

PART TWO:
PLAYS AND
NONFICTION

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Big Ball

By Leslie Bramm

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama editor Janet Colson writes: And now for a warm and gooey welcome to a play about our favorite dysfunctional family, the Brumfayleurs.*

In the words of family patriarch Hugh Brumfayleur:

HUGH

That's pronounced *Fail-ure, Fail-ure*...It's French.

It's young Billy's birthday and the Brumfayleurs are celebrating by touting their version of the perfect life, which for this family includes physical abuse, humiliation, some particularly icky incest (isn't that redundant?), and so much more! To top it off (although there's really no such thing as topping it off in this play), Uncle Wade is being kept prisoner in a closet - with an overflowing bladder - and is eating his own flesh.

Playwright Leslie Bramm rocks the American Dream off its foundations by putting all of these madcap elements together in wildly unpredictable but frighteningly recognizable ways. And what's more American than heroine addiction, abortions, and daring to venture beyond all limitations of propriety?

Here's a taste:

HUGH

Yeah, but that's not gay.

(Again to audience.)

This is all an inside joke. Unless you know this author's work, and his need to humiliate his father by re-sexing such American icons of masculinity, you're just not going to get it...Where was I...Ah, yes...(cont'd)

(He does a grotesque blend of *Reagan* and *Wayne*.)

This is where European grotesque meets American absurd. Where macro-aggressions become meta-aggressions. The writing is brilliant, sharp, and dangerous. We're in awe. And unless you're afraid of ejaculation, it's too good to miss. This is BIG BALL.

Again from Hugh:

HUGH

We have a “perfect agreement”, don’t we? Perfect families don’t discuss “little glitches”.

Outrageous. Tragic. Hysterical. Frightening. Oozing with creative juices.

Five Stars.

(Spacing is playwright’s own.)

Big Ball

(An American Grotesque.)

Characters:

HUGH BRUMFAYLEUR... The Father.

MADGE BRUMFAYLEUR... The Mother.

BILLY BRUMFAYLEUR... The Son.

SALLY BRUMFAYLEUR... The Step-daughter.

WADE BRUMFAYLEUR... The Uncle.

Time: Now.

Place: Somewhere in the mid-western delusion of America. In the suggestion of a living room, with the suggestion of a family.

In the tradition of classic European grotesque theatre. The characters should have their faces painted in macabre ways. Their costumes the same.

Setting: The suggestion of a Leave it to Beaver style living room. The stage is littered with tissues, over-flowing ashtrays, candy wrappers, vodka bottles, used syringes, Pop Tart wrappers and walnut shells. Five televisions are on stage and should be used as end tables, foot stools, etc. Stage Right is WADE'S closet. It is suggested by a stationary door frame. Wade can be seen by the audience. In the closet is an overflowing bucket. The door has a series of locks, latches and chains running down one side. Stage Left is SALLY'S area. She uses one of the TVs' as a table. On it is a heroin set up and a pair of pink pompoms.

At Rise: The family are all frozen in various all American family positions. BILLY ENTERS sits down in front of one of the Televisions and begins to eat Pop Tarts. He takes up a remote, and turns the TV on. The family snaps to life. They begin the rituals The rituals should have a row, row, row your boat cadence. They are- SALLY "ties off" her Barbie doll and gets it high on heroin. WADE is writing on the closet walls and weeping. HUGH has a putting iron and cracks walnuts with it and swishes it down with a Diet Pepsi, belches and scratches his crotch. MADGE lights a cigarette and takes a swig off a vodka bottle and spits on the floor.

The rituals build in speed and intensity to the point where they becomes more ridiculous than they already are. A spot light hits BILLY. He leaps to his feet and screams like a wounded animal. This stops everyone in their tracks. BILLY'S bellow should have ample time to resound of the walls of the theatre. Finally the ensemble break the silence and sing...

ENSEMBLE

"Happy birthday to you
happy birthday to you
happy birthday dear Billy
happy birthday to you."

BILLY stops the singing by changing channels. This also changes the family's direction. Lights, sound and action onstage should reflect the channel surfing he does. He will change these channels/actions numerous times throughout the play.

MADGE

We do have the perfect life, don't we dear?

HUGH

That's because life is so perfect.

MADGE

Always 70 degrees, always sunny.

HUGH

We have 2 cars. We have television.

MADGE

We have several televisions.

HUGH

God bless our *lies*, I mean, "lives". God bless our country too.

MADGE

God bless our Christian God...Wait, Can God bless himself?

HUGH

Sure he can. He's God, and I should know...

(He whips out preacher's frock dons it.)

I'm the deacon remember?

(BILLY Changes channels.)

MADGE

We're good parents.

HUGH

We're even having the gosh darn birthday party to prove it.

MADGE

We have it perfect and that's all that matters.

HUGH

Absolutely perfect. Perfectly perfect.

(Suddenly stricken with horror.)

MADGE

What about his “little glitch”?

HUGH

Damn you. Damn you Madge. Damn you for bringing that up!

MADGE

The very bane of our existence.

HUGH

These are words, we agreed, that would never be spoken.

MADGE

Oh God, dear God, I saw it Hugh. I saw it!

HUGH

We have a “perfect agreement”, don’t we? Perfect families don’t discuss “little glitches”.

MADGE

He was in the shower. Getting ready for school. The door was ajar. I peeked. I know a mother shouldn’t, but I did.

(She shrieks runs down stage and smacks BILLY in the back of the head.)

Sheet Stainer”! Damned Laundry Assassin!

HUGH

Easy there, calm yourself mother...Hey, I have an idea. We’re good Americans aren’t we? Let’s do what all good Americans do and, forget the whole thing?

MADGE

You mean, pretend it’s never existed?

HUGH

The more you pretend something doesn’t exist, the less it does.

MADGE

But, he must have noticed that he’s different. Unusual down there? I mean, he’s not retarded for God’s sake. “Minimally exceptional” is what his teachers say. But, he’s not a drooling idiot or anything like that.

HUGH

Gosh dear, I can't imagine why you're still harping on about this. Especially since we decided to practice denial American style.

MADGE

But, I saw his manhood Hugh. In it's entirety.

HUGH

But, heck mother we're trying to make everything perfectly perfect.

MADGE

Is everything perfect? I mean, really, truly perfect?

HUGH

We should have no fear and no doubt. And why is that? Why is that?

MADGE

Because we're Hugh and Madge Brumfayleur.

HUGH

That's pronounced *Fail-ure, Fail-ure*...It's French.

MADGE

Yes, of course dear, we're French. Do you suppose I should start speaking the language of our people?

(BILLY changes channels. We hear a loud pounding.)

HUGH

Gosh dear do you hear that pounding? Must be Wade...Wade is that you?

WADE

Is that you, Hugh?

HUGH

It's Hugh, Wade.

WADE

Is Madge there?

HUGH

Right in her place Wade. We're both right in our places.

WADE

Well, gosh...It's been so long since we talked, you know? Brother to brother. I miss that. I miss not being in the closet. I miss it out there. I know you don't like to talk

about it, I appreciate that it's a sore spot, but I have sore spots of my own. Quite a few actually. Closet sores. That's why I've been trying to get your attention these last few days. I know I'm being silly, but, well you see...I have to pee.

HUGH

Ah, pee you say?

WADE

I have to urinate quite badly.

HUGH

I hate having to pee.

WADE

Me too.

HUGH

All that pressure and discomfort. Then all you can do is think, about trickling water , or rain pelting a tin roof, coffee percolating.

WADE

That's why I was hoping that you'd let me out of here, so I can use the toilet.

HUGH

What about the bucket I gave you?

WADE

Well, to quote the good book Hugh, "My bucket runith over". It's like an ocean rushing through my body. Feeling it swell and crash against the shores of my bladder.

HUGH

Gosh Wade, it sounds serious.

WADE

My kidneys are throbbing, like they're going to burst.

MADGE

Who is it Hugh?

HUGH

It's my brother.

MADGE

You have a brother?

WADE

What am I supposed to do?

HUGH

“Do” Wade? You shouldn’t do anything. Doing stuff. That stuff, is how you got yourself into this mess to begin with.

WADE

Blame the muse if you must.

HUGH

Remember what dad used to say? We’d be tossing around a foot ball, or playing fetch with Goldie. Remember. He’d take us each by the arm and say...

(LIGHTS dim to a spot on Hugh. He becomes a gross exaggeration of his father.)

Stop making excuses you worthless piece of shit! Be something! Do something! Stop sitting around crying! Stop your blubbering or I’ll give you something to cry about! Do you hear me! Do you hear me!

(He acts out with near psychotic rage, his father beating him.)

Jesus is Lord, say it! Jesus is Lord, say it! Jesus is Lord, say it! SAY IT, SAY IT SAY IT!!!

(LIGHTS come back to normal.)

WADE

But, it's not too fun standing drenched in your own urine. I think that’s where the sores came from.

HUGH

I don’t imagine that it is. Bye now Wade...

WADE

Wait, Hugh! Isn’t today a special day?

HUGH

It is indeed. Yes in-deedy. A very special day.

WADE

Maybe you could let me out, in honor of that?

HUGH

Come on now big brother. Where's that Brumfayleur family spirit? Man up and tough it out. Well Wade, I have to get back to the play now. Good luck to you. If you need anything else...

“Hor vwa mon frier-in law”
MADGE

All righty, we'll be seeing you.
HUGH

This is so tres boring.
MADGE

All righty, we'll be seeing you. That was my brother. My big “bro”.
HUGH

The man in the closet is related to you?
MADGE

Why yes, what did you think?
HUGH

I didn't know who he was.
MADGE

‘Just some strange man living in our closet?’
HUGH

I did wonder.
MADGE

Why would I keep someone I didn't know locked in the hall closet?
HUGH

Do I know why you do, what you do?
MADGE

Think Madge, wouldn't that be illegal? Keeping a perfect stranger locked away.
HUGH

I thought maybe that's where “skeletons” come from.
MADGE

(BILLY changes channels.)

HUGH

Can we just go back to our perfect day, please? Quite frankly, between the glitch and my brother this is getting to be very tedious. Not to mention taking the play in a completely different direction.

MADGE

Okay, let's start again.

HUGH

All the way from the very beginning? From the opening "at rise"?

MADGE

No stupid. We're near quarter of the way through the piece. Let's pick up from a random "perfect life" bit.

HUGH

Okay. Hey guess what fat ass? We still have the perfect life.

MADGE

That's because our life is so perfect.

HUGH

We're having the perfect time.

MADGE

*Pur-fec-tea-own-ay...*How old is he now Hugh? Puberty? I remember puberty. Bleeding and eating, bleeding and eating. "Blea-ting", that's what Mummy used to say...Now, he's post pubesant. A real man finally. That long penis peeking at his toes, over the crest of his one normal ball.

HUGH

Sometimes you can be very creepy Madge.

MADGE

You're a fine one to talk.

HUGH

Doesn't count, she's a step.

MADGE

We can no longer deny it. Our *sin* is different, did I say *sin*, I meant our "son". The "I" and the "O" are side by side by side after all. Oh dear God, who to blame, who to blame?

HUGH

I say we blame it on him.

MADGE

Make it all his fault. Everything for that matter, past present and future, can all be his fault.

HUGH

That's the spirit. He's the one whose poked a tiny hole in the bubble of our *lies*...Sorry, didn't mean to drop that "V".

MADGE

The deceptive little bastard! He's doing it on purpose. That's how teenage boys are.

HUGH

Deceiving us!? You're right, gosh darn it! How do you like them apples? And after all we've done to him? And you know what my Daddy always said about *deception*...

MADGE

"Deceive me once, shame on you".

HUGH

"Deceive me twice"...

MADGE & HUGH (together.)

"And you're a Jew".

(BILLY changes channels.)

HUGH

I was thinking Mother, maybe it's time I had "the chat" with him?

MADGE

Father!

HUGH

The family wisdom passed down. From Father to son. From Brumfayleur to Brumfayleur...Yes mother, it's time for..."The Chat".

MADGE

Which is French for "cat". It's a shame *Whiskers* isn't a girl. You could have had a chat with your *chatte*.

HUGH

This is an important time in a Brumfayleur's *lie*...Damn it! Damn that "F".

(MADGE produces a disposable camera.)

MADGE

And "Viola". A Kodak moment to be sure.

HUGH

Oh you and your French Madge...All right...Boy...Well, I feel the need to share with you...No listen very closely.

(She snaps pictures.)

A man gets to a certain age...The age you're getting to...Well things start changing for him...See a man gets to a certain age...and...Well when I turned 18, for instance...I was a young man about your age. My father sat me down and we had this very same chat...Boy, a man...Well, a man is a man...I'm glad we had this little talk. I feel like this birthday thing is moving right along.

MADGE

I feel better.

HUGH

And what did my Mama always say about "feeling better"?

MADGE

"You're always feeling better, when you're not feeling bad".

HUGH

"So always think of happy things".

MADGE

"And stop acting like a fag".

HUGH

That was a good chat.

MADGE

Yes dear, it really hit home.

HUGH

So, I'd say we're done with this "chat" business then.

MADGE

Back on with our perfect life?

HUGH

Perfectly perfect.

MADGE

Absolutely perfect.

HUGH

But, But? You have that big but look on your face.

MADGE

But, wait! Life suddenly makes sense now. I understand. I change the sheets on his bed. I practically have to chisel them off. This explains quite a lot actually. I take the sheets down to wash them, I spritz them with that stuff. 'Removes blood, grass and wine they say. Come to think of it, it says nothing about *cum*...I hang the sheets out to dry and they look like one of those maps. One of those maps of the world stretched flat. He leaves large continents all over these sheets. I stare at these continents. This world on white...I don't know if a Mother should be seeing the juice of the fruit, of the fruit of her loins.

HUGH

It's hard to deny if you keep bringing it up...I mean, heck we just had the "chat". Cake comes soon, then presents, a birthday wish...

MADGE

I know dear, but...

HUGH

"Perfect party, perfect day".

MADGE

I can just see him cumming. Like he was throwing these great ropes. Swinging lariats of gooey white.

HUGH

I SAID, DROP IT YOU FAT BITCH! JUST SHUT UP! SHUT UP! SHUT UP!

(BILLY changes channels.)

This is what I'd call the perfect birthday.

MADGE

That's because our life is so perfect.

HUGH

Perfectly perfect, I'd say.

MADGE

So you've said. So you've said numerous times already.

HUGH

Gosh, just felt like saying it again, and please don't blame me for the symbolic repetitions in the text.

MADGE

But, what does all the repetition symbolize, I wonder?

HUGH

Who cares, Sally's about to enter.

(SALLY crosses to them. She is dressed like a cheerleader. She is junk sick.)

SALLY

My head is a disco ball. My eyes spit out candy colored lights. They dot the floor, as I march down the center of the auditorium. I've been waiting for this moment all my life.

MADGE

He's your fault. Your seed. Bad batter.

SALLY

I wanna be prom queen.

HUGH

My nuts are fine, thank you.

SALLY

To wear hot pink.

HUGH

Ah blame. A woman's third breast.

MADGE

I thought incessant chattering about mundane or redundant details was?

HUGH

No, that's her second vagina.

SALLY

I sail across the floor. My feet hardly touching the ground.

MADGE

Defective Hugh goo. That's what you dribbled inside me.

SALLY

I am perfection in a crushed pink, taffeta gown.

MADGE

Rotten right down to the basic mix.

HUGH

They're the same size, hang at an even angle. Right Sally?

SALLY

If I could be the most perfectly, perfect Prom Queen ever, only for a moment, I could escape where I am now. I wouldn't have to be here. I wouldn't have to be me...Look, my King, the star Quarterback, waits on stage, glowing in the lights of my eyes.

HUGH

In fact I would say it's more that dusty old, womb of yours.

SALLY

He could have any girl, but he chooses me. Me, Sally Brumfayleur.

MADGE

It was fine until you fouled it up. Made it unclean.

SALLY

We'll slip vodka in the punch, smoke cheap pot, dance to *The White Stripes*

HUGH

Mrs. Dusty Death Oven.

SALLY

And later when I've thrown up all over him and in his car he won't care. He's my king. He'll love me, covered in puke and all. And for those few hours the rest of the world will vanish. It's just me sleeping in the crux of his arm. Me and him, happy in this moment. Me, finally, finally, someplace I want to be.

HUGH

My balls are perfectly fine. That's all I'm going to say.

MADGE

You're an idiot. With a capital, I...D...I-

SALLY

"Gimmie an I, gimmie a D, gimmie an I-O-T!

(She pathetically tries to do the spits.)

Every girl wants to be just like me.

HUGH

Well, frankly my dear, you're quite dry. 'Much like sticking the 'ol "John Thomas", into the mouth of the *Mo-jave*. Tumble weeds, cow skulls, vultures perched. O'Keefe's craggy old face painting landscapes. A ghost town of a womb. Complete with salon door banging in the arid wind?

MADGE

And, you're a stupid, loser of a man. Empty in side and soulless.

HUGH

You're the perfect combination of dried crust and blubber.

SALLY

Mommy...Daddy...

HUGH

"Crubber", that's what you are.

SALLY

HELLOOOOO! EXCUSE ME! I EXIST!

HUGH

Well hey, look who's here. Hello Sister.

MADGE

Meanwhile Mother fixates on the TV, pretending not to notice and eats.

SALLY

Step-Daddy, I need to use the car.

HUGH

Well, honey, today is your brother's birthday.

SALLY

I'll show you my tits.
(He places his hand on her breast.)

HUGH

You're such a kidder.

(She removes it. He places it back, etc.)

SALLY

I need the car.

HUGH

But your brother.

Step-Daaaaaaddy... SALLY

Now honey. HUGH

I have a date. SALLY

Hmmm, Step-Daddy's jealous. HUGH

It's my dealer. SALLY

HUGH
Hear that mother, sister's got herself a new boyfriend.

(MADE has her hands over her ears and makes blah, blah sounds.)

SALLY
How can I be the perfect, apple pie, American girl, without my SUV?

HUGH
To quote Mick, "We don't always get what we want. But if we try real hard"...

MADGE
And pray.

HUGH
"We soon discover, we achieve what we require".

(MADGE sings from same song.)

MADGE
"I saw Hugh today with an erection".

HUGH
We're family here. With a capital "F", and that means you sister-

(She flashes her tits to her father. He hands her the keys. SALLY takes them and sits back down.)

BILLY changes channels.)

HUGH

Ah, what a perfectly divine life we lead.

MADGE

That's because our life is so perfect-

HUGH

Still sunny?

MADGE

Last time I looked.

HUGH

It was sunny yesterday.

MADGE

It was on Wednesday too.

HUGH

The great thing about living in the suburbs? They cut down all the trees, then name the streets after them. I like that.

MADGE

I just can't unstick his testicles from my brain.

HUGH

We agreed to forget it, didn't we. We decided to move on. To not get hung up on his nuts, remember?

MADGE

"They" say, the testicle in question, doesn't have a shut off valve. Apparently after all these years the veins have begun to sheep-shag.

HUGH

Madge...

MADGE

And, the left one doesn't have a valve at all.

HUGH

Gosh dear. Have we forgotten, trying to forget, again?

MADGE

"Until it's empty", can you just imagine the sheer volume? We're talking cups of cum. A jorum of jizz. A veritable bucket of bukake.

(He reaches over and punches her

in the eye.)

HUGH

You brought that on yourself.

(He reaches over and punches her in the other eye.)

Sometimes a man has to solve his problems, his own way. I hate to hit a woman but, sometimes, you just gotta "smack that bitch up".

(BILLY changes channels. WADE speaks.)

WADE

Hugh...Hugh...Listen I was wondering if I could get a little food. I'm pretty darn hungry in here. Maybe some soup? A little bread maybe?...It's been awhile. Well...Gosh...I've taken to eating parts of my own body...And you know what? I don't taste too good. Yep...Yep...That's me, 'Oi Wade Brumfayleur, eating his toes and drinking his own urine. "To thine own self be food"...Hugh? Hugh?...Well, guess you're not home....All right...I'll just keep eating myself.

(BILLY changes channels.)

HUGH

We seem to have a quite the sticky wicket Madge.

MADGE

Oh dear, did he cum on the wicket as well?

HUGH

This is quite a conundrum. On one hand you have the boys balls. On the other-

MADGE

Your daughter's-

HUGH

Step-daughter's-

MADGE

Step-daughter's breast.

HUGH

We can't go around pretending we don't know it exists, when it obviously does.

MADGE

Wow, a moment of personal clarity, insight and self-awareness.

HUGH

Obviously we've been switched to a PBS type channel.

MADGE

He did that.

HUGH

The little bastard.

MADGE

Do you suppose he can control us that way?

(BILLY change channels. The lights do a weird backward looking thing. Hugh and Madge move quickly in reverse.)

HUGH

The little bastard.

MADGE

He did that.

HUGH

Obviously we've been switched to a PBS type channel.

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Hugh...Hugh...Listen I was wondering if I could get a little food. I'm pretty darn hungry in here. Maybe some soup? A little bread maybe?...It's been awhile. Well...Gosh...I've taken to eating parts of my own body...And you know what? I don't taste too good. Yep...Yep...That's me, 'Ol Wade Brumfayleur, eating his toes and drinking his own urine..."To thine own self be food"...Hugh? Hugh?...Let me explain myself, if I can. I know I'm in here for a reason. I appreciate that it's something we can't talk about, but it's just that...Gosh, if we don't talk about it how can I ever get out? I miss the sunshine. The blue sky. I miss my family. I know that sounds strange, we are a strange lot. Strange in a normal kind of way. Meaning, our version of "strange" is in, actuality, normal by most definitions. At least the way we define ourselves. Does any of this make sense?...Hugh...Well, guess you're not home....All right...I'll just keep eating myself.

(BILLY changes channels.)

HUGH

We need to confront this head on Madge. Stare it right in the face...Now your observations have confirmed that the boy has a large testicle.

MADGE

Yes, dear.

HUGH

With the exception of hacking the thing off, I don't know what else we can do.

MADGE

Perhaps further research into the matter...

HUGH

I feel a "prop cue" coming on...

(She's produced a stack of *Reader's Digest* .Magazines.)

MADGE

Ah, here!...I knew, I knew I remembered it being here. Proof, that my testicle obsession is justified...

(She reads.)

"What to do when your boy has one big ball"...This story comes from a Father in Topeka..."One day, quite by accident, I was working in the garage cleaning my shot guns when".

HUGH

Cleaning his shot gun, hmm...I like guns. Guns are fun and important.

MADGE

Apparently, he was working in the garage cleaning his shot gun when his son walked in..."He walked in and I saw he was crying. He said, "Daddy I think I have a problem." He then went on to show me something I thought I would never have to see. What no Father ever wants to see. The apple of his eye has a bad spot. His boy has one big ball".

(Grabbing the magazine from her.)

HUGH

Says here, he took the ram rod and promptly thrashed him.

MADGE

But, we don't own a shotgun or a ramrod.

HUGH

Wait! I know, I'll take the putter to him. Just like my father did to me.

(Doing a *Reagan* impression.)

HUGH

Boy...Boy..."Be-ready yourself for the wrath of Hugh"!

MADGE

Who's that supposed to be?

HUGH

Ronald Reagan.

MADGE

That was your best Reagan impression?

HUGH

I'm not an actor for God sake...

(Producing his head shot. He speaks an aside to the audience.)

But, ha, ha, I really am!

(To his son.)

"Listen to me pilgrim"...

MADGE

'Sounds more like John Wayne.

HUGH

Same difference...And I have it on good authority that the "Gipper" would get himself "Duked" on a regular basis.

MADGE

You're insinuating that Ronald Reagan was a "bottom"?

HUGH

Of course. John Wayne was no fag.

MADGE

But, certainly J.W. must have had the decency to use his hand on the 41st.
President?

HUGH

Yeah, but that's not gay.

(Again to audience.)

This is all an inside joke. Unless you know this author's work, and his need to humiliate his father by re-sexing such American icons of masculinity, you're just not going to get it...Where was I...Ah, yes...

(He does a grotesque blend of *Reagan* and *Wayne*.)

'Whether it's getting the lane in traffic he wants, killing a bunch of Indians or celebrating his son's birthday...Listen to me pilgrim, as a man of the Caucasian persuasion, you have the God given right to "insist your will". It's what we call in *'merica*...See Madge, the way I did the '*America* thing? With the apostrophe before the "A", so it's almost silent. *'merica*. When you can do that, you know you're a real American...Well, back to the insistence. Now boy I insist you come over here immediately, so I can beat you with this putter.

MADGE

He doesn't seem to be moving.

HUGH

Boy...Here me now Boy! I insist!...You listen to me now...Are you listening? Hugh doth *insist*...

MADGE

Do you hear your father?

HUGH

You're helping me?

MADGE

Well of course. You're my husband and I'm supposed to love, honor and obey you.

HUGH

"Obey", you say, obey? Nudge, nudge, wink, wink. Looks like Herman the One-eyed German is auctunged and ready to Blitzkrieg.

MADGE

Sally, your father needs you.

(Going back to his *John Reagan* voice.)

HUGH

"Well heck. With a fat woman standing beside him and the wind at his back, I guess there's nothing a white man can't do"...Well then, I'd say I've done a lion's share of "fatherly duties" today.

(BILL changes channels. SALLY crosses to her father. She is even sicker now.)

SALLY

Step-daddy I need a thousand dollars.

HUGH

Heck honey, that's a lot of smackers.

SALLY

I really need it.

HUGH

You're disregarding everybody else's feelings except your own. That's just plain rude, and selfish

SALLY

What about my feelings...Whose paying attention to those?

(He looks around to see who might be paying attention.)

HUGH

Hmm...Gosh, guess nobody is, I guess....Now, why would a young girl like you need all that money?

SALLY

For my abortion.

HUGH

We all know that's illegal in the eyes of God and some of these United States.

SALLY

I suppose you want a smack addicted, mongoloid, who might look a lot like you, tearing around the house?

HUGH

What happened to all that money I already gave you?

SALLY

That went for my last abortion.

HUGH

Heck that's a regular cornucopia.

MADGE

What does she want Hugh?

HUGH

A thousand dollars.

MADGE

Another abortion.

HUGH

Perfect families are more careful sister.

MADGE

Show him your ass Sally.

HUGH

Nope. We just can't be having abortions any time we feel like it-

(She lifts up her skirt and shows him her ass.)

HUGH

I...Ah...mmm....Well...Ah....

SALLY

The money?

(He reaches in his wallet and pulls out a thousand dollars.)

HUGH

Can't take it with you, I guess.

SALLY

Thanks step-daddy.

HUGH

Wait, a moment young lady...Did you do your homework?

SALLY

No, but I have been working from home. You can find my ad on Craigslist.org. I offer a full body massage with a happy ending. I also provide the following list of services. BBBJ, Golden Showers, Roman Showers, Rimming, S&M, Spanking, and prostrate milking. I'm 420 friendly and speak fluent Greek, as well.

(BILLY changes channels. SALLY returns to her area.)

MADGE

Wait Hugh a thought! What if he's not ours?

HUGH

That's not just a thought honey, but, a full fledged non-sequitur. Now what do you mean by not ours?

MADGE

What if some how, by an act of God or clerical error, our real son got switched at the hospital, for this big balled boy.

HUGH

Then what became of our son, if that's not him?

MADGE

What if some how, by an act of God or clerical error, our real son got switched at the hospital, for this big balled boy.

HUGH

Then his balls are his own problem.

MADGE

And if he's not our real son, that means my obsession with all this is nothing more than the pining of a middle aged woman, over the glorious beauty that is youth. I'd say that was a healthy reaction. Unlike your obsession which is just plain gross. Hey another thought!

HUGH

Wow, two in one day. That's pretty good for a woman.

MADGE

Why don't we call out his name, that would get his attention. Names are good for that. We call out his name. If he doesn't respond, he's not ours, and technically not our problem. Agreed?

HUGH

Hey Madge, as much as I hate to admit it. That is an excellent idea on your part. Kudos. In fact I've been remiss in giving you your due. Many of the good ideas in this play happen to be yours and you deserve all the credit.

MADGE

I can't take all the credit. A lot of it is in the way I'm written. But, thank you honey, that's very kind of you

HUGH

It's always good, about mid-way through, to hit the audience with something they least expect.

(They coo and rub noses.)

All righty then, let's get this name business underway.

(He speaks to BILLY.)

Hey you...Ah...Hey Ah...Strangest thing. I can't seem to remember his name.

MADGE

You're such a dolt...Excuse me...Ah...Young man...The strangest thing just happened...Well, for the life of me I can't remember...

HUGH

We did name him didn't we?

MADGE

Well of course we did...I'm sure we did...I don't think you can leave the hospital without a name...Wait, stupid, I think it's Larry?

HUGH

I think it was *Lawrence*...Ah, Lawrence?...Hmm. He doesn't seem to be answering to either one. I think it's in the "L" family.

MADGE

Liddy?

HUGH

Lucky wasn't it Lucky?

MADGE

Les...Les...Lester.

HUGH

We would never name a child Les?...Lazarus...No wait, that's my penis.

(Blurting out.)

MADGE

Latrell DeShawn Jones!

HUGH

Madge, "Latrell DeShawn Jones"?

MADGE

Oh dear God. What if his name is Latrell DeShawn Jones? That could only mean one thing...

HUGH&MADGE (together.)

He's a "NEGROOOOOO"!!!

HUGH

How is that possible?

MADGE

He flinched.

HUGH

The U.P.S. guy! They like big women.

MADGE

I saw him. I said the name. His entire body shuddered in a "Shaftian" like tremble.

HUGH

Are you sure he's a Negro, have you ever seen him tip?

MADGE

A throbbing, thick, virile, black...

HUGH

WE BOTH JUST HAVE TO RELAX HERE!...I mean, "A man's home is... his house", after all.. "A man's got to find his manly pride. Now go over there and shake him by the shoulders.

Shake him by the shoulders? MADGE

To see if he's...You know ... HUGH

I can't do that. I mean, God forbid you step on one of their shoes, let alone shake them by the shoulders. MADGE

(He clears his throat.)

"Yo up G. What's the dilly yo"? HUGH

Havens to Betsy! What are you saying? MADGE

It's the special "Negro code". HUGH

Where did you learn that? MADGE

(He picks up another *Readers' Digest* .)

"In the unlikely event of a suburban Negro encounter always remember to know your code". See Madge, I've been studying. HUGH

Oh dear God! Save us from this dark, ungodly, un-godliness. MADGE

(She yanks magazine from him.)

Remember Jesus is on our side. We're decent. We're certainly white and we dress really comfortably. Now what do they say to do next? HUGH

"In the event that the "code" fails, one should resort to "rapping"? MADGE

Okay I know, it's that talk-sing thing. You know, you flail your arms in these quasi-simian, threats and... HUGH

MADGE

..."And terrify whitey to his very core".

(SOUND of a heavy Rap beat is heard.)

HUGH

Sort of makes you feel..."Primal", doesn't it?

MADGE

"Don't forget to use the word *Niggaz*".

(HUGH throws down.)

HUGH

"You dope, you fresh
you stupid fly
niggie dis me one mo time
and I think you gonna die

'Cause I'm lookin' for a shortie
who booty got mass.

Look at me again
I'll buss a cap on that ass...

Take it mother...

MADGE

Oh dear...
"Niggie give me this
Niggie give me that...
Niggie give me nuttin'
so I pull my Gat".

(She suddenly gets into it and is really good.)

Making lots of money
with the white man's way
My chains are all gold
But, I'm his muthafuckin' slave.

Puffy sells out
while Jay Z flinches
see, I'd bust those Niggas up
and make 'em both my bitches.

(The “music” stops suddenly.)

HUGH

All right Madge, that’s enough.

MADGE

But, the “darker the berry”...

HUGH

Enough Madge. My Anglo-Saxon member can’t bare up to your scrutiny.

MADGE

“Once you’ve had black you never go back?”

HUGH

I said, “that will do”!

MADGE

Yes, dear...He doesn't seem to be responding.

HUGH

That means...

HUGH/MADGE

He's not a Negro!

MADGE

I think a prayer of thanks is in order Deacon.

(BILLY changes channels. LIGHTS and music become holy.)

HUGH

God, and I don’t mean some 8 arm elephant, kneel down on a rug, slap you with a shoe God. I’m not talking about a worship at sun down, bob to the east, dance naked around a fire, spray on, made in China, by one get one free, God. I’m talking about the true God. The lord of hosts. A big, ‘ol, pissed off, white guy with a beard. A right to bear arms kinda God. A fire and brimstone, Chuck Heston, pry it out of my cold dead hands, semi-automatic, lock and load style lord...To that fag-hating creator of the heavens and earth, we wish to bestow our humble thanks for the aversion of a horrible tragedy. Yea though we walk through the valley of the shadow of black people, your rod and staff did bring us much comfort. We’d like to thank you lord in the name of your son, Jesus H. Christ...Amen...

(BILL changes channels. LIGHTS back to normal. SALLY ENTERS. She is very sick now.)

Hey sister. Guess what, your brother's not a Negro.

SALLY

I need a thousand dollars.

HUGH

You're pregnant again so quickly? Gosh Sally, keep you knees together.

SALLY

It's for my dope.

HUGH

A new boyfriend?

SALLY

No step-daddy, it's for my heroin.

HUGH

Well, we all need heroes in life don't we. Wait Sister, for your "heroine?" As in female icon? Hmmmm...Are you suggesting that you're a "lesbian"?

MADGE

Probably because of you.

HUGH

Well you know what my grandma always say about lesbians?

SALLY

"A Dyke's hand is like two in the bush".

HUGH

I'd like to *meat* this girlfriend of yours.

MADGE

You mean M-E-E-T, not M-E-A-T.

HUGH

I'm just reading what's written.

MADGE

Maybe it's a type-o?

SALLY

Step-daddy listen...

HUGH

Or, maybe the playwright is trying to make a feminist statement, about how women are objectified in our culture. By using *meat and meet* as an obvious pun.

MADGE

I don't think so dear, he's not that *cleaver*.

SALLY

Step-daddy. Father. Deacon.

HUGH

Just don't go trying to marry this girlfriend of yours. I won't stand for it. Marriage is a sacred thing.

MADGE

"Sacred", is just "scared" with an inverted "C".

HUGH

You know, as a man of the cloth, I feel obligated to denounce homosexuality. But, gosh honey, when it's two girls...I guess it's different. Heck, doesn't seem like a sin at all, now that I think about it.

SALLY

No, listen step-daddy! Not *heroine*, "heroin". "China Red". "Bulldog". "White death".

HUGH

"Heroin"? Heroin...Ah, heroin you say?

MADGE

Which is really just "hero-in".

HUGH

Gosh, what a difference an "E" makes.

SALLY

My legs hurt, like I've been pelted with putting irons.

HUGH

Well sweets, Daddy doesn't have the scratch.

SALLY

If you don't give me the money, I'll go back to being bulimic.

HUGH

Honey.

SALLY

My ribs, my knees, my pelvis. I'll be like fondling a bicycle.

HUGH

Gosh honey.

SALLY

It'll be apples and *Exlax* again for dinner.

HUGH

But, you look so perfect now.

SALLY

I'll purge right here. I swear. I'll "poke and choke" right in front of your very eyes.

HUGH

Your mother's just had the carpet cleaned.

MADGE

What's she saying?

HUGH

She's threatening to vomit.

MADGE

Not on my carpet, I just had it cleaned.

SALLY

Step-daddy I'm in pain.

HUGH

Don't be silly Sally, 'cause it's too good to use just once, you're not in pain. I don't see any pain. Remember dear, if you can't see the pain then it cant hurt that bad.

SALLY

Wait! Another devisacle digression. I think I know why the playwright has us making references to the play, thus destroying the illusion for the audience. He's trying to pull them in and make them realize that we're really them, turned inside out. Wow! See that's what drugs can do for you.

HUGH

Now, back to the play...Honey, I swear. The Ministry is broke. It's not the same for step-daddy anymore. Gosh, it seems like nobody's interested in giving money to God these days. Well heck, there used to be a time when a man felt like taking care of his soul. It's the liberals. I said it before. They have this country tied up in a mess

of liberal knots. It's getting so you can't fling a dead cat without hitting a smelly Chinaman or a damn democrat.

SALLY

You're a fucking liar.

HUGH

Now honey, that's a little harsh, wouldn't you say.

SALLY/MADGE (together)

Liar! Liar! Liar!

HUGH

You're not being very respectful.

SALLY

And you're a child molester.

HUGH

"Droit de Seigneur"!...And it's only girls, honey. Heck, I'm no Catholic! And, as Martin Luther King once said, now there's a respectable negro.

MADGE

"I'm getting my black ass outta here"?

HUGH

No. That was the "I have a dream", check your history dear. No, he said, "It takes a village to raise a child, but only one priest to molest him".
(She does a pathetic cheer.)

SALLY

Gimmie a "G", gimmie an "O", gimmie an "O, O, D"! What does it spell...GOOD GIRL!...(cont'd)

(She tries to do the "splits" and collapses near her mother. BILLY changes channels.)

SALLY

Mommy, Mommy, I don't feel good. It feels like I have hot quarters on my eyes.

(To the tune of "Love and Marriage".)

MADGE

I hate children, I hate children...

(SALLY wraps a belt around her arm. She searches her arms for a vein.)

SALLY
How did this happen?

MADGE
Being a mother is a very difficult thing.

SALLY
Mommy, oh Mommy, it hurts.

MADGE
Children, war and the New England Patriots...

SALLY
There's like a war going on inside of me.

MADGE
The only three things I truly hate.

SALLY
I can't bend my legs straight.

MADGE
The little creatures are born so stupid and needy.

SALLY
I'm so ugly now.

MADGE
I didn't want either of them. A dog would have been fine.

SALLY
I used to be pretty. "Pretty Sally", remember?

MADGE
They *Gerbered* up all my time.

SALLY
Is this my fault? Did I do this to myself?

MADGE
It's my life...

SALLY
I want it to stop.

MADGE

My only life...

SALLY

I just want to stop hurting.

MADGE

I mean, what about doing something else with my time?

SALLY

I have an ache crawling all through me.

MADGE

Couldn't I have done something else?

SALLY

Everywhere, in my veins, grabbing at my calves.

MADGE

"They" say children are magical. Does that mean I can saw one in half?

SALLY

Maybe I could curl, curl up with my head in your lap? Maybe you could brush my hair? I could come over there. We could pretend couldn't we?

MADGE

Why can't I return the children that don't work properly? I kept the receipt.

SALLY

You could brush my hair. Like on TV. Put your arms around me. Make me feel like that, safe like that. Like on that show.

MADGE

Did you ever take your children to the park and wish that you could just leave them there?

(She begins to mine her legs for a vein.)

SALLY

Maybe you could...I mean, just for a minute?

MADGE

I tried it once, but like a wet retriever, she found her way home.

SALLY

I feel so fucking lonely.

MADGE

Can't stand them. Can't stand them. Can't stand them!

SALLY

I'm not going to cry...I'm not...I just wanna get "straight".

(She taps at the artery on her neck and cries in spite of herself.)

MADGE

No medals, no certificates. Not even a simple thank you note?

SALLY

I mean, I can't find a vein, man.

MADGE

When Hugh and I first met we dreamed of what we might be. What we might do with the time in our life. Doctor, lawyer, Indian "thief". But that was too hard, a commitment to our own dreams and screams, much too difficult, so we became parents instead.

SALLY

Mommy can I come to you?

MADGE

Well, what reward do I get now?

SALLY

Can I?

MADGE

Where's my prize? My "worlds best mom" statue. It isn't fair.

SALLY

Can I come over there?

MADGE

My pot 'o' gold. My lucky charms. My chance to kiss the blarney stone.

(SALLY reaches out her hand. MADGE automatically throws a handful of loaded syringes at her.)

SALLY

I could come over there and you could brush my hair.

MADGE

Lying Irish bastards.

SALLY

You could help me.

MADGE

They're just Puerto Ricans with red hair.

(She slips the needle into her neck.)

SALLY

Mommy...Mom...I need you...I mean...I can't seem to fix...Mommy...

(SALLY injects.)

MOTHERRR!!!...

(The drug takes her instantly. A warm rush, a pleasant itch moves around her body. MADGE finally acknowledges her.)

I have a problem Mommy.

MADGE

Gosh dear, let's hope it's not too tedious.

SALLY

It's a serious problem and it's only getting worse.

MADGE

You're too young for "serious problems" sister. I remember what my mother used to say to me...

(LIGHT dim to a spot on Madge. She does a grotesque exaggeration of her mother.)

MADGE

Stop you whining you fat, little whore! Go ahead, eat yourself swinish.! No man is going to love you. I wish you weren't born! I wish you were dead! Fat, little whore, Fat, little whore, Fat, little whore, Fat, little whore, Fat, little whore!

(LIGHTS back up to normal.)

SALLY

I need your help Mom.

MADGE

What's the matter now?

SALLY

I feel lost. Like I'm floating in space.

MADGE

Don't be silly Sally,

(Aside)

Because it's too good to use just once...That's the heroin talking.

SALLY

They make fun of me at school. They call me "Junky Sally Brumfayleur". You know what they say when I walk down the halls?

(She chants.)

"Junky Sally's at the prom
Junky Sally's drunken Mom
Junky Sally's teeth are bad
Junky Sally's, sex with Dad".

MADGE

Well, Junky Sally Brumfayleur, "Stick and stones", "Sticks and stones".

SALLY

Tell me that you love me?

MADGE

Certain things are simply "unspeakable", you know that.

(Sally starts to slip into a nod.)

SALLY

Help me mother please.

MADGE

See, that's unspeakable.

SALLY

Tell me mother?

MADGE

Simply unspeakable-

SALLY

Tell me-

Absolutely Unspeakable- MADGE

Help me- SALLY

Unspeakably, unspeakable- MADGE

Even if you really don't mean it, say it. SALLY

MADGE
Sally dear, dear junky Sally, there are certain things in life, that are just unspeakable-

(She looks at her daughter who has nodded off.)

Oh...That was easy.

(BILLY changes channels.)

Bad news Hugh. The Big Balled Boy is ours. Look at those pajamas.

HUGH
You're a fat pig Madge. Everything about you disgusts me. The way you look. That you drink gravy. I hate the way the moisture builds up in the rolls behind your knees. I hate that constellation of moles that dapple your neck. I hate the "Madge flab" that jiggles when you point. I hate everything about you Madge. I hate you and I only wish you had a twin sister, so I could hate you twice as much.

MADGE
My turn now?...You're a weak, frightened, man who's never succeeded at anything in his life. A terrified, dribbling, mess of a man is what you are..."Mess Man". Sounds like the name of a Super Hero. Here comes big old "Super Stupid Man". Able to stumble over failure in humiliating bounds. 'Cums faster than a speeding bullet. Look it's a bird, it's a "pain", it's a man bent over like a question mark, it's...it's...*Failure Man*.

(Singing.)

"Failure man, failure man
does what ever a failure can".

(He raises his fist to punch her, but is interrupted by pounding from the closet.)

WADE

Hugh...I know you're out there...Stop pretending you can't hear me...Hugh!

HUGH

What is it Wade? I'm trying to punch my wife in the face here.

WADE

Well Gosh little brother. I guess you know what it's about.

HUGH

Well Wade, we covered all that didn't we?

WADE

We did. Yes, but I'm afraid I have to pee even worse now.

HUGH

Now, now, big brother. I know you too well. You can't pull the wool over this ewe's eyes..."Ewe's eyes"...Wool..."Baaaa", get it?...Just remember what happened last time I let you out.

WADE

I don't believe in yesterdays Hugh.

HUGH

That's what you pretty much said last time.

WADE

I just have to pee.

HUGH

I hate to call my own brother a liar. I hate calling any man a liar, except Italians and Filipinos of course.

WADE

I'm begging you. I'm begging you little brother.

HUGH

Well Wade...I don't believe you. See, what I think's going to happen is; I open that door. You'll step out. Shade your eyes from the light and start immediately in on that darned *poetry*. The neighbors are talking Wade. Madge and I can't go anywhere without people asking; "How's that crazy verse-reading brother of yours"? I mean gosh, we have to live here don't we?

WADE

Well Hugh, poetry is weird that way isn't it? I mean, you have to have a lot of heart to read or write poetry. In fact, heck, I'd say it was down right impossible without it...And...Well...Here's the situation little brother...My heart...Well, gosh...My heart is basically "empty". That is to say the pump reaches down into the well all right but, the well, gosh, it's dry. 'Just keeps sucking up air. I won't recite anything. I don't think I could...What if we made a deal?

HUGH

The very word to you Wade, is like whiskey.

WADE

You let me go pee little brother and if I so much as recite one phrase. One beat of pentameter, one breath of verse, I'll become your slave. Imagine that Hugh, your very own slave.

HUGH

If I let you out to pee and if you relapse into poesy in any way, you'll be my slave? Forever?

WADE

I swear on the Brumfayleur family jewels.

HUGH

No man in his right mind would risk all that. You wouldn't sell your freedom for a lousy poem would you Wade?

WADE

No way.

HUGH

You may have a "poetry problem", but you're no fool.

WADE

Just a quick pee.

HUGH

Very well, I'll do it.

(He unlocks the door. WADE emerges. He carries in his arms a sloshing bucket of urine. It sloshes over the rim. LIGHT FADE on the rest of the stage. He shades his eyes

He slowly tries to stand erect. He inhales deeply. A tear rolls down his cheek. He pisses himself. He recites a poem.)

WADE

This is a poem I wrote entitled "A birthday poem for Billy Brumfayleur from his Father who would never have the guts or the inclination to tell his son so his estranged Uncle ends up doing it for him". That's a run on sentence, sorry.

(His sense of release is profound.)

I tried to navigate this
strange living room,
naked and mostly in the
dark.

I realized...

We all wound somebody.

We all get wounded.

For some the ability to
inflict pain is simple.

Like brushing your teeth
or walking the dogs.

Then sometimes a person
will do something obvious
something vulgar
some thing cruel.

And so my son I
burned that bridge
to you. However,
A single heart can be
an immense place.
Time will find me that place,
in your heart, in my heart,

That perfect place
where we both can
be happy....(cont'd)

(LIGHTS up full. HUGH is swatting at him with the putting iron. Wade retreats. The urine is sloshing everywhere.)

WADE

No, no, Hugh please, please!!! Don't throw me back in there! I'll die Hugh please...Hugh, Hugh, in the name of God man! Let me have my words!

(Corralling him back into the closet.)

HUGH

Unspeakable!

WADE

It's-

HUGH

Unspeakable-

WADE

It's just-

HUGH

Unspeakable-

WADE

It's just poetry Hugh-

HUGH

It's unspeakable Wade!

(He gets him back in the closet and locks the door.)

Damn shame. Damn shame...But hey! I got me a slave...Now where was I? Ah, yes, beating my fat wife.

(BILLY changes channels. Both MADGE and HUGH leap from their chairs and face off like Gladiators. She wields her vodka bottle while he thwarts her with his golf club. TV. Jingles start to underscore their battle.)

MADGE

You promised me it was going to be like a "rose garden".

(They circle each other.)

HUGH

I beg your pardon?

(She swings at him and misses.)

HUGH

It would have been, if you could have produced normally.

MADGE

Why don't you get sick in your perfect balls and die!

HUGH

Why don't you go suck down a gallon of cancer.

MADGE

Wait, stop!

(She lets loose a flood of crocodile tears.)

I'm a terrible Mother. I'm a terrible wife.

HUGH

Now, now, dear.

MADGE

I don't deserve a perfect husband like you.

HUGH

Now, now, dear. You're being too hard on yourself.

(She smacks him with the vodka bottle.)

MADGE

We're not really French, I know that now. It was just a ploy to mask your ridiculous, yet suggestive, last name.

(He grabs SALLY and uses her as a shield.)

HUGH

Stop bitching at me you sagging mound of withered old NAG!

MADGE

Don't start with me you stupid ass.

HUGH

If you just did something with your life. Pulled your own tremendous weight in some way. Is that so difficult?

(SALLY'S still on a nod. The needle stuck in her neck.)

SALLY

Gimmie a G...Gimmie an O...O..O...O...O...

(LIGHT up on WADE. He weeps. MADGE and HUGH continue to battle.)

HUGH

You're a bitch/cunt Madge, a "Bunt" actually.

MADGE

Liar-

Bunt- HUGH

Liar- MADGE

Bunt- HUGH

Wait Hugh! It's the Smith-Jones. MADGE
(The Smith Jones stroll by.)

Well, howdy there neighbors! MR. SMITH-JONES

Smith-Jones...How goes it? HUGH

Lovely day isn't it. MRS. SMITH- JONES

Indeed it is. MADGE

Perfectly perfect I'd say. MR. SMITH-JONES

We were just saying that ourselves right honey. HUGH

You must give me that brownie recipe Betty. MADGE

I'll bring it to the Tupperware party. MRS. SMITH-JONES

I expect to see you on the links Brumfaylure. I shot two under last week. MR. SMITH-JONES

I'm ready for you Smith-Jones. HUGH

Well, we have to be off now. MR. SMITH-JONES

MRS. SMITH-JONES

Bill's treated me to an anal bleaching for my birthday.

HUGH

You old rascal.

MR. SMITH-JONES

Take care now...

(They stroll off.)

Now there's good people.

MRS. SMITH-JONES

Madge is looking a little on the hefty side...

(They EXIT. HUGH and MADGE fall back to battle.)

HUGH

Wait everyone! I think it's time for a round of the rituals.

(They are about to begin when BILLY jumps up and uses his remote to PAUSE them. They freeze mid-rit.)

BILLY

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!!!

(Pointing to the TVs.)

This is my family! THIS IS MY FAMILY!

(Beat.)

A Sunday, in the summer. A father son fishing trip. Hugh rents us twenty-footer and we go. Me, Hugh and this salty old skipper are sitting there bobbing our lines...All of a sudden, over my shoulder, about 3 football fields away comes this blast! Like a shotgun blast. Then another one off to the right, BLAM! One from the left, BLAM! BLAM, right over there!. Salty says, "Them thar are whales. In these waters, probably Sperm Whales". Sure enough only a hundred yards away come a whole bunch of blasts and we can see 'em now. A small herd or pack or what ever you call them and they're circling us. It's so fucking cool! The blasts coming one after another, fast! Do you see this?...Do you?...One of them is real close now. Real, real close. BLAM, and this gush of water shoots out, right in front of the sun, it fans back down, all gleaming like diamonds...Salty says; "These here whales feed in a circle",

and he figured we were probably dead center in there dinner...All of a sudden one of 'em comes barreling down on us. He gets about 10 yards from the boat and, I swear to God, he comes straight out of the water, this monster wall of whale...He hangs there in the air, like a gigantic exclamation point! I can see his stomach, so close, grooved blue, crusted with stuff and streaming water...Then he hooks, cuts back down and dives. But before he goes completely under, his tail hovers. It smacks the top of the water and sends a sheet of rain into the boat an inch deep. Do you see that? Did anybody see that?

(He removes the needle from Sally's neck. He slaps her sharply across the face a couple of times. She wakes up.)

I love you little sister. I love you...You can stop this now.

SALLY

Really, just like that?

BILLY

Yeah...

(She EXITS with a smile. He begins to remove his clothes.)

Anyway, Salty says; "That's the old Bull and it seems he's asking us politely to leave", and he fires up the engines. WAIT! We can't leave"! He said they would start bumping the boat next and his old rig couldn't take it. "So what? Who cares? Sink it. Sink it all!...We're motoring away, and the bull is getting smaller.

(He is now naked.)

The next thing I know, I'm in the water. I don't even remember jumping in. I take off after the whales. I swim and swim. I swim until my arms ache and my legs are like rubber. My heart is pounding out of my chest, but I can breathe. I can breathe better. I can breathe easier. I'm there. I'm with them. We're rolling and diving and laughing...I see the boat. A little dot on the horizon...Then it's gone.. remnants of oil, gas, are all that's left. No trace of them at all. Just the blue, blue ocean...I dive under. I can hold my breath just like them, and I see crusty stuff clinging to my ribs. My feet...They're flat and blue and I don't have any toes, and this thing, I can feel it, between my shoulder blades. It puckers, then opens wide. I arch my back and let it break the surface. One thrust of my mighty tail and I'm off with this pack, this pod, this family of mine... I could hate them. My human family. I could hear their voices, in my head for the rest of my life. I could nurture this perfectly, perfect hate. 'Hate the world, hate myself. I could let that hate of Hugh and Madge drown out everything else my life has in store...Or, I could do what any good whale does when confronted with this much ugliness -- swim away...Just swim away.

(He unlocks WADE'S closet.)

Just swim away...

(BILLY EXITS. WADE slowly emerges from the closet. LIGHTS fade.)

Finis.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *Thank you for reading Big Ball. I hoped it made you laugh, made you think, pissed you off, and maybe even offended you a bit. Tho in this day and age offending the American psyche is a difficult, if not impossible feat. We are a crass, obscene and perverse culture. We have eschewed our boundaries, our decency, and more over our compassion. This is reflected in the music we listen to, the TV we watch, law enforcement, our so-called “leadership”, the Church, the nuclear family, and most of our other sacred institutions. The aim of grotesque theatre is to lampoon and at the same time expose the mythologies American culture struggles to maintain. Big Ball is a coming of age play. If there is a glimmer of hope for us, it resides in the individual. One person’s ability to exercise empathy and forgive, while unlocking what is best in their hearts.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Leslie Bramm is the author of 22 plays which have been produced, work-shopped and/or developed, regionally, internationally, off-Broadway, and independently by Variations Theatre Group, Three Crows Theatre, The Present Company, The Penobscot Theatre, The Actor’s Theatre of Louisville, Emerging Artists, Theatre, Nicu’s Spoon, The Edward Albee Last Frontier Conference, Rattle Stick, Reverie Productions, Playwrights Horizons/Tisch, Shelter Theatre Group, Gold Coast Theatre, The Province Town Players, and the Colorado Fine Arts Center. Bramm is the recipient of a Stanley Drama Award (Oswald’s Backyard) A Paul T. Nolan Award (Islands of Repair) A Tennessee Williams Literary Award (Big Ball). Bramm is a two-time finalist for the O’Neill Conference. His play A.B.C. was banned from the curriculum at SUNY college and adapted into the film “Be My Oswald”. He co-wrote the screenplay “This is Not Here”, with actor the Kevin Corrigan, based on The Memoir; “The Last Days of John Lennon”. He is published by JAC Publications, Smith and Krause, Brooklyn Publishers, One Act Play Depot, The New York Theatre Experience and Indie Theatre Now. He was the literary

director for Nicus Spoon Theatre Company, Variations Theatre Group, and Communications director for The League of Independent Theatres. He is also a longtime member of the Present Company (producers of fringenyc), at the Actor's Studio Playwright and Director's Workshop, and IATI Theatre. Bramm was lead singer of the indie rock band Diz Dam. He was kicked out of Julliard and studied playwriting with Aristotle, and The Beatles.

THEY

By Rosemary Frisino Toohey

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama editor Janet Colson writes:*

*Rosemary Frisino Toohey has created a powerful piece of theatre in **THEY**, a series of interwoven monologues delivered by four workers at the community focal point where race and class intersect - the local supermarket. Writing dynamic monologues with characters whose need to talk is reciprocated by an audience's desire to listen takes a special skill and playwright Rosemary Frisino Toohey nails it. The characters in her play speak like real people, and regardless of their perspectives, we get caught up in the conversation.*

Toohey addresses an urgency of the present moment in her monologue driven play, packing a sucker punch with her characters' contrapuntal spoken-word attitudes towards race. It's particularly difficult to push past the comfort zone into the powder keg issue of racial relations, but this play meets the challenge head on. We see how a theatre piece, especially one as well-written as this one, can transcend the time and space continuum, allowing us to not only listen to people's words, but to hear them.

Five stars.

An excerpt from Carla:

Well, alright then. Since we're both, you know, the same, I guess I can say this. I'm not prejudiced or anything, but here's the way I see it. If they were all like Morgan Freeman, everything would be okay...

And Rena:

RENA

Look, bro, just because we're both brown skin don't think I'm gonna stand here and spill my guts to you. I need to know if this is going to get back to my boss...

Okay, I get it, it's a friggin' survey for college, but you're askin' me to tell you how I feel. Like, really? I got to think about this.

THEY

CHARACTERS

CARLA: female, White, middle-aged, supermarket shopper.

RENA: female, Black, 20s, supermarket employee

JIM: male, White, late teens, supermarket employee.

LEON: male, Black, middle-aged, supermarket employee.

N.B. The play is a series of interrupted monologues with each character speaking to unseen questioners. Each is in a separate place onstage.

TIME The present.

SETTING A supermarket, minimally suggested, or the set might be just an empty stage.

THEY

(CARLA, RENA, JIM AND LEON all stand in separate spaces. Lights up on CARLA. She addresses an unseen questioner.)

CARLA

What do you want?...

Yeah, this is my regular place to food shop...

You're doing a survey for college? Well, I don't know if I've got time to answer any questions. I just ran in here to grab a few things for supper. What's it all about?...

Oh, good Lord, race in America, yeah, I've got an opinion. Doesn't everybody? And you want to hear what I really think?...

So, what you're telling me is, white students are talking to whites and the black students are talking to blacks, is that it?...

Well, alright then. Since we're both, you know, the same, I guess I can say this. I'm not prejudiced or anything, but here's the way I see it. If they were all like Morgan Freeman, everything would be okay...

Yes, Morgan Freeman, the actor. I mean, Morgan Freeman could come over and hang out with me anytime. Talk about class, talk about style. Same thing with Samuel L. Jackson. And of course, Denzel Washington. Denzel Washington could move in next door as far as I'm concerned. I told my husband Denzel Washington could move into our spare room if he wanted to. I would be fine with that. Absolutely fine. Him or Sydney Poitier. But you see, the rest of them, they're not like Sydney Poitier. That right there is the whole problem with race in America today.

(Lights crossfade to RENA, likewise addressing an unseen questioner.)

RENA

Look, bro, just because we're both brown skin don't think I'm gonna stand here and spill my guts to you. I need to know if this is going to get back to my boss...

Okay, I get it, it's a friggin' survey for college, but you're askin' me to tell you how I feel. Like, really? I got to think about this.

(Lights crossfade to JIM, addressing an unseen questioner.)

JIM

Well, I've been working as a stock boy here all summer...

I don't know, maybe I'll go to college one day, it's hard right now to see that. My dad's out of the picture. It's just me and my mom and there's not a lot of money...

Yeah, I heard about the way you're doing this, that the white kids are only talking to the whites and the blacks are only talking to the blacks. Thing is, I don't want to talk about it at all. It just don't feel right, okay? I mean, who really wants to talk about race?

(Lights crossfade to LEON, addressing an unseen questioner.)

LEON

I know you guys have been coming around the store and asking questions. I didn't know you were gonna hang out and catch the night shift too...

Okay, research, I got it. Well, the way I see it is, even when there was a black man in Washington---and he was a top-notch, intelligent guy, nobody can argue with that---but even with him in the oval office, it got worse. There was all that nit-picking with everything he did. The abuse that man had to take, why, they ought to be ashamed...

Hell, no, nobody, nobody in this country ever talked about a president of the United States the way they talked about Barack Obama. If it wasn't his name, it was where he was born, where he went to church. I swear they found fault with what the man ate for breakfast. I think it got under their skin, you know? Some of them just would not accept a black man in the White House.

(Lights crossfade to RENA, as before.)

RENA

This is just a job. I don't plan on doing it forever. My dream was never to spend my days and nights behind the deli counter of a supermarket but here I am...

Well, I've only been here three weeks and it's a lot to learn, you know? All the different meats,

RENA (cont'd.)

and the salads and eighteen kinds of olives and like sixty-nine kinds of cheese. I mean, who eats all this? I don't. And we have to keep the cases clean and re-stock all the time and then the women who come in here drive me nuts...

Yeah, mostly they're white. They show up and they expect me to drop everything and wait on them. Like, what? They're catching a plane or something? I mean I get that they're customers but the boss is on me if I don't do all the other shit I'm supposed to do. And then they give me the look...

You know what I mean, bro...

Of course, they don't *say* anything, they're too "lady-like" to say it, but it's that look. That "Jump to it, you lazy black bitch, I haven't got all day."

(Lights crossfade to CARLA, as before.)

CARLA

But let me tell you about Maddie. Maddie Washington is the sweetest, nicest woman I ever met in my life. Or ever hope to meet. Hard-working, kind, gentle, clean, I mean immaculate. And loving? Oh, my word. Those months she spent taking care of my mother, that was a gift. Her manner, she was so caring, even when Mom was difficult or stubborn, as only my mother could be. I swear to god, the woman is a saint. Her skin may be black but Maddie Washington is lily-white inside. And that's the truth.

(Lights crossfade to JIM, as before.)

JIM

Well, sure, some of my buddies are black. It don't mean nothing. We all hang out together, know what I mean? But people in my family...

Well, like my Uncle Ben, for instance...

Yeah, I guess you could say he's a racist. He's always talking about that stuff, you know? The way he sees it, yeah, sure, blacks had it rough all those years. But it was a long time ago and now it's like we're supposed to make up for everything that didn't go their way. I don't know,

JIM (cont'd.)

I guess sometimes I kind of see his point. Whose fault is it? When is enough, enough? Am I to blame for what some slave trader did? All that stuff happened hundreds of years before I was even born. What's it got to do with me? I mean does that make any sense?

(Lights crossfade to LEON as before.)

LEON

Look, you know this as well as I do. When a brother screws up, you never hear the end of it. From Doctor King to Freddie Gray. I'm tellin' you, they dogged King right up to his death. And those white boys? They do drugs right and left and what do they get? A slap on the wrist is all. That whiteness covers up an awful lot of sins, know what I mean? But they catch some black kid doin' the same damn thing and that jail house door is slammin' shut behind him. And no parole. Now, how can anybody call that fair? Like right now, my sister's son is doin' time for this thing that happened at a club. He and his pals got into a fight with some white guys and this fireman ended up dead. I blame it all on too many guns. Stuff that used to get settled with fists, now it's a piece. But my question is, when my nephew gets out, what's he gonna be like? You can't tell me he's gonna be all good and nice and upstandin'. Man, that's not what you learn on the inside.

(Lights crossfade to RENA, as before.)

RENA

So, my plan right now is to do this for a while and save some money so I can get out of here. I don't tell that to everybody but look, I don't like it here. Too much bad shit goes down in the city. The worst of it is my brother. Now that he's gone, it just hurts. It really hurts. My Gram says it'll be the same anywhere I go. She says, any town, any city in this great red,

white and blue country will be the exact same thing. You know, cops all over you like ants on a chocolate cake at a picnic...

My brother? He was only fifteen. Just a kid. 'Course, he didn't look like a kid. He was big for

his age, six feet tall. And is that a crime? To be big at the age of fifteen? Seems like everything's a crime when a black kid does it.

(Lights crossfade to CARLA, as before.)

CARLA

Yes indeed, if they were all like Maddie Washington, we wouldn't have the problems we have. But the simple fact of the matter is, they're not. Like last week, I'm right here in this store and all I wanted was a half-pound of maple ham. So, this black girl is cleaning the display case and she's taking her good old time about it. Now, she could see me plain as day, big as life, but did she make a move to wait on me? No way. I mean I could have stood there growing in the linoleum 'till doomsday for all she cared...

No, I didn't tell the manager. I mean, what's the point? It's the same everywhere you go. Some of them just have, well, they have an attitude.

(Lights crossfade to JIM, as before.)

JIM

My uncles said they were going to move to Canada if Obama got elected. Well, he did and they didn't. But I can't help thinking about what they say. And yeah, they tell jokes all the time that are just, well, racist. Two of 'em are police officers but all my uncles are racist, if you get right down to it...

Hell, no, I wouldn't want my buddies, Jay and the rest to hear the stuff my uncles say, but how am I supposed to fix it? I mean, they're my uncles. And it's not just them, it's Christ, just about everybody in my family has, you know, racist ideas. What am I supposed to do? Call them out on it? I mean, it's family. My Uncle Jack was put on leave from the police department because he accidentally shot this black kid when he was doing a drug bust. It

was just an accident, you know? We were all worried about him but he's back on active duty now. I mean, he puts his life on the line every single day he goes to work. My mom says cops see the worst of humanity. That's why they think the way they do about blacks. But there's no changing it. That's never gonna happen.

(Lights crossfade to RENA, as before.)

RENA

My Aunt Maddie is always pointing out to me how things have changed since she was my age. She told me how it was years ago when she worked at a restaurant down at the shore... Oh, no. She couldn't be a waitress, not back then. Her job was to keep things going behind the scenes. Back in the day, everybody in the kitchen was black and the cooks couldn't read, so Aunt Maddie got the paper slips from the waitresses, all of who were white of course, and then she told the cooks what people wanted. When the orders were done, she'd put the plates up on the pass-through. Aunt Maddie says she absolutely knew that she was just as smart as those white girls out front, smarter even. But in the afternoon before the dinner rush, could she get out of that hot kitchen and go sit at a table and laugh and talk like they were doing? No way. No possible way. Not back then. They'd have canned her for sure if she poked her black nose out of that kitchen...

Oh, yeah, I know it's better now, but it seems like, Jesus, we still get the short end of the stick.

(Lights crossfade to LEON, as before.)

LEON

Change? Hell, yeah, you can't deny there's been change, a whole lot of change over the years. When my dad was a kid, he couldn't do anything. But we fought and we marched and we took the crap they kept dumping on us and we turned it around. We were banging our heads and our fists against that wall every goddamn day so it would be different for your generation, and it is. There's no denyin' that. Nowadays, there's no ridin' in the back of the

bus, drinkin' from different fountains, sittin' in lousy classrooms with old books or no books...

No, I know it's not perfect but it's a lot better than it was, a hell of a lot better. Of course, you young people today don't have the patience to wait for things. That's why a lot of kids act like they do. I understand it, I get where they're comin' from.

(Lights crossfade to CARLA, as before.)

CARLA

When I was a kid, it was a totally white world. The school, the church, the library, the movies, the stores, everybody was white, with one exception, just one. The trash men were black. The guy driving the truck was white. But the guys throwing the cans in, they were all black. And they were the only black people I ever saw. When I grew up, I heard that the bishop who ran our church deliberately kept black families out of our school. Now, how could he do that and live with himself? He was a bishop. Was that right? Of course, it wasn't. But that's how it was.

(Lights crossfade to JIM, as before.)

JIM

A lot of the stuff on race with my family goes back to what happened to my cousin a couple years ago. Owen was a great guy. He was six years older than me and he was a firefighter. He was trained to run into burning buildings and shit with all that heavy stuff those guys have to wear. I don't think I could do that...

Well, what happened was, Owen was out at a bar one night with his buddies and they were having a few. What's the crime in that? After you work hard all day long, can't a guy go to a bar? Anyway, they're leavin' and then something happens. I don't know how it got started. But there was some kind of fight between Owen and his pals and these black guys and this dude pulls a gun. Next thing you know, Owen's in Shock Trauma on life support. Two days later, the doctors said there was no use. So, they pulled the plug and that was it.

The end. I mean, you see that shit in movies but Christ, my cousin? He was only twenty-three years old...

Yeah, the guy who did it is locked up now, but so what? I'll never forget the funeral. Owen's casket on a firetruck and all these guys lined up in uniform. My aunt goes to his grave every holiday, every Christmas, his birthday, the anniversary of the day he went in the Fire Department. She can't get over it. I guess she never will. And of course, after that whole thing, nobody in my family has had anything good to say about blacks.

(Lights crossfade to LEON, as before.)

LEON

Lemme tell you about the other night. So, I'm leaving the store to go home, heading to the parking lot to grab my car and this white woman comes along in her car. She pulls up and stops for the light and what does she do? I'll give you three guesses and the first two don't count...

Exactly right. Damn if she don't roll her window up. Now you tell me what makes her do that? I swear I didn't make a move toward her. Didn't say a word. I don't even think I looked at her. But we both know what it is. She's afraid I'm some bad-ass mugger. Like I'm gonna attack her, steal her wheels and roar off into the night. Or even worse. I'm going home from work. She thinks I got the energy to do all that? Of course, it's even worse if they're out walking. You know the old joke about why a chicken crosses the road? Hell, I can get a white chick to cross the road like that.

(snaps his fingers)

All I have to do is stroll toward her. Yeah, a white woman sees a black guy bearing down on her and man, she is running to the other side of the street, traffic be damned. What the hell do they see when they look at me?

(Lights crossfade to RENA, as before.)

RENA

Of course, if I up and move, I'll miss my Gram, but she's about the only one. I mean since my brother died it's like, there's nothing left, you know?...

His name was Todd. He was a sweet kid. I mean you just knew he was gonna turn out to be somebody special if he'd had the chance...

He was out in front of the house washing a car. He loved cars, Todd did, and he was taking care of this guy's car. It was like a little business for him, you know? And then down the street some fucked-up drug shit is happenin' and the cops come and next thing you know, Todd's lying there on the street, still holding the hose with the water pouring out of it, but his t-shirt is all bloody...

No, it was a cop that shot him but, you know how it is. Everybody's sorry but what the fuck. We're all like targets in a shootin' gallery here.

(Lights crossfade to CARLA, as before.)

CARLA

I'll tell you about a scary thing that happened right here in this store a while ago. There's this older woman who works at the checkout. She's mid-sixties, white hair, and she's always smiling, making jokes, you know, real friendly. Anyway, one day I'm in her line and she's chattin' it up with the man ahead of me. He says he wants to retire, but he can't because he's got to pay for health care and he mentions Obama. And then, this nice, little, old lady pretends to hold a shotgun and she says "You know, people take shots at everybody else nowadays. Why didn't they take a shot at him?" Well, I was struck dumb. I mean, did I really just hear this sweet old grandmother say they should have shot the president? That woman has to be old enough to remember JFK's assassination. I don't understand that, I just don't...

Oh, sure. Her and the guy she's talking with and me, all of us were white. Does that make it okay to joke about something like that?

(Lights crossfade to JIM, and as he speaks, lights slowly up on all.)

JIM

It's like I'm in two different worlds. There's this weird shit I hear when I'm with my family and then there's what goes on when I'm with the guys. I mean, my uncles and my aunts, they don't know my buddies. They don't know what they're like. How do you make sense out of it, you know?

RENA

So, I guess before it was all crap and now, what? There's a little less crap? And I'm supposed to go, hallelujah, ain't it great! Yeah, well, don't hold your breath.

CARLA

Like I said, if they were all like Morgan Freeman and Maddie Washington, this country would be a different place. But still, making jokes about shooting the president? That's just not right.

LEON

Look, I got to get back to work, but I'll tell you something. I think you have to look at the world through these eyes, through the eyes of an old black man to get what it's really like. Yeah, we've got the laws now, we've got the rules that say we're all even. It's all written down. But that's not it. It's what's *not* written down, what's inside, what's in people's minds, that's it. That's the toughest thing to change.

(Lights slowly down)

END OF PLAY

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *Five years ago, Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old Baltimore man, died of spinal injuries after he was arrested by the police. When that happened, my city, Baltimore, blew up. There were riots, cars burned, buildings torched. No lives were lost, but it was scary and sobering and sad. It was an awful reminder of how things were after Dr. Martin Luther King was killed. His assassination also prompted riots here.*

Hundreds were injured and six people died. Despite the passage of nearly 50 years between one event and the other, it seemed as if we were in the same place. Had we really learned nothing? Was racism just as virulent? THEY emerged from these ramblings.

My favorite playwrights? William Inge, Caryl Churchill, Herb Gardner, as well as Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman. I write a lot of comedy...

THEY has had 2 readings, both in Baltimore. One at a library as part of a group of plays on racism, and a second by Rapid Lemon Productions.

AUTHOR BIO: Rosemary FrisinoToohey has had nearly 300 productions of her plays around the world. She's produced on 4 continents and in 40 US states. In London she won top honors as Audience Favorite in the British Theatre Challenge and in New York she won the Next Generation Playwriting Contest. She tied as Gold Medal Winner in the Italian American Theatre of Chicago's First Playwright Competition, and she's won the Baltimore Playwrights Festival three times. Nine of her comedies are published and three of her dramas have been honored with Artist grants from the Maryland State Arts Council. She is currently penning the book, music and lyrics of her second musical. FrisinoToohey is a member of The Dramatists Guild of America and SAG/AFTRA. There's more at www.frisinotoohey.com

OAK TREE

By Sean Patrick Smith

Drama Editor JANET COLSON writes... *Oak Tree is a starkly realistic brutally violent and personal piece of theatre. Sean Patrick Smith's debut play is a visceral mixture of dream, memory, alternating (and altered) consciousness, and the cultural and symbolic representation of manhood. Toxic male? You have no idea. Everyone is implicated in this wrenching tale of grappling with an unspeakable act that somehow demands the radical idea of compassion for those who have hurt us most.*

X: You're making this up. It can't be true. Shut up, there's no way! I just saw you. We were just...

Y: It was like I was there and not there. I wasn't me. Me wasn't I. I was mechanical. And, the weird part, when I took the knife out, it made no sound. No sound at all. I thought there'd be a sound. It felt like there was supposed to be a sound. (*shwlop's* with his mouth). You know something like that. But, no. Nothing. Just blood. Not much at first. But then the neck; yeah, that made a sound (*crack*).

X: You can't be—ugh; I think I'm going to vomit (*reaches*).

The writing is dizzying. You might throw up, too. But this isn't the desensitized made for TV kind of squeamishness; it's the unsettling feeling that in getting to know these people, you bear the responsibility for their horror and pain.

The title of Modern Greek no longer belongs to a Panera salad.

And the final speech from X is too good to excerpt. Just read it.

Five Stars. If you can take it.

Oak Tree

Scene I: The stage is bare save for a large structure resembling a tree back stage left, lights up and X (man, late 20s/early 30s) is standing, center stage, looking aimlessly at audience when Y (man, late 20s/early 30s) runs from stage left bumping into X who is startled by the contact. "/" indicate where two characters are speaking at the same time, or when one cuts another off.

X: What did you do?

Y: I can't explain it.

X: What is this? What happened?

Y: I can't explain it.

X: What do you mean? What'd you do?

Y: I can't explain it, but I can explain, I can explain...what snapped.

X: OK what is it? There's--what's all over you?

Y: I was with her again.

X: Who?

Y: In the car.

X: What are you talking about?

Y: She and I. We.

X: Tell me. Help me understand what is going on.

Y: We were sitting there. I absent-mindedly, yet calm, gazed over the cliff. I was avoiding the situation of two people in a car, at night, alone. Something was going to happen. Up by that overlook. It felt that between these two people, something was supposed to happen. Do

you ever get that feeling? What she expected and what I expected were worlds apart. She pulled over to show me her favorite view of the city. And.

X: And? And...What?

Y: I don't know.

X: Who was with you? Where were you coming from?

Y: We were at Albie's. Had a drink. ...Okay, I had two—but that's it!

X: So you're drinking again?

Y: That's not the point.

X: How?

Y: It, they—the drinks—they had nothing to do with this.

X: With what?

Y: I'm telling you! We pulled over. Sat and watched the fading day turned rising night. And then I had this urge. I suddenly was attracted to her, when I knew I shouldn't be, to this woman. But, I had never seen this view before. It was breathtaking. Have you been up to that spot? At night? On a clear, open lightless night? On a night where you can feel the outer reaches of the solar system? I image that when the air is so crisp, it's because we are tilted closer to space...62 miles, straight up then the abyss. We're given a glimpse of what it must feel like to be truly outside, devoid of the comforts of home, as if it were only 60, 50, 10 miles max.

X: Sounds terrifying. What spot?

Y: But assuring. I felt an overwhelming confidence in the face encroaching adrenaline and fear.

X: It sounds like the drink.

Y: We were up by the cliff overlooking the rundown quarry, back by I-24. Got off on our way. She wanted to show me this spot, and talk to me about...before taking me home. What did she want to talk about?

X: And what happened?

Y: I snapped.

X: Snapped?

Y: Something inside of me.

X: So, what did you do?

Y: It was ethereal, otherworldly. I'm not even attracted to her, to women.

X: Right?

Y: Right. Especially her. But up there, up by that big old oak tree, the moon was rising. You know how it does that thing, just above the horizon—early in the night? Maybe she felt for me, felt bad, felt sorry; I felt nothing.

X: Perspective. Or something. It's big.

Y: It was huge! I've never seen it so big, and the tree—as if Van Gogh just packed up his brush and canvas, biking home with the next would-be masterpiece. And I was /

X: / Did you try to kiss her? Would you tell me who this goddamn woman is?

Y: No, I did not.

X: Who is it then?

Y: I felt nothing, toward her. It doesn't matter. *(To himself, under breath)* It was Traci.

X: What'd you say?

Y: She's a regular at Albie's. I think. You know her. You've seen her.

X: Do I? What does she look like?

Y: Dead. She looks dead now.

X: What!

Y: Listen, I'm telling you I don't know what happened. I have no idea what—I was someone else. Watching, me.

X: She's dead?

Y: I saw all this beauty, elegance and all of the sudden she, and the sky, glittered with tiny balls of light, and the moon, that colossal tree. This oak tree is godly. It must be hundreds of years old, statuesque.

X: Stay focused. What happened to her! Did you...?

Y: And they say the branches are just like the roots below, growing upward, growing downward, in unison. Tandem.

X: What did you do to her? Tell me what you did.

Y: I have never. I was. I lost it and grabbed my small umbrella. For some reason I thought it would rain tonight. I took the umbrella and shoved it at her throat. She coughed. Gasp. Must have broken her windpipe. My face, I was in complete disillusion. And I couldn't stop.

X: I don't believe what your saying. Just. Shut the fuck up.

Y: I'm not. Then there she was, in the driver's. And just a moment before, we were looking at this moon. How does it look so big? So massive, celestial. More than when it's full and way up in the sky. Next to the oak tree. You know oak trees, they have these trunks, no other tree has a trunk like an oak tree. And its leaves, they were yellowing, I could see it from the moonlight. And turning red, this burnt orange quickly changing red, a deep red. Vincent would have had a field day with this scene.

X: It's because of perspective. The moon is the same size on the horizon as it is way up high in the sky. Same moon. It's just an illusion. Wait. Why? Why did you punch her with your umbrella? You killed her! What is going on?

Y: I couldn't stop myself. I grabbed my knife and stabbed her in the chest. Repeatedly. You know the one I carry. Dad gave it to me. Wanted me to be a boy scout, a real stand up man's man. I hate the thing, fucking hate. That. Fucking. Knife.

X: (*Hysterical*) The what? I'm familiar. It's sentimental. But stop! You didn't. Why are you telling me this?

Y: But then—god there was blood, so much blood. She didn't even scream. Obviously, I see now, it must have been because of the windpipe, crushed. I just kept forcing that silly little boy-scout knife into different parts of her. Her neck. It was so thin that I nearly missed. So sleek and pale, it was beauty I can't explain. Have you ever seen a neck so supple? And then I grabbed her head and I, I just broke it. I snapped it to the side, real hard. I've never seen a neck so white in comparison to the dark red drops that squirt from her chest and dripped from my knife. You know that one with the little Swiss army cross? I broke that too. Must have been from the—I guess I cracked it on...something. She went lifeless. Like that (*snaps his fingers*).

X: You're making this up. It can't be true. Shut up, there's no way! I just saw you. We were just...

Y: It was like I was there and not there. I wasn't me. Me wasn't I. I was mechanical. And, the weird part, when I took the knife out, it made no sound. No sound at all. I thought there'd be a sound. It felt like there was supposed to be a sound. (*shwlop's* with his mouth). You know

something like that. But, no. Nothing. Just blood. Not much at first. But then the neck; yeah, that made a sound (*crack*).

X: You can't be—ugh; I think I'm going to vomit (*reaches*).

Y: I need to tell you this. When I started moving her out of the car. Because right then I snapped, again, snapped into something out of body, and right then, I knew I had to do something. So I took this, this dead Traci, lifeless out of the car. I was calm. Unnaturally calm.

X: You buried her? You can't be serious?

Y: I had to get rid of the body! So I dug a hole, next to the oak tree. Dug it deep. Well, deep enough, so many roots. And rolled her in. The whole time, I barely broke a sweat. I was automatic. It felt like I wasn't in...control of me. But I was doing it, I was controlling everything, I knew exactly what to do. They'll be looking for me.

X: By the tree? Who will be looking for you?

Y: Who? Who do you think? Her cat! I mean, probably, eventually. But no, the police, you idiot, her employer when she doesn't show up to Albie's, the people who saw me leave with her. Her family, if she's got any.

X: She works at Albie's? I thought—wasn't she a regular?

Y: Regularly works there. You know this. You know her.

X: I've never been to Albie's.

Y: You were there yesterday. With me. You left. I think you left. I don't remember.

X: We were there together?

Y: Weren't we? We were. They kicked us out—86'ed. I don't remember much, but I remember that...and, burying her.

X: What are you going to do? What are *we* going to do?

Y: That's why I came to you!

X: So all of this...all of this is blood and dirt?

Y: Blood and dirt.

X: Blood and dirt. (*X looks down at his hands*). We buried her.

Y: We buried her. Here. Right there, under that tree. Look at it. Look at that tree and that moon.

X: What did I do?

Scene II: The scene takes place in a dream-like state, not exactly reality, not exactly a dream. Stage setting same as in Scene I. X & Y walk on stage from stage right, X clearly agitated and Y following lethargically behind. The action takes place in a dream-state not exactly a dream, but not exactly a reality, existing in a plain beyond the real.

X: DAD? Dad! Where the f-

Y: Why are you looking for Dad?

X: Dad? Where are you?

Y: He's not here. You know he's not here.

X: He's around here somewhere. DAD! (*To Y*) We did something. Right? You have your way of keeping him close, this is mine.

Y: This is pointless, what do you think you'll get from bringing *him* back?

X: God damn it let me deal with that. I need to figure out how to *deal* with *this*. And discuss it with the man. (*To nothingness*) Are you here?

Y: Discuss?

X: Need to address some past grievances.

Y: Hmm. Are you sure about that?

X: It's about time.

Pause.

Y: Fine. Let's bring him back, if you think it's time.

X: I'm sure he's here. He's supposed to be here. Dad! Where /

A man pulls a rolling grill onto the stage from stage right, stopping at mid stage right with his back to X & Y and a spatula in hand, grilling food.

Man: / What're you yelling about? I'm right here.

X & Y stop searching and turn to realize the man is there. X & Y tense up, demonstrating the significant new presence in the world.

X: Hello, sir.

/

Y: Hello, sir

Man: I've been here the whole time. Now keep it down. Gonna' upset your mother...and the neighbors. You know how they get. *(Doesn't look up from grill but motions with spatula at temple to signal crazy)*. We didn't invite them. Ornery types. So, what do you want?

Y: *(To X)* Yea, what do you want?

X: I need to talk to you. About what happened.

Man: Son, listen closely: something always happens. Now what you do want?

X: I think I made a mistake.

Man: Burger or dog?

Y: *(To X)* You know it's not the time to discuss that mistake. *(To Man)* What?

Man: I said, "What do you want?" I've been cooking burgers and dogs all day, for the cookout. Well not all day. People should be coming over soon, not the neighbors, but the guests we invited. See, first I did the lawn, the grass was practically coming out of my ears.

Mowed it corner to corner. Then those goddamn weeds. First thing you should know about

being a true man, keep your grass cut, and green. You can tell everything you need to know about a man by the way he keeps his lawn. Very important.

X: No, Dad, listen I need to talk to you, now.

Man: (*Yelling*) Son! We *are* talking. So what'll it be, burger or dog?

Y: (*To X*) You can't just jump in on this like that.

X: (*To Man*) I don't/

Y: / I'll take a hot dog.

Man: Good choice. I'll grab the mustard.

X: I don't want mustard.

Man: Another thing you can tell about a man. (*Holds two fingers up mouthing the number, two*). Man's gotta' take mustard on a dog. It's down right blasphemous not to put mustard on your hotdog. Here, take it.

Y: (*Taking mustard, to X*) Bring him up to speed. He won't get it here if you don't.

X: (*To Y*) You want to "bring him up to speed"? If it wasn't for your pocketknife outburst, we might not have to be here; you're the reason we're here anyway.

Y: Before you go blaming the masses, let's get this straight—you're the reason we're here. The mental gymnastics of talking to our dead father are the conjuring of your own doing. I'm just here for moral support.

X: Can I proceed?

Man: "May..."

Y: You may proceed.

X: It's because of you.

Y: (*To X*) Stay focused through this part. It's time for this.

X: It was you; you realize that right?

Man: Me what?

X: The reason Mom isn't inside taking a nap, the reason she's gone.

Man: She's just inside, actually should probably go wake her up, guests are on the way.

X: No, they aren't. And she's not inside. She's not napping.

Man: Okay, that's enough.

Y: Is this the third thing to know about how to be a *real* man?

Man: Number three is to treat your lady with respect. So...we let her rest. Now, we should wake her up.

Y: Ha!

Man: But, you're learning. *(To himself)* It's about fucking time. *(To X&Y)* You know, as a kid—always thought you weren't getting it, bit...funny. But I knew, figured you'd come around sooner or later. Didn't fully expect you to, but...Hand me that beer, almost out.

Pause.

(Cont.) Let's not bring up such things. You know how your mother and I detest such hurtful conversation. Look around you, boy. Enjoy this barbeque. Fresh cut grass. I even did some prepping for the racking, well pre-racking. Since we'll have to deal with all those gargantuan oak leaves come fall. It'll come sooner than you think, always does. And our mighty tree never takes a year off. She always drops them big, brown, and in tremendous quantity. Hope you're up for it. Right now, the birds are out chirping their little lungs out. Sky's clear. You can see straight up to the spy planes. They're up there, watching. Not a cloud in sight. Not a one up there to taint that Keys' water blue ocean above us. This is what it's all about, my boy. Don't forget that.

X: Stop talking about her like she's here. None of that is real. It took me years to put it together. Mom's not inside, Dad.

Man: You used to love trying to climb that tree. (*Laughing*) I'd say, "Good luck! One day you'll reach those branches!" You'd need a fucking fire fighter's ladder to get up on those branches. Never quit though. Might have been the only admirable effort I ever saw in you. Not like trying to throw a baseball (*laughing*). Sorry, I mean (*mimicking an un-athletic toss*). I mean, what was that (*laughing*).

Y: Is he done?

X: Mom's not inside.

Y: She's gone. Years ago.

Man: (*Curtly*) Listen here, son, I won't say it again.

X: You took her (*stops abruptly*)...Do you even remember what it was like? When you first felt your mother's love? You must remember. Maybe you can't, not here anyway, not anymore. I can, or I think I can from a memory, or maybe a photo of a moment, a memory of a photo. There, in the bathtub, rolls of baby-fat up and down my plump arms and legs, laughing. She with a bar of soap the size of my forearm, scrubbing carefully. I'm not sure of the point of this ivory square. So I'm nervous, confused by the warm water and bubbles. But I'm happy, I have no idea of pain, or loss, just bubbles. Eventually the tear-no-more baby bubbles are nearly overflowing the claw foot tub. She blows them into my face. It makes me laugh harder. I still know no pain. She loves me in a way any other human can possibly love another person. She bathes me. I don't even know enough yet to know that I need to bathe myself, let alone have the capability to accomplish such a feat. She loves me unconditionally, wholly.

Man: I didn't love you?

X: That's all gone. You took that away.

Y: How long did you keep it secret?

Man: You already seem to know the answers to everything. Why are you asking me the questions?

X: *(To Y)* We were on our way to tee-ball when I found out. Of course, I didn't know what I found out, then. *(To Man)* Fucking tee-ball, Dad, in the back of that old champagne-colored 1980 Mercedes station wagon.

Y: *(To X)* Putting the pieces together now.

X: I tried to open up the back to put my water and glove in the back. You never wanted anything dirty in that car.

Y: *(Mimicking Man, pointing finger)* No eating in the car! Don't touch anything! Wipe off your pants! Knock your boots before you get in!

X: But you were so visibly nervous and angry that I tried to open the back. *(To himself)* I shouldn't be putting my dirty glove in the trunk? *(To Man)*. It was a contradiction to all normal behavior before that day. But there I stood with a feeling of split confusion, and in you I sensed embarrassment, shame, anger. And that's when I saw it, the first time. That painting of a, it was a...CLOWN!

Y: A clown in a tuxedo.

X: I was nine. The first time I saw that painting. The first time I saw you caught for something I didn't even know I was catching you doing.

X: Did Mom ever see it? How would you explain it to her?

Y: Did you have that same caught-with-your-pants-down look on your face when she saw it?

X: Is that the fourth thing to know about being a *man*, have a painting of a clown in a tuxedo. Or is this the exception to number three, treat your lady with respect unless you want something else, someone younger, someone...different?

Y: That must be it. (*Holds up four fingers*) A man needs what a man needs. (*Mouthing the number four*).

X: What was your plan; wait for Mom to find out, have her leave you? Coward. Would that make it easier?

Y: I guess it didn't work out. Because she (*makes a snapping neck motion with rope about head*).

X: (*Looks at Y as if too far*). I realized it all the other night. When we went to her gallery show, and I saw that tuxedo donning clown.

Y: I don't know why you even agreed to go.

X: As soon as I walked it, front and center. That clown, the reason Mom's gone.

Man: You saw Traci?

X: I left. Went to Albie's.

Y: And guess what?

X: I took something from you.

Pause.

Y: And now a woman is dead.

Man: (*To X*) How'd you do it?

X: I...

Man: Isn't this what you wanted, to talk? Well, boy, talk.

X: I can't explain what happened.

Y: (*To X*) But, you can explain how you snapped.

X: I lost control.

Man: Again?

X: What?

Man: This isn't novel, son. You are your mother's son. This will happen again as its happened before. So how did you? What did you do to her? Forget it. I may have left your mother for Traci, but she made me whole. One day you'll understand. (*Struggling*) And we were...I don't...you're mother had her issues, as do you. I can't—won't be responsible, for what she did. (*Switches quickly to anger again*) And you shouldn't hold me responsible! (*Upset again*). I only did my best. To be happy.

X: Like father, like son, right?

Man: Look around you. There are no blue skies, no late summer sun. There is darkness around you, boy. None of it matters anyhow, we've been here before and we'll be here together again.

Y: That's the fifth thing about being a man.

X: Like father, like son.

Scene III: The stage is set the same as Scene I and II, the grill remains at mid stage right, but now there is a U-shaped bar jutting out into center stage with Chuck (bartender portly and evident of a "not so nice" bar flare) The bar is surrounded with a few small tables and chairs for patrons. Not all tables and chairs are occupied, the place is practically, but not, empty. An old red neon sign "Albie's Bar and Grille" hangs from stage right, flickering on with the loud sound of ionized electrons that fades the same time the sign's light becomes constant as Y storms in from stage right and sits down next to an old man, orders whiskey neat. X is trailing closely behind, head down carrying an umbrella at his side.

Y: Chuck, whiskey.

Chuck is drying glasses with a white towel. Looks at Y long and hard, then slowly pulls out the whiskey to pour two glasses, one of Y and one for X.

X: (To Chuck) Please and thank you. (To Y) The nerve. I can't believe it.

Y: It's been going on for that long.

X: That long. How didn't I realize it until now?

Y: Since the painting in the trunk?

X: How could I be so blind?

Y: All this time.

X & Y pick up their glasses, contemplating the decision to imbibe. Bartender stares at them, drying glasses again, curious if they will actually drink. X & Y eventually drink their whole glasses, in unison and one gulp. Chuck looks down, in disbelief but without judgment.

Momentary pause.

Chuck: Another?

X & Y pausing in the guarded realization they are drinking, again.

X: Pour it.

Chuck pours two more.

Y: That bastard really is /

Old Man: / Excuse me, son.

X: Help you?

Old Man: Do you have the time?

Y: Huh?

Old Man: I'm sorry to interrupt. I was asking for the time.

X: It's 8...8:47. PM.

Old Man: Thanks.

Y: (*To X*) Please tell this man to mind the room.

X: (*To Y*) It's nothing. He just wants the time.

Old Man: What's that?

X: Nothing.

Old Man: I never *had* a watch my whole life.

X: What?

Y: (*To X*) What's he talking...?

Old Man: Well, that's not true.

X: Can I help you with something, sir? I'm kind of...having a...

Old Man: I have had a watch.

Y: (*To Chuck*) What's this guy talking about?

X: (*To Y*) Just, hold on a second.

Old Man: I've had watches, three to be exact. But, I've never worn a watch, in my life.

Y: And...?

X: I'm sorry. You see, I just found out some...troubling information. So, if you would.

Old Man: Ah, I see. Again, pardon me.

Y: Will you tell this guy to ([can it])? We need to do something about Dad. (*Y—he cannot see him*).

Old Man: I'm going to be eighty, next month. (*Holds his hands far apart*). Abundance.

X: (*To Y*) Lighten up. (*To Old Man*) At that point, who has the time?

Old Man: What?

X: For watches, who has the time for time anyway?

Old Man: Oh (*chuckles*) Well, I've just always been lucky enough to have friendly people like you so far, to give me the time. Let me tell you though /

Y: Oh Jesus...

Old Man: / I have actually had three watches, in my life. See, I used to play /

Y: Is this guy serious? (*To X*) Can we get back to (*X hushes Y before he can finish*).

Old Man: / baseball. College ball. Are you a baseball fan?

Y: Nope.

X: Eh, not particularly.

Old Man: Well. Okay. But, I was good. Won three league championships—sophomore, junior, AND senior.

X: Is that right?

Old Man: Gave me a watch each time.

X: And you didn't keep 'em, didn't want to keep the time.

Old Man: Who's got time for time, right? I gave the first one to my sister, the second to my older brother, kept the last one for myself.

Y: (*To X*) Thought he never had a watch?

Old Man: But I kept that last one upon my mantel. Like a time clock, a mantel piece, like a mantel clock. That is until...I'm going to be eighty, next month. How about that?

X: Abundance.

Old Man: YES!

Y: (*To X*) All right. Wrap this up—don't have time for this.

Old Man: The archangels and abundance are on my side. My son stole the last watch from me. But who needs it.

X: I guess he did?

Old Man: Maybe. I gave him what he needed though, everything a child needs. I fed him, I clothed him, supported him. Did he have to take that watch? I tried, (*to X*) son. Tried real hard to love him, treat him like he deserved. I can't put my finger on it, but there was just something about him, eternally...unsettling.

X: What do you mean?

Old Man: (*cont.*) It's not that I didn't love him. I was young. I didn't know what it meant to have to care for someone other than myself. We tried, god we tried. But we were, you know, the way I was, the way we were raised. No other option. I was 19, with a full-on child who, truth be told, I didn't even know how to hold. The nurse had to show me, more than once. (*Emulating a nurse instructing how to hold a baby*) "It's like this, see. Hold his head. Yep, support his head. Cradle his back. Not so firm. Just, okay, just let him rest, like so. Right in your arms." I thought that most of it, or at least part of it would come, I guess naturally. (*Chuckles*). It did not come easy, and we made ALL our mistakes on him. Did the best I could, but I learned from my father, and he his father before, and his father before him. All of these men, they were just trying to get by, make a better life for their sons. But that learned inability to care, it's passed down through our cells, the memories stored in DNA. All they knew was war, depression, and famine. All I knew was baseball. How was I to care for another living being when all I knew was, a game. She was pregnant. And like I said, no other options. Nine months go by much faster than you think when you don't know whether you're making the right choice. Before I knew it, I was...a father, to this little boy. I was only a little boy myself. All of the sudden there was this little, tiny, child with small fingernails and big green eyes, no hair. He yawned, constantly, and I thought, "You and me both,

buddy." I was tired of it before it even got started. I didn't know what to do, or how to do it. Who knows what's right and wrong, right? I just did my best. Maybe that wasn't good enough.

X: I, I can't say, sir. Maybe it wasn't?

Old Man: I'm sorry, I don't mean to consume your evening—what with my ramblings—on about a child I see no more, feel like I never knew. But, I like you, son. Good listener. Ya know most people, when I talk to them, they say: "Well, it was nice *listening* to you." Never, "It was nice *talking* to you." I guess at this point I don't have time to listen to other people, too much to say. I used to be busy, trying to make up for what I lost. The time I lost having to start a life not my own. Distracting myself from what I had by seeking out lost potentials...with things that could have been, that weren't. People I could have loved, but who didn't love me. People who were in love with me, but whom I didn't even know.

X: I had a father once. I guess we all do, did.

Old Man: Was he good, a good man?

X: He was like, well like you, always in search of the next better thing. Without ever knowing what that better thing was. Left my mother, mid way through. Unfinished job. Someone else. Dead now. Physically. But after tonight, he's been dead to me for years.

Y has finished his drink, and orders another. Drinks it down fast. Orders another.

Old Man: I...tonight?

X: Years later, I tried to make it right with the only person left from his life. Myself aside. Stopped in to her show. Thought it was the right thing to do. Trying to forgive him for leaving. Wanted to reconnect with him, through her. Maybe I wanted to see if she was better than, Mom. See what he left us for; she had to be better, right?

Old Man: Oh, well, I don't know. Can't say. I just, I'll let you do your own searching.

Y: *(Starts talking to himself, becoming noticeably intoxicated)* Sitting here, talking about time and watches, and children. *(Turns toward X and Old Man)* Are you done talking about time yet? *(Back to himself)*. Am I supposed to feel sorry for this old guy? Time. So you lost your time. You didn't shine when your light was bright? Maybe you turned on the wrong torch. I won't feel sorry for this. Time is what we make of it. And you squandered it, royally. Time is relative. It speeds up. It slows down, when you're moving fast enough. Sure, maybe you moved too fast by becoming a father. But you lost the chance in the matter, to make all of this time, work for you. You can debate that it's linear. Or that it's cyclical, repeating on endless loops for eternity. But above everything, time is constant, that's for sure. True. It's long. It stretches. Time is persistent. No matter how much time, things don't change. People stay the same, regardless of time. Whether or not you wanted to be present in that time is your own damn quarrel to fight. But you chose avoidance and disregard, as support and love. Ignoring the time you had.

X finishes his drink. Orders another. Drinks it fast. Orders another.

Y: *(Cont.)* Dad used to say life is like baseball. There's time, but not really. We move about this life, time passes, but do we ever actually recognize it. Or does it just move through us as a breeze does on a warm day in July. You can't feel it, but are comforted by it. Time moves too slowly for us to perceive it. If you call "time-out" in baseball, there's no clock to stop. Maybe he was right about one thing. Maybe I'll feel differently about time when I'm eighty. But it's certain that by that time, it will have already passed me by, unable to get back the present moments I wished I could have been there to enjoy.

X: Maybe we're all doomed to repeat the past wrongs our predecessors committed, unable to recognize the fallibility of our actions until long after we've committed them.

Y: *(To X)* I can't take this self-indulgent attempt at releasing the misgivings of older men before us any more. Why should we let him off the hook? Because we're both here, getting drunk? It seems like a rash decision to just absolve him of his sins. While we're at it, should we just *(making the sign of the cross)* *In nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti*, forgive Dad. Don't forget what he did/has been doing, all these years.

Traci walks into the bar—searching, eyes land on X & Y.

Traci: There you are. Why did you leave the show?

X: *(Drunkenly slurs)* There she is.

Y: Get out of here.

X: What do you want? Why are you here?

Y: *(To X)* Don't indulge.

Traci: I came looking for you, figured you might come back here.

X: What gave you that inclination?

Traci: Are you serious? It's the closest bar to the gallery, for miles. Hi, I'm Traci remember.

(To herself) You Dad's ex-wife, I suppose. Widow? *(Ponders)*. Friend of yours, remember?

X: Okay. Yes, hi. Here I am. Thanks, and goodbye, you can leave now.

Traci: I just want to help. Why did you leave? Was it the wine? I know those art shows can be a bit...unwelcoming. But you didn't have to just run out. *(Pause)* God, I hate them too: all of those *(using hyperbolic hand gestures)* socialites standing around, with their big glasses of chardonnay—calling it, vino—complimenting you with self-masturbation of their own similar yet highly superior work. Was it the wine? Did you leave 'cause of that?

Y: Not the wine.

Traci: Are you sure? Because now you're here, drinking again.

X: I'm fine. Thanks. Please leave.

Traci: I think I should call a cab.

Y: Best, not.

Traci: No, no I'm calling a cab, you should go home.

X: Don't! Please.

Traci: Then talk to me. Why'd you leave? You agreed to come, remember?

Y: I don't.

X: Yeah well, I just—had to do...this, instead. Have you met...(to *Old Man*) what's your name? He's got a fascinating story about how his shit son stole his watch.

Old Man: I'll give you some privacy.

Old Man turns away and gets up to move to a table away from the bar, recognizing the disrespect shown by X about their conversation and Old Man's opening up to X.

Y: (To X) I guess we're done talking about time.

X: And so what? I didn't agree to stay. I came, saw what I needed to see, and left. But, you staying here, checking in...it's tired, I'm only getting agitated the longer you stay.

Traci: Listen I know what it's like. I want to help. How can I help?

Y: What the fuck you know about what it's like?

Traci: You're father, he would talk to me and tell me about you, about your mother.

Y: That's enough, Chuck can you get her out of here?

Chuck looks up, decidedly continues to dry glasses.

Traci: He tried to tell him about how much he wanted you to be okay. He would tell me about you, and what it's like, what he thought it must be like for you.

X: Sounds like he had a lot to say. Did you get to the part where...never mind.

Traci: The part where you found your mother?

X: *(To himself)* This isn't worth it. *(To Traci)* Fine, you really want to go there?

Y: *(To X)* Don't tell her.

X: *(To Y)* Why not?

Y: *(To X)* She doesn't get it. She wouldn't understand. Don't let her in.

X: *(To Traci)* It wasn't the wine, not the people. Thing is, Traci, you don't get it. You won't understand. As much as you try to comfort me, and be the stand-up friend, widow to my father, it won't change what happened. You can keep inviting me to your shows, call to check in on me, follow me to Alfie's. I won't go to any more, I won't answer, I'm finished with him, and you. I wasn't ever your problem and I'm certainly not now.

Pause.

X: You won't be able to help.

Y: *(To X)* Not in the way she thinks anyway.

X: Because you didn't find out your father was cheating on your mother and left her alone to hang herself so her nine-year old kid could walk in looking for dinner only to find her with blue lips, eyes open, little red dots of petechial hemorrhage. Learned that little tid-bit term from the police reports, pretty young. And you didn't have to try to get her down from the railing. Try because she weighed more than I expected and even with the adrenaline I was too short to lift her up and stop the hanging all because your dad was fucking, you. You won't, and it's even more unlikely that you would understand that I realized all of this when I saw...your painting tonight.

Traci: My painting?

X: The clown, in the tuxedo.

Traci: So you left because of my painting?

X: *(To Y)* Let's make a run for it. Let's get out of here and leave this all behind. Let's leave the drinking, the widow, the painting, watches, Dad and all this bull shit. Let's leave it and never come back. This is our chance. It's time.

Y turns to X, Old Man, and Traci to speak.

Y: I've got a better idea.

X pulls out the Swiss Army Pocket Knife, stabs it into the bar frightening all but Chuck.

Chuck: That's it—you're out! Get the fuck outta here.

Y: Fuck you, I don't want to stay here anyway.

Traci: Hey, hey, hey. Let's all just calm down.

Chuck: This piece of shit comes here, pulls out a damn knife. He's gone.

Traci: Will you all just calm down!

X: I'm done; I'm gone.

Y: I'm leaving. Ready.

Traci: *(To X&Y)* Let me take you home. Come on, I'll give you a ride.

Y: *(To X)* Fuck it, let's take the ride.

X: *(Looks at Traci, contemplates the offer, hesitates a long while)* Where are you parked?

X & Y and Traci walk out, X first, followed by Traci. Y finishes his drink and X's drink, grabs the knife from the bar, then the umbrella and follows them out of Albie's.

Scene IV: *The stage is set as it appeared in Scene I. The only lighting is from headlights of a vehicle positioned at stage right pointed toward stage left, and at the tree, where X & Y are located. X is down on his hands and knees. Y stares blankly at the audience.*

X: Help me dig.

X stops digging to look up at Y.

X: Help me dig. Why aren't you helping me dig?

Y comes to, notices X digging.

Y: We need to dig deeper.

They both dig, feverously. And keep digging. And digging. And digging. Until, finally, X stops, seemingly satisfied with the hole, followed by Y upon realizing X has stopped.

X: So.

Y: So what?

X: Have you come to terms with it yet?

Y: Come to terms? With...this?

X: With what you did.

Y: *(Glaring at X contemplatively)* Me? What I did? You mean what you did. You did this. You created this whole mess...*(gesturing at the digging)*, this hole, everything.

X: *(Brushing Y off)* Okay. I see. You're not going to take *any* responsibility in this. Got it.

Y: What responsibility should I take? What did I do here? I'm just a part, of you, of us. I may be real to you, but I am not *real*. You, my good man, are Creator and Destroyer. You are the Mis-placer of Blame. Killer Almighty! You are the one who holds on to past wrongs, which have nothing to do with you. You, who have passed judgment and who took a seat at the murderous table, the only player in this game...The Clown in a Tuxedo.

Pause.

Y: Have *you* come to terms with it?

X stares deeply at Y without breaking his gaze. He appears ready to be disagreeable. But then X shifts his attention away, appearing to accept and admit his actions are his own. Then turns directly to the audience. At this time the lights dim to black behind him, engulfing Y leaving the stage, as X walks toward front stage center under a spotlight.

X: I passed by the old house the other day. Where we used to live. It's set back no more than 200 feet from the street, just far enough for a small lawn. Before, we finally called it our "old house," pulling out of the driveway saying and waving, "Goodbye House!" onto another structure with a roof and walls, rooms for pissing and shitting and sleeping, and living as a family, with a father and his new—Traci. In the front lawn, that old Oak Tree, its outstretched leafy limbs gave shade and reprieve from the blistering summer days. I was now tall enough to climb that tree. And she was still standing, able to bear my weight upon its branches. I climbed as high as I could, just beyond the point of feeling safe from how much potential for a broken arm that would most certainly result if I fell. It was at this height that I could see a park down the block across the road I used to board the school bus every weekday morning at 6:17 AM. And at this height above the tree line of the neighbors' younger trees, I could see the park with its playground. The place I would escape to, and spend hours—losing track of time in jubilation. Swings, monkey-bars, slides, a merry-go-round. The old playground and metallic jungle gym pieces on which I used to play "pirates," "cowboys and Indians," and "cops and robbers," was torn up and made new with plastic green and tan slides. A soft rubber mat covered those hallowed grounds which now lacked the hard grit of wooden splintery mulch that stuck to the palms of your hand when trying to swing so high you might make it all the way around the top bar, only to jump off and see how far you could fly before tumbling harshly to your hands and knees. Where does the old equipment go? Where do the pieces end up, in a graveyard for swings and slides, thrown sloppily into a heap? Do the builders dismantle those adventures I cherished along with the removal of our metal-framed playground? I have come to terms with this.

X removes the red pocket knife from his pocket, looks at it for a moment, looks back out into the audience, opens the knife and violently stabs himself in the stomach. At this time, the curtains fall.

THE END.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *I have no resume or career history in theatre of which to speak. Reared by parents who's focal parenting discouraged creativity and passions stifled for profession, religion, and conservative success. I spent my formative years under the watchful eye and care of a grandmother while mom and dad worked tirelessly to support four boys. This wonderful woman sang, danced, instructed, and taught me to love life and chase creative outlets in secret. I wrote "Oak Tree" after a vivid dream about my brother committing something unspeakable. He was confused, surprised in his actions. "Oak Tree" is purposed with highlighting the pain and turmoil present in those mentally ill persons against whom we, as civilized others, issue death sentences for they are largely deemed unsuitable for society.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Sean Patrick Smith is a playwright living in Brooklyn, New York. He studied Business and Chinese at Villanova University School of Business, before entering law school at Widener University School of Law (now, The Delaware Law School). Sean Patrick has informally studied and wrote plays since 2018. OAK TREE is his first publication, but he is currently writing THE DOORMAKER, a two-person, one Act play about the struggles of indecision and the ramifications of doing, or not doing, sure to include trippy dreamscapes; as well as, HOLY LANDS, a play about the interfamilial struggles after the loss of a mother and potential gain of a plot of land by the sea. The first planned performance of OAK TREE was scheduled to appear in a DIY Play House in Bedford-Stuyvesant, prior to the wholly unanticipated halt of the world from the COVID-19 pandemic. The performance is hopefully expected after a vaccine arrives.*

Time to a Phantom

By Zachariah Ezer

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama editor JANET COLSON writes:*

I love deceptively simple stories that could only be told onstage, and Time to A Phantom is one of those. With just two characters (unless you count a temperamental toilet), and a one-line premise, “Kyle’s Apartment is haunted, so he calls his super,” this play is a contemporary ghost story with heart and soul that gets under the skin and into the grit of race and privilege.

*Playwright **Zachariah Ezer** takes the risk of giving his character Jerome a thick Caribbean accent, which takes some effort to decode, but it’s worth it. At first it almost seems like a foreign language, but then we realize we’re getting almost every word – and even learning a few new ones (a “duppy” is a ghost). It takes some serious balls to pull off writing dialect, especially in a piece that’s this racially charged, but in Time to A Phantom it’s the magic ingredient, communicating across invisible lines of culture, class, experience, and trauma.*

The piece is not without humor or irony, but as in most ghost stories, the roots are in tragedy and loss. The duppy-haunted toilet is symbolic of a story that can’t – or won’t be flushed away. And whether or not Kyle can accept the existence of ghosts, he’s shaken out of his privileged vantage point long enough to take off his headphones and listen to another person’s story.

*From creating a toilet ghost to addressing systemic racism, **Zachariah Ezer** isn’t staying on the sidelines. Watch out for this playwright. We need to be haunted with stories like these.*

KYLE

So how do you get rid of a ghost?

JEROME

Ya na get rid of duppy, dem just fade away.

Five Stars.

(Spacing and font size are playwright’s own.) Eds.

Time to A Phantom

By Zachariah Ezer

Jerome: Black, 50s

Kyle: White, 20s

PLACE

The Big City

SYNOPSIS

Kyle's Apartment is haunted, so he calls his super.

Lights up on the dingy studio apartment of, KYLE, a boy in his twenties. He futzes on his computer with intense focus, headphones encasing his ears, preventing him from hearing a knock at the door. Unheard, the knocks continue to grow louder until...

KYLE

Oh, uh, come in. It's open.

In walks JEROME, a man in his fifties, annoyed to even be here.

JEROME

Mi deh yah. Wah seems ta be de problem?

KYLE

It's, well, the toilet. It's running.

Both stop to listen for it. No running.

JEROME

I dun hear notin.

KYLE

It comes and goes.

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JEROME

Botta you?

KYLE

A little bit, yeah--

JEROME

--Dun let it.

Jerome thinks this is hilarious. A Caribbean "Not" joke. He laughs to himself and turns to leave.

KYLE

Hold on! I pay the exorbitant rent for this apartment, and, as the superintendent, that's your salary. You have to fix the toilet.

Jerome stares at him for a second.

JEROME

Yuh goin call mi managa, den?

KYLE

If that's what it takes.

JEROME

Aight den.

Jerome crosses over to the bathroom. He inspects the toilet. As soon as he touches it, it starts running. Jerome calmly walks back into the bedroom.

JEROME

Mi find de problem.

KYLE

Yeah, what's wrong?

JEROME

Yuh ave a duppy inna here.

Kyle stands up.

KYLE

What's a duppy?

JEROME

A ghost.

KYLE

A ghost? There's a ghost in my bathroom?

JEROME

Wah mi seh?

KYLE

Yes, I heard what you said, but there's no way that it's true. Did you check that little cup on the chain in the back of the toilet?

JEROME

Mi check aal mi need. Ghost inna de apartment.

KYLE

How do you know that?

JEROME

Yuh can feel it, can you?

KYLE

No, I can't.

Jerome shrugs.

JEROME

Not a shock, dere now.

KYLE

I can't feel anything because there's nothing to feel. Ghosts aren't real.

The water running gets louder.

JEROME

Now wat yuh goin say dat fah?

KYLE

Because it's a ridiculous idea.

JEROME

Payin two grand ah mont is a ridiculous idea, but yuh do it, don't yuh?

KYLE

What's it to you?

JEROME

Mi used to live here. Mi kip tabs pon de place.

KYLE

Why'd you move down to the basement?

JEROME

Mi not tell ya? Two grand a mont ridiculous.

The running stops. Kyle looks away, guilty.

KYLE

So how do you get rid of a ghost?

JEROME

Ya na get rid of duppy, dem just fade away.

KYLE

Well, how long is that going to take?

Jerome shrugs.

JEROME

Who can say? Duppy fade until people can't see it, den until odda duppy can't see it. Den it goes onto de odda side.

KYLE

Then why is one haunting my bathroom?

JEROME

Haunt a word fah wi, ya na? Duppy not haunt; duppy just be. Duppy not care if wi here or not.

KYLE

Okay, I can see you're not going to help. Just go; it sounds like it stopped anyway.

Jerome turns to leave. Kyle puts on his headphones. The running starts again. Kyle throws his headphones against the couch.

KYLE

Goddamn it!

JEROME

Wat yuh got dere?

KYLE

I'm trying to get all the static out of this Robert Johnson song, but I can't focus.

JEROME

Wat yuh wan dat fah?

KYLE

I'm a DJ, and I want it so I can--

JEROME

--Nah, nah, yuh nah wan hear de crackle?

KYLE

Because I want the song, unfiltered, how it was supposed to sound.

JEROME

Dat is de blues. Yuh affi ave de pop and de hiss.

KYLE

That's not how the song was originally recorded.

JEROME

Yuh tell mi dat *de* Robert Johnson, man what sold his soul, would nah wan a likkle mystery in de music?

Kyle considers this a moment.

KYLE

What makes you such an expert?

JEROME

Used tah play de bass.

KYLE

In a band?

JEROME

Long time ago.

KYLE

Were you any good?

Jerome comes to life.

JEROME

Wi used tah tour de country. Packed crowd, aal ovah. Al caused ah riot inna Charlotte once.

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KYLE

Why'd you stop?

JEROME

On de road too long. Mi dawta dea worry, so mi come home, ya na?

KYLE

Do you miss it?

JEROME

Fram time to time. Tings worse to lose dan playing de blues.

Kyle nods, pretending he understands. The toilet stops.

KYLE

Yeah... So, where'd you learn all that stuff about ghosts?

JEROME

Pass dung trough de years, ya na? Moda to son, fada to dawta.

KYLE

Can I ask you a question?

Jerome shrugs.

KYLE

I took this class in college, and the professor asked us, “Is a ghost from the present or the past?”

Jerome thinks a moment.

JEROME

De past. Is a ghost of a person.

KYLE

Yeah, but the ghost is here now.

JEROME

But it nah fram de present. De duppy a just a shell. De person long gaan.

KYLE

Exactly.

JEROME

Okay, so one of dem riddles?

KYLE

I guess so. I never really got my head around it, myself.

Jerome smiles.

JEROME

Mi ave a riddle.

KYLE

(playing along)

Okay, let's hear it.

JEROME

Wat got a mout, but neva talk, always run--

KYLE

--It's a river.

JEROME

Yuh na even let mi finish!

The toilet starts running again.

KYLE

Sorry, that's an old one. Well, it started again. Do you think it can hear us?

Jerome shrugs.

KYLE

Then why do I feel like this ghost has a great sense of timing?

JEROME

Duppy dun care about timing.

KYLE

How could you possibly know that?

JEROME

Tink bout it. Person live wat, maybe eighty years. Ded foreva.

KYLE

Okay, I can see that. Once you're looking at eternity, you would think about time a little differently.

JEROME

What did yuh study in college?

KYLE

Ethnomusicology. It's like--

JEROME

--Mi know wat dat be.

KYLE

I'm sorry, that was really condescending. Did you go to college?

JEROME

Started, ya na?

KYLE

Why didn't you finish?

JEROME

Well mi dawta did bawn.

KYLE

Where's your daughter now?

JEROME

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Gaan.

KYLE

I am so sorry.

Jerome nods.

JEROME

It was ah long time ago.

KYLE

What happened?

JEROME

Shi died inna dis apahtment.

Kyle looks over to the bathroom, suddenly much more aware of his surroundings.

KYLE

How did she die?

Jerome draws closer to Kyle. Perhaps the lights dim. The toilet definitely picks up in volume.

JEROME

Long time ago, ya know, dey try kick wi out of de building. Someting bout condos. Well dey stopped fixin tings. One night, it was de middle of winta, Ya know, I'm playing in de hip paht of town. Jazz. Ya na white people luv jazz. Mi dawta was home alone. She whole heap like yuh; can't fix ah damn ting. Well, sometime late dat night, de radiator go out. Ya na she couldn't fix it haself, so she wait fi mi. Gig ran long. Mi come home, an she froze to death. Found har in de showa, using de hot wata to get warm. Mus ave ran out, cah de wata runnin wen mi gat back was ice cold. Ou long was shi de unda dere? An howa? Two?

Jerome trails off, and the lights return to normal. Kyle looks back to the bathroom.

KYLE

So, you think...

Jerome nods. The implication is clear.

KYLE

Okay, I'm sorry. I've let this go on long enough.

JEROME

Wah yuh mean?

KYLE

I'm really sorry that your daughter died, and it's really shitty that the people that own this building are fucking criminals, but no. That's not your daughter in the bathroom. Ghosts aren't real.

Kyle's tone is serious, but his posture is less sure.

JEROME

Who yuh tellin'?

KYLE

I'm telling you. Are you going to fix the toilet or not?

Jerome stands and walks toward the bathroom.

JEROME

Haunt. Dat is ah word fah wi. Wat it mean?

KYLE

I don't know. Is this another riddle?

Jerome turns back.

JEROME

It mean fa be someplace yuh dun belong. Duppy haunt cah de ouse is fi de living.

KYLE

Sure, and your daughter is haunting my apartment.

JEROME

Now yuh believe mi? Dat's always how it always go. Wi not belong. It's nah ya fault. Wi inna ya space. Well wah yuh doin wit it? Mi see yuh around de block. Neva hail up nobody. Don't know ya neighbors. Yuh even know mi name?

Kyle is flustered. He obviously doesn't.

JEROME

Jerome. You're Kyle, an shi Clarissa. Mi dawta ah na ghost.

KYLE

So, I don't belong here. Because I'm white?

JEROME

Cah yuh tek de life outta everyting yuh touch.

KYLE

Who am I haunting? I'm not dead.

JEROME

Yuh nat alive. Yuh want mi to exorcise mi dawta... Yuh haunt wi everi day of wi life... Yuh haunt de life yuh neva knew yuh didn't ave.

Jerome walks into the bathroom.

JEROME

Shush, babi gyal. I hear yuh.

Jerome puts his hand on the toilet again, and it stops running completely. He returns to the bedroom, and walks to the door.

KYLE

Are you just going to leave me here with this ghost in my apartment?

JEROME

Let mi know ef notin else need fixin. Mi ave notin but time.

Jerome exits.

Kyle looks around his apartment, full of fear.

The toilet starts running again.

Lights dim as Robert Johnson's "Me and the Devil Blues" plays, full of crackle.

END OF PLAY

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *One thing I like to do in my work is present a theoretical conundrum (whether it be Philosophy, Black Studies, Queer Theory, Media Studies, etc.) in a theatrical fashion. This piece is no exception; I often think of it as an unofficial adaptation of a Mark Fisher article called *The Metaphysics of Crackle: Afrofuturism and Hauntology*, which I think everyone should read. I was very interested in the idea of whether a ghost was from the present or the past and what it means to haunt a space. The gentrification setting came from my own life. I was living in Brooklyn, New York after college, and I would see how a lot of white people my age interacted with our Jamaican super (he actually was a musician, as well as the worst weed dealer in Bed-Stuy). I always felt this kinship with both sides as a Jamaican-American myself but still a gentrifier, so I wanted to imagine a heightened version of that relationship that would let me play with the ideas that were already swirling around in my head. Our toilet was also running around that time, and that brought the whole thing together.*

This play went on tour in the summer of 2019, heading to The Woodside Players of Queens' Summer Play Festival where we did a reading (and won Best Play!) at the Long Island City Library, The DC Black Theatre Festival for another reading, and it finally had its world premiere at the Fade to Black Play Festival in Houston, Texas. The next year, we finally did a full production in New York at the (now defunct) Secret Theatre, and Charging Moose Media recorded a version of the play for their "At the Table" podcast. Publication was the white whale for this piece for a while, so I am glad it's finally found a place to rest.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Zachariah Ezer is an M.F.A. [Playwriting](#) Candidate at the University of Texas at Austin. His work has been developed at numerous theatres in New York, Chicago, LA, DC, Houston, and online. He is a UT Michener Fellow for the class of 2023, a 2020 Town Stages Sokoloff Creative Arts Fellow, a 2018 BUFU EYEDREAM Resident, a 2015 Wesleyan University Olin Fellow, and a member of The Tank's LIT Council. He is also a dramaturg (for The National Black Theatre, Merde, foolsFURY, and The Workshop Theater, where he is currently in residence), an essayist (published by Gizmodo/io9, HuffPost, Bubbleblabber, and elsewhere), and a performer (in alternative rock band [Harper's Landing](#))

Two Heads of a Hydra

By Darby Sherwood

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama editor JANET COLSON writes:*

Two Heads of a Hydra is an epic extravaganza with elements of epic theatre itself. The play is a Greek tragedy told through the lens of ancient Greek mythology that takes us from Prometheus getting his heart pecked out by an eagle to the Salem witch trials to the anti-gay purges in modern day Chechnya as if they were all happening in the present. The play is both timely and timeless. It's an actor's feast with opportunities to dig down deep and play double and triple roles. It's expert storytelling and great theatre.

It's also f-ing brutal.

Thanks to the gods and to playwright Darby Sherwood for giving us a Greek chorus of nine muses who bring their own baggage into the mix and help us sort through ours. The muses bear the responsibility of witnessing history repeat itself while questioning the horror perpetuated by gods and mortals alike. They also tell us stories, such as the one about the hydra:

THALIA

And what about the hydra?

CALLIOPE

Every time one head got cut off, another one grew back in its place.

The play is about the power of stories, how they work on us at a conscious and unconscious level. These stories offer us insight, but give us no closure. And they exist beyond the realm of theatre, provoking us to take action.

MELPOMENE

Do you ever wonder why the gods seem so concerned with repetition?

URANIA

They watch history repeat itself.

Day-in and day-out, they witness as humankind makes the same mistakes.

So I guess the worst punishment is to see everything

And yet be powerless to do anything

May the gods take heed.

Five stars.

(Spacing and font size are playwright's own.) Eds.

Two Heads of a Hydra

By Darby Sherwood

SYNOPSIS

Two Heads of a Hydra is a story that spans continents and centuries, featuring dual storylines in modern-day Chechnya and 1692 Salem, Massachusetts, as well as intervention from the Muses. It follows parallel Greek tragedy structures to discuss the ways that inequalities are propagated when they're mourned and then forgotten.

CHARACTERS

Chechnya

Kesira
Raisa
Keram
Malika
Pyotr
Police Officer
Taxi Driver

Salem

Verity
Rachel
Jonas
Ethel
Abigail
Temperance
Dorothy
Chief Magistrate Stoughton
Newton
Executioner

Greek Chorus

Calliope
Clio
Erato
Euterpe
Melpomene
Polyhymnia
Terpsichore
Thalia
Urania

DOUBLING

Characters can be doubled in a variety of ways. The current format is optimized for these doublings:

Kesira/Temperance/Melpomene

Raisa/Abigail/Thalia

Keram/Newton/Erato

Malika/Verity/Clio

Pyotr/Taxi Driver/Chief Magistrate Stoughton/Terpsichore

Police Officer/Jonas/Euterpe

Rachel/Urania

Ethel/Polyhymnia

Dorothy/Calliope

SETTING

Chechnya, 2019 and Salem, 1692

NOTES

Each scene should flow as seamlessly as possible into the next

PERFORMANCE HISTORY

METEA VALLEY THEATRE (February 2018) - Directed by Darby Sherwood and Abha Naik

Stage Managed by Truman Mitchell

Cast - Michael Miller, Maya Williams, Annie Sweeton, Alyssa Livorsi, Emma Carlson, Roger Valdez, Jordan Mamon, Macy Margherio, Alexis Bass

NOW HERE THIS SEATTLE (June 2019) - Directed by Megan Brewer

Stage Managed by Sandra Bobman

Cast - Arika Matoba, Hannah Kathline, Frank Sun, Carolynne Wilcox, Andrew Forrest, Nathan Drackett, Kayleah Lewis, Alexandria Stevens, Aimee Decker

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON SCHOOL OF DRAMA CABLAB (March 2019 - performances cancelled due to COVID-19) - Directed by Darby Sherwood and Sha Ritoch

Stage Managed by Brittany Thomas and Raina Sadhan

Cast and Crew - Natalie Modlin, Kendra Kolasinski, Elliott Chinn, Spencer Goodin, Darby Sherwood, Sagen Berry, Jaime Dahl, Ryn Paris, Megan Darby, Alaina Moretti, Alexandra Cotutiu, Tina Rajabi, Isaac Afolayan

Prologue

CALLIOPE

Have you ever heard the story of Prometheus?

CLIO

He molded mankind out of clay.

ERATO

And then brought them fire.

CALLIOPE

And all of this made Zeus very angry.

So, he chained Prometheus to a stake and set an eagle to eat his heart every day.

After the eagle had eaten all but the smallest piece, it became whole again

And the eagle began to eat it again and again and again.

EUTERPE

And Sisyphus?

MELPOMENE

He was forced to roll a gigantic boulder up a hill
 But every time it reached the top,
 The boulder would go tumbling down again
 And Sisyphus would push it all the way back
 Until it came tumbling down once again.

THALIA

And again and again.

POLYHYMNIA

And do you remember the story of Danaus and his daughters?

TERPSICHORE

Each of the daughters killed their husband.

URANIA

As punishment they were forced to carry water to a bowl until it could be filled to the brim.
 And yet, as much water as they brought, it would never be full.

CLIO

Because of the holes in the bottom.

EUTERPE

Why didn't they ever think to patch the holes?

ERATO

They were told to carry the water, not patch the holes.

CALLIOPE

I suppose it seems easier to keep carrying the water than to go through the whole ordeal of
 changing the bowl.

MELPOMENE

Do you ever wonder why the gods seem so concerned with repetition?

URANIA

They watch history repeat itself.
 Day-in and day-out, they witness as humankind makes the same mistakes.
 So I guess the worst punishment is to see everything
 And yet be powerless to do anything.

THALIA

And what about the hydra?

CALLIOPE

Every time one head got cut off, another one grew back in its place.

This is the story of the hydra,
Or pieces of it.
It's not finished yet,
But it keeps turning over and over.

Scene One: Chechnya, 2019

KESIRA

Mama, is this what we're walking to?

MALIKA

Yes.

KESIRA

I don't understand. It's just a couple of trees between empty fields.

MALIKA

It's a graveyard.

KESIRA

What?

MALIKA

See the way the grass grows differently over there?
It's the edge of a trench.
Two - three hundred bodies down there.

KESIRA

Oh my god.

MALIKA

Your great grandfather is buried here somewhere.
My mother used to point to the exact spot,
But I think she pointed somewhere different every time.

KESIRA

I had no idea this existed.

MALIKA

It becomes easy to forget.

*(A moment of silence. MALIKA gazes at the tree as
KESIRA walks around the field.)*

MALIKA *(continued)*

Your great grandfather fought with the Red Army in World War II,
Helped push the Nazis all the way out of Malgobek.
Nohkcho Tsatsarov, one of many heroes.

KESIRA

I know that. Papa talks about him - and Keram, too.

MALIKA

Do you remember how the story goes after that?
After the glory of war?

KESIRA

No.

MALIKA

He got his leg blown off. He had to come home.
It was right around the start of the deportations.
Stalin's soldiers started pillaging the country, forcing all the Chechens out.
They wanted everyone to walk to Kazakhstan and your great grandfather couldn't walk anymore

So they shot him in his good leg.
 You don't die immediately from a shot in the leg.
 So there must've been... moments,
 I don't know how long it takes,
 Where he saw the people he'd fought alongside
 Destroying everything he'd ever known.
 And that's how his story ended.
 Nokhcho Tsatsarov, for all his medals and sacrifices and honor,
 Is now a stranger, lying forgotten in a mass grave.

KESIRA

Do you think he would rest easier if it had been a real grave?

MALIKA

Maybe.
 There used to be a plaque.
 Right here.

KESIRA

I can feel it.

MALIKA

People forget but there's something in the universe that never does.

KESIRA

What happened to all of it?

MALIKA

It was torn down by the police
 Who were told to by the government.
 It used to be lovely, in a tragic way.
 After the Chechens were allowed to come back,
 There was a whole group of women who built a memorial to their husbands and fathers and
 sons.
 There were flags and plaques and headstones.
 And the ground was alive with flowers.
 For years, one person or another would always remember to replace the flowers.

KESIRA

And now it's all gone.

Even the remnants of dead flowers.

MALIKA

All of this suffering...

KESIRA

Quieted.

MALIKA

It's awful.

KESIRA

I wanted you to see this place before your father dies,
Because it's not us who die, Kesira.
The women live to tell their stories
And put headstones on their graves.

MALIKA

Chechnya, 2019.
Its own Greek tragedy set on the southern tip of Russia.
After fifteen years of war, cities were reborn and rebuilt

ERATO

Which doesn't stop them from decaying on the inside.

URANIA

Like flowers on graves.

ERATO

It's always baffled me,
The way they put flowers on graves.
As if there aren't already enough dead things in a cemetery.
Before long the color fades from the petals as they separate from the stems,
As they age decades in days.
Until there's just enough left to resemble ashes.

URANIA

Not even a corpse.
Not enough to bury
But, still, something once living is now dead.

MELPOMENE

Do they know that flowers die too?
Or did they forget because it was convenient?

Scene Two: Salem, 1692

EUTERPE

And this is Salem, 1692.

The Salem Witch Trials.

Less than twenty years after the start of the witch trials, the Salem legislature formally apologized and restored the good names of all those accused and tried.

A lot of good that does a corpse.

ABIGAIL

Good afternoon, Lieutenant Governor.

CHIEF MAGISTRATE STOUGHTON

Hello, Abigail.

My, my, with all this witch business, I thought everyone would have forgotten what my real purpose here is.

ABIGAIL

You've been doing a fine job of leading those trials.
Chief Magistrate suits you.

CHIEF MAGISTRATE STOUGHTON

All for the good of the town.

ABIGAIL

Certainly.

I should think this whole sordid ordeal is, grim as it may be.

CHIEF MAGISTRATE STOUGHTON

I agree completely.

Always nice chatting with you, Abigail.

I best get back up to the courthouse,

We've got another trial today.

*(TEMPERANCE enters and approaches ABIGAIL,
STOUGHTON exits.)*

TEMPERANCE

If you had to guess, who would you say is going to be tried next?

ABIGAIL

Why, for witchcraft?

TEMPERANCE

What do you think?

ABIGAIL

Could be anyone, really.

TEMPERANCE

It really could be anyone.

ABIGAIL

In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if it's that spinster, Verity Underhill.

TEMPERANCE

Seems well within the realm of possibility.

ABIGAIL

Something's very off about her.

TEMPERANCE

Well, as they say, it could be anyone.

Scene Three: Chechnya, 2019

RAISA

Have you heard from Ruslan?

PYOTR

No.

I don't expect to see him again.

He must've been seized by the police.

RAISA

I guess I shouldn't be surprised.

PYOTR

It's getting worse.

There have been whispers about it for awhile.

Novaya Gazeta just published an article telling the rest of the world that Kadyrov's been setting up concentration camps and abducting gay men to fill them.

RAISA

Well, that's got to change something.

PYOTR

Who's going to care?

RAISA

Someone's got to.

PYOTR

I don't see anyone volunteering.

Besides, everything run by the government denies that gay people even exist here at all.

RAISA

(Scoffing) We know that's not true.

PYOTR

Once you have enough power, you don't have to care what's true.

RAISA

What's the point, then?

PYOTR

You still have to be careful, Raisa.

Knowing the world doesn't make you immune.

RAISA

Heeding the world may kill me first.

(A buzzing noise from RAISA's phone. She checks

it.)

RAISA (*continued*)

My family. They want me to come home.

PYOTR

Don't underestimate survival, Raisa.

Scene Four: Salem, 1692

and

*(VERITY is cleaning up the house as JONAS enters
knocks on the door. VERITY crosses to open it.)*

JONAS

Verity.

VERITY

Why, Jonas Bishop, what are you doing here?

JONAS

Had some extra bread, figured I'd drop it off here.

VERITY

Now, Jonas, I don't need charity.
Rachel and I get on just fine by ourselves.

JONAS

Came to see you, too, Verity.

VERITY

You should call me Miss Underhill.
I'm older than you. And a mother, you know.

JONAS

No husband.

VERITY

You volunteering?

JONAS

I told you, I'll run away with you.

VERITY

I'm sorry to say, that's not how things work.
Besides, Abigail would come after us all.
I already do whatever I can to avoid that woman.

JONAS

Aw, my mother wouldn't do anything.

VERITY

Have you met her?

JONAS

(Defensively, daftly) Yes.

VERITY

What I mean to say is that you're already married to that girl your family picked.

JONAS

Don't love her, though.

VERITY

People rarely do things for love.

JONAS

I love you -

VERITY

Don't be foolish, you don't know what that means.

JONAS

I know what I can promise you, Verity.

A good life.

A loving husband.

And I can be a good father, too.

VERITY

Jonas.

JONAS

I'm serious.

VERITY

You'll make a loving husband for Ethel.

You can be a father to your own children.

JONAS

I want to be with you.

VERITY

Jonas Bishop, I need you to stop pretending I even could say yes to any of these things you're proposing.

JONAS

I'd like you to.

VERITY

Then you're a fool.
Our lives are set.
I'm going to be a spinster for the rest of my days.
You've got a future ahead of you -

JONAS

I don't want that future.

VERITY

Well, you're not in a position to refuse it.
None of us are.
We're always judged by our decisions
But, in truth, there's barely any we really made ourselves.
Now, I'd appreciate it if you could stop humoring me, Jonas.

JONAS

You'll change your mind, Verity.

VERITY

Out, now.
Rachel will be home any minute.

JONAS

I'll be back soon.

VERITY

Goodbye, Jonas.

*(JONAS exits. He passes RACHEL, who is heading
towards the house, on his way.)*

JONAS

Morning, Rachel!

RACHEL

Afternoon, Jonas.

(RACHEL enters the house.)

RACHEL (*continued*)

Good afternoon, Mama.

VERITY

How was school?

RACHEL

Good.

VERITY

Wash up, we're about ready for supper.

RACHEL

Mama, I'm nearly fifteen now.

VERITY

I know that.

RACHEL

I'm getting older and I want to know more about this world.

VERITY

(*Scoffing*) What made you decide that?

RACHEL

I think that this town is too small for me.

These people are too small for me.

VERITY

Rachel -

RACHEL

I should like to travel long enough and far enough away so that I can know the whole world and not feel too big or too small anywhere.

VERITY

Rachel, the world is vast.

RACHEL

And this corner of it is small and cramped.

VERITY

It does well enough.

RACHEL

All I know about the rest of the world is that it's different and I'd like to know how.

VERITY

Perhaps it's worse.

RACHEL

Why do you say that?

VERITY

If living in one town were so bad, more people would leave.
So it could be that people find it's not worth the cost or the strain and that they're hardly any
happier than they were before.

RACHEL

Well then, do you know what else I've realized?

VERITY

What?

RACHEL

I've lived in Salem all my life and some days I barely know it at all.

VERITY

Really?

RACHEL

And the people in it.

VERITY

What are you trying to say, Rachel?

RACHEL

I want to know about my father.

VERITY

Rachel.

RACHEL

I'm almost fifteen.

VERITY

You think I forgot?

RACHEL

I think it's right for me to know.

VERITY

Don't ask me now.

RACHEL

It's been fifteen years.

VERITY

I'm tired.

RACHEL

If you won't tell me, I'll run away.

VERITY

Don't say things like that.

RACHEL

I'm serious.

I'd rather see what I can find on my own if my only other choice is living half in the dark.

VERITY

Rachel.

RACHEL

Mama, please.

VERITY

Fine.
Sit down.

(RACHEL sits down and looks at VERITY expectantly.)

VERITY *(continued)*
It's a long story. Are you sure you wouldn't rather hear another?

RACHEL
Yes.

VERITY
Well, Rachel,
They say "God is faithful;
He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear
But when you are tempted,
He will also provide a way out so that you can endure it."
And... God knows we're strong.
He knows that we don't need some of the things other people do.

RACHEL
What does that mean?

VERITY
It means God knew I wouldn't need a husband
So he gave me a daughter instead, knowing that she, too, would be strong enough to face the world unafraid.

RACHEL
So I don't have a father at all?

VERITY
I... yes.

RACHEL
Because we're too strong.

VERITY
... Yes.

RACHEL

Well... alright.

VERITY

That satisfy your curiosity?
Come now, we'll make supper.

Scene Five: Chechnya, 2019

*(RAISA enters and knocks quietly on the door.
answers it.)*

KESIRA

KESIRA

(Whispered) Raisa! You were supposed to come hours ago.

RAISA

I tried to. I got held up.

KESIRA

Well, you can't just show up here without warning.

RAISA

You said your parents were in Grozny.
They're still there, aren't they?

KESIRA

Yes, but Keram's here.

RAISA

We won't wake him.

KESIRA

(Softly) Raisa, this isn't a good idea.

RAISA

But you still want to see me.

KESIRA

Well, we have to be quiet.

RAISA

I know.
How are you?

KESIRA

I'm tired.
I didn't know what to think when you didn't come earlier.
I thought maybe something had happened...

RAISA

I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to scare you.

You said you had something to tell me?

KESIRA

Let's not talk about it now.

What should we talk about? RAISA

I don't know.
Nothing.
I just want to be with you. KESIRA

POLYHYMNIA
Time is the most precious thing we'll ever hold
And yet we can never possess it or tame it.
You would think that knowing life is short would make people kinder and more considerate
But life is also long.

What is it? RAISA

A couple more seconds. KESIRA

Until? RAISA

A couple more seconds. KESIRA

(KESIRA inhales, closing her eyes; RAISA watches closely.)

...until it feels like reality again. KESIRA *(continued)*

Oh. RAISA

POLYHYMNIA
So what do you do with time?
What can you?
Is anything worth spending a life on?

KESIRA
(With her eyes still closed) Nothing's real yet. Maybe it doesn't have to be

If I can keep my eyes closed and my feet on the ground.

RAISA

Open your eyes. Let's be together.

KESIRA

(Opening her eyes) No, that's the problem.
We can't be together in reality. I can't see you again.
This only works if nothing's real -

RAISA

Then nothing's real.

KESIRA

I can't see you again.
This has to be the last time I ever see you.

RAISA

Kesira.

KESIRA

This is too dangerous.
I don't know why it took me so long to realize.

RAISA

We've always known it's dangerous.

KESIRA

But we didn't think about it.

RAISA

Or we didn't care.

KESIRA

We didn't want to.
And I don't want to.
But I can't ignore it any longer.

RAISA

What's the point of existing then?

KESIRA

Don't ask me that.
Do you think I want to be saying this?

RAISA

Would you rather survive or die in pursuit of something to live for?
Because there's a difference between surviving and living.

KESIRA

I have my family. I need to worry about them.

RAISA

We're our family.
Your family would kill you the moment they knew who you were
And mine would do the same.
All we've got to live for is each other.
Otherwise we're alone.

KESIRA

Don't you get it? The real problem is that no one's ever alone.
The world has never been just us
And there will never be a time when it could be.
Don't make me the villain in this. I don't want it any more than you.

RAISA

Then close your eyes again.
And I'll close mine.
And then we'll never see each other again after tonight
But maybe tonight will never end.

KESIRA

Raisa.

RAISA

Try it.

KESIRA

Don't pretend it's romantic to live in delusion.

RAISA

Then I'll think of something else.
(*After a moment*) Come outside with me.

KESIRA

Why?

RAISA

Because I love you
And I want a sweeter last moment than this.

Raisa. KESIRA

For love? RAISA

For just a second. KESIRA

(They go outside and look at the stars.)

RAISA
 They're beautiful, aren't they?
 Like cracks in the world.
 I think it's easy to get stuck looking at these walls with your feet on this ground and forget
 that there's anything else at all.
 But then, if you find the place and the moment, you can see the entire vastness of the
 universe.
 And then you can look -
 Are you looking?

I'm looking. KESIRA

RAISA
 We're not of this earth.
 We exist above it or just on top of it.
 We're not bound to the walls or the ground.
 We're not a part of it like we're a part of each other.
 You're real
 And I'm real
 And nothing else has to be.

Nothing else? KESIRA

RAISA
 Not a damn thing.
 We're like lost stars
 Who've been lost almost long enough to forget they ever were stars.
 Don't you see that now, Kesira?
 All people are stars, really.

All stars are lovers.

KESIRA

I can't do this.

Raisa, I wish just as much as you that metaphors could solve reality
But they can't.

RAISA

Perseus loved Andromeda.

KESIRA

We can't stay out here.

RAISA

Perseus loved Andromeda so much that he killed a great sea monster to save her.
They loved each other so much that their entire beings are immortalized in the stars.
Do you love me like that?

KESIRA

Raisa, don't ask me that.

RAISA

Tell me you don't and I'll leave.

KESIRA

You have to leave.

RAISA

Not if you still love me.
Go on, tell me you don't.

KESIRA

I don't want to do that either.

RAISA

Then tell me you do!

KESIRA

It's not that simple!

RAISA

Then just say something!
Stop whispering! Stop just standing there!
Stop letting the world destroy you!
Be a goddamn person and not just a decoration -

KESIRA

Stop being so rash!
You pretend that danger is noble without even considering that survival could be too!

RAISA

You're a doormat!

KESIRA

You don't know what you're talking about.

RAISA

You don't know what matters.

KESIRA

At least I can see the world as it is.

RAISA

You can't see any farther than the confines of your misery.
I can see the world that could be better.

KESIRA

And isn't yet!

RAISA

And won't be if we just wait for it.

KESIRA

Do you love me?

RAISA

Of course I do.

KESIRA

Do you love me or do you love the thought of me?

RAISA

I love you. What's that supposed to mean?

KESIRA

It means I love you but sometimes you scare me.
Sometimes I'm scared that you'll fly too close to the sun
And burst into flame.
And maybe you just don't want to burn alone.

RAISA

Is that what you're worried about?

KESIRA

Yes!

RAISA

You're right, in a sense.
Sometimes I ignore all the things I'd rather forget
But that's only for the love of you.
And you're wrong, in a sense, too.
I see the world, I just see through the walls and beyond the stars
Because I see all that this world could become.
I can see the danger but I don't dwell on it
Because no matter what I could survive,
I couldn't live without you.

KESIRA

I love you.
I love you, but I can't live like this.

KERAM (*from offstage*)

Kesira?

KESIRA

(*Hissing whisper*) Get out of here!

(*RAISA exits hurriedly. KERAM enters.*)

KERAM

Kesira, what are you doing out here?

KESIRA

I was looking at the stars.

KERAM

It's past midnight.

KESIRA

I couldn't sleep.

KERAM

Thinking about Papa?

KESIRA

Yes.

He's sick. KERAM

I know. KESIRA

He's dying. KERAM

I know. KESIRA

It's feels so much heavier when you say it rather than think it. KERAM

He's dying. KESIRA

I don't even know how to think about it. KERAM
(*A pause.*) And the inevitability of it.

What do you mean? KESIRA

He's dying KERAM
Faster and faster than before.
But I'm dying too.
We're all dying before it starts to show.

What's the point of existing then? KESIRA

Maybe it's leaving behind some part of you that will stay alive KERAM
Or being sure to die in a right way.
Or maybe it's not about that at all.

I don't know. KESIRA

I wish I knew if I'd notice the moment I die. KERAM
You know?
Like, maybe it'll be this sudden rush of nothing.

Or there'll be this tearing sensation.
Or what if there's something eternal that stays intact
And it takes me a long time to even realize I've died?

KESIRA

Some people say there's people living up there in the stars.

KERAM

Do you think that?

KESIRA

I don't like to concentrate so much on what comes after life.
I suppose I've got to concentrate on living for now.

KERAM

You're probably right.
Yeah, you're probably right.

Scene Six: Salem, 1692

*(ABIGAIL joins DOROTHY and TEMPERANCE.
are working on their sewing throughout the*

*They
scene.)*

ABIGAIL

Good morning, Dorothy. Good morning, Temperance.

DOROTHY

Abigail, have you heard the rumor that Jonathan Huxley's been "visiting" with that Catherine Barrows?

ABIGAIL

What's he been doing on these visits?

DOROTHY

Nothing that would please Mrs. Huxley.

TEMPERANCE

Nothing pleases that woman anyway.
She does nothing but complain.
And they've been fighting for years.
One can hardly blame Jonathan.

ABIGAIL

And what about the other girl?
She can't be much older than Jonathan's daughter.

DOROTHY

That's what makes it so scandalous, isn't it?

TEMPERANCE

Well, there's another scandal going on in our little town.

ABIGAIL

Do tell.

TEMPERANCE

Well, my daughter came home the other day and I asked her about school as usual.
And she had a very interesting story to tell me.

DOROTHY

Go on.

TEMPERANCE

She said that Verity's little girl told her the - apparent - reason why Verity doesn't have a husband.

DOROTHY

Go on.

TEMPERANCE

She said that Verity told her that God blessed Verity with a daughter because she was too strong to need a husband for that.

DOROTHY

Like some new age Virgin Mary!

ABIGAIL

My, my. Isn't that just all kinds of odd?

TEMPERANCE

I certainly thought so.

ABIGAIL

The kind of thing that could brand someone a witch in this town.

TEMPERANCE

Are you suggesting...?

ABIGAIL

It should certainly be considered.

DOROTHY

Now, I'm not so sure.

ABIGAIL

And why do you say that?

DOROTHY

I just mean, it's starting to get out of hand, isn't it?
People being accused left and right.

TEMPERANCE

But the lists of incidents and grievances are growing as well.

DOROTHY

Well, of course,
It just seems like a comment from her daughter doesn't warrant a whole witch trial.
It at least encourages pause.

ABIGAIL

Well, to add to the list of grievances, I think you should be concerned for your own daughter,
too.

DOROTHY

What are you on about, Abigail?

ABIGAIL

I should hope to assume she's but an innocent victim in all this.
As my son is, of course.

DOROTHY

Well, what's this?
Your Jonas is married to my Ethel.

ABIGAIL

I know that.
Seems Verity's the one that needs to be reminded.
Haven't you seen how often she's with Jonas?

TEMPERANCE

Oh, I've noticed that.

ABIGAIL

And you've seen the looks she's given him.

TEMPERANCE

And the looks he's returned.

ABIGAIL

Temperance!
All in all, it certainly makes one question.
Aren't devil women always trying to destroy our proper little families?

If I were Ethel, I'd worry my husband was being possessed by her.
And, as a mother, of course, it's my responsibility to ensure my child's safety and sanctity.
Unless, of course, safety and sanctity are of little concern to you, Dorothy?

DOROTHY

Well, when you put it like that...

ABIGAIL

It's a small price to pay for preserving life and liberty.

DOROTHY

Yes.

ABIGAIL

I'm glad we see this the same way.
Good afternoon, girls. Always a pleasure.

Scene Seven: Chechnya, 2019

KERAM

He was dying and now he's dead.
He was dying and, logically, the next step was for him to die.
You're not supposed to just die.
There's supposed to be something bigger attached,

Something otherworldly or eternal or powerful to turn death inorganic.
So we can forget that it conquers even the good and the weak and the insignificant.

*(A knock on the door. KERAM answers and the
POLICE OFFICER enters.)*

POLICE OFFICER

I need to speak with the man of the house.

KERAM

My father's dead, Officer.

POLICE OFFICER

Congratulations.

KERAM

What?

POLICE OFFICER

Condolences, of course.

I just mean to say, you're the man of the house now, are you not?

KERAM

I am.

POLICE OFFICER

So, congratulations.

KERAM

What are you here for?

POLICE OFFICER

Lots of responsibility, isn't it?

KERAM

I - yes.

POLICE OFFICER

Ever had to be a real man, son?

KERAM

What?

POLICE OFFICER

Are you military?

No. My father was.

KERAM

Which side?

POLICE OFFICER

Ours.
Kadyrovtsy. Both wars.

KERAM

Enough glory for the both of you, I suppose.

POLICE OFFICER

I was too young to join.

KERAM

And now?

POLICE OFFICER

(Firmly) What are you here for, Officer?

KERAM

It was just a bit of a joke.
Can you take a joke, son?

POLICE OFFICER

Don't call me that.

KERAM

Wasn't too funny, I guess.

POLICE OFFICER

It's been a long day, Officer. If you're just here to -

KERAM

Straight to the point. No messing around.
I like that.
Suppose a man like you could pull the trigger.

POLICE OFFICER

What are you here for, Officer?

KERAM

You would've made a good soldier.
If you hadn't been scared...

POLICE OFFICER

Officer - KERAM

Your sister's head. POLICE OFFICER

What? KERAM

On a platter. POLICE OFFICER

I think you need to leave. KERAM

Come on, we're just starting to have fun.
I think you want to keep me on your side.
I think you want to listen. POLICE OFFICER

(A tense moment of silence.)

Your sister's a homosexual.
She's a threat to the peace and the public
And as such, it's your responsibility to kill her. POLICE OFFICER *(continued)*

(Another moment of silence.)

To the point enough for you? POLICE OFFICER *(continued)*

I can't. KERAM

If only that were an option.
See, I told you you'd want me to like you.
Because I can make your life hell.
And I will.
But only if I need to.
You've got your chance to do the right thing.
The thing a good soldier would do. POLICE OFFICER

KERAM

Officer -

POLICE OFFICER

No more small talk.
This is your war.
Have a good night, now.

Scene Eight: Chechnya, 2019

*milling
away,*

*(The street in town. There's just a couple people
about. RAISA and PYOTR are standing farther
trying not to be noticed.)*

PYOTR

You shouldn't be out here, Raisa.

I'm leaving Chechnya.

RAISA

Excuse me?

PYOTR

Kesira and I are leaving.
I saved up money, I'm buying the tickets.
We'll go to Moscow first and then somewhere else.

RAISA

(Dismissively) Good for you.

PYOTR

I wanted you to know.
So that when you hear I'm gone you won't have to worry.

RAISA

Ruslan came back.
They were keeping him locked in a basement.
They were electrocuting him,
They were kicking him with steel toed boots and beating him with pipes.
And all that time, they never touched him.
They're the fucking government.
They were the ones holding the goddamn pipes and they were afraid to touch him.
Then they dropped him on his doorstep, all bruised and bloody
And he couldn't take it anymore.
Ruslan came back but a part of him had already died.
So he shot himself and the rest of him died too.

PYOTR

I'm so sorry.

RAISA

Yeah?

PYOTR

This is why we have to get out.

RAISA

You're too naive.

PYOTR

If it's about money, I can help you,

RAISA

Once we're settled, I can send -

PYOTR

No one wants refugees, Raisa.
Chechnya's burning but so is the rest of the world.

RAISA

So you're just gonna watch it?

PYOTR

From the comfort of my own home.

RAISA

Ruslan wouldn't want -

PYOTR

Don't tell me what the fuck Ruslan would've wanted.

RAISA

He would've wanted to be safe.
That's all any of us want.

PYOTR

Good luck with your plans.

(PYOTR exits.)

Scene Nine: Salem, 1692

ETHEL

Another woman's to be hanged as a witch this afternoon.
And there are more to be accused, my mother's been telling me.

JONAS

It's utter hysteria, isn't it?
It's madness, Ethel.

ETHEL

I agree.
No one ever has much evidence and yet the woman's always convicted.

JONAS

Madness, that's what it is.

ETHEL

One certainly starts to worry that it can befall anybody.

JONAS

One certainly starts to doubt the motives of those accusing.

ETHEL

I'm glad we can talk about these things in our house.
I'm glad we're not one of those newly married couples who don't share anything.

JONAS

Me, too.

ETHEL

My mother's miserable.
Growing up, I watched her get more and more sad.

JONAS

Your mother seems fine.

ETHEL

She's tired.
And no one listens to her,
So she's stopped saying things she wants people to hear.

JONAS

Oh.

ETHEL

My father isn't like that.
He's tired too but he speaks very loud.

JONAS

He does.

ETHEL

I don't want to scream.

JONAS

I'd appreciate if you didn't.

ETHEL

I don't want to scream to be heard.

JONAS

I see.

ETHEL

I'm not foolish, Jonas.
And I'm not naive.

JONAS

I know.

ETHEL

We're not in love.
And I don't mind it.
I'd rather we be friends anyway. Confidantes.
People who can make each other less lonely.

JONAS

Yeah?

ETHEL

All I want is someone to talk with and stand by.
We don't need to pretend we're in love with each other
And that you don't like flirting with other women.

But so long as it stays this way, with you by my side,
I'd like to be a rather more casual pair of companions.
What do you say to that?

JONAS

That sounds like a good idea.

ETHEL

I'm glad we agree.

JONAS

I am, too.

ETHEL

I think that the reason why so many marriages become miserable is because people have this
outlandish expectation of love.
Or even of reasonable love to stay reasonable.

JONAS

I think you're right, Ethel.

ETHEL

It could be that we'll grow into it.
But maybe it'll just be that we develop a fond respect for each other
And I believe that would serve quite as well.
I should only like to not be alone.

JONAS

I promise you that.
'Til death do us part.

ETHEL

Amen.
Our mothers stopped by earlier, while you were out.

JONAS

What were they here for?

ETHEL

More gossiping as usual.

JONAS

(Scoffing) Then I don't need to know.

ETHEL

You'd find it interesting.

JONAS

How come?

ETHEL

They're accusing a woman of witchcraft.

JONAS

My God. Who?

ETHEL

Verity Underhill.

JONAS

What?

That can't be.

ETHEL

They're just waiting until the Magistrate issues an arrest warrant.

JONAS

I have to go tell her.

Immediately.

ETHEL

Go on, go.

Although I fear there's not much that can be done.

Scene Ten: Chechnya, 2019

*(A soft knock on the door. KESIRA moves to answer
and finds RAISA there.)*

it

KESIRA

Do you have a plan?

RAISA
Yes.

KESIRA
What is it?

RAISA
Moscow and then further on.
Stockholm, maybe. Or Tallinn.

KESIRA
Leaving?

RAISA
Just imagine it.
We could forget we were ever here.
Years from now, we could be sitting on the porch in our house by the water in Stockholm or
Tallinn,
As if no one existed but us.

KESIRA
It sounds lovely.

RAISA
It'll be amazing.

KESIRA
Shh.

RAISA
I'm sorry. I'm just excited.
I didn't know if you were going to say yes.

KESIRA
I haven't.
I -
It sounds lovely and tempting and amazing
But I don't know if I can leave my family
Especially not so soon after my father's death.

RAISA
Do you want this?

KESIRA
Yes, I do.

RAISA

You deserve a life worth living just as much as anyone.
More.
You're a good person, a truly good person, and that's rare.

KESIRA

I love you.
And I want to be with you.

RAISA

I love you and I want to be with you, too.
Nothing else has to matter.

KESIRA

What about the rest of the world?

RAISA

What about it?

KESIRA

I can't forget it.
The world never really disappears.
Saving ourselves won't stop this world from destroying other people.

RAISA

And what does staying do for them?

KESIRA

I don't know.
I don't know, it's just -
Doesn't it make me a horrible person to forget about everyone else?

RAISA

No.

KESIRA

You're so angry at the world all the time.
Is it because you never expect it to change?

RAISA

I hope it will, but I can't change it alone.
And until then, I still have to live in it.
Where did this come from?
You were so content to lose yourself here before.

KESIRA

What if we need to exist for something bigger?
Maybe our happiness can't be enough.
What if we have to sacrifice to be good people?

RAISA

There's nothing tragically heroic about giving up your life.
Once we're safe and gone, then we'll care about the rest of the world.
But just for now, we can be the most important things.

KESIRA

Okay,
Theoretically.
How do we do it?

RAISA

Getting out of here?

KESIRA

Please tell me there's a plan.

RAISA

There is.

KESIRA

Yeah?

RAISA

First, we've got to get to Moscow.
We'll go by taxi, it'll be the easiest.
Then, once we're in Moscow, we'll figure out what's next.
I've got some money saved up, we could hop a flight anywhere.

KESIRA

And this'll work?

RAISA

I promise.

KESIRA

Don't make promises you can't keep.

RAISA

This is something I intend to keep.

(RAISA and KESIRA kiss. KERAM has been eavesdropping just long enough to see this.)

KESIRA

Okay.

RAISA

Okay?

KESIRA

Yes.

RAISA

Yes!

We've gotta move fast. I'll put everything in motion.

You just have to be ready, okay?

KESIRA

Okay. Yes.

(They embrace before RAISA leaves. KERAM ducks of the way so that KESIRA can exit further into the house without KERAM being detected. After exits, KERAM enters. He is silent for a moment speaking.)

out

*KESIRA
before*

KERAM

In my house.

Not only does she break the law and risk everyone in this family

She does it in my house.

So that I can't even pretend to ignore it.

What is war to this? Strangers to family?

"A man like you could pull the trigger."

A man like you could pull the trigger.

It's my duty, not my choice.

Nothing's ever anyone's choice.

We're not gods in our own right.

We're not given the power to hold the rising sun

Or place the stars in the sky.

We're interred in other people, reliant on them.

We carry out pieces of the highest vision

And hope that someone knows what we're creating.

(KERAM exits.)

MELPOMENE

Have you ever heard the story of Lotis and Priapus?
 Lotis was a nymph and Priapus was a god of fertility.
 Late one night, Priapus secretly found Lotis's forest bed and was intent on raping her while she slept.

TERPSICHORE

Silently, he approached her but to his surprise, she awoke.
 In her haste and terror, she turned herself into a lotus tree for protection.

POLYHYMNIA

Rebirth.

TERPSICHORE

Have you ever heard the story of the lotus eaters?
 Odysseus happened upon them while on his journey home.
 The people ate the lotuses and then fell victim to their sweet taste,

POLYHYMNIA

Becoming distracted and disinterested in everything in the outside world.

MELPOMENE

Apathy.

POLYHYMNIA

Rebirth and apathy,
 One to comfort the other
 But neither to save us from anything.

MELPOMENE

This is the way the world is.
 Too ephemeral to be meaningful.

Scene Eleven: Salem, 1692

*(JONAS knocks feverishly on VERITY's door.
 answers it.)*

VERITY

VERITY

Jonas!
What in the hell are you doing here?
It's already dark out.

JONAS

I know, I know.
I got something to tell you, Verity.
It's real important.

VERITY

It wouldn't be proper to let you in so late.

JONAS

You're being accused of witchcraft.

(VERITY pushes JONAS inside and shuts the door.)

VERITY

What's this?

JONAS

I don't know much.
Ethel told me that they're waiting on an arrest warrant.

VERITY

My God in heaven.
This can't be happening.
I don't even know what to do.

JONAS

We'll run away.
For real, Verity.
You've got no reason to say no this time.

VERITY

I haven't got the money.
I couldn't survive anywhere else.

JONAS

I've got money left from the wedding.
I can get us far enough out of town.

VERITY

You best be serious about this, Jonas.

JONAS

Completely.
I love you.

VERITY

Then can I ask one more thing of you?

JONAS

Anything.

VERITY

If this... plan doesn't work, will you still protect Rachel?

JONAS

Of course.

(RACHEL enters groggily.)

RACHEL

What's going on?

JONAS

I'll go get the money and then I'll be back.

VERITY

Thank you, Jonas.

JONAS

Goodnight, Rachel.

(JONAS exits.)

RACHEL

Mama, what's going on?

What's Jonas doing here?

VERITY

Sit with me a moment.

And breathe.

Rachel, you know I love you more than anything else in the world.

RACHEL

I love you, too.

VERITY

I want you to remember that always,

No matter what.

RACHEL

Mama, what's wrong?

VERITY

God doesn't give us more than we can handle.

He doesn't ask us to lift more than we can bear.

Our earth was designed by the same craftsmen who made the stars

With the kind of beauty that can only be understood from far away.

We can see meaning in the constellations that would be impossible to see if we were standing upon Orion himself.

So perhaps Orion can see our path,

The way it tangles and winds and draws us to heaven in the end.

RACHEL

What do you mean?

VERITY

I thought I knew this world

Or at least this corner of it.

I thought I could see our lives and futures as clear as day

But every layer of this world is more murky and disguised.

So knowing it only leaves more to be known.
Truth is not a privilege nor a right, but a punishment.

RACHEL

I don't understand.

VERITY

You are my blessing, Rachel.
But you weren't given to me by God alone.

RACHEL

I still don't understand.

VERITY

Before anything else comes to pass, I need to be completely honest with you.
Do you remember when you asked about your father?

RACHEL

Yes.

VERITY

There was a man
Who I was in love with but shouldn't have been
Who was in love with me but not for quite long enough.
And then there was a child, you.
And even though I was without him,
I realized that the love I had for you was so much more pure and unconditional than the kind
I'd shared with him.
It was true in a way, what I said before.
God knew that you would be more than enough to make me happy.

RACHEL

Why didn't you tell me that from the start?

VERITY

It's a blessing to live in a world without evil.

RACHEL

Just because we can't see evil doesn't mean it doesn't exist.

VERITY

And so much evil lurks just beneath the surface, unheard and unseen.
I'm being accused of witchcraft.

RACHEL

No!

VERITY

We've got a plan, Rachel.
We're going to go away with Jonas.
You'll finally get to explore.

RACHEL

And you'll be okay?

VERITY

I truly hope so.

Scene Twelve: Chechnya, 2019

(RAISA is speaking on the phone with KESIRA.)

RAISA

Kesira?

Kesira?

Yes.

One of my friends is pulling everything together.

We'll take taxis to the airport - separately.

And then we'll meet up there.

Sound good?

Okay. Love you.

Scene Thirteen: Salem, 1692

*possessions
him*

*(JONAS looks for the money amongst other
within the house. Before too long, ETHEL hears
and enters.)*

Jonas, come to bed.

ETHEL

I can't.

JONAS

Then at least stop banging around.

ETHEL

Ethel, where's the money?

JONAS

What are you talking about?

ETHEL

I need it to get Verity out of Salem.

JONAS

And you weren't going to tell me?

ETHEL

We're running out of time.
I need to be gone as soon as possible.
Where is it?

JONAS

You're leaving too?

ETHEL

This is life and death.

JONAS

Not for you.

ETHEL

I promised her I'd -

JONAS

ETHEL

And what did you promise me?

JONAS

Ethel.

ETHEL

Get up.

Stand up and look me in the eyes and at least pretend to have the kind of dignity a husband should have when he's telling his wife he's leaving her.

JONAS

Ethel, don't.

ETHEL

It wasn't even worth a discussion?

What was I supposed to do when I woke up to find my husband gone?

Were you going to leave a note

Or was I just supposed to worry?

JONAS

Ethel.

I need to get back to Verity's.

We have to be gone before they come to arrest her.

ETHEL

Let's see.

How would I do it, if I were leaving my wife for my lover?

JONAS

This isn't a time for -

ETHEL

"I know we just got married

And we've just recently agreed upon so few very simple guidelines for our relationship."

(JONAS finds the bag of money.)

ETHEL *(continued)*

"And, dare I forget, I'm also robbing you of all of our money."

JONAS

I'm sorry.
I need to go.

ETHEL

Maybe she is a witch.

JONAS

What?

ETHEL

Could be that *she's* possessing you.
She's making you abandon me when that was truly the only thing I asked you not to do.

(JONAS and ETHEL look at each other silently for a moment. Then JONAS leaves quickly.)

a

Scene Fourteen: Chechnya, 2019

and

(KERAM is holding a gun, fiddling with it shakily turning it over. KESIRA approaches the door

*and
sight.)*

enters. KERAM quickly hides the gun out of

KERAM

Kesira!
I didn't realize you were here.

KESIRA

I just got back.

KERAM

I didn't expect you to be home yet.

KESIRA

I always get home around this time.

KERAM

Then it must be that I'm usually gone.

*(KESIRA nods and starts to exit further into the
house.)*

KERAM *(continued)*

Wait.

(KESIRA stops, turning to face him.)

KERAM *(continued)*

Sit down for a second.
We're hardly ever both home at this time.

KESIRA

Okay.
What do you want to talk about -

KERAM

You know how Papa was in the military?

KESIRA

Yes.

KERAM

And our grandfather and his father...

KESIRA

What about them?

KERAM

They had to kill people.

They had to hold a gun to someone's back and squeeze the trigger and fucking shoot.

KESIRA

I guess.

KERAM

Do you think they murdered people?

KESIRA

I don't know -

KERAM

It's not murder if it's during a war, right?

Because it's what they had to do.

They pulled the trigger but they didn't choose where the gun was aimed.

Because it was to create a better world.

So, it can't be murder then, can it?

It's killing but it's not murder.

KESIRA

What's the difference?

KERAM

Killing can be forgiven.

KESIRA

Then there's no difference for whoever dies.

KERAM

Do you remember when we were kids?

KESIRA

Which part?

KERAM

Eid. When the whole family would go walking down the streets to admire the lanterns that lined the trees.

I held your hand. I protected you.

KESIRA

I remember.

KERAM

One year, I was so distracted I let go of your hand and within minutes, you'd wandered away.

KESIRA

And you came to find me.

KERAM

A lot has changed since then.

KESIRA

It's been years.

KERAM

I'm the man of the house now.

KESIRA

Mama will need you.

KERAM

When your father dies, you don't immediately think
"I'm the man of the house now"

You're lost somewhere between yourself and the other person

Until you're reminded that death is just as practical as it is spiritual.

KESIRA

What does that mean?

KERAM

Death is something like betrayal.

KESIRA

I miss him, too.

KERAM

It's not just that.

(KESIRA moves to comfort him. KERAM recoils.)

KERAM *(continued)*

Don't touch me.

KESIRA

(Surprised) I'm sorry.

KERAM

I know what you've been doing -
Who you've been seeing.

KESIRA

What?

KERAM

It's disgusting.

KESIRA

Keram, I don't know what you're saying.

KERAM

The police want you dead.

KESIRA

Keram -

KERAM

They want me to kill you.

KESIRA

Kill or murder?

KERAM

(Holding out the gun to her) Take this.
Give me this one thing.
You can die with honor, Kesira.
There's only one way.

KESIRA

I can't believe this.
Kill me yourself if you want, I won't do it.

(JONAS runs onstage to find RACHEL, distraught.)

JONAS

Where's your mother?

RACHEL

They took her!
As soon as the sun started rising, the police were here
And they took her away.

JONAS

I can't believe this.

RACHEL

She's not a witch.
I know it, I know she's not.

JONAS

I know it, too.

RACHEL

What do we do now?

JONAS

I... don't know.
I wish I knew.

KERAM

Poison is so easy to come by.
Pour anything into something else
Or remove a label
Or just forget to look.
And you can be dead just like that.
Without ever knowing what happened.
And then it's not murder.
It's not killing.
It's just death.
People die every day.
Young and old, remembered and forgotten,
It's not altogether out of the ordinary.

(KERAM exits.)

CALLIOPE

There's something viscerally important about stories and legacies.
They're what survive of those who don't.
Just like the lives they recount, they can so easily die or become corrupted.

We're all blind in different ways,
Our perception distorted so that we can all look to the same place
And yet see different incarnations of anything.

Perhaps there's only ever been one story
And we've all been struggling to tell it.

CHIEF MAGISTRATE STOUGHTON

The Court of Oyer and Terminer is now in session.

Verity Underhill stands accused of witchcraft.

I, Lieutenant Governor William Stoughton, stand as Chief Magistrate

With Thomas Newton serving as Crown's Prosecuting Attorney.

NEWTON

Pleasure.

To begin this trial, we will hear the testimony of Miss Underhill's neighbor, Mrs. Temperance Abbott.

Mrs. Abbott, will you please present your evidence against this woman?

TEMPERANCE

I would like to preface this by reminding the court of a certain passage in the Bible.

"Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" -

CHIEF MAGISTRATE STOUGHTON

That's one of my favorites, too, Mrs. Abbott,

But we'd rather hear your testimony, if you please.

TEMPERANCE

Of course, Your Honor.

I simply mean to say that Verity Underhill is undoubtedly a witch.

Have you ever wondered why she has no husband,

Why she lives on the edge of town with hardly anything to her name except that daughter?

It's because she's a souvenir of Verity's wicked nature.

Verity was weak, easily taken in by the Devil.

Even her daughter knows it.

My girl heard Verity's daughter saying that Verity didn't use a man to create her.

So, I ask this court:

Doesn't this evidence point to Verity's having intimate relations with Satan himself?

RACHEL

That's not true!

VERITY

(Whispered) Rachel!

CHIEF MAGISTRATE STOUGHTON

Silence!

Mr. Newton?

NEWTON

Thank you, Chief Magistrate.
And thank you, Mrs. Abbott.
You may sit down now.

TEMPERANCE

Thank you, sir.

CHIEF MAGISTRATE STOUGHTON

Your next witness, Newton?

NEWTON

I'd like to call up Mrs. Dorothy Shepard.

DOROTHY

Well, I'm happy to be here, helping with the judicial process and all.

NEWTON

We appreciate your time.
Mrs. Shepard, do you believe that Verity Underhill is a witch and a menace to Salem?

DOROTHY

Yes, yes, on both counts.
She's doing harm to more than just her daughter.
I have reason to believe that she's possessing that boy, Jonas Bishop,
And trying to make him fall in love with her.
She's using her devious tricks against my daughter and her husband
And I won't stand for it.

NEWTON

Thank you, Mrs. Shepard.
Now, I'd like to call up Miss Ethel Shepard.

CHIEF MAGISTRATE STOUGHTON

Go ahead.

NEWTON

Ethel, is there truth to your mother's claim that your husband, Jonas Bishop, is being possessed by Miss Verity Underhill?

ETHEL

I can't find any other explanation for it, truly.
 I'm not one to believe in these trials or even the superstition
 But I have to say that it makes sense.
 The most sense of anything going on right now.
 My husband, Jonas, has been acting odd - erratically - lately
 And... there can be no other explanation for it.
 Verity Underhill must be a witch.

NEWTON

Thank you for your candor, Miss Shepard.

ABIGAIL

That means it's my turn now, right, Your Honor?

CHIEF MAGISTRATE STOUGHTON

Mr. Newton?

NEWTON

I - yes. Mrs. Abigail Bishop -

ABIGAIL

I'm sure I can take it from here, Attorney.
 Your Honor, late one night, I was asleep when Verity's spectral form appeared to me in a dream
 Like wisps of energy, not fully visible but clearly malevolent.
 And those wisps - Verity - they started chasing me
 And she - her voice - told me she was coming to hurt my son
 And to hurt this entire town
 And that there was no earthly force that could stop her.
 And this, right here, is exactly where the law must come in
 And where godliness must come before evil.
 Thank you, Chief Magistrate, Crown's Attorney, Jury. I'm sure you'll make the right decision.

CHIEF MAGISTRATE STOUGHTON

We will take a brief recess.

Jury, please take the time to come to your conclusion.

*(CHIEF MAGISTRATE STOUGHTON and
NEWTON exit. TEMPERANCE exit.)*

RACHEL
Mama, what's going to happen?

VERITY
I don't know, Rachel.
I wish I knew.

RACHEL
I'm scared.

VERITY
But you remember our plan, Rachel?

RACHEL
Yes.

VERITY
You have to go with Jonas even if I can't come with you.

RACHEL
I don't want to leave you, Mama.

VERITY
I'll always be with you, Rachel.
I promise.

JONAS
Ethel, how could you do this?

ETHEL
Jonas, there's nothing else to say.

JONAS
What a sick, horrible way to get revenge on me.

ETHEL

Stop assuming I do everything solely for you.
Maybe I'm worried about our town being overrun with witches.

JONAS

You're not naive.

ETHEL

I can only hope that you are.

*(CHIEF MAGISTRATE STOUGHTON
reenters.)*

CHIEF MAGISTRATE STOUGHTON

Order, order.

The Court of Oyer and Terminer is once again called to order.
I have spoken with the Grand Jury and am now prepared to announce the verdict.
For the charge of witchcraft, Verity Underhill has been found guilty
And is sentenced to death by hanging.

Scene Eighteen: Chechnya, 2019

KESIRA

I wanted to say goodbye.

KERAM

What?

KESIRA

I'm going away.
I'll leave as soon as Mama gets home.

KERAM

No, you can't...

KESIRA

I have to talk to her before I go, I don't want her to worry.

KERAM

Kesira...

KESIRA

Don't.
Not when I've made this so easy for you.

KERAM

You're supposed to be dead.

KESIRA

Not for lack of trying.

KERAM

Don't talk to me like that.

KESIRA

I know you tried to poison me.

KERAM

What you're doing is against the law.

And what you're doing isn't? KESIRA

No. It isn't. KERAM

Who was I hurting? KESIRA

It's against the law. KERAM

So that's all there is. KESIRA

The entire family.
That's who you're hurting.
You know they'll kill you someday
Your only choice is who else you'll hurt.
Can you imagine what people would say at our father's funeral?
His legacy would be destroyed.

The rest of him already is. KESIRA

I didn't choose this. KERAM

But you chose to poison me.
Because that was the only way that you could do it without looking me in the eye.

(KERAM pulls out a gun, though he is obviously uncomfortable with it.)

I have other ways. KERAM

KESIRA

You would shoot me?

KERAM

I don't want to.

KESIRA

Then don't.

KERAM

I didn't want any of this.

This is war and I'm doing what I can.

KESIRA

What kind of world is that,
Where your soul is the sacrifice for your body?
How can you live with yourself?

KERAM

This isn't my world to change.

KESIRA

But it's your place to decide who lives or dies?
Listen to me. It's your hand on the trigger, no matter who told you to put it there.
And it's you who chooses to end a life, no matter who told you that you have to.
Right now, it's just you and me.
We're the only ones in the world.

KERAM

I'll arrange a funeral.
I'll preserve your honor.

KESIRA

I'll walk out this door
And then we can both sleep at night.

*(KESIRA starts to leave. KERAM stands, his hand
the trigger of the gun.)*

on

KERAM

Don't move. Don't fucking move.

KESIRA

You're gonna shoot me?

KERAM

You wanna be more fucking careful what you say to a man with a gun?

KESIRA

This is murder, Keram.

This isn't death, this isn't killing.

This is unforgivable.

You're a heartless coward!

*(KESIRA turns to leave. Before he realizes what
doing, KERAM shoots her.)*

he's

Scene Nineteen: Salem, 1692

ETHEL

It's morbid, isn't it? These damn executions.

DOROTHY

I've never had the stomach for it.
Is Jonas gone?

ETHEL

It doesn't feel right.

DOROTHY

It's not supposed to.

ETHEL

He left earlier.

DOROTHY

I'm sorry, honey.

ETHEL

It doesn't feel right.

DOROTHY

At least that witch got what was coming to her, dear.

ETHEL

A woman is dead.
That makes it better?

DOROTHY

I don't know.

ETHEL

Sometimes I think they play God with too much certainty.

DOROTHY

That's not for us to decide.

ETHEL

What if it's not for them to decide either?

DOROTHY

Well, we all die anyway.

ETHEL

But at whose hands?

There's a difference between death and murder.

DOROTHY

Need I remind you that you testified against her, too?

And keep your voice down, we don't need any more trials.

ETHEL

I wasn't thinking when I did that.

I was just angry.

DOROTHY

Do you think we're not all angry?

Well, tell me, what does anger - even righteous anger - do to help anything?

Right and wrong don't matter when it's life or death.

So what if we're weak?

There's only weak and defiant.

The weak live in peace.

What do you suppose happens to the defiant?

Scene Twenty: Chechnya, 2019

her (RAISA sits on the bench with her bag, waiting for taxi to come.)

RAISA

Goodbye, Chechnya.
I'll miss very little of you.
It's a better world beyond here.
They don't kill people for being different in other places.
So we're going to one of those other places.
Kesira and I will meet in Moscow
And then we'll live actual lives
Like actual people.

(The TAXI DRIVER enters.)

TAXI DRIVER

Airport in Grozny?

RAISA

Yes, thank you.

TAXI DRIVER

I can take your bag.
Car's just around the corner.

RAISA

Thank you.

TAXI DRIVER

Where are you off to?

RAISA

Moscow.

TAXI DRIVER

What for?

RAISA

I'm meeting my... fiancé there.
We're going to live a whole new life.

Scene Twenty-One: Salem, 1692

hanging (VERITY stands by the tree. There is a noose
from it and a stool nearby.)

VERITY

Gallows Hill.

I suppose it's better than a prison.

Could be that everything's some sort of dichotomy between suffering and ceasing.

And we tend to choose suffering because at least it's the evil we know.

But it could be that there's some sort of beauty in letting go,

In falling.

Maybe the sensation of colliding with the earth never hits the dead.

Perhaps death is hardly an evil at all.

VERITY, (RACHEL and JONAS enter. RACHEL hugs
while JONAS stays at a respectable distance.)

RACHEL

Mama, I'll miss you.

VERITY

I love you, Rachel. So much.

RACHEL

I love you.

VERITY

Thank you for doing this, Jonas.

JONAS

Glad to.

Would you believe me if I said I loved you now?

EXECUTIONER (*from offstage*)

To Gallows Hill!

JONAS

We should be off.

VERITY

I love you, too, Jonas.

JONAS

We'll see you again soon.
Come on, Rachel.

RACHEL

See you again soon, Mama.

VERITY

See you again soon.

(RACHEL and JONAS exit.)

VERITY *(continued)*

So that's what keeps us tethered
And struggling within ropes and nooses.
(A beat.)
Goodbye, world.
What an awfully sunny day you chose to be my last.

Epilogue

(KERAM, MALIKA, RACHEL, and JONAS place lotuses at the base of the tree. When they're finished, CHORUS looks on.)

CALLIOPE

Perhaps there's only ever been one story
And we've all been struggling to tell it.

TERPSICHORE

Flowers on graves.
It says something about immortality
People suppose that nothing beautiful can wilt
So they abuse and exploit it.

CALLIOPE

Could be that time has made me melancholic
Or memory ruined me.
But I can't help seeing every bud as the dust it'll come to be.

MELPOMENE

Some people don't do that.
They don't see that.
They live, and in doing so, become distracted.

POLYHYMNIA

Is anything worth spending a life on?

MELPOMENE

They don't see the patterns of this world that exist in a never-ending circle.
They just cover death with more death.

EUTERPE

Have you ever heard the story of humanity?
It's long and winding and I don't know how to tell it.
I don't know how it ends.

URANIA

Let me sit beneath a lotus tree
 And hug the stars all into me
 And watch them again every night
 And feel them still in the morning light
 For, no matter what, they're still with me
 As I wait for you by the lotus tree

CLIO

Two - three hundred bodies down there...
 To be mourned and then forgotten and then joined.

MELPOMENE

Knowing the world doesn't make you immune.

CALLIOPE

Heeding the world may kill me first.

URANIA

I'd like to be a star
 They've got so much more time.

CLIO

We can see meaning in the constellations that would be impossible to see if we were standing upon Orion himself.

CALLIOPE

We're all blind in different ways.

EUTERPE

Have you ever heard the story of Prometheus?
 He molded mankind out of clay
 And then brought them fire.

ERATO

Have you ever heard the story of Sisyphus?
 He was forced to roll a boulder up a hill

POLYHYMNIA

Have you ever heard the story of Danaus and his daughters?

ERATO

Again and again.

POLYHYMNIA

They were forced to fill a bowl with water

ERATO, POLYHYMNIA

Again and again and again.

URANIA

I don't know if there's truly a lotus tree

If death brings us joy and sets us free

THALIA

I wonder why the gods are so concerned with repetition.

CLIO

Have you ever heard the story of the Salem Witch Trials?

EUTERPE

Less than twenty years after the start of the Salem Witch Trials, the Salem legislature realized they fucked up.

CLIO

Two hundred bodies too late.

POLYHYMNIA

What does righteous anger do?

CALLIOPE

Have you ever heard the story of the hydra?

MELPOMENE

Hercules was assigned to kill it as the second of his Twelve Labors.

ERATO

He was shocked to find that every time he cut off one of the hydra's heads

URANIA

Another grew back in its place.

CLIO

If hatred is a hydra, ignoring or mourning without taking action is like cutting off a head just to watch it grow back again.

TERPSICHORE

Hercules and his nephew, Iolaus, were determined to defeat the hydra.

EUTERPE

So the next time, Hercules cut off each head and Iolaus cauterized the wounds left so that nothing could grow there ever again.

URANIA

We watch history repeat itself.
Day-in and day-out, we witness as we make the same mistakes.

MELPOMENE

Again and again

MELPOMENE, EUTERPE, TERPSICHORE

Again and again

ALL

And again and

THALIA

Have you ever heard the story of Chechnya?
It's happening today.

EUTERPE

As we speak, people in Chechnya are being murdered and tortured and captured and disowned for being gay.

THALIA

Again and again.

CALLIOPE

This is the story of the hydra,
Or pieces of it,
It's not finished yet.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

At its core, I wrote this play because I wanted to bring attention to the ongoing gay purges happening in Chechnya, Russia. This was the first play I ever wrote. I wrote the first version that was performed when I was 17, in my senior year of high school. Through trial and error, this play taught me what words and stories can be. Through three years, three rehearsal processes, and three casts, this play has been expanded and revised and performed numerous times. It is fundamentally about storytelling and perspective. One of the things I deeply believe about humans is that we all act reasonably given our circumstances, but there are always circumstances we can't see from where we're looking. If we saw the whole picture, everything would look different; however, we only ever see the full picture after the fact. This play asks us to consider how we can use history to broaden our perspectives and practice our empathy.

This play was rehearsed and performed by Metea Valley Theatre (2018), NowHereThis Seattle (2019), and University of Washington School of Drama CabLab (2020 – performances cancelled due to COVID-19)

AUTHOR'S BIO:

Darby Sherwood (she/her) is a rising junior at the University of Washington. Her play *Two Dinosaurs Under the Sun* will be published by Smith & Kraus Publishers, Inc. in *Laughter is the Best Medicine: Forty-Five 5 Minute Plays in the Time of Coronavirus*, coming out this December. She recently participated in the New South Young Playwrights Festival at Horizon Theatre in Atlanta. Recent playwriting credits include *Two Dinosaurs Under the Sun* (NSYPF), *Cause for Celebration* (NSYPF), *Two Heads of a Hydra* (UW CabLab, NowHereThis Seattle, Metea Theatre), and a new adaptation of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* (UW School of Drama). This year, Darby has been commissioned to write a new play for the UW School of Drama, thanks to a grant from the Floyd and Delores Jones Endowed Fund for the Arts. www.darbsherwood.wixsite.com/site

The THING... on the Doorstep

By Rom Watson

WHY I LIKE IT: Drama editor JANET COLSON writes:

A stunning original adaptation of H.P. Lovecraft's short story, Rom Watson's play is tightly written, thought provoking, and as creepy as hell. The Thing in THE THING ON THE DOORSTEP is beyond description - it's too menacing, too elusive, too disturbing. Through masterful storytelling and clever use of theatrical convention (the asides and seamless jumps in time are particularly inspired), the play delivers a narrative that sucks us in, latches on, and takes over our bodies and minds. H.P. Lovecraft's tale of the downfall of a friendship and the unraveling of the psyche is both mystery and horror. With dry humor, references to Shakespeare, and the power of dark magic from the Necronomicon, reading this play is like a master course in playwriting at Miskatonic University. Beware: THE THING is still out there - you may never pay back those student loans.

*In admiration. **Five Stars.** (Spacing and font size is playwright's own.)*

Love this (excerpted) dialogue between Daniel and Asenath:

DANIEL UPTON

But how can consciousness and the body be separated?

ASENATH WAITE

The body is merely the cage our consciousness inhabits.

DANIEL UPTON

And when the cage dies, when “black chaos comes again,” our consciousness moves on?

ASENATH WAITE

Yes, exactly.

DANIEL UPTON

To . . . I won't say heaven, but . . . a higher plane of consciousness?

ASENATH WAITE

Sometimes.

DANIEL UPTON

How can you test your theories without dying?

ASENATH WAITE

One doesn't have to die to leave the body.

The Thing on the Doorstep

A one-act play

Stage adaptation of the H.P. Lovecraft story by Rom Watson

Cast

THE THING, male or female, short

DANIEL UPTON, male, 30's to 40's, 8 years older than Edward

DR. PICKMAN, male or female, 30's to 60's

DETECTIVE DRAKE, male, 30's to 50's

EDWARD DERBY, male, 20's to late 30's, 8 years younger than Daniel, taller than The Thing

ASENATH WAITE, female, 20's to late 30's

If necessary, the Thing, Dr. Pickman and Asenath Waite may be played by the same actress.

The location: Arkham Sanitarium in Arkham, Massachusetts.

The time: 1955.

An upstage door faces the audience. It is the entrance to the Upton home, and is not used for other entrances or exits. It is surrounded by black curtains that run the length of the upstage area. The stage is bare except for two chairs, a low stool, and a cot. DANIEL UPTON is asleep on the cot, stage left. The lights rise as the door opens, revealing THE THING, a humped figure, short in stature, bundled up in loose, ill-fitting clothing. Its face is covered by a piece of dark fabric or a black silk scarf, kept in place by a hat or cap. It wears an overcoat that is much too long for it. The gender of this figure is indiscernible. It approaches Daniel, who stirs but does not awaken. Blackout. The Thing exits. The lights rise and Daniel awakens from his nightmare.

DANIEL UPTON

Aahhh!

(He sits up, catches his breath and calms down.)

Always the same dream.

(He looks around.)

Edward. You must have hated this room as much as I do.

(Calling out.)

Dr. Pickman?

There is no answer. He takes a folded piece of yellow legal paper from his pocket, unfolds it and begins to read. DR. PICKMAN enters, followed by DETECTIVE DRAKE. Drake carries a notebook and a pen. Daniel folds the paper and returns it to his pocket.

DR. PICKMAN

You're up. Good.

DANIEL UPTON

Yes. And very glad to be awake.

DR. PICKMAN

Bad dreams again?

DANIEL UPTON

“The dream’s here still: even when I wake, it is without me, as within me; not imagined, felt.”

DETECTIVE DRAKE

You can’t be that crazy, if you’re quoting Shakespeare.

DR. PICKMAN

This is Detective Drake. He needs to question you. Do you feel up to that? Daniel?

DANIEL UPTON

What? Sorry; yes.

DR. PICKMAN

Alright. Let me know if you get too agitated. I can give you something to relax you.
(To Drake.)
I’ll be down the hall if he gets . . .if you need anything.

DR. PICKMAN exits.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

How are they treating you?

DANIEL UPTON

I have no complaints about the staff. Dr. Pickman is being very kind.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

How are you feeling?

Drake sits.

DANIEL UPTON

I have terrible nightmares and when I wake up I’m in hell. Other than that, just fine.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

What I meant was, are you ready to talk about what happened?

DANIEL UPTON

It’s the most horrible thing - why would I want to talk about it?

DETECTIVE DRAKE

You know; get it off your chest. Make you feel better.

DANIEL UPTON

That would not make me feel better.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Yeah, I know what you mean. Women feel better after they talk about whatever is troubling them. Men don't.

DANIEL UPTON

So why ask?

DETECTIVE DRAKE

I have to. I need to know what happened; why you put six bullets through the head of your best friend.

DANIEL UPTON

I did not murder Edward.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Care to explain that?

Daniel turns away from Drake.

DETECTIVE DRAKE (CONT'D)

You'd just like to forget about it, huh?

DANIEL UPTON

I'm never going to forget it.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Then you might as well talk about it.

DANIEL UPTON

You're very logical, aren't you.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

It's one of the reasons I'm good at my job.

DANIEL UPTON

What I have to say isn't going to sound logical. Or believable.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Why don't you tell me what you know.

(He opens his notebook.)

When did you and Edward Derby first meet?

DANIEL UPTON

When I was sixteen. He was eight.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Your best friend was eight years younger?

DANIEL UPTON

We had a lot in common.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Such as?

DANIEL UPTON

We shared an interest in the occult.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

(Taking notes.)
Hmmm.

DANIEL UPTON

Horror films, comic books . . .we had great discussions. He was very smart.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

How smart.

DANIEL UPTON

He went to college at fifteen and graduated in three years.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Okay, I'm impressed. Which college?

DANIEL UPTON

Miskatonic University. His parents insisted he live at home, so he had no other choice.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

I graduated from Miskatonic. He could have done a lot worse.

DANIEL UPTON

I didn't mean to imply –

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Forget it. Why did his parents make him live at home? His age?

DANIEL UPTON

They were always overprotective. When Edward was a child he had severe asthma; had to stay in bed for days at a time. He outgrew the asthma, but his parents never stopped coddling him.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Are they still living?

DANIEL UPTON

No.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

What did he do for a living?

DANIEL UPTON

He never needed to earn money.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Must be nice. What did he study at college?

DANIEL UPTON

English and French literature, to please his parents. For himself he studied the occult. Particularly ancient magic lore. The Necronomicon has a large section devoted to that topic.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Neck - row - ...?

DANIEL UPTON

Necronomicon. Miskatonic's library has one of the few copies in existence.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

(Taking notes.)

Did you study that as well?

DANIEL UPTON

Edward and I shared a fascination for the occult, but I studied architecture at Harvard.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Oooh, fancy.

DANIEL UPTON

When I graduated I worked for an architect in Boston. I was learning all I could from him, and hoped he would make me a partner. But then I met my wife. We married and, I decided I'd rather raise a family here.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

How often did you see Edward, once you married?

DANIEL UPTON

He came to dinner almost every night. For about two years.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Wasn't that an imposition?

DANIEL UPTON

No. We considered him part of the family. We named our son Edward, after him.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

What happened after two years?

DANIEL UPTON

He met Asenath. (He rises.) She later became his wife.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

What kind of name is Asenath?

DANIEL UPTON

Biblical.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Aahh. And how did he meet her?

DANIEL UPTON

He occasionally gave a lecture at Miskatonic, on mediaeval metaphysics, and after one of these lectures a student approached him. Asenath Waite.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Any relation to Ephraim Waite?

DANIEL UPTON

His daughter.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Ooh. Poor kid.

DANIEL UPTON

You knew Ephraim?

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Not personally, but we got a lot of complaints about him down at the station. "Weirdo Waite." People were scared of him.

DANIEL UPTON

He was scary. I remember seeing him at the town library when I was a child. He was always engrossed in ancient books I wasn't allowed to read.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

And that wife of his, who never spoke and always wore a veil? Creepy.

Drake rises.

DANIEL UPTON

It gets creepier. He died insane. Locked in an attic.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

When?

DANIEL UPTON

A few weeks after his daughter entered college. They say she inherited his gift for magic. And for raising thunderstorms.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Raising thunderstorms?

DANIEL UPTON

Besides being a student of magic, there were rumors that Ephraim could create a storm on a cloudless day.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Do you believe Asenath could do that as well?

DANIEL UPTON

I have no proof of her controlling the weather, but I do believe she could control people.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

How?

DANIEL UPTON

Hypnosis. She could gaze at someone and cause them to feel as though they had exchanged personalities with her. They felt they were in Asenath's body staring at their own body from across the room.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Did this happen to you?

DANIEL UPTON

No.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Then how do you know this?

DANIEL UPTON

It happened to my wife.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

And you believe her?

DANIEL UPTON

Absolutely. If you knew her, you'd believe her too.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

I wish my wife were like that. Did you like Asenath?

DANIEL UPTON

I'm not sure anyone "liked" Asenath; except Edward.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Why is that?

DANIEL UPTON

Most people found her bizarre. She seemed to inspire fear and awe, but not affection. Even animals disliked her.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

What did she see in Edward?

DANIEL UPTON

Besides their shared interest in magic and the occult? Edward had a strong mind, but a weak will. Which is just the way she liked it.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

When did you first meet Asenath?

DANIEL UPTON

Edward brought her over to the house. My wife had gone out, and I wasn't expecting anyone, but I could tell from the series of knocks that it was Edward.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Series of knocks?

DANIEL UPTON

It was our signal.

There is a knock at the door: knock, knock, knock, pause . . .knock, knock. Daniel rises and crosses to the door. Drake crosses downstage to the low stool and sits facing upstage. Daniel opens the door and EDWARD DERBY enters, followed by ASENATH WAITE.

EDWARD DERBY

Daniel, I want you to meet Asenath Waite.

DANIEL UPTON

Hello.

ASENATH WAITE

Edward's told me all about you, so we can dispense with pleasantries.

EDWARD DERBY

That's her way; she's rather forward.

DANIEL UPTON

It makes a nice change.

EDWARD DERBY

I'm glad you think so.

ASENATH WAITE

Some people find me off-putting, so I hope for Edward's sake you'll look past my prickly exterior.

DANIEL UPTON

Of course.

EDWARD DERBY

Daniel's the best.

ASENATH WAITE

How fortunate for you.

DANIEL UPTON

Can I get you something? A drink?

ASENATH WAITE

No, thank you.

EDWARD DERBY

I'm fine.

Asenath gazes at Edward.

DANIEL UPTON

I'm glad Edward has found someone who looks at him the way you do.

ASENATH WAITE

Was I staring?

DANIEL UPTON

Yes, but in a good way.

ASENATH WAITE

Edward is quite the catch.

EDWARD DERBY

I'm the one who's lucky.

DANIEL UPTON

Edward told me you met at one of his lectures.

ASENATH WAITE

Yes. I was impressed by his knowledge of ancient magic. (She sits.) And when I spoke with him after the lecture, I was even more impressed.

Daniel sits. Edward stands next to Asenath's chair.

EDWARD DERBY

(Embarrassed but pleased.)

Asenath is a student of magic and metaphysics.

DANIEL UPTON

All of it? Or a particular portion?

ASENATH WAITE

Consciousness. The way it localizes, and the way it travels.

DANIEL UPTON

Travels?

EDWARD DERBY

Her theories on astral projection are very interesting.

ASENATH WAITE

It's not projection.

DANIEL UPTON

Then what is it?

ASENATH WAITE

Consciousness is independent of the physical body.

DANIEL UPTON

"Our bodies are our gardens to which our wills are gardeners."

EDWARD DERBY

Daniel sometimes quotes Shakespeare.

ASENATH WAITE

I recognized the quote.

DANIEL UPTON

But how can consciousness and the body be separated?

ASENATH WAITE

The body is merely the cage our consciousness inhabits.

DANIEL UPTON

And when the cage dies, when "black chaos comes again," our consciousness moves on?

ASENATH WAITE

Yes, exactly.

DANIEL UPTON

To . . . I won't say heaven, but . . . a higher plane of consciousness?

ASENATH WAITE

Sometimes.

DANIEL UPTON

How can you test your theories without dying?

ASENATH WAITE

One doesn't have to die to leave the body.

DANIEL UPTON

How does one accomplish that?

ASENATH WAITE

Practice. And of course a lot of study.

EDWARD DERBY

Sometimes I think she loves libraries more than she loves me.

ASENATH WAITE

Libraries, no. It's the knowledge inside them I crave.

DANIEL UPTON

Most people identify with their bodies so strongly, they can't conceive of their consciousness as being a separate entity.

ASENATH WAITE

Most people are ignorant.

EDWARD DERBY

Or they've never lost a loved one. When you lose a parent, you feel their presence, and it becomes very clear that their body was only a vessel. Isn't that what you meant, Asenath?

Asenath rises.

ASENATH WAITE

I wish I had been born a man. Life is very unfair to women.

DANIEL UPTON

Yes, it certainly can be.

ASENATH WAITE

When a man displays power, or a forceful opinion, he's hailed as strong, or a leader of men. If a woman displays any power at all she's declared a witch.

DANIEL UPTON

Fortunately that's changing.

ASENATH WAITE

Not fast enough.

EDWARD DERBY

Well, I'm glad you were born a woman.

Asenath tries to smile. The lights change and Edward and Asenath exit.

DANIEL UPTON

They were married a month later. I was his best man.

Drake crosses to Daniel.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

You didn't try to talk him out of it?

DANIEL UPTON

No.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Why not?

DANIEL UPTON

There's an old saying that's actually true: "infatuation thrives on opposition."

DETECTIVE DRAKE

I see your point; it's better to let a man find out the truth about a woman for himself.

DANIEL UPTON

Are you referring to your own marriage?

DETECTIVE DRAKE

(Ignoring his question.)

Do you think she married him for his money?

DANIEL UPTON

Oh no. She had her own money. Plus, she inherited the old Crowninshield place from her father. They fixed it up and moved in.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

She didn't move in with Edward?

DANIEL UPTON

She wanted to be near the college, and its library, and her circle of friends.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

So he moved in with her.

DANIEL UPTON

Edward had a strong mind—

DETECTIVE DRAKE

But a weak will.

DANIEL UPTON

After they married I didn't see him as much. And when I did, he was secretive about his occult studies, which we used to discuss for hours.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

When someone marries, their friends tend to fade into the background.

DANIEL UPTON

I missed Edward, but not Asenath.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

(Taking notes.)

Uh-huh.

DANIEL UPTON

After about a year, Edward began to be a very different person.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Sadder?

DANIEL UPTON

More thoughtful. More adult.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Marriage can do that to a man.

DANIEL UPTON

That was my explanation. At first. But his facial expressions changed, and I wasn't the only one who noticed. Plus, he was seen around town driving a car.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

So?

DANIEL UPTON

He never learned how to drive.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Oh come on.

DANIEL UPTON

I told you his parents were overprotective. They were afraid he'd have an asthma attack behind the wheel. But he was seen driving, and people would say he was starting to look like his wife.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

That happens to married couples.

DANIEL UPTON

After they've been married fifty or sixty years. Not one. I remember I stopped by to visit them, but just as I got there I saw Edward get in the car speed away.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

So he did learn to drive.

DANIEL UPTON

That's one theory. I rang the bell to speak to Asenath, but their servant told me she was out as well.

Asenath enters.

DANIEL UPTON

As I was leaving, I glanced at the window and I saw Asenath in their den.
(Daniel and Asenath enact the following encounter while Daniel speaks.)
But her face . . . I'd never seen it like that before. It was sad, and defeated; hopeless. Then she saw me and turned away, but in that moment our eyes met, I could swear that it was Edward's eyes looking at me.

Asenath exits as Daniel crosses back to Drake.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Is that when the trouble started?

DANIEL UPTON

It wasn't until they'd been married about three years that Edward began to complain.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

A whole three years.

DANIEL UPTON

That's also when Edward began to talk about . . . his fears.

There is a knock at the door: knock, knock, knock, pause . . .knock, knock. Daniel crosses and opens the door as Detective Drake crosses downstage to the low stool and sits facing upstage. EDWARD enters.

EDWARD DERBY

She's going too far, Dan. I'm losing my identity.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

I know that feeling.

Daniel gives Drake a look and he shuts up.

DANIEL UPTON

(To Edward.)

What are you talking about?

EDWARD DERBY

I want us to move back into my house, but Asenath won't hear of it.

DANIEL UPTON

Why do you want to move back into your house?

EDWARD DERBY

Her house is creepy.

DANIEL UPTON

Edward, so is yours.

EDWARD DERBY

But the spirit of her father permeates that house.

DANIEL UPTON

I'm not surprised; he lived there for decades.

EDWARD DERBY

Not only that, but it's getting harder for me to come visit you. Or anyone. She has a power of some kind . . .

DANIEL UPTON

Mesmerism?

EDWARD DERBY

Telepathic. She can stop my actions with words, or a glance. I can't explain it. Her study of the occult has made her strong. It's a very potent sort of magic. More will than magic.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

(Aside to Daniel.)
Did you believe it?

DANIEL UPTON

(Aside to Drake.)
No, but I knew he believed it.
(To Edward.)
You managed to make it here today.

EDWARD DERBY

She's away in her own body. At Chesuncook.

DANIEL UPTON

(Not sure he heard him correctly.)
What's that?

EDWARD DERBY

An old forest in Maine. I refused to go; it's too creepy even for me.

DANIEL UPTON

That's saying a lot.

EDWARD DERBY

They have these secret gatherings out in the woods. They perform rituals, and have out-of-body experiences that take them to other worlds, and different dimensions.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

(Aside to Daniel.)
Is this when he started to lose his mind?

DANIEL UPTON

(Aside to Drake.)
No. Edward always had that type of imagination. Over-active, people used to call it.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

(Aside to Daniel.)
I call it freaky.

DANIEL UPTON

(Aside to Drake.)

I just thought he'd been reading too much science fiction.

Daniel turns back to Edward.

EDWARD DERBY

I have to move out of that house.

DANIEL UPTON

Do you think Ephraim is haunting it?

EDWARD DERBY

I think Ephraim is haunting Asenath.

The lights change and EDWARD exits.

DANIEL UPTON

A week later I got a call from Arkham Sanitarium. Edward had been admitted and wanted to see me.

DR. PICKMAN enters.

DR. PICKMAN

Edward Derby stumbled out of the woods near Chesuncook, raving about . . .

(Checking notes.)

. . .Shoggoths, black magic, and Kamog the Hooded One. The police were kind enough to drive him here, and I've been observing him.

DANIEL UPTON

What's your diagnosis?

DR. PICKMAN

I haven't made one yet. He saw something in that forest that terrified him, but I don't know if it was imagined, or real.

DANIEL UPTON

Why would you think it might be real?

DR. PICKMAN

Because I grew up near Chesuncook forest. Come with me; I'll take you to Edward.

The lights change as they cross to another part of the stage and Edward enters.

EDWARD DERBY

Dan, thank god you're here.

DR. PICKMAN

Call me if you need any help.

Dr. Pickman exits.

DANIEL UPTON

Are you alright?

EDWARD DERBY

I was at the pit of the shoggoths! Down six thousand steps. I would never let her take me there, and then suddenly I found myself there, in front of an altar with hundreds of howling things shouting "Kamog!"

DANIEL UPTON

Kamog?

EDWARD DERBY

It was Ephraim's name in the coven. Asenath took my body to that unholy pit, where the black realm begins. I saw the shoggoth; it changed shape. I'll kill her if she ever sends me there again.

DANIEL UPTON

Edward, when you feel well enough to leave the sanitarium, you'll come stay with us. I will help you get a divorce.

EDWARD DERBY

Daniel, you don't understand. She's been getting a hold of me, taking me over. One day, she's not going to let go. Right now she can't hold on for long periods of time, but she's making herself stronger. She takes my body to obscure places for those occult rites. She leaves me in her body and locks me up in our den. When she loses control of me, I'm stuck in the middle of nowhere. I wish to God I'd learned how to drive.
Edward begins to pace.

DANIEL UPTON

Why would Asenath –

EDWARD DERBY

The most bizarre thing, is now that I've inhabited her body, I've come to realize she's not one hundred percent human.

DANIEL UPTON

What?

EDWARD DERBY

A few weeks ago . . . I tried to kill myself. I was too embarrassed to tell you because I didn't want you know how weak I am.

DANIEL UPTON

Edward, . . .

EDWARD DERBY

She had taken my body and gone off to some black magic ritual, and I was so depressed I filled the bathtub with water and lay down in it to drown myself. I waited for death, but it never came. I lay underwater for half an hour, staring up at the surface.

DANIEL UPTON

That's impossible. You must have been hallucinating.

EDWARD DERBY

Rather than dying, her body seemed to thrive. Her DNA must be part amphibian.

DANIEL UPTON

You're saying your wife is a salamander?

EDWARD DERBY

No. But some salamanders have both lungs and gills.

DANIEL UPTON

Yes, they do. They're called sirens. But--

EDWARD DERBY

Which leads me to believe she has some amphibian DNA. Besides, her family comes from Innsmouth. You always hear rumors about people from Innsmouth.

DANIEL UPTON

Not that they're salamanders. Edward, if you ever want to get out of this place, don't share this with anyone.

EDWARD DERBY

I'm not sure I want to get out. This might be the safest place for me.

DANIEL UPTON

Edward, why would Asenath want to do this to you?

EDWARD DERBY

Because she wants to be in a man's body. Permanently.

DANIEL UPTON

Why?

EDWARD DERBY

Dan, did you ever meet her father?

DANIEL UPTON

No, but I saw him a number a times. Years ago, at the main library in town, before you ever met Asenath. He had a long, ugly grey beard.

EDWARD DERBY

That's him. He glared at me once when I was a kid and I never forgot it. Now she glares at me that way. Dan, he found some sort of formula or spell in the Necronomicon. He took over her body, and now he means to take over mine. He's going to go from body to body, on and on, so he'll never die.

DANIEL UPTON

Edward, I think you need to rest now.

EDWARD DERBY

Well I think you need to hear this. Don't patronize me. I don't need a rest.

DANIEL UPTON

Okay.

EDWARD DERBY

Asenath told me her father went insane and she had to lock him away in the attic, where he died shortly thereafter. But Dan, I think Ephraim took over Asenath's body and locked her away in the attic, in his body, which was old and about to die. Why else would her handwriting suddenly cha--

(Edward's face changes and his posture shifts. He is suddenly calm. He slowly turns his head to Daniel and glares at him with a sinister air. His voice is now firmer and more decisive.)

I hope you'll excuse my ravings, Upton. I've been through a lot of stress lately. Please forget any crazy things I may have said about my wife. I shall rest now.

Edward lies down and closes his eyes. The lights fade on him and he exits.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Interesting. Multiple personalities?

DANIEL UPTON

That was my first thought. But it turned out to be something worse.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Go on.

DANIEL UPTON

Mid-September, after Edward was released, I heard rumors that people were hearing sobbing in the old Crowninshield house, sometimes female, sometime male. One evening in mid-October, I heard the familiar three-and-two knock at the front door.

There is a knock at the door: knock, knock, knock, pause . . . knock, knock. Daniel rises and opens the door. Edward enters, looking furtively back over his shoulder.

DANIEL UPTON

Edward! Come in. It's good to see you. You seem like your old self again.

EDWARD DERBY

I hate to admit it, but my time in the sanitarium actually did me some good.

DANIEL UPTON

I'm relieved to hear it.

EDWARD DERBY

Dan, Asenath is gone. We had a long talk last night, and I made her promise to stop controlling me. I have certain occult defenses I never told you about, and she, had to give in. She got very angry. Packed up and left for New York. Walked right out.

DANIEL UPTON

I think it's for the best.

EDWARD DERBY

I'm hoping she'll go west, and get a divorce. Anyway, I made her promise to keep away and leave me alone.

DANIEL UPTON

Maybe now you'll have some peace of mind.

EDWARD DERBY

I paid off those awful servants of hers this morning, and they're gone as well. I'm going to move back into the old Derby house. She's never going to take possession of my body again.

DANIEL UPTON

Uh . . .good.

EDWARD DERBY

That time you visited me in the sanitarium, when I was explaining it to you; she got me, she took over. Did you see the change?

DANIEL UPTON

I saw it.

EDWARD DERBY

I was telling you about her powers, and then in a flash I was back at the house, locked up in our den, in her body.

Edward becomes agitated. Perhaps he begins to pace, or crosses away.

EDWARD DERBY (CONT'D)

I had to save myself -- I had to, Dan! She'd have got me forever if she'd carried out that sacrifice she was planning for the Hallowmass. Old Ephraim would be in my body forever. Some people know things about the universe that no one should know.

Daniel crosses to the Detective.

DANIEL UPTON

I got him to calm down, and then we discussed arrangements for his moving back into the Derby family mansion. It needed some repairs.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

When did he move?

DANIEL UPTON

He didn't. The repairs were completed by December but he never left Crowninshield. I paid him a visit there at Christmas, and . . .he broke down.

Daniel crosses back to Edward.

EDWARD DERBY

Dan, it's happening again!

DANIEL UPTON

What is?

EDWARD DERBY

Asenath . . . Ephraim . . . it's trying to take control of me again. I feel it tugging at me, clawing at my brain, trying to get in. It's like a flame that won't go out - nothing can stop it, not distance, not magic, not death.

DANIEL UPTON

Is there anything I can do to help?

EDWARD DERBY

There is. Daniel, I need you to be my guardian.

DANIEL UPTON

Okay.

EDWARD DERBY

I'm having seizures every night, and if anything happens to me, I need to know you'll act in my best interests.

DANIEL UPTON

Of course. I'll have my lawyer draw up a Power of Attorney form.

Daniel crosses to Drake as Edward crosses to the cot and lies down.

DANIEL UPTON

I spoke to his doctor.

Dr. Pickman enters.

DR. PICKMAN

(To Daniel, not seeing Drake.)

His seizures are getting worse. I've called in two specialists.

DANIEL UPTON

What can I do?

DR. PICKMAN

I think he needs constant supervision.

DANIEL UPTON

Is he a danger to others?

DR. PICKMAN

No. But I can't guarantee he won't be a danger to himself.

Dr. Pickman exits.

DANIEL UPTON

I put him back into the sanitarium.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Did you visit him?

DANIEL UPTON

Twice a week. And every visit he would shriek and rage . . .

EDWARD DERBY

(From the cot.)

I had to do it - I had to - it'll get me! Dan, save me, save me!

DANIEL UPTON

One morning in late January, Dr. Pickman called to say that Edward's sanity had returned. I was so relieved, I went to see him immediately.

Daniel rushes to Edward.

DANIEL UPTON

Edward! They said you were back to normal.

Edward rises, extends his hand with a polite smile.

EDWARD DERBY

How nice to see you, Upton.

Daniel instinctively backs away.

DANIEL UPTON

(To Drake.)

He had changed again. It wasn't Edward.

Edward exits.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Who was he?

DANIEL UPTON

I don't know. But whoever he was, he wasn't "insane" any more. The seizures had stopped, the shrieking had stopped, there was nothing I could do. He was scheduled for release the next day.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Then what happened?

DANIEL UPTON

That night I got a phone call. I couldn't hear who was on the line, but I was worried about Edward, so I thought it might be him. I said, "Hello? . . .Hello? . . .Edward, is that you?" The only response was a liquid sound, a sort of . . .gurgle. I said, "I can't hear you. Hang up and try again."

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Phone records show that the call came from Crowninshield.

DANIEL UPTON

Later I realized that it was Edward on the phone, trying to speak to me.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

I inspected Crowninshield the next day.

DANIEL UPTON

What did you find?

DETECTIVE DRAKE

The cellar was a mess. Dirt, tracked everywhere. A closet had been rifled through. There was an odd substance on the phone; and also on a yellow legal pad and some pens. What was really weird was the stench. It was horrible.

DANIEL UPTON

What do you think happened?

DETECTIVE DRAKE

The medical examiner is still trying to explain what we found on your doorstep. He's got a lot of theories, but I suspect the truth is a lot more incredible.

DANIEL UPTON

And terrible.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Daniel, I need to hear what you think happened.

DANIEL UPTON

Why would you believe me? Why would anyone believe me?

DETECTIVE DRAKE

The evidence.

DANIEL UPTON

What evidence?

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Things like fingerprints on a candlestick. And time of death. And dental records.

DANIEL UPTON

Dental records?

DETECTIVE DRAKE

The medical examiner was able to positively identify the remains.

DANIEL UPTON

(Brief pause.)

I . . . I now believe everything Edward told me. There are horrors beyond life's edge, things we don't even suspect. If we pry too much, we draw them to us. Those horrors engulfed Edward, and they're reaching out for me.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

Is that why you shot him?

DANIEL UPTON

That thing I shot wasn't Edward any more. Has his body been cremated?

DETECTIVE DRAKE

They're keeping the body for another autopsy; by a different doctor who's driving up from New York.

DANIEL UPTON

Edward must be cremated.

(He crosses to Drake and implores him.)

Promise me he will be cremated!

DETECTIVE DRAKE

I-- I promise.

DANIEL UPTON

(Very relieved.)

Thank you.

(Perhaps he extends his hand and the Detective shakes it. Daniel crosses to the cot.)

I will not be driven out of my body. I will not change souls with anyone. That hell would be worse than this one.

He lies on the cot facing away from Drake.

DETECTIVE DRAKE

What happened that night? After the phone call?

Brief pause, then Daniel turns to face him. He decides to tell him. He rises, takes the folded piece of yellow legal paper from his pocket, and hands it to Drake. The lights fade on Drake. There is a knock at the door: knock, knock, knock, pause . . . knock, knock. Daniel crosses to the door and opens it, revealing The Thing. Daniel slowly backs away, covering his nose and mouth. The Thing extends a gloved hand, which holds a letter impaled on a pencil or pen, hastily written on a piece of yellow legal paper and folded in thirds. Daniel takes the letter. He closes the door and crosses downstage, unfolding the letter. He reads it aloud. [If possible, it might be preferable to have the actor playing Edward pre-record the letter and play this recording while Daniel reads the letter silently. Or have Edward read the letter on stage in a pin-spot of light.]

DANIEL UPTON

(Reading.)

“Dan, go to the sanitarium and kill it. It isn’t Edward Derby anymore. It’s Asenath and she’s been dead for three months. I lied when I said she packed up and left for New York. I killed her. We were alone and I was in my right body. I saw my opportunity, and I didn’t see any other choice. I grabbed a candlestick and smashed her head in. I buried her in the basement, in the dank ground under some old boxes. I was fine for a while, but then I felt the tugging at my brain. She was trying to make me change bodies with her. A soul like hers --or Ephraim’s, lingers after death as long as the body lasts. And her amphibian DNA allowed her body to last longer in that moist soil. One day it happened --I found myself in the dark, in Asenath’s corpse down in the cellar. And I knew she must be in my body at the sanitarium. Permanently. Sane and ready for release, a menace to the world. I was desperate and managed to claw my way out. This body is too far gone for speech, but I can still write. Hope you can read my scrawl. I’ll manage somehow to get this letter to you. Kill that thing in the sanitarium. Make sure it’s cremated. Unless it’s burned to ash, it will live on, going from body to body. Dan, you’ve been a great friend. I’m sorry to drag you into this. I’ll be at peace soon; this body won’t hold together much longer. Kill that thing. And stay away from black magic. It’s the devil’s business. Yours, Ed.”

Daniel hurries upstage to the door and opens it, covering his nose and mouth to shield himself from the stench. The overcoat and other clothes are still there, but the body inside them has collapsed and is disintegrating. Slime oozes from one of the sleeves. Daniel watches in horror. The lights fade to black. End of play.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

*In January of 2016, I joined Offending Shadows Theatre Company. At their first meeting, one of the artistic directors mentioned she loved H.P. Lovecraft. Never having read his work, I decided to read all the Lovecraft short stories, to search for something to adapt for the stage. I chose *The Thing on the Doorstep*. Not only*

because I liked it better than most of his other work, but more importantly because I felt it could be adapted easily and produced cheaply.

Lovecraft wrote the story as an inner monologue. Transferring the narrative from inside a character's head onto the stage of a theatre required a number of changes. I added a detective to the story, and a doctor, and gave dialogue to the character of Asenath, who in the story never spoke. I also confined the play to a single location, so it would require no set changes. I tried to capture the atmosphere Lovecraft created with his words, and included phrases from his story when appropriate.

As I was writing it, I found out Offending Shadows was looking for a one-act play to pair with an hour-long one-man show entitled Roughly Hamlet. I added a few quotes from Shakespeare as a tie-in to the one-man show, finished my adaptation, and submitted it. It was chosen, and the two were produced under the umbrella title Adapted, which played in Los Angeles for six performances in October of 2016. Subsequently, there was a student production at Northland Pioneer College in northeastern AZ on May 7, 2019.

--Rom Watson, July 2020

AUTHOR'S BIO: Rom Watson is the author of the full-length plays LYING BENEATH THE SURFACE, IMAGE AND LIKENESS, THE NORMA CONQUESTS, PICKLE JUICE and PINOCCHIO IN THE BRONX. 12 of Rom's 27 short plays have been produced, including THREE SYLLABLES OF SHAME, MEAD AND STU GO TO SEAWORLD, CELEBRITY DEATH WATCH and MR. CUDDLES. Rom's full-length plays have had readings at The Road Theatre, Moving Arts, The MET Theatre, Alliance Repertory Company, Unknown Theatre, Celebration Theatre, Fierce Backbone and Neo Ensemble Theatre. Rom is a member of The Alliance of Los Angeles Playwrights and The Dramatists Guild of America.

Barren Landscape

By Steve Gold

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor Peter J. Stavros writes...*

The opening line of Barren Landscape, "I think I ... I think I have a problem," sets the tone for this heartbreaking yet sweet (and oftentimes witty) story of a daughter tending to her mother who is suffering from the early stages of Alzheimer's. Depicting two episodes in the characters' life together, the playwright is able to expose the audience to the depth of their relationship. The time jump is particularly effective in establishing the relentless nature of this disease, with which both mother and daughter (and perhaps the daughter more so) struggle to come to terms. This is brilliantly revealed in the following exchange (with Susan the daughter, and Lucinda the mother):

Susan: It's just that sometimes I forget ...

Lucinda: Forget what?

Susan: Forget how you are.

Lucinda: I forget too.

Susan: Not the way I do.

With pacing that is deliberate, and dialogue that is minimal (the characters rarely speak more than one sentence at a time to each other), Barren Landscape shows the toll that long-term illness can have on not only the patient, but also the caretaker, as the daughter rather poignantly comments to her mother that she is in solitary confinement with no escape. Yet the final stage direction, after the mother is able to remember her daughter's name and asks for a pencil and paper to write it down, ends the play on a hopeful note. (Spacing and font size are playwright's own. Eds.)

Barren Landscape

Cast of Characters

Susan Thaxter.....Unidentified

Lucinda Thaxter.....Susan's mother

Time: The present

Place: New York City

Act I

(THE DOWN STAGE CENTER PORTION OF THE STAGE IS LIT, THE REST IS DARK. THE SETTING IS A MANHATTAN TOWN HOUSE, REPRESENTED BY A STAGE RIGHT WOODEN CHAIR. TWO ARISTOCRATIC-LOOKING WOMEN ENTER UP STAGE RIGHT: ONE OF THE WOMEN IS SIXTYISH IN AGE, THE OTHER IN HER FORTIES. THE YOUNGER WOMAN LEADS THE OLDER ONE TO THE WOODEN CHAIR AND SITS HER. THE YOUNGER WOMAN IS NAMED SUSAN THAXTER, THE OLDER WOMAN IS HER MOTHER LUCINDA. BOTH ARE DRESSED CASUALLY AND STYLISHLY IN AN UPPER-CLASS SORT OF WAY. THE OLDER WOMAN SEEMS BEFUDDLED AND PUZZLED BY HER SURROUNDINGS, WITH A PERMANENT, FAR-AWAY EXPRESSION.

A SUBTLE SENSE OF DISPAIR PUNCTUATES THE ENTIRE SCENE, EMPHASIZED BY DIM LIGHTING)

Susan

Mother?

(PAUSE)

Mother?

Huh?	Lucinda
It's me, Mother.	Susan
...You?	Lucinda
How... are you?	Lucinda
I'm fine.	Susan
I'm glad.	Lucinda
Are you hungry?	Susan
What?	Lucinda
Are you <i>hungry</i> ?	Susan
I...I don't think so.	Lucinda
Don't you know for sure?	Susan
Do I...have to eat?	Lucinda
You don't have to do anything.	Susan
Promise?	Lucinda
Have I ever forced you to do anything?	Susan

...I don't remember.

Lucinda

Well, I haven't.

Susan

That's nice.

Lucinda

Do you think you're in prison?

Susan

Have I ever been there?

Lucinda

Certainly not.

Susan

Have you?

Lucinda

I'm in prison now.

Susan
(WISTFUL)

Are you?

Lucinda

Yes.

Susan

Escape.

Lucinda

...There's no escape for me..

Susan
(DEJECTED)

That's a pity.

Lucinda

I'm not complaining.

Susan

Lucinda

You should—you'll feel better

Susan

...I've no right to complain.

Lucinda

Why not?

Susan

Because you're my mother.

Lucinda

Go ahead. Complain—I don't mind.

Susan

People like us never complain...it's bad form.

Lucinda

If *that's* how you feel, the good-bye.

(STANDS, TAKES SEVERAL STEPS TOWARD THE UP STAGE RIGHT EXIT UNTIL
SUSAN STOPS HER)

Susan

Where are you going?

Lucinda

Home.

Susan

You *are* home.

Lucinda

I...I am?

Susan

Yes.

Lucinda

I *knew* it looked familiar.

(SUSAN LEADS LUCINDA BACK TO THE CHAIR, SITS HER)

Susan

I should hope so.

Lucinda

(GLANCES ABOUT THE PLACE)

It looks very nice.

Susan

Yes, it is.

Lucinda

I like the furniture.

Susan

You picked it out.

Lucinda
(AMAZED)

I did?

Susan

Every piece.

Lucinda

I have good taste.

Susan

Indeed.

Lucinda

How long have I lived here?

Susan
(CROSSES TO STAGE LEFT)

Fifty-odd years.

Lucinda

That's a long time.

Susan

...I grew up in this house.

Lucinda

Were you happy?

Susan

...I was never happier.

Lucinda

That's good.

Susan
I should never have left. ...I should've stayed a child...like Peter Pan.

Lucinda
Why did you leave?

Susan
(IRRITATED)
I got *married*, Mother.

(PAUSE)
Lucinda
Are you mad at me?

Susan
I'm not mad.

Lucinda
You sound mad.

Susan
I'm not. ...It's just that sometimes I forget how you are.

Lucinda
I forget too.

Susan
Not the way I do.

Lucinda
(MEEKLY)
You're not mad at me?

Susan
No.

(PAUSE)
Lucinda
(PROUDLY BLURTING OUT HER WORDS)
I used to be a good tennis player.

(PAUSE)

Susan
(INTRIGUED)

What made you say that?

Lucinda

It came to me...all of a sudden.

Susan
(CURIOUS)

You remember playing tennis?

Lucinda

Yes.

Susan

But you don't recognize this house.

Lucinda

Not right now.

(SHY CHUCKLE)

...Isn't that funny?

(PAUSE)

Susan
(TO STAGE CENTER)

Do you ever remember me as a girl?

Lucinda

Sometimes.

Susan

Now?

Lucinda

...Bit and pieces.

Susan

What do you remember?

Lucinda

Are you interested?

Susan

Yes.

Lucinda

I remember nursing you.

(PAUSE)

Susan

(QUIETLY TAKEN ABACK)

You do?

Lucinda

(SLOWLY, DREAMILY)

..It brought me great pleasure...the way your mouth fastened on to my breast...a tingling feeling.
...I never felt so happy...so alive...I can still see it...see it in my mind...I wish it could last
forever...isn't that the damnedest thing?

(PAUSE)

Susan

It took until now for you to tell me this?

Lucinda

I never did before?

Susan

Never.

Lucinda

I should have...

(HER VOICE TRAILING OFF)

...How foolish of me.

Susan

...That's alright, Mother.

Lucinda

(WORRIED)

You're...not mad at me now?

Susan

Why do you keep asking me?

Lucinda

Because I didn't tell you until now.

Susan

...I could never be mad at you.

Lucinda
(FEEBLY)

Promise?

Susan

You're all I have, Mother.

(FORLORN)

There's no one left anymore.

(LONG PAUSE)

Lucinda
(FRUSTRATED)

(STANDS; MOVES TO STAGE CENTER)

I know I've lived a life. I'm sure I have....But I can't remember...sometimes I remember parts of it, but mostly...mostly it's a dark room.

Susan
(QUIETLY)

...Getting darker.

Lucinda

There's something the matter with me, isn't there?

Susan

There is.

Lucinda
(MOURNFUL)

I'm terribly sorry.

Susan

For what?

Lucinda

For being a burden.

Susan

I never said that.

Lucinda

I feel like I am.

Susan

You could never be a burden to me. You're all I have.

Lucinda

Don't you have children?

(PAUSE)

Susan
(TIGHT-JAWED)

I had a son...Spencer.

Lucinda

Where is he?

(PAUSE)

Susan

...He died...six months after Father.

(PAUSE)

Lucinda

It's terrible to lose a child.

Susan
(DISTANTLY)

So they say.

(PAUSE)

Lucinda

Are you lonely?

Susan
(A FEW STEPS DOWN STAGE)

...Yes.

Lucinda

...Is it because of me?

Susan

No.

Lucinda

...I'm lonely.

Susan
(QUIETLY MOVED)

...I wish I...I could do something. Maybe this new doctor can help us.

Lucinda

What new doctor?

Susan

The one we saw yesterday.

Lucinda

Was he nice?

Susan

I suppose so—what difference does it make?

Lucinda

Maybe I'm not sick after all.

Susan

You just said there's something the matter with you.

Lucinda

But maybe I'm wrong.

Susan

Mother, what's my name?

Lucinda

Your name?

Susan

Yes.

Lucinda

Let me see. It's...it's...I don't...quite....

Susan

It's Susan.

Lucinda

Susan.

Susan

You picked it out yourself.

Lucinda
Did I?

Susan
Yes.

Lucinda
(ASHEN FACE)
I must...I must write it down...could you bring me a pencil and paper?

(LONG PAUSE)

(SUSAN SLOWLY CROSSES TO LUCINDA AT STAGE CENTER, HUGS HER, THEN
GENTLY KISSES HER ON THE CHEEK)

(SLOW FADE TO BLACK)

End

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *With this play, I wanted to show how the loss of memory, of self-awareness, is as much of a death as anything else. My main influence for this particular play is Samuel Becket.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Steve Gold is a New York City-based playwright and the author of the full-length plays *Women and Guns* and *Smash the State*. For several years he reviewed plays for John Chatteron's *Off Off Broadway Review* (OOBR).

EDITOR'S BIO: Peter J. Stavros is a writer in Louisville, Kentucky. "Room 310," and "Ten Something in the Morning" from Volume 2 of *Fleas on the Dog*, are from his forthcoming chapbook, *Three in the Morning and You Don't Smoke Anymore*, which will be released this May by Etchings Press (<http://etchings.uindy.edu>). Peter is also a playwright who has had plays produced across the country. More can be found at www.peterjstavros.com and follow on Twitter @PeterJStavros. His play **Three Sides** was published in Issue 6.

Our Daily Wheat

By Stephen Cedars

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET COLSON writes...*

*Sometimes when I read a play that's so eerily familiar, I think that it's not a play at all, but a biopic, or a diary entry from my own childhood, perhaps, and then I get PTSD and look into therapy, and then – well, you know how it goes. That's exactly how I felt after reading *Our Daily Wheat*, and that's why I recommend it so highly. Stephen Cedars' biting short play (and I mean biting) is a fable that makes me want to use a word like *gestalt* that nobody understands (and if you do, kudos!). *Our Daily Wheat*, however, is about something we all understand. It's about lies. Specifically, the lies we tell our children. Because we love them so much. The child in the play isn't a child *per se* (nor does he have to be played by one as the playwright lets us know), but is symbolic of anyone whom we believe needs to be protected from the truth at all costs. And if you don't recognize yourself in any part of this frightening tale, you're way beyond therapy. I mean, no, you're absolutely fine.*

WIFE

Nothing! Oh, what a bloody sad moment it will be, when he comes down to breakfast any moment, to find his world has changed! If he does not have his cereal, then he will have to ask why...and even if we lie, there will begin his awakening, there will he begin to learn...that we are all of us doomed...that we are poor...that, for people like us, there is no hope...

Pause. HUSBAND

There must be a way. Surely –

(Spacing and font size are playwright's own.) Eds.

“Our Daily Wheat”
by Stephen Cedars

CHARACTERS

HUSBAND, a kind and simple peasant.

WIFE, a kind and simple peasant.

BOY, a naive child. *Does not need to be played by an actual child.*

PLACE

A peasant's hovel.

TIME

Not so long ago as we'd like to believe...

A simple dining room in a modest hut. At center stage a wooden kitchen table.

The WIFE paces the stage. The HUSBAND enters.

HUSBAND

Dear wife, you seem troubled.

WIFE

(stops, wrings her hands)

No shit, husband. For weeks now you have not worked at all - which would be fine, dandy and bearable if we had between us even a farthing in reserve. But us being already so stricken with this putrid lot of poverty, I am indeed quite troubled.

HUSBAND

(angry)

Ah! I can no longer stomach this resentment! Times are hard and there are many of us who want for labor! I'm no lazy man, no matter how you'd have it. The world heaps enough hatred my way, I do not need more of it here at home!

WIFE

Oh, dear husband, please, I would never mean to diminish you, I know that fault is not yours...but our quarrels are of no consequence, as what troubles me concerns our dear, sweet boy...

HUSBAND

(suddenly alarmed)

Our son? Is he harmed?

WIFE

No. Not yet.

(Pause.)

For weeks, we have made due.

HUSBAND

You are well-equipped for that.

WIFE

My life has made me so...for weeks, we have made due...eaten what we could find...stolen wilted lettuce when once we had full salads, drank from wells when we used to tap springs, and where in better days we dined on mutton stew, now it is the red fattened flesh of house rats that fills our stomachs...

HUSBAND

Yes, it's so...but dear, I must insist, we must continue to bear these disappointments lightly...our boy knows us to be happy and bright people, always have we sacrificed our self-pity so he would know us to be glad with life...and he is, you know, a creature so dependent on his usual routine -

WIFE

You think I don't know that?! Dear Christ, husband, it is that which troubles me so...

(Slight pause.)

Through these particularly hard times, we have made due, made compromises on almost all fronts, but we have not yet had to sacrifice his daily breakfast of wheat cereal...how he loves it...his daily wheat cereal...and moreover, how he *knows* it...even at our very worst, when we could not find wheat, we kept him lovingly duped, with flakes of corn or dried fruit...

HUSBAND

And now?

WIFE

Nothing! Oh, what a bloody sad moment it will be, when he comes down to breakfast any moment, to find his world has changed! If he does not have his cereal, then he will have to ask why...and even if we lie, there will begin his awakening, there will he begin to learn...that we are all of us doomed...that we are poor...that, for people like us, there is no hope...

Pause.

HUSBAND

There must be a way. Surely -

WIFE

There is no way. I have thought it through. It is this routine that keeps him blind to life's cruelty...were he used to eating bread in the morning, I could substitute it with mud...were he used to eating oatmeal, I could substitute with pig's crap...but our beloved son knows and loves his wheat cereal, and adequate substitute for that we simply do not have...

HUSBAND

(realizing it)

He is lost.

WIFE

(sobbing)

I know it.

Pause.

HUSBAND

(suddenly)

Unless...I hear him coming...stall him, wife, I will soon return...

WIFE

But...

HUSBAND

He may in his life know momentary displeasure or pain, but the true callousness of our fate, he will *never* see. What kind of father would I be if I led my son to such terror before his time? We will maintain what his innocence, we will make certain all is as he believes it to be, we will give him what he knows.

He rushes off.

WIFE

There's no way!

BOY

(enters, wiping his eyes from sleep)

No way for what, mama?

WIFE

Oh, my darling!

She smiles through her tears, a strange contradiction.

BOY

Are you sad, mama?

WIFE

No, my darling! Only so happy with the sunrise! What a wonderful day!

BOY

Ay, as always! Though last night was a tough one -

WIFE

(concerned)

Tough?

BOY

Yes. This new mutton of late has me every night plagued with the thin dirties, and I am forced to spend half the night on the crapper.

WIFE

(brightening)

Oh! That means it's good protein, dear!

BOY

Oh.

HUSBAND

(entering with a bowl)

Who is hungry for cereal?

BOY

I am!

HUSBAND

Come and get it!

He puts the bowl on the table and the boy rushes and sits. He is about to start eating.

HUSBAND

First, the milk!

WIFE

Wait!

HUSBAND

Huh?

BOY

What?

WIFE

I'll get it.

(Whispers to husband.)

We have no milk...I have been using water...

HUSBAND

(impressed)

You marvelous woman!

She gets a decanter of water, brings it over, pours it.

BOY

This milk is quite thin, yes?

WIFE

All the better to battle those late night craps!

BOY

Yay!

She looks in the bowl. She gasps. When she finishes, she rushes and embraces the husband.

WIFE

You marvelous man!

HUSBAND

(a whisper)

God might deprive us of fertile soil, but even the beggars have stony ground.

WIFE

And our boy has his cereal...we have saved him yet another day from the ugly truth of life.

He takes a bite. A HEAVY CRUNCH, as he bites down onto stones.

BOY

(his mouth filled with stones)

Ow!

WIFE

It's good for you, sweetheart! A new strain of wheat! It is good protein! The best protein!

BOY

(after swallowing)

Will this too keep me on the crapper in the daytime?

HUSBAND
If that is God's will.

BOY
OK.

He takes another bite. Another loud CRUNCH.

BOY
(his mouth filled with stones)
Ow!

WIFE
Oh, we have done our duty...

BOY
(after swallowing)
It hurts to eat, mommy.

HUSBAND
The good things are hard, son. This, you will learn, but for now, you must enjoy your cereal.

BOY
(after a third bite)
Ahh! I think I broke a tooth!

WIFE
(concerned)
Oh no, that's...

HUSBAND
Don't sweat it...

WIFE
(a sudden inspiration)
Why, that only means they're your baby teeth!

HUSBAND
Yes! Of course! That's why it hurts to eat this morning! Because you're growing up!

BOY
I am? Wow! I've been so patient, but now I can open my eyes as an adult and I'll know what the world is truly like...

WIFE
Yes, yes, but do eat. You'll be late for school.

BOY

Late? Oh no!

He starts eating fast. As he chomps on the stones, the crunching gets louder, more violent. BLOOD trickles from his mouth, being torn up as he chews. His parents stand upstage, watching, relieved.

BOY

(as he eats, through stones in his mouth)

Ow...ow! Oh, I'm bleeding...how wonderful, Mama! I bleed the blood of being an adult! Bye, bye baby teeth! Ow!

WIFE

(whispering to husband)

We have saved him for yet another day, husband...for today, at least, he will remain happy...

HUSBAND

He has had his cereal, as every morning...he has had his daily wheat...but tomorrow...

WIFE

...is another day. We'll face it if it comes. But for now, let us enjoy that one truly happy thing we know.

They watch him bleeding as he eats, a big smile on his face.

END OF PLAY.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

OUR DAILY WHEAT is about illusion and poverty and parenthood and that quality of human resilience that seems to me worth both mocking and celebrating. In its social intent and anachronism, it reminds me of Brecht's lehrstücke and in its brutal climax calls to mind the grotesquerie of the grand guignol. But as most of the good ones do, it came quick and pretty much complete, so I'm happy to acknowledge those potential influences while feeling fairly certain that it's my own piece of wild fun.

The play has been produced twice, by Over Our Head Players in Racine, WI, and by the Renaissance Guild in San Antonio, TX.

PLAYWRIGHT BIO:

Stephen Cedars is a writer, director and teacher originally from south Louisiana. His plays have been produced or developed both in New York City and throughout the U.S. and Canada, and published by Original Works and Words of Choice. As a producer and director in NYC, he has created work for stages in three boroughs,

including several years of community programming. Amongst his awards are the Theater Masters Visionary Playwright Award, the Gloria Ann Barnell Peter Award, a Fellowship with the Target Margin Institute, a Residency with America-in-Play, and the John Golden Playwriting Prize. He earned his MFA in Dramatic Writing from NYU, which he attended as a Rita and Burton Goldberg Fellow, and is currently pursuing a PhD in Theatre and Performance Studies with the CUNY Graduate Center.

A Room Of One's Own

By Seth Berner

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama editor JANET COLSON writes...*

Inspired by Virginia Woolf's remarkable essay-slash-novel of the same name, Seth Berner's play, A Room of One's Own, speaks to women's rights as human rights, pitting expression against oppression. This is a terrific story about Victorian women denied any outlet for artistic creativity or personal freedom. It's about power dynamics. And it's about 'the man,' who in this case is epitomized by the indulged master of the house, Thomas, who hasn't yet exceeded his deceased father's legacy of abuse (although we give him points for trying). Then there's his betrodden mother, the lady of the house, a bully in her own right, who once wrote beautiful poetry in a fine "feminine hand," and is now relegated to staring at empty walls for entertainment. Yes, she's both a reflection of the man and a victim of the society that created him. At its essence this play is about empathy. While our hearts readily go out to the servants who have little chance for a better life, we have to feel for the plight of this cold and officious character of privilege, the "Mother" (she has no other name), a Victorian Karen, who reminds us that behind every meme there's a human with a backstory.

BEATRICE

Maybe she doesn't want to write any more.

ALINDA

I don't believe that. I think she was made to stop.

BEATRICE

Why do you think that?

ALINDA

Because no one who can write poetry would ever just stop to stare at walls.

(Spacing and font size are playwright's own) Eds.

A Room Of One's Own

A play in one act.

CAST

BEATRICE powerless	A female servant, 20s. She knows she is being mistreated but is to do anything about it.
ALINDA	A female servant, a bit older than Beatrice. She knows she is being mistreated but is powerless to do anything about it.
THOMAS	Lord Scarborough, Lord of the manor. In his 20s. Arrogant bully
MOTHER by her	Thomas' Mother. A free spirit when young, beaten into submission husband and son.

SCENE

The mansion of an English nobleman

TIME

Early to mid- 19th century.

SETTING: The Lord's bedchamber mid-morning.

AT RISE THOMAS is lying in bed, fully dressed; MOTHER is in a chair.

MOTHER

The party was quite pleasant.

THOMAS

Tell me.

MOTHER

The Duke and the Worcesters and the Willinghams were there with their daughter. The girl was out for the first time and behaved quite badly.

THOMAS

What did she do?

MOTHER

When Lord Bilton entered she stared at him, then turned back to Evelyn Chambers.

THOMAS

John will probably be rather pleased.

MOTHER

Pleased, Thomas? With that behavior?

THOMAS

He's wanted out of that marriage since it was announced. And rightly so.

MOTHER

The match has been made.

THOMAS

Then it will need to be unmade. When a horse is of bad stock you don't make the purchase and then hope to fit it to the saddle - you make damn sure it does not get into your stable in the first place.

MOTHER

Language, Thomas. If the Willinghams refuse?

THOMAS

Then the Thurstons could demand a trial by peers.

MOTHER

Do you think the Thurstons would want to go to trial? They, who have never been touched by a breath of scandal would be willing to air their dirty laundry in public?

THOMAS

A slight to Lord Bilton is a serious offense. The Thurstons would go through trial and more to show Lord Bilton and the rest of the world that they know what is proper. And after the trial they will be respected for upholding propriety.

MOTHER

But to have to stand in court . . .

THOMAS

Father allowed no improprieties and was not afraid to stand for what he believed in. You would not have had him avoid court when it was necessary, would you?

MOTHER

No.

THOMAS

And if he went to court over trifles like domestic difficulties you don't think he would have publicly decried outrage.

MOTHER

Your father was not afraid of court.

THOMAS

A family that will not stand in public when necessary and proclaim its spotlessness probably can not. Good citizens must proclaim crimes in public. Not knowing one's station in life is such a crime.

MOTHER

You know, they were saying things about the girl even before this. That she wrote poetry.

THOMAS

Don't make me laugh, Mother, my side is still sore. Wrote poetry. I never. Of what use has a girl writing poetry?

MOTHER

I do not know that for a fact, Thomas, it is just what was said.

THOMAS

But if true, Mother, it is preposterous. Girls are not artists. Creation is beyond them. It is enough for girls to support those who can create. Play the piano. A girl attempting poetry is no laughing matter. It means that she has forgotten her place in the world. Well. What else happened? No more adventures, I hope? Who else did you see?

MOTHER

It was well attended. You were missed.

THOMAS

I would have been there if I could.

MOTHER

That rib has barely mended. Everyone knows of the accident and forgave your absence. There were some jokes. James Worthy asked if that horse had finished riding you yet, if it had you jumping fences.

THOMAS

I've been riding for years and get thrown on my own course by a horse I know likes to buck. I should have been more careful. Soon as I am well I am getting back on that nag and turning her into a lap dog.

MOTHER

A lap horse?

THOMAS

Now there's a sight. I wonder if I would hurt any more with that horse on me than with me on that horse. Ow, don't make me laugh.

MOTHER

I am being cruel, and to an invalid.

THOMAS

Not for long. I am not staying in this bed a minute longer than necessary.

MOTHER

I am sure you won't.

THOMAS

So what of Miss Chambers?

MOTHER

I am so happy for you, Thomas.

THOMAS

Happier than for John Thurston?

MOTHER

Miss Chambers is a model of decorum. She behaved herself perfectly in every way. She will make you a fine wife.

THOMAS

I am glad to hear it. Is she attractive?

MOTHER

She has poise. She holds her head up and her back straight and dances elegantly.

THOMAS

But not much to look at?

MOTHER

She is not slim like Sylvan Willingham. She is, well, she has attributes that do not show in a portrait.

THOMAS

Then I will be pleased to add her portrait to our hallway. And if she is no great beauty I will not have to worry about her while I am away.

MOTHER

Thomas!

THOMAS

Good looking girls are not to be trusted. I do not mean you, of course, Mother, but girls today are not raised as you were.

MOTHER

No, it is not like it was, that is true.

THOMAS

So I will not need to keep an eye on the gardener. There are just a few simple rules I demand of people, and right at the top is that a wife be faithful to her husband. But back to the party. Are you recovered from the excitement now?

MOTHER

Goodness, I am still a little tired. I am not as young as I used to be. I may take a short nap.

THOMAS

Why Mother, why not sleep all day if you want to? You know that I can run this place even in bed.

MOTHER

Yes, yes, but who would run the house? Who would see that the dusting is done and meals prepared? You could do that?

THOMAS

No Mother, the women's work I leave to you.

MOTHER

And so a short nap will be all I can afford.

THOMAS

Do you have so much to do?

MOTHER

Just like your father. He was a gentleman among gentlemen but no idea in his head about what went into what he did not do himself. Nor should he.

THOMAS

Like father, like son.

MOTHER

Like father, like son. What I would do without you I do not know.

THOMAS

Leave the sweat to me.

MOTHER

And the poetry?

THOMAS

I am working in something now, Mother, a poem comparing life to clouds. It will be an elevated piece when finished.

MOTHER

Clouds are elevated, Thomas.

THOMAS

No joking, Mother, this is serious. You could not understand. You must believe me that my writing is important. Every man can ride and dance but I will be the one who is known for his culture as well as his manners.

MOTHER

I wish I could appreciate it the way you do. As a girl I learned to recite scripture and read works for my moral improvement but I could never see the beauty in what was before me.

THOMAS

Women don't. You are not meant to.

MOTHER

No, I am not.

THOMAS

I will try it out on others I trust to know good work when they hear it.

MOTHER

I will share in your glory.

THOMAS

And I will keep you here no longer.

MOTHER

Do you need anything? Are you hungry?

THOMAS

We have servants to ask those questions, Mother. Please send Beatrice in to do her job, leaving you free to do yours.

MOTHER

I will check in with you at dinner.

MOTHER exits.

[from offstage] Beatrice, the Master needs you.

BEATRICE enters.

BEATRICE

Yes Sir?

THOMAS

Bring me some cold meat and a glass of stout.

BEATRICE

Yes Sir.

THOMAS

I have not dismissed you yet. I want you to hear something. Fetch that folder on the mantle.

BEATRICE

Yes Sir.

THOMAS

Now listen. "Oh clouds. So high you float. So white. Bringing together what you need to give you substance. So alone and yet so bold. Bolder than the birds that must change course to avoid you." Are you listening?

BEATRICE

Yes, Sir.

THOMAS

What do you think? You have not heard enough. Here is more. "Must change course to avoid you. For you are master of the sky, you are master of your fate, none can make you . . ." [interrupted]

MOTHER

[from offstage] Thomas?

THOMAS

What is it Mother? I'm busy.

MOTHER

[still offstage] Oh forgive me, it can wait.

THOMAS

How can anyone work with interruptions? Did Plato?

BEATRICE

Who is Plato, Sir? A landowner?

THOMAS

No he was not a landowner! He was a Greek philosopher. One of the greatest philosophers of

history.

BEATRICE

I'm sorry, Sir.

THOMAS

Do you think he had to put up with interruptions? He never could have written The Republic if he had been interrupted all the time. No one can work without peace and quiet.

BEATRICE

No, Sir.

THOMAS

Of course not. Well what did you think?

BEATRICE

I have no ear, Sir.

THOMAS

What did I expect asking a female? A servant no less. How could you understand true poetry? But you do understand a servant's place, don't you. Come here. Lie down here. Goddamnit, I told you yesterday to be careful of that rib. I think you've broken it again. You can't do anything right, can you. Can't even handle yourself in bed. I should just fire you. But I'm going to need you, I think. I hear my future wife looks like a dog and there are some things a dog can't do, at least to me. Goddamn you. Help me downstairs. I will have to say that I injured myself trying to ride. And if you value your life you will not say anything.

BEATRICE

No Sir.

THOMAS

And stop that bawling. Someone with as little sense of beauty as you could not possibly have anything to cry about. Now let's go.

THOMAS and BEATRICE exit. ALINDA enters and begins straightening the room. BEATRICE enters.

BEATRICE

I can't take much more Alinda.

ALINDA

I don't see how you've stood it this long.

BEATRICE

What else can I do? If I complain of him who will believe me? I can't leave, he would not give me a reference, so I could not get a job. What else is there for me?

ALINDA

I don't know. I only know that if he touched me I would kill him.

BEATRICE

You don't know how lucky you are.

ALINDA

He knows how plain I am. Funny to think of one's self as being lucky for being unattractive.

BEATRICE

You're not unattractive, Alinda!

ALINDA

I'm death warmed over next to you. And that's what he sees. If I'm a dog to him, much the better for me.

BEATRICE

But doesn't it bother you to be always reminded of it?

ALINDA

Of course it does. But what can I do? At least I'm not pawed. I could have a master who doesn't mind dogs. Our master's father was not so picky.

BEATRICE

Were you here when the older Scarborough was still alive?

ALINDA

No, but I heard plenty. The man was a tyrant. He was often before the magistrate for beating the staff. It is said that once he even killed a girl who refused him something. But what did he care if he got fined? He bragged of paying for his rights.

BEATRICE

His rights?

ALINDA

What he did in his household was his right. And he stopped others from doing what he did not want.

BEATRICE

What do you mean?

ALINDA

The young Miss Fitzwater was reportedly a free spirit before she married him. Saucy ways that offended nobility, discourtesies at balls that nearly cost her the marriage. But her family was one of the wealthiest and the Scarboroughs calculated that they could take some disgrace as long as it

came with so large a dowry. After that the man made sure that she did nothing to embarrass him. Ruled with an iron fist. Really crushed her spirit.

BEATRICE

Our mistress?

ALINDA

Yes.

BEATRICE

She seems all right to me. She certainly is not afraid to work me. Or you.

ALINDA

She knows how to command. But she doesn't know how to live.

BEATRICE

What are you saying?

ALINDA

She doesn't know what to do with herself.

BEATRICE

What should she do? She has no work.

ALINDA

She just sits in her room all day.

BEATRICE

And why not? So would I if I could.

ALINDA

She stares at the walls. I've often gone in to clean and found her sitting in the dark, looking at nothing. If she hasn't heard me come in I can watch for minutes and she doesn't move. So I clear my throat to let her know I'm there and she jerks awake and watches me carefully for a bit and then nods off again.

BEATRICE

So?

ALINDA

She used to put her time to good use.

BEATRICE

How?

ALINDA

Wait here, I'll be right back.

ALINDA exits and BEATRICE resumes cleaning the room. ALINDA enters carrying an old notebook.

ALINDA

Look at this.

BEATRICE

It's an old copy book.

ALINDA

Yes.

BEATRICE

Whose?

ALINDA

Hers.

BEATRICE

Our mistress's?

ALINDA

Yes. Well, it was hers. At least I think it was.

BEATRICE

How do you know?

ALINDA

It's a feminine hand. Whose else could it be in this house?

BEATRICE

It's from this house?

ALINDA

The attic. A dusty pile of books and papers in the back. Not looked at in years, I'd say. I found it one day when hunting for a chair. And being nosy I picked one of the books up.

BEATRICE

What does it say?

ALINDA

Read it.

BEATRICE

I do not read well. What is it?

ALINDA

Our mistress's own poetry I think.

BEATRICE

Why do you say that?

ALINDA

Look at it. She wasn't practicing her hand, the writing is accomplished right from the start. No servant writes so well. And she wasn't copying out of a book or why would there be all these cross-outs and different versions of the same thing?

BEATRICE

She might have been writing for someone else.

ALINDA

Who? It couldn't have been from before her marriage - Scarborough would never have allowed this into his house. If after, who could it have been? Scarborough was no artist. She saw no one who could have given her this. Except herself.

BEATRICE

All right, so it's hers. So?

ALINDA

She used to write. Now she sits in her room staring.

BEATRICE

Maybe she doesn't want to write any more.

ALINDA

I don't believe that. I think she was made to stop.

BEATRICE

Why do you think that?

ALINDA

Because no one who can write poetry would ever just stop to stare at walls.

BEATRICE

OK. So do you think her husband stopped her?

ALINDA

You've heard our master's views on women and poetry.

BEATRICE

And he compares himself with his father.

ALINDA

Though as I think on it I'm not so sure. Her husband might not have known.

BEATRICE

No?

ALINDA

These books are still here. If he had known he would have destroyed them.

BEATRICE

She stopped because she couldn't risk his finding out. She wrote poetry as Miss Fitzwater and continued as Lady Scarborough. Until she'd heard his ravings enough and realized that it would be more than her life was worth if he caught her. She stopped on her own to save herself.

ALINDA

Yes.

BEATRICE

You say there are more of these? This isn't the only one?

ALINDA

There are nine.

BEATRICE

She hid them in the attic because if he had found them he would have killed her or thrown her out.

ALINDA

I think she's forgotten about them. She hasn't gone to the attic in years and shows no signs of having something up there that she values.

BEATRICE

Maybe she doesn't value them.

ALINDA

She saved them. Knowing that she could have been plagued if they were found.

BEATRICE

Have you asked her about them?

ALINDA

Never!

BEATRICE

Why not?

ALINDA

I'm not supposed to know, I came across them without permission. Would you tell her?

BEATRICE

Not if I wanted my job.

ALINDA

Exactly. So when I'm sent up there or think I can get away for a few minutes I read on the sly. It's taken years but I've read most of the books and they are all like this. They should be seen.

BEATRICE

Our master likes poetry.

ALINDA

But not from women.

BEATRICE

No. If he learned that his own mother wrote poetry while married to his father he would feel that his name had been besmirched.

ALINDA

He would torment her to the grave. She'd get the torture she feared from her husband. Which I don't care so much about, though things could only get worse around here with her gone. She does keep Lord Thomas somewhat civilized. What I'm scared of is that he would destroy the books.

BEATRICE

But you need not tell him who wrote them, he need not know it was his mother.

ALINDA

He would figure it out just as I did. Who else could have written them?

BEATRICE

So he would know. But he professes a love of beauty. He could claim the writing as his own. That would cheat our mistress but save the books

ALINDA

He has less artistic nature than a dog, he wouldn't want to claim these.

BEATRICE

So what will you do?

ALINDA

Continue sneaking trips to the attic. Dreaming of getting them out, if I could hide them.

BEATRICE

You seem angry.

ALINDA

Yes, at what has happened to the writer.

BEATRICE

Why feel sorry for Lady Scarborough? You said yourself you wouldn't mind seeing her in her grave.

ALINDA

Not her personally. What she went through.

BEATRICE

What has she gone through? No one beats her or threatens her job as she does us.

ALINDA

But she has been beaten. First by old Scarborough and now by her son.

BEATRICE

She has never been beaten in her life. I see no reason to feel sorry for her in the least.

ALINDA

But can't you imagine what it would be like to lose your voice?

BEATRICE

There's nothing wrong with her voice.

ALINDA

Poetry was her voice. And it was scared out of her, so that all she can do is sit staring at the walls.

BEATRICE

But she still runs the house. I don't feel sorry for someone who orders me about.

ALINDA

Then you're not a artist.

BEATRICE

And you are?

ALINDA

I think so. If I could be.

BEATRICE

Why do you think that?

ALINDA

I hear a voice.

BEATRICE

So do I. Two of them. Master and Mistress Scarborough ordering me about.

ALINDA

No, I mean inside of me. A voice telling me to let loose. To come alive.

BEATRICE

Come alive?

ALINDA

Sometimes I think that the night grows still so that I can take my turn. That the carts stop their rumbling and the smithies their pounding and the laborers their shouting as an invitation to me. It's like they are offering me silence and solitude until morning so that I can do what I like. No distractions, no interruptions. And then I have my choice. I could take up a pen and write. Or perhaps let forth a song. Or not words but a dance that I throw my whole body into. Something I make that is mine, that comes from me, that is me. And I take off my apron and I let down my hair and I raise my eyes from the ground where I have obediently kept them all day long and I breathe and I wait to begin.

BEATRICE

Oh, Alinda!

ALINDA

But I no sooner begin to stretch my toes than I hear a creak on the stairs or a hand on the doorknob and a voice commands me this or that and I know that I shall never be alive until I can stop that knob from turning, that command from coming. I shall never have my soul until I have a room of my own.

BEATRICE

You are a poet!

ALINDA

No, I'm a servant. But I would like to be a poet. I would like the chance to try.

BEATRICE

Will you ever, do you think?

ALINDA

I have to tell myself so or I'll turn into Mistress Scarborough with no servants to boss around.

BEATRICE

Could you appeal to Mistress Scarborough? If it really is as you say maybe she would help you.

ALINDA

I've thought of that but I don't know. I'm afraid she's been down so long that she no longer remembers what it is like. And if her son found out, which he surely would, hell would break out.

BEATRICE

You would be heard if you danced or sang in your room, but you could write.

ALINDA

How, when I'm called every fifteen minutes, even at night? And it would be the end of me if my writings were found.

BEATRICE

You could keep them in the attic.

ALINDA

Yes I could, couldn't I. I could get paper from the study and hide it in the attic. I could.

BEATRICE

You will, won't you? Say you will?

ALINDA

We'll see. If I can make sure it's safe. Maybe someday if Mistress Scarborough's books survive mine will too.

BEATRICE

Oh, that would be too exciting. Can you disguise your hand so that it does not look like a woman's?

ALINDA

My hand is bad enough that it looks only like a child's. Maybe I'll be seen as a child prodigy.

BEATRICE

No, you should put a note in saying who you are and what you've done. Let the world know about you. Maybe in some future day it will be all right for women to write.

ALINDA

And servants?

BEATRICE

Why not? Are you not human? Have you not a soul?

ALINDA

Depends on who you ask. Scarborough says not so much as a dog.

BEATRICE

But Scarborough will be dead then.

ALINDA

And so will I. Who knows who will be here instead?

MOTHER

[*calling from offstage*] Alinda, Beatrice, where are you?

BEATRICE

Here, Madam.

MOTHER enters.

MOTHER

There has been an accident. Your master was found on the ground by the stables. I have had him put in the study downstairs, he is in too much pain to be brought up here. Are you finished in this room?

BEATRICE

Almost Madam.

MOTHER

Good. I shall need one of you to see that he has hot compresses. How much longer will you be?

BEATRICE

I can finish alone, Madam.

MOTHER

[*inspecting room, sees the book on the bed*] What is that?

ALINDA

What, Madam?

MOTHER

That book.

BEATRICE

Something of Master Scarborough's, Madam.

THOMAS

[*offstage*] Mother!!

ALINDA

Madam, the Master is calling.

MOTHER

He can wait for once. [*looking at both*] I think I know how he got hurt this time and he can wait. Don't you agree?

BEATRICE

If you say so, Madam.

MOTHER

[*looking just at Beatrice*] You know what I mean, don't you.

BEATRICE

I'm not sure Madam.

MOTHER

Thomas is to be married in a month. He is marrying a proper girl from a fine family who expects their daughter will be marrying a proper gentleman.

BEATRICE

Yes, Madam.

MOTHER

A proper gentleman. That means that there are things that he can not do. He should not do them at all but he can not do them before the wedding. You know what I am talking about, don't you.

BEATRICE

Yes, Madam.

THOMAS

[*offstage*] Mother, I'm dying down here.

MOTHER

[*to Alinda*] You go downstairs and help the Master.

ALINDA exits

I will not have his wedding taking place with him on a stretcher and I will not allow you to *assist* him in his games. The next violation and you will leave this roof!

BEATRICE

Yes, Madam.

MOTHER

Now let me see that book. What is it?.

BEATRICE

I don't know, Madam. I think it is Master Scarborough's.

MOTHER

You know very well it is not. Does that look like his writing? It must have been the other one, you never go to the attic.

BEATRICE

No, Madam.

MOTHER

What is it doing down here?

BEATRICE

She was showing me something she found, Madam.

MOTHER

Do you know what it is?

BEATRICE

Is it yours, Madam?

MOTHER

Would I have done this?

BEATRICE

I don't know, Madam.

MOTHER

Have you ever known me to engage in nonsense?

BEATRICE

No, Madam.

MOTHER

Then why did you say it was?

BEATRICE

Alinda said so, Madam.

MOTHER

A servant brings you a book and says it is mine. How does she know?

BEATRICE

Whose else could it be, Madam?

MOTHER

It could be that other one's, couldn't it? It's she who brought this to you. Thinks herself a poetess, does she?

BEATRICE

Not exactly, Madam.

MOTHER

I see her mooning about all the time. Now she has filled a book up with her drivel. And says it is mine so she will not be blamed if your master finds it. Only I found it first. And I know if it is mine or not.

BEATRICE

Yes, Madam.

MOTHER

She is an uppity servant who does not know her place. Or her sex. Writing poetry. She thinks very little of her job.

BEATRICE

I think she does, Madam.

MOTHER

She does not act like it. She would not do this if she valued her employment here.

BEATRICE

Madam . . .

MOTHER

Or you either.

BEATRICE

Madam, I value my job very highly.

MOTHER

That is better. So, if you want to keep your job what do you suggest I do about the other one.

BEATRICE

Madam, . . . I don't think it's hers Madam.

MOTHER

No?

BEATRICE

Her penmanship is not so fine, Madam.

MOTHER

This is fine, is it?

BEATRICE

Much nicer than could be writ by a servant, Madam.

MOTHER

Let me see it. No, it could not have been writ by a servant. It should not have been brought down.

BEATRICE

I'm sorry, Madam, I'm terribly sorry.

MOTHER

Can you imagine what your Master would say if he had found this? If he had been put in his room just now? I would have had to say it was Alinda's. And he would have said what you said.

BEATRICE

Yes, Madam.

MOTHER

You see why these must be kept hidden.

BEATRICE

Yes, Madam.

MOTHER

If he should ever find them.

BEATRICE

Madam?

MOTHER

What is it?

BEATRICE

It's beautiful, Madam.

MOTHER

You read it?

BEATRICE

Alinda has. She says you were a lovely writer, Madam.

MOTHER

She does?

BEATRICE

She's read most of what's up there. Do you still write?

MOTHER

No.

BEATRICE

Why not, Madam?

MOTHER

My husband would not have it.

BEATRICE

Your husband is gone.

MOTHER

I can't. I look at paper and see nothing. Just menus and correspondence. There is nothing inside me.

BEATRICE

Alinda says she hears voices.

MOTHER

They were not voices . . . I used to look at a blank page and see the words already there. I just had to write them down. Sometimes I'd write too fast and have to change something. Or sometimes I would write it and then see it again a little differently. But it was all there in front of me.

BEATRICE

Perhaps if you tried again?

MOTHER

I tried once or twice. I have nothing of my own. The land is my son's. And so is my life. I can not do anything that might stain our reputation.

BEATRICE

I'm sorry, Madam.

MOTHER

No staring at Lords, though some deserve it. Just staring at my walls. My room is all I have. I spend my life in my room trying not to think of the past.

BEATRICE

I'm very sorry, Madam.

MOTHER

No need to be sorry unless my son finds out. He must never find out under any circumstances. I

would have you killed first. I would kill you myself!

BEATRICE

Yes, Madam.

MOTHER

Now get this back in the attic and finish the room.

BEATRICE

Yes, Madam. Madam?

MOTHER

What?

BEATRICE

About Alinda, Madam?

MOTHER

What about her?

BEATRICE

She would like to write, Madam.

MOTHER

Well she can't.

BEATRICE

No, Madam?

MOTHER

Not in this house.

BEATRICE

How can you deny her, Madam, after what you have been through?

MOTHER

What have I been through?

BEATRICE

Losing your voice.

MOTHER

As you can hear there is nothing wrong with my voice.

BEATRICE

Your spirit, then.

MOTHER

My spirit still inhabits my body, else I would be buried next to my husband.

BEATRICE

You were a poet once, Madam.

MOTHER

And learned the folly of it. Alinda can do as well.

BEATRICE

It isn't folly, Madam.

MOTHER

And I tell you it is. A woman does not write poetry. A woman has no need to write. Nor has she the capacity. It is enough for us to encourage men to write, for they create what is beautiful and lasting. Do you know of any women artists from the Greeks? From the Orientals? From here in England? Nothing that we hold in high esteem today has come from our sex. And that is because our sex can not do it.

BEATRICE

But this book, Madam

MOTHER

This book does not exist.

BEATRICE

But . . .

MOTHER

No more, I tell you. That was the error of youth and I am pleased to say that that error has been mended. I have learned my place in the world. You and Alinda will do the same if you wish to remain in my employ.

BEATRICE

Yes, Madam.

MOTHER exits. ALINDA enters

ALINDA

He wants you. [*sees the book*] What did she say?

BEATRICE

That it is not hers.

ALINDA

Really?

BEATRICE

That it was hers but that it is hers no longer.

ALINDA

How can that be?

BEATRICE

She has learned that women do not write.

ALINDA

She can't mean that.

BEATRICE

She does. And she won't allow you.

ALINDA

You didn't mention me!

BEATRICE

She worked out that you had brought the book down. I thought she might be sympathetic, she's too scared. She won't let you go now for fear you will tell her son, but she won't let you write in this house. And I think will be careful to see that you do not.

ALINDA

So I am lost. No, not more lost than I was. Before I *thought* that I must keep it secret, now I know I must, so nothing really has changed. Except that now I know why she stares at nothing.

BEATRICE

Yes.

ALINDA

She will give up her life for peace with her son.

BEATRICE

Will you?

ALINDA

That remains to be seen. Yes, I probably will. I can live without creating, I can not live without eating.

BEATRICE

No.

THOMAS

[offstage] Beatrice!!!

BEATRICE

Nothing has changed. She wants this book gone

ALINDA

I'll put it back.

THOMAS

[offstage] Come when I call, damn you!

BEATRICE

Yes, Sir.

ALINDA and BEATRICE exit

END

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS... *If I, Seth Berner, had to describe myself in one word it would be “political.” I am consumed by wanting everyone to have equal rights and opportunities to decide who they are and become it. Most of my writing comes from that belief.*

Much of the time I use absurdity to strike blows against the expected normal. My settings, situations, and approach to staging challenge what plays are supposed to do. In one ten minute play I have a character laugh for six minutes – because I want an audience to start feeling uncomfortable and asking itself why it feels that way. In another I have three blind narrators standing in a child's wading pool for an entire play because, well, it still seems like a good idea and no one else is doing it.

*I also directly confront conditions in our society blocking the path to personhood. Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own* makes explicit the necessity of freedom for individuality. She was not the first, and many since her have made the observation. But I was struck by her phrase “a room of one's own” and wanted to build around that. Who would literally and figuratively not have a room of their own? And how could that idea develop without it being obvious all along where I was going? There are as many answers as there are writers, mine became servants who would not only not have the physical privacy, but would not be allowed the personal privacy to become themselves. This setting also allowed the observation that privilege is both real and relative – the servants are not the only ones being crushed by their circumstances.*

*When I wrote *A Room of One's Own* I expected that it would be the first act*

of a work drawing attention to the privation in our modern “enlightened” America. I still have not found a conclusion I’m happy with, so this remains a one-act. What is missing is a contrast; the message is clear without it, I hope.

Stylistically I was influenced by 19th century novelists. I tried to capture speech from that time. I worked hard to eliminate the structural quirks that are my default. Keep It Simple, Stupid, I said to myself, let the story, not the style, be the story.

The play was read as part of a fund-raiser for a struggling local theater. More recently it was presented to a couple of informal workshops, where I got helpful feedback. It has never had a staged performance.

I live in Portland, Maine where I practice poverty law, am heavily involved in progressive politics, act, and know more about punk rock than anyone you know.

AUTHOR’S BIO: I have a profession that requires very non-creative serious writing, so the other side of my brain starts howling when I take my jacket and tie off. I have had plays accepted by the Samuel French Off Off Broadway Short Play Festival, the King of Crows Festival and the Eleven and One Festival. I have had prose published in the University of Southern Maine literary journal and an on-line fiction journal I no longer remember the name of. My writing typically explores the absurd and unconventional, though I will work in more conventional styles to keep people from thinking they have me figured out. I also act - preferably for pay, but for fun when that's what's on offer. I live in Portland, Maine.

A SHORT HISTORY OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

By Charles Leipart

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama editor JANET COLSON writes:*

Three young people are going nowhere fast. They can't afford a meal, but watch out when one of them brandishes and then stomps on a shiny new iPhone:

BRANDON

Holy shit, you just smashed an iPhone! We could have used that, man.

HUCKER

FOR WHAT? To order out Chinese? No, we got to free ourselves of these devices. That's how the government spies on us and controls our minds. Google knows stuff, man.

SAM

Google knows everything.

This is a tale of destruction and self-preservation. On the streets. On the edge. Starbucks is currency in this Orwellian vision of the present day where exploitation and power dynamics reign supreme and he who carries the bloody hockey stick holds the power. Themes of morality, mortality, and corruption are woven throughout. What would it take to help each other out? Playwright Charles Leipart delivers with an I don't give a fuckery on a level with Tarantino. Kind of leaves us wondering if there's any kindness left in the world, but to hell with happy endings. You have to laugh, otherwise you might weep.

SAM

(painting her toenails)

Fuckin'-A. We're gonna change things.

(Spacing is playwright's own.) Eds.

A SHORT HISTORY
OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

in One Act

A SHORT HISTORY OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

in One Act

CHARACTERS
(1 woman, 2 men)

SAMANTHA, called SAM, 20s, a female member of a homeless tribe.

BRANDON, 20s, Sam's boyfriend, a reader of history, member of the tribe.

HUCKER, formally "Harrison Huxley III," 20s, a new member of the tribe. He has a full shaggy beard, wears a leather hunting cap with ear flaps, and carries a blood-stained hockey stick.

and

Biscuit, a sleeping mongrel bitch of pit-bull breed. She does not wake. Note: "Biscuit" is a dummy property, not a live dog.

*A residential side street in Manhattan. Morning.
The front step and arch-covered entrance
to a padlocked derelict brownstone church.*

A SHORT HISTORY OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

(A residential side street in Manhattan. Morning.)

The front step and arch-covered entrance to a derelict brownstone church. The double red doors to the church are chained and padlocked. A defaced metal sign reads "PRIVATE PROPERTY, NO TRESPASSING." The "NO" of the sign has been red spray-painted out. SAMANTHA, 20s, called "SAM" unkempt, in need of a bath, lies sleeping covered by a light blanket. Next to her, lies Biscuit, a sleeping mongrel bitch of the pit-bull breed. (the sleeping dog is a dummy property; during the play, "Biscuit" never wakes).

BRANDON, 20s, unkempt, stringy hair, in need of a bath, sits reading a battered, secondhand, thick paperback. Duffle bags, backpacks, and a rusty grocery cart filled with their possessions are piled up. A blood-stained hockey stick leans against a pile of duffle bags. BRANDON turns a page of his paperback)

BRANDON

Man! Like, you know, WOW.

SAM

(Stirring awake)

Like, I know, what WOW?

BRANDON

This Hannibal dude. Awesome.

SAM

Brandon, that Hannibal "dude" ate human brains with a spoon. I'm not that desperate.

BRANDON

Not that Hannibal, Sam. The original guy, Hannibal, way back in the Punic Wars.

SAM

Punic Wars, Pubic Wars. Whatever. I missed the movie.

BRANDON

This dude way back in the B.C., like 250 B.C., crosses the Alps with a bunch of elephants and invades Italy and defeats the Roman army! Totally awesome.

SAM

Did they eat the elephants?

BRANDON

Eat the elephants? *(He scans the page)* No, I don't think so. They must have put them in the circus when they got to Rome. The Romans had circuses, you know, with lots of cool stuff, like gladiators fighting to the death.

SAM

To the death is cool.

BRANDON

And wild beasts and sea battles. They flooded the place for that.

SAM

Maybe you should think about getting us some breakfast. Pass me the toilet.

(BRANDON passes her an aluminum bowl. SAM takes it, tents herself with blanket)

BRANDON

So how long is he staying?

SAM

(from under the blanket tent)
How long is who staying?

BRANDON

Captain America with the hockey stick.

SAM

I don't know. Maybe 'til he can pick up a good hockey game. *(SHE un-tents herself and passes BRANDON the aluminum bowl)* Here, empty this. Pour it where the dogs pee. Nobody will notice.

(BRANDON takes the bowl)

BRANDON

I hate doing that to the nice flowers. Don't you like flowers, Sam?

SAM

Yeh, I like flowers, doofus. But I ain't the Beautification Police. You can bring me a dozen roses. Now empty the toilet.

BRANDON

Okay, okay. *(HE exits off with the metal bowl. SAM takes up a small yellow plastic container that props up a colored chalk-lettered sign, "HOMELESS & HURTING. BLESS YOU." SHE empties out the loose change on the ground, counting out the change)*

SAM

We got to do better than this. Time to change the sign. (*SHE reaches behind her for a set of hand-lettered, battered cardboard signs*) "SICK DOG NEEDS VET." No. Let's switch to "EVERYONE DESERVES A GOOD BREAKFAST. BE KIND." (*SHE sets the "BREAKFAST" sign in front of the change container*)

BRANDON

(*re-entering*)

Maybe we should just call your parents. Or ask what's-his-name to call his father.

SAM

Fuck, Brandon. You are such a wuss. Man-up, dude. You need to put down that stupid book and work the front of Papaya King around the corner. You got to learn to hustle, man.

BRANDON

I don't eat hot dogs. If you knew what goes into them. They make hot dogs out of Biscuit here. You wouldn't eat Biscuit would you?

SAM

I'd eat you first.

BRANDON

I wish you wouldn't say stuff like that.

SAM

MAN, you are SO INEFFECTUAL! Get a sense of humor, dude. Hucker must have scored big. He went out before dawn. Hucker knows how to work it.

BRANDON

You didn't answer my question. How long is this Hucker guy staying?

SAM

He has a plan, Brandon. He's gonna set us up. Hucker knows how to play the Man.

BRANDON

I know why you like him.

SAM

Yeh. Okay. I like him. But not like I like you, baby boy.

BRANDON

He brings you Starbucks. Where the fuck does he get money for Starbucks?

SAM

Brandon, what you don't get is, Hucker has charm, Hucker has the charisma! He doesn't need money. People give him stuff.

BRANDON

Like Grande Lattes from Starbucks.

SAM

Yeh. If you don't stop complaining, next time you'll buy your own. Take this one, "STRANDED IN NYC. NEED BUS FARE HOME TO IDAHO." (*SHE hands BRANDON a cardboard sign*) That sounds like you.

BRANDON

I'm not doing the hotdog stand, I told you.

SAM

Then you'd better do something, because I'm getting the feeling your days are numbered.

BRANDON

Numbered? NUMBERED? Like, what do you mean, "Numbered"?

SAM

Like I'm counting down all the way to ZERO. Approaching expiration date. Like that pathetic carton of milk you brought us yesterday.

(BRANDON takes a box of Cap'n Crunch cereal from the rusty grocery cart)

BRANDON

And a box of Cap'n Crunch. It's got all the Daily Nutrients. You oughta read the Nutrition Facts on the box: "Niacin, Iron, Zinc, Vitamin B6--". All that good stuff.

SAM

When you score a steak, let me know. Pass the Cap'n Crunch.

(BRANDON does. SAM eats from the box)

BRANDON

He's got blood on his hockey stick.

SAM

What?

BRANDON

Blood. There on the end of his stick. That's blood.

SAM

Rats, Brandon. He's been whacking rats. You're too passed-out dead asleep at night to know that. When Biscuit catches a rat, Hucker whacks it. Otherwise, we might get the bubonic plague or something. When the rats bite you.

BRANDON

The rats don't bite, it's the fleas. I was reading back in the Dark Ages, when they had the plagues, it was the fleas jumping off the rats on to human beings that did it.

SAM

Christ, Brandon, STOP, all right? You're really creepin' me out. Hucker whacks the rats, that's why he's got blood on his hockey stick!

BRANDON

Maybe he whacks people. Maybe he kills people. We don't know. Maybe that's how he gets stuff.

SAM

You got too much imagination. You always got your nose in that book. Hucker doesn't have to kill people. He knows how to work it to get the stuff he wants.

BRANDON

So, like, explain to me, if he can get everything he wants, what he's doing here with us? Sleeping on the street.

SAM

Maybe he's into us, doofus.

BRANDON

He's into me?

SAM

He only has to be into ONE of us. Do the math.

(Enter HUCKER, formally "Harrison Huxley III," with a full shaggy beard and wearing a leather hunting cap with ear flaps. He carries a take-out tray set with three Starbucks' Grande Lattes and a Starbucks paper sack)

HUCKER

Home is the hunter, home with the kill. Three Grande Lattes. And I scored some Reduced-Fat Cinnamon Swirl Coffee Cake to go with them.

SAM

Awesome. Hear that, Brandon? That's why Hucker is here. Hucker is a Provider.

HUCKER

With a capital "P" and that rhymes with "T" and that stands for the Tuscaloosa County Jail where I spent a weekend whacked out of my mind on crack. When am I'm gonna get some of that sweetness, baby girl?

BRANDON

Hey. Hey, Hey. That's out of line, dude. Samantha is my girl.

SAM

The name is SAM, doofus. SAM. Got it? I hate that whimpy-assed, pussy name. (*Grimacing*) SA-MAN-THAAA. BLECK!!

(
SAM runs a large broken-tooth comb through her straggly hair, looking at herself in a small mirror, scrubs her teeth with her index finger)

BRANDON

I think it's a sweet name.

SAM

You would. And while we're on the subject, baby boy--I am nobody's girl, Brandon. Nobody owns me. I own myself.

HUCKER

"I AM WOMAN, HEAR ME ROAR!" YEH! And possession is 9/10th of the law.

BRANDON

9/10th of what law?

SAM

He doesn't get it, Hucker. Brandon is SO OBTUSE AND INEFFECTUAL.

HUCKER

I love it when you use those ten-dollar words, babe. Like mo' money in the bank, Ka-ching, Ka-ching!! But go easy on ol' Brandon, Brandon is my bro'. (*HE puts an arm around BRANDON shoulders, pulling him to him crushingly*) Ain't that right, Bro'?

BRANDON

Yeh. We're bros'. (*Taking a Starbucks*) Thanks for the Starbucks, Hucker. Get me some of that coffee cake--- (*reaching for the bag*)

HUCKER

(*withholding it*)

Hey. Hey. What do we say? (*in a grand manner*) "Though our circumstances be reduced, good man, there is no cause for incivility."

BRANDON

What?

HUCKER

Shakespeare, dude.

SAM

Hucker, you are so DOPE. (*to BRANDON*) Suck-up, baby boy.

BRANDON

Okay, I say, "Please, Hucker, may I have a piece of coffee cake?"

HUCKER

“OH, PRETTY PLEASE, HUCKER, MAY I?”

SAM

And don't forget, “With whipped cream and a cherry on top!”

BRANDON

Sam, please--don't--huh? *(to HUCKER)* C'mon, give me some cake, man.

HUCKER

Sure, buddy. There you go. *(HE gives BRANDON the paper sack.*

BRANDON opens the sack, taking out a piece of coffee cake. It has been half-eaten)

BRANDON

Hey, man, somebody's been eating this.

HUCKER

And now you're eating it. Do you want it or not?

BRANDON

I want it, I want. *(HE takes the cake and his container of coffee and hunkers down, eating it)*

HUCKER

And then he says, “Thank you, Hucker.”

BRANDON

Thank you, Hucker.

HUCKER

Anything for a brotha'. You can hustle us up some dinner tonight. How much much we got in the Give-All Cup?

SAM

Four dollars and seventy-three cents.

HUCKER

Not good. Not good. Somebody ain't pulling his weight. Okay, into Papa's bank account. *(HUCKER takes the container of change and dumps it into his pant leg pocket)*

BRANDON

Shouldn't we be splitting that up? I mean, you know, like sharing it?

HUCKER

Sharing it? Like this is some fuckin' communist commune, or what? Like meet Brandon the Millennium Bolshie? Man, Marx went out with the European Free Market and the euro, dude. Look at China, look at Russia, man, what we got now is State-Controlled Capitalism, or don't you keep up on with Current Affairs?

SAM

Current Affairs is bullshit.

BRANDON

I've been reading up on history. There's a lot of awesome stuff in here, like Hannibal crossing the Alps with elephants-- cool stuff you can learn.

HUCKER

Let me see that. *(HE takes the book)* "Property of the Boston Public Library", there you go, dude, somebody stole this book! That's the history lesson there, bro'. "A Short History of Western Civilization." Yeh, a very short history. *(HE tosses the book back to BRANDON)* Write me up a one-page summary. I had a book like that in prep school. Except mine wasn't a piece of secondhand beat-up paperback shit like that. It was quality textbook binding on gloss-finished paper. But it was still full of shit. Sam agrees with me, don't you, Sam?

(SAM reaches into her knapsack, takes out a bottle of green nail polish and begins applying polish to the toenails of her dirty bare feet)

SAM

History is shit. It's stuff that a lot of old white guys made up and wrote down to control us. That's why we have to live outside the system. Brandon doesn't get that.

BRANDON

I get it. I get it. We're living outside. Like we're living here. On the street.

HUCKER

YO! Brandon's the wit. "Living outside." You are a mother-fuckin' genius in the art of repartee, dude.

BRANDON

I'm just sayin'.

HUCKER

And that was, saying what exactly?

BRANDON

You know. Like we're all in this together. Struggling to live on the street. Like doing what we can to get by. Beating the system.

SAM

(painting her toenails)

Beat the motherfuckin' system. Whack.

HUCKER

No, Brandon, you're just along for the ride. Everybody likes a free ride. *(HE throws his hands over his head)* WHEEEEE! FREE RIDE!!

SAM

Go easy, you'll wake up Biscuit. She needs her rest. She's gonna have pups. *(SHE pets the sleeping dog, hugging it)* Yes, she is. We're gonna be a Mommy.

BRANDON

Hey. Hey. I do my share. I get us dinner from the "sharing table" at the center, don't I?

HUCKER

There you go again with your sharing bullshit. What we have to learn from history, Brandon, is that one must control the resources. "To the victor go the spoils--VICTORI SPOLIA! VENI, VIDI, VICI! Totally control the resources. *(with a look to SAM)* Resources of all sorts and kinds. Build up our capital base. Then we can change things.

SAM

(painting her toenails)
Fuckin'-A. We're gonna change things.

BRANDON

When you say that "Veni, Vidi" stuff. That's Latin, right?

HUCKER

Some of the shit they taught us a Choate. That and "Chinese In the Cyber Age" and "Ennui, Adultery, and Death in Madame Bovary."

SAM

Say something in Cyber Chinese, Hucker. Show him.

HUCKER

Běn hā kè, Huǒbàn.

BRANDON

What's that?

HUCKER

"HACK THIS, BUDDY!"

SAM

Hucker, you are so COOL!

HUCKER

Give me some sugar, baby.

SAM

Just a little. (*SHE puckers up, chastely.*)

HUCKER puckers up. THEY share a chaste kiss. Then HUCKER slips his arms around her, pulling her closer)

SAM

That's enough. Stop it. (*SHE pulls away*) I mean it, Hucker.

HUCKER

I like a lady with limits.

BRANDON

I guess you got like what they call a classical education. They didn't teach us cool stuff like that in Kenosha.

SAM

That was back in the day when Hucker was "Harrison Huxley the Third." How many companies does that pig of a father of yours own?

HUCKER

Too many, sweet stuff. The pater sent me this iPhone to keep in touch. (*HE takes a new iPhone from his pocket*)

SAM

Hey, cool, guys! Now we got a iPhone!

HUCKER

Sorry, Pops. Wrong number. (*He drops the iPhone and steps on it, crushing it*)

BRANDON

Holy shit, you just smashed an iPhone! We could have used that, man.

HUCKER

FOR WHAT? To order out Chinese? No, we got to free ourselves of these devices. That's how the government spies on us and controls our minds. Google knows stuff, man.

SAM

Google knows everything.

HUCKER

And the waves from them can really fuck up your head.

BRANDON

You can get a lot of cool free stuff and games.

HUCKER

I don't need games, man. I got the greatest game of all. THE GAME OF LIFE. Where I get to make the rules.

SAM

Hucker is so awesome. Hucker is gonna rule the world.

HUCKER

"Is Paris burning?"

BRANDON

What's wrong with Paris?

HUCKER

Like Attila the Hun said, "Walk softly and carry a hockey stick."

BRANDON

I don't think Attila had a hockey stick. They didn't have hockey back in his day.

HUCKER

It's a metaphor, dude. You know what a metaphor is. Like, English Lit 101. This thing stands in for that thing. Figure it out.

SAM

Hucker the HUN!

BRANDON

What do you want with us, Hucker? What are you doing here?

HUCKER

Want? Doing? I want doing what everybody wants doing, man. I want World Peace and zero carbon footprint. *(HE walks gingerly about)* But most of all, I want SPACE. I need a lot of space. We got a territorial imperative, dude. We want the whole motherfuckin' front of this church and all this sidewalk here. We're gonna mark it off. There to there. It's gonna be Hucker space!

SAM

We're gonna take the block! Drive out the Bougies!

HUCKER

Save the nabe' from the Avocado Apocalypse!

BRANDON

Avocado Apocalypse! Oh, yeah, I get it. That's funny, man--Look, it's raining avocados!

HUNKER

(Deadly serious)

What I mean, dude, is to restore this block to its authentic pre-gentrification culture. Dig it?

BRANDON

The garbage pickup used to be really bad.

SAM

It's gonna belong to the tribe, HUCKERLAND FOREVER!

HUCKER

We want it all, Brother Brandon. HUCKERLAND, THE BEAUTIFUL! The Brady Brunch over there is gettin' it. They all crossin' to the other side of the street. *(HE shouts "across the street")* YO, BRADYS! *(Grabbing his crotch)* SUPER-SIZE THIS!

SAM

Christ, Hucker, if you were a dog, Biscuit could have your puppies.

HUCKER

Woof, Woof!

BRANDON

You guys are weird.

HUCKER

What?

BRANDON

You're weird. The two of you. You talk some weird shit.

HUCKER

(Picking up his hockey stick, precisely)
Don't. Ever. Call. Me. Weird.

SAM

You gonna piss him off, Brandon. You don't want to piss him off.

HUCKER

'Cuz I got the hockey stick. And the man who holds the hockey stick, rules the tribe. Let us take a moment's pause for that thought.

(An uncomfortable PAUSE. Then)

SAM

I-- was--*(pause)* I--was-- *(pause)*

HUCKER

You was what, sweetheart?

SAM

At the library.

HUCKER

Holy shit.

SAM

On the INTERNET. They got these really cool sites where they show you how to make bombs and shit. You can make bombs out of stuff you got around the house, like Mr. Clean and Mazola Corn Oil and plant fertilizer.

HUCKER

That's nothin' compared to the bomb that's in my head. Bomb-making is very cool. All-expense-paid trip to Syria!

BRANDON

We're gonna blow something up? Since when?

SAM

Ka-BOOM! Drop the fuckin' bomb on Iran! That's how we change things. Blow the fuckers up. We're gonna be in charge. Then the heads are gonna to ROLL! (*SHE high-fives HUNKER, HE high-fives her back*)

HUCKER

You are so ON IT, babe. Like Robespierre.

BRANDON

Robespierre? Who's Robespierre?

HUCKER

WHO'S ROBESPIERRE? You're the one reading history, man. THE FRENCH REVOLUTION, dude. THE REIGN OF TERROR. Dig it!

SAM

Brandon is SO not there yet.

BRANDON

That's still three hundred pages ahead, Sam.

HUCKER

You're closer than you think, bro'. Robespierre was a real righteous, do-right-dude and his fellow do-right bros' put together the Committee for Public Safety.

SAM

That's what we need. There are a lot of crazing, bad-ass freaks roamin' the streets. I'd go for that Public Safety thing. That's why we have to have Biscuit here.

HUCKER

Unfortunately, all that bitch does is sleep.

BRANDON

Hey, man, don't talk smack about Biscuit. She protects us.

SAM

Catches rats. So we don't get the Plague.

BRANDON

What's this "Reign of Terror" thing? What page is that on?

HUCKER

You don't have to look it up, dude. That's when they roll out Madame Guillotine.

SAM

Like a big Veg-o-Matic! Chop, chop, chop!

HUCKER

When all the "HAVES" become the "HAVE NOTS."

SAM

You mean the "HAVE-NOT-HEADS"!

HUCKER

BUGGALOO!!

(HUCKER and SAM fist-bump)

BRANDON

That's THE REIGN OF TERROR, huh, chopping people's heads off.

HUCKER

Man, you are so PERSPICACIOUS, Man.

SAM

Ka-ching! Ten dollars for Hucker!

HUCKER

So when am I gonna get some sweetness, sugar?

BRANDON

Enough of that, all right? Enough. You're way off-base, Hucker. Show some respect, man.

SAM

Oh, chill, Brandon! You are such a TOOL. Hucker's only messin' with you.

BRANDON

Well, I don't like it.

HUCKER

Too bad, Sir Galahad.

SAM

I'll decide who's disrespecting me, Brandon. Stay out of it.

HUCKER

We need to concentrate on the PLAN. This sign here. "PRIVATE PROPERTY." We're taking this dump over, it's our new squat.

BRANDON

It's a church, man. You don't want to vandalize a church. It's bad karma. We got a good situation here. The cops don't hassle us. We got like SANCTUARY.

HUCKER

SANCTUARY? Ka-ching! Brandon's gonna break the bank.

SAM

They might have left some really good stuff inside.

HUCKER

Yeh, like altar stuff and shit. Gold plate and candlesticks and statues of Jesus and shit like that. We could sell 'em here on the sidewalk. Make us some serious bread.

BRANDON

It's a sacrilege, man.

HUCKER

"And Jehovah shall smite thee!" Whack, WHACK!

BRANDON

I'm serious. We don't want to do this.

HUCKER

"We don't want to do this." Sam?

HUCKER and SAM

INEFFECTUAL!!

BRANDON

Besides, they got a big padlock and chain on the door. There's no way we can break that.

HUCKER

My motto, "Be Prepared." (*HUCKER opens a large duffle bag, taking out bolt cutters and a sledge hammer*)

SAM

Holy shit, bolt cutters! And a sledge hammer! Hucker you are so COOL. We can get in anywhere with those. We can do the cash machines!

BRANDON

But what about the owner-guys, it says, "NO TRESPASSING." They'll get the cops on us. We don't want any trouble with the fuzz, man.

SAM

Nobody wants this old dump of a church. We can take it over. Move in. CONFISCATE IT, MAN!. Get all the tribe in here tonight. Built a fire. Make us some cool s'mores. And there's plenty of room for the dogs and Biscuit and the puppies when they come. Let's do it!

HUCKER

Okay, you two stand in front, so nobody can see.

BRANDON

I don't know about this.

SAM

Are you with us or not, Brandon?

BRANDON

With you, with you.

(BRANDON and SAM stand side by side as HUCKER goes behind them with the bolt cutters)

HUCKER

Ready to roll. Hold a mo'. On second thought-- *(HE hands BRANDON the bolt cutters)* --to show you're with us, comrade, you do the honors. 'Cause if anybody asks--

SAM

(pointing at BRANDON)
"Brandon did it!"

HUCKER

(pointing at BRANDON)
"Brandon did it!"

BRANDON

Okay, I'll do it. I'll do it. Just don't step on Biscuit. *(BRANDON takes the bolt cutters, carefully steps over the sleeping dog, and cuts the chains & padlock, swings the church doors wide)*

SAM

Holy shit, you did it! We're in!

HUCKER

Give him some sugar, babe.

BRANDON

Yeh. Give me some sugar.

SAM

Sugar for Brandon. *(SHE kisses BRANDON)* You are BOSS, baby boy.

BRANDON

I am not ineffectual.

HUCKER

No, YOU DA MAN. As we say at Mo' Money Moe's Chop Shop on East 141st Street. Shall we take possession, Sam? Let me carry my girl over the threshold.

SAM

I'm nobody's girl, Hucker. I told you.

HUCKER

No, nobody's girl. You're my woman now.

SAM

Am I?

HUCKER

Time to give me some sweetness. How 'bout it, Princess? *(HE cuddles up to her)*

SAM

(coily to HUCKER)

Only Princess wants-- *(pause)* Only Princess wants-- *(pause)*

BRANDON

Only Princess want what?

SAM

Princess Samantha wants a Starbucks Caramel Cocoa Cluster Frappuccino. For afters. With extra caramel dribbled on top.

HUCKER

You got it, babe. Anything else?

SAM

And a rose. A big, mother-fuckin' long stem red rose. It's got to be a red one. Yeh. That's what Princess wants. Brandon, be sure to feed Biscuit. She's eating for her puppies now-- *(SAM steps into the church, turns)* I got to go get pretty in the church.

(Sings, as SHE exits) "I feel pretty, oh, so pretty, I feel pretty and witty and smartttt--"
(Exits)

HUCKER

Yeh, we're all eatin' for her puppies. Have a squat, bro'. Later you can come in and do a pipe.

BRANDON

Hucker?

HUCKER

What?

BRANDON

Like I'm thinking, I mean, you know--

HUCKER

Frankly, "dude," I don't know.

BRANDON

What I'm thinkin,' I mean--when you're finished gettin' your sweetness, do you think I could get some? Sweetness, I mean. When you're finished.

HUCKER

That all depends, bro'. On how much Sam has got left when she's done with me. You know I'm a double-dipper.

BRANDON

Yeh. Whipped cream and a cherry on top.

HUCKER

But you know what you can do. If you want to stay.

BRANDON

I want to stay.

HUCKER

Then you know what you gotta do.

BRANDON

Sure. *(Pause)* What is it I gotta do?

HUCKER

Do some crowd-funding, dude.

BRANDON

Funding? For what?

HUCKER

For that monster frappuccino for the lady. With the extra caramel dribbled on top. And don't forget the rose.

BRANDON

A red one.

HUCKER

Princess Samantha likes a little romance. *(Picks up the empty yellow plastic change container)* Jingle, jingle.

BRANDON

(taking the container)
Jingle, jingle.

HUCKER

Don't forget your sign. *(HE hands BRANDON a battered cardboard sign)* "STRANDED IN NYC," yeh, let's get you home to Idaho. You can work the curb with your baby-boy looks. Lookin' good, man. Real good. *(HUCKER steps carefully over the sleeping dog Biscuit)* You better feed this bitch soon. I don't wanna be around when she wake up REALLY HUNGRY. Gonna go in and get me some sweetness. You know what you gotta do. Generate some revenue! Yo!

BRANDON

Generate some revenue. Yo.

HUCKER

E PLURIBUS UNUM. *(HUCKER picks up his bloody hockey stick, holding it high)* "Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia!" Sam Peckinpah, 1974. Now, THAT is HISTORY, man. What we needs to do is get us a gun. HUCKER IS ENTERING THE BUILDING! *(HE exits into the church.*

BRANDON looks about. He kneels and tenderly pets the sleeping dog. He picks up the cardboard sign reading, "STRANDED IN NYC. NEED BUS FARE HOME TO IDAHO." He digs into his pants pocket for a bit of change, puts it to the plastic container, shaking it. HE takes the cardboard sign and moves downstage center to the curb, looking out. HE extends the yellow plastic container to the AUDIENCE, shaking it)

BRANDON

Hey, man, be kind? BE KIND? *(HE continues to hold the sign in one hand and extending the plastic container to the AUDIENCE, shaking it)* Hey Lady--BE KIND? *(as the lights fade)*

THE END

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *Civilization is a fragile contract. At any point in its existence, depending on the ruling powers of the community, their “civilization” can begin the downward slide back into Barbarism. This is the theme and concern of the play. A group of homeless youth abandons civilities and have begun to function in their baser natures. With the sole exception of Brandon, who with his battered paperback “A Short History” begins to question where they are headed, and makes a plea for compassion and kindness.*

A Short History of Western Civilization was award 2nd prize in the Segora International One-Act Playwriting Competition, August 1019 St André-sur-Sèvre, France. It has yet to be performed.

AUTHOR’S BIO: CHARLES LEIPART’s work has appeared in the Bayou Magazine, the Jabberwock Review, Burningword Literary Journal, Gathering Storm Magazine, the Scene and Heard Journal, QU Literary Magazine, Projector Magazine of the University of Greenwich, London UK, and the Exposition Review. An award-winning playwright & screenwriter, Charles is a graduate of Northwestern University, a former fellow of the Edward Albee Foundation. He lives and writes in New York City. www.charlesleipart.com witter: @CharlesLeipart

KAMAU IN THE AFTERLIFE

By Victoria Muthiani

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama editor JANET COLSON writes:*

Victoria Muthiani's haunting play is a modern morality tale in which three tormented souls await their final judgment in the reception area of the afterlife (staffed with the familiar snarky receptionists we know we'll all be seeing at the gates of hell). The three of them share the same name - as the playwright tells us, Kamau is a very common name in Kenya - and at least one of them deserves eternal damnation.

This is a strange and magical play. Praise for the three-act structure, the classical feel of the piece coupled with contemporary cynicism, and the simple expressive language. Also, no spoilers allowed, but there are twists. I like that.

Muthiani's self-styled mélange of surrealism and je ne sais quoi leaves us with a bold existential play that harkens to Sartre's No Exit and Dantes Inferno, but maybe with a little more hope for humanity.

Here's a sample from the other side:

REBECCA: (aside) The dead do not dream, but I feel as though I have dreamt up all these faces. The silver cord which tethers me to all I am tugs me closer to The Absolute. There is no wind around me, but I feel a chilling breeze, as if coldness is all I've ever known.

(Spacing is playwright's own.) Eds.

KAMAU IN THE AFTERLIFE

by Victoria Muthiani

CHARACTERS

REBECCA KAMAU, a woman who never fulfilled her dreams, died at age 21

GODFREE KAMAU, a pseudo-religious man, died at age 56

CHARLES KAMAU, a man too afraid of facing himself, died at age 23

SISYPHUS (SISSI), a young woman, the receptionist of Hell

PARVATI, an older woman on a wheelchair, the receptionist of Heaven

THE CERBERUS, three men who usher the damned into hell

ACT I

SCENE 1

A cosy waiting room. Two women, Sisyphus and Parvati, sit on different edges of the same receptionist desk. Each has a thick ancient book open before them which they are steadily reading and making notes on. Behind them are sign posts. The one behind Sisyphus reads: to heaven, and points across to Parvati, stage right. The one behind Parvati reads: to hell, and points across to Sisyphus, stage left.

The three Kamau's are sited on the same long bench.

Sisyphus stands up.

SISYPHUS: Kamau?

The three Kamau's stand up and look at each other.

GODFREE: Yes, I'm Kamau.

CHARLES: No, I'm Kamau.

REBECCA: No... I'm Kamau.

Sisyphus looks at her book.

SISYPHUS: One of you belongs in hell.

Godfree chuckles and sits back down.

GODFREE: I had my funeral in a church. My wedding ordained by a priest. I served in the House of God on Sundays and baptised all of my children.

REBECCA: I was baptised but I never liked it, the water was too cold and there were too many people watching.

PARVATI: Baptism, a metaphor.

SISYPHUS: Who is going to hell?

GODFREE: Not me.

CHARLES: I was never baptised. My parents said I was christened, but I don't remember it.

GODFREE: They buried me with a statue of an angel overlooking my grave.

CHARLES: They burnt me.

GODFREE: There are flowers there right now, blooming.

CHARLES: I'd be lucky if the living remember me.

SISYPHUS: Who is going to hell?

CHARLES: Does it hurt, being in hell?

SISYPHUS: Just emotionally, physically, and mentally.

Charles miserably sits back down. Sisyphus goes to her desk and gathers three pamphlets which she hands to the three Kamau's.

CHARLES: "A Spirit's Guide to the Infrastructure and Eternal Suffering of Hell"?

Sisyphus sits back at her desk. She takes a telephone from under her desk and makes a silent call.

GODFREE: (flipping through the pamphlet) Charon? Hungry Ghosts? Yama? This must be a joke. The Bible said nothing about a place called Elysium.

REBECCA: There's a paradise in hell?

Sisyphus ends the call and hides the telephone once more.

PARVATI: It's the heaven of the damned.

SISYPHUS: Part of the Axis Mundi.

PARVATI: The younger sister of the Isles of the Blessed.

SISYPHUS: And the youngest son of Heaven.

GODFREE: Blasphemy! Where is Saint Peter in all of this?

Sisyphus and Parvati snigger to each other.

CHARLES: So hell isn't that bad?

PARVATI: That depends on what you did?

SISYPHUS: Did you do something evil? Something you want to confess...

Charles shamefully looks away from her teasing gaze.

SISYPHUS: You better say it, before they get here.

REBECCA: Before who get here?

GODFREE: The angels?

Parvati and Sisyphus cackle as fog appears and dogs are heard growling and howling. Enter, from stage left, The Cerberus. The three men are dressed identically.

Godfree shuts his eyes and mutters a prayer.

CERBERUS 1: Prayer?

CERBERUS 2: It's too late –

CERBERUS 3: for that.

GODFREE: Where is God in all of this?

CERBERUS 1: God is everywhere.

CERBERUS 2: If you come with us,

CERBERUS 3: We can take you to the creator.

GODFREE: Get behind me Satan!

Godfree shuts his eyes and continues praying. One of The Cerberus growls.

CERBERUS 3: Is this the one

CERBERUS 2: We're taking to –

CERBERUS 1: Helheim?

SISYPHUS: I don't know, that's why I called.

Godfree weeps louder. The Cerberus stare at Rebecca and Charles.

CERBERUS 2: I see,

CERBERUS 1: They're all called –

CERBERUS 3: Kamau.

The Cerberus point at Charles and Godfree sited on the bench.

CERBERUS 1: Get up,

CERBERUS 3: And stand -

CERBERUS 2: Before us.

The two men stand before The Cerberus. Rebecca retreats towards the reception desk.

CERBERUS 2: There is a place in hell -

CERBERUS 1: For both of you but,

CERBERUS 3: Only one of you can come.

CHARLES: Are there beds in hell?

CERBERUS 1: You can sleep on the bed of illness.

CHARLES: How about food?

CERBERUS 2: You can eat from the plate of hunger.

CHARLES: What if I get thirsty?

CERBERUS 3: Then you can drink from the river of oblivion.

CHARLES: Will I see my friends?

CERBERUS 1: Just the ones you knew well;

CERBERUS 2: Anxiety,

CERBERUS 3: Fear,

CERBERUS 1: Need,

CERBERUS 2: Agony,

CERBERUS 3: Guilt,

CERBERUS 1: And conflict.

CHARLES: (to Rebecca) I never meant to do it you know, and now I'm going to spend the rest of my life suffering because of it.

THE CERBERUS: You were already suffering. Come.

Sisyphus picks a t-shirt from under her desk and gives it to Charles. Charles puts it on. It is plain and written "I KILLED HER".

Parvati wheels herself out of the desk with a coin in her hand. Charles opens his mouth and Parvati places the coin under his tongue.

The Cerberus lead him towards Hell. The fog appears. Dogs are heard howling

ACT 2

SCENE 1

Godfree is kneeling at the bench praying. Parvati and Sisyphus are looking at their books once more.

REBECCA: (aside) The dead do not dream, but I feel as though I have dreamt up all these faces. The silver cord which tethers me to all I am tugs me closer to The

Absolute. There is no wind around me, but I feel a chilling breeze, as if coldness is all I've ever known.

PARVATI: Kamau?

Godfree stands up and looks wearily at Rebecca.

GODFREE: That's my lift.

REBECCA: I remember you. You were my father.

Godfree nods.

REBECCA: What made you so sure you were going to heaven?

GODFREE: I lived a moral life.

SISYPHUS: But you failed at ethics.

PARVATI: Kamau, God will see you now.

REBECCA: You know what? I think you went to heaven because you believed you were worthy.

SISYPHUS: You weren't a good person Kamau.

REBECCA: You might have been good to yourself but you weren't good to us.

Sisyphus wheels Parvati out of the desk. Parvati removes the blanket covering her legs. They are badly burnt. Godfree looks away.

GODFREE: Cover yourself.

Parvati leaves her legs bare.

PARVATI: We hope we never see you again.

GODFREE: Everything I did, I did so I could have my place in His Kingdom.

Godfree begins to exit towards Heaven, then looks back –

GODFREE: I wonder why you think I went to heaven.

He leaves.

REBECCA: Where has he truly gone?

PARVATI: Back to the wheel.

SISYPHUS: Samsara.

REBECCA: What's going on with me?

SISYPHUS: You're dead.

REBECCA: Where do I go from here?

Rebecca goes behind the reception desk and retrieves a birthday cake from under it. She licks the icing with her finger.

REBECCA: (to Sisyphus) I think, this was meant to be yours.

SISYPHUS: Yes it was. I never got to taste it.

REBECCA: That man was my father.

A beat.

REBECCA: The one before him my killer.

A beat.

REBECCA: I know who both of you are. But who are they?

Rebecca points and faces the audience.

REBECCA: And why are they just looking? Why do they have nothing to say?

Rebecca walks to the edge of the stage and watches the audience. She gets off the stage and approaches the audience, staring at them with unfamiliarity. She goes back to the stage.

REBECCA: My unconscious. You may be watching me, waiting for me to realise something, but dying is not easy you know. Why does it feel like I'm the only one of us dying?

SISYPHUS: Because you're the last of us who needs to accept.

REBECCA: The spotlight, the one I spent my entire life trying to avoid. The stage I never performed in. The plot I never cared for.

A beat

REBECCA: (to Parvati) Mum... It aches to think that I have left you with tulips which never sprouted.

PARVATI: Tulips, which only bloomed for a day.

REBECCA: Will sorrow consume me for the rest of my death?

SISYPHUS: Only if you choose to become a phantom of life.

REBECCA: What else can I be?

PARVATI: Alive, without any recognition of who you used to be.

SISYPHUS: The salty scent the wind carries by sea.

PARVATI: The wish carried by dandelion seeds.

SISYPHUS: The hunger of stray dogs.

PARVATI: The solitude of hibernation.

REBECCA: Dust floating in the sunlight.

SISYPHUS: All that you were

PARVATI: All that you are.

SISYPHUS: All that you'll ever be.

REBECCA: No more picking dirt under my fingernails, or sifting through the dirt in peoples hearts.

REBECCA, PARVATI, SISYPHUS: No more desire.

REBECCA: I'm not ready! There is still too much I've never done. I never played the piano on stage for all of them to hear. You know how much I wanted to.

PARVATI: We know.

REBECCA: It was my passion. The one which kept me awake, my heart beating softly and my breath like a blanket. Those were the only times I'd feel warm.

SISYPHUS: We know.

REBECCA: I'm not ready! Even now the thought of it caresses me, reminding me of life. How my eyelids would close in the night and my feet would feel those dull blades of grass. And the sunlight on my skin, the lavender in the garden. (to Sisyphus) Sissi! Your coffee in the morning!

SISYPHUS: We know what you're feeling.

PARVATI: It's love, and it will never leave you.

REBECCA: I would do anything to be caught in the rain.

PARVATI: Love will never leave you.

REBECCA: Or dance alone in corridors.

SISYPHUS: Love will never leave you.

REBECCA: Let my fingers touch the keys once more.

A beat.

REBECCA: Love will never leave me. Go before me, return to dust. I won't be far behind, I only want to feel the passion flow to my fingertips.

Sisyphus nods and hugs Rebecca. Sisyphus and Parvati exit to Heaven.

ACT 3

SCENE 1

An iridescent black piano. Rebecca is sited on the piano bench.

The spotlight hits her.

She begins to play. Fingers buoyantly bouncing rhythmically from one key to the next.

Passion oozes out of her song.

Each note fulfils

and sings a celebration,

for the life she lived

and the love,

which never stopped

surrounding her.

THE END

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *Kamau is a very common name in Kenya, the idea of multiple Kamau's meeting at the same place was the favourite improv scenario for my high school drama class. This was supposed to be funny, but I guess without the influence of Siraiyion, Okidi, and Liam, it really wasn't. I always enjoyed bringing the sardonic and miserable characters to our improvs, it would only be fitting that my take on Kamau's adventures would be entirely surreal and set somewhere in the psyche.*

ARTIST BIO: Victoria Muthiani is a writer from Nairobi, Kenya. Her plays dramatize the conversations she has with herself, the words she wishes people could hear coming out of her mouth.

RICKEY and LANCE REENACT SCENES of HISTORY for GAY ZOOMERS

By Lee Lawing

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama editor JANET COLSON writes:*

This wry playlet is bound to entertain some of us kiddos whether we're gay Zoomers or just crashing the party.

The play takes place on a Wednesday during a Zoom call in the summer of 2020. That's right, it's COVID time and Rickey and Lance, a couple who met on a Zoom Seminar ("Gay Boys who Love Death") while sheltering in place, are busy hosting their Zoom meeting in which they discuss topical topics (such as the Black Death in 1439) with all fifteen of their followers.

Through the compact storytelling we see an emerging type of mise en abym theatre in the specter of the pandemic. One in which a play could be done on a shoestring - or on the Zoom call that it's sending up. And playwright Lee Richard Lawing doesn't shy away from using the pandemic and virtual landscape as a backdrop

RICKEY (continued)

Some have you written in to say you're sick to death with this topic. Sick to death with all things . . .

LANCE

(Whispered)
Covid.

RICKEY

But that's a little like saying you're sick of all things about healthcare because we all go to the doctor. Or, that you're sick of all things funny because you all tell jokes and like to laugh.

Let's be clear. What passes as a relationship in the self-referential world of this play is about as unstable as the Internet on a Zoom call, but it does beg the question about what happens when our lives (and living rooms) are laid bare on social media but are devoid of meaningful human connection.

Fun for all ages with allusions to necrophilia and a (brief) mention of fisting. (Spacing and font size are playwright's own.)

Rickey and Lance Reenact Scenes of History for Gay Zoomers

Cast of Characters

RICKEY 20s, race-neutral, m

LANCE 20s, race-neutral, m

SET: Bare, representative of RICKEY's and LANCE's apartments.

PLACE: LANCE's and RICKEY's apartments

TIME: Early summer 2020. A Wednesday afternoon.

SETTING: Bare, representative of Rickey and Lance's apartment.

AT RISE: RICKEY and LANCE start their Zoom Show. Both have masks around their necks.

RICKEY

Hello all you gay Zoomers out there and welcome

LANCE

. . . .to the Ricky and Lance Reenactments of history for gay Zoomers. Remember that all of you are on mute upon entry, so please use the chat feature to ask any and all questions.

(RICKEY and LANCE give the thumbs up sign.)

RICKEY

Like so many of our recent shows, this show will deal with

(LANCE does a drum roll with his fingers over some surface.)

RICKEY (continued)

Plagues!

(LANCE cups his hands around his mouth and does a low "Boo".)

RICKEY (continued)

Some have you written in to say you're sick to death with this topic. Sick to death with all things . . .

LANCE

(Whispered)
Covid.

RICKEY

But that's a little like saying you're sick of all things about healthcare because we all go to the doctor. Or, that you're sick of all things funny because you all tell jokes and like to laugh.

LANCE

Ricky and I are of the opinion that the past holds nuggets for the present and future.

RICKEY

And so today we want to talk about that on this very day, kissing was banned in England to stop the spread of the Black Death back in 1439.

(LANCE puckers his lips together and kisses the screen.)

RICKEY

Who knew you had such delicious lips, Lance?

LANCE

Thank you, Rickey.

RICKEY

One day when this is all over, I will enjoy kissing those lips.

LANCE

One more for good measure.

(LANCE puckers up and kisses the screen again.
RICKY kisses his screen.)

RICKEY

Wait, we must slow down.

LANCE

And mask up!

(RICKY and LANCE mask up and then both kiss the
screen.)

RICKEY

I bet you were wondering, Lance.

LANCE

What's that Rickey?

RICKEY

Did that ban help stop the advance of the Black Death in
England in 1439?

LANCE

It's like you can read my mind.

RIKCEY

I know right? We have such great on-screen chemistry. Do
we want to tell the audience just how we met in the time
of Covid?

LANCE

They've heard it before.

RICKEY

I can see new people on. We're up to fifteen today. New
faces always mean ones who don't know.

LANCE

True that.

(RICKY and LANCE sit back from kissing the
screens and pull the masks down.)

LANCE (continued)

We met on a Zoom Seminar entitled "Gay Boys who love
Death!"

RICKEY

Although it seems like that would be such a heavy topic to meet someone that you clicked with, Lance asked a question during that presentation that caught my attention certainly, and from that day forward, I knew that I wanted to shelter in place with him the first day we could actually do that.

LANCE

It's coming.

RICKEY

It sure is. Our love of being gay and death lead to us chatting after the seminar on FaceTime and then we chatted on one of the dating apps and then that just lead to us wanting to do our own thing of helping the world.

LANCE

One topic at a time.

RICKEY

There's a question from Roger D.

LANCE

Hi, Roger, welcome to the show. Roger asks where our favorite ghoulish spot would be to have sex when we can do that?

RICKEY

Good question, Roger D. Mine would be a cemetery.

LANCE

Yes. That would be mine as well.

RICKEY

There's another question from . . oh wait, that's a little too off colored for a public show. Although. . .
..

(LANCE looks at the question and starts to laugh.)

LANCE

I'd enjoy that for sure.

RICKEY

Are you sure? Did you see the question?

LANCE

Yes, I did. And it's a yes. I would do that for sure.

RICKEY

Really?

LANCE

Yes. Wouldn't you?

RICKEY

No. I wouldn't.

LANCE

We can take that offline after we finish the call.

RICKEY

That's one sex act that's not negotiable for me.

LANCE

Really?

RICKEY

Yes.

LANCE

Roger D says he'd be willing to do that. No negotiations needed.

RICKEY

Go find Roger D then. I am not doing that. Not now, not ever.

LANCE

Roger D says that sounds like you are a wet blanket, Rickey.

RICKEY

Wet blanket? I'll have you know that I have done a lot of various things, Roger D. But that act is not one of them. And I am OK with that.

LANCE

Roger D says . .

RICKEY

You know what? How about this Roger D? How about you go find another Zoom call to zoom into and destroy that relationship instead of this one.

LANCE

Roger D says sure thing and . . . oh, thank you for the number.

RICKEY

Really? Thank you for you know what? Go find Roger D. Go find the cemetery and have fun with Roger D. It's perfectly clear that we would never work.

LANCE

You're letting one fan come between us?

RICKEY

That and one fist, yes. And for your information, that ban in England didn't work. They all still caught the Black Death even though the forbad everyone from kissing. But that doesn't mean that I can't tell you and your new playmate to kiss off.

(RICKY leaves the meeting. LANCE is left alone.)

LANCE

Well, that was a bit of an overreaction during our reenactment call. Join me next week when I'll be

(LANCE looks at the chat again.)

LANCE (continued)

. . . .Roger D and I will be sharing with you another fascinating reenactment of famous historic events. This time we will be acting out the events that led up to the Solidarity Work Movement in the early 1900s. Till next week.

(LANCE holds up his fist and ends the call.)

BLACKOUT

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *I was initially inspired to write about this because of an article I saw in Weird History about kissing being banned in England to help try and stop the spread of the Black Death. They were unsuccessful as it turns out. Then I thought about two people doing a Zoom call for their followers which then lead to the play. At first, I didn't plan on making it about fisting, but as I was re-writing the first draft*

I needed something else that would make Rickey walk out of the call and relationship. Fisting is a pretty divisive sexual act and topic among the gay community. Hence the end scene where Lance makes the sign of the fist that also was of historical significance for many movements. I've been really excited to be on the National Play Exchange where I have been able to read all sorts of new and exciting works by many great playwrights who share their work there. These plays have inspired me lately and I am forever grateful for being a part of this exciting network.

AUTHOR'S BIO: I won the Young Playwrights Festival with my play ***Doll***. Other productions include ***Prosperity*** at the 17th Annual Playwrights Award at Wichita State University; ***Delivering Dad*** at the DramaRama Festival in San Francisco. ***A Murder of Crows*** was selected as the best drama at the WIT 2015 Kauai Shorts 10-Minute Play Festival. The short play ***The Chorus Awaits Its Cue!*** was a part of the anthology *Off the Rocks*. WIT selected my play ***Trinkets for Jenkie*** as part of their 2017 Festival. I participated in the 2018 William Inge Playwright's Festival with my one act play ***Crashing Through Kauai*** and most recently my play ***Alien Lovers and Friends*** was selected by the 2019 Last Frontier in Valdez, Alaska and my short Play ***Eve Addam's Tearoom*** was a part of the BUA Takes 10: Stonewall Edition In Buffalo June 2019. My short play, ***Alien Lovers and Friends Anonymous*** will be produced twice this year, this summer in Virginia and later in November in London, England..

The Men from the Mechanical Age

By Ioana Cosma

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A heavy duty existential drama set in a pre-digital pre-virtual world, when watches were wound and pictures developed, that feels like the Twilight Zone but manifests like Ionesco—not for everyone, maybe, but we urge you to give it a try. This is second language theatre and we were impressed by this Romanian playwright’s grasp of the subtleties and lyrical complexities available in the English language. They get a new, fresh take here and we are treated to some wondrous passages.*

Quote: Our pockets are filled with fond memories Raphael, our eyes are swimming like nostalgic fish for the tepid waters of pacific times when the machineries had just started. But our stomachs are empty for now, so have a little bite.

There is an elegiac tone to the play and Uri and Raphael are not just citizens in a small Soviet town but iconic (as in icon) stand-ins (like the painted elders in ancient icons)—solemn and Socratic, vertical and ritualized in characterization. We have no idea whether the playwright is familiar with Eliot’s Thomas Beckett but for us it has something of the same vestigial weight and ring. The inherent touch of ‘outsider-ism’ never fails to charm.

Quote: The scene of my life served on a silver platter. And my head with it. If we lose our minds, who will take care of our souls?

(Spacing and font size are playwright’s own.)Eds.

The action takes place in the photographer's laboratory. He is a man of 60 whose wife has become estranged after the loss of their only child, a girl. He believes that the girl is transmitting him signs from beyond through his photographs. He is friends with a clockmaker, his age, who is a widower. One day a stranger brings him a watch that he fails to repair. From then on, he will become atemporal, he will miss appointments, sleep for days on end and begins to live either in the future or in the distant past. Through his photographs, the photographer will slowly take him back to the present where they will both have to cope with the idea of imminent death. Topics: time, after-life, death, photography, the past, the future, friendship.

Scene 1

The laboratory lit only by the red and green lamps. The photographer is alone saying a prayer.

URI

Our Father who are

Because you are

You cannot not be

Beingness being your primal attribute

Just like not being is not really an option

Or is it?

Where are those who are not?

[the iron door squeaks and the lights change]

RAPHAEL:

Hello? Anybody in?

URI:

Come in, my friend, join me, I was just having lunch

RAPHAEL:

Oh, is it lunch time already? I went to the cemetery this morning to take some flowers to Maria's tomb. It's a splendid day, you should come out of your den once in a while, the park in spring is beautiful. What are you having?

URI:

Just some bread and cheese and these what do they call them
now, cherry tomatoes.

RAPHAEL

(sighs) There was a time when I would pick tomatoes from my
parents' garden. They were plump and juicy and oh so tasty. If
we didn't pick them in time, they would rot in the ground but
the seeds remained or were nibbled by birds. Warm clothes like
bread from the oven for a soul that was pure and humble. Enough
to watch the days go by, the evening fall gently on the cattle
and grass and our small house.

URI

I spent my days watching the mountain tops in the distance. The
silence was interrupted only by the shriek of vultures and
hawks. I remember the sheep returning from greener pastures, I
remember the cicadas and their wailing song. It's a memory like
a postcard that some people frame on their mirrors, it reflects
time and the way we once were. The light was extraordinary,
crystal blue and blinding bathing everything like a caring
mother.

RAPHAEL

The days and nights were shorter running like spring water, I
was in a hurry myself to catch up on the living and the sound
of sirens luring me to the city, it was like a dream.

URI

Our pockets are filled with fond memories Raphael, our eyes are
swimming like nostalgic fish for the tepid waters of pacific
times when the machineries had just started. But our stomachs
are empty for now, so have a little bite.

RAPHAEL

If you insist, but I can't stay long, I have a client coming
with an old watch.

URI

How is the old business going? Do people still need their
clocks?

RAPHAEL

Like a baby lark the sound of his mother's song, there are people bringing all sorts of watches to my shop: Soviet watches, American watches, Swatches, cuckoo clocks, pendulae, or gold watches. There are clock lovers like there are music lovers or movie lovers. Time keeping can even be a vice but I sometimes wonder do they arrange their lives in tune with the ticking or is it the object as jewel that attracts them? For me, it will always be the mystery of minutes, seconds, hours chasing one another and then starting all over each new day. Everything seems to be like that in this world. The moon, the Earth, the Sun. The sea and the shoreline. The hills and the horizon. Our frail bodies always trying to keep up with our tireless minds. I sometimes think my brain is ticking to the sound of a thousand clocks in my shop.

URI

Our brains can be deceiving, don't let time fool you Raphael.
Time is just a convention, an illusion.

RAPHAEL

No, it isn't. It is part of the great artificer's plan for existence. Without time, we would burst into black holes, time is like magnetic fields, it holds planets apart from one another, it gives us chances to become better or worse, to make up for old sins or to make new ones <others. It is one of the greatest mysteries of all time.

URI

When I take a picture, time stands still and I see as if through and out of time, like there were another world where time is irrelevant and there are other things that matter like love, attention, compassion. Beauty, mostly. I keep seeing Veronica in my pictures, you know. I don't know if she wants to tell me anything or if I just get glimpses from the other world. Or if my mind wills her there, still in my life, even like this.

RAPHAEL

She's been gone for so long...one day I'll ask you to show me those pictures where you keep seeing her. Now, I must leave as that client is supposed to arrive real soon. Thank you for the wonderful lunch. Take care of you and come out of this laboratory and not just for taking pictures but for walks in the park, the city has become so vibrant and vital, the youth

are amazing even if I don't understand them much, they look
tricky.

URI

I lost interest. Anyway I don't think I can keep up with the
latest changes. There have been too many in our lives already.
Here I'm at home.

[end of scene I]

Scene II

[Uri alone in his lab, working with his photographic paper in
the revelatory substance. He carefully places the photographic
paper in the yellow tray, moves it around with some pincers,
then, using the same pincers, he attaches the pictures which
begin to reveal themselves behind droplets of water. These are
black and white pictures but a strange red object appears in
each of them.]

URI

These are the days and nights of our short living, they are the
angels of dusk and the angels of soot rising from the shadows
gently unfolding blindfolds.

Our father

Blessed be thy children

Who are in heaven

The meek and the bold

The lions and la.....

[Raphael enters tempestuously]

Raphael

You won't believe what I have been doing for the past week. I
have been trying to fix a watch. Need I say, to no avail. I've
repaired thousands of watches, from the most complex ones to
children's watches, it has never been a problem for me. And
this one isn't old either and is a good brand too. I just can't
repair it, I can't (starts crying)

Uri

Are you sure it is a real watch? Maybe it is a decoration or some piece of jewelry. Maybe someone wanted to play a trick on you.

Raphael

I know a watch when I see one. This one is real as the palm of my hand. Wait you haven't heard the whole story. Ever since I got it, I haven't been able to sleep and I've started missing appointments. You know me, I'm a punctual man. Well, not anymore.

Uri

What do you mean you started missing appointments?

Raphael

I'm either awfully late or terribly early. I cannot fix the time in my head anymore it slips through my fingers like sand through the hourglass. I think I'm losing it my friend. Slowly but surely. I don't know if I should tell you this but the other day, when I went out of my shop, I thought I saw...Veronica

Uri

You mean Veronica, my daughter? How do you know it was her?

Raphael

She looked exactly like she did before dying--sweet little girl with pony tails and red dress. But this is not everything. The whole town had changed like in the time when she was still alive. The streets were grey and dusty, there were workers coming from the factory in their blue overalls, the sirens were screaming "Stay indoors", like that day of the Chernobyl explosion. I tried to find my car but it was nowhere I'd left it. My heart began to race and my feet to shake and I think I fainted.

Uri

And?

Raphael

When I woke up, there were people all around me, the ambulance had arrived. Everything was back to normal and I felt somewhat relieved. Then I came over to you.

Uri

This is not like you, not like you at all. If I say it is your mind that played a film in front of your eyes, would you believe me? Listen, I think that our mind has this kind of capacity of actualizing other worlds, of accessing different dimensions, even other temporal dimensions, universes, galaxies. It's like a short-circuit that sends us through a portal.

Raphael

It certainly felt like a short-circuit. I've been getting these strange dreams too, you know.

Uri

Tell me more about Veronica, what was she doing?

Raphael

She was chasing a balloon and laughing. She turned to me and waved - that's how I know for sure it was her - and then went on her way.

Uri

Listen, I wasn't going to show you these pictures but, given the situation, I think I should.

[Uri starts showing the latest pictures to Raphael. In the first one, there is a crane but in the right hand corner, we can see the red skirt of a girl and part of her pony tails; the next picture, still black and white portrays an army officer one of whose gloves is red; the third picture is of the store where the clockmaker works but there is a red line crossing through the building; the fourth picture is a self-portrait of Uri, there's a red aura around his head; the last picture represents the theatre building with a red bird sitting on its roof. The pictures are displayed on a large screen behind the stage]

You would say it is an impossibility with black and white film and you are right. But see, these pictures have been overexposed: too much light has impacted them and this is the result. It's like a thin red line from Peter Greenaway's short movies, you must have seen them too: A Walk through H. H can mean anything: Heterotopia, Heaven, Hell, Hours, History...But in my case, I think Veronica is signaling me from her world.

Raphael (more and more amazed)

History is crumbling my friend. I think we are the last rhinoceros to inhabit this planet. The machines have become liquid and the dreams have become specks of astral dust bringing us into unfamiliar worlds. I fear for my mind and for your sanity. I hope at least there will be some sort of dignity in the end.

Uri

In the end, there will be only love, that's what Paul said. All crafts will disappear, ours included. This is what we've had on our hands loveless, brainiac crafts and our search, oh our millennial search. Taking us from the heart of things to the heart of darkness...you were foraying the minutes while I was extemporizing stills. We killed time that's what we did!

Raphael

How will love save me from this temporal madness? Will Paul perhaps come with his hosts of angels to repair my watch? To give me back my sleep? To make room for the future, the present, the past? All aligned beautifully and orderly like toy soldiers on the battlefield of days? I need my routine back, the lunchtime and bedtime, the times that I visit you to relax, the time to cry for my wife.

Uri

There is no longer time for laments. The time of wailers has now passed. Now enter the time of forgetting and forgiving and letting go. Living alongside the ghosts if necessary but never crying for them. Never.

Raphael

(in tears)

But this is all that I have. My memories and my tears washing the roses that I take to my wife's tomb. Is there no more place for nostalgia and melancholy?

Uri (sternly)

No

Raphael

Where will we go, Uri? Who will come to bring flowers to our graves? Who will remember us? We've been out of time, all along, I now see. Nobody keeps the time in Communism for fear of the outcome. And nobody takes pictures of Communism for fear

of evidence. And now that we are free, we are disposable heroes of an age that's best not remembered.

Uri

Maybe you're wrong. We stand proud on the crest of a wave that's shattered time first by parching it like the body of a despised god and then played with it like playdough. But we still stand. You gave a purpose to people's lives attaching them to an order other than the one from above and I stole stills of beauty from a not so beautiful time. We stand for much more than you think.

Raphael

But now, all of that is over. I will never be able to repair a watch in my whole life. I fear time, it's like a locust eating away the remnants of my mind. I fear the ghosts too.

Uri

The ghosts are just impressions from our minds on the film of days. They are harmless and probably scared themselves. Veronica is long gone as you say but her passage through time has impregnated my world and yours with images that endure. What is the meaning of the red signs that you see in the pictures that I showed you? Is there a meaning even?

Raphael

Maybe our time is black and white and silent like a film from the thirties. We have long been on a procession coming as though from a Greek tragedy and this color, Veronica's color, is to show us that real time, the time of the living, be they dead or alive, is elsewhere.

Uri

When you dream, Raphael, what is the color of your dreams? Do you dream a movie or a set of stills?

Raphael

I rarely dream in color and all I remember from dreams are glimpses, or as you call them, stills. So far, even my dreams were chronological, they had a beginning, a middle and an end. Now it seems to start from the middle and take me to another story and another and another like a Russian doll. I wonder what is the structure of time?

Uri

My pictures tell me that time is both chronological and... I don't know how to put it, something else, that I still haven't figured out. But when I photograph a mere tree, there's a sense of that tree's history but also of its treeness, the story of this tree and other trees. The picture singles it out and makes it eternal in a moment in time.

Raphael

Maybe we are all like trees and this is the meaning of eternal life, our existence, as human beings peopling the planet, is the sum total of all people who have ever lived and will live, nothing is lost, everything transforms itself.

Uri

Yes, but if nothing is lost, then where does it go? Where are those who are not?

Raphael

Follow the red signs, they might lead you somewhere. I just hope I'm never going to be displaced from the present again. It's a terrifying experience.

Uri

I think you are right, I should be starting to get out of the laboratory once in a while. See the world as it is, enjoy the sunrays and the lark song like I used to. How is the world these days, Raphael?

Raphael

It has changed a lot. My small shop looks from out of time as compared to the things that have appeared. Fast and luxurious cars - they are driving them like crazy in this small town of ours, you should be careful when you cross the street - children with headphones in their ears, they look like they're drowned in a sea of dreams, busy businessmen and businesswomen in a hurry and impatient all the time, many many children who are obsessed with money and riches, but, saddest of all, nobody walks around anymore, they are all driving their cars.

Uri

I remember when I was walking with Veronica in this park. I was trying to put a blindfold on her eyes, not to see the terrible world we had brought her into, I took pictures of her in fields of flowers and told her she was a flower herself. Then again we were the only strollers in a deserted town, people were hiding

or were too tired and discouraged to hang out. She did love those walks of ours. She used to say: "Daddy, when I grow up, I want to be just like you, work with you in this laboratory and make up stories that I steal from the world".

Raphael

Maybe this is what she is doing right now, making up a story for you.

Uri

Maybe. Have you been to the marketplace lately?

Raphael

Yes and that hasn't changed much you know. Besides the import flowers that they now bring, it's the same hustle bustle you know, the same women from the country with their wonderful produce, stories and jokes.

Uri

How about the Chapel Hill? Are still people walking there?

Raphael

There are a few elderly people like you and me who go there religiously, it's a small community by now. They climb the hill up to the terrace every day and they stop for chats, they exchange recipes and memories. But that's pretty much it. I've seen a youth or two, they're usually running. By the way, sports has become a big fad for the young people nowadays. They no longer smoke and drink. They go to the gym. They are becoming more and more beautiful too.

Uri

I hope they will make beautiful lives for themselves like we once did. Although we did smoke and drink. For a while. And we aren't that pretty, are we now Rapha?

Raphael (chuckles)

There wasn't much you could do with beauty in the times that we lived. We lived the time of invisibility and anonymity. A beautiful face would have got us into trouble, for sure.

Uri

I imagine the town stripped of its framework of steel and iron, with the houses it used to have and not the ugly buildings they built. I imagine its parks and hills extending to the horizon

and people roaming them freely and simply enjoying life. I imagine, well, as you know, I imagine a lot of things but it's getting late now.

Raphael

Yes, we should probably head home.

Uri

Goodnight, Raphael

Raphael

Goodnight, Uri

[the lights go off and music is heard]

Scene 3

Uri

Our Father

Come Thy Kingdom

Of daffodils and sparrows

Of startled suns

And mustard moons

Here on earth

The world has changed unlike me who looks dusty and stuck in an unfinished project. But I love it with all my heart. Just like I love Raphael. Don't you just love Raphael, Veronica? He's a crazy old clockmaker and the ghosts are making fun of him. Do you hear me, Veronica? I know that you're here. I saw you as a bird today [picture of a red bird in a tree] you called out my name and I followed you. Then the sun became red for a second but it filtered the light so as to see the people again, Veronica. And they were beautiful, like you. What do you think, do people deserve second chances?

I know you will say they do and your mother would be so proud of you shining like a tiny star from your world up there. Tell me, do the dead hear us?

Yes, they hear us like the angels in Wim Wenders movie, a cacophony of voices reading in the library fighting with our

lovers for our lives, reciting verses, praying. This is no Tower of Babel and men are not yet speaking in tongues. They are just begging for mercy most of the times. Did you see the Chapel Hill, Veronica, in its viriscent glow? I took a picture, look, of the cell tower up on the hill where we used to go.

[picture of the cell tower, there is a red house in the distance]. Where is home now? Here in this laboratory or at our old house where your poor mother plays music all day long. She's left us too, you know. I saw her, the other day, when I was following your signs, I went to the theatre and there she was sitting on the bench a red book in her hand [picture of wife on the bench]. She looked up at me and smiled but I don't think she recognized me. What do you think, Veronica, should we show her our pictures?

[five pictures are shown on the big screen, the first one is an image of a market seller selling tomatoes, she is smiling broadly, the second picture is of an old man sleeping on a red bench while pigeons are gathering around him, the third picture is Klee's Angel of History, the fourth picture is of a young girl talking on the phone and holding a bunch of red tulips in her hand and the last picture the red clock in the center of town].

What of this world, Veronica, isn't it wonderful? I was a fool to leave it for so long! A crazy old fool. You're making me laugh, my sweet girl for the first time in many years. What do we say, shall we save your mother and Raphael?

[enter Raphael]

Raphael *[looking frightened and distraught]*

I think I'm nearing the end, Uri. Today I went to the cemetery and there was a stranger at my wife's grave, wearing a red scarf and there were poppies all over her tomb. I think your photos are doing it, they are transforming our world. After I left the cemetery, I was again in a loop where I beheld the town as it was in my parents' time, with buggies and horses, merchants screaming out to sell their products, women dressed like in the thirties, wearing sun umbrellas and all that. The sky was the color of amber and I watched everything in replay. It was like the movie of my life were played all over again in non-chronological order.

Uri

Wait a minute, what time was that?

Raphael

It was around noon, I think. But I could be wrong.

Uri

I was out taking pictures at that time. Nothing of the kind you are telling me in this part of town. But I did see a red bird and the sun become red for a second too. What happened, how did you come back again?

Raphael

It was in the blink of an eye. One minute the whole show was there, in front of my eyes and the next minute, I knew I was back in the present with cars roaring past me on the highway, with birds flapping their wings and people bumping into me. I don't know how long it lasted. Oh God, please make it stop.

Uri

Tell me more about the man you saw at your wife's grave. What did he look like?

Raphael

Now that I think about it, he looked familiar, actually he looked like me but younger. I don't care for this man, I want to have my old life back. Little as there's left of it.

Uri

These are our lives now, for better or worse. Maybe we needed a little shake-up. We were becoming dusty like a primadonna's closet full of moths. Maybe God has something in store for us, something we've been waiting for our whole lives. What do you fear, Raphael? Dying?

Raphael

Yes, but more than that, I fear being suspended in an a temporal space where I have to watch the same scene over and over again. The scene of my life served on a silver platter. And my head with it. If we lose our minds, who will take care of our souls?

Uri

Don't worry about that right now. Have you considered going to church?

Raphael

What for? The church is where other scared people go to get some relief and they get it for a while but then they're back to their old problems, cheating wives, disobeying children, harassing bosses. The last time I went to church was to bury my wife. You know what the priest said? Pray for her sins. Her sins! She was the most innocent person I've ever known and she didn't deserve to die so young. And I didn't deserve to lose her.

Uri

It's time to grow up, Raphael, people do die, some earlier, others later on. We have both lost dear, innocent ones too early. But there's nothing we can do about it now. Let's start to forgive the world and God

[looking for something]

Did the stranger at the grave look like the man in this picture?

Raphael

Yes, exactly. Where did you get this picture?

Uri

But it's you, my friend, forty years ago. Don't you recognize yourself?

Raphael

Can't be. Was I wearing a moustache?

Uri

Yes, you were, you were quite the dandy.

Raphael

Maybe I was but I'm sure not that anymore. Are you telling me that the young man I saw at the grave is me forty years ago? And I saw myself??? This is getting way too weird, I need air

Uri

Yes, let's go outside in the park

[the landscape changes, they are now in the park, beside Uri's lab; they are sitting on a bench]

Raphael

The trees never change. Did you know that the ginkgo tree lives for thousands of years? It has a modular design and structure, its parts regenerate themselves gradually, as they go. But people have envied the trees and their long-lasting lives and their verticality. We have cut them in huge numbers and made houses out of them as though they would guard us from death. I've known these trees here since I started coming to your laboratory. Nobody has cut them yet, fortunately

Uri

These are the trees of benevolence and the trees of forgiveness, they grow from a root that's theirs only partially. They have grown on a scaffold of muted dreams and hope in a better world. On a thin scaffold of incoherence and wooden language but they survived. And so did we. It is our crafts that saved us.

Raphael

Crafts also involve the cutting of wood and its transformation into ships that sail the seven seas into combs and pins that adorn the hair of the Salomes of the world, but also of Ophelia and Iphigenia. Tragic heroes all. Why have so many women had tragic destinies? Even when nothing happens to them it's that nothingness that kills them. Think of Virginia Woolf.

Uri START

I'm thinking about her "Hours". Do you know where the word "hour" comes from? The Horae, who were the goddesses of seasons and of the natural portions of time. They were always dancing in tune, obeying to their god, Chronos, ensuring that time stays unchanged and unaltered. The Horae or Horai have now disappeared at once with our age. They have been replaced by Persephone, whose mother Ceres wants the fruit of land. The fruit of man. The reapers are approaching.

Raphael

Even the trees shiver hearing your words, Uri. Look, the wind is blowing strong and it will chill our bones. Maybe we'll turn to stone, we'll be the Philemon and Baucis of friendship, dying both at the same time.

Uri

Or achieving eternal life at the same time.

Raphael

What makes a man deserving of eternal life? They teach us it's his good deeds. But the old book says it is by our words we will be judged. By our words, do you imagine? Most of the times we don't even realize what we are saying. Will the trees and animals judge us too? If that is the case, then I fear. I fear everything these days: the wind, the nights, the temporal loops, the dead and the dying. Sometimes, I fear you too. I sometimes feel you are hiding something from me.

Uri

If I am, it's only for your protection, Raphael. You have been so humble all your life and I would like to give you the whole world, actually more than just one world, all the possible worlds, to show you that you have a place in each of them just like Jesus told the Apostles that he's going to find them a spot in His Father's House. I want you to know you will always have a spot in my home and in my heart. Listen, I want to take some pictures of you.

Raphael

Pictures of me? What for?

URI

For us, to remember these times, when we are both unconsciously grazing the invisible. Making the invisible visible that's my job, remember?

Raphael

I sometimes think you're a magician, Uri

Uri

You can call me that too.

Just stand still please there on the bench, legs crossed, look in the distance or in my eyes.

Raphael

Should I smile or wave at you?

Uri

Do as you please

Good. Now please go next to that tree over there. You may hug it. Looks like it needs a hug

Raphael

Ok

Uri

Now let's have a look at you and the city. Go to that fence over there overlooking the city. Wait it's contre-jour. Go to the other side please.

Raphael

Is here all right?

Uri

Yes. Now please go next to that field of flowers. I want to take your picture there

Raphael

That one here? OK. [looks awkward]

Uri

The shooting session is over. You may come back on the bench. I think you're quite photogenic. Wait I also have one of those new cameras, digital. Let's take some selfies.

Raphael

Some selfies? What are those?

Uri

Just sit still and smile. [Uri places his head gently on Raphael's head and takes some selfies]. It's close-ups of you and me.

Raphael

I like the idea.

[end of scene 3]

Scene 4

Uri

Our Father

As in the sky

So on earth

The angels and the ghosts

The bread and the wine

Our memories and their aftermath.

I should go, or else I'll be late [leaves the laboratory]

In the next scene, he is alone in the middle of a stadium:

My pictures come out of the night like stars on the zenith, they flicker too. What if Raphael is right? What if we did stop time? Opened a vault into the black hole from before time? The days are now shorter, they say we have lost four hours from the sum total of time. What is that reported to a single human being life?

[enter Raphael, disconcerted]

Raphael

God, this is happening again. One minute ago it was day and now night has fallen. What is this place? I saw Veronica again chasing the red balloon and I followed her, from the town center, to the marketplace, through the park and here I am. From the two spaces of confinement and dream to the high planes where vultures fly in majestic circles, I've seen this world and its beauty. I've bathed in the oceans of crowds, in the amnesiac waters of the mass-media, lulling us to slumber and to insignificant details. I've seen the big picture and the small picture, I've touched the high and the low. But not this, dear Lord, not this. I wonder if Veronica is around here. [sees Uri approaching]. Uri is that you?

Uri

In flesh and bones and rags like vagabonds. I'm trying to take a picture of this stadium that looks like a Roman arena. How about you, what are you doing here?

Raphael

I was following Veronica. Haven't you seen her?

Uri

No (sighs).

It's just you and me. Looks like it's going to rain. Have you ever seen the drops of rain in a picture? They look like droplets of crystal become solid like glass. They have all the shades of grey in a black and white photo and the color of the rainbow in a color photo. What is the form that keeps that running water in that perfect tear shape? Remember, Rapha, the

stadium and the manifestations in the scorching sunlight?
Remember the neatly aligned groups of pioneers and workers
chanting hymns as though to a god?

Raphael

Oh, I remember that all too well. I wish I could forget that
part. I'm beginning to forget more and more. But I remember you
and Veronica on that motorbike cheering happily while you were
taking pictures of her and the crowds. That had a beginning and
an end. These were the days of our lives.

Uri

There will be many more days of our lives and I will be happy
to spend them with you. Remember when we first met [a picture
of light is displayed in the background] I came to you to have
a watch repaired. I was distressed because it was a gift from
my wife and I didn't want her to know I had managed to break it
so fast. We started talking about politics and the world that
we both knew so well. You had those big eyes and I thought they
were the warmest loving eyes I'd ever seen.

Raphael

And you looked like a dissident with your long curly hair and
trapeze jeans and leather jacket. You looked like a wayward
angel to me. We were small but felt like giants [picture of the
sky and the sea]. I thought you were baptizing the world with
light.

Uri

We lost and found each other on several occasions like two
widowed penguins we took care of one another, we took care of
the world, of the course of rivers and the phases of the moon,
of the four corners of attention and of the saplings that were
planted in those times

Raphael

The saplings had a red ribbon around them to keep them tight
and upright now they have become the parks, the parks have
become the forests and the forests were felled like summer
grass. [picture of forest] Giants step on tall trees and ants,
they devour the world in their passage. Were we giants or
elves, Uri?

Uri

I prefer to think we were human, with our failings and sins, carrying burdens that others wouldn't carry, showing a small glimpse into the heart of things, unveiling the clothes of time and making up for the lost connection. But our connection, Raphael, what would you say about it?

Raphael

All I can say is that I wouldn't have been able to make it through without you. You are my only family now. There's a crack in the clouds, a surreal sunlight is beckoning us. It's like judgement day. Will we be found pure or tainted? Sinful or innocent? Will the good or the bad prevail?

Uri

The starry sky above me and the moral law in me [picture of the starry sky], that's what Kant said. We have tried to be good, more than some and less than others. We have made mistakes and will continue to make them. My father used to say "I don't kill and I don't steal, so there should be no problem". But I wonder if that's enough. For the old Greeks, excessive pride was a mortal sin. Ate, it was called. When the humans wanted to be like gods, with free will and all that. We have been a bit like gods, you and I. You were intervening with time and I was compressing distance.

Raphael

We were doing our jobs mainly. Putting to work our god-given skills. When I was fixing a watch, I got a feeling of the beautiful job done, of having put things into their right order. Like a peasant at the end of a working day. Or like God in the seventh day. All of His creation aches for this service, the planets and plants, the animals and the animae celestes, the children in their games, the young in their tempestuous treading and the old in their wondering ways. We haven't served in a war but in a peace treaty.

Uri

A frail peace treaty, where God has put all of His creation in our hands and we have tried our best to preserve it. Our children and other people's children are the heirs of an architect's dream, of a poet's plunge to the sky, of a city built by romantics and visionaries. This is our home, our hearth and battlefield. I was angry with God when Veronica died. But she has taught me that the world is alive in all its zones.

Raphael

I'm still angry with God for closing the world down on us like we were some extras in a movie we don't even understand. If only I could grasp the meaning of this, then it would be easier. If only I could fix that watch!

Uri

Sometimes things cannot be fixed. They are irreparable. In life we should mourn only for irreparable things, like losing a loved one.

Raphael

I mourn the mornings and evenings, I mourn the trains and telegraphs, I mourn the books and the soda bottles, I mourn the zeppelins and the submarines.

Uri

When the all the ships set sail, from Viking ships to sky rockets, we forget once more about time, time expands and compresses like an accordion, it becomes nothing and everything. I remember "Youth without ageing and life without death". When the hero comes back home, he feels he hasn't been long gone but in reality all his loved ones are either very old or dead. Did our dead travel through time, Raphael? Or did they age awfully fast?

Raphael

I travel through time and you're still here ageing and ageless like a gingko tree. I am still here, which is somewhat of a miracle. I'm not one to believe in miracles. Not for me. But I'm beginning to believe in a force that keeps us alive and intact, apart and together, a force other than gravity or time or distance.

Uri

I reckon, because it feels like reckoning day, that you have somewhat changed. Have we been here since the beginning of days? And returning only to find one another again and again?
[picture of Uri and Raphael, the light changes turning to normal daylight]

Raphael

How long has it been, Uri? Since we've been here?

Uri

The whole night long

Raphael

Are we still good?

Uri

Yes

Raphael

What are we going to do from now on?

Uri

We'll find our way home

Raphael

Where is home?

Uri

Home is where your heart is

Raphael

What kind of heart?

Uri

A heart of gold

Raphael

Do I have a heart of gold?

Uri

For a noble heart, the most precious gift becomes poor, when
the giver stops loving. (Shakespeare)

Raphael

I never stopped loving you. Do you love me, Uri?

Uri

More than you will ever know

Raphael

Is love the force that holds everything together?

Uri

Like a Pablo Neruda poem

Raphael

What do you mean?

Uri

Like the gaze that faces the stranger's gaze and sustains it answering back, like a face that becomes like a poster in your mind, like the sky that appears blue but actually it isn't the sea water looking green, it is all in the force of sustaining an appearance

Raphael

I wonder what God looks like

Uri

They say the angel of death has a thousand eyes. How many more God must have! In Buddhism, we are all god and He is someone who is playing hide and seek with himself, appearing in a different image in each and every one of us

Raphael

That's what Christ told the apostles, that they are gods but I doubt whether they believed him. Uri, if we are good, why were we judged?

Uri

I guess everyone gets judged. Even angels. More harshly than others even. But maybe not. If they are really cute (smiles and looks in the distance). Let's take a look at the pictures I've taken ever since I got here [first there's Raphael alone in the middle of the stadium, under ominous, cloudy skies; then, there's the two of them under the same skies, then the light reemerges and their faces are transfigured by the light, in the last picture there's just the stadium looking modern but deserted)

Raphael

Amazing. It's like time out of time. Maybe they needed time beyond time too. The minutes, the seconds and the hours, the

myriad months with their secret numbers and names. The years to remember birthdays. The time of the sun and the time of the moon. The time of stars and galaxies. A time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant, a time to reap. A time to kill, a time to heal. A time to laugh, a time to weep.

Uri

How can ghosts find their way back in the world without time?
[there is a red glow in the scene] I think it's time. Goodbye,
my love.

[end of scene 4]

Scene 5

[Uri alone in the laboratory]

Uri

Our Father

Forgive us our sins

Those we have forgotten

And those we cannot forget

Paint us gold and silver

Give us back our wings

Books, books. Where can I find some? I used to be a bookworm, devouring books for days on end. Now that the old book is obsolete, I wonder what will guide our steps out of the long night? Morning has broken over this young generation who is supposed to think in a non-linear fashion. I wonder what that means. Will they have greater brain capacities? Look what we have achieved with limited ones.

[enters Raphael, timidly, smiling]

Raphael

May I?

Uri

Of course, do come in. I was waiting for you.

Raphael

I'm just coming from the market place and I got you this nice bunch of flowers. I got a few tomatoes and cheese if you'd care to join me for lunch

Uri

Of course, that's lovely. Where shall I put these flowers?
[takes a plastic bottle, cuts it in half and places the flowers in it]

Raphael

You won't believe what happened. I managed to fix the watch. And the guy who brought it to me never came back for it. So I figured I would give it to you.

Uri

To me? Are you sure?

Raphael

Yes. I want you to keep it. For me. For you. For everybody else. I have more clocks than I can handle in my old shop. I hear their ticking again and I'm happy. For some people, it's the bells from the church, for others, the roar of cars, for others the song of the nightingale. For me it's the ticking of clocks.

Uri

Thank you so much. Listen, I have something for you too. It's my old Zmena that I've been using to take photographs for years. I think I'll no longer use it. A student of mine has taught me how to work with one of those new digital cameras. It's quite fascinating, you can take as many pictures as you like and then you can alter them as you please. You can draw and paint in them, you can play with light, distance and even time.

Raphael

Tell me about this student of yours. And thank you

Uri

It's just this very talented kid who wants to become a movie director. He takes these amazing photographs that I only half-understand, they're very filled with detail but in a non-linear fashion. He's having an exhibition this afternoon. Do you want to go?

Raphael

Sure, I've nothing to do this afternoon.

Uri

Wonderful! My wife will be coming too. I showed her the pictures of Veronica. You know what she said? "For me, it's been music. But I'm glad that you showed them to me. Now I know for sure". I think we needed photography in the twentieth century. So many unbelievable things have happened, the future generations would have had a hard time believing them if we didn't have this sort of evidence.

Raphael

Yes, the wars, Fascism and Communism, Hiroshima, Chernobyl, the cold war, the cars and space travel, Hollywood and rock music. It's all there on photographic paper. God knows what they will see in them. In us.

Uri

I will never forget the picture from Hiroshima. They say the people's shadows were imprinted on the walls during the explosion. Like a bloody Xray. The xray, psychoanalysis and pictures, these are the apex of Modern man's search. We haven't been very discrete. On the contrary. We have wanted to touch the kernel of things, to take each object and unveil it like a lover, like a famished lover. We have been myopic too. The new age will take us from the detail to the big picture. These kids they are visionaries, they see through the heart and soul and beyond.

Raphael

They already travel in different temporalities. On the internet, they say that time expands like a ripe pumpkin. It also flies. But they will have enough time to assimilate the huge encyclopedia that we have left them. And then connect the dots. And then draw their own picture. Make their own encyclopedia.

Uri

They say the kids nowadays are ignorant and less profound. I beg to differ. From the students I see come into my laboratory, I can tell that they are very creative and inquisitive. They ask a lot of questions and speak a lot. Unlike us. Remember, we were terrified to speak in class. Unless you had something brilliant to say, you had better shut up. But now, the new generation speaks up their mind, they are critical and passionate about what they're doing. They're no longer interested in the heart of things but in the way the heart of things relates to the world and themselves. Although they take selfies, they are not narcissistic

Raphael

Were we narcissistic, Uri?

Uri

A bit and for a while. Enough to feel a bit too sorry for ourselves, as if the whole world were limited to our sorrows and frustrations. Enough to look for Mercury in the skies, in the ground and in water. But Mercury cannot be grasped, he conspires with and is hidden by time. Just like light. But enough is given us to see partially through Maya's veils.

Raphael

I no longer fear death or time. Time takes care of its servants and children. And I think I have served it well for the past forty years. Even if I have remained a child in time. We have advanced so much but we have remained children. To us the kingdom of heaven

Uri

To us the freedom and the sparrow's flight, to us the soaring song of splendid guitars and violins, to us the written page and the unwritten testament, to us the three-dimensional space and the two-dimensional space complimenting and reinforcing each other, to us the libraries of Babel and the spiral steps, to us the ebony towers and the cathedrals of green. When I go in the world now, I feel like I'm stepping through soft air and I find all of creation beautiful. There's nothing I wouldn't take a picture of.

Raphael

When I go outside now, I hear the bells from the church up the hill and I see this town of chapels become filled with compassion and trust. I see myself as part of a greater design and I see everyone else as having a glorious destiny. I have seen the light and the glory. It was frightening at first but so was the burning bush.

Uri

We were baptized in water but brought to light the burial and the necessity for rebirth. And the crafts will not disappear. Will the potter stop making pottery? Will the children stop playing games? Will the artificer stop making art?

Raphael

I'll never stop repairing watches, that's for sure. And if the time comes that I won't be able to do that anymore, I will tie ribbons of grass around the old monuments, I will weave wreaths of flowers that I will place on the doors of small shops and I will light a candle actually two: one for the living and one for the dead.

Uri

When the time comes, I will take my wife to watch a movie from the 50's, I'll drive her home and tell her that she's beautiful, I will look for you when night falls and I will show you the world in my eyes.

Raphael

The world is beautiful in all its zones but I still think we are living in the best of all possible worlds.

Uri

I wouldn't mind visiting a few other worlds. Just for the sake of comparison. Just to see how it feels. But I don't want to be alone like the Little Prince.

Raphael

We'll always be together, Uri [gently places his head on Uri's shoulder]. [we hear Like a Bridge over Troubled Water and the curtain falls].

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *This play is inspired by my father, who was the only photography and film teacher in our hometown during Communism in Romania. In this play, I wanted to explore the magic of “kindred spirits” of a friendship such as it could exist between a photographer and a clockmaker during inauspicious times. Another theme which is extremely important is that of time and timelessness: ageing, dying, but also transcending (time), becoming immortal, etc. My main influence is Beckett and Modernism. This is my first play and it has never been performed before.*

PLAYWRIGHT’S BIO: I am a poet from Romania. My was volume was published with a Romanian press, the second one with Silver Bow in Canada and my third is forthcoming with New Meridian Arts.

The Perfect Matrimonial Alliance

By Rashma N. Kalsie

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama editor JANET COLSON writes:*

Live from Bollywood, it's The Perfect Matrimonial Alliance, a stageplay that's the perfect mash-up of Bollywood and real life. Indian-Australian playwright Rashma N. Kalsie's script takes us on a trip to the suburbs of North Delhi in the 90's, with a traditional family trying to broker an arranged marriage for their headstrong (and whip-smart) daughter, Simran, who has a more modern take on the ideal partnership.

The story begins with an advertisement for a popular movie coming up on TV as an invocation of the magic of a Bollywood romance:

TV VOICE OVER

Come fall in love..watch the TV premiere of Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge only on Zee. (Shahrukh Khan's Voice)

CHUTKI Come fall in LOVE...(mesmerized)

Don't worry about not keeping up with the cultural references. Yes, this is another world, but it's also a parallel universe where the characters fly off the page and the dialogue is so natural, you always know who's saying what whether you know bupkes about Bollywood or you're already a fan.

The Perfect Matrimonial Alliance has a cinematic appeal as well as a theatrical realism that resonates from past to present. There's a lot of good stuff about standing up for oneself and forging a new identity in an oppressive system. I especially love Simran's outspoken and pragmatic feminism, which drives her to speak the unspeakable even at the expense of the perfect Bollywood ending.

Here's Simran on why she hasn't yet made her perfect match:

Simran: We interviewed quite a few men, but they turned out

to be idiots.

Senior Editor Charles writes: *This is 2nd language writing so expect a touch of 'outsider-ism'. For us, this is part of the reading experience and in the interest of authenticity of 'voice' we don't edit or correct it. Nouns that include the letter 'u' as in — neighbour, favour, colour—are using the British spelling common in India (and also in Canada) and are correctly spelled. (Spacing and format are the playwright's own.) CP*

The Perfect Matrimonial Alliance

By Rashma N. Kalsie

ACT I

Scene 1

INT-LIVING ROOM-DAY

1996 Summer. *Living room of a two-bedroom apartment in a middle-class suburb in North Delhi. The television set is placed on the top shelf of a mobile cabinet. There is a brass flower vase next to the television set. Cheap, colorful and artificial flowers in the vase draw attention to the vase. The sofas are covered with the bed sheets.*

*The bed rooms open into the living room. The living room is more like a foyer with doors opening into it. A calendar of Goddess Durga and Laxmi hangs on one door. This is Baldev and Kumud's room. The second door has the poster of the hit Bollywood film, 'Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge'. (**DDLJ**) This is Simran and Chutki's room.*

CHUTKI (24) is a next-door girl with a dreamy look. She is sitting on the sofa, chopping onions in a steel plate. The plate is placed in her lap, the chopped onions are strewn on her dress. She is watching a movie trailer on the TV and singing along. The title song of the film, Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge, is being telecast on the TV. When the song ends Chutki lets out a SIGH of yearning.

TV VOICE OVER

Come fall in love..watch the TV premiere of Dilwale Dulhaniya

Le Jayengey only on Zee. (Shahurukh Khan's Voice)

CHUTKI

Come fall in LOVE...(mesmerized)

BALDEV CHAUDHARY (60) swings open the door that has Goddess' calendar. He comes out of the bedroom folding the newspaper. He has an expression of discontent bordering on frustration.

BALDEV

Arrey..you are again watching a film? Your brain will rust with Bollywood shit. *Chalo*, give the remote and go to your room.

CHUTKI

I didn't watch the TV one whole week because they were showing DDLJ today.

BALDEV

DDL--*Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayengey*? How can you watch the same film over and over. It's not a Hitchcock thriller!

CHUTKI

I have seen it only once. But how can you rubbish a film without seeing it?

BALDEV

You don't need to eat rotten potatoes to know they are rotten!

CHUTKI

That's a poor analogy.

BALDEV

Clearly shows you don't work in the kitchen. Rotten potatoes stink..you can smell them from a distance.

CHUTKI

How come there were no rotten potatoes in your time?

BALDEV

Integrity..that is the difference between my generation and.. *oye hoye!* you're chopping onions on the sofa? Get off..I just spent 7000 rupees to change the...Off!

CHUTKI

There's a bedcover between me and the upholstery.

Chutki gets up reluctantly. KUMUD CHAUDHARY (54) enters from the kitchen. Baldev puts the newspaper on the table.

KUMUD

Chutki! I need the onions NOW!

BALDEV

You haven't done the gravy yet? I don't have a helicopter to fly you--

CHUTKI

Ma, you get dressed. I'll do the gravy in 2 minutes.

KUMUD

There are three hours for the meeting.. my *sari* will crumple.

BALDEV

We can't get late because of your sari. Do you know how many girls are lined up to meet a perfect boy like this one?

CHUTKI

That's exactly why *ma* should look crisp and smart. A perfect mother-in-law for a perfect Non-Resident Indian.

BALDEV

Haan..but he needs a perfect wife before the perfect mother-in-law?

KUMUD

Our Simran is no less. She speaks fluent English--

BALDEV

Haan..but English is no qualifying criterion for a marriage.

CHUTKI

But these people advertised they are looking for an English-speaking girl. They will give her some marks..

BALDEV

0.5 bonus points for English, that's all. Didn't you see the boy's photo..he looks like a film star.

CHUTKI

How would you know what a film star looks like, you haven't watched a film in 10 years.

Kumud indicates Chutki to stop the argument.

BALDEV

There aren't any boys lined up for you or for your sister.

KUMUD

They don't need a queue..just one..

CHUTKI

I am going to make sure there is a queue outside the door.

Door bell rings

BALDEV

There's only one person outside the door, that good-for-nothing neighbour, Sheena.

KUMUD

Shhush!

Chutki goes out to answer the door bell.

BALDEV

You'd better ask her to leave right away. I don't want any distractions on such an important day.

Chutki...where's the remote?

Chutki and Sheena heard off

SHEENA

I can't wait--God..
Shahrukh's so cute.

CHUTKI

Did you watch 'On
the Sets of DDLJ'? He is so
down-to-earth, *yaar*.

BALDEV

I want the remote.

SHEENA (27) enters. She is attractive and slightly plump. She comes in beaming and happy.

CHUTKI

Sorry papa, but we are watching a show.

BALDEV

Who's we?

KUMUD

You crack such poor jokes..why it's Sheena and Chutki.

(Signaling him to stop)

BALDEV

I want to watch Indo-Sri Lanka match, how's that a joke. And Sheena, sorry to disappoint you child, we are going out.

KUMUD

He's joking.. Chutki will be home.

SHEENA

I know.

Beat..Baldev gives Chutki an intense stare.

BALDEV

You know? Why of coure..the whole neighbourhood knows more about this family more than I do. But what happened to your television, child?

SHEENA

Oh the TV....? Umn..it's working..woh, Titu is watching..
umnn..the match - yes, the Indo-Sri Lanka match.

BALDEV

Ah..so you finally paid the cable operator? Four months rent was
it?

Chutki stares back at Baldev

CHUTKI

How can you believe that lying, cheating cable-
operator?

BALDEV

Tut..not me, I don't believe anything that people say.

Baldev smiles at Sheena, she looks away.

KUMUD

You chat with Sheena, I'll do the onions.

Kumud takes the onions to the kitchen.

CHUTKI

I'll do it ma..

BALDEV

Give me the remote before you go to the kitchen.

CHUTKI

Seriously papa, you want us to miss Shahrukh's candid interview
for a test match?

SHEENA

Let it be *yaar*..anyway he is going out in one hour..

BALDEV

Ah..so you have an hourly update.

SHEENA

*Nahin..woh..(to Baldev) Accha..I'll come back at six. (to
Chutki)*

*Chutki takes out the remote from her pyjama pocket and hands it
to Baldev. He takes it as a matter of right.*

Sheena scuttles out, Chutki follows her to see her off.

*Baldev turns the channel to the match. We hear the commentary
in the background.*

BALDEV

Why is Azhar batting, have we--? Oh oh oh...

Commentary is heard. Baldev watches.

BALDEV

Drop it, drop it, drop it, drop it... Dhut! Bloody Ranatunga, never misses a catch. Kumud! Lunch?

KUMUD (OFF)

Ready...

BALDEV

And Simran?

KUMUD (OFF)

Ready..

BALDEV

Where is she?

Kumud enters with salad platter, offers to Baldev. He picks a carrot. She continues standing with the platter as he picks more carrots and eats.

BALDEV

Is she serious this time? Or do you want me to bring Prince Charles to India?

KUMUD

Shush..she is working.

BALDEV

A school teacher working on a Sunday?

KUMUD

It's the new principal; he is driving the teachers up the wall.

BALDEV

Not the principal, it's your daughter driving us up the Himalayas.

KUMUD

Shush! She brought the work home so that we can meet the boy.

BALDEV

O ho..I should thank you two for giving me time!(sarcasm)

KUMUD

Arrey woh..

Kumud starts to reply. Excitable noises on TV..Baldev munches the carrot.

BALDEV

Wait wait wait..Clean Bold! Muralidharan..rascal! And you--by God, what timing! You speak and India loses a wicket!

KUMUD

Tut. you enjoy the salad, I'll check on Simran.

BALDEV

What enjoy? If they play like this, the five-day match will end in one day.

Baldev takes the plate and watches intently. Kumud exits. She opens the door that has the movie poster. Baldev continues watching.

Scene 2

INT.- LIVING ROOM - DAY (AFTER 20 minutes)

Chutki enters from the kitchen. She places the bowl of curry on the table. Baldev is watching the match.

CHUTKI

Do you want rice or should I make chappatis?

BALDEV

You can't be negotiating menu at this hour. Just serve what you have!

CHUTKI

Ma..Simran..lunch.

Chutki exits to the kitchen. SIMRAN (31) comes out of the room that has DDLJ poster. She is a plain Jane. Her hair is tied back in a neat braid. She has a no-nonsense look. She takes in the TV and her father in a quick glance. Baldev looks at her askance. She starts to cross to the kitchen.

BALDEV

Kumud! Can you and Simran get dressed?

Simran stops mid-way. She turns to face Baldev. Kumud comes out of the room. She is in a blouse and petticoat. A towel is thrown on her shoulders to cover her blouse.

SIMRAN
I am ready for the meeting.

BALDEV
Are you wearing this dress--

SIMRAN
What's wrong with it?

BALDEV
On the day we are meeting
a boy from Australia--

SIMRAN
I bought it last month.

BALDEV
An engineer with a foreign
degree--

SIMRAN
From Rajouri market. The shop
has the latest trend.

BALDEV
Who earns seventy-
thousand dollars--

SIMRAN
And this is not cheap.

BALDEV
Whose family lives in South
Delhi--

SIMRAN
This is the best dress I have.

BALDEV
Even a clerk would refuse you if he sees you in this dress!

KUMUD
What's wrong with the dress? (mustering courage)

BALDEV
Is that what you are teaching your daughter, to rebel against
me? (To Kumud)

*Baldev hurls the salad plate into the air. It smashes. Kumud
lets out a squeal. Simran remains unfazed. Chutki comes out of
the kitchen. BEAT*

SIMRAN
Don't blame ma, I chose the dress.

BALDEV
You think I can't see through your tricks? (To Simran)

KUMUD

What tricks..she likes this dress, that's all.

BALDEV

It's not what she likes, but what will make her likeable.

KUMUD

She prefers pastel colors...

BALDEV

She's not a beauty queen that she can wear any colour she likes.

CHUTKI

Beauty Queens are not competing for grooms.

BALDEV

There you go..we were missing your voice.

CHUTKI

I was only trying to reason out.

BALDEV

Can you please reason out with the boys want to marry a Aishwarya Rai look alike. Think I'm lying--here-- look at this advertisement..today's paper..see, I have marked it for you..

He picks up the newspaper...shows the advertisement..Reads.

BALDEV (CONTD)

"Looking for a model-like beautiful, tall, slim girl. Cut off height 5 ft 5inch"..See! You think I am mad to fuss over your dresses.

CHUTKI

Ha..these grooms will have to go to a beauty pageant to find a model like bride.

Chutki exits to the kitchen.

KUMUD

Why don't you wear a sari? (To Simran)

BALDEV

What's wrong with you? She looks old in a sari. Better wear a bright colored salwar kameez.

Chutki enters with a broom. She sweeps the remains of the plate and salad. Exits.

SIMRAN
I don't have a *bright dress*.

BALDEV
Of course she has a bright dress. We bought it last year...when we met the boy from Canada.

KUMUD
Tut..but that is silk.

BALDEV
That is exactly what we need--silk, to make a fucking impression.

KUMUD
But it's too hot to wear silk.

Chutki enters. She picks up the bowl that she had put on the table.

BALDEV
Seriously? You think you are in a position to think about comfort?--Where are you taking the lunch?

CHUTKI
Keeping it safely in the kitchen.

BALDEV
Bring it back..we are late.

SIMRAN
I don't see how a change of dress can change my destiny?

KUMUD
Shush...

BALDEV
Look at her, unwilling to budge. Do you know how many matrimonial ads I responded to last month...47! BEAT Do you know how many people responded?

KUMUD
Tut--I know-
-

BALDEV
Three--exactly THREE, of which one is unemployed, the other has polio in one leg, and the third is waiting for his divorce papers.

KUMUD

I know, but-
-

BALDEV

No you don't know, because if
you did, you would do
anything to make this
proposal work.

Kumud starts to reply--stops. BEAT

BALDEV (CONTD)

We have reached a dead END--

SIMRAN

So let's put an end to this weekly PARADE?

BALDEV

The what?

KUMUD

Shush..go to your room.

BALDEV

No no no no..stay here, let's talk! So I force you to parade in
front of strangers! Right?

KUMUD

No no no no..she did not mean it like that.

Simran looks away.

BALDEV

She meant it like that!

KUMUD

She meant it generally...

BALDEV

I know your game. You want them to humiliate me. Why? I have fed
you, clothed you, given you a house, this fucking house--for
what? So you train your guns at me?

*He looks for something to throw. He charges towards the brass
flower vase. Chutki appears from the kitchen. She grabs the
vase before him.*

CHUTKI

I've a bright, blue salwar kameez.

BALDEV

Put that vase back.

CHUTKI

You don't need the vase, you need the dress.

KUMUD

It's okay. Let him
break the vase, the
TV, the whole
house.

CHUTKI

It's bright, it's just right
for summers and it's loose, so
Simran will fit into it.
Just what you need for
today's meeting.

BALDEV

We are not meeting anyone. It is the end of the PARADE. Didn't you hear your sister? From now on, she will sit at home and wait for a miracle. Just like Pummy!

KUMUD

Don't! Don't drag Pummy into this..leave her alone,
please!

*BEAT. Kumud's towel falls to the ground. She looks
beaten as she sobs silently. Door Bell.*

Chutki takes the door.

*Simran takes in the moment. She looks at her mother in
pain. But Kumud has withdrawn into herself. Kumud
picks her towel - Exits to the room. Simran exits to
the kitchen. Chutki is heard off stage as the above
sequence plays out.*

SHEENA

Someone shrieked! You okay? (OFF)

CHUTKI

Oh yes yes yes..that was mom.

SHEENA

Oh my God! (OFF)

CHUTKI

Oh no no no..it's the match--India lost a wicket. (OFF)

SHEENA

The match?(not convinced). (OFF)

Baldev turns on the TV. India has lost a wicket.

SCENE 3

INT-CAFE, AT SHOPPER'S STOP MALL- DAY

RAJ MALHOTRA (32) is a handsome and charming. His sunglasses, gelled hair, crisp white shirt and his countenance tell us he is successful. He wears a smug smile.

MONICA MALHOTRA (26), Raj's sister, is slim and glamorous. She is a head-turner. Their mother, USHA MALHOTRA (55) is a wanna-be. She wears a gaudy saree, dark lipstick and sandals.

SURENDER MALHOTRA (62), Raj's father, is a bulky man with an air of self-importance. He is sorting papers while his wife is slurping her coffee.

SURENDER

Six to go.

USHA

Six girls or six wickets?

SURENDER

By God, if you had paid attention to what I was saying.

USHA

You confuse everyone, one minute you talk cricket, the next you are talking about proposals.

SURENDER

Money can buy everything except--

USHA

See, now you jumped to money.

MONICA

Love

SURENDER

Intelligence.

RAJ

Dad..don't be bad.

SURENDER

Son..please don't make the same mistake as me.

USHA

For once, you admit you make mistakes.

Raj gives his mother the look of 'please don't speak'

SURENDER

Marry a girl who has some brains.

RAJ

Mom...please..focus on your coffee. We have meetings lined up.

Usha goes back to her coffee.

MONICA

I'll freshen up.

SURENDER

Don't take forever, we are already late for the next meeting.

Monica pulls out a makeup kit.

RAJ

Why did we squeeze so many meetings in a day?

SURENDER

We could have managed time better if your mother and sister had not darted off to the shops and now they want to freshen up every few minutes.

USHA

Wait, I want to check my makeup.

SURENDER

Please control your mother, every time she goes into the ladies room she comes out looking worse.

MONICA

Dad..don't be bad.

Usha stomps out. Monica follows her chuckling.

RAJ

Can we call up the people we are to meet next?

SURENDER

We can pass this girl, she's average.

Surender pulls out Simran's biodata from a heap of papers.

RAJ

Do we have her photo?

SURENDER

I can't carry photos around, therefore I wrote my comments on the biodata.

RAJ

What does she do?

SURENDER

School Teacher.

RAJ

I like that, plenty of jobs for the teachers. Does she teach Maths?

SURENDER

English.

RAJ

That's terrific, she can pass the English exam easily. What's her name?

SURENDER

Wait...

Surender reads.

SURENDER (CONTD)

Simran Chaudhary.

RAJ

Simran! We can't skip this one dad.

SURENDER

But she is average - nothing wrong, but nothing right.

Monica returns.

SURENDER

Where's Usha?

MONICA

She's touching up her lipstick.

SURENDER

Why did you gift her makeup kit? She wears all of it at the same time.

RAJ

Let her have fun with it. So how tall is Simran Chaudhary?

MONICA

Are we meeting a Simran? Wow!

SURENDER

Don't be excited, she doesn't look like anything like a Bollywood actor.

RAJ

Height?

SURENDER

Most people add an inch or two to the actual height, after all you can't measure.

Surender scans the biodata

SURENDER (CONTD)

5 feet 2 inch.

MONICA

More like five one.

RAJ

Weight?

SURENDER

Says medium built.

MONICA

More like slightly overweight.

SURENDER

They click photo at an angle, you can never tell.

RAJ

Means she is not fat or you would have noted it down.

SURENDER

Definitely not fat.

RAJ

Fair?

SURENDER

At least the biodata says she is fair.

MONICA

Prem Studio photographers do the touch up anyway.

RAJ

Didn't we specify 'No photos from Prem Studio'.

MONICA

Every girl goes to Prem for a matrimonial photo shoot. They wait weeks for an appointment because those guys can make you look three sizes small.

SURENDER

And the soft lens makes you look five years younger.

RAJ

Ah good one..how old is she?

SURENDER

31! By the Goddess, how did I shortlist her?

RAJ

Wait wait wait wait..let's go over her particulars without discounting facts--5ft 2inches, medium built or say not fat, fair, teacher, knows English, and definitely has brains. Guys, let's meet Simran.

SURENDER

Oho..but we have to meet the currency agent on the way?

RAJ

Just call them and delay the meeting by half an hour. Use my mobile.

SURENDER

Tut..mobile call is 16 rupees a minute. I'll use the phone booth. Can you believe they still charge one rupee per call.

RAJ

But dad, this is quicker. They might leave if we don't turn up on time.

SURENDER

This is India son. The girls' parents play on back foot. They'll wait.

RAJ

I don't like to make people wait.

MONICA

Don't stress, no one expects people to be on time. Who knows they might be running late themselves?

Surender exits. Raj reads Simran's biodata.

SCENE 4

INT-BED ROOM-DAY (AFTER 30 Minutes)

There's a small bed and a stool by the mirror/dressing table. Shahrukh Khan's poster is on the wall. Simran has changed into a blue dress. Chutki is rummaging through a box of bangles.

CHUTKI

Try this..

SIMRAN
It won't fit..

CHUTKI
This one has a clasp.

SIMRAN
It's pointless.

CHUTKI
How do you know you won't like him?

SIMRAN
The question is whether he will like me?

Chutki slips the bangle in Simran's hand.

CHUTKI
It's destined. Didn't you see his name?

SIMRAN
Seriously, the name?

Chutki stands by Shahrukh's poster. Stretches her arms like him.

CHUTKI
Raj, Simran on screen - two strangers meet on Eurorail and ta..da..! Cut to - Raj and Simran in Delhi- two strangers meet in a hotel and ta..da...

SIMRAN
Aren't you too old to believe in Santa Claus and Cupid.

CHUTKI
Films imitate life.

SIMRAN
There's a fine line between the real and the fantasy.

CHUTKI
What if he says yes.

SIMRAN
What if he doesn't?

CHUTKI
Someone better will come along, because God creates a special someone for everyone.

SIMRAN
How come he forgot to create a special someone for Pummy aunty?

CHUTKI

She got unlucky in love..and that was way back in 1980.

SIMRAN

Unlucky is an understatement and 1980 was 16 years back.

CHUTKI

What do you want me to say, ruined in love?

SIMRAN

Wedding called off a few hours before the ceremony - is that merely unlucky!

CHUTKI

Okay worse than unlucky!

SIMRAN

No no no, let me help you visualize the scene..the bride waiting in a red bridal sari--the family waiting to receive the *baraat*-- the marquee all lit up-- the waiters serving mocktails and snacks -- the *pandit (priest)* seated in the *mandap* (ceremony place)--and the groom goes BOOM!

CHUTKI

Heartbreaks are part of the deal.

SIMRAN

You don't anticipate a heart break when you fall in love.

CHUTKI

Did you have one?

SIMRAN

What?

CHUTKI

A heartbreak?

SIMRAN

I am not telling you even if I did.

CHUTKI

All the more reason to go for an arranged marriage. No heartbreaks.

SIMRAN

Oh please! You haven't had to meet random people at random places, how would you know?

CHUTKI

The adventure of meeting a stranger--

SIMRAN

--With his mother, father, sister, father's sister and--

CHUTKI

Isn't that kinky-- locking eyes with a stranger with so many people around.

SIMRAN

All the eyes on you, checking you out, judging you, rejecting you.

CHUTKI

But they let you talk in private, don't they?

SIMRAN

The boy and the girl can talk only if other things match

"Child come stand next to her--haan the heights match alright. Is your daughter wearing heels?"

Simran enacts the above sequence with Chutki playing the girl under scrutiny

CHUTKI

You can't have sex with all of them, so they have to use their imagination.

SIMRAN

Or maybe they should have a swimming costume round.

CHUTKI

Boy and girl date by the pool..

SIMRAN

They want a whole package.

CHUTKI

There you are - the school teacher package - the most favoured profession. Early to rise, early to return home, summer holidays, steady income, and extra income from tuition.

SIMRAN

Exactly, that's all there is to a human being.

CHUTKI

Your biggest armour, read your poetry out to them if you don't like the guy. He'll run away along with his--

SIMRAN

Mommy, daddy, aunty, aunty's husband, sister, sister's mother-in-law----

Sheena comes into the room. She has ear rings in her hand

SHEENA

Did you want these?

CHUTKI

Oh God..(still laughing at the joke).. no..not these. Arrey the blue ones-- tut..the ones with a tear drop pearl at the bottom.

SHEENA

The danglers with stone work?

SIMRAN

Don't trouble her. I have a collection of ear rings.

CHUTKI

Na...yours won't work and her ear rings are exquisite.

SHEENA

What does he do?

CHUTKI

A software guy. But guess his name?

SHEENA

What's in a name?

CHUTKI

Raj and Simran. Ta-da..synchronicity.

Sheena sings the title song. Chutki joins.

SIMRAN

You are more excited about marriage than I am. Why don't we place your ad in the matrimonial column?

CHUTKI

Na...no marriage until I have experienced the depth of love.

SIMRAN

Why different parameters for the rest of us?

CHUTKI

You had your chance when you were 24.

SHEENA

Some people fall in love after marriage.

SIMRAN

Unhuh--people fall out of love after marriage.

SHEENA

Depends on how much you love.

SIMRAN

Of course, of course..you and Titu are eternal love birds.

SHEENA

Tut..I'll bring the blue earrings.

Sheena exits

CHUTKI

Don't be mean.. she's lending you her best earrings.

SIMRAN

Kindness cannot compensate brains.

CHUTKI

You witch!

SIMRAN

Fair is foul and foul is fair...

CHUTKI

There's a world beyond Shakespeare.

SIMRAN

Nay...not that. (To Chutki)

Sheena stands at the door with the ear rings. She is panting from running around.

SHEENA

Not even these?

CHUTKI

She was being poetic.

Chutki leaps at the earrings. Wears one.

CHUTKI

How do I look?

SIMRAN

Where's your tiara, dear Ms World of our suburb?

SHEENA

That's a splendid idea, we should organize a beauty contest for Vikaspuri. I'll go on a diet immediately.

CHUTKI

Simran was being sarcastic.

SHEENA

Sarcasm is not good for girls, makes us look old.

SIMRAN

In which case I am already 60.

CHUTKI

These earrings can take away those years off your face.

Simran wears the ear rings, sees herself in the mirror.

SIMRAN

Nah..too cheesy for my style.

Kumud comes in. She is looking graceful in a sari. She has a tinge of sadness - she has not recovered from the fight.

KUMUD

Simran?

SIMRAN

Let's go.

Simran takes off the ear rings and leaves them on the table.

KUMUD

Sheena, child, I don't mind you being here, but your husband will get restless and come looking for you and Simran's father doesn't like men coming home in our absence.

SHEENA

Yeah yeah...I am going home for now, but..can I come down to watch the movie at 6?

KUMUD

Haan..but come alone.

SHEENA

Thank you aunty.

Sheena scuttles out. Simran has picked a bag.

CHUTKI

Don't you think you should have been discreet! (to Kumud)

SIMRAN

Clearly your friend is incapable of picking up hints.

Kumud pats Chutki's cheek, Simran chuckles. They exit. Chutki wears the ear rings. Admires herself in the mirror. Wears a tiara. Kisses Shahrukh Khan in the poster. Music of DDLJ

Scene 5

INT. -HOTEL LOBBY -DAY

Two sofas in the hotel lobby. Simran is sitting across her parents. Western classical music is playing in the background. They are ill-at-ease. Shuffling in their seats.

SIMRAN

We should have waited outside the hotel.

KUMUD

But it's so hot outside.

SIMRAN

We should not have come in early.

BALDEV

Twenty minutes before the meeting time is not early.

KUMUD

We should have met them at Coffee Home. Cheap and best.

BALDEV

You think I didn't suggest Coffee Home. The boy's father was firm about meeting in a hotel.

KUMUD

But we can't afford this place.

BALDEV

Exactly, that is why he suggested we meet in the lobby.

KUMUD

What if the hotel staff objects? If everyone starts meeting in the hotel lobbies, they will run into losses.

SIMRAN

Just pretend you intend to go to their cafe after meeting in the lobby.

BALDEV

Be at ease, no one will notice.

KUMUD

Isn't it time?

BALDEV

Five minutes past.

SIMRAN

They are entitled to ten minutes grace time.

KUMUD

Not that I expect them to be on time.

BALDEV

They can afford to be late, they are in a strong position.

SIMRAN

Their strength is relative.

BALDEV

Our weakness is absolute.

KUMUD

We are all equally helpless before destiny.

BALDEV

We were not so helpless once. We had options when she was young, even three years back there were good proposals. But she rejected them all and now--

SIMRAN

One good thing about meeting people in hotel lobbies is that you can use the toilets.

KUMUD

Coffee Home toilets are disgusting.

Simran exits to the toilet.

BALDEV

How convenient to run away from reality.

KUMUD

No point meeting people from South Delhi.

BALDEV

We can only meet people who want to meet us.

KUMUD

They have a lifestyle..we are no match.

BALDEV

Perhaps they are looking for a girl who can speak good English..remember what Chutki said this morning.

KUMUD

Chutki is a kid.

BALDEV

She is smarter than Simran.

KUMUD

If only we could contact the boy's parents..do they have a walkie talkie?

BALDEV

You mean the mobile phone? Wait...let me check his biodata.

Baldev takes out a paper from his pocket.

BALDEV (CONTD)

It's an overseas number.

KUMUD

Tut..what are our options?

BALDEV

Just one--wait for them.

Simran enters

KUMUD

Can I do my knitting here?

SIMRAN

You could knit a sweater for the Austalian boy--

BALDEV

They must be on the way..they know we are waiting.

A hotel staff enters

HOTEL STAFF

Mr Baldev Chaudhary?

BALDEV
Yes--?

HOTEL STAFF
Mr Malhotra called the reception, he is running late. Would you like to order some tea--coffee?

BALDEV
Ummn..how much..

SIMRAN
We'll have it later..Thanks.

Staff exits. Baldev is relieved.

BALDEV
They can afford to be late--

KUMUD
What's our option?

SIMRAN
Just one.

Kumud starts knitting. Simran picks up a magazine from the coffee table. Flips pages. Baldev shifts in the sofa. Changes position--stares into the abyss. They wait. Western Classical music is playing. BEAT

Scene 6

INT-LIVING ROOM-DAY

CHUTKI
I saw him in the balcony..

SHEENA
What's his name?

CHUTKI
With his morning coffee.

SHEENA
House number?

Chutki peeps out the window

CHUTKI
He came out for a bit.

Sheena peeps out.

SHEENA

On the other side of the road?

CHUTKI

He looks like Shahrukh.

SHEENA

Every guy looks like Shahrukh.

CHUTKI

But this guy has dimples..deep dimples. Exactly like--

Chutki goes to the poster on the door.

SHEENA

But who is he? What does he do?

CHUTKI

I don't know.

SHEENA

How can you love him without knowing his name?

CHUTKI

Happens..

SHEENA

How long have you been in love?

CHUTKI

Since Tuesday.

SHEENA

Five days!

CHUTKI

Feels like eternity.

SHEENA

Five whole days and you didn't tell me.

CHUTKI

I wanted to be alone with the feeling.

SHEENA

Let's go to the lane he lives in.

CHUTKI

I went this morning.

SHEENA

Did you wave at him?

CHUTKI
He wasn't there.

SHEENA
Tut..

CHUTKI
Can you do me a favour--please! Get me his name and number?

SHEENA
I don't even know him.

CHUTKI
Or ask your husband?

SHEENA
Titu is not the social sorts.

CHUTKI
All he has to do is befriend the security guard of their colony.

SHEENA
Even I can ask the guard--but wait-- my maid works in that colony. I can ask her to connect with the maid who works in Shahrukh's house.

CHUTKI
Yes..let's call him Shahrukh until we know his real name.

SHEENA
What if Shahrukh has a steady girl friend?

CHUTKI
I'll win him over.

SHEENA
What if he's a Casanova?

CHUTKI
True love can change people.

SHEENA
What if he doesn't find you attractive?

CHUTKI
Impossible.

SHEENA
You are not Aishwarya Rai.

CHUTKI

Are you even my friend?

SHEENA

Don't raise your hopes lest you suffer.

CHUTKI

But I want him..that's it!

SHEENA

Go slow.

CHUTKI

I have to chase my love with urgency. It's critical!

SHEENA

Why..you're only 24!

CHUTKI

I don't want to end up like Pummy aunty.

SHEENA

So it is true?

CHUTKI

What?

SHEENA

Her husband ran away with her best friend.

CHUTKI

All I know is he didn't make it to the wedding.

SHEENA

And she died of heart ache?

CHUTKI

That's a mystery no one talks about.

SHEENA

Was it arranged or love?

CHUTKI

They went to the same college. That's the reason papa sent us to girls' school.

SHEENA

Tut.. but what about Simran?

CHUTKI

She's looking for someone special.

SHEENA

Don't mind, but isn't she too plain to be choosy.

CHUTKI

She knows what she wants.

SHEENA

Maybe she likes someone?

CHUTKI

I would have sniffed him out.

SHEENA

Why she is already 31..who will marry her?

CHUTKI

Raj will find Simran!

SHEENA

You are impossible.

CHUTKI

Movie time..

Chutki turns on the TV...DDLJ song.

Scene 7

INT-HOTEL LOBBY-DAY

Raj's sister, father and mother are squeezed on a sofa. Usha's makeup is loud and comical. Simran and her parents are sitting on the sofa placed directly across. Raj is standing behind his parents' sofa. He keeps changing position.

SURENDER

You know how these currency agents are..always late. We couldn't have avoided the meeting-

RAJ

I am so sorry you had to wait..just a bad day. Should we go to the cafe?

SURENDER

I don't want to saddle Mr Chaudhary with a fat bill.

RAJ

I'll pick the bill--

SURENDER

Tut...I know you are modern, but Mr Chaudhary will not let us pay..right sir?

USHA

Traditions bind us, only the girls' parents can pay.
What do you say sister? (To Kumud)

KUMUD

Yes..yes. Such is the tradition.

SURENDER

So it's settled we'll stay here and talk.

BALDEV

Not a problem, the sofas are quite comfortable. In fact, we have been sitting on them for an hour.

Monica crosses her legs. Her skirt is too short for everyone's comfort. Kumud is horrified.

Surender realizing the awkwardness of Monica's action.

SURENDER

Monica, child, why don't you let your brother sit for a while.

RAJ

I don't want to sit..but mom, why don't you exchange seats with Monica?

Usha shuffles in her seat, pushing others to the end.

USHA I am comfortable.

Surender looks at her for a second and Usha doesn't respond. BEAT

SURENDER

You are far too comfortable for others comfort, darling.

KUMUD

Raj, child.. please sit here, Simran is used to standing long hours.

SIMRAN

Exactly..don't kill yourself over chivalry.

RAJ

No no..

SURENDER

Tut *nahin*...you keep sitting. My wife missed the joke. But really.. Monica is an independent girl. Tell them about your work, Monica.

MONICA

Dad please..we are here to talk about Raj.

Baldev is restless by now. He wants to say something, only if someone would let him speak. Simran is half-amused, half-annoyed. Raj squeezes his sister's shoulders.

RAJ

How can we not introduce you, you're the rockstar of our family.

SURENDER

Tut..now that the cat is out of the bag--just two minutes of your time, sir?

BALDEV

Yes yes..

SURENDER

So this young girl here is a fashion designer. She has a boutique in Green Park .. 20 people work under her. Can you guess her age?

KUMUD

Twenty..eight..or--

SURENDER

By God no! She is only 26!

BALDEV

Very nice. Simran is also the head of the--

SURENDER

English teacher, I know--it's in the biodata. You'll be amazed sir, how I remember all the biodatas. Do you know how many responses we got to Raj's ad.

RAJ

Dad...

BALDEV

I can imagine..

SURENDER

Beyond imagination--500! And I had to sort out all the biodatas. Your daughter is lucky to be in the shortlist.

USHA

He did not consult me. So which standard do you teach--what was her name again?

SURENDER

Simran--her name is Simran. She teaches grade 10th students. Right sir?

BALDEV

You have an astonishing memory.

SURENDER

Desi ghee...my mother used to make *ghee* at home. Mind you, *ghee* made from cow's milk.

USHA

That is why his cholesterol is high.

SURENDER

Usha darling..it's not that high.

MONICA

Borderline.

Monica crosses her legs again. Baldev looks away. Simran coughs.

RAJ

Monica, why don't you check out the shopping arcade in the hotel? Remember we saw a shop when we were coming in.

USHA

She has spent all the money at Shopper's Stop.

RAJ

Monica?

MONICA

I need cash.

Monica gets the hint. Monica and Raj move away from the sofas.

MONICA

Why are we wasting time on her?

RAJ

Tut..we can't just walk away.

MONICA

Dad was right--average STUFF.

RAJ

Shh..Can you please buy a longer skirt while we finish here.

MONICA

Seriously?

RAJ

Please..it's getting awkward. And don't be gone long. Mom..do you want to accompany Monica?

Usha does not move. Raj takes out his wallet and pulls out currency notes.

USHA

Nahin baba..I am tired. So much running around.

SURENDER

You know how it is..so many girls to meet and only 15 days to finalize things. (To Baldev)

KUMUD

You send your daughter alone--is it even safe?

SURENDER

She is trained in karate. And your daughter?

BALDEV

She has been so busy with academics that-

USHA

Don't mind, but Monica is so beautiful, we had to train her in self-defence at a young age.

SURENDER

If I am not mistaken, you have two daughters.

KUMUD

The younger one has learnt kathak. She loves dance.

SURENDER

Monica is also big time into dance. (To Kumud) Why did you send her shopping--she will delay us for the next meeting.(To Raj)

Raj has just returned. He continues standing

RAJ

She can't be gone long, I gave her just enough money.

USHA

Do you know how to cook Simran? Academics is of little use in the kitchen.

Surender nudges her to stop

USHA

No harm in asking..what do you say sister?

KUMUD

My daughters are excellent cooks.

USHA

Can you cook momos?

Simran looks straight at Usha

SIMRAN

No..

SURENDER

Nevermind..Usha likes to ask this question to every girl she meets. Not that we eat momos. So Mr. Chaudhary, do you have any questions for Raj?

BALDEV

Not really..you told everything..just wondering if Raj is planning to settle down in Australia?

SURENDER

He is already settled there. So much so, he drinks Bisleri water in India.

RAJ

Sir..I am an Australian citizen now.

BALDEV

So..you would want your wife to work?

RAJ

Absolutely..not for money, but for her own sanity.

BALDEV

Simran is an independent girl. She can adjust anywhere. Why don't you two talk in private?

SURENDER

Why bother, they can talk here. What do you say sonny?

RAJ

Yeah..now that I have a place to sit.

Raj sits down on the sofa.

SURENDER

Just inquisitive as to why you delayed your daughter's marriage? 31 is old even by international standard.

BALDEV

Just didn't materialize....you know how it is--things have to click--

KUMUD

--You can't change destinies.

SIMRAN

We were looking for a perfect matrimonial alliance.

SURENDER

A perfect alliance for you, is it? (contempt)

SIMRAN

We interviewed quite a few men, but they turned out to be idiots.

RAJ

You seem to have a high bench mark.(not believing)

SIMRAN

My IQ is 101, I can't marry any Tom, Dick, Harry.

USHA

What is Monica's IQ?

SURENDER

Shh! (To Usha) What do you want to do with this IQ? Apply to Indian Institute of Technology? (To Simran)

SIMRAN

Why would I want to go to an engineering college? English is my subject.

RAJ

Well..good for you to have a high IQ.

SIMRAN

An average Indian has an IQ score of 80 something. But I can't request candidates to take an IQ test?

BALDEV

She has a sense of humor. (Trying to stop Simran)

SIMRAN

That's another trait that I am looking for - a sense of humor. Hard to find.

BALDEV

The kids need their space, maybe they could go to the cafe?

USHA

Raj talks to a girl only if she clears the first round.

BALDEV

I think you should talk to her before making up your mind.

RAJ

Mom please! Yeah..so talk? I am still thinking what to ask?

SIMRAN

Don't you have a list of questions?

RAJ

No..I...just go with the flow.

BALDEV

How can you marry or not marry a person without talking?
(Beseeching)

Simran looks away. Kumud is scared. Surender continues talking non-chalantly.

SURENDER

You won't believe this Mr Chaudhary, but I didn't see my wife until the wedding night.

KUMUD

Times have changed..

USHA

I like the change, they didn't make good makeup in our times. Simran doesn't wear any makeup?

KUMUD

She..just like that--Simran?

SIMRAN

I don't have the time to remove makeup.

USHA

Raj brought me a makeup removing kit from Australia!
These foreigners are ahead of us in everything.

RAJ

Mom! (firm)

SURENDER

So Mr Chaudhary, nice meeting you, I will call you up and-- you know, it's up to Raj really. So many girls to choose from.

BALDEV

But Raj didn't even talk to Simran? How can he discard--they should talk for at least five minutes. (pleading). You'll be surprised how well versed Simran is in politics, international relations and literature. She speaks impeccable English. In fact I learnt this word from her - impeccable. Her vocabulary is--

Kumud is tearful. Simran is angry. Surender rolls up his eyes.

RAJ

Rest assured sir, I am a keen observer. I don't like to engage with people directly--this distance gives me a perspective.

Simran stands up

SIMRAN

Excuse my imprudence Mr Raj Malhotra, but I have a different style of engaging with people. I like to probe deep. Since I have made the effort of coming to this hotel which is 27 kilometers from where I live, and spent 300 rupess on the cab, and then waited an hour for you guys to arrive, I think I deserve a better return on investment.

SURENDER

Like what investment? (suspicious)

Baldev is too overwhelmed, he sneaks a moment to wipe his tears. Kumud looks askance at Baldev.

SIMRAN

Investment of my time and my father's hard-earned money. As a pensioner he has limited means.

Raj is trying to gauge the situation. Usha is baffled. Surender's patronizing contempt is changing to anger and suspicion.

RAJ

I am sorry..but what is it you want?

SIMRAN

Five minutes of your time.

BEAT. A feeling of shock has overcome the group. Monica walks in with a shopping bag.

MONICA

Hey--are we ready to leave?(Sing-song)

SIMRAN

Not yet. You can take my seat..(noticing Monica's reluctance).
I insist you take my seat and sit across your father, while I
talk to your brother. And be careful how you cross your legs.

Monica sits in Simran's place.

SIMRAN (CONTD)

Mr Raj, are you waiting for an invitation?

Raj stands up reluctantly.

SURENDER

Where are you going?

SIMRAN

To those soafs in the corner. Not too far from where you
are.

*Raj realizes he is cornered. He walks swiftly to the indicated
sofas. Baldev starts to say something - stops.*

SIMRAN (CONTD)

Please continue talking...we'll be back soon. (To Surender)

Scene 8

INT-LIVING ROOM-DAY

Chutki and Sheena are watching DDLJ.

SHEENA

Look at his smile..

CHUTKI

The dimples..

SHEENA

And his dance moves.

CHUTKI

Do you think he'll like me?

SHEENA

What do you mean?

CHUTKI

The guy who lives on the other side of the road -- how can you forget?

SHEENA

I don't know. Guys are strange..they can like a girl for silly reasons.

CHUTKI

Like what?

SHEENA

Like her dad's car.

CHUTKI

Why did Titu like you?

SHEENA

My dad didn't have a car..but I had my eyes, looks--and an hourglass figure in those days.

CHUTKI

Why you must have been quite a head turner.

SHEENA

I was spoilt for choices. But Titu chased me for two months before I said yes to the first date.

CHUTKI

You didn't like him?

SHEENA

Guys don't like girls who are easy.

A muffled voice of a man. Chutki increases TV volume.

SHEENA

Did someone call my name?

CHUTKI

I didn't hear a thing. But why does he keep calling you again and again.

SHEENA

He loves me like insane and--

CHUTKI

And what?

SHEENA

I won't tell you--it's too naughty for a young unmarried girl. Your parents will kill me.

CHUTKI
Why doesn't he work?

SHEENA
He is thinking of starting a business.

CHUTKI
Hasn't he been thinking a long time.

SHEENA
He doesn't want to risk his money. I am looking for a job myself..can you ask Simran to ask in her school?

CHUTKI
But you don't have a degree.

SHEENA
She would know of schools that are not so particular about a degree. Perhaps nursery classes?

CHUTKI
Nursery kids are tough. Are you sure?

SHEENA
I want to work..go out every day and do something.

CHUTKI
Do a computer course..it's the next big thing.

SHEENA
Can you teach me computers?

CHUTKI
Silly, I need a computer before I can teach you. But there's a training center in the market.

SHEENA
They'll ask for a fee..and--

CHUTKI
Hey that's Titu--why's he forever yelling!

A man's voice -- Sheena!

SHEENA
I told you I heard someone.

Sheena hurries out. Chutki goes to the window. Looks out. DDLJ song in the background.

Scene 9

INT-HOTEL LOBBY-DAY

Raj and Simran stand by the sofa. Their parents are looking at them. Baldev is trying to hear what's going on.

SIMRAN

You could sit if you like.

RAJ

No, I am good.

SIMRAN

In a rush, are we?

RAJ

I have meetings lined up, if you don't mind. (sarcasm)

SIMRAN

Ah the mating bazaar! The girls can wait for their Australian prince.

RAJ

Are you mocking me or the girls like yourself?

SIMRAN

What do you think?

RAJ

Somebody said spinsters are bitter, vitriolic women-- now I can appreciate the saying.

SIMRAN

How come you are an eligible bachelor at 32 and I a frustrated spinster at 31?

RAJ

Didn't you see your father's desperation?

SIMRAN

He is a victim of the system that shames women who cannot find a mating partner by a certain age. There's a clock ticking for women, whereas men can live in timelessness.

RAJ

It's the physiology and anatomy of reproduction.

SIMRAN

It's the mindset that wants younger brides so that they can produce more babies and work in the kitchen.

RAJ

So you wanted to lecture me on patriarchy?

SIMRAN

Oh no no no..I wanted to admonish you for being an arrogant bastard.

RAJ

Excuse me!

SIMRAN

Not entirely your fault, though.

RAJ

Are you blaming my family?

SIMRAN

No..the extended family and beyond the family.

RAJ

My family respects women, don't you see how we dote on Monica?

SIMRAN

Of course I see everything----how your dad showers respect on your mother, and Monica --why she's such a sweet..spoilt.. brat.

RAJ

You think you can fling abuses on my family!

SIMRAN

She could learn some manners--the average STUFF!

Beat. Raj avoids Simran's piercing gaze.

RAJ

Oh.fuck..no..I mean.. I'm sorry..it wasn't meant like that. It's just an expression..

SIMRAN

Yes...yes..we understand. Afterall, it's a bazaar of mating partners and gentlemen like you are forced to make a relative comparison of secondary sexual characteristics-- not your fault.

RAJ

Yes..but excuse me, what is secondary sexual character--characteristics?

SIMRAN

Just a term in anthropology, that describes the physical traits that give humans and animals advantage

(MORE)

SIMRAN (cont'd)
over their rivals in finding a mating partner. The primitive stuff.

RAJ

Listen..mate..I didn't think like that or think at all. I simply want to marry an Indian girl, how do I do that sitting in Australia? So I took this route.

SIMRAN

Aren't you too modern for this age-old traditional system?

RAJ

Why corner me? The newspapers are full of matrimonial ads. If it works for modern Indians, then it works for me.

SIMRAN

People like you have distorted the system. We are no longer equal partners in this bazaar.

RAJ

But I didn't cause this inequality?

SIMRAN

But you took advantage of it.

RAJ

Maybe---but you are here of your own volition. You don't have to enter this bazaar at all. So can we go back now?

CUT TO

*Baldev has been looking at them from a distance.
Others snatch a glimpse when they can.*

SURENDER

What's taking them so long?

BALDEV

They seem to be enjoying the conversation?

USHA

What are they talking about?

MONICA

The bees and the birds.

KUMUD

Let's continue with our conversation..so what were you saying Mr Malhotra?

Surender is peeved, but he resumes talking.

CUT TO

SIMRAN

In a bit--in a bit, we'll both go back to our respective parents.

RAJ

Mate..I am done talking.

SIMRAN

But I am not finished yet.

RAJ

What's left to talk?

SIMRAN

I want you to apologize to my family.

RAJ

For what?

SIMRAN

For being arrogant and rude.

RAJ

It's not my fault if I don't find you attractive. You should bleach your face, wear make up to hide the dark circles and wear a strong perfume. I am repulsed by your looks and odor.

SIMRAN

Wow! The mask falls!

RAJ

My dad said let's skip this girl, she is too old and plain. But I said, hey..her name is Simran, let's check her out. How wrong I was!

SIMRAN

My sister said, his name is Raj and he is an NRI, he will be modern and polished. How wrong she was!

CORY CORBETT(28) enters. He is dressed in casuals and sunglasses.

RAJ

How distasteful this has been?

SIMRAN

Living in Australia has not made you modern or even half-decent.

CORY

Hey..Raj!

RAJ

Cory! (Puts on a fake smile and switches accent)

CORY

I didn't know you were in Delhi?

RAJ

It's my hometown. But what are you doing here mate?

Raj puts his arm around Cory, moves away from Simran. Simran watches them closely.

CORY

Work..we are outsourcing a process.. .and--oh I am sorry, I interrupted you guys. (indicating Simran)

RAJ

Oh no no worries..I don't know her.

CORY

You don't what?

RAJ

Some random lady.

CORY

Weren't you guys talking when I walked in?

RAJ

Who me? No..no..

CORY

Wait wait wait..I came out the lift, walked to the foyer--and then I saw you--and I said, hey that's Raj--Raj talking to a woman--and--but of course you were talking to her.

RAJ

Oh that--I wasn't talking--as in talking..she was looking for the cafe, you know..directions and stuff.

CORY

Ah..so I didn't get it wrong.

RAJ

Yeah..yeah..my mistake, I had a brief interaction with her, but I am here to meet my uncle. He should be coming in any moment.

CORY

Cool..see you around.

SIMRAN

Hi..

CORY

Hey.

SIMRAN

Simran.

RAJ

Excuse me ma'am, the cafe's that side.

SIMRAN

I am talking to that gentleman.

CORY

Do I know you?

SIMRAN

No..

CORY

Ummn--the cafe's straight down..on to your left.

SIMRAN

Thanks..but I am not looking for a cafe.

CORY

Sure..(looks at Raj)

RAJ

Ma'am I'll talk to you once I am done saying goodbye to my friend. .

Pulling Cory aside

RAJ

Let's get out of here quick...she looks like a mental case.

CORY

Let's call the hotel staff to help her.

RAJ

Let's help ourselves first.

SIMRAN

Your parents are getting restless.

CORY

Parents? Oh..oh.. you and your family are here to meet your uncle--

SIMRAN

No no no..he and his family are here to meet my family.

CORY

Sure--(looks at Raj)

Raj signals Cory to flee

SIMRAN

We are on a matrimonial date.

CORY

A matrimonial date? Exciting.

SIMRAN

With our families, of course.

CORY

A matrimonial date under parental supervision.

SIMRAN

No no no..let me educate you. Mind you, not every tourist gets to see this first hand. You got lucky.

Cory pulls out a camera from his pocket.

CORY

Sure..

SIMRAN

This is a scene straight out of an arranged marriage film.

RAJ

Don't listen to her, she's mad.

CORY

Sure..(To Raj)

SIMRAN

In an arranged marriage, like any other marriage, people go looking for mating partners. They meet probable partners in cafes, hotel lobbies, people's living rooms, or even by the roadside.

CORY

Sure..roadside is cool.(To Simran)

RAJ

Are you nuts? Lecturing people in a public place. (To Simran)

SIMRAN

In the good old days the partners were introduced by common relatives, but these days people advertize in newspapers.

CORY

Sounds like an adventure. (To Simran)

RAJ

Oh no no...she's just making up things for effect. (To Cory)

CORY

Sure.. (To Raj)

SIMRAN

So when you walked in, Raj was checking me out—in fact he was done checking me out.

RAJ

She is a vindictive woman...she has been hurling abuses at me and my family because I rejected her.

CORY

Sure.. (To Raj)

SIMRAN

And I had rejected him even before he arrived, because he was one hour late.

CORY

An hour!

RAJ

Are you even in a position to reject a proposal?
(sneer)

SIMRAN

You see he had meetings lined up..meeting one girl after another..checking them out and striking a conversation if he approves of their secondary sexual characteristics..it's a tough job. (To Cory)

Monica and Surender come from behind. They pull Raj away. Simran continues talking to Cory.

SURENDER

C'mon, we are late for the next meeting.

MONICA
Who's he?

SURENDER
Your friend? Oho..why didn't you introduce him? (To Raj)

Hello there..(To Cory) SIMRAN
Meet Raj's family!

Surender and Monica surround Cory. Raj remains aloof and overwhelmed.

Surender shakes Cory's hand vigorously. In her zeal to go close to Cory, Monica pushes Simran behind.

SURENDER
Hello young man. I am Raj's dad. Monica, my daughter.

CORY
Hello.

SURENDER
What a mad day to run into you..we have meetings lined up.

CORY
I know..

MONICA
Raj must have told you.

SURENDER
But young man, tomorrow you are having dinner with us. I insist. I'll send my car and driver to bring you over.

CORY
Thanks but..

SURENDER
No no no--you are our guest.

MONICA
We'll be delighted to have you over.

SURENDER
Now you can't say no..

Simran walks away to Baldev and Kumud who are where she had left them. Cory's eyes follow her.

Scene 10

INT-LIVING ROOM-EVENING

Chutki brings in two coffee mugs to Sheena. Sheena is watching the film.

SHEENA
You missed the fight scene.

CHUTKI
I don't like fights.

SHEENA
Ummn good coffee. (Drinks)

CHUTKI
I made it strong for you.

SHEENA
Thanks. I am waiting for the last scene.

CHUTKI
Two fight sequences before the train comes into the frame

SHEENA
You should become a film director.

CHUTKI
Sighs. Should we go check out the guy after the movie?

SHEENA
No way..Titu is upset I have been out all afternoon.

CHUTKI
We'll dash across the road and be back before Titu realizes the film is over.

SHEENA
God..you're fixated.

CHUTKI
I don't want to lose him.

SHEENA
Ad Break! I hate the break before the climax. (Sigh)

Chutki goes to the window. Peeps out. Turns back disappointed. Sheena lowers TV volume.

CHUTKI

We are living under the shadow of a curse.

SHEENA

What?

CHUTKI

Pummy aunty cursed my father.

SHEENA

You don't believe that kind of stuff?

CHUTKI

I was a kid--I just know that Pummy aunty left a suicide note. She said she would have survived the heartbreak but for all the people jeering her.

SHEENA

Did your father--

CHUTKI

You know how senseless he can be--anything for a good laugh.

SHEENA

So the rumours are true..she killed herself.

CHUTKI

Ma is so scared.

SHEENA

What's the curse?

CHUTKI

That we'll both end up like Pummy aunty - heartbroken, jilted spinsters. And my father will be ridiculed like he--you know Karma.

SHEENA

I don't believe she would have cursed her own nieces. She loved you both.

CHUTKI

I see the fear in my mother's eyes.

SHEENA

What about Simran?

CHUTKI

She is fearless and resilient.

SHEENA

That's the only way to be - fearless and resilient. Aeee--
up the volume.

CHUTKI

The train is here!

SHEENA

Raj gets on the train while Simran is at the platform.

CHUTKI

Helpless in her father's grip.

SHEENA

There the father lets Simran go--'go live your life Simran'.

CHUTKI

Live your life Simran...run run run!

SHEENA

Raj stretches his arm--Simran running with the train--
her arm seeking Raj's.

*Door bell. Rings twice. Chutki takes the door, reluctantly.
Sheena continues watching. DDLJ song starts playing.*

*A tall, bulky man storms in. Pushes Chutki aside. Chutki falls
down. He is drunk and disheveled.
Charges at Sheena, lifts her by her shirt. DDLJ song continues
to play.*

TITU

I have been shouting like a fool, you deaf woman.
Singing songs while I wait for ice cubes. Making me
look like a fool in the neighbourhood - you cocksucking
bitch!

He slaps Sheena. Chutki shrieks.

*Titu Exits. Sheena collects herself. She looks at
Chutki. In that moment we know she had been lying
about her happy married life. Sheena exits. Sound of
the door shutting.*

Song continues to play.

*Chutki goes to the window--draws the curtain. The song
continues to play.*

Scene 11

INT-HOTEL LOBBY-NIGHT

Kumud and Baldev are waiting. Simran enters.

KUMUD

Why did you go to the toilet without telling me? I have been holding for so long.

SIMRAN

It was urgent. Have they gone?

KUMUD

They left without a proper goodbye.

BALDEV

They were late for the next meeting. I think Mr Malhotra was upset with Raj for spending too much time with Simran.

KUMUD

What was he talking about?

SIMRAN

General stuff.

BALDEV

Did he mention marriage?

SIMRAN

Not even a hint.

KUMUD

But there's hope, no boy has talked to her for so long.

BALDEV

It's positive so far. The mother is okay, but the father and the sister were not interested in Simran.

KUMUD

But I have to use the toilet before we leave.

BALDEV

It's on the other end..let me show you, lest you lose your way.

Kumud and Baldev exit talking about, 'Most positive'.

Cory enters.

CORY

Ma'am..the cafe is straight down, on to your left.

SIMRAN

Oh no..I am sorry I dragged you in the mess.

CORY

It was most entertaining and educational. Now I want to know more about arranged marriages -- how about you continue the lecture in the cafe?

SIMRAN

I am with my family.

CORY

Tomorrow or the day after--?

SIMRAN

Tomorrow works.

CORY

Five PM in the café?

SIMRAN

Okay..

CUT TO

Baldev and Kumud spot Cory and Simran. They are returning from the toilet.

BALDEV

What is this white man talking to her about?

KUMUD

I think he is Raj's friend.

BALDEV

What's wrong--all the boys are suddenly falling in love with Simran.

KUMUD

The curse is broken.

Cory and Simran continue talking. DDLJ song in the background.

The Playwright Speaks..

Nineties was India's golden decade. Indian economy had opened up and India had gone global, but the abundance had not percolated to the middle class. Westernization, capitalism and global exposure led to rapid commercialization. Everything became a commodity - food, beauty, love, sports and even marriage. Arranged marriage became a market, a bazaar to hunt for the partner of your dreams. Around the time Aishwarya Rai won Ms World title and suddenly Indian girls were expected to transform into beautiful nymphs. In 1995 Bollywood produced DDLJ or *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayengey*, a romantic comedy starring the super star, Shahrukh Khan. The film was about lovers standing up against parents but not breaking from the tradition.

I wrote the play because I wanted to capture a society in flux and create characters that were trapped between personal aspirations, social expectations, cultural mores and Bollywood romance. The question was how will these young women find love and does love exist outside Bollywood? The play has Bollywood music and dance thrown in the mix of high-voltage drama. It is a realistic play and the characters are your next-door neighbors living out their vulnerable lives. But there is hope for them and for us as the characters redefine love and come to their own.

Author's Bio: Rashma N. Kalsie is a playwright, theater maker and author. Her works have been performed and published in Australia and India. Rashma's work includes the plays: *Padma Shri Prahasana* (India Habitat Center 2016, Indira Gandhi National Center for Arts 2018, Jawaharlal Nehru University 2019), *Melbourne Talam* developed at Melbourne Theater Company (MTC Education Season 2017), *The Lost Dog* (Walker Gallery & Arts Centre, Dandenong 2012 and 2014), and *Meri Script Hai Kahan* (Eventura Creations 2003); the novels *Ohh! Gods are Online* co-authored with Phl Cherry (Srishti Publishers & Distributors), *Melbourne Talam* (Currency Press 2017), and *The Buddha and the Bitch* co-authored with Phebe Beiser (Hay House); and over 100 scripts for TV shows. She has published articles and shorts in print and online magazines.

Awards: Green Room Nomination for 'New Writing for Australian Stage' in 2018 for *Melbourne Talam*, *Melbourne Talam* won 'Drama Victoria Award for Best VCE production 2017'

Grants: Council of City of Greater Dandenong Grants for *The Lost Dog* in 2012 and 2014, IGNSA grants for *Padma Shri*

Prahasana (2018), Indic Academy grants for *Padma Shri*
Prahasana (2018)

Rashma was CONNECT Ambassador for CONNECT Program by
Melbourne Theater Company & Multicultural Arts Victoria
from 2013 to 2015

TWO OLD WOMEN

By Marjorie Conn

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama editor JANET COLSON writes:*

Guess what? Turns out hook-up culture for the older set can be just as superficial and disappointing as it for everyone else, but in Marjorie Conn's short play, Two Old Women, there may be a silver lining to a global pandemic after all. In this bittersweet dramedy, we get a bird's eye view of the two old women negotiating their relationship while masked up and 6' feet apart on a park bench. And just because the characters are old doesn't mean they don't have plenty of spirit and sass. This is a feisty conversation that swiftly moves through the life cycle of an open relationship; it's about confusion, connection, commitment – and regret. Everything in this seemingly breezy fare is weighted by the backdrop of the pandemic and the age of the characters. These women thought they knew how to live their lives to the fullest under ordinary circumstances, but did they? All it takes is a little coronavirus to make them reexamine their social distance and find out that "friends with benefits" might be an oxymoron.

Note - the open air setting of Two Old Women means we could potentially see the play in a current (or future!) pandemic without even installing Zoom and begs an art-imitates life question about the fate of theatre itself: How long can we afford to wait? Maybe we don't have to.

Ella

What is the first thing you'll do when this isolation is over?

March

I don't want this isolation to be over.

Ella

What?

March

Just what I said Ella! I don't want this isolation to be over.

(Spacing is playwright's own) Eds.

Two Old Women
By Marjorie Conn

Synopsis: 2 women sitting 6 feet apart wearing masks are talking on separate park benches

Setting: Any place where there might be a couple of benches or even 2 chairs outdoors

Time: July or August 2020

Characters: Ella – 70 +
March – 70 + but slightly younger than Ella

Ella

What is the first thing you'll do when this isolation is over?

March

I don't want this isolation to be over.

Ella

What?

March

Just what I said Ella! I don't want this isolation to be over.

Ella

Damn. I still can't hear you. My hearing isn't what it used to be. And now having to wear a mask and sitting 6 feet apart is not helping. It sounded like you said that you don't want this isolation to be over. But I am sure I am not hearing you correctly. Can you speak louder?

March

(yelling). I said I don't want this isolation to be over.

Ella

I still can't understand you. I asked you what is the first thing you'll do when this isolation is over.

March

And I answered you and you heard me correctly.

Ella

What! Why?

March

It's complicated. Let me ask you the same question. What is the first thing you'll do when this isolation is over?

Ella

First thing is to see my grandchildren. And the second thing is invite you to my apartment, have drinks on my roof, and then finally seduce you.

March

That's a switcheroo. We've been friends, what is it now, almost 2 years?

Ella

I can't remember. But it was at the LGBTQ+ picnic.

March

Right. At Roosevelt Island.

Ella

Governor's Island.

March

I get those 2 islands mixed up all the time.

Ella

Roosevelt Island is where people live and Governor's Island is where people play.

March

I can never remember. But we did play. At least I did. I rented that surrey bike. I tried to get someone, anyone, at the picnic to pedal with me and there were no takers.

Ella

Hey March, I didn't know you then and I don't know why I didn't take you up on your offer. I kind of wish I had.

March

I didn't know anybody except the person in charge. But I thought these picnics were to meet people. That's why I was surprised nobody wanted to pedal the surrey with me and believe me, just me pedaling was not easy. I had planned to take it out for an hour but I returned it after 30 minutes. But I'm not complaining. I had fun. And I was quite happy that we at least exchanged cards.

Ella

So what do you think about the second thing I want to do once this nightmare is over.

March

Remember December around Christmas? We went to a women' dance and it was so crowded that we just sat in the corner on 2 chairs and made out.

Ella

That was just kissing.

March

French kissing.

Ella

I don't remember.

March

Well I do. So then I invited you over just after Christmas intending to seduce you. I had eggnog with bourbon and cheese and crackers and other snacks. Don't you remember that?

Ella

Yes I do. And your multitude of animals were all over me. One cat gave me a love bite. Another one tried to kiss me on the lips. And one dog was literally trying to eat the cheese right out of my mouth and the other one was trying to get up on the couch and was scratching my legs.

March

Yeah, that was unfortunate. But if we had made it to my bed, I could have locked them all out. You know, these railroad apartments don't have doors between the rooms except my tiny bedroom at the very end. The caboose so to speak. I put in a sliding door.

Ella

I know but your bed is on the floor and I just had my 87th birthday. How do you do it? You're only a few years younger than me. Oh, and I can't thank you enough for my birthday present. Yummy! Crystal vodka in a glass rainbow skull. A collector's item.

March

I knew it was the perfect gift. And since I couldn't take you out to a restaurant for your birthday because of this fucking pandemic which would have been my first choice, I had to go with option 2. You know that famous actor . . . Now what is his name . . . It's on the tip of my tongue.

Ella

What movies has he been in?

March

Some like Ghost Clusters.

Ella

You're getting as forgetful as me.

March

Maybe worse since now I can't remember what month it is, let alone the date. Finally got the courage to go out to see my doctor and I was a week early and he was on vacation.

Ella

I'm glad we're meeting today.

March

Only my third time out in 5 months. Ya know, I'm thinking of changing my name.

Ella

Why? March is a lovely name. The beginning of spring.

March

Yeah. And also the beginning of the isolation in New York.

Ella

What would you change it to?

March

I don't know. Maybe Winter reminding me of all the lovely things I did this winter, which most likely will never happen again. All the parties and concerts and dances and together times and the hugging and kissing . . .

Ella

So tell me more about my birthday gift and the famous actor whose name you don't remember.

March

The vodka is filtered through crystals.

Ella

Really! So what does that do?

March

Beats me. But the skull shaped rainbow colored bottle made it a must buy. And that bottle was only available during June for Pride month. And any little thing giving us pleasure during this time of corona is a plus.

Ella

Agreed and this pandemic has made me realize I want a lover. You. And I am so sorry in the 2 years we have known each other that I didn't invite you to my place.

March

Yeah. I was wondering about that.

Ella

If we ever get this virus under control then I will invite you over and wine you and dine you.

March

I like that but there is a complication which I haven't mentioned to you because it never came up in conversation. I don't think you heard me when I said I don't want this isolation to end. You see just at the time my failed seduction attempt with you happened, I met this other woman. Much younger than me and we started hanging

out. We both agreed that we would be friends with benefits and have an open relationship cause she really wants to meet a woman her age or younger.

Ella

What's friends with benefits?

March

Right. I actually had to look it up on the Internet cause I never heard that expression before. It's a friend that you have sex with without a romantic relationship or commitment. And so even though I was having sex with her, I still wanted to have sex with you. And I was planning on it. I was hoping you would invite me to your petless place. But then this nightmare began and I couldn't be with anybody. So my new friend and I both isolated for more than a month from early March to mid-April. Didn't see a soul or go out at all so when neither of us got sick even though we were both exposed to a friend who tested positive . . .

Ella

You were exposed?

March

Yup. At a mbira class.

Ella

What's that?

March

A mbira is a little thumb piano from Africa. I only went to one class and then this damn nightmare began and we found out a few weeks later that one woman in the class tested positive. Her mother died of this dreaded disease, which is why the daughter was tested. And the strange thing is I did have a raging headache and a sore throat, which were the exact same symptoms that the person in the class had.

Ella

Did you get tested?

March

Like my name, this was in March and testing wasn't available.

Ella

What about your new friend? Did she get sick?

March

Not in March but oddly enough she had a terrible flu the first week in February so who knows what kind of a flu she had. So then when neither of us had symptoms for over a month, we thought it was safe to see each other. And now we've made a commitment.

Ella

Is that where you go on weekends?

March

Yup.

Ella

Damn! I shouldn't have been so uptight about the animals.

March

So that's why I kind of don't want this isolation to be over cause I like being in this new relationship. And because of this damn pandemic, friends with benefits is off the table. So for the time being we have made a commitment to each other. But if this pandemic is ever over, she and I may go back to an open relationship and then the first thing I'd like to do is be with you.

Ella

It's a date.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *What inspired this play is that a friend asked me what was the first thing I'd do when we are all "safe" again. LOL*

But I began to think of my life now and decided to write a play based on my life now as a stepping stone with lots of poetic license. I titled it Two Old Women to confront ageism. Just because we are in our 70's and 80's doesn't mean that we are not sexual beings.

Yes, our hearing isn't what it used to be and sometimes we are forgetful, but we are horny.

The issues and themes I wanted to explore is just that. People of my age are vibrant beings. I have a medical doctor who cannot believe that I am sexually active. What does this say?

I also wanted to address how our lives, all of our lives regardless of age, have been impacted by this deadly virus.

Two Old Women is "hot off the press" and has never been performed and even though I despise zoom with a passion, it suddenly and surprisingly occurs to me that this play would actually work on zoom because there is

no action, no stage directions that need to be read and to see the actors in separate little boxes would work because in the play they are supposedly 6 feet apart wearing masks.

Stylistic influences? Hard to say. Maybe just influences such as Rod Serling, Samuel Beckett, Shirley Jackson, Charles Ludlam, Lois Smith, Susan Glaspell.

AUTHOR BIO:

MarjorieConn(Actor/Playwright/Storyteller/Ventriloquist) made her acting debut with the late, greyt Ethyl Eichelberger as his leading man playing Aegisthus to his Klytemnestra with her lover, the late, incomparable Katy Dierlam as Electra. She was given an award by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force for her contributions to theatre in Provincetown, MA. Marjorie is most known for her portrayal of Lizzie Borden (ax murderess) and Lorena Hickok (Eleanor Roosevelt's lover). These plays which she wrote are published in LOST LESBIAN LIVES. She founded the Provincetown Fringe Festival in 1994, which relocated to Asbury Park, NJ in 2007. One of her stories is scheduled for publication in WMN Zine: *Show Me What You Got*. Currently she is a full-time New Yorker living in Hell's Kitchen with a plethora of rescue animals.

NONFICTION

THE SCAPULAR'S LESSON

By Vince Barry

WHY WE LIKE IT: *When a story the author submitted to us was snapped up by a competing lit site we asked him for another. He submitted his short story The Scapular's Lesson. We loved it, of course, but we think it works better as nonfiction, so here it is. We've published a couple works by this gifted author and even a cursory read will tell you he's a literary stylist. Delve deeper, and his manifold understanding and mastery of the language ascends to something like private language.*

The Scapular's Lesson

I never liked making novenas with my father. He used to take a drink or two before going, which made him snooze and snore as if fetching breath during the Franciscan's sermon. Nor did I like the detour on the way home to Grunnings Groc 'n Groggs, under pretense of getting a brick of that tri-colored ice cream for me, whereas, in fact, it was, the chicane, for a bottle or more for himself, of "the dry flavored treat, not bitter or sweet," Rheingold by name.

I can still see him, smeared in the side mirror awkwardly trying to wrap his stash of suds in the dirty tan trench coat he never wears, but carries in the trunk for just such missions. I am at the time fingering a caramel brown piece of wool cloth about an inch square with connecting strips for wearing around the neck. It bears the pink and blue image of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Brother gave each of us one. He said that Blessed Mary told some saint or other that it had a "special power."

Intangibility, force fields, reality warping—visions of sundry superpowers dance in my head like sweet Christmas sugar plums, as I nudge the father awake with an inherited trait, a pointy elbow. Then, tramping the flock with eyes as clear as water and unbearably bright, before fixing on mine as though two burning

coals, Brother, in a faint susurration, calls the scapular's power, "A revealed privilege!"

Embroidered on its underside: the exact nature of the privilege: "Whosoever dies wearing this scapular shall not suffer eternal fire." . . .

Thus the scapular's poor part in the gravitational pull of the lamentable past: In life there are no free lunches. Die in the shower and all bets are off. . . .

End

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Perhaps I've seen The Treasure of the Sierra Madre too often. Or perhaps it's just the mounting years. Maybe both. Whatever, something has awakened my "inner prospector." . . . Call him—what? . . . How about Howard? Howard's pitting for gold—the gold of clarity, especially about what's fuzzy and blurred around the edges of the long-unvisited past. He's "gold panning," my wizened inner miner is, — scooping and shaking, shaking and sweeping, 'till only the heaviest stuff is left—the "gold." On this occasion he has opened a promising vein. "So what's it worth?" my greedy inner Dobbsie wants to know. "Hard to say," Howard is quick to jerk out, "could be pyrite—you know, fool's gold?" He means now that I understand why I've always favored the "combat shower."*

AUTHOR'S BIO: After retiring from a career teaching philosophy, Vincent Barry returned to his first love, fiction. His stories have appeared in numerous publications in the U.S. and abroad, including: *The Saint Ann's Review, The Bitchin' Kitsch, The Broken City, Abstract: Contemporary Expressions, Kairos, Caveat Lector, Terror House, The Fem, BlogNostics, The Writing Disorder, whimperbang, and The Disappointed Housewife.* Barry lives with his wife and daughter in Santa Barbara, California.

A Few Thoughts on the Ontological Argument to a Budding Young Philosopher

by Brendon Sykes

WHY WE LIKE IT:

If you can't remember the many nights you stayed up arguing about the Ontological Argument into the wee hours with a case of 24 or some good Colombian what the heck were doing in university? Every generation since Anselm has taken a swipe at this philosophical equivalent to Rubric's Cube and nobody, except maybe Kant, could ever claim something close to refutation. Anyway, we liked Sykes's impudent, even brazen kick against 'one of the cornerstones of empiricism' and since it was directed towards a 'budding young philosopher', we hope the dude learned from it. And that's a truth a greater than which does not exist!

Editor's Note: We originally published Syke's essay in Issue 2. He undertook some revisions so we're republishing it because he owes Charles money and he wants to do everything he can to make sure the dude pays it back.

Per Stefano, il mio amico italiano,

Che fai di bello, raga? Io spero stia bene. Ho letto il tuo saggio, quindi alcune cose...

You write: Anselm's Ontological Argument (hereafter OA) is as follows:

- 1. If God exists only in understanding, then we can think of a greater God.*
- 2. We can't think of a being greater than God.*
- 3. Therefore, God cannot exist only in the understanding.*
- 4. Either God exists in reality and the understanding or God exists only in the understanding.*

5. *Therefore, God exists in reality.*

I think this argument is reasonable with respect to Anselm's definitions of God and greatest. The definitions support the argument. The argument is also valid because it takes the form of modus tollens. Because it is modus tollens, it is a valid argument.

Stefano, the OA logically proves the premise set out by Anselm but this proof does not constitute validation of God's existence. Most of the objections to the argument lie outside the boundaries of *modus tollens* and logic. In, effect, whatever the argument (as it is formulated) proves, it fails to convince. Bertrand Russell famously said of the OA, 'Probably the best way to deal with it is to forget it.'

A few of the problems to consider...

You write:...God, by definition, means the being than which nothing greater (or more perfect)can be thought. Nothing imagined can be greater than God. ...The next important phrase...is what it means to exist in understanding. What this means is that if someone understands a concept then that person has an understanding of that idea....Another important thing to consider is that existence in reality is greater than existence in understanding...

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Anselm argues that a God that exists in both understanding and reality is greater than a God that exists only in understanding. But that 'reality,' his real existence, is exactly what we are setting out to prove. So it's like he's already made him 'real' before he proves him 'real'. This, in effect, begs the question. A number of philosophers have taken up this line of rebuttal.

God's essence doesn't prove his existence. We can assign essences and properties to all manner of imaginary things and this in no way necessitates their existence in reality (time and space). Essence, here, is the fundamental 'is-ness' of something—what makes an apple an apple and nothing else and that no other thing other than an apple is an apple because of that essence. It's sort of like the unique genetic blueprint of an apple. But where does essence become existence? The apple exists or it doesn't exist? How are these two possibilities related, specifically, to its essence?

Anselm treats God's existence as a predicate but as you know, Kant famously challenged this assumption by asking 'can existence *be* a predicate?' A predicate here means a property of something. He suggests that it cannot. For example in the sentence 'The bicycle is red', red is a property or predicate of bicycle. But is the same true in the sentence 'The bicycle is red and it exists.'? 'Exist' here does not relate to the bicycle in the same way. To talk about 'a red bicycle' assumes the existence of a red bicycle in at least some capacity—either the understanding or the understanding plus time and space (reality). It's absurd to say 'the red bicycle exists'. We say 'the red bicycle' because its existence is already assumed. Its existence is *a priori*. We couldn't point to the bicycle or have such an object of reference, if this were not the case.

Anselm's use of 'great' as in 'none greater of which one can conceive' also raises problems. 'Greatness' is subjective. What is great for one is not great for the other and though we can both agree on the meaning of the word great, its application to objects within our experience (objects in the world) is variable and this includes concepts of God(s). For example, in Christianity greatness includes kindness, forgiveness, love of God, compassion, faith etc. All of these are 'good', that is great, qualities. On the flip side, in Tantric Hinduism, the greatness of the goddess

Kali (Durga) is measured by how ferocious, cruel and bloodthirsty her demands. Kali is considered Hinduism's greatest female deity.

You write: One standard objection to Anselm's argument is that perfection doesn't require existence. What this means is that by definition if X is a perfection then X is the highest degree of a property, that it comes in degrees and is good to have. But in logic existence is not a property...the fact that something exists doesn't enhance our concept of the thing...So regarding Anselm's argument, perfection doesn't require God to exist in reality....

This is another sore point: his use of perfection. (God is that of which a more perfect being cannot exist). This has generated a lot of comment. Is perfection a property of God's or any existence? He must exist because if He did not He would be less perfect than a being who did exist. But, again, is there a necessary connection between perfection and existence? In fact, it could be argued (if playfully) that the opposite is more likely to be encountered. Take an apple. Does the perfect apple exist? And is its perfection the reason why it exists? Must it be perfect to exist? And how do you account for blemished or imperfect apples which certainly exist?

Also, how could a perfect being—a more perfect of which cannot be conceived, a more perfect of which there is none—create an imperfect world? He is, by Anselm's own definition, less perfect than a perfect being that creates a perfect world (and therefore, by the terms of his argument, should, in fact, *not* exist). And if not, then the idea of his existence is *redundant*. In the perfect world, in the perfect universe where nothing is imperfect, God becomes unnecessary. In a perfect world, would there be a need for God? We don't live in such a world, of course, and maybe that's why Voltaire said, 'If God didn't exist we would have to invent Him.' But if that is the case, does this mean God's very existence is an invention of Man? If so, he exists *only* in the understanding and not in time and space. Or if He *does* exist independently in time and space He is a different God from the one that owes His existence to human invention.

I found your final paragraph the most interesting one in your paper. You write: 'I believe (in God's existence) *because of my personal beliefs and what I was taught as a child.*' Belief is a mental construct that by virtue of its nature resists inquiry. In some respects, it throws a roadblock into philosophical investigations. Belief is black and white; philosophy is a universe of grays. Sometimes it confronts us with prickly issues that make us uncomfortable because they call into question ideas or beliefs we hold fundamentally dear. It's the job of philosophy to ask those questions. And while your statement of what you believe is your special privilege and understandable in context, it's not philosophically sound. It is a declaration of faith that is not open to investigation.

With regard to your metaphor of a painting—you have to be careful when you step out of topic and address something you may not be altogether familiar with. This has nothing to do with logic and everything to do, empirically and historically, with sense data. You write: *Before an artist draws or paints a picture, he/she has an image of it in their mind. Then he/she actually draws it so now it exists. I think that people would feel that the actual painting is greater than*

having the understanding of the concept of that image. But this very notion has been challenged. In the late 1970's an art movement emerged in New York (mostly) called Conceptual Art. It argued that the 'idea' or 'thought' behind the work of art *was* the work of art. So you have an idea of a painting in your head. Once you do, according to Conceptualism, *that* is the actual art work. To then paint or sculpt what you thought is redundant and mechanical. So this challenges the very idea of existing in the understanding and existing in both understanding and reality. To the Conceptual artist, existence in understanding IS the artwork and its existence in reality is unnecessary. Sort of a back flip of Anselm's criteria for existence. This is why much Conceptual art consists only of ideas scribbled onto a page or instructions for making the painting/sculpture by a person other than the artist himself. If you weren't aware of this movement in art—and there are similar examples in literature and music—you would not think to challenge your statement. As I mentioned above, sometimes you have to step out of the tight boundaries of deductive reasoning and approach the philosophical problem in other ways: appeal to art 'in the world', empiricism, metaphysics etc...

...I like your curious mind, Stefano. Keep reading. Keep thinking. Thinking is, after all, the second most important thing you can do in life. The most important thing is to understand thinking isn't important.

Va bene, e' tutto. Abbi cura di te stesso e ci vediamo la prossima settimana...Il migliori saluti alla tua famiglia.

Ciao,

Brendon

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

I came. I saw. I came again.

BIO:

Brendon Sykes not only questions the big stuff in philosophy, he also questions his own existence. Last summer, he realized a milestone in self-revelation. 'I drink, therefore I am.'

LEFT OR RIGHT: The Fear Factor

By Robert D. Kirvel

WHY I LIKE IT: Guest editor BRANT von GOBLE writes:

Of all political catchphrases—Where’s the beef? Eat the rich. It’s morning again in America—few are more frequently quoted than FDR’s the only thing we have to fear is ... fear itself.

But is this true? Is fear the nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance of Roosevelt’s description, or is it more?

The answer, obvious to anyone who has spent more than five minutes outside of the womb, is that fear is not just sometimes justified, but essential. One can thrive without hate, survive without love, and skip merrily through the days without despair. But the jaunty whistle of the fearless is a prelude to the funeral march. We need fear, but only in fair measure. Thus, the essay that follows—an essay about fear and its awesome and dreadful energy.

The author, Robert D. Kirvel, quite successfully illustrates and explains the mechanisms, the utility, the limitations, and the universality of fear and how they relate to the current state of political discourse:

The key here is to appreciate, whether Republican or Democrat, left or right, hawk or dove, red or blue—that is, regardless of identity politics—you are responding much the same way your perceived antagonist responds. You behave according to the way the human brain has functioned since cavemen huddled around fires or responded to the perception or reality of injury.

For the rabbit—an animal mentioned in the piece—threats are either imminent or non-existent: Coyotes do not plan their meals a month in advance. They do not window shop for dinner. There is something of the rabbit and the primitive in all of us. Fear amplifies instinctive longings for clan identity, well-defined community, quick solutions, and Manichaeian moral certainty. Such does not make for easy and meaningful communication with those whose worldviews differ from our own. It does not make for much in the way of insight.

It makes for tribal warfare (for us, not the rabbit).

And this problem—that of the tribes of belief and how their members and differing perspectives clash—is central to Kirvel’s essay. Even if his plea for understanding is unheeded or is heeded only by the few, it is no less worth making. A call for sensibility,

reason, and empathy stands on its own merits, regardless of effect, if only because it is a testament to the decency of the author.

A parting thought, this one by Lovecraft: The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown. The less we know, the more we fear, and the more we fear, the more difficult learning is likely to become. This contradicts neither Kirvel nor FDR. It only reinforces the point that fear is powerful, with fear built upon ignorance more powerful still. Perhaps Kirvel is right. Perhaps understanding our opponents will allow us to climb up and out of our present spiral of anxiety and hate. For this much, we can hope. For this much, we can labor with sincere intent.

There is no harm in trying. All we stand to lose is our fear of the dark. (Spacing is author's own.) Eds.

Left or Right: The Fear Factor

Americans who survived the Vietnam War era (1961–75) recall living with anxiety. Students feared the draft and dodging bullets in some foreign jungle. Parents were terrified by the prospect of losing a son. Politicians warned of the global erosion of democracy from a Communist-led domino effect. Those in the military were vilified, and some were abandoned after returning to a country that no longer felt like home. Many voters were outraged by a deceitful White House, while others deplored the depraved antics of counterculture hippies. Women, African Americans, farmworkers, and minorities charged the “system” with ongoing oppression. During those turbulent years, most people, regardless of political persuasion, believed that on many levels of experience—personally, culturally, politically, nationally—the U.S. was in serious trouble.

Approximately 80% of Americans and citizens of other nations who are alive today are too young to remember much about the Vietnam War. I thought back then I would never live through more anxious and disturbing times. I was mistaken.

On first encountering the expression “identity politics,” I didn’t know what it meant. Reflecting on the way people I know react to the news these days however, I realize many of us have become single-issue voters. Some of my social-media friends have “unfriended” one another because of political opinions, or they edit what they say. An acquaintance divorced her husband after the 2016 election because of endless arguments about politics. Aunts or uncles are no longer welcome at holiday gatherings. Disagreements arise at the mere mention of abortion, guns, gangs, arming teachers, political correctness, black lives, blue lives, economic inequality, immigration, evolution, nuclear brinkmanship, and climate change. Of late, initiating a conversation can feel like stepping into a minefield in a land of magical thinking.

Identity politics refers to individuals making decisions according to social categories or ideologies that are often political. Examples are women supporting feminist causes and gays voting for LGBTQ rights. Two overarching and often mutually excluding identities today are liberal versus conservative, or left versus right. We constantly hear about irreconcilable differences in Washington D.C.; indeed, we can hardly escape the thunder in an era of lightning mass media, and the racket is usually about “them,” those other guys on the wrong side of an issue, and us.

I would like to propose a more unifying idea, the concept that folks on the left and right—even extreme ideologues who steadfastly adhere to some political stance—have more in common with antagonists than they might suppose. Indeed, we are all acting much the same way for a reason.

In what follows, it is relevant to clarify that my background is in physiology and psychology with a focus on the structure and function of the brain. That context is

germane (though my political opinions are not) because one interpretation of what's happening now in the U.S.—and to some extent elsewhere—centers on the human brain with its unique trick of discovering its own existence, yet sometimes ignoring pertinent information. Nothing else in the known universe can pull off such feats: self-discovery plus a voluntary disavowal of what might readily be acknowledged as fact. Put another way, the human brain is adept at conjuring distorted notions, some of which can be delusional. A more common mental departure from reality is denial, one of several defense mechanisms for rejecting what is right before our eyes. Are we all delusional then, in denial, or is something more basic going on?

Here's a peek at how the brain can sometimes work using an example—much in the news today—of Donald Trump lovers versus haters. Trump is one person, and everybody can observe what he says, does, and how he says and does it, but judgments about the man could not be more divergent. The more Donald misbehaves, in the opinion of Trump haters, the more the Donald lovers like him. How is it possible? Are people in the opposite camps even living in the same mental universe?

“I don't disagree with a single thing the President has done in office,” a female acquaintance said recently. She is a decent woman who can be counted on in times of difficulty. “What's wrong with people anyway?” she asks. “Don't they want to make America great again?”

Let's consider the statements in more detail. In what follows, I acknowledge the essay, “Trump and the American Collective Psyche,” by Thomas Singer. His is an analysis worth reading, but the content is quite technical unless a reader is familiar with psychiatric terminology. Here's a more accessible and modified analysis.

What I think the Trump supporter is really asking is not, “Don’t you want to make American great again?” Rather she is pleading, “Don’t you want *me* to feel great again?” Because I am not great right now. In fact, I feel injured and broken. I feel a loss of my sense of place in my own country. And the person you detest so much, Trump, is our best hope for a fix, my fix, because he understands my injury and says out loud what I’m feeling.

This woman’s adoration is reinforced by a hope of restoration through a single male. Criticism of Trump threatens her certainty and rapture, much like a religious individual encountering a crisis of faith and fearful of falling from grace.

Charged feelings are equally evident in the expressions of her NRA-loving mate. He likes a loud motorcycle vibrating against his loins, and it’s tempting to joke about his Harley as a phallic symbol, but the guns in his collection are more than symbolic. He loves his guns and shooting them, but why? It isn’t merely that he adores guns as adult toys or suffers from penis envy. Attack his gun, and you attack him. Protest guns in the street and you are not protesting for the safety of school children, you are not marching against the NRA in his mind; you are attacking all guns, our national gun heritage in the Land of the Free, and, in particular, his personal guns. You are attacking *him*. Deprive him of a gun—even one gun in a vast collection—and you take away his best friend, his security, and his identity. In a sense, he *is* his gun. That’s identity politics with a polarizing recoil.

My Trump- and gun-loving acquaintances are patriotic citizens, and they cheer when America wins at something, but their overriding concerns, evident on Facebook posts and in conversations, have to do with feeling aggrieved amid chaos. Job security and family income have been threatened in recent years. They feel burdened by soaring healthcare

costs while at the same time providing financial support for unemployed offspring who continue to bring into the world new mouths to feed. Accompanying the loss of personal solvency and pride and identity within a country they once knew is a sense of entitlement to better treatment. Top it off with a pandemic, and their sense of personal security takes a catastrophic hit.

A fundamental factor shaping their politics and everyday lives has to do with fear. Fear of government interference in their lives and wallets. Fear of thugs and immigrants and cheaters stealing their benefits and tax dollars. Fear of most things liberals stand for, just as progressives fear some of the very things conservatives champion. When they talk about their views on abortion or assault weapons, my acquaintances are really speaking about themselves, and they tend to overlook what they do not want to consider, as all of us do.

Thinking back to what happened to us as a nation during the Vietnam War era, I suggest parallel reactions are occurring now. The same types of emotion are being expressed by people on the right and left. I am not proposing liberals believe in the principles and solutions conservatives value, rather that the brains of liberals and conservatives are up to the same, old tricks that have been evident for millennia, and a self-defensive cloaking device in the noggin is covering its tracks.

If you're a naturalist or biologist or some other brand of scientist, and you observe the Earth being degraded, and you appreciate planetary and climate balance are essential to life as we know it, then you likely feel a sense of personal injury and urgency these days. If you're a conservative, and you picture an unborn baby being aborted, and life is sacrosanct according to your definition of life, then you feel grief or personal injury. If

you're a feminist and you hear an elected male is accused of sexual harassment or rape and brags about it, you judge the politician to be a creep to be feared. If you're an unemployed coal miner in Appalachia and you are losing your house and your kid just died from a drug overdose, what does it matter if some Arctic ice melts or freezes over, but it's comforting to hear the suggestion that melting is a hoax anyway. Job loss to globalization and automation, racial bias, downward mobility, discrimination on the basis of sex or sexual preference: it doesn't matter so much whether you identify politically as red or blue when you are hurting or overwhelmed by a sense of hopelessness. Though the triggers and details differ among individuals, you are feeling the same thing as the other guy. You are experiencing injury or helplessness. One way to counteract helplessness—though it might seem counterintuitive—is to identify with a bully, just as domestic abuse victims sometimes stand by their abusive partner in public.

Injury is scary inside our heads, and a central factor underlying most political hot topics these days is anxiety, as it was during Vietnam. It's an old saw in psychology that fear and anger are strongly linked. In physiological terms, both emotions involve arousal of the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord) in response to a threat. Accelerated heart rate and breathing, sweating, tremor, narrowed vision, and a host of other responses are triggered when the drug, adrenalin (epinephrine), activates the brain. Over the longer term, we can experience paranoia, black-and-white thinking, isolation, panic attacks, and low levels of testosterone and oxytocin. The latter is a neurotransmitter now thought to enhance pro-social feelings of empathy and trust especially towards ingroup members, but to enhance aggressive feelings toward the outgroup.

When confronted by injury or its likelihood, our brain communicates, “Wake up and watch out!” because responding to a threat is imperative to life itself. People can respond with fear or anger, which can lead to rage and hate, or fear can activate defense mechanisms that obscure the recognition of reality. Anger is also a wired-in behavior that can help mask a person’s fear. For example, anger can defend a person against feeling hurt and out of control, or against grief, and it can mask inner tension or a desire for empowerment.

If you’re a rabbit in a hay field and you’re confronted by a threat, you have few options: freeze in place, fight, or flee. Rabbits flee or freeze on the spot because they are lousy fighters. If you’re a human being facing a threat, you can opt to do nothing at all or fight or run away as well, but the most ancient parts of the human brain (called the limbic system) provide other options centering on emotion. The amygdala in particular helps to regulate fear. We can internalize the fear we feel. We can get mad. We can externalize blame and hate others, and we often do just that. A cold and clammy reaction, especially the freezing-in-place variety, is one expression of paralyzing fear. Hot anger is the fight part of the fight-or-flight response to threat, especially when a person is emotionally invested in a belief.

By suggesting that the same brain mechanisms are operating in folks on the political left and right (even though triggers for threats and external manifestations of fear and anger might be quite different), what I mean can be summarized in three steps.

1. The first step involves a cause or trigger. We feel threatened or injured or emotionally wounded about something personally meaningful. Think job loss, bankruptcy, deportation, a killer virus, or your child being shot dead in the street or in school.

2. The second step is a mechanism. The body shoots adrenalin everywhere, and by the time adrenalin and other neurotransmitters get to the brain and are experienced as emotion, a threat or injury manifests as fear or anger, which can lead to hate.

3. The third step is a solution. We seek relief from emotional injury, as we would for a physical wound. Quick relief might come through split-second decisions, or we might make premature conclusions involving black-and-white thinking unjustifiably separating what we believe to be good from bad, friend from enemy. In the end, the reaction is consolidated into a belief reinforced through selective attention. From there on, we can respond without the need to think things through.

What constitutes a threat or potential source of injury to you? The answer, much like triggers for political polarization, depends on many factors. For example, if you form opinions from watching only MSNBC or FOX news on television, your knowledge base will be quite different from that of someone who reads lots of respected and refereed science journals. If the news you watch on TV serves up threat to consolidate a particular response or reinforce paranoia, your idea of what even constitutes a threat will be shaped accordingly.

Let's take the specific case of abortion. Is abortion a threat in your opinion, equivalent to murder, or is it a basic human right? Your viewpoint depends on whether you are a devout Christian fundamentalist or a hands-off-my-body women's libber. If your philosophy or religion holds that conscious life (and susceptibility to murder) begins with conception (fertilization of egg with sperm), your idea of abortion as an assault on life would differ markedly from that of most biologists. But when, really, does the awareness associated with human life begin, and with it, the full complement of human rights? We

use words such as consciousness, awareness, and attention as if we know what they mean, but even psychologists who study the concepts for a living acknowledge the age-old and present-day difficulties inherent in understanding these complicated topics. Nevertheless, if you define your personhood and identity as championing the unborn, then your political identity is almost certainly Republican these days regardless of whether the party leader is saint or sinner, savior or bigot. You see the mercy in your stance and tend to overlook the rest. As psychologists express it, you maintain cognitive consonance or an internal consistency of thought compatible with your beliefs. A related concept is confirmation bias: looking at any new evidence as if it confirms existing views. The trouble is that only attending to what we already suspect is true means we also ignore or remain impervious to what is *objectively* true, in other words, reality.

Is a stable world climate a human right and on your mind a lot these days? Again, the answer depends on whether you are a tree hugger or lumberjack. Is Trump a fierce protector of the nation or racist scum? A white Christian fundamentalist and Muslim refugee would likely answer differently.

Given a perceived threat, where is relief to be found? For a person with progressive views, relief might come through political activism or regulation, such as protesting guns or marching for social justice. As a conservative, relief might be channeled through a leader who verbalizes the things you feel down deep inside but are not supposed to say, someone who tells you illegals are criminals and responsible for taking your job, and all those welfare cheats are robbing you blind. Relief might come from a man who jokes glaciers are not shrinking and winters are colder these days, and the whole business of global warming is fake, a leader who talks about bringing back law and order, improving

economic conditions, and restoring national glory. If you are a liberal and observe Donald Trump, what you observe is a manipulator, serial liar, science-denier, and admitted pussy grabber, and relief comes from disavowing him as your leader and maybe supporting impeachment. If you are a scientist who has dedicated a career to studying the natural world, then climate change threatens the things you care about, and relief comes from addressing global warming through prompt and science-validated action. To the scientist in you, an important part of your identity, Trump is an intellectually barren, morally bankrupt, politically toxic, and mentally ill science denier.

The key here is to appreciate, whether Republican or Democrat, left or right, hawk or dove, red or blue—that is, regardless of identity politics—you are responding much the same way your perceived antagonist responds. You behave according to the way the human brain has functioned since cavemen huddled around fires or responded to the perception or reality of injury. When you feel threatened or wounded, the injury elicits fear or anger, and what you require is relief from the cause of injury. In other words, regardless of personal or political opinions, we all respond with predictable reactions and emotions orchestrated by the brain. The difference between a person on the left or right originates from the trigger, that is, the cause of perceived injury. If you appreciate why the trigger is a spark for someone's fear or anger, you can better understand why the individual supports a position or person that brings relief even when that solution might be your own personal trigger for injury.

A friend of mine recently posted on the Internet, "I just don't get U.S. gun culture. It's totally wacko." Indeed, gun culture appears to be bizarre if you are the kind of person who feels threatened by guns. Then the threat of injury to others or yourself from a gun

triggers anxiety, and the relief you require resides in stricter gun laws. But if you feel threatened by gangs rather than guns, or by an intrusive and untrusted government, or by an antagonist who wants to outlaw guns, then buying a bigger gun for self-defense is just the ticket to address your anxiety and quell it. In each case, the organ inside the skull is operating according to the principle of self-preservation.

Apply the same reasoning to other hot-button issues, from building a border wall to eliminating food stamps for hungry children, and what seems wacko on the surface becomes understandable. The brain is simply doing its job.

The real picture of course is far more complex than the simple model presented here. Neuropsychology is complicated: there aren't just a couple of neurotransmitters in the brain but interactions among potentially several dozen, and it isn't only the amygdala that plays a role but exquisitely complex brain circuitry involving many centers and millions of neurons. Culture and genetics matter, as do education along with recent and early-childhood experiences. A simple model of threat-derived fear and anger does not address extreme behaviors, ranging from antisocial pathology or malignant narcissism to violent expressions of hatred. Clearly, there are extremists and fools out there, but the next time your aunt or grandpa fumes about some topic in a seemingly irrational way, think about the central nervous system we all share in common and a brain that wants, above all, to be safe.

End

Reference

Singer, Thomas, M.D., “Trump and the American Collective Psyche,” in *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump*, Bandy X. Lee, M.D., M.Div., ed., St. Martin’s Press, New York, 2017.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *As a youngster struggling to make sense of a bewildering world and my place in it, I looked for explanations from obvious sources: initially from parents and religion, then teachers and books. Eventually I settled on science and its methodology, which features inductive and deductive reasoning, as the most likely domain from which to marshal insight or at least converge on a rational way of thinking when confronted with perplexing issues. In many respects, science works well, but how are we to understand surreal or toxic content assaulting us daily on the news and in social media? An elderly woman throws a tantrum and squats on the floor of a big-box store upon being asked to wear a facemask while shopping during a pandemic. Politicians and police officers, scholars and ordinary citizens, among others, are at once lauded, screamed at, or otherwise reviled for expressing a given viewpoint or responding to a situation. On a personal level, this essay is motivated by seemingly irreconcilable expressed beliefs among members of my extended family and larger circle of acquaintances. More than ever, I consider science and critical thinking to be our best strategies today for guidance even when—perhaps especially when—times are unsettling. This essay invokes a potentially unifying hypothesis derived from behavioral science; namely, despite real differences, people are far more alike than dissimilar in the way they react to unsettling or threatening events, and one common thread is a biologically adaptive coping response to fear. The promise in recognizing common ground is that despite individual social triggers and opposing political aims, we all respond to fear in much the same way, and with such recognition we might begin to transcend some divisive grievances.*

AUTHOR’S BIO: Robert D. Kirvel, a Ph.D. in neuropsychology, has works appearing in more than 40 literary journals or anthologies and is co-author of numerous articles in refereed science and technology journals. Awards include the Chautauqua Editor’s Prize for nonfiction, Fulton Prize for the Short Story, ArtPrize for creative nonfiction, and two Pushcart Prize nominations. His writing and technical contributions have been recognized by the National Science and Technology Council, Executive Office of the President (Obama) of the United States. The author has published in the U.S, Canada, U.K, Ireland, New Zealand, and Germany. Most of his literary fiction and creative nonfiction articles are linked at twitter.com/Rkirvel. His novel, *Shooting the Wire*, was published in late 2019 by Eyewear Publishing, Ltd, London, and is available from most online book sources. His essay **Never At Home At Home** was published in Issue 5.

EDITOR’S BIO: Brant von Goble is a writer, editor, publisher, researcher, teacher, musician, motorcyclist, juggler, and amateur radio operator. Born in Kentucky,

Brant has lived throughout the United States, and he spent more than three years in Hunan, China, where he won the Wuxi Friendship Award (2012) for his excellence in teaching. He received his Doctor of Education (EdD) from Western Kentucky University in 2017 and his Doctor of Law (JD) from Cooley Law School in 2020. One of his books, *Foresight (and Other Stories)*, was favorably reviewed by *Publishers Weekly*. His essay **Best Year Ever: Sex, Death and 2020 Vision** is published in this issue.

Instagratication

By Anna Kaye-Rogers

WHY WE LIKE IT: *If the media is the message, as one culture critic 'guru' claimed when granddad was smoking dope at Yager's farm, then two of our most cherished infatuations—working out and Instagramming—predictably morph into malevolent bodies of influence and our relation—or rather need for them—becomes destructively fetishistic. 'Setting goals was meant to be healthy, but it became a prison'. The author explores this fallout with both wisdom and compassion. What is lost, she evinces, is a sense of proportion, both moral and material. 'How do you go on living when you lose the balance that kept you human.' (Note this is not a question.) A literate, insightful and provocative CNF written with a light touch in target prose. (Font size is author's own.)*

Instagratication

I reach for my toes longingly, fingers towards the floor, back already bent in something like pain, waiting for the sudden crack that tells me it's time to stop. Working out is *hard*. It's a pain I inflict on myself, a soreness to the touch I lean into and cultivate like a pulled tooth waiting to heal. I poke at my exposed gums and tired muscles and I wait, luxuriating in the sensation. There is a rawness to the intimacy of pulling ropes and lifting kettlebells. Cold metal on bare skin, taut ropes against thick thighs, the push and pull of weights, the feel of arching into a stretch. I love working out, I just don't like going to work out.

I want to be friends. I want to make jokes and laugh and feel safe, the same comforting ease that I feel sitting down at a machine. There is a familiarity built on use, a routine that comes with practice and time. It is the sudden stops and starts, days when you can stay up late texting but then go a week without speaking. In a world where the daily consistency of the workout is paramount to improvement, the silences do not bode well. And often, motherly intuition is proven correct.

What if you cannot have everything? What if the business books that talk about home and work-life balance are as full of shit as the men in suits who cheated on wives and left the rest of us behind, betting with money they did not have on houses no one owned. What if you have to choose the ways you can be a good human being, to sacrifice some of your dreams to fulfill your morals?

I can see two brothers related in stubbornness, the way they hold their jaws, carved granite and steel. I wonder which broke first, the one with external damage or the one holding internal trauma. There should be no shame in overworked muscles needing time to heal and rest days, but they push and push until the whole body trembles on the verge of breaking down.

I worry what constantly pushing yourself does, striving for perfection when humans are not built for it. Formerly private things become instagrammed captions, and the screenshots I take seem to be evidence for a murder yet to occur. The 'old' versions

become ghosts, but the physical evidence seems to haunt the men they have become. Setting goals was meant to be healthy, but it became a prison. The men you grow into are not always the men you planned to become, and in the tension, the tightness, the work, you risk injuries that send you sprawling on the cold gym floor.

I want warmth, peace, and happiness for them. Instead I watch the whole thing go up in flames. They are passionate sparks already doused in gasoline, mistakes they hop on treadmills to run from but find themselves back at the starting line. The problem with visions is the humans who see them, who take might-have-beens and could-becomes as prophecies; immovable fate. They eat the same meals and I unwrap candy bars greedily; we won't know who lives life until the end of the workout. The timer will stop and we'll step away, and that'll be it.

I think about how interconnected we are, the way pulling a rope at one end sends the weights up into the air, trusting you to set them back down gently, not crashing to the ground like meaningless objects meant to be used and cast aside. I think about the people who get hurt when the vision you had for yourself cast them as tools, stopped considering what they wanted. My six-pound medicine ball is small and useless but I love it, cradling it between sets. Like a friend who has helped me, a small child I protect between my hands, and you slam your ball into the ground and leave it behind after classes like one of your exes. Knowing you, you'll circle back to put it away after, but you treat your workouts more seriously than the rest of your life. What does that do to a person, to

become almost perfect outside and forget to train your insides at the same time? How do you go on living when you lose the balance that kept you human.

You regret it and say you want to stop running, but you can't stop working out to find it, repeating the same routines, set in the same repetitions. I hate going to the gym because I don't want to leave home, but you've lost sight of your home in the filters of instagram. Your workout buddies go home to their other interests but you remain, long after everyone else leaves. Maybe in the silence and the stillness, when it's just you, no cameras, no expectations, no partners or plans, you can find your center and your peace again, but the moment passes quickly, and whatever you were before you began is gone.

We are constantly at war, tense and expectant, the friction between the loaded bar and the bench press. What I value you set aside, seeking more, and yet when I enter your sacred space I smile more. My little weight is all I needed and all I want. If you keep lifting more than you can handle someday you'll get hurt. And I wanted to be there to help you, but once you no longer needed me to spot, you walked away, back to the exercises you did before, as if you'd learned nothing at all. You point out the mistakes in form your brother makes, missing he's doing a different workout entirely, and your empathy does not stretch far enough into the person you used to be able to be. I am left alone in my workout when all I wanted was a family, but you are far worse off, because all you'll have is yourself.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I have seen the wonders of social media, how it has connected me to people I would have never met otherwise and helped me form lasting friendships. But I have seen those who have used it for other*

purposes and how it warps them into someone different. It was through this lens that I thought about the fitness obsession and competition that runs through my chosen family, how something that might have been good and brought us together instead kept us apart. But mostly, I made a pun and then wrote an essay to justify having used the phrase.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Anna Kaye-Rogers is a writer in the Illinois Valley who has been published in fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. She can be found awkwardly sitting on floors avoiding writing wherever there are animals nearby.

DON'T WORRY

By Bryan William Myers

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A scruffy interior monologue of sorts in which the author, holed up in Da Nang, Vietnam for 8 months during the pandemic, begins to sort out his world. He's a jaundiced writer on the road to burn out and apart from the usual discomforts and inconveniences imposed by lockdown, he faces his toughest critic: himself. Reality and fantasy blend seamlessly in this well told example of CNF. We feel a strong a sense of isolation and what began as an excursion into a disjointed past becomes an existential quest with cameos by Will Shakespeare and Jim Morrison. The prose, sometimes loose, sometimes cloistered, makes for a beautiful read:*

Quote: 'We've had plenty of time to think about everything. Maybe this is the most prescient era since the Greeks were holding plays in stoned amphitheaters, gaseous chemicals giving oracles visions of the future. Leading up to the Mayans and the Aztecs and the Incas. And the Chinese emperors crackling peanuts between their toes. I still can't believe I've been here for eight months. It's surreal.'

(Spacing is author's own.) Eds.

DON'T WORRY

"I can't seem to find the right line..." —Jim Morrison

I'm sitting at the end of the world, here in Da Nang, Vietnam. I've been stuck here since January when I'd arrived from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Since then, I've seen the Tet

Holiday/Chinese New Year come and go. I spent a week in Hoi An, just trying to get away from all the tourists.

That was a bad idea. They were everywhere.

I rode bikes into town nearly everyday as a respite from myself being trapped in my room as I waited for more freelance copy editor work or writing gigs or any work at all. I was then still in touch with my (ex) Chinese girlfriend who explained that everything back in her country had devolved to one simple word: “Panic”.

She said the stores were all closed and if they ran out of food, they had rice flour. For dumplings. I lay in bed, thinking about something just as simple as the other side of the coin: Yeah, it’ll all be over in four months. You watch.

Mysteriously enough, that had been Elon Musk’s same prediction.

And now it’s nearly seven months later. I’m no more closer to becoming the next Kurt Vonnegut as I’d been before ... and all I’ve got tonight are these few Vietnamese beers, same as always, Jim Morrison, and a leaky AC unit that probably won’t be fixed for the second time until the end ... no wait, that’s Jim Morrison’s line ... until this is all over.

When will that be?

It’s hard to tell as I’ve been putting off writing, for quite a bit.

I mean, what’s the point?

Existentialist despair.

Ah, the melody of a sad-sack.

Last time we were stuck in lockdown—here in Da Nang—I wrote like a madman. A full-length book of poetry, a new novel. A few short stories and four short plays. I just

got a rejection for the book of poems—manuscript, not a book until it's published. Who knows if it ever will be? Maybe it'll end up like Jim Morrison's spoken word album, released some ten years after his death when his former bandmates needed some new royalty checks to beat that almighty capitalist system's downgrade in the wake of Nixon's economic policies that might have underhandedly destroyed the planet and all life on Earth. Can't blame a few guys for needing to eat...

And, well. What else is there to do but talk shop? Yeah. Then I sent out that novel manuscript to two literary agents. And what else is there to do but keep writing? I started a new novel about running amok here via Tinder and dating websites and meeting Vietnamese girls on the beach. Another full-length book of poems. Some more plays. They kept saying, earlier this year on the internet, that Shakespeare wrote a lot of shit during the plague. But I can't really say how true that is because the only thing I know about Shakespeare is that I used to stare at a statue of his head back in the Philadelphia Central Library on Vine Street, thinking, you know what, I'll write better than you one day. Just wait. I'll catch up to you and I'll be that drunk anarchist with long hair, looking for you in the alleyway after one of your performances and I'll come up to you, shouting: "HEY. HEY OLE WILLY BOY. I SAW YOUR PLAY. HEY, WAIT UP!"

And I'll be waving my arms like a burned-out Kerouac.

He'll spin on his heels, William Shakespeare, making little noises with his pointy shoes, bells, frill around his neck. I can see him now. Raising his eyebrows, courting a few lovely ladies to an after-party at an undisclosed location where I'd never be invited.

"BILL. HOLD ON. LET'S TALK SHOP."

And I'll put the bottle to my mouth, taking a swig of some cheap distilled whiskey. My breath will be bad. And his security guards will come out swinging.

“AH! JUST WHAT I'D BEEN LOOKING FOR. A LITERARY DUEL.”

They'll punch me in my gut, there will be at least two of them. And they won't say a word. As William Shakespeare will head up the alley on a winding cobblestone street and there will be dim lighting and no security cameras. So they'll give me a good beating, those Old English brutes.

They'll leave me there. And I'll moan, rolling over and reaching for the whiskey bottle.

“Great,” I'd say, “my first readers, my first true audience.”

And I'll try to sit up but I won't be able to.

“Just want a cigarette...” I'll say into the darkness as a crow flies in the night, searching for a fresh turd. And I'll lose consciousness while William Shakespeare opens a bottle of crappy white wine just to please his girlfriends, some hangers-on who know nothing about plays or being a writer in the 21st century. At the end of it all.

“Who was that guy?”

“I don't know, darling. But close the drapes. He was a ghastly sight.”

Yeah. But at least I can write.

Goodnight!

After my cigarette...

After switching the music in my ears to some Brahms piano quartets...

I can settle myself once again into this stiff wooden chair, back through time. Let's get away from the rhyming stuff.

I am drinking Vietnamese beer. And I think that's one of the biggest reasons why I'm such a fan of modern capitalism here in Vietnam—one of the most communist countries on the planet. They tested me the other day (for free) with a needle and a cotton swab into the upper regions of my nose. And the only thing that worried me was that they might find something other than the virus in my body. Cancer. Leprosy. The sudden urges to switch between past and present tense. Even my Vietnamese landlords have been getting slightly annoyed with my antics, my mental illness. And nearly every convenience store in a three-or-four block radius has caught on to my blatant alcoholism. Things are getting rather tense.

But I felt a little bit of relief, earlier. I went for my usual stroll with two cans of beer to the beach. And I sat there, thinking about everything. I'd never planned to be here this long, for what reason could I have ever visualized the end of civilization? Well, it's hard to think that way when you're sitting on one of the most beautiful white sand beaches in the world. The presence of swimmers and couples meandering in the shadows was helpful enough. I was tired of everything, truly. Even the mosquitoes had gotten on my last nerve. What's left for the rest of us? I sat and wondered about it.

You know, being a writer is a lot of hardship. And I've had to take up some jobs that are much less than ideal. I do it all for the writing. Or for the moments of solitude. Where I can air-guitar myself into a mirror across my apartment and nobody bothers me.

There have been moments of depression, to be sure. And the moments of elation—that's what I look forward to, every single day.

So that's what has been happening to me, in my life. Now.

We've had plenty of time to think about everything. Maybe this is the most prescient era since the Greeks were holding plays in stoned amphitheaters, gaseous chemicals giving oracles visions of the future. Leading up to the Mayans and the Aztecs and the Incas. And the Chinese emperors crackling peanuts between their toes. I still can't believe I've been here for eight months. It's surreal.

I have nothing left but sudden bursts of creativity. They are often most fruitful when I do not engage with social media. A Brahms quartet and a Vietnamese beer, that's enough.

At least for tonight. And I hope I'm not boring you with these words. Isn't that the whole point of being a writer? So much writing these days is boring and uneventful. That's what I feel I have devolved to, tonight.

Social media is constantly reminding me of how bad the world is, right now. And it's ultimately distracting from who I am and what I want to be. Nothing more than alone in a room, resting. Relaxing. Waiting on that urge. To write. Paint. Sing. Dream.

Is it really so bad to be a dreamer? I'm worried, world.

Will you let me be?

Will you let me burst asunder, back into the world. Like a free spirit, or a prophet of doom. I am harmless. And I am not looking to pay any taxes for a world that's out of control. I don't want to pick up a gun and shoot anybody. Unless it's out of love. (Sexual

innuendo.) I'm thinking of Jim Morrison again. The other lost souls, the anarchists—
before the world got so dark.

And in the nighttime, underneath the moon.

I sat on the beach.

And drank...

If the forests catch fire, and Siberia, too.

At least I know there's still Paris in the spring.

Or maybe Nepal.

I talked to my dad the other day. He joked about possibly visiting me in southern
Thailand, next year.

There's a revolution happening in Bangkok.

There's a revolution happening in Hong Kong.

Lot's of political discourse to discuss. About right-wing movements wrapped in a
flag. Nationalism. Militarism. They say anarchism is bad, too.

And I wanted to read an article today about a potential asteroid heading for earth
right around election day in the States.

Oh, and there are some more storms brewing in the Atlantic Ocean.

Yeah. My girlfriend and I broke up. For the fifth or sixth time.

Across the world.

Everything's the same.

Here's hoping for the best.

I'll drink to that...

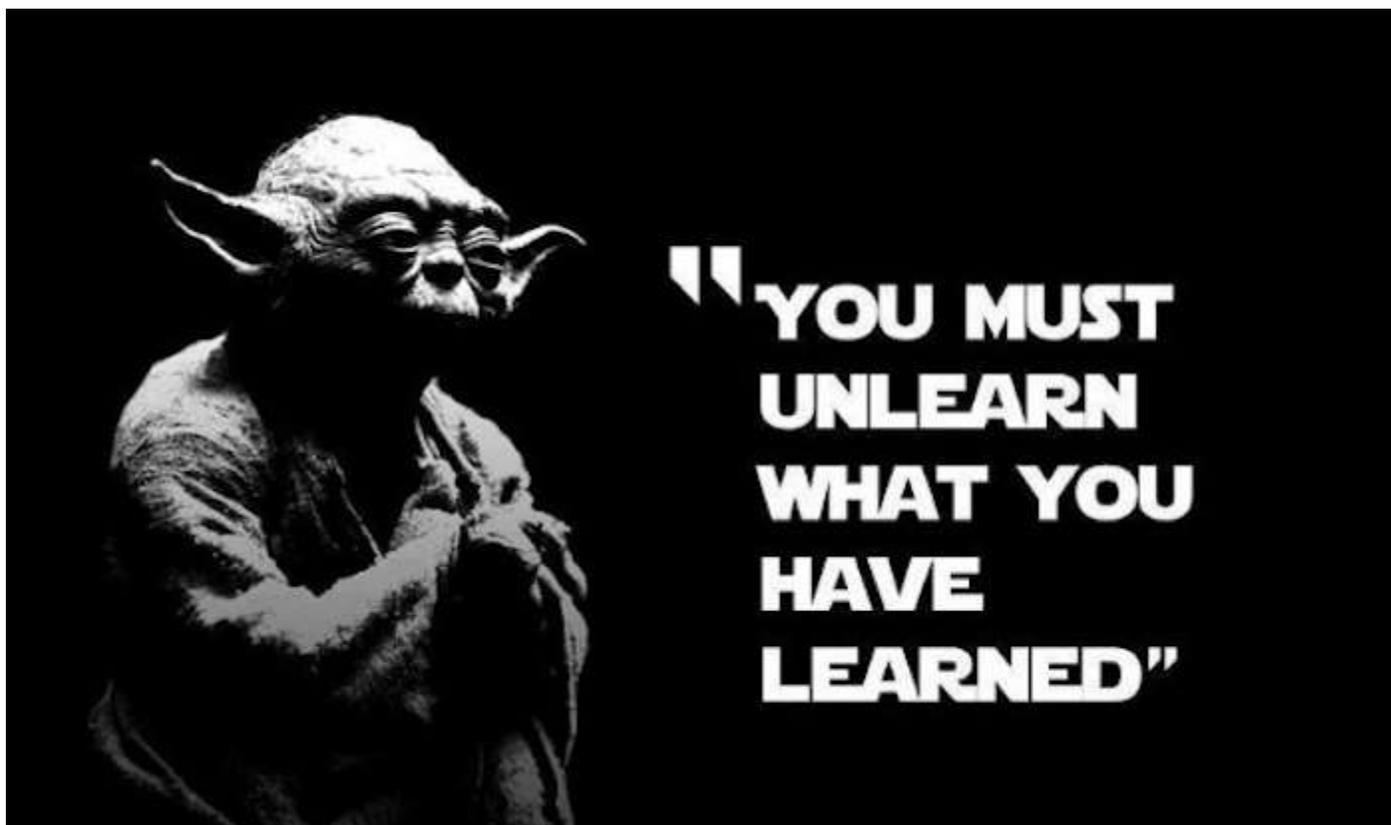
AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I was inspired to write this piece because it was late at night and I hadn't written anything for a few days. I've been here in Da Nang, Vietnam, for about eight months now. We are almost six weeks into a second lockdown and I wrote abstractly about my emotions as a world observer, a loner. I think the world is a very tough place for an unknown writer, just as much as it is for anybody who is young and trying to get started in their lives. I'd like to believe that being a writer is important to reflect those hardships, to say what others might be thinking but unwilling to express. So I maybe wanted to explore or vent those frustrations through writing as somebody who is a little sensitive and just wants to be creative. And how difficult that can be to make a living or even any money at all. There's a self-destructive fault to that end and that's why I brought Shakespeare into the mix. It was a delusion but that can be funny. I wanted to laugh. That's what writing does for me most of the time. I think it's important to be able to laugh, in life, art. For any reason at all.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Bryan William Myers has been traveling around the world since October 2018. He visited 12 countries last year. His work has appeared in various literary magazines such as Red Fez, Whirlwind Magazine, Entropy, Nightingale & Sparrow, Beatdom, Poetry Pea, Poetry Potion, the Daily Drunk, and WriteNow Lit. He's self-published 14 books. Currently, he's working on a new novella, writing plays, and getting his newest novel published called *The Basement*. His website is bryanwilliammyers.com

“You Must Unlearn What You Have Learned”

By Caitlin Johnstone

WHY WE LIKE IT: *This ever radical and tireless defender of the anti-Matrix from the land of Oz always takes up big pile causes with a big stick. But unlike some social zealots, our favourite (Cdn sp) shit disturber proves her mettle as a writer of conscience by releasing all copyrights to her work so that Alt-minded dudes like FOTD can pick ‘em up and republish ‘em. Lucid and feisty!*



We all showed up naked, slimy and clueless in a world of inexplicable sensory input we couldn't make head or tail out of. We were then taught what's what by people who showed up under the exact same circumstances a blink of an eye earlier.

The amniotic fluid is barely washed from our tiny naked bodies before we find ourselves in a marriage and a day job, staring down at a small pair of eyes looking up to us for guidance.

This is not a good environment for developing mental sovereignty, the ownership and authorship of your own cognitive relationship with life.

Stepping into the world as a small person is like stepping completely unarmored onto a battlefield with live ammunition flying in all directions, except instead of bullets, it's narrative.

On one side of the battlefield you've got your family with rifles and side-arms firing their stories about what's important in life, what the world is like, how people should deal with problems, and what society ought to look like.

On another side you've got teachers and preachers armed with shotguns spraying buckshot about the beliefs that various power structures want you to have about your experience on this earth.

On another side you've got the advertisers, armed with machine guns, hammering anything that moves with narratives about inadequacy and problems you never knew you had.

And, raining bombs from above, you've got the mass media propagandists.

You're not going to make it off of that field without sustaining significant damage. You never stood a chance, really. At best you're going to spend a long time picking slugs, bullets and shrapnel out of your flesh and stitching up the wounds that they caused, and that's assuming you're one of the lucky few who makes it off the field at all. Most just absorb the beliefs that get blasted into them in the frenzy of living and keep almost all of them.

Becoming a mentally self-sovereign human being means undoing all that damage, and protecting yourself from absorbing more. It means completely renouncing everything you've been told to believe about what's happening on these strange shores you washed up on small, sticky and confused, and setting off to find out for yourself instead. It means making it to the swamps of Dagobah and looking where the wise old muppet is pointing when he suggests "You must unlearn what you have learned."

Being a mentally sovereign human means constructing your own understanding of this weird reality based on your own investigations and your own reasoning, which means constructing it from the ground up. Even your most basic assumptions about reality itself must be rigorously cross-examined with complete skepticism. Nothing must be taken on faith.

Most people believe that they are truly free thinkers. Most people are wrong. Most people are controlled by unworthy, unquestioned ideas that were put in their heads long ago by other people.

To attain a truly self-sovereign mind, you need to put truth above all else in every waking moment. You need to constantly dedicate yourself to learning what's true and what's real, and to living in alignment with the truth that has been discovered.

Wanting true mental sovereignty means wanting to know the truth in all areas of your experience, come what may.

It means wanting to know the truth about what's really happening in your world, and how it contrasts with what you're being told to believe about what's happening in your world by confident-sounding voices on the screens that you see.

It means wanting to know the truth about your family and your relationships and the various unconscious, unquestioned dynamics that are at play there.

It means wanting to know the truth about the various aspects of yourself that you keep hidden and compartmentalized out of sight.

It means wanting to know the truth about reality itself, and how you might have been misperceiving various aspects of your own field of consciousness this entire time.

It means wanting to know the truth, even if very powerful people don't want you to know the truth.

It means wanting to know the truth, even if it hurts.

It means wanting to know the truth, even if it is terrifying.

It means wanting to know the truth, even if it means being wrong.

It means wanting to know the truth, even if it means discovering that you've been completely wrong about everything your whole life.

It means wanting to know the truth, even if it crumbles every belief you've ever had about what you are and what the world is.

It means wanting to know the truth, even if it tears your life apart.

It means wanting to know the truth, even though you know you'll never have all of it.

Most people are content to sit in various degrees of untruth, accepting unexamined assumptions as true because it is much easier and more comfortable than confronting

reality on reality's own terms. They're happy to let the lies that have been put in their heads by other people rule their experience of this world.

The mentally sovereign human does not do this. The mentally sovereign human looks at life through lenses constructed out of an uncompromising dedication to unrelenting honesty, on all levels and facets of human experience.

Mental self-rule is not for everyone. It is not for cowards. It is not for the lazy or complacent. It's not for those who do things only because there's some material or egoic reward in it for them. These people are destined to have their minds ruled by others.

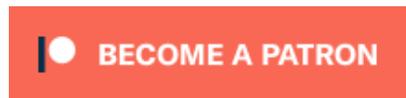
Mental sovereignty is for those who put truth above all else, and who see truth as its own reward. Their dedication to learning what's true never ceases. These people rule their own minds.

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["A Blessing For Anyone" -- Amazing New Song By Michael Brunnock Based On A Poem By Caitlin Johnstone](#)

AUTHOR'S BIO: _____

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Midlife Pandemic

By Amie Heasley

WHY WE LIKE IT: *The isolation and distancing imposed by Covid-19 takes an introspective turn in this strongly written CNF in which a woman watches the life she has built over 22 years with her husband and daughter slowly unravel. A misguided attempt to rejuvenate into a hipper version of how she sees herself—Doc Martens, nose ring, sex toys—ironically and pathetically only point to the woman she is running away from. We like the way social distancing is paralleled by marital distancing in this ‘confession’ and how Covid-19 and menopause conspire to ratchet up the tension. The effective use of the passive POV creates both a sense of intimacy and separation and the author’s nimble slightly frantic prose is deliciously readable. Quote:*

You’re well acquainted with the concept of social distancing, at least when it comes to your marriage. Your husband has been standing six feet away from you for months, maybe years.

She laughs the kind of laugh that makes you feel pleasure in a way you’ve been robbed of for too long.

(Spacing is author’s own.) Eds.

Midlife Pandemic

You do not buy a little red sports car, but you do buy a pair of Doc Marten boots: black ones with yellow stitching. Unlike the ones you bought years ago in some Hollywood boutique, you buy these sober in an over-lit shoe store in the Midwest with your 8-year-old in tow. You put on your new Docs immediately when you arrive home, and you wear them around the house while you do the dishes, run the vacuum and go over your daughter’s spelling words. You act like you’re as hot shit as you were at twenty.

You get a nose ring, spur of the moment. Your husband and daughter go with you. Your husband asks if you’re nervous and you say no because you want him to believe you’re stronger than the hollow tree of the woman you’ve become. Still,

when the sterilized stainless-steel needle pierces your right nostril, you're grateful he's holding your hand. You're surprised he's holding your hand. You hardly ever hold hands. You don't hold hands enough. You wish you held hands more.

You're not sure how much longer you can stay upright. How much longer can you lug around the shards of your heart?

You've never shied away from tears, but you've been weeping too much. Every day you cry, often more than once, for weeks, then months. You avoid watching anything too sentimental. Even insurance commercials with Flo or that Green Bay quarterback can cue the goddamn waterworks. Most of your music could be categorized as Depressive Mode, so though you've loved dissecting lyrics and melodies in songs all your life, you stop listening to anything. (This vignette about the silence in your life that was once filled with song makes you well up.)

Your husband says he feels like his existence doesn't matter to you.

You're irritated by the concept of a mancave. Why do all the troubled and weary men need a cave for escape, hibernation, watching sports and/or jerking off? Can't they just do that in the sunken living room when the kids and the wives are fast asleep in their bedrooms? You don't have a mancave or a sunken living room, but before the quarantine you encourage your husband to go out and have a few drinks, give himself all the space he desires, despite the fact he took a break from wearing his wedding band. Your heart aches from wanting to hold fast and tight to his ringless hand.

You begin seeing a therapist. Your self-esteem is abandoned squares of a quilt you don't have a clue how to stitch together. In the face of what might be The Apocalypse (aka our "New Normal"), could you sew anything? A face mask? A blouse? A wound? You've had these recurring bleak thoughts about the state of the world, your marriage, your soul. There are days when the thoughts won't stop playing on and on, like the jam band music your husband likes but you can't stand. Not that you listen to music anymore.

You call your husband an asshole. He doesn't hear you, but your daughter does. You're well acquainted with the concept of social distancing, at least when it comes to your marriage. Your husband has been standing six feet away from you for months, maybe years.

You buy two vibrators. Your husband reveals he doesn't think you're sexually attracted to him. You have 1) gone through the motions in bed before and 2) haven't been having enough sex for years. You could list out the excuses and the reasons here and now, but they're probably SOP for a couple married for over two decades. Your husband's revelation and his pushing you away make you want him more. You'd bone him every day if he'd indulge you, but your lust reversal turns him off.

You're on eggshells in the home you've lived in for twelve years with the man with whom you've shared your entire adult life. You rarely leave so much as a fragment of a shell in the eggs you routinely scramble for him, and while the man with whom you've shared your entire adult life likes the domestic ritual of the homemade breakfast, he hates the house you've lived in for twelve years.

You attempt and succeed at the smoky eye. Your husband says he loves you, but is not *in love* with you. This little bombshell wreaks havoc on your smoky eye(s).

Your husband insists he's driving the narrative of whatever's going on with or between you two, but he's the one who put whatever's going on with or between you two in park. (Neutral at best.) You are the one who caught him looking at porn. You are the one who pointed out the porn wasn't the problem. The problem was (and is) the walls he erected. You tell him he isn't present in the home and the life you've built together. He agrees with you. So technically, you're the one who put your foot on the gas of the narrative that's currently driving your relationship. (Plus, you're open to watching porn with him.)

Your husband's existence means everything to you.

You used to have game. (Maybe your game is like asymptomatic coronavirus, cloaked within your cushy perimenopausal body?) You meet a friend at a bar for a "girls' night." There's this guy who sells garbage trucks for a living chatting her up. He doesn't hear well, or like your mother-in-law says, he has *selective hearing*. Your friend tells him she works for a company that does research for pharmaceutical development. She keeps repeating the word *drugs* louder when he says *trucks*. This gentleman has nothing but your friend and trucks on the brain. When the bartender steals his attention, you tease your friend: "See, you've got game." She laughs the kind of laugh that makes you feel pleasure in a way you've been robbed of for too long.

You've gone down on your husband more in the last six months than the last fifteen years. It lacks sensitivity and embraces stereotype, but you can't wrap your head around how blowjobs on the regular could spike any red-blooded male's anxiety.

You suck at asking for help. This simple fact blooms technicolor in your mind during one of your solo jogs in the glorious and free fresh air. You share it with your therapist through the grainy screen of an iPad in your third or fourth teletherapy session. Later, you also text your husband your insight. This is what self-discovery looks like mid-pandemic.

You and your husband decide to put in an offer on a lake house. He resents you for not being open to the idea of living on a lake sooner. The lake house is tiny but the water and the promise of happiness in front of it are vast.

You call your husband a dick, a prick, a self-absorbed, coddled narcissist. Nobody hears you.

You try to have some dignity for God's sake. You deserve more than the pittance your husband doles out. You deserve to be loved for the one and only flawed you. Pull up your bootstraps. Put on your big-girl panties. Tell your husband to not let the door hit him in the ass. Stay calm and carry on. Bye, Felicia. OK, Boomer. These silly convictions seem convincing when you're out running. Feet pounding the pavement, you pray your strides beat back your uncertainty.

You refuse to give into the Humpty Dumpty narrative.

Your husband asks your daughter who she's taking to the school dance. She answers without hesitation, "Mommy and Daddy." You wonder if your husband realizes the fleeting and monumental nature of this statement.

Your lake house is sunk. The inspection doesn't go swimmingly—the garage is a full scrape, the deck is rotting, one of the rooms doesn't have heat, the staging is too perfect, there's probably a rabid cat next door who'll shit in your flower box. The list of concerns equals too much risk. No matter what he's said, your husband won't allow himself to steer your marriage into uncharted waters. Instead, he yields to the familiar comfort of throwing open the porthole, letting his, his therapist and his father's doubts about buying his dream home wash him overboard. Ahoy, matey! This isn't the first time he's found himself in need of a life preserver.

You take a trip to D.C. for your twenty-second anniversary. Your husband who has avoided flying for three years and counting has decided you both should be wheels up. You consider it a small miracle you've reached twenty-two. You also consider this a sign your husband is trying to work things out. You spend several hours immersed in the replica of a slave ship that is the African American History Museum. You slouch on a barstool and eat the best fish sandwich you've ever tasted. You stumble into a massive Right to Life march by mistake. (Your daughter is adopted, but you remain firmly pro-choice.) You ride the Metro like Midwest tourists. You have sex like newlyweds. You have oral sex like new lovers. You have orgasms (plural)! You both drink too much, in D.C., in Kalamazoo and everywhere in between. The trip is short and sweet and the relief is welcome and temporary.

You ask your therapist, "How do you help someone who won't get the fuck out of their own way?" (This is a rhetorical question aimed at both you and your husband.)

You tell your husband he thinks he's better than you. He doesn't disagree with you. He is socially engaging, charming really. He's the bread winner with the cool job at a nationally renowned brewery. You are a self-employed writer, don't bring home much bread (or beer) and aren't known beyond your innermost circles. Social situations make you anxious. Your husband says your social anxiety is a burden. You don't disagree with him, but note you've never described his fear of flying or his claustrophobia as burdensome. Maybe you should've been more forthright. Maybe you should've taken that elevator to the bowels of Hoover Dam or that flight to Finland without him, just as he's spent so many evenings mingling among coworkers without you.

Your husband sleeps mostly on the couch. Your bedroom is too confining for him. Bullshit. What's confining is you lying next to him, so you, too, take up evening residence on your sagging leather couch. You're desperate to be near him. You can't be certain how long his nearness will last. If and/or when he leaves, you will either donate or burn that couch. (You're heavily leaning toward flames and ashes.)

You think, I didn't sign up for *this*. Is *this* the for worse, the in sickness?

Your social anxiety could be a boon during the COVID-19 crisis. Yet you can't have children, and even if you could, a chronic introvert wouldn't want any part of repopulating the earth. You're closing in on your fifth decade on the planet and can't fathom sleeping with another man besides your husband in RL.

Your daughter finds one of your vibrators. She asks if her teddy bear can please have it.

You kiss and hug more. It makes your husband flinch. His unease stings, but you won't stop. You will keep telling him you love him. You're angry, you're numb, you're terrified, you're resilient, but one thing is crystal: you will always throw him the goddamn life preserver.

You wind up in the ER for a psych eval. Thoughts of suicide, no specified plan, humiliation thick like the wet blanket your husband has labeled you. He informs you he no longer wants to be married. You inform him you no longer want to live. He calls 911 when you try to flee the house. The cops show up. EMS follows. You're loaded into an ambulance, eyes of your betrothed neighbors watching.

You, your husband (still) and your daughter are all inside a pressure cooker, trapped for God knows how long. Michigan's governor has ordered everybody to shelter at home to help flatten the curve. Your family is together, but if you hear the phrase or read the hashtag "in this together" one more time, you and your Instahouse will explode.

You've had a great fall. You'll need something more than all the king's horses and all the king's men to ever be whole again.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The inspiration for this work came from the precipice of divorce. Trite and first-world as it sounds (most of us are probably familiar with the stats), I never thought the potential dissolution of my marriage was something I'd have to face, let alone during a pandemic. Over the last several months, in what has felt like soul-crushing isolation at times, I've navigated life as a Great Pretender, much to the detriment of my mental health. Nobody outside of a pretty small circle has truly known about my internal struggles. Writing has always been a savior for me, and while it's been more challenging than ever to put pen to paper (or fingertips to keyboard), this particular piece has allowed me to give my pain some much-needed air. It's enabled me to give in to the vulnerability and finally breathe. Using second person (along with the short, non-linear vignettes) made my emotional fragility feel more universal. Beyond my own healing process, my hope is that the work strikes a chord and shows others that we really are (ugh, gasp) "in this together."*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Amie Heasley earned an MFA in fiction from Western Michigan University. You can find some of her work online or in the pages of Stoneboat Literary Journal, Monkeybicycle, Juked, Change Seven, Belletrist Magazine, The Boiler Journal and Fiction Southeast. She blogs lovingly but not nearly enough at chopperchronicles.blogspot.com.

BEST YEAR EVER: Sex, Death, and 2020 Vision

By Brant von Goble

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor ROBERT D. KIRVEL writes:*

An essay of 17,000+ words with 124 referenced footnotes should offer something exceptional to warrant a reader's time and attention. Here, writer and teacher, Brant von Goble, gives us an intriguing vision of a post-COVID-19, post-MAGA realm by speculating on whether next year will be the one when we wise up to the bullshit (metaphorical "death" in the title) and create something new ("sex" in the title). Predictions about this essay's forthcoming "best year ever" range from optimistic to acerbic. By the author's reckoning, a post-pandemic tomorrow-land in the U.S. will feature less glorification of don't-know-it-all experts accompanied by reduced corruption, apology-offering, and faux concern arising from guilt. On education, we can expect a dawning recognition that "masses of marching morons," aka students, really don't learn much in classrooms after all, except for the curious few, and a better route is consolidation of facilities plus more online learning rather than sending rotten learners to bad colleges that are vastly overpriced. Does he have your attention yet? We'll stop thinking so much about our jobs and dastardly fellow man as well, and learn to love work-from-home, automation, and robots—some of us with employment at least. On the world scene, we can anticipate decreased international interventionism prompted by self-righteous moralizers in the U.S. and a peaceful realignment of global power because, well, maybe China is more focused on China's own welfare than on a smallish population of yappy critics thousands of miles away. Not all is rosy though. Steel yourself for my favorite section on the "chaos factor" personified by

*one thoroughly disenfranchised movie character, Arthur Fleck from Joker, who would dismember and set a match to everything. Yet even in this respect, the author finds some good news. The good is that the despair, the pain, and the isolation felt by millions of Americans is now impossible to deny. Since 2000, we have been *Bowling Alone* (nonfiction by Robert D. Putnam). Now we burn our cities down together. Yikes. Though readers might not agree with every forecast or assumption, this is writing replete with ideas and insight, and it is entertaining to boot, a rarity during a year of global pandepression. The future then? Yes, bring it on, please.*

Best Year Ever:

Sex, Death, and 2020 Vision

Decades where nothing happens . . . and the ejaculations of progress

Fantasize, fixate, pursue, fail . . . repeat. . . Fantasize, fixate, pursue, fail . . . repeat . . .

Fantasize, fixate, pursue, fail . . . repeat . . .

And then you get what you want.

And it is almost certainly less than what you wanted. In retrospect, the dreams, the chase, the ham-fisted exertions and heavy breathing, and the underwhelming finish will make for good

barroom stories and cringe-laugh memories. Or not. Sometimes you are stuck with someone you

cannot stand for reasons that seem less compelling with each additional minute spent staring at

that person's shockingly charmless, uglier-than-a-mud-fence visage.

So goes the cycle of revolution. What did you think I meant? And in revolution, even those who see their every demand met are left with dull victories, shattered dreams, and utopias

that end *à la Thomas More*, with at least one person losing his head. ¹ *All conditioned things are*

*unsatisfactory . . .*²

And since our minds are already somewhere below the waist, let us move them a bit lower, *to the feet*—and the road upon which said feet tread. That road, the road to revolution, is a

memorial of sorts, and much like the Kolyma Highway in the Russian Far East, it is built upon

the bones of those who gave their labors to it, oftentimes less than willingly. ³ We all walk upon

the labors of the dead, but we cannot walk too far along with our metaphor: It has its limitations.

Highways are incremental things, built piece by piece. Revolutions do not happen *until they happen*. And *the impossible* becomes *the inevitable*, becomes *the done*. There is no *might*.

There is no *somewhat improbable*. Nothing happens. Then everything happens. The revolution

takes moments, but the consequences last for years. So perchance sexual flights of fancy (and whatever fear of flying thereof) make for a better metaphor than a Russian Road of Bones.

Putting aside metaphors, here is the plain truth:

2020 is our year of revolution.

And that is a wonderful thing.

Rather than mourning the world that was, we must let the dead bury the dead. The future awaits. And here is how it will be better than yesterday, which is not to say it will be perfect:

1. We'll stop believing the bullshitters.

*The end of history*⁴ was the *beginning* of America's era of bullshit without limits. We had done stupid things before (*Goodbye my darling, Hello Vietnam . . .*), we had subsidized extremists and enemies (*Morning, Mujahideen . . .5*), and helped to overthrow legitimate governments and leaders only to have them eventually replaced with people far more hostile to us than we would have imagined possible (*Afternoon, Ayatollah . . .6*). Our leadership was never wondrously capable unless *capable* is defined as being born in the right place at the right time.

Even our great victories—World War II, for instance—were as much the product of America's wealth and geographical isolation (and willingness to accept bright immigrants⁷) as they were

any great genius on the part of our leadership. But then, *really smart people* have their parents

make their money for them. So perhaps we should give credit where it is due.

During the Cold War, we had some reason to contain our baser instincts—the desire to imprison everything that moves, ⁸ the impulse to militarize and arm every law enforcement

agency to the teeth,⁹ and the yearning to obliterate goatherds.¹⁰ We needed to keep focused on the

Evil Empire, which with its strange alphabet, strong liquor, bombastically patriotic anthem,¹¹ and

an arsenal of nuclear weapons, was just different enough for contrast. Ideology the Empire had,

but mere ideology it was not. Rather, it was a people, a government, and a land that could be

easily identified and well-enough understood. We knew where to point our missileers and their

missiles.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, we know nothing with certainty, so we fish for adversaries, and if we discover there are no fish to catch, we stock the pond. We waged a *Global*

War on Terror (GWOT)—effectively a fight against what is variously *a tactic* or *an emotional*

state. This made about as much sense as fighting a war against *ennui* (because we should all care

about something!), and it fed the piranhas of anti-Americanism with bone and blood.¹²

We find

other enemies of every shape and stripe within our land, be they *superpredators*,¹³

terrorist

sleeper cells,¹⁴ the Y2K computer bug,¹⁵ or Asian giant hornets.¹⁶

The dangers of the enemy are always sold hard. Vanquishing said enemy always requires some expensive strategy. The strategy is always either badly designed, poorly executed, or both,

and the enemy never does much measurable harm, even when the strategy fails. The failure is

always proof positive that more money is needed.¹⁷

Our leadership is ill-suited to peace. It does not know what to make of it. So it engages in perpetual war, hoping that we will not catch on to them. Our news outlets/content producers do

not do much better. *If it bleeds, it leads*. And the big six media conglomerates (Disney, TimeWarner, et cetera¹⁸) will do or say whatever they must to keep themselves in the black.

The good news is this: We are more skeptical of these people and institutions than ever before. And our faith in experts—far from absolute even years ago¹⁹—was further diminished by

the great Anticlimactic Piddly Pandemic of 2020. Predictions as to the damage that COVID

would bring were so inconsistent, so hyperbolic that they put the most alarmist of climate change

doomsday predictions—those of the *Day After Tomorrow* variety—to shame.²⁰ Yet the professionals learned nothing. They will continue to undermine their credibility for a few brief

moments of screen time, proving that they are no less inclined to be famewhores than are the rest

of us.²¹

If the last six months have established anything, it is that government officials, scientists, and academics know nothing much more than the man on the street. They can do nothing.

They

wear no clothes. We are losing faith in the lot of them.

From this good news springs much other.

2. American moralizing and interventionism will come to an end.

One of the great global annoyances is the American tendency to save others from themselves—to liberate them, whether they want it or not. We have been doing this for years, but

the height of the stupidity was our effort to bring Western liberal democracy to the Middle East.

This effort was so singularly doomed to failure that no sensible person would have thought that it

had any chance of success. The flaw in the grand plan: the belief that American values are *universal values*.²² Make no mistake about it, the GWOT was not a war about oil: There would have been easier ways to capture that market, and cheaper too. Rather, it was a scheme hatched by true believers—those who take as inviolable truth that inside of every foreign man, woman, or child, there is a Ding Dong-loving American waiting to burst out (probably because he’s hungry).²³ But this is wrong. It is founded upon the supremely arrogant failure to understand that *they are not like us*. Whoever *they* are, they are not American. They have their values, their traditions, and their priorities—different from ours, but no less authentic or deeply held. We all may bleed red, but not all puke white and shit blue. Anyone who has spent a few years working in another country and away from the expat settlements will recognize the truth in this. And he will soon learn that either he must adapt to *their* tempo, *their* values, and *their* way of life, or he must stay indoors, waiting for his labor contract to end so he can fly home.²⁴ But despite all their credentials, make no mistake about them: Our gold-plated masters-of-the-universe leaders are *provincial*.²⁵ They know less about the outside world than does the average soldier or bordercrossing day laborer. And their Dunning-Kruger confidence makes them more dangerous still.²⁶ And then there is the matter of *human rights*—a fine notion about which all and sundry crow, but that few nations observe except when convenient. If governing a people while respecting their rights with any consistency is possible is a matter yet to be determined.²⁷ This *may* change. But *may* is not must. What *is* clear is that we—the American people and government—are in no position to demand from others what we do not demand from ourselves. Putting aside the past—the nearly genocidal reduction of the American Indian population, for instance—we have no grounds to unhypocritically attack other governments for the treatment of their people *today*. Do foreign powers routinely abuse, kill, and incarcerate their minorities and their poor? *Of course!* Do they deny their less-privileged citizens fair, speedy, and impartial trials? *No doubt they do!* Do they tolerate inequality of wealth and opportunity so extreme that the difference between the haves and the have-nots is one of worlds, rather than mere dollars? *You betcha!*

Do they allow the infrastructure upon which their citizens depend to crumble into the sea, leaving only the richest of private-jet rich with safe means of transportation?

Yep!

But what do we do differently?

We incarcerate at a rate unmatched by any existing power. We provide our citizens with the best justice they can buy, and we provide them with roads with free potholes and water with

free lead (not *lead-free* water).²⁸ Our generosity towards our fellow Americans is inversely

proportional to our capacity for shambolic crisis-management and political infighting.

About

none of this should we despair: Our emerging inability to enforce the demand that the world

remake itself in our image will save all of humanity lifetimes' worth of grief.

Enforce the demand is not a matter of mere verbiage. Demands we will still make, but enforce them we will not. We no longer have the wealth for one international adventure after the

next. And we lack the moral stature to have our chest-thumping dictates taken seriously.²⁹

The

more loudly we attempt to boss about other nations and attack their record of ignoring rights and

due process, the more impotent we will appear. If we issue a human rights report about the

treatment of the Uyghurs, the Chinese will tweet back a George Floyd GIF. There the argument

stops. And with each excretion of holier-than-thou fluff and puffery, our opponents will need

only to dig through the public record to make us look to be bigger asses. Guantanamo Bay, Abu

Ghraib, the collateral damage of America's many efforts to bomb the world's cave peoples into

modernity—our actions and the ready availability of digital images thereof give endless fodder

for the meme machines of hostile powers. We can keep arguing the issue, but only at an ongoing

expense to our dignity.

This all sounds trivial and jejune—tweets and twits and online derision—but it is not.

The select shapers of the world hate being teased. They have no tolerance for it. They have been

the butt of jokes throughout the ages, but never has the ridicule of the unwashed masses (or other

elites) been piped directly into their homes, their phones, and their hollowed-out souls.

Enough

in the way of psychological attack, and the elite will retreat. They will stop trying to bring about

heaven on earth and leave the lot of us well enough alone. God will not save us from *a most*

*oppressive tyranny, sincerely exercised for the good of its victims.*³⁰ The merciless mockery of

the internet peanut gallery will.

The pole of global power will shift east, and a different set of values will prevail—less abstraction, less grand design, less individualism, more concrete thinking and incremental improvement, and more in the way of collective unity, to be valued above the happiness of the

individual.³¹ These *are* values. They are as real as ours, but they are different. A people who

sacrifice to get to heaven (us) will view life and its purpose quite differently from a people who

think more in terms of passing down a legacy from one generation to the next.

One order falls. Another rises. The new world may be less brave than that which we imagined, but it will almost certainly cost us less.³² And we will not bear the heavy burden of

trying to make it come to pass.

3. And the great global power shift will happen without a world war.

Global power shifts are disruptive, and they rarely occur without mass death. The expansion of European nations and cultures from regional players to world leaders—which is

what European culture and values have been for the last 500 years—was monstrously lethal.

Depending upon the estimate used, more than 80% of the native population of the Americas died

from either disease, warfare, or slavery after Europeans began to stream into the New World.³³

Then there were the First and Second World Wars, which resulted in a total of around 37 million and 70 million deaths, respectively.³⁴ These marked the collapse of European colonialism

and the subsequent rise of the United States as a military and economic superpower.

The rise of China *could* be disastrous. Academics, industrialists, and a fair number of chickenhawks (on both sides) have either predicted or demanded war with China. This is a *fait*

accompli, so they argue. There is no other way for America and China to resolve the matter of

their changing global roles.³⁵ The sooner the bloodshed starts, the sooner it can be finished. The

outcome of a war involving potentially billions of people is never entirely articulated by these

saber rattlers.

Perhaps America will win, and the Chinese will take their millennia of distinct history and culture and simply go home, leaving the rest of us to do as we please. Perhaps

democracy

will break out in China after the evil government of today is disintegrated by glorious Red, White, and Blue firepower. (And we know this will happen because of our successes in . . . Iraq? Afghanistan? Vietnam?) None seem to very well consider the possibility that America might lose. That the Chinese have a population vastly larger than that of the United States is irrelevant in their minds. And China's nuclear arsenal is dismissed with no more thought.³⁶ Another possibility—that both China *and* the United States would suffer horrific losses and that entire continents would be as poisoned with radiation as is the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone—is rarely mentioned.³⁷

Yet war with China—the emergent post-COVID power—seems unlikely, both because of China's nuclear deterrent and because the Chinese lack the requisite attachment to ideology to start a war and the Americans lack the money. Chinese empire-building efforts were never particularly extensive: Even during the height of the Zheng He's treasure ship exploration (in the 15th century), the Chinese never established colonies of much size or power, traveling as far as Mogadishu and the Middle East, but not staying for long.³⁸

China's modern forays into Africa appear more commercially than politically (or culturally) oriented. Granted, European colonization efforts were largely driven by economics as well, but there was another layer to them—that of wanting to transform peoples and lands, with the Christian tradition of proselytization playing a role. There is no comparable Chinese tradition. Daoism, Confucianism, and Chinese Buddhism spread beyond their motherland's borders, but they were carried by visitors who traveled to China, studied, and took them home, with the Chinese appearing to have little interest in what other people in other places knew or thought of the Middle Kingdom's beliefs or customs.³⁹

Here is a lesson for the ages: The Chinese do not hate us. They do not want to conquer us. They simply *do not care*.⁴⁰ The Chinese have a great many people of their own. They do not need any more to share their beliefs, to respect their values, or to practice their faith. They have enough people already. *We*—meaning *everyone who is not Chinese*—will be viewed pragmatically, as buyers, sellers, or providers of natural resources. So long as we do not interfere

in China's business—her internal affairs or her ability to engage in commerce—the Chinese will prove no more dangerous than the haggling shopkeeper down the street. Yet *nearly bloodless* battles still stain a uniform or two—the damned spot is still there—and for those who die, the cost of conflict is absolute. Likewise, the comparatively humane and peaceful transition from West-to-East preeminence will not be without its casualties, however few and far between.

Given that COVID has served as the tipping weight on the global balance of power, perhaps its deaths should be counted as the price of the transition. If every COVID death worldwide is attributed to China's rise, the total number of deaths thus far is around 500,000, and this is over a half-year period.⁴¹ If this rate of mortality holds constant until the end of 2021 (by which time the disease is likely to have either killed the most vulnerable or mutated into something less virulent, if not both), the total number of deaths will not exceed 2,000,000, or slightly more than 0.02% of the world population. This would make the United States-to-China global geopolitical shift one of the least costly in terms of human life on record.⁴²

Such is more remarkable given that it encompasses an actual change in dominant civilization. The British-to-American shift was from one culture to another so similar as to be nearly interchangeable, save for the vexing British tendency to spell *check* with a *que*. Yet China's rise from *interrupted superpower* to superpower proper is as significant an occurrence as to have happened in all recorded history.⁴³ So we will have peace (and fewer deaths than almost anyone has feared) whether we want it or not.

4. The public will learn to distinguish between science and scientist.

Declining faith in experts need not lead to a rise of primitivism, magical thinking, or technophobia. Rather, just as faith in scientists may decrease, respect for science itself will likely increase. This is a critical good. Science demands no worship. Science demands no faith. Science demands *nothing*. It cannot demand anything. It has no personhood or personality. Anthropomorphizing a process does neither people nor process any service. And the sooner that the public learns how to read and interpret scientific research—how to view it with an appropriately jaundiced eye—the less easily charlatans will be able to bamboozle them. A

great many people may indeed lack the intellectual tenacity and capacity to understand the most complex scientific arguments, but that is not to say that they will prove unable to identify glaring errors in logic and experimental design.

The *fundamentals* of the scientific method can be understood by almost anyone, and in an era of freely available information, those who *can* grasp the details and the higher math involved

can make the complex simple enough for the majority to interpret.⁴⁴ Those who *choose* to avoid

this information—who choose ignorance—have only themselves to blame for whatever ill

befalls them for not knowing what they can and should know.

A world in which scientists are valorized is not much better than one in which they ignored entirely. In the latter, the warnings go unheeded. In the former, they grow dangerous

from an excess of power and a lack of accountability. So it goes with all experts. The unchecked

mad scientist risks becoming a Trofim Lysenko.⁴⁵ The unchecked and unaccountable social

engineer, an Edward Bernays.⁴⁶

From our skepticism towards experts and professionals, comes another benefit.

5. Our government will become less corrupt and abusive, even as we lose faith in it.

The surest sign of a scoundrel is that he demands blind faith in his good intentions and rejects independent oversight. *Trust me* says the crook, and the wise man grabs his wallet and

holds it dear. Scientists, experts, officials, and lawyers who demand that we have high confidence in their goodwill and great competence, should be held up for special and close

examination.

The idolization of authority figures is dangerous for a society, and just as dangerous is an overestimation of the risks authority figures face. This is relevant when considering the role of

security services and institutions—the military and police. The narrative Americans have been

sold for decades now is that we are under constant risk of attack—from criminals, from terrorists, from immigrants, from our own families. We are kept terrified of *them*, meaning

anyone other than ourselves and our great protectors. We are sold the notion that if the thin blue

line breaks, all will turn to hell. Yet for the better part of human history, there was no blue line to

break. The first police force was not established in the United States (in Boston, more specifically) until 1838.⁴⁷ And before 1800, when France established the first modern police

force, *no* country had such an organization in the sense we now take as a given.⁴⁸ Before that, constables, sheriffs, night watchmen, elected and appointed officials, and the military all played a role in imposing the law upon the public, but regular policing by a professional uniformed force did not exist. Laws existed, but laws and their enforcers were far less prevalent than today. Despite this lack of ever-present agents of government-approved violence, the historical record does not suggest that colonial America was *Ye Olde Purge*, and to the extent great crimes were committed before the founding of the Republic, they were as likely to have been the *product* of government actions as they were to be *prevented* by them.⁴⁹ Yet a great many of our people, namely White, middle-class Americans, live as though they must cling to the authorities with such a codependent-girlfriend tenacity that being more than ten minutes away from the nearest police station is a terrifying prospect to them. These hyperthyroidic, amphetamine-munching cats masquerading as citizens will cling to authority—any authority—so long as there is any authority left, and when the authority falls away, collapses, or walks off its post to never return, they will cling to the memory and symbols of what once was. But the population of the fearful felines will shrink. Demographic and economic changes will chip away at it, until it becomes just one more minority, and not a uniquely powerful one.⁵⁰ Given time, many of the children of the status quo will turn against authoritarianism, partially a result of campus indoctrination and partially as a result of them earning less while working more than did their parents, and thus being impoverished even in their faith.⁵¹ The emergent groups—poorer, darker, less connected to the established power structure, and more likely to be on the receiving end of years of destructive social engineering—will prove far more skeptical than did their lily-white predecessors.⁵² They—the replacements—know what most of the world takes for granted: The police are neither more inherently moral nor any more likely to be infallible than any other group of human beings given gun and badge. Ultimately, the police are *men with guns*. And the *hombres armados* (armed men), regardless of how they identify themselves or the values they claim to uphold, are people the *hombres desarmados* (unarmed men) are better off avoiding.⁵³ Even the most *color-deficient* (or maybe *tanning-challenged* is the proper adjective) of us

will have a more difficult time denying as much with each new damning dashcam, bodycam, or smartphone video.⁵⁴

The irony of this is that the very same technologies that make us distrust our authorities *more* make them *less* likely to do something worthy of distrust. Even judges, probably the *least*

likely of any group of authorities to be held to account for their actions, are finally discovering

that abusing and tormenting attorneys, plaintiffs, witnesses, and defendants is not a good look on

camera. And looking bad on camera can lead to an early (and unceremonious) retirement.⁵⁵

The other great benefit of this—when we see our flaws, so does the rest of the world. The more the world knows of our ways and our failings, the less likely it is to repeat them, which is

not to say that other peoples will not make mistakes of their own.

6. *We'll quit pretending to give a damn about everything and everyone.*

There is no greater enemy of true compassion than feigned concern. The latter allows a convenient relief of guilt, a saving of face, and not much more. The former—compassion—is

more difficult and more limited. We *cannot* care about most things. We *cannot* care about most

people.⁵⁶ The teens were a decade of great but meaningless display and rebellion without direction. All were well befitting a century in its adolescence. Protests over nothing, about no

one, and without any goals beyond mayhem—the University of Missouri and Evergreen State

College, Occupy Wall Street, et cetera—we know about as much about these jamborees of petty

destruction as did the protestors, which is to say that we know nothing.⁵⁷

But at the heart of all these protests is an imperative—that we *must care*. We *must care* about minorities. We *must care* about economic inequality. We *must care* about hurt feelings and

emotional and social insensitivity.

And as the years progressed, we faced even more of the same—a never-ending imperative to care. The *Rape on Campus* hoax of 2014, the Kavanaugh hearings, #MeToo, the

great protest/riots of 2020—all are public and political actions impose something on us—that we

must care (or look as though we do), that we must make the world *right* according to whoever is

doing the protesting.⁵⁸ And we must do our caring in the most performative, melodramatic

manner possible.⁵⁹

The truth is this: We all have limited time. We all have limited energy. This applies to the

most sympathetic, just as it does to the least. No one can concern himself with all things and all people. Those who *pretend* to care about every wrong, much like those who claim to like all

music or all movies or all religions, do not care much about any of them.

This is not to say that we cannot all care about *something* or even several things, but we must, as a matter of necessity, be indifferent to more of the world and more of the people and

things therein than not. And anyone foolish enough to attempt to fix *every* problem on earth, or

even every problem in a community of a few thousand, will achieve nothing but exhaustion and

will martyr themselves to no effect. As this goes for people, so does it for companies and charities, no matter how large and powerful they may be. This is an undeniable fact—one of

which any sensible person would be unlikely to claim ignorance. We are functionally sociopathic

at certain times and regarding certain causes, no matter how worthy such causes might be.

As often as not, wisdom is the art of learning to acknowledge and accept the obvious, rather than denying or raging against it. This is the year we wise up, not because we are inherently sapient, but because we have no alternative. Beat someone about the ears long enough

with the truth, and he will eventually notice it is there and that it is giving him a headache.

This is the year we will finally learn to say the magic words: *I do not care. I have problems enough of my own already.* Let us all learn to listen to our inner bastards—the little

voice inside of us each of us that proudly proclaims *Screw you, buddy, I'll look out for Number One!*

Our lives will be better for this.⁶⁰

7. We'll stop apologizing constantly.

And then there is the companion to the culture of constant attack and never-ending concern: *the apology cult*. Sometimes for the actions the apologizer has committed, sometimes

for the actions of a group in which one is a willful member, and sometimes for being on the

receiving of pure poor fortune—for being a member of an imaginary community of race, class,

or culture—apologies are churned out for every possible reason and come in every form, from

the *mea culpa* to the public grovel, to the carefully worded and drafted-by-a-team-of-attorneys

variety. Baskin Robbins could never hope to offer as many flavors. What these apologies have in

common is this: The very rarely mean much. And even more rarely do they matter. Apologies, much like a convicted man's alleged remorse for burning down your house and decapitating your cat, fix nothing. Your house will not turn from ashes to wood, and your cat has still been deprived of one of his lives. And *forced* apologies—those done under pain of harassment, imprisonment, or unemployment—are *worse* than nothing. Coercing one's enemies to scrape and kowtow does nothing more than make the apologizing enemy resentful, the strong and stupid ever more arrogant; and the observant more cynical.⁶¹ Nothing good comes of this. The worst ritual of the apology cult is the *proxy apology ceremony*, in which those who were not wronged demand (and receive) an apology from those who have not wronged them. This is not an act made in good faith. No one can feel the pain of another, nor is it the right of the living to accept apologies on behalf of the dead. And it is not the place of descendants to presume the attitude their forebears would have assumed in time. Had they lived a few decades more, the butcherers of American Indians might have concluded that stripping a people of their lives, livelihoods, and lands was wrong. But perhaps not. Given millennia, given until the heat death of the universe, their opinions might have never changed. They might become no less tenaciously racist or exploitive and only become *more* skillful in justifying and excusing their conduct. There is no good reason to assume anyone's ancestors would prove a whit better. We might be wise to quit apologizing altogether or to reserve apologies for the most unusual of circumstances. These we may well do. If one feels so inclined to right a wrong, he should fix it to the best of his ability. And if he is not so inclined (or there is nothing to be done), he should neither pet nor kick drowsy dogs, knowing it best to leave them to their dreams of chase and hunt.

8. *We'll admit that most students learn little and that most children are not special.*

Our multi-generational celebration of mental mediocrity—of the perverse and profoundly destructive notion that cognitive weakness is strength and strength is weakness, that no one is simply *a moron, dull, or about average*, but is instead *special*—will be brought to a nearly

instantaneous conclusion by COVID. More specifically, COVID's effects on distance and time as

they relate to education are what will make the music stop.

First, there is the matter of *distance education*.

Distance education has a history of more than a century. Correspondence schools (of the traditional, by-mail variety) go back to the 19th century.⁶² And a few of the schools founded in

that era are still open. Other iterations, such as learning by radio and television, were developed

and deployed with varying degrees of success. A few, such as the Open University of China

(originally *China Central Radio and TV University*), are still in operation.⁶³

Computers and the internet have been used to deliver instruction since the 1980s, and electronically mediated courses are common enough today that a large percentage of college

students have taken at least a few of them. Still, online learning remains somewhat of a redheaded stepchild. We may tout distance education as a great opportunity for the poor, the

rural, the disabled, and the single mother, but Harvard still offers classes in person.

Or it did.

In COVID Land, all the world is not a stage, but a chatroom. This is the year colleges, including the elite ones, kicked their precious, moldable minds off campus quicker than one

could utter *homeless undergrad*—community, continuity, and tradition be damned.⁶⁴

Grade schools, middle schools, high schools, trade schools—all followed suit. And for the first time in a long time, parents and guardians can now see plainly what their budding

geniuses are learning *and are capable of learning*.

So, two questions: 1) How much *does* the average student learn? 2) How much *could* the average student learn?

Answer 1: Almost nothing.⁶⁵

Answer 2: Not much more.⁶⁶

It is easy enough to get a child (or increasingly, *an adult*) diagnosed as learning disabled, differently gifted, *on the spectrum*, suffering from ADHD, or whatever else was recently added

to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). There is an entire industry

dedicated to labeling and excusing anything and everything—we are fast on our way to medicalizing bad personalities and awkwardness—and any number of clinicians will conform

their professional observations to the expectations of those who enable them to continue paying

down (slowly, oh so slowly) their student loans. ⁶⁷

When discussing learning plans, behavioral management strategies, time accommodations, and medication regimens with teachers, administrators, and clinicians, it is

easy enough for parents to think of all this procedurally or bureaucratically—just one more lot of paperwork and protocol. But when the spawn of said parents is plopped in front of the family computer’s screen, where said child-beast oozes drams of oils, pints of mucous, and quarts of ejaculate (or gallons of menstrual blood); soils his/her/its pants; and recites the alphabet (incorrectly) ten times in a given day, considering the *thing* as being much more evolved than the amorphous, eternally suffering blob of “I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream” becomes a mental exercise only the grandly deluded can long sustain.⁶⁸ Thus, it is distance education that *decreases* the distance from parent to child, and in this proximity, delusions die. Next, there is the matter of time, and how much more difficult it is to slaughter when not in the classroom. Students (particularly *college* students) who study online may be forced *to study!* No more fighting, no more drugs, no more whoring, no more hugs. Presumably, they can do a fair amount of sexting with their classmates, just as they can have the occasional virtual bar crawl (meaning the students sit at their computers and drink, while periodically punching/groping themselves at the behest of their peers), but there would be not much in the way of partying to be had. Social media still chugs along, but uploading photo after photo of your Instaworthy eggplant grows tiresome for even the most *like-thirsty* of netizens. And attendance by itself does not mean much in the online classroom, so teachers and students alike must do more than stare at their phones and pretend that education is happening by way of osmosis. Thus, *something* must be done. And once the work product of our bright young minds is revealed, any sensible person—parent, teacher, advocate for education—is presented with evidence of the hugely expensive non-education students receive. An examination of school coursework and assignments confirms that students *do not* learn much. The students themselves, by their words and deeds, confirm that they *cannot* learn much. This is a bitter pill for many, but the more schools are seen for what they are—babysitting services for children ages 6 to 36—the more we can align their design with their proper function of keeping America’s great irritation—her youth—out of our hair and out of harm’s way.

9. *We’ll stop paying for bad students to go to worse colleges.*

In an era in which information is very nearly free, college is of questionable value. There

are a few subjects that require special facilities and equipment—biological and biomedical sciences (about 6% of college majors for completed degrees); engineering (6%); health professions and related programs (12%); homeland security, law enforcement, and firefighting (3%); military technologies and applied sciences (<1%); physical sciences and science technologies (2%); and transportation and materials moving (<1%).⁶⁹ Even if we assume a few relevant fields and categories were not included in the National Center for Education Statistics table from which these numbers were obtained, no more than a third of all college graduates require access to a classroom, a laboratory, a clinical setting, a machine/engineering facility, or a model/experimental farm for them to complete their degrees. The rest can learn the vast majority of what they need to know to achieve mastery in their fields of study remotely or independently. There is a legitimate argument to be made some of the never-articulated process, customs, and procedures required for mastery of any number of domains (*tacit knowledge*, as described by Michael Polanyi) cannot easily be taught or learned by way of self-study or distance learning. But if a student can gain this information in a classroom of 50 students seems no less uncertain, particularly in a climate in which teachers are hesitant to interact with students except in the most cautious, detached, and legally defensible manner.⁷⁰ And there is an equally legitimate argument to be made that some fields simply lack much in the way of tacit knowledge, or that tacit knowledge in many fields (to the extent that it exists) is of so little consequence that students can figure it out on their own. One can imagine a chemistry student learning that a certain apparatus only works properly if manipulated *just so* or a budding biologist learning that certain cultures or cell lines can only be sustained with the most particular care and feeding. But as one moves from the physical to the abstract, this becomes less relevant. Once schools move the better part of their instruction online, they face a new reality—that of non-regional (and potentially *global*) competition. Aside from bureaucratic and institutional hurdles, nothing stands between rationally managed higher education organizations and the outsourcing of instruction. Philosophy, mathematics, and critical theory can be taught

about as easily from across the world as from across the state. Having internationally located teachers instructing American students has the potential to save time, money, and legal resources for a school. Consider how many teachers are imported into America's classrooms to instruct students in algebra, statistics, and economics. Sponsoring a skilled worker is difficult. The paperwork can run to hundreds of pages; the delay, to months; and the cost, to north of ten thousand dollars.⁷¹

The burden placed on the would-be professor is great as well, who must travel away from his home and all that he knows to work and live thousands of miles away, in a country from which he can be removed if his employment is terminated. Although some travel by choice, others travel by necessity. The latter group would as likely as not stay home, receive their salaries by way of electronic deposit (or PayPal), and spend their income in their motherland—where money goes further than in the United States.

And given time, change is bound to lead to *consolidation*. Schools siloed within a certain geography can establish near-monopolies on access to higher credentialing, particularly if these institutions provide partially subsidized tuition to in-state residents. Without the need for physical proximity (for most majors), schools can easily encroach upon the territory of their peers. Colleges, particularly the smaller ones, have been facing financial difficulty for years, with some older (pre-COVID) estimates being that half of all colleges will go bankrupt before 2035.⁷²

If anything, the COVID crisis will accelerate this trend, quite possibly by a decade or more. Anyone familiar with bankruptcies and bankruptcy reorganizations should know that they do not necessarily lead to the destruction of organizations (including colleges and universities) under bankruptcy protection. They can be reorganized, or they can just as easily be divided into sections and sold to pay off creditors. And then there is the prospect of schools and universities avoiding formal bankruptcy proceedings altogether by selling assets or merging with larger organizations.

One of several keys to lowering costs by way of establishing economies of scale is for consumers (meaning students, parents, and *employers*) to recognize that colleges are *credentialing* institutions firstly, and *educational* institutions secondly.⁷³ They serve other

functions—as publishers, as research institutions, and as farm teams for the NBA and NFL—but these can all be provided for more efficiently outside of the framework of the university megastructure. In the realm of sports, for instance, independent or community-backed minor league sports teams could serve the same social function as college teams do, but without being attached to higher educational institutions, which would free them from the legal vagaries of the various government regulations that control college sports operation and funding (Title IX comes to mind).⁷⁴

As for the publishing, research, and science/technology apprenticeships (which is what the training of scientists and engineers should consist of, rather than a series of dry lectures)—they can also be either spun off as freestanding entities, taken over by state governments, consolidated into interstate research consortiums, or sold to larger publishing and research ventures. Whatever happens to the athletic, publishing, research, and scientific and engineering training functions of the modern college will have little effect on the purely credentialing division that processes that vast majority of college students.

So how does this relate to COVID?

COVID effectively shut down every part of America's colleges *except* for the credentialing and financial arms. School sports teams saw their practices and games canceled, university publishing houses slowed their release schedules to a crawl, and laboratories for scientific teaching and research were almost entirely closed.⁷⁵ With all non-credentialing functions stripped away, all that is left is an army of bureaucrats in training and their trainers, staring into screens, darkly.

With the previously pre-COVID bacchanalia that was college life having ground to a halt, communities losing interest in and connection to schools without football seasons, and those few non-science/technology majors who are interested in gaining knowledge discovering that they can learn about as well at home on their own as they can listening to a teacher drone, college attendance becomes an unsentimental thing, to be assessed with no more feeling than one would a mutual fund.

In the end, the college credential will either be reformed, abolished, or trivialized. As it stands now, it means little and costs much. Outright abandoning/abolishing the college credential

as economic signaling mechanism is one way to reduce the extraordinary expense inflicted on the great majority of students, who want nothing more than to obtain a piece of paper that affords them the possibility, however remote, of making their way to middle management. Trivialization is another possibility. There is no reason that *everyone* cannot have a college degree. Paper is cheap, and electronic certificates are cheaper. This is a more likely terminus of ongoing trends than is the abandonment of the credentialing process. Outright elimination of an administrative institution or procedure is difficult—too many parties have vested interests in maintaining the status quo—however, dilution is far easier to manage. If enough schools close or consolidate, they can streamline the credentialing process to the point that it becomes not much more demanding than obtaining a driver’s license—hardly an *effortless* process, but not something the average schlub is unable to do. Bureaucracies make liars of us all. Demand enough in the way of paperwork, forms, and sworn statements, and eventually expediency necessitates dishonesty. And a trivialized credential is a lie—it certifies something that all know to mean nothing. Thus, *almost everyone* may have a college degree, but the vast majority will expend little effort and less money to obtain well-printed wallpaper. Finally, there is the matter of *reform*. This is probably the most difficult and unlikely path to take. This entails a radical rethinking of decades’ worth of college design and development, going back at least to *Griggs v. Duke Power Company*.⁷⁶ There is no reason for most students to attend college except to obtain a certificate of compliance and docility, which can be done in other, less-wasteful ways. As for the peculiar monkish few—those who want nothing more than to think—the classical model of college may serve a purpose. Schools, no longer burdened with the task of serving as gatekeepers to the neomandarin class, will be free to help the curious pursue their interests and learn abstract reasoning. Since almost all books and educational content (such as lectures) can be found online, this—the new, improved, non-credentialing college—would serve as a community and gathering place, their purpose being to promote thought and discussion, rather than issue credentials.⁷⁷ This will allow for tremendous decreases in bureaucratic/administrative overhead. The arts, humanities, and social science divisions of colleges will become more similar in purpose and operation to private, interest-specific learning centers, such as music and

dance/ballet academies; and hobby learning centers for ceramics, painting, or wilderness survival. Given that these private ventures will be less expensive (and subsequently less regulated), the quality of their instruction and facilities will vary from world-class to barely-upto-

building-codes bad. Some humanities students will be duped, much in the same way other

students are duped into attending dojos run by incompetent fighters. The difference: The defrauding of the former is less significant than that of the latter.⁷⁸

Either way, we (the taxpayers) will not be funding private academies for philosophical debate, so what happens therein concerns us little.

The transition from the current hodgepodge of credentialing, research, publishing, and athletics that defines the university to more streamlined and purpose-built replacements may not

be complete by the end of the year, but the COVID crisis has accelerated this great and longoverdue

process. Within a few years, there will no longer be any reason to send masses of marching morons to the nearest state center for indoctrination and soul destruction.

10. We'll learn to stop worrying and love the robots (and remote work).

Generations of easy living may well have caused horrific decay in the cognitive capacity of the average *first worlder*, but that is not to say that we will quit learning altogether.

The lesson

of 2020—a hard taught one—is this: *Stop worrying about jobs. Stop worrying about your neighbors. Love the robots.*⁷⁹

Fifty years ago, our neighbors were *neighbors*—nearby humans we knew as individuals. Twenty years ago, they were *the people in the house down the street*—we might not have known

them personally, but we could recognize them on sight. Ten years ago, they were *something that*

lives over there—we might not have known or recognized them, but we suspected that they were

alive: *Something* had to be turning on and off the lights and ordering pizza.⁸⁰

Now, our neighbors are either potential disease vectors, or communists, feminazis, anarchists, or MAGA-morons—whatever terrible things that go bump in our respective nights.

Even when we knew our neighbors, we might have not cared much for them: *Familiarity breeds*

contempt, et cetera. Today we drop the pretense. We no longer need to pretend to care about their

jobs or incomes. And human interaction has become a monstrous social and legal liability.

All this liability, complication, and risk of disease or death makes staying home (and minimizing human interaction) more appealing than it was even a few years ago. And liability

hurts employers as well. Employees get sick, employees sue, and employees risk embarrassing

whoever cuts their paychecks.

Automation has been industrially and economically relevant for generations. Robotic welders and surgical assistants are already used so frequently as to be almost unworthy of attention.⁸¹ Since the 2004 DARPA Grand Challenge (when a self-driving car was first able to complete the 150-mile course), self-driving cars have been slowly but steadily improving, and Tesla's most recent production vehicles are only a few software upgrades away from dispensing with the human driver as anything more than a legally mandated seat warmer.⁸² Grocers, retailers, and warehouses are also gradually dispensing with human shelf stockers, loaders and unloaders, packers, and cashiers.⁸³ Considering the COVID outbreaks at major retailers and in Amazon warehouses, accelerating to the fullest extent economical the replacement of man with machine is prudent. And then there is the matter of demands for higher wages. *Fight for 15*, which has been chugging along since 2012, has had some success, and given the increasingly left-wing/pro-labor/anticorporate tenor of a great many 2020 protests, the demand for higher wages is likely to grow louder, more persistent and of greater effect.⁸⁴ This makes unskilled labor more expensive (and automated labor comparatively cheaper) than it would be otherwise. So we will have more and better machines replacing those workers who cannot or will not work 24-hour shifts in virus-filled, un-climate-controlled warehouses.⁸⁵ And then there is COVID-accelerated growth of remote work. Slightly more than 50% of American adults would prefer to work primarily at home, and nearly 75% of Americans would appreciate the option to work at home at least occasionally.⁸⁶ Not all jobs can be done this way, but many of those that cannot are steadily being automated away or transformed into jobs that can (telehealth and remote surgery are just two examples of the latter). COVID led to a huge increase in at-home work, and there is compelling evidence that the end of travel and distancing restrictions will not reverse this.⁸⁷ Each of these trends—the growth of automation and the expansion of distance work—reinforces the other. The more robots, of the entirely autonomous or of the human-guided variety, the greater the percentage of labor that can be done from home. And the more people choose to stay at home, the more relevant delivery and service robots become. As Millennials have come to dominate society, the *fear of missing out* (FOMO) has been

replaced with the *joy of missing out* (JOMO)—the pleasure one takes from missing many inconveniences of socializing and of keeping the company of those one would rather avoid.⁸⁸

There is nothing new about wanting to keep one's own good company. What *has* changed is the role of technology, which makes being a cheerful loner all that much more cheerful, and COVID.

For the first time in living memory, the American imperative of *get out more* became that of *for*

the love of God, stay home! And best of all, keeping to oneself became not a sign of being antisocial, damaged, or dangerous, but one of being *a responsible and self-sacrificing citizen*.⁸⁹

The extrovert went from fantastic to foolish, feckless fleabags, and the introvert rose from suspected pervert to known patriot.⁹⁰ This great shift helps not only the shy and the retiring,

it benefits the entire planet. The average American adult drives in excess of 13,000 miles per

year, and the country consumed 3.39 billion barrels of gasoline in 2019.⁹¹ Although some of this

is used for purposes other than fueling cars and motorcycles (powering lawn equipment, off-road

vehicles, and small planes), cars are the primary consumer. If the average car and motorcycle

mileage rates are cut in half by way of remote work—not an unrealistic assumption—a billion

barrels (or more) of oil could be saved every year, and more than 10,000 lives could easily be

saved premature termination by way of vehicular accident.⁹² And as for the loss of time due to

commuting, the average American spends a total of 19 workdays worth of time commuting to

work and from every year.⁹³ Assuming workload and efficiency remain constant, every person

who transitions from working in a cubicle to working at home gains the equivalent of threeweeks'

vacation every year.

Finally, there is the added benefit of transparency. There are few better places to hide from work than an office. Exercise and bathroom breaks can burn through a few hours a workday, but relying on such tactics is the hallmark of amateurs and peons—those bound to lose.

The real lords of time destruction make more money, have better titles, and exert even less effort

than their inferiors.

Achieving victory in the war on productivity requires a sophisticated attack on all things temporal. The first weapon: *the meeting*. The second: *the email*. And those who most deftly

wield these two can achieve almost perfect uselessness and be promoted for doing so. Nod along, repeat a few key phrases, project enthusiasm (while committing to nothing in particular), and suggest that any idea or course of action be given a meeting of its own and you have mastered the meaningless meeting.⁹⁴ But this is a mere rusty saber in comparison to the Gatling gun of the excruciating email. Here is complete user's manual:

- 1) Find some task or question to address
- 2) Compose an answer
- 3) Add between 20 and 50 irrelevant tangents
- 4) Reorganize the text so that it appears coherent but lacks any discernable meaning
- 5) Helpfully invite the recipient to contact you if he or she has any questions or requires any clarification. (Rest assured that the recipient will.)
- 6) CC at least three other people, just so that they can be *kept in the loop*.

The saber may slice time into paper-thin strips, but the excruciating email does one better—it annihilates it so completely and renders time itself so thoroughly dead that dental records are the only tools sufficient to identify the remains.⁹⁵ But these weapons are less effective on the home front of the home office. Video conference calls may be riddled with technical problems, but the awkward and delayed nature of the interaction that occurs therein discourages time wasting. Their *inefficiency and unnaturalness* demand that participants be more direct and more efficient. This *seems* paradoxical, but it is not much different than that which caused telegrams and text messages to be short and to the point. One can ramble in person for hours, but when paying by the word, the communicator tends to get to the heart of the matter.⁹⁶ Granted, the cost of interacting by way of Zoom is only a fraction of that of sending a telegram (and easier on one's thumbs than sending a text message), but little delays here and there make speaking for the sake of mere idleness more trouble than it is worth. And then there is the matter of doling out assignments. The remote worker submits an assignment on time (or not), and the work is acceptable (or not). The worker, the time spent working, and the quality of the work are all there—digitally recorded and open to review. Claims of *assisting, inspiring, or motivating* the worker are hard sells. And objective measures of worker productivity are easier to make when computers track everything.⁹⁷ The people who are most likely to be hurt by difficult-to-falsify performance metrics—

middle managers. But they are, at least as often as not, in the way, their *people skills* and red staplers be damned.

11. We'll innovate faster than we did before COVID.

Medical science moves at a snail's pace, and the pace has grown slower in recent decades. This is partially the product of the increasing complexity of treating a great many of the remaining diseases (with the low-hanging fruit having already been plucked).⁹⁸ It is also a result

of differences in work style and legal norms. A great many of the significant human studies of

yesteryear could not be conducted today—the entities responsible for reviewing and approving

the research protocol (institutional review boards) would either revise such research to the point

of uselessness or ban it outright.⁹⁹ And the approach to scientific and engineering research used

from the beginning of the Industrial Age to NASA's heyday would be considered almost suicidally reckless by modern standards. The development of powered flight was not much more

than a series of poorly controlled crashes and explosions, with the first fatality happening under

the watch of Orville Wright himself.¹⁰⁰ The development of nuclear fission and medicine and

rocketry was not much better, with the latter claiming human and animal casualties alike.¹⁰¹

The low-hanging fruit problem may not be easily addressed, but the matter of risk aversion will almost certainly be transformed by COVID and the public, governmental, and

private reactions to it. Although COVID has proven relatively mild in its effects on public health

(as far as pandemics go), its spread has already spurred better and faster sharing of medical/genetic information among nations, advancements in public health and treatment protocols, and almost shockingly fast vaccine development.¹⁰²

Outside of the medical field, famously sclerotic institutions, such as law schools, went from very nearly refusing to acknowledge the distance learning paradigm to embracing it wholeheartedly in a matter of *days*.¹⁰³ Even the court system—probably one of the most rigid and

self-important institutions on earth—has seized the opportunity to work from a distance: Judges

may not care how much of a burden one pointless hearing after the next imposes on poor and

disadvantaged defendants (or how much time, money, and heartache these defendants could be

saved by way of technology), but they embrace the modern at lightning speed when they fear

their wellbeing may be imperiled by a coughing convict.¹⁰⁴

As post-COVID shutdown economic and cultural complications ripple through our society, the institutions that do not change will die (as they well should).

12. *We'll finally recognize how many Americans want to watch the world burn (and why).*

We should have seen this—the current political instability—coming: President Trump, regardless of what one thinks him, was not elected by an army of the undead nor aliens.

Rather

he was chosen by millions of Americans. Some bought his pitch for Making America Great

Again, some hoped he could slow the nation's slide into senescence, some had faith in the

Christian piety of a twice-divorced Manhattanite billionaire, and some wanted lower taxes. Many

simply disliked him *less* than they disliked the other team, but a fair number saw him as *an agent*

of chaos—a meme-making bull with a Twitter account in a china shop nearly half a continent in

size.¹⁰⁵

Too many dismiss this last factor—the *chaos vote*—as being of no consequence, or pigeonhole it, as though it can be fairly described as *left, right, radical, Antifa, Marxist, racist,*

incel, or some other convenient term that suggests a cohesion of belief as understood by the

average sociology, psychology, or political science major. There *is* cohesion of sentiment in this

portion of the electorate. But what binds this lot together is more nebulous and more frightening

than what the average man and woman of comfort and privilege can easily grasp. Worse yet, it is

far more *universal*.

Media and policy institutes are either dumb regarding the source of nation-destroying rage or do a fine job of playing the part, mocking those who are not happy to have their communities and families destroyed and their lives commoditized by the chosen few. No matter

how badly these elites (left and right) mangle what they claim to be intent on improving, they

and their mouthpieces will not frankly speak of the errors they have made.

To the extent any acknowledge that the great unwashed masses have any grounds for dissatisfaction, some may profess a vague sympathy for the Black Lives Matter protests.

But

only the rarest of the rare managers, professionals, and social engineers would take any responsibility for undermining the Black household and the Black middle class through a toxic

combination of poorly designed social welfare programs and job-destroying free trade

policies.¹⁰⁶ This privileged ignorance is more than annoying to the non-oblivious, it is *dangerous to the entire country.*

Black families and communities have been destroyed. White ones have as well, with but the smallest delay. *Fury, detachment, disconnect, and nihilism* may manifest in different ways in

different communities, but they are not specific to any one race, religion, color, or creed.

And

until the deliberate unknowing of cause and remedy is corrected by a skillful instructor, our

society will only continue to become less stable. This year *is* that dear teacher, and she is giving

wayward students the vicious beatings and stern guidance they require.

Art imitates life, imitates art. Consider the breakout film of 2019: It foreshadowed 2020 so closely as to be unnerving. An examination of its underlying message and how radically it

contrasts films of even a few decades prior reveals much of the new American psyche.

Joker—a tragedy about a man who tries to be funny—resonated far more effectively than one would anticipate in a society of prosperity, peace, and relative safety. Nothing about the

world of *Joker* is aligned with the physical world of the present. Our cities are not totally overrun

by massive rats. New York City (upon which Gotham is clearly based) is less 1980s punk hellhole than it is gentrified playground of the superrich. There are few (petty) criminals in the

City That Never Sleeps—they cannot make rent. And the Marauders of Manhattan do not pick

pockets and violate damsels. They drain entire economies and rape nations, and they would

rarely stoop so low as to pick a Patek Philippe Grand Complications up from the sidewalk—

doing so is not worth their time. Mugging such peons as are the lot of us would be beneath their

villainous dignity.¹⁰⁷

Joker is not materially realistic. It is drab. It is about a difficult, psychologically damaged man who has been abused and betrayed by the few people who have seen fit to notice him and

who has been ignored by all the rest. Arthur Fleck—the clown who would become *Joker*—has

more in common with the nameless protagonist of Gogol's "The Overcoat" or Dostoevsky's

Notes from Underground than he does with a character sprung from the mind of Steinbeck,

Melville, or more modern writers, such as Stephen King.

What Fleck and his unnamed Slavic compatriots in the Kingdom of Despair share (and

that separates them from most American protagonists) is worse even than a lack of friends—it is the lack of a specific enemy. Ahab had his whale, King’s protagonists have their supernatural opponents, and Steinbeck had his well-defined social wrongs. To have an enemy can be better than not—at least those who have them can direct their energies in a named direction. Fleck is deprived of even the small comfort of having someone to hate. Rather, he has *everyone* to hate in general and *no one* to hate in particular. There is no reason for him to *not* hate anyone, and much reason for him set the world aflame. And although Arthur might never comprehend it, his feelings are more than the result of base and destructive instinct; they are part of an evolutionarily sound reproductive and survival strategy.¹⁰⁸

The problem is not that Fleck enjoys his time alone—that he appreciates solitude—but that he has no one at all. This is fundamentally different. No friends, no enemies, no purpose—the only thing Fleck has is a few petty tormentors. The only way the Arthur Flecks of the world stand much chance of having success is if the existing power structure decays to such a point that entrenched people and systems break. Only then—when all is up for grabs—may they have some small chance of getting more than the *absolutely nothing* to which they lay claim at present. What else do these men—Fleck and the Slavs—share? They are so injured and so fragile that kindness would be at least as likely to destroy them as save them—one can kill a long-starved person with too much food, offered too quickly.¹⁰⁹ Anything more than a bit of passing, carefully calibrated humanity towards them would likely put them on high alert: They would not (and could not) know what to make of such a thing. There is not much anyone can do for *Fleck, et cetera* that does not involve turning the world upside down. That is the most disturbing part of all. Few would be very much inclined to help any of these men—they are not lovable and aiding them would do little to burnish one’s reputation—and even those who might, would be hard-pressed to find any measure or medicine that had fewer side effects than benefits.

And *Joker* was a 2019 film. Turn back the clock a mere two decades (1999). The top five films in the United States were *Star Wars Episode I*, *The Sixth Sense*, *Toy Story 2*, *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*, and *The Matrix*.¹¹⁰ Granted, *The Matrix* was a film about

breaking free from the conventions and mental slavery of modern living. And *Fight Club*, an iconic representation of disconnect from the modern, consumerist world, was released that same year. Yet *The Matrix* and *Fight Club* are different from *Joker*. Neo breaks free from the Matrix.

The unnamed protagonist of *Fight Club* eventually liberates himself from his alter ego and annihilates a nation's worth of debt. Even at their darkest, there is always Hollywood Hope and Happy Endings™ in the films of yesteryear.

But for Arthur Fleck, hope is not an option—the light at the end of the tunnel is the possibility of being drugged into catatonia (at worst) or breaking free from the asylum to punish

the world that punished him. *This* is what resonates—the feelings of a man without connection to

anyone or anything. This hollow ringing sounds no better in one time or place or culture than it

does in a different one. It has little basis in racial or acculturated prejudices. It can be described

no better in one language than in another. It is general in its appeal and relatability. And although

ideology can *harness* the energies of the Flecks of the world, namely by giving them a sense of

place and purpose, it cannot eliminate them. And even this harnessing is of limited effect and

duration.¹¹¹

One can make too much of movies—sad, happy, mind-numbingly stupid, grandiose, and romantic films have been made in different ratios since film has been an art form. But the difference between box office boom and box office bust tells us something—something of the

temperature and mood of a people. Turn to television and consider this: How well would *Friends*

land in the 2020 zeitgeist? How well would *Breaking Bad* have done in 1997?

One can also make *too little* of the arts or treat them too narrowly. Not all Arthur Flecks are White, thin, and living with their mother. Some can be in financially stable positions. Some

may have prestige. Those who want to set a match to it all are oftentimes poor (or not), frequently poorly educated (or highly educated), White (or Black or Brown), and rural (or urban

or suburban). They may be single, or they may be married or divorced. Academia houses a fair

number of them—those who howl against the world in journals so dry and obscure that even

their editors, who undertake the (largely unpaid) labor of wading through one Foucaultreferencing

manuscript after the next, struggle to read what they publish. But one can be respected, tenured, and well-paid and still be without a true friend in the world.¹¹² The desire to deconstruct (and sometimes *dismember*) an entire culture is not often felt by those who consider themselves meaningfully connected to it. Those who perceive themselves as having a place of some value within a community may see its flaws and work to correct them, but this is a matter of *improvement*—of remodeling the house or adding rooms—not tearing it to the ground.

So now we see that we have a problem—one that 2019 showed us in film and 2020 is showing us in the streets—that cannot be easily remedied. And this is great news! Not that something like 24% of Americans would like to watch the country be leveled by nuclear blasts (or incinerated by more conventional means)—there is little cheering in that fact.¹¹³ Rather, the *good* is that the despair, the pain, and the isolation felt by millions of Americans is now impossible to deny.

Since 2000, we have been *Bowling Alone*. Now we burn our cities down together. Fleck, the Slavs, the discontented poor, and the discontented not-so-poor all share this: Their world has *already* been turned upside down once. *Notes from Underground* was written when Russia was integrating into the West. The values and traditions of the people were being swept aside by the winds of technological change (the Industrial Revolution) and crushed underneath new thoughts and philosophies to which few could quickly adapt.¹¹⁴ Likewise, the discontented poor have had the customs of their ancestors—dictating everything from the role of the family to the role of the employer to the nature of relationships between men and women—derided, replaced, or made irrelevant. Their better-off peers have seen much of the same. We have come to expect an entire class of elites to live entirely in the world of ideas. For the most select of the most select—those with a great bent towards metaphysics—such a life is nearly the platonic ideal.¹¹⁵ But only a peculiar few have the mental buoyancy to remain afloat when waves of ideas come crashing down on their heads as though they were boats off the coast of Kanagawa. For the rest, this is a miserable way of drowning.

We all too quickly forget how much tribe and clan ruled our lives until what was, in the scheme of history, moments ago. We have *tried* to replace these with radical independence, which works well in theory, but only if the better part of the population proves capable of critical

thought and self-determination with little in the way of guidance from family, community, or elders. This is too much for the average man or woman, and most of the supposedly exceptional cannot fare much better. Even amongst the most intelligent, there are not many adventurers, and an adventurous spirit, as well as raw cognitive ability, is what freethinking requires. Free and critical thinking also requires a willingness to attack one's ego throughout life—to admit that the thinker may be wrong about nearly anything and everything, including dearly held values—and this process of ongoing creative destruction is unpleasant. It is unpleasant because it demands the slow murder of the old self and its replacement with the new. Here is the paradox: One cannot fully become mentally independent, with self-formed thoughts, values, and beliefs, unless he is willing to demolish himself. Only through this can he pull down and away the thoughts suggested to him by men he has never heard of, who have taught him that the rubber stamps of established beliefs and doctrines are somehow the individual's own.¹¹⁶

The sooner we acknowledge this—that we cannot turn the world upside down for millions and expect them to be anything but angry, injured, hateful, and vulnerable and that they *cannot* construct workable selves without the help of others—the sooner we can set about turning the world again. The select few must devise a common set of beliefs, suitable to most, that will allow the better part of humanity to function sustainably. They must construct communities bound by something other than fury, pain, mindless hedonism, or the collapsing shell of family. They must toil to make something new.

A different metaphor: No one can simply repave the old road: It cannot take us where we need to go. Nor can the building of new roads be left only to those with a commercial interest in doing so: All such people and businesses will do is engineer highways that lead to the prosperity and power for themselves at the awful expense of the many. This task—that of studying the old ways, including both those that failed and those that succeeded, assessing the needs and resources of modernity, and of finally building something that works—stands to be one of the great challenges of the coming decades. Those who can think and who can reason for themselves

and others will have little choice but to undertake this extraordinary task if they wish to have a habitable world. Otherwise, the Arthur Flecks and their companions will only grow more destructive.

The conventional experts can do little to contribute to this endeavor—they are too self-assured in their ways to see their failings. So the species must rely upon the few, the proud, the free thinkers who are willing to labor on, despite the scorn of both the indifferent and the ignorant. And the only reward the thinkers are likely to receive is knowing that they are engineers of the roads and the turners of the world.

Some of them will rise to this occasion. This is the year they will see the need, the year that their ingenuity starts to get the best of them. They will not fix so much of what is broken because they *care about everything*, but because they are builders of peoples, myths, and spirits, and they can no more abide disordered societies than can a musician of the highest caliber abide the sound of a poorly tuned instrument. The freethinker, both despite *and because* of his ongoing and well-controlled self-destruction, is the bulwark against the entropy of the universe.

13. We'll learn to recognize both the inevitability and necessity of death.

And yet, death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it, and that is how it should be, because death is very likely the single best invention of life. It's life's change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new. —Steve Jobs¹¹⁷

America is awakening from the dream of the evermore—from the notion that our institutions will never die, our way of life will never be replaced by another, and our citizens will never fracture into incohesive factions or be swallowed by another faster, stronger, smarter, or meaner people. We have our share of survivalists and doomsters, but they are no less attached to the American dream than are the rest of us: In their minds, the collapse of the nation either is

precipitating or will precipitate the collapse of civilization itself.

Decline and decay are rarely so fascinating. Governments fail, currencies collapse, but life goes on, with most people do as they have always done—trying to make their way through

the day without irritating the people with guns.¹¹⁸

We are not the first to develop this hubris. Stefan Zweig's *Golden Age of Security* encompassed several decades of Pre-World War I history, in which his homeland of Austria was

prosperous, progressive, and placid.¹¹⁹ If not *the end of history*, Zweig's era was the end of dramatic, violent, and destructive history—all replaced by technological innovation and steady

improvements in living standards and human rights. The parallels to late-1990s America are difficult to ignore for all but the most unmindful.

Turning to the present: much of the stability we take for granted will pass. And this is as it should be. Aging governments and ways of life are bound too much to the past.

Sustaining

them can only be done by strapping the nation down as its muscles gradually atrophy.

Such was

the approach that the Qing Dynasty took to controlling China, which went from the country with

the world's largest economy to one under the heel of drug-peddling, big-nosed invaders in the

space of a few generations.¹²⁰

To predict that America will undergo a period of declining global prestige and decreasing global involvement and significance (Sections 2 and 3) and to predict that American lives will

improve involves no contradiction. Two decades of war in the Middle East and Africa have

proven costly, and by letting die the dream of a world in which all peoples and values are perfectly in harmony with our own, we can effectively enrich ourselves to the tune of trillions of

dollars.¹²¹ And billions will hate us less than they do today. Rome conquered the better part of

Europe, but the Eternal City is not under perpetual attack by Goths or Gauls demanding freedom.

Old grudges are forgotten, and old wounds heal in time. In a generation, such could be the case

with the United States and the Middle East. The desert peoples may never like us, but if we leave

them alone, they will cease to think of us much one way or the other.

And then there is the death of the individual. We can sustain the fantasy of unlimited medical care and resource expenditure for all only so long as there are no crises.¹²² We have

avoided the hard question of who lives and who dies by throwing money at everyone. But this

does not always work. There are hard decisions to be made. *If you don't pick one kid, Sophie,*

*they both go to the shower!*¹²³ Refusing to decide is a decision of its own.

We were completely unprepared to decide who received a respirator and who did not, so luck, panic, and emotion made the decision for us. We, as a nation, *decided* to let irrationality

rule. But we were lucky. The next virus might do more than save Social Security a few dollars

here and there. So now is the time to weigh our values carefully and decide how we will mete out

life and death.

Then there is the matter of *the imperative*—the sense one has that the minutes, hours, and days are irreplaceable and should be used deliberately, lest they go to waste. There are few better cures for procrastination than a terminal diagnosis. And a terminal diagnosis is what we have all been given from the moment of conception, even if we forget as much. Our ever-growing bureaucracy, our monstrous system of credentialing—one that discourages the competent from engaging in skilled and professional work and favors the plodding—and our infantilization of children until they are nearly in their middle years: Death will solve these problems. It sweeps out the old and broken. It makes room for the new. It impels those who would be waiting in line forever to the front.

Finally, there are those of us who will be rendered useless by the change. The middle manager, the petty social engineers and technicians—what can and should be done with these people? A few will leap into the abyss. Others will fight change with all their might. Others still will cause trouble of varying degrees or join the ranks of Fleck. They may be good students and highly trained, but they are not much better equipped to find purpose in the post-2020 era than is the average cart pusher. They may be worse equipped in some ways: Their work is their identity. Most cart pushers are not so burdened. Those who cannot keep up with the march and the rhythm of the world are unlikely to simply get out of the way. The thinkers must consider these people too and find a place for them.

Hindsight, Foresight, and Perfect Vision

The world of 2021 will be different than that of 2020. Every day is different—a statement so obvious as to be clichéd—but different differences are . . . *different*. Watching a puppy grow into a dog is one thing. Watching a caterpillar transform into *Mothra* is another thing entirely. A technological singularity—the Industrial Revolution—already happened.¹²⁴ The next one will happen faster. There is nothing new about singularities. They are just weeks where decades happen or years where millennia do. Foresight is limited in normal times, and even hindsight does not afford us perfect 20/20 vision. We can only see the slightest ways past singularities—they warp the light around them—but that is better than seeing nothing at all.

We turn back to how this missive started—with sex and death. Each necessitates the

other, and 2020 shall have plenty of both. The latter—the death of the old things and ways and people—will hurt, possibly even more than we fear. The former—the messy, the unhygienic, and the frequently awkward creation of the new—will be less enjoyable than we hoped. This is the year that the new will be made (if not necessarily born). This is the year that much that should have happened long ago finally does. This is the best year ever.

¹ For those who don't get the joke: Sir Thomas More was decapitated. See <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Thomas-More-English-humanist-and-statesman#ref236522>

² This is a Buddhist concept. For a clear explanation of *conditioned things* see <https://www.lionsroar.com/it-alldepends/>

³ Dead convicts and road trips! Hooray! See <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/which-road-is-known-as-the-road-of-bones.html>

⁴ *The End of History* is both a concept and a book. The short explanation: The liberal democratic order would prevail across the world, with much prosperity and peace resulting thereof. See <https://www.amazon.com/dp/0743284550/>

⁵ Yes, we funded terrorists. See <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-hccc-worldhistory2/chapter/the-united-states-and-the-mujahideen/>

⁶ For the young'uns: The United States backed the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, a leader so hated by his fellow countrymen he was overthrown and replaced by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who would not have been out of place in the Old Testament. See http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/khomeini_ayatollah.shtml

⁷ The Manhattan Project relied heavily on imported brain power. See <https://www.atomicheritage.org/article/scientist-refugees-and-manhattan-project>

⁸ Despite some efforts at legal reform, the United States still has the world's highest incarceration rate. See <https://ejournal.org/news/united-states-still-has-highest-incarceration-rate-world/>

⁹ Transfer of materiel to law enforcement happened under Program 1033. See <https://www.wired.com/story/pentagon-hand-me-downs-militarize-police-1033-program/>

¹⁰ Not only goatherds are killed, but also any number of poor schlubs at the wrong place at the wrong time. See <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/projects/drone-war>

¹¹ I am as capitalistic as they come, but after listening to their anthem, even I want to collectivize something. Hear <https://youtu.be/U06jlgpMtQs>

¹² Apparently, some people don't like being bombed. *Who knew?* See

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/30/world/middleeast/iraq-airstrikes-us-iran-militias.html>

¹³ Yes, Hillary Clinton did refer to *superpredators*, and yes, she was fearmongering. She was not the first to do this.

She will not be the last. Politicians manipulate us with fear, *because we let them*. See https://www.huffpost.com/entry/hillarys-superpredator-comment_b_9655052

¹⁴ Yet more fearmongering, *sleeper cells* (as a concept) were borrowed from anticommunist propaganda. Finding any real ones has proven difficult. See

<https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=1hzbunK5dNAC&oi=fnd&pg=PR9&ots=K7xkqAch91&sig=aCrkt>

[cebCkMN_RZD60mmlANLE#v=onepage&q=sleeper&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=1hzbunK5dNAC&oi=fnd&pg=PR9&ots=K7xkqAch91&sig=aCrkt)

¹⁵(A) Probably the biggest non-event in decades, Y2K was supposed to hit underprepared nations, such as China,

particularly hard. Yet almost no problems were reported, even there.

See <https://www.deseret.com/1999/12/14/19480462/y2k-failures-in-china-could-leave-many-areas-scrambling-in-the-dark>

(B) No major problems in China. See <https://money.cnn.com/2000/01/01/worldbiz/y2k/>

(C) And for a general summary of events see

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/kpmg/2020/06/23/covid-19-how-will-sports-and-live-entertainment-find-a-new-normal/#600fdd5c7ae8>

¹⁶ Asian giant hornets are also called *murder hornets*—a hyperbolic term for an insect, but a great name for football

team. See <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/murder-hornets-us-honeybees-washington/>

¹⁷ One could take the Global War on Terror as a never-ending money pit, but a smaller and better documented

example is the development of the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Virtual Case File program. See

<https://cs.gmu.edu/~mlocasto/research/securehealth/content/post-VCF.pdf>

¹⁸ We have less choice in media than we realize, with many different media brands being controlled by a handful of

companies. See <https://www.webfx.com/blog/internet/the-6-companies-that-own-almost-all-media-infographic/>

¹⁹ Distrust of experts is an American tradition. We’ve just gotten better at it. See

<https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/2018/0827/Who-made-you-an-expert-Is-America-s-distrust-of-elites-becoming-more-toxic>

²⁰ Predictions as to the effects of COVID and predictions as to the effects of reopening the economy have been

dramatic, confusing, and alarmist. This is the result of structural flaws in the United States public health system and

competing political agendas. See <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/06/american-public-health-experts-coronavirus-masks.htm>

[masks.htm](https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/06/american-public-health-experts-coronavirus-masks.htm)

²¹ I am not suggesting that COVID-19 is a hoax. The evidence that it is a real virus that can cause real harm is considerable. What I *am* stating is that the institutional response to the spread of the disease was both excessive and inconsistent. Certainly, some safety measures and precautions should have been taken, but they should have been more focused on protecting uniquely vulnerable populations, such as the elderly and those with compromised immune systems.

²² (A) Defining American values can be difficult, largely because Americans emphasize individualism so much that

they hesitate to make statements about the collective. Nevertheless, researchers developed a list of 13 values widely

shared by Americans. See <https://msu.edu/~mandrews/global/americanvalues.pdf>

(B) These are far from universal. One of these (Item 3 on the list) is the belief that meeting deadlines is more

important than taking the time to build relationships. This indicates a *monochronic* culture. The differences between

such cultures and their opposite (*polychronic* cultures) have been the subject of much study. See

<https://www.pmi.org/learning/library/everything-time-monochronism-polychronism-orientation-6902>

²³ (A) One could also argue that the Iraq War served to enrich defense contractors, but that could be said about every

conflict since the age of Smedley D. Butler (and probably a great many before). See

<https://ratical.org/ratville/CAH/warisaracket.html> and

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/15/war-is-still-a-racket/>

(B) As for the reasons for the war, true believers in *the American Way* (largely neoconservatives) almost certainly

played a noteworthy role in initiating it. See

<https://newrepublic.com/article/153450/enduring-powerneoconservatism>

(C) Other writers have examined this assertion that the Iraq War was not about oil in more depth than I could. See

<https://quillette.com/2019/05/06/the-iraq-war-was-not-about-oil/>

²⁴ This tendency to remain isolated from the local population is not unique to Americans abroad. Foreign students in

United States college rarely know their American classmates well, with language limitations explaining some of this

social disconnect. See

<https://www.voanews.com/student-union/why-arent-americans-and-international-students-becoming-friends> and

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1140259.pdf>

²⁵ (A) There is no entirely objective way to quantify provincialism. Generally, Americans do not travel much. See

<https://nypost.com/2018/01/11/a-shocking-number-of-americans-never-leave-home/>

(B) As for the elite, most college graduates do not travel, and of those who do, the majority travel to Europe, rather than regions with greater cultural differences. See <https://www.nafsa.org/policy-and-advocacy/policyresources/trends-us-study-abroad>

²⁶ For those unfamiliar with Dunning-Kruger see <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/technology/what-is-the-dunningkruger-effect/ar-BB16ohMI>

²⁷ Even the annoyingly human-rights concerned Europeans are not without their sins, and not just in their brutal

exploitation of non-European peoples throughout the colonial era. See <https://www.hrw.org/worldreport/2020/country-chapters/european-union>

²⁸ While writing this, I thought of Michigan, where I studied for several years. See <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/michigan/2019/05/03/more-michigan-roads-now-rated-poor-thanfair/3662836002/> and

<https://www.npr.org/2019/04/25/717104335/5-years-after-flints-crisis-began-is-the-water-safe>

²⁹ The world views America differently than it did a few years ago. The simplistic argument (as follows) blames

Trump almost exclusively, but there is almost certainly more to it than that. See one diplomat's take on the matter.

See <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/06/america-image-power-trump/613228/>

³⁰ This fine phrase was borrowed, slightly modified, from C.S. Lewis. See <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/526469-of-all-tyrannies-a-tyranny-sincerely-exercised-for-the-good>

³¹ (A) We take for granted that Chinese values (and Eastern values in general) are different from those of the West;

however, that is not to say that most of us have a clear understanding of what these values. For a detailed analysis (to

be compared to the survey of American values mentioned in Note 22) see

<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/afbb/48c3f552fd6c752ba5931c81a5528258c1e0.pdf>

(B) For a Chinese perspective of the Middle Kingdom's role in world history see *Superpower Interrupted: The*

Chinese History of the World <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07YSN3XLH/>

³² The United States has a total of 234 active-duty bases, 66 of which are overseas. The total cost of Base Operation

Support (BOS), which only covers the essentials of keeping the base itself functional, not the cost of weaponry, et

cetera, was \$25 billion in 2016, with the cost of maintaining a single overseas base being much higher than that of

maintaining one in the United States. See <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2019-11/55849-CBO-BOS-costs.pdf>

³³ I first thought that an 80%+ death rate for Native Americans seemed high, but that seems to be the consensus. See

<https://phys.org/news/2016-01-aftermath-native-american-depopulation-impacted.html>

³⁴ WWI deaths. See <https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-I/Killed-wounded-and-missing> WWII deaths. See

<https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/wwii-casualties-by-country.html>

³⁵ For a summary of these *war-is-inevitable* arguments see

<https://www.newsweek.com/south-china-sea-war-nuclearsubmarines-china-united-states-barack-obama-xi-473428>

³⁶ The Chinese nuclear stockpile is estimated to consist of 290 large (strategic) nuclear weapons and a great many smaller weapons suited to battlefield use. The country may well double the size of its nuclear arsenal by 2030. See

<https://time.com/5597955/china-nuclear-weapons-intelligence/>

³⁷ Also called the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant Zone of Alienation, the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone is not empty—

a few people and a great many animals and plants live therein. But simply because one *can* live there, does not mean

one should. See <https://www.businessinsider.com/what-daily-life-inside-chernobyls-exclusion-zone-is-really-like-2019-4?op=1>

³⁸ Zheng He was a Chinese adventurer and admiral. His exploits covered vast areas, but he explored more than he

settled. See <https://www.ancient.eu/article/1334/the-seven-voyages-of-zheng-he/>

³⁹ As far as I have been able to ascertain, the Chinese never made any effort to translate their religious or

philosophical texts into foreign languages prior to the 20th century. Given that they were uninterested in making this

much effort, there would appear no evidence that proselytizing is a priority for adherents of Confucianism or Daoism.

⁴⁰ (A) Chinese views of the United States and American views of the Chinese mirror each other, with neither side

taking a particularly positive (or negative) view of the other. In 2015, both Chinese and Americans expressed

lukewarm views of their counterparts' nation. See [https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/03/30/6-facts-about-how-](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/03/30/6-facts-about-how-americans-and-chinese-see-each-other/)

[americans-and-chinese-see-each-other/](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/03/30/6-facts-about-how-americans-and-chinese-see-each-other/) and <http://graphics.wsj.com/lists/camerica0320>

(B) As far back as 2012, these views were not overwhelmingly positive. See

<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2012/11/01/how-americans-and-chinese-view-each-other/>

(C) From my personal experience (as a teacher in China): I found many Chinese to be vaguely curious about

America, and of the opinion that America is fine so long as she does not interfere with Chinese affairs. Overall, the

view was neutral. *The Chinese were indifferent to America (and Americans).*

⁴¹ Estimated deaths from COVID (worldwide) as of June 30, 2020: 513,268. See <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/worldwide-graphs/#total-cases>

⁴² This assumes a world population of 7.8 billion. It can be contrasted with the 3% global death rate for WWII. See

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_II_casualties

Thus, WWII—the event that precipitated the last major global power transitions—can be said to be around 150

times more deadly when adjusted for population growth.

⁴³ See Note 30 for the origin of this phrase.

⁴⁴ Most children can grasp the rudiments of the scientific method. Here, a video explaining the fundamentals in

language a ten-year old should be able to understand <https://youtu.be/qAJ8IF4HI20>

⁴⁵ (A) Not everyone with the title of *scientist* follows the scientific method, hence Lysenko and his bizarre notions

(and keep in mind that he was regarded as a much-respected *expert* for much of his life). See

<https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2017/12/trofim-lysenko-soviet-union-russia/548786/>

(B) Most of Lysenko's experimental results could not be replicated, and *replicability* is the hallmark of good science.

Much of modern social *science* suffers from the same problem. See

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/19/science/science-research-fraud-reproducibility.html>

⁴⁶ Bernays and his significance will be explored more later in this essay. For a brief summary of his life see

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Edward-Bernays>

⁴⁷ See <https://time.com/4779112/police-history-origins/>

⁴⁸ See <https://www.britannica.com/topic/police/The-decline-of-constabulary-police#ref36617>

⁴⁹ (A) Murder rates have varied throughout American history, but even at their highest, they are estimated to have

never exceeded 35/100,000—considerable, but not unimaginably so. And by 1800, they were below 20/100,000. See

<https://blogs.berkeley.edu/2010/06/16/a-crime-puzzle-violent-crime-declines-in-america/>

And these rates never approached the horrific number of premature deaths that happened during WWI, WWII, or

any number of cultural upheavals and revolutions.

(B) Going back further in history is difficult. Statistics were not gathered with any consistency prior to the 19th

century, but several estimates of historical homicide rates exist. The most violent years in Europe were around 1450,

with national homicide rates ranging from 73/100,000 (in Italy) to 16/100,000 (Germany and Switzerland). Both

numbers are elevated by modern standards, but they are far below the levels one associates with social chaos. See

<https://ourworldindata.org/homicides#how-have-homicide-rates-changed-over-the-long-run-until-today>

⁵⁰ If current demographic trends continue in America, Whites will become a minority by around 2045. See

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2018/03/14/the-us-will-become-minority-white-in-2045-censusprojects/>

⁵¹ Obviously, there is an element of prediction to this statement, but what *is* certain is that Millennials are poorer

than their parents were at the same age. See <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/millennials-are-much-poorer-than-their-parents-data-show/>

⁵² (A) Again, I am making a prediction, but this is based on solid evidence. First, non-Asian minorities are poorer

than Whites (on average). See [https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/poverty-rate-by-race-ethnicity/?](https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/poverty-rate-by-race-ethnicity/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D)

[currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D](https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/poverty-rate-by-race-ethnicity/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D)

7D

(B) Next, there is the matter of minorities being less trusting of authorities. Blacks typically hold police in lower regard than do Whites (perhaps with good reason). See

<https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2016/09/29/the-racial-confidence-gap-in-police-performance/>

⁵³ This phrase—*hombres armados*—is taken from a movie, *Men with Guns* being the English-language title. I am not suggesting that *no one* should ever trust police, but *blind* trust in authority is hardly a sign of wisdom or maturity.

⁵⁴ (A) Research on the effects of body cam footage suggests that the technology has mixed results on officer

behavior. See <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1745-9133.12412>

(B) However, this is still an emerging technology, and its effects may take some time to be felt. One would have a

difficult time imagining the current George Floyd protests taking place without video evidence of exactly what

happened.

⁵⁵ Occasionally, a judge makes such an ass of himself (or herself) that a public outcry ensues. Such would be

unlikely were the proceedings not recorded. For an example of a judge who became video infamous see

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5643311/Judge-resigns-berating-breathless-defendant-wheelchair-court-DIES-three-days-later.html#reader-comments>

⁵⁶ This closely relates to the concept of *compassion fade*. See

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0749597818302930>

⁵⁷ One may argue that there were some legitimate grounds for the University of Missouri protests (largely relating to

medical insurance for graduate students); however, the same cannot be said about Occupy Wall Street—a movement/political action so poorly defined that almost no one, protestors included, knew what the protests were supposed to achieve. For insight into the well-meaning befuddlement of protestors see <https://www.npr.org/2011/10/17/141427331/op-ed-occupy-wall-street-protesters-goals>

⁵⁸(A) Even the community of journalists could not excuse the sheer reckless behavior of Sabrina Rubin Erdely, the author of “A Rape on Campus.” See https://www.cjr.org/investigation/rolling_stone_investigation.php

(B) The Kavanaugh hearings were based on accusations that were essentially incoherent. See <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/supreme-court/evidence-doesn-t-support-claims-against-kavanaugh-judiciarycommittee-prosecutor-n915236>

(C) Finally, #metoo, while possibly well-intentioned at the beginning (or not, who knows?) degenerated into something so vitriolic that even some feminists found it suspect. See <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/ami-a-bad-feminist/article37591823/>

(D) As for the command to care, what effect would any of these movements/claims have were more of us simply to declare “I do not care!”?

⁵⁹And those who are *too* performative in their politically correct Madam Mao-approved playacting, are subject to public criticism as well. See <https://coloradosun.com/2020/06/29/kindness-yoga-closure-during-black-lives-matter/>

⁶⁰For more information on how to be a better bastard, see “On Being a Bastard” in http://vongoblerules.com/978-0-9820991-7-9_Extract.pdf

⁶¹The Chinese Cultural Revolution demanded millions of apologies from at least as many supposed wrongdoers, be they teachers, landed farmers, or businesspeople. One lesson to be learned from that era: Apply enough pressure and you can make most people confess to (and apologize for) just about anything, even if the allegations entail impossible claims. And the long-term effect of this—a culture of cynicism and indifference. See *The Tragedy of Liberation: A History of the Chinese Revolution 1945-1957* <https://www.amazon.com/dp/1408886359>.

We should not underestimate the horrific cruelty that lies in the hearts of many. Nothing brings this badness out faster than shows of weakness, which is why complying with those who demand confessions and apologies oftentimes does little but make them angrier.

⁶² See <https://www.worldwidelearn.com/education-articles/history-of-distance-learning.html>

⁶³ Not only is this school in business, it offers some classes in English. See <http://en.ouchn.edu.cn/>

⁶⁴ See <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/03/12/colleges-confronting-coronavirus-tell-students-move-outmany-urge-attention-needs>

⁶⁵ See <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Are-Undergraduates-Actually/125979>

⁶⁶ Although many people can benefit from vocational training, a smaller number have the cognitive capacity to

benefit from college. See <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Are-Too-Many-Students-Going-to/49039> and

https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/20/opinion/sunday/sorry-strivers-talent-matters.html?_r=2

⁶⁷ (A) Hyperactivity (ADHD) is almost certainly overdiagnosed. See https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/side-effects/201710/adhd-is-now-widely-overdiagnosed-and-multiplereasons#comments_bottom

(B) Autism is likely overdiagnosed as well. See <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/kids-health/study-suggests-autismbeing-overdiagnosed-n450671>

(C) Efforts to categorize bad behavior or beliefs go back years, to when *racism* started to be seen as both the result and the cause of a medical or mental problem, rather than simply being a belief or part of an unpleasant disposition.

See <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1536504214558213>

(D) Finally there is the matter of student loans. How bad are they? See <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/05/13/hereshow-much-student-debt-americans-with-phds-have-on-average.html>

⁶⁸ Love fades, but hate is eternal. Ellison knew this well. See <https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=bWlsZm9yZHNjaG9vbHMub3Jnfg1yc21pdGhzY2lmaXxneDo3ODRkNDg0YjFjNzdkMDcx>

⁶⁹ For complete table see https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_322.10.asp

⁷⁰ For an explanation of *tacit knowledge* see <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/psychology/tacit-knowledge>

⁷¹ The cost of sponsoring a worker under the H-1B visa program ranges from a few thousand dollars to much more.

See <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stuartanderson/2019/04/01/employers-have-paid-5-billion-in-h-1b-visa-fees-since-1999/#e45834168d10>

⁷² See <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/08/30/hbs-prof-says-half-of-us-colleges-will-be-bankrupt-in-10-to-15-years.html>

⁷³ A great deal of formal schooling does little more than serve as an economic signaling mechanism. See *The Case*

against Education: Why the Education System Is a Waste of Time and Money

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/0691174652>

⁷⁴How long colleges can afford to sponsor sports teams is uncertain. Stanford University—with some of the best athletic teams in the United States—is cutting 11 teams. Granted, neither basketball nor football were on the chopping block, but for a school of Stanford’s size to cut so many teams is significant. See

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2020/07/08/stanford-discontinue-eleven-sports-programs/#commentswrapper>

⁷⁵(A) University publishing houses have not fared well during COVID. They will need to either adapt or die. See

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2020/04/17/without-stronger-academic-governance-covid-19-will-concentrate-the-corporate-control-of-academic-publishing/>

(B) Academic research laboratories were largely closed as well. See

<https://www.statnews.com/2020/03/14/coronavirus-pandemic-forces-research-labs-shut-down/>

⁷⁶Employers began to rely more heavily on college education as a sorting tool for prospective workers after other

assessment tools were largely banned under *Griggs v. Duke Power Company*. See <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/08/higher-education-has-become-increasingly-partisan/596407/>

⁷⁷Regarding classic literature: Project Gutenberg provides thousands of texts at no cost (<https://www.gutenberg.org/>), and a great many lectures from esteemed professors can be found online as well.

MIT’s program is just one of many. See <https://ocw.mit.edu/index.htm>

⁷⁸If anything, instruction in the humanities should be *less* regulated than that in the martial arts: Flimflam academies

of postmodern literature are far less dangerous to their students than are Frank Dux-style *Con Kwon Do* schools.⁷⁸

When was the last time anyone thought a working knowledge of Derrida would save him from an ass beating in a

street fight? Although I suspect a great many of my readers have already seen his footage, YouTuber Joe Rogan has

much fun tearing apart fake martial arts. For an example, see <https://youtu.be/NCDA6LBvyuM>

⁷⁹Intelligence is a fragile trait, and without aggressive selection pressures, it is subject to rapid decay. See

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tig.2012.10.002>

⁸⁰(A) Most Americans do not know their neighbors. See

https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2018/05/22/what-unites-and-divides-urban-suburban-and-rural-communities/psd_05-22-18_community-type-00-13/

(B) More generally, we have become increasingly isolated over the period of the last few decades, although such

does not necessarily bother us. See <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/nurturing-selfcompassion/>

201901/isolation-nation and <https://theconversation.com/americans-are-becoming-more-socially-isolated-but-theyre-not-feeling-lonelier-96151>

⁸¹ (A) The first welding robot was developed in the 1960s. See <https://www.robotics.org/blog-article.cfm/The-Evolution-of-Robotic-Welding/33>

(B) The first surgical robot was developed in the 1980s. See https://www.brianday.ca/imagez/1051_28738.pdf

⁸² (A) A brief history of the DARPA Grand Challenge. See <http://www.grandchallenge.org/>

(B) Tesla's recent advancements in self-driving technology. See <https://nypost.com/2020/07/09/tesla-very-close-tonext-step-in-self-driving-elon-musk-says/>

⁸³ Walmart relies more on robots now than it did even a few years ago, and it will deploy even more in the coming years. See <https://www.cnn.com/videos/business/2019/04/09/walmart-robots-retail-jobs-sdorig>.

[cnn/video/playlists/business-robots/](https://www.cnn.com/video/playlists/business-robots/)

⁸⁴ *Fight for 15* started in New York, and it has expanded to many other cities. See <https://fightfor15.org/about-us/>

⁸⁵ Viruses may come and go, but miserable summertime heat is predictable, particularly for those working at

Amazon.com's warehouses. See <https://www.mcall.com/news/watchdog/mc-allentown-amazon-complaints-20110917-story.html>

⁸⁶ See <https://www.newsweek.com/54-percent-americans-want-work-remote-regularly-after-coronavirus-pandemicends-new-poll-shows-1501809>

⁸⁷ Working from home is here to stay. See

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/zackfriedman/2020/05/06/covid-19-futureof-work-coronavirus/#493795773b2e> and

<https://www.crn.com/news/running-your-business/some-may-work-from-home-permanently-after-covid-19-gartner>

and <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/05/04/why-many-employees-are-hoping-to-work-from-home-even-after-the-pandemic-is-over.html>

⁸⁸ The Millennial preference for staying at home predates COVID. See

[https://www.independent.co.uk/lifestyle/](https://www.independent.co.uk/lifestyle/jomo-fomo-millennials-netflix-spotify-subscriptions-marie-kondo-a8752216.html)

[jomo-fomo-millennials-netflix-spotify-subscriptions-marie-kondo-a8752216.html](https://www.independent.co.uk/lifestyle/jomo-fomo-millennials-netflix-spotify-subscriptions-marie-kondo-a8752216.html)

⁸⁹ Staying at home is good for America. Hooray! See

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/24/opinion/coronavirus.html>

⁹⁰ There seems to be little research on how America has historically regarded those who prefer to be by themselves.

Still, the benefits of being alone are gradually gaining recognition. See

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/hide-and-peek/201911/what-we-can-learn-loners>

⁹¹ (A) Total gasoline consumption for 2019:

<https://www.eia.gov/tools/faqs/faq.php?id=23&t=10>

(B) Number of miles driven per person (2018):

<https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/ohim/onh00/bar8.htm>

The numbers are not for the *same* year, but they are within one year of each. *Good enough is good enough!*

⁹² (A) There were more than 30,000 vehicular deaths in 2019. See

<https://www.caranddriver.com/news/a32388179/us-vehicle-fatalities-down-2019/>

(B) Since the COVID pandemic, insurance claims for accidents have dropped 50%. See

<https://www.caranddriver.com/news/a32201608/auto-accidents-insurance-claims-down-coronavirus/>

Thus, few miles driven should lead to fewer accidents and lost lives.

⁹³ Commute times have been getting worse for decades in the United States. This article refers to *9 calendar days*,

which is about the same amount of time as in *19 workdays*. See

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2019/10/07/nine-days-road-average-commute-time-reached-new-recordlast-year/> and

<https://nypost.com/2019/04/19/americans-spend-19-full-work-days-a-year-stuck-in-traffic-on-theircommute/>

⁹⁴ Meetings waste time and money. See <https://www.inc.com/jeff-haden/why-99-percent-of-all-meetings-are-a-complete-wast.html>

⁹⁵ The average office worker spends 2.5 hours per day on emails. See

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/annabelacton/2017/07/13/innovators-challenge-how-to-stop-wasting-time-onemails/#6806a4389788>

A truly skilled time killer can spend far more!

⁹⁶ Telegrams were remarkably short by modern messaging standards, with the shortest known being sent by Oscar

Wilde to his publisher. Living in France at the time, Wilde wanted to know how well one of his books was selling.

The message he sent consisted of a single character—?—his publishers reply: ! See

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/6494297/Ten-famous-telegrams.html>

⁹⁷ Middle management is likely to take post-COVID beating. See

<https://www.cnbc.com/2020/04/29/how-the-coronavirus-pandemic-will-impact-the-future-of-work.html> and this post about

flattening organizational structure

<https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/ready-set-go-reinventing-the-organizationfor-speed-in-the-post-covid-19-era#>

⁹⁸ The *low-hanging fruit* hypothesis has already been developed at tremendous length. See *The Great Stagnation:*

How America Ate All The Low-Hanging Fruit of Modern History, Got Sick, and Will (Eventually) Feel Better

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B004H0M8QS>

⁹⁹ Psychology is just one domain in which old studies would never gain modern approval. See

<https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/52787/10-famous-psychological-experiments-could-never-happen-today>

¹⁰⁰ The first airplane death <https://www.nytimes.com/1908/09/18/archives/fatal-fall-of-wright-airship-lieut-selfridgekilled-and-orville.html>

¹⁰¹ (A) Disastrously dangerous radiation experiments. See <https://www.discovermagazine.com/health/from-mariecurie-to-the-demon-core-when-radiation-kills>

(B) The first dog in space was essentially cooked alive. See <https://www.space.com/17764-laika-first-animals-inspace.html>

¹⁰² (A) Lightning-fast genome sequencing of COVID. See <https://phys.org/news/2020-03-sequencing-genome-viruscovid-.html>

(B) And equally speedy vaccine development. See <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp2005630>

(C) Innovation in other domains is speeding up as well. See <https://www.forbes.com/sites/adigaskell/2020/06/04/how-the-coronavirus-is-transforminginnovation/#43c21578c73e>

¹⁰³ The law school I attended during the pandemic (and from which I recently graduated) moved from in-person classes to online classes in three days. Other schools did the same. See <https://www.law.com/2020/03/10/law-schools-shift-classes-online-amid-covid-19-but-can-they-do-itright/?slreturn=20200607011842>

¹⁰⁴ Courts around the world are learning the benefits of Zoom. See <https://www.economist.com/international/2020/06/14/covid-19-forces-courts-to-hold-proceedings-online>

¹⁰⁵ For an extraordinarily biased interpretation of a significant study, see the *New York Times* article <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/04/opinion/trump-voters-chaos.html>

The original paper can be found here <https://psyarxiv.com/6m4ts/>

¹⁰⁶ (A) Free trade benefits the rich everywhere and the poor in the developing world. In the developed world, it leads to “polarization in local wages, employment, skill attainment, and individual welfare,” which is another way of saying that it has a tendency to make the rich richer and the poor poorer—not a great thing for the middle class. See

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022199615001543>

(B) Obviously, this harm was not exclusive to Black family, but a great many Black families did depend on the solid

factory work and wages that allowed them to climb out of poverty, earning far more than they could have in the

South. See <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/great-migration>

(C) As for those who would blame free trade on those evil Republicans, note that it was a decidedly bipartisan

effort—the elites on both sides of the isle did all in their power to rob the American worker of opportunity. Consider

the history of the (recently renegotiated) North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)

<http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1868997,00.html>

(D) As for social welfare, how does it undermine the family? Let us count the many ways. See

<https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=njlsp> and

<https://www.nytimes.com/1983/11/20/us/breakup-of-black-family-imperils-gains-of-decades.html> and

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/20/government-policies-racist-myths-dissolve-black-families>

Establishing a perfect causal relationship between social welfare and Black family destruction is difficult, but that is

a problem common to almost any matter investigated by the social sciences.

¹⁰⁷ (A) The effects of the gentrification of New York City area are well known. See <https://news.berkeley.edu/2019/04/10/new-york-city-gentrification-creating-urban-islands-of-exclusion-study-finds/>

(B) And violent crime has dropped a great deal in the City, which is not to say that there are not plenty of crooks.

See <https://www.wsj.com/articles/new-york-citys-murder-rate-hit-new-low-in-2018-11546559793>

¹⁰⁸ (A) Solitude is one thing, extreme forced isolation is another, and its effects can be measurably severe. They

include greatly increased aggression and fear. See

<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/05/180517113856.htm>

(B) I explore this topic further in “The Dark Forest: Recognizing the Naturalness of Misandry and Misanthropy” of

The Rules (page 219). See http://vongoblerules.com/978-0-9820991-7-9_Complete.pdf

¹⁰⁹ I am using food and starvation as metaphor, but the metaphor is grounded in fact. See <https://www.healthline.com/health/refeeding-syndrome>

¹¹⁰ See <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/year/1999/>

¹¹¹ The sexual revolution almost certainly undermined family and (by extension) community, which in turn led to the

growth of identity politics. *Primal Screams: How the Sexual Revolution Created Identity Politics* addresses this

hypothesis in considerable (and fascinating) detail. See

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/1599474115>

Unfortunately, extremist ideologies do not so much cure the problem of societal disconnect as they do weaponize it.

And given time, a great many ideologies either collapse under their own weight or become self-parodying.

¹¹² Academic life can be surprisingly stressful. See

<https://www.chronicle.com/article/Stigma-StressFear-/237353>

and <https://www.chronicle.com/article/A-Prominent-Economist-s/245932>

¹¹³ See Note 105, *New York Times* link. The *NYT* article contains the phrase “should be burned to the ground”

(without referring to atomic conflagration). How this should be taken is up for debate. I suspect that some survey

respondents meant this literally. Others might have had destruction of a more metaphorical sort in mind. Either way,

this does not bode well for many. If a fourth of the population sees little in America worth preserving, those with

much to lose have much to fear.

¹¹⁴ *Notes from Underground* was published in 1864, not long after the end of the Crimean War and during the middle

of Alexander II’s economic and legal reforms. See

<https://alphahistory.com/russianrevolution/russianindustrialisation/>

¹¹⁵ Although I have briefly referenced the matter of isolation in academia previously (Note 112), here is more

evidence of the isolation of academics and how it stands to harm them. See

<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2006/03/24/isolated-academic>

<https://theconversation.com/overworked-and-isolated-the-rising-epidemic-of-loneliness-in-academia-110009>

¹¹⁶ And herein lies the great contradiction in American society: On a theoretical level, we advocate a radical form of

self-development that rises to the level of Nietzschean master morality—something that Nietzsche would almost

certainly attack as impractical for the greater part of humanity to achieve. On a practical level, we promote an

engineered, conformist culture created by teams of marketers (and increasingly, computers). The sentence associated

with this endnote is a paraphrase of an Edward Bernays’ quote. See

https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/275170.Edward_L_Bernays

¹¹⁷ For source of quote, see <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/427317-remembering-that-i-ll-be-dead-soon-is-the-most-important>

¹¹⁸ Not only does life go on, it continues with less change than one might think. See

<http://longnow.org/seminars/02009/feb/13/social-collapse-best-practices/>

¹¹⁹ The book in question is well worth reading. See *The World of Yesterday*

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0803226616/>

¹²⁰ Exactly when the Chinese fell behind the West is uncertain, but that it happened during the time of Manchu

(Qing) governance is almost certainly beyond doubt. See

<https://www.theglobalist.com/12-facts-on-chinaseconomic-history/>

and <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1830-1860/china-2>

¹²¹ The cost of our 21st century military adventures was astounding. See

<https://www.cnbc.com/2019/11/20/us-spent-6point4-trillion-on-middle-east-wars-since-2001-study.html>

¹²² (A) American medical costs are the highest of any country. See

<https://www.investopedia.com/ask/answers/020915/what-country-spends-most-healthcare.asp>

(B) Among the many things that COVID did was drive home the fact that not everyone will be able to receive

unlimited care when resources grow scarce, hence the ongoing debate over who gets a ventilator. See

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2020/03/24/coronavirus-among-patient-covid-19-who-gets-ventilatorcolumn/2902014001/>

(C) This discussion should have started *years* earlier, with one writer, Sheri Fink, having considered this some depth

in *Five Days at Memorial: Life and Death in a Storm-Ravaged Hospital*, her book about a crisis at a New Orleans

hospital during Hurricane Katrina. See <https://www.amazon.com/dp/0307718972/>

As for this discussion in the current context, better late than never!

¹²³ *Sophie's Choice* is a 1980s film, so I realize that younger reads might not get the reference. See

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sophie's_Choice_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sophie's_Choice_(film))

¹²⁴ As much as I wish I could take credit for the observation that the Industrial Revolution/Long 19th Century was a

singularity of its own sort, I cannot. See <http://bactra.org/weblog/699.html>

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *There is little more suspect than clamorous consensus, particularly if*

backed by evidence open to a multitude of valid and contradictory interpretations. Consensus

alone does not warrant pricked up ears, nor does clamor. But the cacophony of them sounding

atop each other should raise one's guard, if not his hackles.

The world is going to hell; America is spiraling the drain; and evil lurks behind every corner,

ready to violate and annihilate all that we hold dear at a moment's notice: This is what we are

told (and told with much vituperation).

The deafening drumbeats of fear and dread never cease. We are constant victims of petty acts of

aural and psychical violence by our elites—be they in ordinary government, educational institutions, advocacy groups, the intelligence community, or the infotainment industry—and

and their specific partisan branding is of no real consequence. They injure us for the usual reason—

for power, which derives from violence (with only the occasional exception). Fear overwhelms

logic, and without logic, we cannot well determine how much the select few take from us and

how little they offer in return.

I wrote this essay to attack bullshit and bullshitters alike, both of which annoy me. I wrote this

essay so that anyone who reads it may launch a counterassault upon the lies and abuse he has

suffered at the hands of arrogant fools who would have him believe they are his betters, when in

fact, they are merely inheritors of an abundance of good fortune and a paucity of humility.

I claim no sympathy, no decency, and no compassion. Nonsense irritates me—that is all. And my

desire to trounce the nonsense is reason enough to spend a few spare hours tormenting myself

and my spellchecker. The problems we face are real. They are pressing. No one need be a bouncing, bubbly Pangloss. But there is hope, and there is opportunity in even greater measure.

I wrote this essay with a single wish in mind: That all the long-ignored and competent will rise to

the level of their worth and their ingenuity.

Now is the time for new and good ideas.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Brant von Goble is a writer, editor, publisher, researcher, teacher, musician,*

motorcyclist, juggler, and amateur radio operator. Born in Kentucky, Brant has lived throughout

the United States, and he spent more than three years in Hunan, China, where he won the Wuxi

Friendship Award (2012) for his excellence in teaching. He received his Doctor of Education (EdD)

from Western Kentucky University in 2017 and his Doctor of Law (JD) from Cooley Law School in

2020. One of his books, Foresight (and Other Stories), was favorably reviewed by Publishers

Weekly. __

