as DEKE and NUB dance to the apocalypse.

Lights out and transition. For the transition, a sound design that indicates something like an audio tape being rewound -- time itself is being rewound.

\* \* \* \* \*

### Scene 7: Reprise

We are back at Scene 1.

LAUREL, pistol in her right hand. JEWEL, burlap bag in hand.

JEWEL

You can't.

LAUREL

Bastard.

JEWEL

Yes, but --

LAUREL

Bastards.

JEWEL

Shouldn't, really -- can't --

You just can't -- shouldn't --

Not these days.

Not any days, really, but -- especially -- these days --  
homeland security --

LAUREL

Then what? Then what?!

JEWEL

Don't know.

LAUREL

Then what?

JEWEL

I said don't know.

LAUREL

Then what I want to do  
is as good a thing to do  
as anything anyone can do  
when they do what they do  
to us -- have done to us --  
are still doing -- are planning to do --

LAUREL raises the gun to fire it into the air, but JEWEL grabs her arm and pulls it down -- tight embrace again.

JEWEL

There will be hell  
To pay if you do.

LAUREL

The plaster.  
Original.

JEWEL

What do you want?

LAUREL

I'm all right.

JEWEL

Really. Want.

LAUREL

I had a dream about how  
God would sort them out

If we gave Him the whatall  
To sort through  
Nub, Deke were in on it

JEWEL

A dream.

LAUREL

Not the right word.  
A vision.

JEWEL

How does it begin?

LAUREL

Really?

JEWEL

After all we've been through?

LAUREL

Okay.

LAUREL raises the gun and fires once. Plaster comes down.

JEWEL

Hell to pay for that.

LAUREL

In the vision  
We were already paying  
They say sacrifice should be shared  
I agree  
Sacrifice should be shared  
Share and share alike

LAUREL fires again. Plaster comes down.

LAUREL

Whether they want it or not  
We'll share them some sacrifice



And help God sort 'em out  
If they refuse the offer  
My vision

JEWEL

How did it turn out?

LAUREL

They got their share  
It was only a vision, though  
Real would be harder

JEWEL

Because we can't shoot 'em all.

LAUREL

But we don't need to.  
Just need to be terrorist  
In the right focused way --  
Maximize the guilty.  
Make the élite tremble.  
What do we have to lose?  
They've lost us so much.

JEWEL holds out her hand. LAUREL hands her the gun. JEWEL fires once in the air. Plaster. NUB and DEKE run in.

JEWEL

Laurel's got some thoughts  
She wants to share  
About pink slips.

NUB

The plaster.

LAUREL

Ain't important.  
Come, boys,  
Come let us reason together  
For I have had a vision.

In a separate light appears ALBUMEN, neat, spruced-up, smiling. The four turn their gaze on him. Blackout, with the appropriate music for apocalypse.

# **The Business**

## **CHARACTERS**

- Peter Waldo, mid-40s, male, fairly successful mutual funds manager
- A.D. Vance, mid-40s, female, leader of the company's chapter of CARPE -- Catholic Association (Risen) of Professional Entrepreneurs; also head of the growth funds division where WALDO works
- Dominic Lucius, mid-40s, male, works for VANCE in one of the aggressive growth funds
- Aaron Labelial B mid-40s black male; not very high on the corporate rung
- Joanna Momus -- mid-40s female; about where LABELIAL is

## **TIME**

- Present

## **SETTING**

- One of the corporate conference rooms of a major investment house and mutual funds company B lunch-time prayer session
- Other locations

## **MISCELLANEOUS**

- Small flashlight, in the coat pocket

## **NOTE**

All quotes are from The New American Bible, not the King James.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **Scene 1**

Rising in volume, a voiceover of a half-dozen people intoning the Lord's Prayer. On the "Amen," lights up to reveal all the characters, Bibles in hand, heads bowed in a comfortable but blandly furnished corporate conference room. There should be some way to indicate the name and purpose of the company a poster or a plaque perhaps -- "Avantguard Investments: Building Your Future Today." They should all be dressed in standard issue business garb. One clothing requirement: whatever they wear, it should have a pocket where they can carry a small flashlight. They all look up except for WALDO. VANCE rises and walks around.

VANCE

We need to get more people to attend.

LUCIUS

I agree.

VANCE

This is important work.

LUCIUS

I agree.

LABELIAL

I've spoken to the people in my division --

VANCE

And?

LABELIAL

-- they say they'll come -- some say -- but --

VANCE

Aaron, Aaron, you need to be more assertive --

LABELIAL

They seem embarrassed --

VANCE

We all need to be more assertive --

LABELIAL

I do my best.

VANCE

We're fallen creatures --

LUCIUS

Hard-core.

VANCE

-- and people need to be --

LUCIUS

Forced.

VANCE

(just a beat behind "Forced")

"Persuaded," Dominic -- that their souls need healing.

LUCIUS

Or they'll suffer forever.

VANCE

(to LABELIAL)

But then again, Aaron, you've never been one for strong leadership. You did do the best you could.

LABELIAL

I do the best I can.

VANCE

I'm sure -- your best.

LUCIUS

Need to awaken their spirit --

VANCE

Right.

LABELIAL

(to VANCE)

What's wrong with my best?

LUCIUS and VANCE overlap, as if they have spoken in tandem many times.

LUCIUS

Get them to see --

VANCE

-- the power --

(to LABELIAL)

You did your best.

LUCIUS

-- how they need Christ if they're going --

VANCE

"I have the strength for everything -- "

LUCIUS

-- to make it out alive.

VANCE

" -- everything through him who empowers me -- "  
[Philippians 4:13]

LUCIUS

Good Christians and good businessmen --

VANCE

Businesspeople.

LUCIUS

-- at the same time.

VANCE

That's what they need to know.

LABELIAL

Well, I tried.

VANCE

You did.

MOMUS

Maybe it's the name.

LUCIUS

The name.

MOMUS

Maybe.

VANCE

What's wrong with CARPE?

MOMUS

Doesn't it mean "seize"? --

VANCE

It means --

MOMUS

-- kinda grabby -- and Latin at that?

VANCE

It means "The Catholic Association (Risen) -- "

MOMUS

Not very invitational. Also sounds like a fish.

VANCE

(stronger)

"The Catholic Association (Risen) of Professional  
Entrepreneurs." C-A-R-P-E.

MOMUS

People's ears don't catch onto long names.

VANCE

I think it says exactly what we're about.

MOMUS

It does?

VANCE

God and Caesar can dance together --

MOMUS

I didn't know God mambo'd --

LABELIAL

(to MOMUS, trying to sound consequential)

Profit is the life-blood of the holy body.

VANCE

(to LABELIAL)

Good.

LUCIUS

Discipling businessm[en] -- businesspeople --

VANCE

That, too.

LUCIUS

-- that's our business.

VANCE

Discipling, yes.

(to MOMUS)

See?

MOMUS tries to get a word in but LUCIUS cuts her off.

LUCIUS

"Bear your share of hardship" --

MOMUS

Dominic!

LUCIUS

-- "like a good soldier of Christ Jesus."

VANCE

(completing citation with him)

-- "like a good soldier of Christ Jesus."

LUCIUS

II Timothy, 2:3.

MOMUS

No, I don't see.

VANCE

Joanna?

MOMUS

God and Caesar?

VANCE

What's hard to understand?

MOMUS

Divinity with a salad?

VANCE

(to everyone)

We do need to get more people to come.

LUCIUS

(to MOMUS)

Expand our limited horizons.

VANCE

(to MOMUS)

You need to forge a finish-line mentality --

MOMUS

I have just as much "finish-line" as you do --

(to LABELIAL)

Did you sign on to run a race?

(to VANCE)

I thought we were about, you know, saving souls, making people better. Ourselves better. Getting out of the race.

Through the next lines, VANCE begins to notice that WALDO has not spoken, and her attention draws to him even as she speaks to the others.

VANCE

If we're good businesspeople, then we'll be good people as well.

LUCIUS

Our real boss --

VANCE

Jesus, the greatest salesman of all time.

LABELIAL

Salesperson.

LUCIUS

Our real work --

VANCE

Getting people to have -



(emphasizing each word)

-- godly ambition.

MOMUS

(to LABELIAL)

Watch out for low-flying high fives!

LABELIAL

They're right, though.

MOMUS

I don't come here to make myself --

VANCE

Business is God's work on earth, Joanna.

MOMUS

-- a better businessperson.

VANCE

(picking up a Bible)

Read, Joanna. You need to read.

MOMUS

I do read.

VANCE

See I Corinthians, 3:14-15.

MOMUS

Not everything can be solved with a quote.

VANCE

Joanna, business is God's work.

MOMUS

I show up to make myself a better person --

LUCIUS

We all need to be strong.

MOMUS

I just want to be good. Do some good.

LABELIAL

You can buy and sell and still be good --

VANCE holds up his hand to shush LABELIAL and speaks directly to WALDO.

VANCE

Peter? Peter, what do you think? You've been pretty quiet over there.

WALDO does not respond. Everyone looks at WALDO, then VANCE. Lights out.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Scene 2

A single pool of light. Everyone remains still. VANCE steps into the light, speaks as if speaking to a group.

VANCE

In the Epistle of Paul to the Phillipians, Paul says (chapter 2, verse 13) that it is God which works in you both to will and to do his good pleasure. This echoes all the way back to Psalm 37, verse 4, where David goes, "Take delight in the Lord, and he will grant you your heart's requests." When we're out there building up the portfolios of the widows and workers and struggling middle-class families -- people who play by the rules -- when we're buying and selling to find the best profit margin, the solid investment, we're doing the work of God because we're giving delight to the hearts of others and increasing the wealth of the earth, just as God told Noah after the flood. Compound interest -- a glorious invention, really. Compound interest is God's handiwork -- we're honored to be in his vanguard here at Avantguard.

Light out; another single light up on LUCIUS, as if speaking to a group.

LUCIUS

Humans -- interesting creation, aren't we? Brains capable of genius, and hands ready to kill. A mix of a volcano and a cool breeze. An imperfect nature -- that's why we all need a discipline, to keep us on the narrow when we threaten to

erupt, yet something that juices us when we become too soft, too weak. And business is just that. Taste that word for a moment business. Not "bidness," though I welcome all our friends from Texas -- but bus-i-ness. Busy-ness. In the world doing. Engaged in the world doing. That is our best discipline, my friends. Yet that imperfect nature -- always there. Always threatening. So I bring to you a bright anchor for all that doing so that you don't drift off down the road of your worst intentions -- your greeds, your hungers, your minimal expectations of yourself. Business with soul, doing with the sense of doing good, is our salvation as a species. Yea, truly. And only the businessperson, producing the stuff of life, can make our survival possible. Titus, 2, verses 7 and 8. Show yourself as a model of good deeds in every respect. Do what's right for your customers, and you'll be doing what's right for God's dominion on this earth!

Lights up on conference room.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Scene 3**

VANCE

Peter?

No response.

VANCE

Peter?

Still no response.

LABELIAL  
(to everyone)

Is he all right?

VANCE

Peter, why so silent?

LUCIUS

Lunch hour's almost up.

VANCE holds her hand up to quiet him.

VANCE

Peter, what are you doing? Why won't you talk?

WALDO finally raises his eyes and speaks to them.

WALDO

I've been reading.

VANCE

Yes?

WALDO

And thinking.

VANCE

Yes? Yes?

WALDO

And we've been wrong.

LUCIUS

Wrong.

WALDO

Wrong.

VANCE

(looking at the others)

Mr. Peter Waldo says we've been wrong.

WALDO

No, actually hearing you say that -- let me correct myself. Let me be fully disclosed. I have been wrong. You -- you all will have to decide that issue for yourselves. I can speak only of my own tongue.

MOMUS

Decide what?

WALDO

(holds up his Bible)

Like I said. I've been reading.

(to VANCE)

Do you read this?

VANCE

I consult it daily --

WALDO

(interrupting)

Not consult. Read. Consult? No, not really. You rummage.

If you read it, really --

VANCE

What do you mean --

WALDO

If you read it -- If you read it, you would be heartsick. Like me.

MOMUS

Heartsick.

MOMUS starts thumbing through her Bible.

MOMUS

(to herself)

Heartsick.

LABELIAL

We've got to get back --

VANCE

I head the division, damn it!

(regaining her control)

We can leave when we want to.

MOMUS

"For the love of money -- "

She has their attention. She looks at WALDO. WALDO nods yes.

MOMUS

"For the love of money is the root of all evils, and some people in their desire for it have strayed from the faith and have pierced themselves with many pains." [I Timothy, 6:10]

(closes the book, to WALDO)

Heartsick, right?

LUCIUS begins pacing.

LUCIUS

(to MOMUS, slow viciousness)

What, exactly, is your point?

MOMUS

(indicating WALDO)

Ask him.

LABELIAL

The market is moving --

WALDO

I have been thinking.

(indicating all around him)

All this -- excuse me for saying it this way -- shit. "Temptation and the snare."

LABELIAL

(nervously)

The market -- expanding --

LUCIUS

What's next -- give it all up?

WALDO looks at MOMUS.

MOMUS

Yes, he is.

LUCIUS

(derisively)

Give it up?

(to MOMUS)  
You his herald?

WALDO  
It can't be done.

LUCIUS  
Stupid!

VANCE gestures to LUCIUS to stop.

VANCE  
(to WALDO)  
What?

WALDO  
God and Caesar.

VANCE  
We do it every day.

WALDO  
We fool ourselves.

(smiling slightly)  
We give ourselves "the business" every day.

LABELIAL  
I'm going back --

WALDO  
(to LABELIAL)  
"Though wealth abound, set not your heart upon it."

LUCIUS  
His dulcet tones!

LABELIAL  
I'm not good at all the quoting -- I can't remember --

WALDO  
Psalms 62, 11. Take a peek.

MOMUS

"It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle  
-- "

VANCE  
(to MOMUS)

Wait, wait.

MOMUS

" -- than for one who is rich -- "

VANCE  
(to WALDO)

You can't be serious.

MOMUS

" -- to enter into the kingdom of God." [Matthew, 19:24]

VANCE  
(to MOMUS)

I said wait.

LABELIAL

You better stop.

VANCE

You can't be serious.

WALDO

Nothing but.

VANCE

Throw it all away?

WALDO

What "it"?

VANCE

Your career.

LUCIUS

Your family.



LABELIAL

You've done really well, Peter --

WALDO

I have, have I?

LABELIAL

It'd be a shame --

WALDO

Well -- but not much good.

VANCE

We do good every day!

MOMUS

You're going to, aren't you?

WALDO nods yes.

VANCE

What?

MOMUS

Give "it" up.

WALDO

Without a doubt.

(smiling genially)

Which chapter and verse would you like?

Lights bump to black. Each individual speaks. Each turns on a flashlight under the chin as each speaks. When each finishes, the flashlight is turned off. WALDO moves upstage. He does not have a flashlight, so that when he speaks, his voice comes out of the darkness.

VANCE

He's too fucking literal.

MOMUS

He's taking the word literally.

LUCIUS

He's going to lose everything.

LABELIAL

He has everything to lose.

MOMUS

And gain.

VANCE

It's stupidity. The way of the world --

LUCIUS

-- is making money --

VANCE

Not for itself, of course.

MOMUS

But didn't Christ love the beggars?

LUCIUS

Christ was selling insurance.

MOMUS

But didn't he love the beggars?

LABELIAL

And tax collectors -- he liked them, too. Niggers of their day.

MOMUS

And the money changers in the Temple?

VANCE

We're stewards. Of the earth's abundance.

MOMUS

What about the money changers?

LABELIAL

Jesus never had any money to change.

WALDO

"Though wealth abound, set not your heart upon it." [Psalm 62:11]

ALL

What was that?

VANCE

Stewards. Increase and multiply. Abound on the earth and subdue it. [Genesis, 9:1,7]

MOMUS

We make nothing out of nothing. Compound interest.

LABELIAL

That is strange, come to think of it.

LUCIUS

Not you!

MOMUS

What do we do? We make nothing --

LABELIAL

Build nothing --

MOMUS

Just speculate.

VANCE

Dangerously close to --

MOMUS

Usury.

WALDO

"Lord, who shall sojourn in your tent? He who lends not his money at usury..." [Psalm 15:1,5]

ALL

What was that?

WALDO

"He that lends at interest...shall surely die; his death shall be his own fault." [Ezekiel, 19:13]

ALL

What was that?

WALDO

It's all right there.

MOMUS

If we really believed it --

LUCIUS

You can't take it literally --

LABELIAL

How else?

LUCIUS

It's meant to change with the times.

MOMUS

That's shaving it close.

VANCE

All this has to stop.

With that, they put their flashlights away. Lights bump up to full. Sound effect: the sound of a whip.

VANCE

(to WALDO)

Perhaps CARPE is not the right place for you.

WALDO

I am not right for it.

LUCIUS

Perhaps you should leave. Now.

WALDO

I'm only doing what you say you believe.

WALDO leaves.

VANCE  
(to LABELIAL)

Now can we go back to work?

Lights to black. Sound the crash and five seconds of the last chord in the last song off Sergeant Pepper's.

\* \* \* \* \*

#### **Scene 4**

A single pool of light. WALDO is talking with others, as if around a water cooler. He holds a cup of water in his hand, one of those cups with a pointed bottom. He sips from it occasionally. The rest of the cast faces upstage in the darkness. VANCE is Voice 1; MOMUS, Voice 2; LABELIAL, Voice 3; LUCIUS, Voice 4.

WALDO  
Business ethics -- contradiction in terms.

VOICE 1  
You're nuts! I'm a good person.

WALDO  
Maybe. But even good people turn savage -- look at war.

VOICE 2  
This isn't war!

WALDO  
"Competition" isn't war by another name?

VOICE 1  
So that makes us all savages?

WALDO  
Accomplices.

VOICE 3  
In what?

WALDO

Robbery. Taking it from there, giving it here.

VOICE 4

Eff-ing Marxist!

WALDO

Profit comes from -- ?

VOICE 4

From the Golden Rule -- "He who has the gold -- "

WALDO

My point.

VOICE 1

Not savages.

WALDO

Because of your suit and tie?

VOICE 4

It's always been this way -- rich get richer.

VOICE 1

Not savages.

VOICE 2

And I'm not a baby-killer!

WALDO

You are if you buy into interest on investments. That's the crux, the cross. Someone has to pay for money to be made. If we really believe in ethics, we have to believe --

VOICE 3

With that prayer group, aren't you?

WALDO

No longer.

VOICE 3

A Christer! The Bible's just a buncha stories!

WALDO

So is Fortune and Forbes and the "free" market. All depends on what you want to believe.

VOICE 1

I like how my money makes money for me without me working too hard.

WALDO

And again -- where does it come from? The pound of flesh has to come from somewhere. No interest in butchery any more.

VOICE 2

So what are you going to do?

WALDO

Give it all up. Keep enough for my family to live on, comfortably. Give the rest away. And talk to people.

VOICE 4

Your own TV show.

WALDO

I am sure a big media corporation will give me air-time to tell people what "whited sepulchres" their owners are. No, the streets will do fine.

VOICE 3

You won't get away with it.

WALDO

Get away -- I'm only telling people to think about their souls.

VOICE 1

Most people think "soul" is bottom of their shoes.

VOICE 2

Or a fish. Or a black "thang."

WALDO

I just don't see any other choice. When the truth is in your mouth, you spit.

VOICE 4

You have the truth?

WALDO

I just think the man from Galilee would not have cared for mutual fund investment managers.

VOICE 3

They won't let you get away with it.

WALDO

What harm could I possibly do?

He drinks the water and crushes the cup.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Scene 5

Radio talk show music intro. WALDO in light, VOICEOVER of a radio host.

VOICEOVER

"God and Mammon -- You Decide." No, "mammon" is not a new cheese spread. It's the name the medieval scholars gave to the "devil of covetousness," and out there, wandering in the wilds, is Peter Waldo, reformed mutual fund executive, saying that profit is bad, compound interest is putrid, and that we've all sold our souls for the price of a blue chip stock. Is he a dangerous man? You decide. Caller number 1 -- you're up.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Scene 6

Another meeting of CARPE. The members are now dressed in monk's robes.



VANCE

You've heard how it is spreading.

LUCIUS

Like the stain of blood on a white cloth.

LABELIAL

I am amazed by how his ideas have caught on.

LUCIUS

The herd will believe anything the Devil feeds them.

MOMUS

What's he done wrong? And why are we wearing these ridiculous outfits? What's he done wrong? All he's said --

VANCE

All he's said is that our lives are meaningless -- no, worse than "meaningless" -- evil, mindless, greedy --

LUCIUS

That we do not know the true meaning of The Word.

LABELIAL

He shouldn't do that. He's wrong.

MOMUS

Sheesh, you guys are too uptight!

LUCIUS

(to VANCE)

It sound like we have a little heresy right here among us, doesn't it?

MOMUS

Me?

VANCE

Heresy? No, just a young misguided girl --

MOMUS

Girl!

VANCE

-- who needs a little re-education to make her mind right again.

MOMUS

My mind is all right!

LABELIAL  
(to VANCE)

What do you mean?

All this time LUCIUS has snuck up behind MOMUS, and as LABELIAL speaks, he pins MOMUS' arms. MOMUS struggles but can't break loose.

VANCE

Your mind is -- infected. It has lost the light. How do you know the Devil hasn't taken up residence there --

(touching her head)

and there --

(her heart)

-- fooling you --

MOMUS

Don't touch me!

VANCE

-- into thinking that you know the truth when what you see is an illusion --

MOMUS

Let me go!

VANCE

-- this illusion of the pious man, self-povertied, clean-breasted, telling the world that money -- money! -- our money! -- kneecaps the word of Christ, betrays The Man. And you --

MOMUS

I'm warning you --

VANCE

Let her go.

LUCIUS does.

VANCE

Just a taste.

MOMUS

A taste?

(to LABELIAL)

You staying with them? Well, I'm not. You guys are too hard-core.

She takes off the monk's robe.

VANCE

I wouldn't do that if I were you.

MOMUS

It's done -- so what? You going to put me on the rack?

VANCE and LUCIUS look at each other. MOMUS doesn't notice it.

MOMUS

All Peter is doing is repeating the words as he reads them -- It's all right there -- what's the big deal?

LABELIAL

The interpretation, Joanna -- it's all in the --

MOMUS

What interpretation? "It's harder for a camel to get through the eye of a needle" -- what's so hard about --

LABELIAL

It's not just that.

LUCIUS

He calls us "usurers."

MOMUS

Not just "us" -- well, you -- I don't make enough -- he calls everyone Ausurers" who lives off skimming the interest.

LUCIUS

All of us -- indicted. And some of the best.

MOMUS

Some of the "best" should be. They should be -- there's a lot of scum out there masquerading as -- In fact, I've never understood --

VANCE

That's true, you haven't.

MOMUS

-- how anyone -- well, I look at me, coming to these meetings. Why? What was I thinking? I'm employed by a cut-throat mutual funds company, and you're telling me that Jesus gives that a thumbs-up? I'm sure he'd look good in a corporate uniform -- he'd feel real at home.

LUCIUS

You mock.

MOMUS

The whole thing is -- Christ, right down to the roots!

LUCIUS

So easy to say -- you've gotten the benefits.

LABELIAL

If we fall -- if we fail --

MOMUS

(to VANCE)

Look, you have bloviated on about "Christian business principles" for months, but I've been doing my reading, too, and thinking, and it's just all --

LABELIAL

Business is our foundation.

MOMUS

"Bidness" is all about cannibalism -- our "duty" to provide good service -- Jesus' "leadership principles" -- "Jesus, C.E.O."

LABELIAL

How will people get the goods and services if --

MOMUS

If we made something, something hard and useful, maybe -- but we don't! We shove numbers, roll dice -- that's our theology! Your theology now!

LUCIUS

Not yours.

MOMUS

I've never been convinced -- just needed a job -- to pay the rent. Just look at you! Peter is right -- white on the outside, empty and smelly on the inside. What are you looking at?

VANCE

You have one more chance to take back everything you've said.

LUCIUS

One last chance.

LABELIAL

You have stepped beyond the bounds.

MOMUS

Why are you looking at me like that?

VANCE

Recant.

LUCIUS

Confess.

LABELIAL

Return.

MOMUS

(suddenly frightened)

This is the twenty-first century, the twenty-first century, in a high-rise office building full of fluorescent lights and a cafeteria that sells bad coffee and full of major modern

appliances. I am standing in a room with three business associates, wearing synthetic fabrics that were not around during the thirteenth century and talking peacefully and rationally about ideas and perceptions. Does anyone contradict me?

VANCE

One last chance.

MOMUS

One last chance to be out of here. You guys have turned!

LUCIUS

You're going to him, aren't you?

MOMUS

Right now, I just want to --

VANCE

It's not as if we haven't gone over the very same thoughts that you have.

LUCIUS

Picking through the Devil's chaff to find the seeds of truth.

LABELIAL

But the truth is here, not there. Stay here.

MOMUS

About that Devil thing --

LABELIAL

Stay here. With us. With the truth.

MOMUS

Everything feels cold. I'm leaving.

She moves toward the door. They do not move.

MOMUS

I am standing in the twenty-first century, I have the right to leave, this is nothing but a personal disagreement, I want to get my hair cut later --

She stops. They move aside.

VANCE

Let him know what is going to happen.

LUCIUS

There are always consequences to actions.

MOMUS

What is going to happen?

LABELIAL

The will of God. What needs to be done. Necessity provides.

MOMUS

When did you start talking like that?

VANCE

Let him know what is going to happen.

LUCIUS

The path is set.

LABELIAL

Leave.

MOMUS leaves. The three look at each other as the lights come down.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **Scene 7**

In the darkness there is the sound of struggle. Lights bump up. WALDO is seated in a chair in a single light. The three circle him.

VANCE

The time has come --

LUCIUS

For you to face --

LABELIAL

The coming judgment.

VANCE

Heretic.

LUCIUS

Peter Waldo --

LABELIAL

Should die.

WALDO

I can't be stomached, so I have to be pumped.

VANCE

You know what your sin is?

WALDO

Believing.

LUCIUS

In lies. Ego.

LABELIAL

Yourself "greater than."

VANCE

And you're cutting into profits. Too many following your ideas.

LUCIUS

No room for error. For liabilities.

WALDO

What do you intend --

VANCE

Do you recant?

WALDO

No.



LUCIUS

We have no choice, then.

They take out what look like bills and start stuffing them into WALDO's mouth. WALDO gags.

VANCE

Do you repent? No?

LUCIUS

Then die.

WALDO begins to gag, then dies.

VANCE

Error is gone.

LABELIAL

The danger is over.

The lights fade down.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Scene 8**

Three pools of light. Three letters appear. In synch, they open the letters.

VANCE

Merger.

LUCIUS

Cost-maximizing.

LABELIAL

Downsizing.

ALL

Superfluous.

In synch they shred their letters and slowly eat them.

**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](http://www.m-bettencourt.com)

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