

The Mercurian



A Theatrical Translation Review
Volume 7, Number 2 (Fall 2018)

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Editorial Assistant: Sarah Booker
ISSN: 2160-3316

The Mercurian is named for Mercury who, if he had known it, was/is the patron god of theatrical translators, those intrepid souls possessed of eloquence, feats of skill, messengers not between the gods but between cultures, traders in images, nimble and dexterous linguistic thieves. Like the metal mercury, theatrical translators are capable of absorbing other metals, forming amalgams. As in ancient chemistry, the mercurian is one of the five elementary “principles” of which all material substances are compounded, otherwise known as “spirit”. The theatrical translator is sprightly, lively, potentially volatile, sometimes inconstant, witty, an ideal guide or conductor on the road.

The Mercurian publishes translations of plays and performance pieces from any language into English. *The Mercurian* also welcomes theoretical pieces about theatrical translation, rants, manifestos, and position papers pertaining to translation for the theatre, as well as production histories of theatrical translations. Submissions should be sent to: Adam Versényi at anversen@email.unc.edu or by snail mail:

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Editor's Note

Welcome to the Fall 2018 issue of *The Mercurian: A Theatrical Translation Review*! Five plays, one opera, and one book review present different translation challenges having to do with radically different approaches to theatrical structure, character, and language from Romanian, Serbo-Croatian, Spanish, Korean, French, and German than commonly occurs in conventional U.S. dramaturgy.

We open the issue with Mihaela Murdure's translation of Romanian playwright Radu Tucelescu's one-act *The Thief or Three in the Bedroom*. This dark comedy uses the device of the erotic triangle to examine Romanian society after the fall of Ceausescu in December 1989. In the process Tucelescu reveals the hypocrisy and corruption of Romanian politics in the period.

Next is Zeljko Maksimovic and Cory Tamler's translation of the Bosnian playwright Tanja Sljivar's *We Are the Ones Our Parents Warned Us About* in which the accidental meeting of a middle-aged woman and a teenaged boy in a public restroom becomes a series of scenes of role-playing as they attempt to make sense of their lives. As the translators note, not only were they faced with conveying the cultural and political complexity of the Balkans to an English-speaking audience, but also with a text heavily imbued with regional Bosnian idiomatic expressions that might be difficult for even a native speaker to untangle, as well as allusions to Bosnian folk songs, Serbian TV shows, and bloody regional conflicts that might elude the understanding of even audiences from the region.

We Are the Ones Our Parents Warned Us About is followed by Samuel Buggeln (translator of Marivaux's *School for Mothers* in Vol. 4, No. 2 and Molière's *Hater* in Vol. 5, No. 1) and Ariel Gurevich's translation of Argentine playwright Rafael Spregelburd's *Why Does Everything*. Spregelburd's text is divided into three sequences utilizing various doubling schemes for the actors as the play investigates state bureaucracy, art, business, religion, and superstition. As the translators discuss, contemporary Argentine theatre, and Spregelburd's own company in particular, frequently runs at a fast pace, with lines overlapping each other in a manner that can seem chaotic to Anglo audiences. The fact that Spregelburd directs and performs in his own plays and that such productions often tour or run intermittently for two years or more, frequently means that a published text does not reflect the rhythm and/or textual changes made in performance. By working closely with Spregelburd on their translation Buggeln and Gurevich attempt to recreate that feeling of Argentine performance on the page.

Spregelburd's play is followed by Walter Byongsok Chon's translation of South Korean playwright Sam-Shik Pai's play *Inching Towards Yeolba*. By means of a talking "four-legged beast" who relates tales of the outside world to an isolated village, Pai creates an allegorical satire that explores the tension between tradition and innovation. Drawing upon the travel diary of an eighteenth-century Korean philosopher named Yeon-Ahm, Pai's play explores Yeon-Ahm's search for practical ideas based in Chinese Confucianism that could be used to modernize Korean society. As Chon discusses in his introduction, while Korean-American playwrights have recently begun to receive recognition, contemporary Korean theatre in translation has largely been absent from the English-speaking theatre. *The Mercurian* hopes that the publication of Chon's translation will spur more work in this area.

We continue with David Carter's translation of the undervalued twentieth-century French playwright Arthur Adamov's *The Invasion*. A contemporary and friend of Antonin Artaud, André Gide, and Jean Vilar, Adamov's play investigates the nature of human existence in Europe in the 1950s, with references that seem all too contemporary as we deal with present day issues of mass migration. Influenced by both August Strindberg and Franz Kafka, Adamov's work mixes dream-like scenarios with existential angst and political theory.

We conclude this issue with Mark Herman and Ronnie Apter's translation of Carl Maria von Weber and Franz Carl Hiemer's *singspiel Abu Hassan*, paired with Rick Davis' review of Apter and Herman's book *Translating for Singing: The Theory, Art and Craft of Translating Lyrics. Abu Hassan*, although using the tale of Abu al-Hasan told by Sahrazad to King Shahyar in *Thousand and One Nights*, parallels Weber and Hiemer's own constant condition of debt. Davis' book review presents Apter and Herman's "exploration of the perils and promise of translating for sung performance." A practice that has been largely shunned by Anglophone productions of opera.

Back issues of *The Mercurian* can be found at: <https://the-mercurian.com/>.

As the theatre is nothing without its audience, *The Mercurian* welcomes your comments, questions, complaints, and critiques. Deadline for submissions for consideration for Volume 7, No. 3 (Spring 2018) will be February 1, 2019.

—Adam Versényi

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The Thief or Three in the Bedroom

by **Radu Țuculescu**

Translated from the Romanian by **Mihaela Mudure**

The one-act play *The Thief or Three in the Bedroom* is a dynamic comedy inspired from the Romanian realities after December 1989, the year when the Communist system dismantled through a violent popular uprising. A burglar breaks into a rich house in a residential neighborhood in the middle of the night. This event will uncover the corruption and the immorality in the Romanian political high life. The wife of a VIP sleeps with her husband's chief secretary but is also eager to offer her charms to the intruding thief. She has always been attracted to the man who has more power. After all, don't all these men have something in common? They are all enticed by goods that do not belong to themselves, in other words, they all steal. Consequently, the thief, the most "innocent" of them all because—at least—he practices the craft in the open, will be invited to join the party. His skills might get more refined. As political phariseism is everywhere the same, the play can be associated with the realities from other societies as well.

The basic structure of the play is the famous (erotic) triangle. There is first the triangle of the Wife, her Husband (who is only heard on the telephone), and the Hunchback. Then there is the second triangle which is formed during the burglary night: The Wife, the Hunchback, and the Thief. They interfere according to changing dynamics that adds a lot to the humour of the play. The power balance between characters is in full swing according to a symbolic motility that has significant gendered connotations. In both triangles the woman holds the reins but she is not visible in the public limelight. Țuculescu uses here a very famous stereotype in Romanian comedy: the powerful woman behind the scenes.

The text can be inspiring both for actors and directors. One of its assets: it can be played in non-conventional spaces. Last but certainly not least, in Țuculescu's play political aromas mix with the culinary ones. Food can make the most different people stick together. Just like similar political interests...

—Mihaela Mudure

Radu ȚUCULESCU (born in 1949 in Tg.Mureș, Romania) is a novelist, playwright, director, and translator from German into Romanian. He was born into a family of Romanian intellectuals, his father Dumitru Țuculescu being a well-known physician. He graduated from the Music High School of Cluj-Napoca (Romania) in 1967 and studied violin at the "Gheorghe Dima" Conservatory of Cluj-Napoca (1972). He worked for the Cluj Studio of the Romanian Television and Radio Company from 1972 till he retired. One of the most important contemporary Romanian playwrights and novelists, Țuculescu has been awarded prizes of the Writers' Union in Romania, grants and creative residences in Switzerland, France, and Austria. He has lectured on his literary creation in Paris, Viena, Torino, Haifa, and Tel Aviv. His novels and plays have been translated into English, Italian, German, French, Hebrew, and Hungarian. Since 2010 he has been president of the jury at "Stage," the International Theater Festival for Youth.

Mihaela MUDURE (born in 1954 in Cluj-Napoca, Romania) is a Professor in the English Department at “Babes-Bolyai” University in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. She has been guest professor in Turkey and the Czech Republic and a member of the Beatrice Bain Research Group at the University of California at Berkeley (2015-2016). Dr. Mudure is interested in ethnic studies, the intersection of gender and ethnicity, and the British Enlightenment. Her publications include books as well as numerous articles in Romanian and international journals. Dr. Mudure has edited several issues of the journal *Studia Philologia* and three collections of articles. She is also a versed translator from English and French into Romanian and from Romanian into English. Dr. Mudure’s next project is a collection of articles on the racial phenomenon known as passing.

THE THIEF or THREE IN THE BEDROOM

A Comedy

RADU ȚUCULESCU

English translation by Mihaela Mudure

Characters:

Thief (Shopi)

Hunchback (Adi)

Wife (Evi)

The bedroom is plunged into obscurity. The darkness is not quite complete; the shy, pale light of the neon lamps from the street can pass through the drawn curtains. For some time, one can hear the deep breaths of Wife and Hunchback who are sleeping in bed. The tick of an alarm-clock or a wall clock. Silence dominates all beings and things.

All of the sudden one can hear from beyond the door of the bedroom the banging noise of the bottles that were knocked over or even broken and Thief's indistinct swearing.

Wife (scared, confused, whispering): What is this?! Am I dreaming? (*again, noise of bottles.*) Oh, no, I am awake! Good Lord! Adi... Adi, open your eyes!

Hunch (confused because not completely awake): Did you say something?

Wife: Did you hear that?

Hunch: You...

Wife: In the kitchen. There's someone there.

Hunch: Who the hell? At this time?

Wife: I heard bottles breaking... someone is there.

Hunch: A bottle may have toppled over... You forgot to put them away.

Wife: Be quiet! Can you hear? Steps...

Hunch: I don't hear anything.

Wife: You are deaf, on top of it all. They will kill us.

Hunch: Who the hell? Evi, you've gone mad.

Wife: Not so loud.

Hunch: If you say so...

Wife: We have no gun, no knife...

Hunch: Not even a grenade!

Wife: Do you feel like mocking me?

Hunch: I think you've been dreaming, kitty. After all our efforts from last night.

Wife: Did I forget to lock?

Hunch: I'll bet you did, kitty.

Wife: Oh, no! I do remember well, Adi. We both checked the door, we also put the chain.

Hunch: Indeed! Yes... it looks like a huge watch chain.

Wife: Who?

Hunch: The chain.

Wife: They are experts. They've opened everything: the Yale lock, the chain, the other lock.

Hunch: I think you have been dreaming, Evi.

Steps can be heard beyond the door. The planks of the inner stairs creak gently.

Wife: Now? How about that?

Hunch: You are right... Somebody is climbing the stairs.

Wife: I'll die without even having had any kids.

Hunch: I'm sure he'll let you live if you mention this to him.

Wife: Could there be more than one?

Hunch: According to the footsteps... I don't think so...

Wife: He's by the door.

Hunch: Let's hide under the bed and get him by the ankles.

Wife: This is a couch... how the hell can we hide underneath?!

Hunch: Let's hold our breath.

Wife: I'll hit him with the bedside lamp.

Hunch: Good idea. So will I!

The door opens slowly. Feeble creaking. Some swearing whispered through teeth.

Thief: This house creaks like hell... Ah, ah, oh my, woe... what a mess! (*One can hear a tumble, a huge smash, Thief's cry.*) Fuck!

Complete silence for few seconds.

Wife: What can that be?

Hunch: He fell, I think.

Wife: He's watching us.

Hunch: I'll turn on the bedside lamp.

Wife: Wait. Let us listen.

Lugubrious silence.

Hunch: Nothing.

Wife: He seems to have stopped breathing.

Hunch: Let's turn on the bedside lamps at the same time.

Wife: I count one, two, three.

Hunch: Where the hell is the switch?

Wife: Under the bulb, genius.

Hunch: I've found it.

Wife: One... two... three!

They turn on the bedside lamps. Strong light. Thief lies on the floor, at the end of the couch and the two cannot see him.

Wife: I don't see anyone.

Hunch: Me neither... I'll get off the bed.

Wife: I'm afraid.

Hunch: Leave it. I'll have a look.

He gets off the bed and discovers Thief: Hunchback cries out.

Wife: Is he there?

Hunch: Yes... I hope he's not dead (*laughs*).

Wife: Why the hell are you laughing?

Hunch: Do you know what the oaf stepped on?

Wife: How would I know?

Hunch: Your little barbells... ha... ha... the small ones which weigh only half a kilo. It's good that you practice sport, kitty.

Wife: Is he dead?

Hunch (*looking carefully at him*): I'm not sure.

Wife (*gets off the bed*): It's always me who has to find things. (*She bends over the Thief*;) Honestly speaking, he seems a bit still.

Hunch: Head blows are the most dangerous.

Wife: What on earth shall we do, I mean, if he's dead?

Hunch: Try mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

Wife: Maybe you.

Hunch: We'll... bury him.

Wife: Where?

Hunch: In the cellar.

Wife: Impossible. The floor is cemented.

Hunch: We could find some space on the lawn.

Wife: Are you mad? What if someone sees us?

Hunch: Let's throw him into the garbage can.

Wife: This guy is enormous.

Hunch: He has to weigh about a hundred kilos.

Wife: We'll have to tumble him down on the stairs.

Hunch: He seems to be breathing.

Wife: Is he?

Hunch: Fetch me a mirror.

Wife: You want to see how handsome you are?

Hunch: No, to put it in front of his mouth to see if he's still breathing, smart-ass!

Wife: I see. (*She fetches the mirror and holds it in front of Thief's mouth.*) It's covered with steam!

Hunch: So he's not dead, then.

Wife: There's no blood on the carpet.

Hunch: He hit his head and fainted.

Wife (*scared*): Adi, look, he's moving! What do we do if he wakes up? This guy can kill us both with just one blow.

Hunch: He is still quite dizzy, he doesn't have any strength.

Wife: Let's stifle him with a pillow... let's tie him up with what? Damn...

Hunch: Maybe I should hit him in the chin.

Wife: Hit him!

Hunch: It is a bad idea. We'd rather convince him to leave.

Wife: You're right. Let him leave on his own feet.

Thief gets up on his elbows, groans loudly, and opens his eyes. He sees Hunchback, screams, and faints again.

Hunch: He's fainted again.

Wife: When he saw you! No wonder! He may have thought he was in hell.

Hunch: If he had seen you first...

Wife: He'd have thought he was in heaven, I know. Do we still have some ice?

Hunch: Are you having hot flashes?

Wife: I'm not, you blockhead! We'll put ice on his head, wake him up and then leave him in the street. He'll be grateful that we didn't call the police, and then make himself scarce, quickly. Let him vanish back into thin air!

Hunch: You are right.

Wife: As usual.

Hunch: I am going to fetch the ice.

Wife: I hope you'll find it.

Hunch (sings): Hope never dies... *(gets out.)*

Thief is about to wake up. Wife looks at him scared. Thief opens his eyes, he sees her, and he is astonished. He rubs his eyes and then the nape of his neck. A few groans of pain.

Thief: Am I dreaming? Before I saw a monster. A Hunchback dwarf... It's clear. I got hurt and now I'm having hallucinations.

Wife: Don't hurt me.

Thief: The monster turned into an angel.

Wife: You feel like playing jokes after entering my house like a murderer!

Thief: Woman, I am a Thief, not a murderer.

Wife: Mind your words.

Thief: Aha. Still, I am hallucinating. In fact, you are that scarecrow who changed its appearance in order to take me in.

Wife: I am no scarecrow.

Thief: Tempt me, stun me, and then hit me. An angel's face hiding a demon!

Wife: You're talking nonsense.

Thief: Who the hell uses these small barbells, good only for dwarfs?

Wife: They're mine.

Thief: I could have broken my head and stayed in a wheelchair for the rest of my life, my mouth crooked and one of my hands paralyzed.

Wife: Such things happen to those with bad intentions.

Thief: I didn't come here for you to lecture me. This is a robbery, if you know what I mean.

Wife: You'd better leave, quietly and peacefully.

Thief: I am making the decisions around here, woman!

Wife: Give up that stupid word!

Thief: You're right. Woman is a stupid word (*laughs*).

Wife: You find yourself laughing.

Thief: First you hit me in the head, then you make a fool out of me!

Wife: Do not shout, please, and calm down.

Thief: Shut up! (*He takes out a gun, upon which the Wife stifles a scream.*) Do you see this little gun?

Wife: Yeah... It is so big!

Thief: When I have it in my hand, I decide what's what. Got it, woman? Or rather... she-devil?

Wife: I've got it.

Thief: In bed.

Wife: Why?

Thief: No comments. I'm gonna sit in the armchair until my pain goes away. And you're gonna tell me where I can find... (*Hunchback can be heard singing: "Hope never dies..."*) Damn, am I hearing things now? Who's that?

Wife: You've seen him already.

Thief: The monster? Damn him! Does he really exist? I'll tan his hide even better (*points his gun to the door*).

Wife: Don't shoot, please. He went to fetch ice.

Thief: Ice?

Enter Hunchback. He discovers Thief in the armchair. Thief's gun is pointed at him. He is not afraid.

Hunch: Hi!

Thief: My goodness, you are so ugly!

Hunch: I got some ice for you to put on your head.

Thief: Aha, yes! Very good! Give me the bag. Slowly, no quick movements. If you try to do anything, I'll blow your brains out.

Hunch: Of course. Some people only dream holes. Here you are.

Thief: Now go to bed. (*Hunchback gets into bed, obediently, near Evi.*) My God... by her side you look even uglier. You're like Beauty and the Beast! Do you know it? It's a cartoon that I like very much.

Hunch (*ironically*): Did you read it?

Thief: You look worse than the devil but you play the ironical guy. You think you're smart. Yes, little monster, I only read cartoons.

Wife: One can see that...

Thief: How can one see that?

Wife: Sorry. It's just words don't get angry.

Thief: Do you think I am a muttonhead?

Wife: Not at all.

Thief: In order to be a successful burglar, one must think thoroughly.

Hunch: Namely. Did you think a lot before breaking in?

Thief: You guys aren't suffering because of the heat? Of course, you aren't, because you are naked. Still you've disturbed my reasoning.

Wife: You mean?

Thief: I saw the windows were closed, the curtains drawn, as well as the draperies, no little window left open for a gust of wind. Pitch dark all over the house. No noise, no bedside lamp on, no music in a low tone. The TV set was not on!! These guys must be away on holiday, I told myself. Correct?

Hunch: Right.

Thief: It is hardly eleven o'clock. How the hell can everybody in the house sleep at this time and in such heat?! You would have judged the same.

Wife: It sounds... comical in your mouth...

Thief: Which word?

Wife: The word "judged."

Thief: Really? It's laughable, is it? I have nothing against it. Laughter is healthy.

Wife: You're a Thief who has the sense of humour.

Thief: Correct. With humour and a gun. Ha, ha! And I feel like laughing... when I see you side by side.

Wife: You've said it before. It is ridiculous to repeat the same thing over and over again.

Thief (*barking out*): I repeat what I want, as often as I want, woman! (*He agitates his gun.*) I am the boss, now.

Hunch: You're right. Take care lest it should fire.

Thief: No rush movements. I'm an expert.

Wife: Have you shot a lot?

Thief: Me? Well... that's a professional secret.

Hunch: Evi, stop asking questions. It looks like a cross-examination.

Thief: Right! You're a smart guy, a Hunchback one. Are you called by any chance, Adam?

Wife (*sulky*): No, his name is not Adam.

Hunch: Adrian.

Thief: Close enough. A and E.

Wife: What's your name?

Thief: Won't you ask me where I live, when I was born, my ID card number...? You're playing the smart one.

Wife: Sorry...

Thief: Eve was a very smart woman, too. She fooled poor Adam and he tasted the apple and when the stupid one took a bite he was damned. Ha, ha!

Wife: You're astonishing me!

Hunch: Stop it, Evi.

Wife: Well you do know a lot of stuff.

Thief: Aha! You are mocking me.

Wife: I wouldn't dare.

Thief: You'd better not! I've also seen some paintings with Adam and Eve! But they were beautiful. Their naked bodies were OK; they had shapes pleasant to the eye. And the serpent.

Wife: Looked like you.

Hunch: Evi, stop it!

Thief (*laughs, amused*): I like the idea. Why not? But it would be even better if... the two of you were Adam and Eve! Painted on each side of the apple-tree. Naked. Oh my! How amused the beholder would be! Eve, the fairy queen and Adam, the Hunchback dwarf with a hideous face. They would roll in the aisles! Madness!

Wife: Do you feel any special pleasure when you make fun of us?

Thief: This is the truth, Evi. My friends call me Shopi. Would this nickname be good for a serpent, as well? You, what do you call little Adi when you caress his hunched back? My swollen one or my wild hillock?

Wife: You can play the smart guy with a pistol in your hand.

Hunch: Forget it, it doesn't bother me.

Thief: You see, Adi is wise... unlike Adam who took a bite. What a pity that I don't have a painter's talent. I'd sell the painting at the auction and get a nice sum of money plus fame.

Wife: True believers would not buy such blasphemy.

Thief: You are wrong, my precious. One is attracted by whatever is more hideous, more shocking, more disgusting and this becomes a commodity. And what does it matter who buys it? And you do not seem to be believers. Your bedroom is not endowed with any icon.

Wife: Do you have one?

Thief: Of course, I do. I have one right here, in my wallet.

Hunch: To protect you from thieves.

Wife: You took the words out of my mouth!

Thief (*laughs heartily*): Good cue, you... Quasimodo! The icon does protect me!

Wife: Did you say Quasimodo?

Thief: Why are you so surprised? The Hunchback from Notre Dame, that church from Paris where he used to ring the bells and then he fell in love with a beautiful woman. Rather like the two of you, the only difference is that the Quasimodo Little Adi is wooing you.

Wife: Don't tell me that you read books?!

Thief: No, dear, I watch movies and read comics! Are you satisfied? I stare at the pictures... *(an idea comes to his mind.)* Pictures? Ha, ha. That's it. Why didn't I think of this sooner? Oh, my, what an idea! *(He takes the mobile phone out of his pocket.)*

Hunch: What are you doing?

Thief: Taking pictures. Some pictures with both of you in different positions. I'll be tremendously successful with them.

Wife: No!!

Hunch: I don't think it's a very good idea.

Thief: It's brilliant. Come on, turn a little, in profile, your hump must be visible.

Wife: I beg you, no! I have a lot of jewellery over there, in that drawer from the mirror. Take them all! Take everything you want!

Thief: I'll take them, I've plenty of time. This telephone makes short movies as well, but... I do not know how. *(To Hunchback)* Are you good at this?

Hunch: No.

Thief: Her, I will ask nothing. Even if she is good at it, she wouldn't help me. Come on, Eva, don't make such faces. You're spoiling the picture.

Wife (almost screaming): I am not sitting for pictures. You're a scoundrel. Kill me, but I am not sitting for pictures! *(She disappears under the blanket.)*

Thief (furious): Fuck, get out from under the blanket!

Wife: I won't.

Thief: I'll put a bullet in your head.

Wife: Shoot! The neighbours will hear and call the police.

Thief: Aha! I have a silencer, too. Bloody hell! But I don't feel like attaching it. Get out, fucking shit, out! *(He snatches the blanket from Wife and throws it in a corner of the room. Wife groans loudly and starts crying. She wriggles.)*

Hunch: Evi, calm down.

Wife: I don't want pictures!

Hunch: Maybe we can make a deal.

Thief: Woman, stop wriggling like this, fuck you! (*He slaps her hard and throws her into the arms of Hunchback.*) Now listen to me. If you don't calm down, I'll beat you to death, leave you toothless and you'll need several plastic surgeries to redo your nice face. A few pictures and it's over. Who the hell can recognize you? You are not some actress or singer.

Hunch: She is not...

Wife: I beg you...

Thief (*starts taking pictures*): Adam, my darling, touch one of her breasts with your hand. Like this. Grand. Now kiss her on the neck. Bravo! Caress her thighs gently. Good Lord! What a contrast! I could have you both naked and in different positions. I don't like pornographic pictures. It's better like this, there's more mystery... but also some comic elements. Very funny. Kiss one of her knees, bend... like this... the hump is so big, and above it rises... brilliant... her angelic face! Now on top of her. Come on, just pretend I'm not here... Ha, ha! How interesting. Your head only reaches her breasts. Well, that's not a bad place, after all. Excellent... Eva, do not lie on your belly. You, Quasimodo, put your face on her buttocks. Wow! How nicely they can be seen through the nightie! Close your eyes. You're in an ecstasy. Wonderful... It's over! I've finished. (*He raises the blanket and throws it over the two people.*) Now you can cover yourself with the blanket. Well, was that so hard? So much fuss over nothing! Sorry I had to slap you, Evi. There won't be any traces... I had to calm you down somehow, otherwise I could have shot, God forbid, a bullet...

Wife (*in a weak voice*): You've ruined me...

Thief: You're exaggerating. Calm down, I won't post the pictures on the internet.

Wife: I'm undone.

Thief: You're repeating the same thing and getting on my nerves. And when I am nervous I do crazy things.

Hunch: A glass of brandy might help. What do you think?

Thief: Alcohol? What exactly are you plotting, you ugly dwarf?

Hunch: Nothing inappropriate.

Thief: Don't tell me! You think I'm stupid, don't you?

Hunch: Not at all.

Thief: Now you've started plotting. You want to get me flustered, even drunk, so I'll be less perceptive, and then, boom, you'll hit me over the head.

Hunch: You're wrong.

Thief: You can drink, if this calms you down. I... I am a little hungry.

Wife: I am going to fix something for you...

Thief: You stay where you are. He'll go. Let me think. When you live in such a lavish house, you must have some salmon fillets in your fridge, no?

Hunch: We actually still have some.

Thief: I knew it. So, something simple. Slices of thinly buttered bread and salmon fillets with a little bit of lemon. Or maybe you don't have lemon?

Hunch: We do.

Thief: And some still water, in which you won't try to dissolve any powder...

Hunch: Don't worry. I'm off.

Thief: Farewell and don't slip on the stairs.

Hunch: Do you worry about me.

Thief: When you return with my sandwiches nicely set on a plate, it would be a pity to drop them...
(he laughs)

Hunch: It's OK. *(exit)*

For several moments, Thief stares at Wife and smiles vaguely while shaking his head.

Thief: Curiosity is gnawing me like a fat worm. How the hell did you mate with Quasimodo? This must be his house, he must have a big bank account, and he must be a successful businessman. *(Wife looks at him without making any gesture.)* Hmm! He may also have a big... I heard that the short ones are better in bed, more capable, aren't they? At least nod if you do not want to answer me verbally... You keep silent. Stubborn and a little angry! You're staring at me like a rattlesnake. Ha, ha! You married him for money, didn't you? Only for money... *(ironically)* Or was it love at first sight?

Wife: Do you think I am beautiful?

Thief: I thought you had lost your speech.

Wife: Tell me.

Thief: You're wonderful. Even when little Adi is missing.

Wife: What?

Thief: With him by your side, a strong conflict appears... to your advantage.

Wife: Of course.

Thief *(hits his forehead with his hand)*: That's it. The law of contrasts which attract each other.

Wife: Everything is natural with me.

Thief: I suspected as much. You've never thrust a syringe anywhere, not even into your lips, is it?

Wife (*rises and sits on her knees*): No. You can see by yourself.

Thief: Stay still, I believe you.

Wife: My breasts have no trace of silicone. Look, they are not too big, but they are firm and elastic. Come on, touch them and see for yourself.

Thief: What are you thinking about?

Wife: My belly is flat, I have never had any liposuction.

Thief: I believe you. You look like a sportswoman. I realized this from the beginning... when I stepped on your barbells.

Wife: And my buttocks.

Thief: I noticed them, too! Your nightie is quite a see-through.

Wife: If you don't like it, I can take it off.

Thief: I mean, what are you up to, woman?

Wife: Come closer, sit on the bed.

Thief: Stop with these temptations, damn woman. Do you think I am an idiot?

Wife: You are tall and strong...

Thief: Exactly! I'll clobber you again.

Wife: Beat me if it turns you on!

Thief: Have you gone mad? Get back into bed, bloody hell! (*He takes a silencer out of his coat pocket and starts screwing it onto the gun.*)

Wife: What are you doing?

Thief: What do you think I am doing?

Wife: That is a silencer.

Thief: You're beautiful and intelligent. (*He gets angry.*) And you think you're smart. You're getting on my nerves, tempting me like that. Aren't you ashamed? Like a common whore.

Wife: You're exaggerating.

Thief: You are overdoing it.

Wife: And what about the silencer?

Thief: Well, well... if you don't stop it, I'll plug a bullet in your kneecap! Got it, Evi? And you'll be lame for the rest of your life. And you'll make a wonderful couple with little Adi. The cripple and the hunchback!

Wife: You're... horrible! A horrible Thief!

Thief: More horrible than you wanting to me to touch you and showing me your breasts and your bottom? And what is all this show for? If you say that all of a sudden you've fallen in love with me, I swear I'll shoot!

Wife (*falls on bed and starts crying*): For the pictures.

Thief: What pictures?

Wife: The pictures from your cell phone...

Thief: I've already forgotten about them. You're ready to sell yourself for nothing?

Wife: I beg you, delete them...

Thief (*angry*): This is the last time that ever you beg me for this stupid thing. You got it?! A woman's whining and whimpering voice... driving me nuts! And I want to tell you something: I'm gonna take some more pictures now when little Adi shows up. You've stirred me up, like a fool!

Wife (*resigned*): What do a few extra pictures matter?

Thief: Some pictures with both of you dancing. Ha-ha! The difference should be very obvious. And I'll enjoy myself whenever I stare at them. Whenever I'm in a bad mood, I'll have a look at your pictures.

Enter Hunchback. He is carrying a large big plate on which salmon fillet sandwiches have been arranged artistically. In his other hand, he has a bottle with still water.

Hunch: Good food has arrived.

Thief: Are you talking to me?

Hunch: We've eaten, had enough.

Thief: You talk to me as if I were three years old.

Hunch: I wouldn't dare.

Thief: Come on and take your spouse and dance.

Hunch: Dance? That's a good one.

Thief: You made me angry again and now I have to calm down. I am taking some pictures.

Hunch: That's right, it's dangerous to eat when you're upset.

Thief: You're smart, Quasimodo, I already told you.

Hunch: There's no music.

Thief: You're going to sing.

Hunch: We don't exactly have an ear for music.

Thief (*angry*): Is that so? Fuck you. Come on, give me a tango. (*Hunchback and Wife sing a wordless tune that resembles a classical tango. Thief also hums, growing more and more amused, going around them, cell phone in hand.*) Good. Well done. You do have an ear for music... And you look... marvellous! Come on, more movement, try some tango dance figures. You should hold a carnation between your teeth, Little Adi! Ha, ha, ha, ha! Evi should bend very low in order to take it from between your teeth! Come on, more sentimental, as sentimental as possible. Pum-pum! The Waves of the Danube! Pirouettes! Tum-tum-tum! Turn around, Evi, swing... and lift your little lover off the floor... like a little doll... Tum-tum-tum! As if we are at the circus... Bravo! I could win a photo contest at a humour festival... Done! In bed, both of you, I am hungry.

Wife: Have you calmed down?

Thief: Of course. You should calm down, as well.

Wife: Are you happy?

Thief: Not yet... Let us see what meal Adi has fixed here. (*He holds his hand to take a sandwich, then he changes his mind, takes the plate, goes to the bed and gives it to Wife.*) Help yourself, Evi, a sandwich.

Hunch: Don't you trust me?

Thief: I don't. (*to Hunch.*) And you will have a sip from this bottle with water.

Wife takes a bite from the sandwich. Hunchback drinks from the bottle of water.

Wife: Now, are you happy?

Thief: Yes. Oh, Lord, I am as hungry as a hunter. (*He eats slowly, taking delight in every bite.*) The salmon fillet, very tasty. It's not bad to be rich and have everything in your fridge.

Hunch: Right.

Thief: Do you know what Evi tried to do while you were out?

Hunch: Steal your phone.

Thief: Seduce me!

Hunch: That's a good one.

Thief: Don't be surprised. Anyway, I look better than you, much better.

Hunch: I agree.

Thief: But a married woman must take care of her house and her family.

Wife (*ironically*): The moralizing thief!

Thief: It seems you don't have children.

Hunch: We don't...

Thief: For a loose woman, it doesn't matter anyway.

Wife: You pretend to be brave when you have your gun with you and you dare offend me.

Thief: I'll be calm once my stomach is taken care of.

Hunch: A normal reaction.

Thief: My Wife made me the laughing stock of the world. The wretch!

Hunch: Of the world? This means you should be famous.

Wife: You should thank her.

Thief: Enough with your stupid remarks! A worthless whore!

Hunch: Your Wife?

Thief: My Wife, even if we didn't have the official papers. What does that piece of paper mean, anyway? We had been living together for many years. And then I caught her.

Wife: You caught her?

Thief: She used to post pictures of herself lying nude, on the internet. She wrote to several wankers who showed her, in return, how big their penis was. She had lewd dialogues even on the phone, under the blanket, at night. When I heard about it and confronted her, she was the one who actually shouted at me saying that I was backward and blockheaded, and that it was a very modern and innocent practice. This word stirred up a hurricane in me...

Wife: Which word?

Hunch: Innocent, my dear.

Thief: Innocent... She was a thin being, beautiful, and frail, you could have sworn that she was the embodiment of virginity and innocence. I beat her until I got dog tired and she was in hospital for many weeks. They did their best to restore her face, but her beauty and her tender expression were lost for ever. Her real face came out, hideous...

Hunch: And you got sent to the cooler.

Thief: So what? I am not sorry. That's where I learnt the trade.

Wife: And what a great trade!

Thief: It's like any other trade if you practise it with passion and talent.

Hunch: As if you were in class, reading life lessons from books.

Wife: Soap opera talk.

Thief: I only steal from the rich. I prefer the upstarts.

Wife: You probably also give to the poor, like Robin Hood.

Thief: Bedtime stories. A writer's fantasy. Do you think you could ever satisfy the have-nots?

Wife: Children?

Thief: What about them?

Wife: Did you two have any?

Thief: "I am too young," she would tell me, "we have plenty of time."

Wife: I think I can understand her, in this respect. There's no need rush things.

Thief: She looked like you.

Wife: Like me?

Thief: Yes. The same angelic face, the same graceful body.

Wife: Now I can see why you hate me.

Thief: You exaggerate.

Wife: So you're taking revenge on her by destroying me.

Thief: What are you talking about? That's nonsense!

Wife: Yes, posting my pictures on the Internet for the whole world to see me dancing almost naked and lying in bed in embarrassing positions...! And to top of everything, you pretend that such practices revolt you. You're a hypocrite, a liar, you behave just as you claim your undocumented wife did...

Thief: Enough! I'm still digesting, woman! at this moment, I could shoot you without a second thought!

Wife: Shoot me!

Hunch: Evi, stop it. The gentleman is not a murderer, he is a Thief:

Wife: The gentleman?

Thief: Exactly.

Hunch: It is indelicate of us disturb his siesta.

Wife (*staring at him*): Am I hallucinating?

Thief: You might. It is sweltering. How is it that you don't have air conditioning in this villa?

Hunch: It is not healthy.

Thief: But to sweat like a pig, is healthy?

Wife: I'll open the window a little.

Thief: You'll open nothing. You want to draw attention from someone outside.

Wife: I'll do it for you... to breathe the fresh night air.

Thief: Bravo! You've returned. You're pulling my leg. You're being funny.

Wife (*continues the game*): I mean it, you are breathing heavily, anyone can see it, it's this crystal clear...

Thief: Am I?

Wife: And your forehead is dripping in sweat... you're panting, you may have problems with your heart...

Thief: Am I panting?

Wife: Your chest is wheezing like a lawn mower.

Thief (*very astonished*): A mower?

Wife: Maybe I should call an ambulance.

Thief (*bursts into laughter*): Hunchback, don't you burst into laughter when you hear what she's saying?

Hunch: Yes, it's comical.

Thief: She thinks I am really quite stupid, like, mentally defective. I've blown my brains out.

Hunch: You are not stupid, but you did get a blow to the head.

Wife: You're not stupid, you are a Thief.

Thief: A classy one, my love! Even when I'm being mocked.

Wife: I made a proposal to you for your own good.

Thief: You see, Quasimodo, this is your woman!

Hunch: I can see.

Thief: Frivolous and insincere.

Hunch: Depending on the situation.

Thief: First she makes a pass at me, then she flatters me, she fawns over me, she pretends she wants to do me good! Luckily, I have eaten. When I have had my fill, I am much calmer.

Hunch: Nor is it healthy to get mad at any trifle.

Thief: Are you a doctor?

Hunch: I am not.

Thief: Are you? I forgot to ask you. What is your job when Eva lets you free?

Wife: He is a programmer. An IT expert. A brilliant mind!

Thief: An expert, and brilliant. I suspected as much. Judging by all of the brilliant products one can see all around...

Wife: Highly qualified work must be paid accordingly!

Thief: You are entirely right.

Wife: Why are you so enthusiastic?

Thief: I also do highly qualified work.

Wife: And... who's paying you?

Thief: I am my own employer.

Hunch: Simple and efficient. Only one employee who's also the employer.

Wife: Now you can sleep in peace. This is your big hit.

Thief: Of course! I shall leave with a very rich load. You're not wearing cut-price jewellery.

Wife: Stop pretending.

Thief: I don't get it...

Wife: You'll have a monthly income without lifting a finger. You can lie in bed all day long, watch television, go on exotic trips by yourself or even in company.

Thief: You're talking nonsense.

Wife: And if you are a smart boy, you'll take care not to fritter the money too quickly.

Thief (to Hunchback): Did she drink something?

Hunch: Last night. But she has turned the corner.

Thief: Can you understand what she's hinting at?

Hunch: I think so...

Wife: You are playing this comedy in front of us. Well, dear Thief... by the way, what is your name?

Thief (*amused*): You've already asked me this. I can only give you the number of my shoes, my shirt, trousers, and...

Wife: And the money, where do we have to bring it?

Thief: What money?

Wife: You're a miserable pretender.

Thief: I am a miserable man who had his fill eating salmon fillets.

Wife: The blackmail!

Thief: What kind of blackmail?

Hunch: She's talking about the pictures.

Wife: Exactly. That's why you took the pictures. Now you can blackmail us as you like. You can milk like cows.

Thief (*angry*): I've found a stupid cow! Dumb cow! Unable to understand the others. Ready to offer her body to any new comer. (*He walks all over the room, agitated.*) Blackmail? Do you think everybody thinks like you? Blackmail is for the impotent, for guys who have no character. For those who are able to step even on their own mothers' corpses just to reach their goals.

Wife: You make me laugh, really you do!

Thief: You laugh stupidly. The blackmailer is an ordinary crook, a little grain, a nothing!

Wife: You're such a smart one!

Hunch: Evi, it's no use provoking him. I believe him.

Thief: Normally. You're a man...

Thief (*rushes to Wife, and gets her by the throat*): I will not blackmail anybody, woman. If you go on with this madness.

Wife: What will you do? Will you stamp me out the way you did your sweetheart?

Wife: I did not stamp her out... I only wiped that expression off her face that she was a frail and honest woman. I already told you.

Wife: You're a choleric. You lose your temper, too damn quickly!

Thief: It's because of you and the heat in this house!

Wife: She may have had enough of your hysterics and then looked for some consolation, an alternative.

Thief: How well women can defend each other even when they've never met.

Hunch: Especially when they've never met.

Thief: Apparently, you might be right.

Wife: Apparently?

Thief (*walks again all over the room*): Finally, she admitted that she had been practising that pornographic sport, apparently, only virtually since the first months that we lived together when we billed and cooed. I had no idea that we're billing and cooing on a pile of shit.

Wife: And you found this out... after breaking some of her ribs.

Thief: Something like that... (*Suddenly, he puts his right hand on his belly.*) Oh, God!

Hunch: Is something wrong?

Thief: It's not good. I feel bad...

Wife: If you feel like throwing up, do it in the bathroom, not on my rugs.

Thief: I don't feel like puking. What the hell was in those fillets?

Hunch: Nothing. They were fresh, I assure you.

Wife: I ate as well. You obliged me. But I'm fine.

Thief: I feel my stomach churning all of a sudden.

Wife: I can hear it...

Thief: Where's your toilet?

Hunch: That door.

Thief (*grabs the pistol*): You must come with me!

Hunch (*smiling*): That's an idea.

Wife: Have you gone mad? Maybe you want us... to hold you by the hand?

Thief: If I leave you alone... you can call... call the police... Oh, my, what pains!

Wife: Shall we come with you? Shall we watch you while you relieve your stomach? You're a psycho.

Thief: I'm logical. Stop talking, I feel I can't take it any more... damn those fillets!

Wife: I will not enter the toilet with you even if you kill me.

Thief: I must see you... what the hell!

Hunch: You could leave the door open.

Thief: OK, little Adi! There is still somebody thinking in this house. I leave the door open and you will sit in front of it. Here, on the carpet... so that I can see you... I was greedy, damn those fillets!

Wife: You mean we sit as if we were at the theatre and stare at you... while you are labouring to get rid of your load! While you're straining!

Thief: You turn your back to me, damn you! And stop talking or I'll hit you in the head. You'll get dizzy, you'll faint, and no more talking!! *(He pulls her by the hand and drags her in front of the bathroom where he throws her down. Amused, Hunchback sits down by Wife.)*

Wife: You feel like laughing. As if he were your relative, this guy stuffed with salmon fillets!

Thief: You whistle and clap your hands... *(He opens the door of the bathroom, leaves it wide open, and enters.)*

Wife: You've gone mad, it's clear.

Thief: Lest... you should hear...

Wife: Embarrassed, are you?

Hunch: Of course, dear. He is a classy Thief. He has principles. Let's start... as well... *(He claps and whistles.)*

Wife: Take care of your little gun. Maybe you drop it into the water and your ammunition will get wet.

Thief: Aaaa...

The two clap and whistle. At a certain moment they even synchronize and sing a fashionable tune. After a while, Thief reappears in the doorway. He listens to them, an expression of supreme relief spreads on his face. He nods and marks the rhythm of the tune.

Thief: You're gifted, indeed you are. You can form a duo. Concerts, tour, lifestyle!

Hunch: You look like another man.

Thief: Indeed. I feel like another man!

Wife: What if we formed a trio?! You beat the drum with the silencer! Wonderful life!

Thief: Back in bed! You were good and obedient.

Wife: This is how people are when they are threatened.

Hunch: Evi, really, it's no use stirring up the hornets' nest. Now the man has got rid of his pain, he's OK.

Wife: And we're ecstatic! You have such black humour, Adi.

Thief: You're exaggerating like any other woman. There's nothing macabre in this.

Wife: You got rid of your upset stomach and now your appetite for life has returned. You feel like flying.

Thief: To the contrary. I feel like sitting in an armchair, breathing freely and relaxing.

Wife: It's only us that you wish to keep under duress.

Hunch: I am not at all under duress.

Thief (to Wife): But relax, dear Evi. Stress deepens wrinkles. It forms dark circles under one's eyes. And it would be a pity...

Wife (to Thief): Might you suggest some naturist recipes for my skin and some ideal diets? You may happen to be a great nutritionist without even realizing it.

Thief: If I had such talents, I would not have swallowed, like a simple-minded man, all of those fillets.

Wife: You finally speak the truth!

Hunch: You could have a glass of still water with some drops of lemon now.

Thief: I risk nothing.

Hunch: It is advisable. Maybe even a glass of water where you dissolve a spoonful of clay. Guaranteed disinfectant.

Thief: I read about clay as well. It seems to have a lot of qualities.

Wife: But you are a real reader. Amazing!

Thief: This amazement of yours is because there aren't too many books here. I can even say that I don't see a single one. At least on the night table, under the bedside lamp, there should be a book.

Wife: They're in the library, where they belong.

Thief: And the library, where is it?

Wife: As you can see, this is a big house; consequently, no one sleeps in the library.

Thief: You're right. (didactic) One sleeps in the bedroom and reads in the library. But the library, where is it?

Wife: Next door. See for yourself.

Thief: This time, I believe you. It would be complicated for me to go there. You should come with me and ... I don't feel like bringing you. I feel a bit exhausted.

Wife: The stomach churning.

Thief: Do you have old books?

Wife: How old?

Thief: Hundreds of years old.

Wife: What would we do with them? Who knows how many unwashed hands could have used them?! How many germs could live among those pages, even viruses of some disease from another century?

Thief: Theoretically, something like that could happen. But old and rare books are very valuable. They are worth the risk.

Wife: Have you taken such risks?

Thief: A thick-headed guy I accidentally saw in a programme on a local channel inspired me.

Hunch: How did he inspire you?

Thief: He bragged about the old and rare books that he had acquired, alongside numerous paintings and other artefacts. All of them were hoarded in his villa, which the cameraman kept shooting very thoroughly throughout the show. I got angry at the man's arrogance and his aggressive mediocrity.

Hunch: Look who's talking! As if he were on a podium!

Thief: He bragged that he had never read a book in his entire life, and that neither did he intend to. That he had become rich without having much education, only the compulsory classes. Schooling and reading: a waste of time! The guy was obviously on his soapbox, but he was an individual who knew what do with their money and where to invest it. His impertinence both angered and challenged me. Consequently...

Hunch: You robbed that villa.

Thief: Yes, I did. I did it with utmost pleasure and thorough preparation. Such a villa has all sorts of alarms.

Wife: We'll have to set up an alarm as well.

Thief: After I'm leaving...

Wife: You're funny. I am sure you are good at alarms. An expert. Maybe you will set a new one for us.

Hunch: And?

Thief: And I made off with all his books. All his shelves were emptied.

Hunch: How many shelves?

Thief: Two. A whole fortune. He did not announce the theft. During that TV programme he had also bragged about the invincible alarm system his home was endowed with.

Hunch: And the books, did you sell them?

Thief: Some of them. I spent the money with my beloved, my honest Wife:

Wife: Whose ribs you lovingly broke afterwards...

Thief: Such rarities can be sold only one by one, at well calculated intervals. Lest you should become a suspect. I'm very careful with every detail, at every peculiarity.

Wife: You're a perfectionist.

Thief: Thank you.

Wife: I also have a cooking book.

Thief: A cooking book. I have a dozen.

Wife: Mine is from 1830.

Thief: Really? I've never seen such an old cooking book. It's fascinating to find out what people used to eat centuries ago. It makes my mouth water... You've made me very curious.

Wife: You can take it... next to the jewels.

Thief: This will happen, be sure.

Hunch: Do you like cooking?

Thief: Cooking is my great passion.

Wife: Besides thieving...

Hunch: And mine.

Thief: I would cook at home even when I was living with my beloved Wife. That is why she had time enough to get bored and gallivant. I would bring her food tray to bed while she was writing to several wankers.

Hunch: I cook to jazz music.

Thief: Me, too! What a coincidence!

Wife: You, you are relatives, admit it!

Hunch: Do you cook the eggplant salad with mayonnaise?

Thief: Not at all. It takes away its real taste, its eggplant taste.

Thief: Right. I'm also not an adept of putting mayonnaise in everything.

Hunch: It shows lack of creativity and taste.

Thief: I scrape a little bit of parmesan and mix everything until it melts into the freshly baked and peeled eggplants while they are still hot. This gives the salad a special taste and doesn't take away its flavour.

Hunch: I get the point. I don't cut the onion very thinly. I want to feel it when I eat it. I also squeeze a few lemon drops.

Thief: I use lemon, too. It is obligatory in mayonnaise.

Hunch: Stuffed eggs swimming in the mayonnaise.

Thief: Delicious! It is a delight to cook them.

Hunch: I thin down the mayonnaise with the runny, not fatty kind of sour cream, and then I spread freshly cut dill on everything.

Thief: A great idea! I also add some very thin slices of raw mushrooms.

Hunch: The flavour of the champignon is stimulating.

Thief: Next... the stuffed eggs! I remove the hot yolk and mix it with butter and Mediterranean herbs. Not with pork pâté...

Hunch: Extraordinary! I also use only butter and spices.

Wife: Rubbish!

Thief: I like to have fun with the halves of the stuffed eggs. My imagination runs wild.

Hunch: I imagine little boats... floating on a yellowish sea...

Thief: Little ducks... with eyes made of black olives...

Hunch: ...beaks and wings made of pickled red pepper...

Thief: A fat fish...

Hunch: or a... half yellow submarine!

Suggestion for the director. In this moment, seized with culinary enthusiasm, the two men could sing together a musical phrase from Yellow Submarine by The Beatles while Wife looks at the two guys who went completely berserk...

Thief: I also tried swans!

Wife: Haven't you tried... storks, crows, little serpents?

Hunch: But what about cabbage? The cabbage! The carefully stewed cabbage!

Thief: Raw cabbage thinly cut. Cutting the cabbage is the only moment that I do not like.

Hunch: Neither do I.

Thief: Then I scald it well, I let it drip, and then I put it in a big heatproof pot without any drop of sunflower oil.

Hunch: No drop?

Thief: No drop. I add two thin slices of fat bacon, two glasses of white dry wine, I squeeze two lemons, thyme, black pepper, a bit of salt.

Hunch: I also pour wine and a few slices of tomatoes and onion...

Thief: Of course, and slices of onion. Everything cooked on a small fire for about an hour and a half.

Hunch: Patiently, so that everything gets tender...

Wife: I'm getting dizzy.

Hunch: And now let me present my personal contribution.

Hunch: Your secret.

Thief: Exactly. I grate a big, long white radish. Inside the cabbage I thrust an apple with the core removed, and in that empty space... I pour honey.

Hunch: Extraordinary! I suspect everything disappears in the end, except the cabbage.

Wife: Of course. Everything melts except the cabbage. The cabbage has a divine taste! There are also some bacon leftovers which are thrown away...

Wife: A genuine cooking lesson.

Thief: You could have taken notes.

Wife: I'm just stunned listening to you.

Thief: If little Adi can cook, you don't waste too much time in the kitchen.

Wife: You got it! I would only disturb him.

Thief: Are you keen on the... internet, as well?

Wife: No, the internet, no? But I got interested in taking pictures.

Thief: Taking pictures?

Hunch: This is a surprise.

Thief: Are you talking about something precise or generally?

Wife: Passions can appear all of a sudden, too...

Hunch: And so do some ideas.

Wife (to Thief): Have you ever appeared in newspapers or on TV?

Thief: Me? Back then, after the beating, there was a short piece of news on some programme or another... I wasn't an important person, a VIP and I did not even kill her, so why would the media have paid much attention to me?

Hunch: You remained a nobody.

Thief: Normally. In my trade, anonymity is vital.

Wife: So... nobody has seen your face.

Thief: You're the first. In such heat, at a reasonable time, everything was closed, the curtains drawn, the lights off, no TV, no movement... I was tempted, I admit.

Hunch: According to what we saw in the movies, you ought to shoot us.

Wife: Annihilating eye-witnesses.

Thief: Theoretically, yes. Practically it would be a stupid thing to do.

Wife (*takes her cell phone from the bedside table*): I thought I should take a picture of you, as well.

Thief: What are you talking about?

Wife: You took so many pictures of us... I am taking one picture of you, too. A souvenir.

Thief: Sit still and forget about the phone.

Wife: To look at you in my moments of sadness.

Thief: Stop it.

Wife: I may even print it.

Thief: I felt so good and now you are destroying everything with your stupid ideas.

Wife: Hang your face on a wall or on the street! Yes, hang it on posts, in metro stations, or in gas stations.

Thief (*makes a real jump to the middle of the bed*): Stop it, woman! I'll hit you over the head with this gun, did you hear me? You will be unconscious until I finish my job here. I don't want to hear your voice anymore!

Hunch: Evi, be more reasonable.

Wife: The cooks' coalition!

Wife's mobile phone rings. Some moments of confusion.

Thief: Don't answer. It's midnight.

Wife: On the contrary. I will.

Thief: It's a mistake. Or some psycho. Or some intoxicated young people are playing dialling numbers at random!

Wife: I have to answer.

Thief: You are sleeping sound at this time or do you want me to punch you in the mouth?

Wife: It's my husband.

Thief (*as if thunderstruck*): Husband? Husband!?

He stands up from the bed and sprawls himself into the armchair, astonished, and mumbling some indistinct words.

Wife (*on the phone*): Yes, love, you did not wake me up! I was watching a movie... well, an older thriller... you know I like them... you, too... with a Thief... and one of those big guns... what about you? Yes? I told you to be careful what you eat at those receptions... I've been on a diet... only yoghurt and cereals... they didn't have yoghurt and cereals? (*laughs*) you make me laugh... you also drank something... I can feel it... well, how can I scold you? you must be up to the requirements... I know, you have to smile at all those stupid guys... and the result? yes... yes... come on, cut it short, I am dying with impatience... well done, love! I was sure you would succeed... you can convince anybody... why should you apologize? It's good that you called... I was looking forward to finding out... are you coming back tomorrow? already? wonderful, why should you waste more time over there? I'm glad... by the 12.30 flight... I'll wait for you at the airport... of course... good night, love... I love you, too...

She puts her mobile on the bed night table and looks at Thief, a huge smile on her lips. Several moments of silence.

Thief (*low voice*): Love... (*he looks at Hunchback in deep amazement, shrugs, sighs noisily.*) Love... I've made a fool of myself. I told you my life... I sermonized to you like an idiot. I criticized fallen women... the whores... I opened my heart in front of whom? In front of some people who...

Wife: You did not exactly open your heart.

Thief: What a fool I was! How ridiculous! How pathetic! How pitiful!

Hunch: You're exaggerating.

Wife: You should look for the comical side of the situation.

Thief: Comical? What the hell do you see comical? You are a harlot, this what you are, nothing else. And you, you are pathetic. With... Quasimodo? Evi? Don't tell me that you met in childhood... that you grew up on the same street... that you used to hold hands when you were children. Bla, bla, bla. He may be your husband's boss. But... I am not interested. I am sick. I am fed up with all and everything.

Wife: The Thief a philosopher! Thieves will be thieves.

Thief: At least I still have my pride, though who knows what good it's for? How the two of you must have been laughing to yourselves while I was severely condemning my Wife and playing the moralist.

Wife: I did not feel like laughing very much.

Thief: What disillusionment, what a disappointment, what perplexity!

Wife: Maybe you're going to cry.

Thief: I feel sick.

Hunch: Also the salmon?

Wife: Do you still need to go to the toilet?

Thief: Enjoy yourself, you have all the right. Make fun of me. You've pulled my leg, you've taken me in...

Wife: Nobody told you that we were married.

Thief: I'm going to leave... It was the most embarrassing night in my whole life. I don't feel like taking anything from here. It would remind me of the whore with whom I lived.

Wife: Time cures everything.

Thief: Is that so? I had no idea.

Wife: You're taking something with you, stop pretending.

Thief: What should I take? Maybe these barbells I almost broke my neck with...?

Wife: The pictures.

Thief: Ah, the pictures. I should delete them, now, since they're no longer funny to me. They'll remind me of my whore, whenever I looked at them.

Wife: Then shall we delete them?

Thief: Well, yes... (*all of a sudden another thought crosses his mind.*) By the way, I want to see your "love," your beloved husband, how does he look, that you cheat on him with... sorry, Adi, I do not want to hurt you, but...

Hunch (amused): It's OK. My sense of humour is very well developed.

Thief (to Wife): Show me a picture. You must have some albums with the places where you travelled, where you spent your holidays full of love.

Wife: OK, I got it. (*She pushes the bed drawer and takes out a picture.*) Look at a picture. Stare!

Thief (looks at the picture, then at Hunchback, then again at the picture): Well, your love looks well... very... very... well... even... if... he's... obviously... older... grey hair... poise... he practises sports... maybe swimming... maybe rides horses... tennis... stuff...

Wife: Then do we start deleting?

Thief: This face is familiar to me! Where from? Clarify this for me.

Hunch: He is a senator.

Thief (*explosive*): Senator?! Senator! Yes, senator. Now I know! Strong party, VIP... So he's a senator (*to Wife*)... so you are the senator's wife! It's you who accompanies him to official dinners and meetings, and whom he shows off in public as the virtuous Wife: The senator's wife!

Wife: You can give *me* the cell phone, I am good at deleting, too.

Thief: So then are you the senator's cook?

Hunch (*laughs*): Well, not exactly. I am his chief secretary.

Thief: His chief secretary! Why am I not surprised? With your mind it is normal.

Wife: Maybe the two of you can still exchange culinary recipes. In the meantime, I can delete the pictures...

Thief: Quick-witted! (*He walks around the room while holding the picture in front of his eyes.*) Senator and chief secretary... Party... Leadership... the senator's Wife... (*to Wife*) Evi, you used to say I look wonderful!

Wife: Of course.

Thief: Better than the Senator! At least I am younger, I have no grey hairs, a nice, even attractive face, no? Look at me, face up, profile!

Wife: Do you want to participate in a beauty contest?

Thief: I am not stupid either. I'm even quite sly.

Wife: In your trade... well. (*insinuating*) Maybe you still want me to take a picture of you!

Thief (*enlightened*): You will take pictures of me, Evi! You will take pictures of me and we'll spread them all over the city. Everything in due time. Adi, get dressed quickly. I have an idea! We're going to discuss it, we have all the night at our disposal. You have finished your job here for the moment, haven't you?

Hunch: I'm getting dressed.

Wife: Are you going out for a drink? This beats everything!

Thief: I would invite you as well but you must rest and meet your beloved husband at the airport tomorrow, with a fresh, serene complexion without dark circles under your eyes...

Wife: What are you thinking of?

Thief: I've made up my mind to give up my shady dealings and enter politics.

Wife: Politics?

Thief: Yes, you've heard well. Join your party. And the two of you will support me! No comments.

Wife: Then... will you give up deleting the pictures?

Thief: For the moment, yes.

Wife: And you're talking about dignity!

Thief: My dignity as a Thief. I shall give it up. Once a Thief... no longer...

Wife: Like the snake that sheds its skin.

Thief (*amused*): Exactly, Evi. You're a beautiful, attractive woman... even intelligent. Suddenly, I think I like you. Very attractive. Even dear...

Hunch: A normal reaction for a future member of our party.

Thief: A potential one.

Wife (*sighs deeply and loudly*): That's it. In fact, why not?

Hunch: I am ready.

Thief: I know a night bar with discreet booths.

Wife: Take care do not get drunk!

Thief: Tonight, it is out of the question. I have a lot to learn.

Wife: Adi is a very good teacher.

Thief: I have intuitively felt his potential from the first moment.

Wife: Then I wish you fruitful debates.

Hunch (*laughs*): Well done, Evi, you spoke as if you were at a meeting.

Wife (*also laughs*): Do I get a little kiss from you when we say good-bye?

Thief: What about me?

Wife: From both of you.

Both men kiss her on a cheek.

Thief: Your skin is like a peach...

Wife: And you... a very subtle observer.

Hunch: And a violet perfume...

Wife: No more flattering! To work!

Thief: We're gone. If you want, I can leave you the gun. To defend yourself from... thieves.

The three of them laugh.

Hunch: The little barbells... are enough for her. Sleep well!

Thief: Rosey dreams.

Wife: Get lost!

Thief: OK!

The men get out. Wife takes the barbells in her hand and makes some movements with them while singing a song. Then she leaves them in the middle of the room and gets back into bed.

Wife: How was that recipe with cabbage? First you cut it thinly, then you add two glasses of wine... you squeeze a lemon... and oil... no, not oil... fat slices of bacon... you scrape a long and white radish... and an apple with honey... onion... tomatoes... spices... thyme...

While Wife remembers the recipe, the light gets dimmer. Happy, rhythmic music is heard. The two little barbells start jumping to the music. They will turn into two puppets taking after Thief and Hunchback.

End

We Are the Ones Our Parents Warned Us About: A play for two characters

By Tanja Šljivar

Translated from the Serbo-Croatian by Cory Tamler and Željko Maksimović

Bosnian playwright Tanja Šljivar, Serbian actor Željko Maksimović, and American writer and theater scholar Cory Tamler first met in 2012 in Belgrade, Serbia to work together on a series of original performances created for underutilized public spaces in the city. As our sense of artistic and personal connection to one another grew beyond that original project, we became interested in two things: the idea of literary translation as a communal act, as a collective formative practice; and the excellence of Serbo-Croatian-language theater compared with the relative lack of excellent translations of dramatic texts from the language into English. The latter problem, we knew, was partially an issue of fluency (so few English speakers learn Serbian), but it also had to do with the difficulty of translating the complexity of the cultural and historical reality of the Balkans into an English-speaking context without weighing it down with endless footnotes and explanations. We began to consider collaborative translation as a method of using our interest to address the lack we had perceived. Šljivar's work is a particular challenge because her characters often speak idiomatic regional Bosnian that would at times be difficult even for a native speaker to untangle. Her Sterija Award-winning *We Are the Ones Our Parents Warned Us About* is a two-person play in which the accidental meeting of a middle-aged woman and a teenage boy in a public restroom one summer evening leads them into a role-play through which they try, and ultimately fail, to narrate their whole lives to one another. Milan and Mara, the characters in the play, face the same gap that the three of us come up against in our collaborations: the one of orienting and re-orienting within one another's languages and contexts. From slanted Bosnian folk-songs to intricate references to Serbian TV shows and bloody regional conflict, the script is dense with elusive, allusive meaning. We have included a glossary written by Šljivar, which follows, to help readers of the text make sense of some of the more complex cultural references; but in production, we encourage the director and actors to find their own solutions.

Tanja Šljivar was born in Banjaluka, SFR Yugoslavia in 1988. She holds both BA and MA degrees in dramaturgy from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade, as well as an MA in applied theater studies from JLU, Giessen, Germany. Her full-length plays *How Much is Pate?*, *Scratching or How My Grandmother Killed Herself*, *We are the Ones Our Parents Warned Us About*, *But the City Has Protected Me*, *All Adventurous Women Do*, *Regime of Love*, and the short play *Stillborn*, have been published, read on stage and produced in professional theaters in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, Albania, Spain, Poland, Austria, and Germany (most recently in Deutsches Theater, Berlin; Schauspiel Stuttgart; and Atelje 212, Belgrade). She also writes short stories, radio plays, screenplays and theater-theory texts. She has received several awards for her playwriting, most recently the prestigious Sterija Award for the best contemporary play in Serbia, the MESS Market co-production award for *All Adventurous Women Do* in Bosnia, and a nomination for the Retzhoferdramapreis 2017 for the same play, in Austria. Her plays have been translated into some ten languages. She has been a guest of writing residencies IHAG in Graz, Austria, Museums Quartier 21 in Vienna, Austria, and Prishtina Has No River in Prishtina, Kosovo.

Cory Tamler (www.corytamler.com) is a writer, editor, translator, and artist whose academic and critical writing and translations have been published in *Studies in Musical Theatre*, *Asymptote*, *Culturebot*, *The Offing*, *Extended Play*, *Howlround*, and *SCENA*. As an artist, she works across performance, writing, and installation to create fresh points of contact between environments and objects—human and nonhuman—in them. She has created and participated in research-based performance projects in the United States, Germany, and Serbia, and has worked with museums and companies including the New Museum for Contemporary Art, Open Waters, The Civilians, Sprat Artistic Ensemble, YinzerSpielen, and the School of Making Thinking. Cory was a Fulbright Scholar (Berlin) and is currently a Ph.D. student in Theatre and Performance at The Graduate Center, CUNY.

Željko Maksimović was born in Belgrade in 1985 but grew up during the 90s in Loznica, a town on the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina. He studied English Language and Literature and Japanese Language before he enrolled at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts and graduated from the Department of Acting. He has translated essays and books on theatre theory, such as *Cambridge's Introduction to Theater Directing* by Maria Shevtsova, and several works by Tanja Šljivar (in collaboration with Cory Tamler), published in various national and international publications. He works as an actor, TV host, and translator in Belgrade (Serbia) and occasionally Prague (Czech Republic) where he collaborates with the director duo SKUTR. He is currently performing in Tanja Šljivar's *Regime of Love* in Atelje 212 theatre in Belgrade.

We Are the Ones Our Parents Warned Us About

Characters:

MILAN, a couple of hours more and he'll be 17, came here tonight to celebrate his birthday

MARA, 45, came here tonight to fix her make-up and to rest

Everything takes place in Bosnia, in a public toilet

...and I walked in back with crazy Neal: he was telling me about the inscriptions carved on shithouse walls in the east and in the west. "They're entirely different, in the East they make cracks and corny jokes of all kinds; in the West they just write their names, Red O'Hara, Bluffton Montana, came by here, date, the reason being the enormous loneliness that differs just a shade and cunthair as you move across the Mississippi."

On the Road, Jack Kerouac, 1957

And so the years, the young years walk by in this damn country.

A Ukrainian forced laborer in Germany, writing on the wall of a Gestapo prison in Cologne, 1944

Free market and marketing, get out of the University.

Graffiti in the women's toilet at the University library in Giessen, 2013

Although the restroom's public, it's white and sterile. Because the restroom's public, it's covered in graffiti. People like to write about the kind of dick they like on the walls of the restroom. People like to write about what it would be like to shove a wooden plank up the ass of whatever ethnic minority they hate on the walls of the restroom. Milan and Mara are in the restroom for an entire night in June. It doesn't stink—a woman cleans it regularly and then initials the chart that tracks the hourly schedule. It might be one of those restrooms you find at rest stops along highways or in big train stations, the kind that don't even exist in Bosnia, where you put in a coin to go through the turnstile and receive a coupon for fifty cents off a coffee or a pastry. But most likely, it's an underground restroom, one of the kinds used for cruising. It could also be a telephone booth at a post office, scribbled on with ballpoint pen, or a park where people have carved words into the bark of the trees, or the wall of a squash court particolored with graffiti, or a classroom with a blackboard covered in chalk scrawls. But it's probably a public restroom. It's a bit dull, a bit sad. Milan is celebrating his seventeenth birthday and you'd never guess that Mara is over forty, although she's forty-five. She's mourning old loves; Milan has never had one. Regularly, Milan takes a drink from a bottle of whiskey he got from his dad as a birthday present. Mara and Milan meet each other for the first time tonight, and they understand each other well.

Scene One

Beloved son o'mine, my green apple

MARA: I kneel at my son's grave and wail. He can't hear me anymore.

MILAN: I'm in my grave. My mother kneels above the grave and wails. I can't hear her anymore.

MARA: I buried my son in Jošavka. Or at Crni vrh. Or in Brezičani, or Lađevci, or Šnjegotina. One of those small villages. Definitely somewhere near Čelinac. Anyway, that's where I taught him everything.

MILAN: I was buried here, near Čelinac. In Brezičani. Or Šnjegotina. My mother was born here, she bought a burial plot here, for herself. But when I died first, she didn't know what to do, it was so sudden. So to avoid taking out loans for a plot in Banjaluka, she tossed me into the plot she already had.

MARA: I prepared my famous veal and potato stew, except I didn't chop the potatoes, I just threw them into the pressure cooker whole, and everyone at the funeral ate them like that: a whole potato in a spoon. All it took was a little extra chewing and no one choked.

MILAN: She couldn't call a priest. I didn't die of natural causes.

MARA: He's gone but nobody took him from me, what could I have done but throw whole potatoes into the cooker, put on a tight black skirt, and head off to bury him in my own plot.

MILAN: Baba Đuja (she once came into my room while I was changing clothes and didn't have any underwear on, so she slowly crossed herself and only then closed the door and went out) kissed my mom with her slobbering mouth.

MARA: And Vuk, and Dragica, and Krstan and six Sladojevićs, and Rosa and Persa, and Anđelka slobbered all over me, covering me with their tears, and snot, and saliva, and eye goop; and their dry skin flaked off their cheeks onto mine. The rest of the people just hugged me. And everyone was sorry, really sorry.

MILAN: No one at my funeral looked good except for my mom.

MARA: When I was little, I was convinced that I could jump from the third floor and not get hurt. I thought that because of a dream I had once: I jump from the balcony and land on my feet, my white sandals in the green grass, and don't even twist my ankles. Now that I'm big, I'm convinced that I'll die if Baba Đuja kisses me once more at your funeral. I think that because of the small chunks of potato and veal from my stew in the corners of her mouth. She chews the whole potatoes, I go to the toilet and with a felt pen I write Dear son, my green apple.

MILAN: I'm in my grave and I can't hear my mother wailing.

MARA: I kneel at my son's grave and wail. He can't hear me anymore.

Mara reads off the restroom wall a song of lamentation she once wrote there.

MARA:

*Beloved son o' mine, my green apple
Oh alas, thou dear unwed boy o' mine
Thy bereav'd mother hath not married thee

Nor hath she roasted a ton of bacon
Nor hath she wash'd enough hampers of socks
Nor clean'd up enough bowls of your vomit

Thou hast hasten'd again, dear son o' mine
Dear bridegroom, the son of a dear mother
Thou hast not chosen thyself a maiden
Unmarried shall the young damsels remain

They shan't stew enough sauerkraut for you
Nor abrade enough shit down the toilet
Nor cover up enough bruises with scarves

Despair'st thou not, oh dearest heart o' mine,
That thou hast brought thy mother so much grief?
Oh, shalt thou not feel commiseration?
Pay thy mother heed when she begs of you
Not to lie about coming home on time
And to graduate from the greatest schools
At least bruise not your dear lonesome mother
If thou shalt give her no fondness at all*

If you were alive, I would make you scrambled eggs now.

MILAN: If I were alive, I would sit next to you now.

I'm going to kill myself, Mom.

MARA is silent.

Mom, I'm going to kill myself.

MARA is silent.

You were sitting on the blue couch, you'd just had it reupholstered with some cheap fabric, it was rough but somehow it felt nice when I would lie naked on it to jerk off when you and Dad would go visit someone, and you were smoking. I walked past you carrying a big black garbage bag filled with sneakers, you didn't even look at me, I went into the bathroom, laid out all of the sneakers in the bathtub and let the cold water flow over them. You kept ashing your cigarette on the floor, you didn't give a fuck about cleaning it up, and you were listening to Billie's "I'll Be Seeing You" off that player

you were so proud to be the first one in our building to own, but you realized later you fucked yourself, it won't play pirated CDs, and it's hard to find anything that isn't pirated in town, so all you can do is listen to Billie, but you don't really care. I like to walk through mud on purpose, but I don't like cleaning my sneakers with that pink cloth you gave me, so soon the bathtub was full of muddy water. You took the white remote control plastered with Scotch tape and switched to Exkluziv on RTL, you can't get enough of the pretty hostess rattling off juicy details from the lives of B-list celebrities. I lay down naked on my sneakers and the muddy water reached my nipples. You changed the channel, leaving the pretty hostess behind; now, instead of rejoicing in her neatly plucked eyebrows, you're watching the news and rejoicing in hearing about all of the accidents that have happened without touching you. A soft cotton Adidas sneaker was wedged up my ass, a Puma underneath my back, under my neck a Reebok, I rubbed a Nike between my legs, a Kappa floated over my belly-button and a Champion near my mouth (I bit it early on, when it really started to hurt) and a Fila bobbed up beneath my ear. You started to wonder then why I was keeping the water on for so long, so you screamed "Why are you keeping the water on so long?" I didn't answer, I took that blue razor you use to shave your armpits but almost never your legs because you don't feel like it, and I cut myself with it a little bit. My beautiful, my warm red blood gushed out of me and you were sitting on the cheap upholstery, smoking. Sneakers below me, sneakers on my head, sneakers under my arm, sneakers on my pupils, sneakers in my teeth, sneakers in my capillaries, I was covered in sneakers, and patterns, and pretty lines, yellow and purple and red with air cushion soles and with cleats, made of rubber and made of plastic and made of cotton and made of polyester and made of my blood. Instead of going to get some vodka, you came to the bathroom to get me. The bathtub was filled to the brim with me and with sneakers. It was beautiful to you, you wanted to call *Explosiv*, that sensationalistic TV show you're always watching, you stared at the scene amazed, then you started to scream.

MARA screams.

MARA: Ever since you were 10 I haven't been able to look at you naked, that's why I screamed.

MILAN: You bought me high-top sneakers, soft around the ankles with white shoelaces that turned grey after three days.

MARA: I also bought you those air cushion sneakers with a bright red line on the side.

MILAN: And soccer cleats.

MARA: And tight black sweatpants.

MILAN: And white socks to tuck the sweatpants into.

MARA: And a windbreaker, black.

MILAN: And a sweatshirt, blue, cotton.

MARA: And a bright green one with a Nike symbol.

MILAN: And one with a purple zipper, made out of something like silk. We always went shopping in sports stores on Gospodska Street and in Zenit and in Boska when you would get a paycheck, but

once when you were drunk, you took me to the flea market. You kept asking the women if the sneakers they were selling were fakes or the real thing, you were just fucking around, they looked blankly at you and one told you “What do you mean real thing, the real thing costs a hundred marks”. Remember when I was a baby and you were dead drunk with a bottle of vodka in one hand and a bottle of milk that you never even heated in the other, how you would stick the bottle in my mouth and the vodka in your mouth and sing me to sleep? (Milan sings) Boil some coffee for me, son, just as if it’s for yourself, dear son. Aaand I will come around midnight to sit beside you. And then you would always sit on the floor and rock the crib, and I would always fall asleep. At the age of six, I learned how to make coffee just the way you liked it—let it boil once, no sugar, and then I would give the coffee to you after your seventh shot of vodka, and then we would start together: Boil some coffee for me, son and then we would sleep together in your big bed.

MARA: But coffee was always waiting for you, too, and a freshly-made bed. No matter how wasted I would get, I would always make your bed. You wouldn’t come home for ten days. From a football match. You wouldn’t come for sixteen days. From the store. You wouldn’t come for four months. From the war. You wouldn’t come for three years. From the suburban flat you moved to in Budžak. But coffee and bed were waiting for you.

MARA AND MILAN (singing together):

*Make the bed for me, mother/ son
Just as if it’s for yourself, dear mother/ son.
Aaand I will come around midnight
To lie beside you.*

MARA: Just come back to your mother, at midnight, it’s fine, at six in the morning, it’s fine, in thirteen years, it’s fine, just come back to your mother.

MILAN: If I were alive, tonight I wouldn’t go play Counterstrike in one of those gaming dens, or to a casino, or the gym, or a coffee shop, or to a club, or a bar, or a bistro, or a commissary, or a café, or to a disco, I would stay to sleep with you in the big bed.

MARA AND MILAN (singing together, hugging and rocking each other gently, then stronger):

*Don’t come, mother/ son
No need
Cause I’m caressing another mother/ son now
Aaand I have said
That I found a better mother/ son than you*

MARA: When you were alive, I had a zillion problems, now I just have one: visiting your grave.

MILAN: My mom would never say something like that, but fine.

MARA: If I had ever had a son with Vojo, he would kill himself and I would say just that. Or he would die because of Vojo, Vojo was lethal. When Vojo loved me, I was always ill. The first time we met, I got cancer of the esophagus, and then when we fucked for the first time, it metastasized to the lungs. I yell at him “Vojo, I’ve got toxic shock syndrome!” He won’t even respond. In the end, I got jaundice and I would vomit constantly when he cuddled me, but he was never around, anyway. I had a fever for the first three months of our relationship, then he left me after six, married Milena later, he only gave her slight nausea, she drank beetroot every morning, so it was easier for her to bear him, I could never do that, it’s bitter.

MILAN: When we were coming home from a Nike shop with a sleeveless T-shirt for the gym and sneakers, white, for hanging around, I wanted to tell you “Mom, I’m going to kill myself,” but it was too hot, so I just drank Red Bull from a plastic bottle, the kind that can fit into a holder on a bike. I also wanted to say something to Gram once, that she lied to me and that we didn’t let some woman ride with us when we were supposed to, but it was so hot and sweat was pouring down Grandma’s neck and her wrinkled cleavage and I started saying something, but Gram said “Please, don’t talk now” so I didn’t say anything. We had been in a horse-drawn cart, riding with Grandma from Kobatovci to Mahovljane. Uncle Ostoja was sitting in the front, he had the reins and he was the only one the brown horse would obey, because they both had dark complexions. Grandma and I were sitting on a wooden bench behind him, I was skinny, Grandma was fat, she was sitting on a blanket, she took it all for herself and riding on the wood hurt my bony butt and a woman blocked our way. Ostoja pulled the reins, the brown horse stopped and Grandma and I jerked forward, Gram told him “For fuck’s sake, Ostoja, you’re not driving potatoes!” Auntie was also there, curled up by Grandma’s fat ankles and fat wool socks, she didn’t say anything. The woman looked at the horse’s eyes, then at Ostoja’s eyes, then at Grandma’s eyes, then at my eyes, Auntie’s eyes weren’t visible because of Grandma’s ankles. Then she said she’s from Prijedor and she wants us to give her a ride. Ostoja didn’t want to, so he drove past her. Grandma later told me this story, she said it had happened to her and my aunt and Ostoja and that I wasn’t there. Then that I dreamt it. Then Aunt Slavka said she also dreamt it. Then there was television coverage on it. There was also a film. But I still think that I was driving with Gram and Uncle Ostoja and Aunt Slavka on a horse-drawn cart. And that there was a woman blocking our way in front of the brown horse, brown as uncle’s skin, who said she was from Prijedor. “Before, in the factory, I used to make ceramic tiles, blue ones with white flowers, and pink with a white stripe down the middle, and yellow with an ochre pattern, and after, at the factory, when I took a dump I would take it in a barrel, they slapped me, they knocked out my tooth, and my left tit was out and they squashed it with their hands, and the beans were small and mushy, and they turned off the lights at nine, and my ribs were visible and one of my ribs broke, I don’t even remember how and another one of my teeth got smashed, that one I broke myself when there was nothing left to chew.” The woman reeked, and she had huge eyes, one green and the other grey, and you could see her bones, and Grandma told Ostoja to keep going, but not like he’s carting potatoes, like he’s carting humans, and he started up the cart, but he couldn’t go around her easily. And then I forgot it all, because it was stupid. And because I was little. And Gram also didn’t talk about it. But once she and Slavka said after lunch, “Remember when we were going to Mahovljane and a woman with huge eyes appeared,” and I said “Is that the woman that had one green eye and one grey?” and Grandma and Slavka looked at

each other and said “Yes, how do you know that, you weren’t there with us?” But I knew that Gram put a cotton handkerchief over my face, because it was hot, so she wanted to cool me down and keep me from looking. And then I forgot. But later, they said on TV, “Before, in that place, they used to manufacture tiles, and after, they wouldn’t let people eat and they would turn off all of the lights and make them shit in barrels.” And then my aunt also dreamed about the woman. So she told Grandma, “I had a dream about her, the one with one grey eye and one green eye.” And then we really never talked about it again. Otoja didn’t even care, he was just concentrated on carting us like humans, not potatoes, he never dreamt about her.

Scene Two

June 21, two drops of blood

MILAN: I’m definitely going to have a daughter. Grandma would never even think of travelling by horse-drawn cart with a granddaughter from Kobatovci to Mahovljane. Grandma was a girl once, she knows that any girl would get hot in the cart and that her little belly and tits would shake.

MARA: I’m eleven years old. And my panties are bloody for the first time, and my groin is bloody, and my skirt is bloody, and my thighs are bloody. And my knees are bloody, but I skinned them on the cobblestones four days ago, so it’s not the same, cause they’re also yellow and green and scabby.

MILAN: I am thirty-five. I’m wearing a white short-sleeved shirt and a singlet underneath and I’m sweating.

MARA: I’m standing facing a short man with a moustache. He’s wearing a white short-sleeved shirt and a singlet is showing underneath and he’s sweating. My blood would suit his shirt, cause it’s his blood.

MILAN: The girl has scabby knees and a green skirt with a ribbon on the back.

MARA: I’m wearing a green linen skirt with a ribbon on the back and I say to the man that my mom told me when I asked her, and I asked her two days ago, because I really didn’t care before, that he’s my dad.

MILAN: The girl says that her mom told her, when she asked the other day, and she really didn’t care before, that I’m her dad.

MARA: My dad is an engine driver, I found him in a sooty locomotive, he’s a baker and a lawyer, I got to his office easily, it’s only two blocks from my house. My dad graduated from a high school of uselessness, so he spent his days getting drunk at the local dive where everything smelled of beer and old men with liver spots and grey hair on their chests when I first got my period, he works as a conductor with a baton and as a history teacher, I saw two drops of blood on my panties in the third floor toilet at the elementary school, my dad deals with exports and imports, we talked in a big warehouse and I smiled only once, he didn’t smile at all, he’s got an engineering degree and he owns

a tailor shop, he spends all day sitting in a bingo hall looking at white balls with numbers on them, when a woman's voice announced that the number six had been drawn I saw blood on my panties.

MILAN: There's a girl with a green skirt and a ribbon on the back, she's bleeding and I'm sweating, she says she asked her mom and that she told her I'm her dad.

MARA: Daddy. Daddy, I'm bleeding, right now, and I didn't fall, I swear, I did skin my knees, but four days ago, on the cobblestones, but I was watching where I was going, Mom drew me a map to get to your store, I go out of my house, then turned right, then the second street to the left and I stopped at the crossing, I didn't fall, Daddy, and there's blood running down my leg and sticking.

MILAN: What am I supposed to do with it now? Here's some satin, use that.

MARA: He gave me some red satin from the shelf in the tailor's shop, didn't even know how to explain how to use it.

MILAN: And a red card I would give to a player if he kicked another player in the balls.

MARA: And a red roll of film, undeveloped, with photos he exhibited at the town gallery and in a group exhibition in Vienna.

MILAN: And a ball of red cotton I would give to a patient whose teeth I'm fixing, after I tell him to spit.

MARA: A red folder to hold wills authorizations statements proclamations and permissions.

MILAN: Take the red curtain from a window of the bus that I drive from Bakinci to Kobatovci each day every forty-five minutes.

MARA: And a red rag he uses to wipe down the bar and the thin rims of glasses.

MILAN: This red glove I wear when I'm changing oil in the motorcycle is also good.

MARA: And a piece of red chalk he uses to write formulas, containing pentane and octane and aldehydes, on the blackboard. He also passed me a red bowl that I could drip into.

MILAN: Have a tomato juice.

MARA: I'll wear red lipstick to turn attention away from it.

MILAN: Just don't wear red clothes, especially on Fridays. They'll say you're a hooker.

MARA: And you're a fag.

MILAN: Use a party membership card to stop it up. It's nothing, it's nothing, I tell you. Don't talk about it.

MARA: I don't talk about it. Cause it's nothing.

MILAN: Put it against your thigh.

MARA: In my panties.

MILAN: On your knee.

MARA: In my panties.

MILAN: On your belly.

MARA: In my panties.

MILAN: Wherever it's leaking.

MARA: In my panties.

MILAN: So that it's not showing.

MARA: In my panties.

MILAN: In your pants.

MARA: In my panties.

MILAN: I don't want to know where it is, just as long as it's not showing.

MARA: You spread it open, and you look into the mirror. In my panties, I tell you. Dad, will you take me to the hospital? There's something wrong with this.

MILAN: I don't know where you're bleeding from, you're not bleeding, there's nowhere to bleed from, stop it, here, it's stopped bleeding, you can't see it under the little green skirt.

MARA: When my tits started growing last year, when I was ten, Mom thought I had cancer or a blood clot at least, so she took me to the doctor who told her "Ma'am, it's just tits," and this winter I went sledding and when I came home, my panties were bloody, less than now, but enough to make me lose my mind, I was already eleven, Mom said "Did you fall off the sled?" I said I didn't, Mom said "What do you mean you didn't, you did, you fell onto a branch, onto an iron pole, onto a yellow fence."

MILAN: While we were dating, your mom was always ill. After our first date she got cancer of the esophagus, and then after I spent the night at her place for the first time, it metastasized to the lungs. She called me once, said she had toxic shock syndrome, at first I didn't want to pick up. Then she called so often that my old man said he would bust my jaw if I didn't pick up, so I went to see her. She'd put in a tampon for the first time in her life and was out of her mind, she'd only used cotton wool before that because it was natural and odorless and because it was good enough, well it never actually leaks that much, and because it was white. I pulled out her tampon; she said I saved her life. We thought it was impossible that we would end up with a little girl, there was so much blood on the bed. However, eventually she ended up with both jaundice and you, and she would always vomit when I caressed her, but I was never there anyway. Now my wife drinks beetroot juice every morning, so she can put up with me much better than your mom, your mom could never do that, it's bitter.

MARA: I see clearly that my mother is insane.

MILAN: I can drive you to the hospital, but I can't talk to the doctor, I don't know what's wrong with you anyway.

MARA: Milanka and Branka already have their periods, Ljubica doesn't but when she feels like avoiding gym classes, she lies and puts some tomato in her panties, sometimes she doesn't even do that, she'll just say "Sir, I have my period today." She's excused from gym classes more often than she participates, so sometimes she gets her period three times a month, but the teacher doesn't notice because he drinks too much and he likes sparing girls from participating in class so that their hands don't get scratched up by the rusty climbing bar or a rough basketball or a nicked bocce ball. When the three of them are sitting out of the gym class, it's great for the rest of us, because our teacher isn't watching us then and can't see how clumsy we are at volleyball, okay not all of us are, just me and a girl called Božana. The teacher then watches Ljubica's hands, the ones he spared from gym class, and Milanka's neck and Branka's back, he doesn't see the way I'm trying to serve and failing. And Milanka told me that she and Pedja never kiss when she is excused from gym class and she's glad because she actually doesn't like it when he's sticking his big tongue in her mouth, so during these days she's really excused, from everything, completely. Now I will also be able to say "Sir, I have my period today," and I won't get busted for not knowing how to serve and I will sit in my teacher's lap and he will look at the back of my head and breathe into it and he will tell me that I am pretty, and he won't see Božana who also doesn't know how to serve and Božana will be grateful to me. And I am also glad that, since none of the boys in the class thinks I am pretty, at least the gym teacher will think so.

I am in my dad's living room. This is the first time I've seen him in eight years. He has another version of Mom, and another version of me. And I found this other me on Facebook, then I looked up where she lives on Google Maps, then I rang the bell and Dad opened the door. I am eleven and in half an hour, I will get my first period.

MILAN: I am in my living room. There's a girl who says that I am her dad. She's wearing a white collared shirt under a blue sweater. She's fat and I tell her so. You're fat.

MARA: Mom feeds me well.

MILAN: My daughter isn't fat.

MARA: I am your daughter.

MILAN: There she is in the photo. She also has a blue sweater and a white shirt; so yes, the two of you do resemble one another, sort of.

MARA: When I was six, Mom told me you were an engine driver. I went to the park because there are no trains there. Okay, except that one in front of the museum, but on this train it says A locomotive used during the National Liberation Struggle for the needs of the National Liberation Movement in Bosanska Krupa, Gornji Podgradci, but I wasn't afraid I would run into you, because Mom never told me you liberated any nation. This park also has a cannon and a tank and for my last birthday, ten of us climbed up on the cannon and we took photos. When I was eight, she told me you were a tailor,

so I went to a swimming pool and I dived with my eyes open, okay so it was a children's pool and okay it was too shallow to dive and really I was touching the bottom covered with yellow square tiles, but I only had my trunks, I had nothing on that you might have sewn. Then last year she told me you were a bum and a maniac, so I didn't go out on the street for a month. I wanted to use my hula hoop, but I could do it in my room as well.

MILAN: I'm an accountant.

MARA: Shit, now I don't know where not to go. Where do accountants work?

MILAN: In offices. I also learn magic tricks in my spare time.

MARA: Ah fuck, I love the circus, I can't avoid that too much. Once, there under the big top, I rode an elephant, I've got a photo of it, and I was afraid you would see me and make me get off; see, I was right, the last thing I need is somebody at school telling me "I saw your old man, he pulled a rabbit out of a hat or a pigeon from a hanky" or some dumb thing like that, but okay nobody at my school knows you anyway, but whatever, can you please not perform in the circus, the Italian one that comes to Banjaluka every summer? I always dress appropriately for the circus: neon green and pink pants I got on the discount rack along with half the neighborhood.

MILAN: There's pudding in the fridge, go find it yourself.

MARA: He gave me the raspberry pudding my other mom made for the other me and there was still some left when my stomach started to hurt and I told him I needed to go to the toilet. I could not sit on the toilet seat because Mom told me never to sit on other people's toilets, and Dad was definitely other people, so I pulled down my panties and squatted above the seat and saw the bottles of shampoo beside the bathtub: one said anti-dandruff, the other one said it was for damaged hair, that bottle was bigger, and there was also a pink shampoo bottle with a princess on it, so gross; and that's when I saw the blood on my panties. Dad is devouring the remains of the raspberry pudding in the living room, and here's me in the bathroom, writing on the tiles with my bloody finger: June twenty-first, two drops of blood. I pulled up my panties and zipped myself up, I didn't even pee, and went back to the living room where my dad was sitting.

MARA reads the menstruation calendar off the toilet wall that she once wrote there.

MARA:

June twenty-first: two drops of blood.

June twenty-second: there were sixteen.

June twenty-third: so many drops of blood that I thought it was all over and in a few hours I would be dead.

MILAN: The anti-dandruff shampoo is mine.

MARA: And this would happen every month and Mom gave me a card to put Xs on for days when there's blood, but told me never to show it to anyone. Seventeen years later, also in June, the drops won't come, even those first two. I will tell that to Branko, he will pretend that he hasn't heard it. We will have Ivana, then Marko. Marko will be prettier, it was clear from the moment the nurses first

showed him to me, wrapped into a cotton diaper. Branko's mother also said it instantly, as well as all the women from the neighborhood.

MILAN: The girl with a white collared shirt underneath a blue sweater has just peed in the toilet and now she is standing in my living room again and saying something about blood.

MARA: My panties are bloody.

MILAN: You fell on the tiles.

MARA: I can walk, I didn't fall. I can walk on cold surfaces, and I can walk barefoot, and on small platforms, you taught me how to walk.

MILAN: Then you're not bleeding.

MARA: Dad, take me to the hospital.

MILAN: I have to go shopping. I can drop you off but your mom has to pick you up.

MARA: Mom and me stand by the fridge and eat. White bread topped with fresh creamy kajmak made with real cream, and with prosciutto and ajvar. I can taste the roasted red peppers in the ajvar, and the garlic. We each have our own plate and I'm also eating a little jam on the side, Mom says it's disgusting to mix it like that. Then she cuts a huge slice of the cake that was frozen and waiting for the Xs in the calendar. We eat the entire cake together, because it's a chocolate cake, and it also has cherries as decoration. Mom says you and me are the same, we bleed on the same days, we only need one card, you mark all of the Xs down and tell me when the fourteenth day from the first X comes, that's when I cannot see Zoka. You always eat at the table. Your other wife and the other me don't have their periods on the same days, they are not the same like me and my mom. Mom says she can't wait until she gets to mark the Xs down only every sixth month, or never, can't wait for her tits to get smaller so she can hang out with Zoka more often, but maybe she won't even be up for it by then. Mom also says that in her day, she only used cotton wool. Mom says that every time something starts or ends you are allowed to be crazy, so now I am allowed, cause it just started; and she will also be allowed, in about twenty years, when the blood stops, when her cycle ends, to be crazy once more. I only have one more thing to ask you—Mom is stupid so she can't answer me—does Goran Bregović live in Sarajevo?

Scene Three

Just say it, General or A mountain, burst into leaf; upon it a brother and a sister

MILAN: At the club, I watch my sister dance. She's wearing a short black dress with fringe on the hem. She's alone on a small dance floor, only three steps separate me from her. I yell at her to get down from there, she can't hear me.

MARA: At the disco, I went up the three steps to the dance floor so I could dance there, I don't want to dance with the pole cause then everyone would look. I practice at home, barefoot in front of the

mirror, so I'm surprised by how nice it is at the disco in my high heels and with green and red and purple lights flaring all over me and tomorrow no one will say that I'm crazy the way Dad says when I'm dancing in front of the mirror, because this is a disco, it's normal to do it here.

MILAN: I am wearing a tight black t-shirt and a lot of hair gel, my hair smells stronger than the sweet machine-made smoke that's winding around my sister's nylon tights.

MARA: I dance my head off, I dance, I don't give a fuck, dance, my dress is so tight, there's no tomorrow, there's no nothing. Last night from the ashes, I stole some fire. I'm still sleeping. I see my brother through the smoke, he says something to me.

MILAN: She sees me, comes down off the stage towards me, of course some jerks are looking at her, one in a white t-shirt with print that's supposed to look like red spray-paint, the other in a white t-shirt with a decal of some Chinese letters on it which has started peeling off over his left pec, the third one in a white t-shirt with a decal of a cobweb and the fourth one in a regular white t-shirt, tight and sleeveless. Fuck them all.

MARA: Four guys in white t-shirts are watching me, luckily I'm wearing this V-neck dress that shows off both of my tits, but not too much, and there comes my bro wanting to tell me something, his hair smells nice, I can smell it in spite of the thick smoke of all the Marlboros and the stink of sour wine and sweet cola and vodka and the yellow light and silver disco ball which is broken so it doesn't revolve and the triangular mirrors and gray smoke. The term "disco" was no longer used in the English-speaking world after 1980, they moved on there to nightclub or dance club or just club, but we kept calling them discos, us and the Germans and the French and the Latin Americans. My brother puts grease in his hair and you can smell it from miles away.

MILAN: I put grease in my hair. Light grease.

MARA: Guys are jealous of him, they think he's my boyfriend. From the snake print clutch I borrowed from Mom, the one she only carries at weddings, I take a pack of Partners, with filters, and three of the four guys in white t-shirts come to me with lighters, a red plastic one, a fake Zippo, and a blue plastic one with Lovely written on it which doesn't even work, my brothers yanks the cigarette from my mouth and asks them if there's a problem, cause if there isn't a problem he'll make one, they're like bro, take it easy, your sis is fine, so what. Then he tells me he's going to kill himself.

MILAN: I ask them if there's a problem, because if there's not I'm gonna make one, one of them says something like Mara is fine, I swing my hand to hit him, I don't even care where, when a song Krajina is our destiny starts playing, Krajina is our prayer, Krajina is our destiny, forever in our hearts and me and the four shitheads start jumping on each other, now we're moshing. I move Mara out of the way, but first I tell her I'm going to kill myself. Not a second later, another song starts: Have you ever loved me as I loved you, have you ever loved me as I loved you, have you ever loved me. I think, I'm gonna tell her now, she needs to know, we wallowed in the mud together in the countryside when we watched pigs eating watermelon rinds and we wanted to eat them too, and every time I see her in the meadow behind the house I know exactly what she'll do, she'll scratch her nose and the inner side of her elbow, and I think why not tell her.

MARA: The band that sings this song is Medeni mjesec and their name means Honeymoon and they disbanded, it's not known precisely when, some members went abroad, others went to rehab at monasteries, and some are still making music. Let's ask these guys to take a photo of us.

MILAN: Sis, I am going to kill myself, in a bathtub, I'll pile all the sneakers Ma bought me underneath me, an Adidas in the ass, a Puma underneath my back, under my neck a Reebok, a Nike between my legs, a Kappa on my belly-button, below my mouth a Champion to bite into when it starts to hurt in the beginning, a Fila beneath my ear. I'll let the water flow over them and over me, Ma'll scream "Why are you keeping the water on so long?" I won't answer; I'll cut myself with her blue razor. Ma will be smoking on the new cheap upholstery in the living room, then instead of going to get some vodka, she'll come to the bathroom to get me and she'll scream. Either that or I'll go to war.

MARA: Fuck you're drunk, let me take a picture of you. Like that time when you lit your first cigarette, it looked great on you, so I kept the photo in a drawer, I was afraid to take it out because Mom would see that you'd started smoking.

MILAN: Or when she made me a cherry cake for my ninth birthday, but I wanted a chocolate one, so my smile was sour and my teeth came out looking really white because the light from the chandelier reflected off of them.

MARA: Or at the swimming pool when you were missing your two front teeth, you were only six.

MILAN: When I go to war I'll send you one, me in a rumpled uniform, a mixture of green and coffee brown, with a white shirt underneath, the one I wore for phys ed that Mom washed once a week, I thought you could also wash it sometimes, in the photo I'll be sitting at a table and smoking. You'll keep that one in a frame on a plywood table in your bedroom and everyone will think it was taken there because the table in the photo is exactly the same as the one in your bedroom that the photo in its frame is sitting on and then you won't feel like explaining, you'll just say yes, this is where it was taken.

MARA: Or when you brought Jelena over and I took a photo of her not wanting to eat the peas Ma made and you're sitting beside her, drunk as a lord and, like, Ma and Jelena don't get it, but me and you do. I captured her blonde highlights, all right, then her ma put it in a frame, placed it on a cloth cloth doily and on top of the TV and told everyone it's Jelena, her sister-in-law took it.

MILAN: Or when our old man took a photo of us in Makarska and cut off half of your head.

MARA: Or when you were on a small stage, speaking and I was in the audience, applauding, I used up the entire roll of film, but only two photos were good enough to go into the album. Today, as I become a Pioneer, I give my Pioneer's word of honor—That I shall study and work diligently, respect my parents and my seniors.

MILAN: Or when Baba Đuja hugged me at the Slava and there was a huge yellow candle in front of us, so you can't see she's missing half her teeth.

MARA: We drank five more kalimotxos each. Ugly in the mouth, ugly going down the throat, ugly in the stomach, but pretty in the head. He paid for everything, because Mom always gives him more money than me. I scrounged around to be able to get the last round, my teeth were already red by then when I looked in the triangular mirror, not white, and I asked a kid with a cap to give me three billion so me and my brother could drink a kalimotxo, I said I don't drink usually, but I really feel like it now, I thought he'd just look at my tits and give me the money, but he says "Get the fuck out of here slut," but then the waiter bought me the last round. Sweet cola and sour wine in thirty-milliliter plastic cups and then I gave him only one piece of advice.

MILAN: Five kalimotxos in thirty-milliliter plastic cups, I got wasted and went to the toilet to piss, one of those ones you have to squat over, of course, the disco was so white trash, then I threw up, my sister held my head.

MARA: Stick two fingers inside, the index and the middle finger, I tell him, but he can't.

MILAN: I can't stick my fingers down my throat, but I think of Mom's tiny, mushy peas, so I puke up the beans she made tonight.

MARA: It sprays my heels a bit too, but at the disco in the dark, you can't see it.

MILAN: My sister washes me, she drenches a handkerchief at the sink and wipes my neck, I write on the toilet wall with a key. Just say it, General.

MARA: I drench the handkerchief and wipe his neck, then my high heels, cleaning his vomit.

Milan reads a rhyme he once wrote on the toilet wall.

MILAN:

*Just say it, General
And we'll fly like bullets.*

Fly in the air, kid? Better go to school.

Somebody added that later, I saw it next weekend when I came back to throw up again.

I wrote to the General that if he just says it, we'll fly like bullets, and who "we" were precisely I didn't know, but me and those four jerks in white t-shirts who were hitting on my sister, that's who I had in mind.

MARA: I find it funny, so on the next tile I write Dragana Mirkovic with a felt pen and I draw a heart.

MILAN: Somebody left me an answer that said I should go to school.

MARA: I only gave him one piece of advice, and it was: Milan, before you go to war, abstain for six days from eating fat and drinking beer and on the seventh day, go and receive communion. Fast for six days, but it will be counted as twelve because you are from a family of heathens, because our old man is not a believer, because he says "Godfuckingdamnit" when he's watching a soccer game

although he's happy, and when he's watching the news, he says "Godfuckingdamnit" and he's afraid, and on the seventh day take white bread and red wine from the priest's wrinkled hand.

MILAN: She says something about Pa watching TV and about white bread, I heave, my stomach twitches, but it doesn't even come up my throat, it just goes back down.

MARA: Don't touch yourself for six days and don't touch Jelena and on the seventh day the priest will say he's giving you the body and blood of Christ. The blood isn't salty. The body isn't firm. The body is doughy and it has a crust and the blood is bitter and sweet, the blood is made out of late harvest grapes.

MILAN: She says doughy and she says body and out of me comes this cheese-like yellow liquid.

MARA: And if you lock yourself in the bathroom and I knock because I want to put on my waterproof mascara and I know what you're doing inside but I pretend that I don't, cause I can do that in bed and you can't because Dad won't wash your sheets and Mom's drunk, you can also do that, it doesn't matter. And if you sweat a lot on the day of the communion and you don't manage to take a shower, you can also do that, it doesn't matter. And if you feel like pissing, hell, even if you feel like doing number two, go to the plastic toilet beside the church, then take communion, you can also do that, it doesn't matter.

MILAN: I throw up from the smell of my sweat. I feel the smell of Ma's beans coming once again from the hole in the ground and I throw up a runny green liquid. I don't feel better.

MARA: And even if you feel sick like today, just throw up, then take communion, then throw up again, it doesn't matter because the sacramental curtain of the Eucharist can be lifted by anyone who knows what body tastes like and what blood tastes like. I would join you, but in seven days I will have my period and I would bleed out all of the newly received blood of the Savior, and you really can't do that, it does matter. And just so you know, so you aren't taken by surprise, it actually tastes like white bread and red wine, not like the real body and blood you tasted with me that time when you were six and later all the time with Jelena, but you should pretend in front of the priest that it tastes like body and that it tastes like blood, mine and Jelena's.

MILAN: She says to remember Jelena's body. I remember Gram in the countryside climbing the ladder to the roof of the summer kitchen wearing a long skirt without underwear and Mara and me looking under Grandma's skirt. Grandma isn't wearing stockings, Grandma isn't wearing hosiery, Grandma hasn't stuffed cotton wool between her legs, Grandma isn't using a sanitary pad, Grandma doesn't know what a tampon is, Grandma hasn't rolled rags to absorb the blood, Grandma isn't even wearing panties. Grandma's blood pours down her thighs and she climbs to the roof of the summer kitchen to take something down. I stop throwing up. Grandma never took communion.

At Kruna, in one of the booths, my sister dances with three of her girlfriends, I come alone to tell her my good news.

MARA: Jovana's pulled all of her hair up in a bun, Ivana has slicked hers back and has a high ponytail on top, Anđela's wearing her hair parted on the right, mine is parted on the left.

MILAN: One life, one dream, to be rich and young. And I love you and I love you, love me while I'm fighting and burning, while I'm afraid. I call out "What's up?" to a bro while I'm walking towards my sis.

MARA: Both Jovana and Anđela have the hots for my brother, but okay, now they're pretending they don't see him, they're dancing, Ivana touches my collarbone, then my cheekbone and there he is with us.

MILAN: Some crazy bitch with a shaggy haircut comes by and says she'll show me her tits if I find an earring she lost.

MARA: A mix of twelve of Ceca's songs, all live recordings, she says Put your hands up and we all put our hands up for fun like we're at a concert. A lot of girls pass by him, but he's coming towards us. I only know I gave the flower of my youth to him.

MILAN: I press one in a puffy white dress against the wall just for the sake of doing it, I can see her a little better under the lasers, fuck she's got a stretch mark on her left tit, GTFO. I go up to my sister and say:

Sis, I'm getting married.

MARA: Mom's gonna go nuts. She's gonna stuff her snake print clutch with ten airplane bottles of vodka, she's gonna bust it apart, I won't be able to use it anymore, or lend it to Anđela when she's going to a parking lot in Paprikovac for a make-out session.

MILAN: Either that or I'll pile up all the sneakers Ma bought me in the bathtub and I'll lie down on top of them and let the water and my beautiful blood flow. An Adidas in the ass, a Puma underneath my back, under my neck a Reebok, a Nike between my legs, a Kappa on my belly-button, below my mouth a Champion to bite it when it starts to hurt in the beginning, a Fila beneath my ear. Ma's smoking on the upholstery, watching TV, instead of going to get some vodka, she comes to get me and starts to scream.

MARA: Oh fuck getting married, let me take a picture of you. I also have one in my phone of you eating a gyro.

MILAN: The one where I'm with Pero at the stadium is cool too. He's wearing a Red Star scarf and I'm wearing a Partizan scarf and we came to a Borac game just to be assholes.

MARA: I've got an 8GB memory card, I can fit seven hundred more.

MILAN: And the one after the gym, like I'm sweaty.

MARA: And the one with you smoking a cigar.

MILAN: And one you took here in this booth with Marko and Šone and Rope, but that one's idiotic because we're all wearing button-down shirts. But okay, there's also one where I'm wearing a t-shirt—like, Homer Simpson drinking beer.

MARA: Under the blossoming tree, in a white dress, I will always wait for you like our grandmother waited for our grandfather and the sacrament of marriage will be revealed to you and Jelena and her blonde highlights and to sheets crusty with cum that the old man doesn't want to wash out and Ma doesn't even know about because of all the vodka. I will be the one who dances the most at the wedding, I will request the most songs, I will break the most glasses, I will adorn the most guests with flowers and ornaments, I will give you the most money in a white envelope, I will bake you the biggest cake and I'll bring it out at midnight, I will buy the most photos from the photographer, I will catch the bouquet, but you won't be able to look at me, little brother, when the priest lays a wreath upon your heads, yours and Jelena's, which will go along well with her highlights, when he begins the betrothal service you won't be able to look at me although I will be dressed completely decently, in a short dress (but my little brother's getting married), in high heels (but my little brother's getting married), no cleavage because of the uncle who I know, when we shake hands, would like to put mine on his cock, but can't do it because of the old man, and you know what these wreaths mean, you have violated the sacrament of marriage with Jelena, because you are the only one who knows the ways I scratch my eyelid or my elbow when you look at me in the field behind the house, because the newlyweds wear wreaths as a sign of victory, to show they haven't been defeated by passion before marriage and that this is what grants them entry to their shared bed: that is, as the victors over carnal pleasures, if someone, caught in lust, has surrendered to fornication, why would they, as the defeated party, get to wear the wreath of victory upon their head, that's what the priest will ask, and you'll know that it's not meant to be, and you'll know that Mom was pouring vodka down her throat while she was listening to you in the other room, you'll know that Dad was changing the sheets, you'll know we all heard when you two broke the shelf you were clinging to and you'll know what it was that the two of us promised and touched and said and swore and cut and bled and sang and told and dreamt and vowed and felt and knew and thought and didn't say and engraved and weeded and dug out and then buried again under the blossoms when I was eight and you were six.

MILAN: She's glad that I'm getting married, but she nags me about a shelf Jelena and I broke once when I was banging her while everyone was home and heard it, but I don't even need to wear the wreath, fuck the wreath, don't you have more important things to worry about?

MARA: Let's take a photo. Joca takes our picture with an iPhone, but we're in front of the mirror, so she's also in the photo. We pose in front of the mirror and the song I sold my soul to the devil when I tasted the old wine, how can such a hot girl be sad, can't you see what you're doing to me, you bastard plays. We hear a click, Milan sticks out his tongue, for fuck's sake, can't you ever look normal in a picture.

MILAN: Jelena is always the craziest one in pictures, she wears sunglasses to other people's weddings. She will be a pretty mother, if ours had looked like that we would be fine now.

MARA: At your wedding, we'll take one to put in a frame, you and Jelena in the middle, our folks behind you—Mom's snake print clutch swollen with her little vodka bottles, but you can't see it because of Jelena's puffy wedding dress with the feathers, so it looks like we're all normal. I stand next

to you, you're holding both me and Jelena around the waist. I'm wearing a short dress that doesn't show any cleavage and high heels, and we're all smiling.

MILAN: Jovana takes a photo of us in front of the mirror in Kruna with her iPhone, I think I should fool around, so I stick my tongue out.

MARA: After we take that picture, you and Jelena will stay to take pictures with the entire wedding party, Mom will go to the kitchen, supposedly to make sure that they bring out the heated sarma but actually to down shots of vodka, the old man will go back to his table so that when the heated sarma comes out he's ready to pack his mouth full of stuffed cabbage leaves, and I will go to the toilet. You and Jelena take pictures with Vuk, and Dragica, and Krstan and the six Sladojevićs, and Rosa and Persa, and Anđelka. There'll also be a photo of the two of you in the middle with Baba Đuja kissing you on the cheek, slobbering all over you, and the feathers from Jelena's dress all around her as well. The photographer clicks the camera, Baba Đuja slobbers over your left cheek with her mouth and I'm in the toilet, writing on the tiles with a waterproof eyeliner pencil. A mountain, burst into leaf; upon it a brother and a sister.

Mara reads a lament she once wanted to write there off the toilet wall.

MARA:

*A mountain, burst into leaf;
Upon it, a brother and a sister*

*In mud the pigs wallow
Brother makes a promise to Sister*

*Touches Sister's knee
And collar bone
And eyelid
And mouth*

*My sister, it will not be much longer
Before I return to our homeland*

*Why, hence, dost thou not come to me
Brother?*

*I would come to thee, sister
But a foreigner forbids it
A foreigner, a good maiden*

*Sister taketh out her eyes for her brother
But her eyes cannot grow back
Nor can her heart for the brother
My eye will never cease to cry*

They don't love you like I love you

I wasn't planning to write the last line, but I added it because the band played the song at that moment, the old man requested it after the sarma, like, for his two children and for him and his sister who wasn't even at the wedding.

I will write that with the waterproof eyeliner pencil, then I might even erase some lines with a wet wipe, Baba Đuja and Rosa and Persa and Anđelka don't need to read it all when they come to pee, and then I'll say to myself: beauty, fashion, and music know no limits. And I'll feel better. And I'll come out, and once again I'll dance the most and I'll adorn the most guests with flowers and ornaments and I'll bring out the biggest cake at midnight.

MILAN: She says she will make me the biggest cake, I say li'l bro has some candy now, let's all snort a line off Jovana's iPhone.

MARA: When we took another picture, someone started banging on the toilet door, I told them to fuck off, we each snorted a line and went back to our booth. He didn't talk about the wedding any more.

MILAN: It's either that or I'll kill myself.

MARA: I wanted to take another picture for Facebook, I held my phone up above our heads, pressed my cheek against his, he closed his eyes because of the bright light, I opened my eyelids as wide as I could, I always look good like that and we laughed. We take three, four, five, six more pictures and he kisses me and I kiss him.

Mara and Milan kiss on the mouth.

MILAN: I won't even tell Mom. That I'm getting married. I want her to be surprised when she gets the invitation.

MARA: I won't tell Mom either.

Mara and Milan are still kissing on the mouth.

MARA: This is your biggest secret. You're doing this in memory of you.

Mara and Milan are still kissing on the mouth.

MARA: I have a test in Latin tomorrow, but never mind. The only thing I know is that Ma always says the first sentence in her Latin book was Yugoslavia est patria mea. In mine it's Puella est pulchra. The girl is pretty. And the pupil is hard-working. The fuck I am.

Mara and Milan are still kissing on the mouth.

Scene Four

Young man, no compensation

Mara and Milan are still kissing on the mouth.

MILAN: In the public toilet, I kiss a woman thirty years my senior. She looks at my shoulders and at the white mottled tiles and I scratch words into them with a bottle opener. Young man, no compensation.

MARA: In the public toilet a kid with a bottle of whiskey in his hand scribbles something on the tiles. I look at his shoulders.

Milan reads a personal ad he just wrote there off the toilet wall.

MILAN: Young man, no compensation, will fuck your brains out, free-spirited, discreetly, big cock, frantically, well-built, with dedication, black hair, better than anyone else, green eyes. And no younger than fifty-four, please.

I am in an ugly flat belonging to a woman who read my ad in the public toilet. She wants to give me fifty-five marks for sex, on an armchair which smells like my grandma did just before she died, when she wasn't able to clean herself anymore, so Ma bathed her once a week, but mostly only her back and armpits, before Happy People on Sunday evenings, because that was the only thing we all watched together, and my sister would always cry if Grandma smelled too bad.

MARA: I sit on an armchair with my legs crossed, opposite the kid whose ad I read in the public toilet. I'll give him fifty-five marks for sex, me on top, kissing included, touching my boobs and clitoris included, if he can find it. I bought the armchairs on sale, two for one, on the third floor of the Kastel. I paid at the cash register and when they put them in two large plastic bags, they weighed more than I expected, and when I turned to ask my child to help me with them, I figured out that she was gone. "Where are you Ivana," I was calling her with the shop assistant who was wearing glasses he'd mended with duct tape. I found her among the carpets which were hanging one next to another from a mobile metal contraption. She was thirteen and her cheeks were red from what the shop assistant claimed was wool but was actually polypropene. I was a bit embarrassed, not because Ivana was among the carpets, but because I gave birth to her, but I just handed her the armchair in a bag to carry. Right in front of Kastel, we hitched a ride in a yellow Yugo, the color of piss, the man smelled just the way these armchairs smell now, he had a small green pine tree hanging from his rearview mirror which smelled even worse than him, so Ivana threw up. While I was cleaning her mouth with a tissue, I asked her what she was doing back there among the carpets. She said she didn't know.

MILAN: Between the armchairs there are three tables. The first fits into the second, and they both fit into the third. My ma also had these three nesting coffee tables, but she never took out the smaller two; she didn't want them to get dusty for nothing. Below the dark glass tabletop, there's a postcard from Makarska on rocky ground with a church, and a photo of a man and a woman on the beach, sitting on a rough cotton towel with 101 Dalmatians print. She's in a red bikini with white letters that

look like the letters in alphabet soup across the top, but it's illegible, it says something like beach fun, and he's wearing a white singlet and bright blue trunks, my old man had the same ones.

MARA: Branko and me, on our first summer holiday together. All day long we played Parcheesi and all night long I was on top, kissing included, touching my boobs and clitoris included, if he can find it.

MILAN: On a lacquered commode by the tables, there's a color TV with a green screen and a sponge over the speakers, and a beautiful big red on/off button.

MARA: And an orange-white empty vase on it, Ivana always said like a giraffe. And a cloth doily which Branko's mom crocheted, underneath the vase, that time he didn't show up at home for four nights I cut up all the other ones with scissors and threw them into the toilet. Then I flushed.

MILAN: A row of thin red books, then a row of thin blue books. My mom bought the green and the brown ones with her first paycheck.

MARA: And an oilcloth that crumbs stick to, with green and navy blue and pink stars.

MILAN: I turn off the lamp which matches the vase—both of them orange and white like a giraffe—and I say to the woman that I've been craving licking pussy and eating tomatoes these days, like, unbelievably.

MARA: I haven't seen an erect cock in three years, and I don't see one now, either, because the kid turned off the fucking lamp. I turn on the lamp that matches the vase, orange and white like a giraffe. His cock is on his stomach, it's both dark and light, both big and small, both veiny and smooth, both hairless and hairy, both circumcised and uncircumcised, but it's young.

MILAN: I charge extra for blowjobs, I tell you I feel like eating tomatoes and licking pussy, so I'll do that free of charge now.

Mara touches Milan's hair.

MARA: When you were born, I found a brown bug and a nest of little white nits in Ivana's hair, she didn't even scratch, she was too lazy for that. In Relaks in the neighborhood they cut her hair with metal scissors all the way to the scalp while all the old ladies of Banjaluka pretended not to watch from under their hood dryers, and then she was, but she already had been, uglier than Marko.

Milan touches Mara's eyes.

MILAN: When I first saw that my mom had tiny black eyes, which always scared me, and which turned into slits after a liter and a half of vodka, you were twenty-eight and you hated cooking that entire year, and also shopping and going to have coffee and to the movies and to Gospodska Street, and talking to your mom on the phone, and to your godfather Željko as well, and watching television, and filling out forms, and driving in the car, and combing your hair, but you loved lying in bed and covering your head. Branko would buy two hundred grams of cheese with holes, a blood sausage, pickles, a can of sardines and a loaf of soft white bread, and you both got fat.

Mara touches Milan's mouth.

MARA: When Marko first called me Mom, yours had her head in the toilet for three hours. You bought toilet paper, lavender-scented, to wipe her mouth, but she vomited even more from the scent; in the end you left the bathroom and laid on the bed she made while she was sober.

Milan touches Mara's nose.

MILAN: Marko hit you here once, when you wouldn't give him half a mark to play Counterstrike.

Mara touches Milan's teeth.

MARA: Ivana got two of her molars fixed, and then I bought her a Kinder Surprise for not crying at the dentist, and it rotted her first premolar.

Mara touches Milan's eyebrows.

When Ivana plucked her eyebrows for the first time, she was so red around the eyes that she skipped her first two classes and came back crying from the last, and then she drew them back on with a pencil.

Milan touches Mara's ears.

MILAN: Mom took you to the jeweler so that you would be the prettiest girl in the street, he pressed the small piercing gun against your earlobe, "What color earring do you want, ma'am?" you thought purple, she said blue, you took them out after seventeen days because your left lobe went blue and you were back to being just the third prettiest.

Mara touches Milan's neck.

MARA: I would kiss Branko on the neck when he snored, every night for six years, I saw something like that in the movies, his mouth reeked, so I couldn't kiss him there, and he was sleeping, so he couldn't kiss me back, to kiss his eyes would have been like he was dead, so I kissed his neck and it was soft and I got used to the smell, and when he wouldn't show up for four nights, I didn't sleep, but imagined kissing his neck while he was snoring.

Mara touches Milan's upper arms.

MARA: When Marko had been going to the gym for three months Branko told him not to be lame, but to get work on a construction site in Budžak at the age of seventeen like he had, and at thirty-five on a construction site for office buildings downtown. When Marko had been going to the gym for six months, he cut his hair and then he was, but he already had been, prettier than Ivana. When Marko had been going to the gym for nine months, he brought home a girl named Jelena, she had blonde highlights in her brown hair, I spoke a bit about that to her, I told her I used Revlon, and she nodded, then they went to his room, and she was loud, and he was silent, I thought of her blonde head, I couldn't even smoke. When she left, Marko repaired the shelf they broke while they were in there together. When Marko had been going to the gym for a year I had no idea what his arms had been like a year before, I wanted to touch the vein on the right one, to remember, but I remembered the blonde head in his bed, so I didn't.

Milan touches Mara's mouth.

Zoka was my first kiss, we were sitting in a park where the stone fountain was, where the metal fountain is now, and I was talking about the countries and cities guessing-game I played at home with my brother, I thought of Lithuania, my brother couldn't guess it at all.

MILAN: A woman with a dry mouth and big ears was my first kiss, she told me she had been sitting in the other room when her son broke a shelf while having sex with his girlfriend and she couldn't even smoke.

Milan touches Mara's breasts.

MARA: Zoka was also the first to touch my tits, I was sitting on a plywood table and again I thought of a country, I told him "Zoka, it's a country of roses," he put his hand under my t-shirt and didn't guess it was Bulgaria.

MILAN: The first nipples I touched were on tits that had started growing at the same time as my mom's had. They were sagging and smelled different than I thought they would, and they had brown freckles all around the nipples and on the nipples, but they were tits. I told her my mom's tits started shrinking when she started getting wasted on vodka. She said hers started growing when she bought a push-up bra at the second stand on the left at the market on her daughter's recommendation.

MARA: When I asked Ivana how come she had such big breasts all of a sudden, I'd given birth to her, she couldn't possibly have exceeded me, she told me about the second stand on the left at the market, she said they sold bras that make your tits grow, and I bought a black and a white bra there.

Mara puts her hand into Milan's pants.

When I first saw a cock, it was shown to me by a boy with a big nose behind a building, everyone said he ripped clouds when he put his head back, and other girls always said it wasn't just his nose that was big, it was something else as well, and then they'd giggle, and I didn't get what the other thing was, so I asked him, and then he showed it to me through the fly of his blue shorts and it was so ugly that I dreamt about two pink worms wallowing in white mucus and I couldn't wait to wake up in the morning and go to school.

Milan puts his hand into Mara's pants.

MILAN: When I first saw a cunt, I was celebrating my seventeenth birthday in the public toilet. I read the graffiti on the toilet wall with a woman thirty years my senior, it said A mountain, burst into leaf; upon it, a brother and a sister, and it said June 21: two drops of blood, and I told her about Ma and the vodka, because it had happened even if I hadn't told her, and she told me about her son and the razor, because that had happened even if she hadn't told me, and I wanted to do the same with a blue razor and I told her that, and she told me she loved dancing at the disco and then we fucked, I did her because I had never done it before, and she did me because she hadn't done it for three years.

Milan and Mara have intercourse on a closed toilet seat. Milan sits on the seat, Mara sits on Milan. It's pretty and white.

I had my first fuck on my seventeenth birthday, it was a bad year, I was dead drunk on cheap whiskey, that was the first and the last time I drank it, Dad gave it to me as a present. And I told her her hymen was silky and I told her I didn't want her first time to be painful and it was about the two hundred eighty-third time for her and the only thing I could think of to say was why didn't you wait for me to be your third, at least. It was in a public toilet and I never felt like going there again.

MARA: I always thought my first fuck would be with Zoka, but it was actually with Voja, why, I have no idea. All I have left from Zoka is a photo he once sent in a yellow envelope from the war. It's him in a rumpled uniform, a mixture of green and coffee brown, with a white t-shirt underneath, the one he wore for phys ed that his mom washed once a week, and I thought I could also wash it sometimes, he's sitting at a table. The plywood of the table is cheap and bright, the table in my room is made of the same stuff, one time a small piece of it rammed into my thigh while Zoka and I were naked on the table, there was blood as if he were inside me, but actually he only touched my tits. And everyone who comes over asks, did he take the photo here, I say yes, there's no point in explaining. And Voja always made me sick, after our first date I got cancer of the esophagus, and then when we fucked for the first time it metastasized in my lungs. I called him, "Voja I have toxic shock syndrome," he wouldn't pick up. I also had Rajko, Rajko promised me love, had a wife before me and promised her the same. I was crazy, he couldn't handle it. Rajko once sang to me in the park, and I really thought, okay it might be this way, and then he went to his third wife, if he did the same thing with her I really don't know anymore. And here I am with Branko now, how, I also really don't know anymore.

MILAN: Last year for my birthday Miša and I bought six cans of beer and a bag of salty roasted peanuts. It was neither cold nor sunny outside, neither windy nor rainy, the sky wasn't cloudy, but it wasn't bright either, there was no moon or stars, the sun was neither up nor down, it was my sixteenth birthday and I had no idea what to do with myself. Miša might have not known it was my birthday but he certainly didn't know what to do with himself. We walked from school along a beautiful street covered in fallen leaves, and on the left there was a house, we knew we would enter it. We never met the people who lived in the house, we never even saw them, although we passed by every day on the way from school, we didn't know if there was a family, or a single woman, or a single man, or a couple, or a single person. We were sitting in the living room. There was a painting of horses on the wall and another one of poppies. We heard a mother putting her child to sleep upstairs. We didn't turn on the TV. We didn't open the cans. At first, we didn't open the bag of peanuts. When the child stopped crying, I started chewing on the peanuts.

MARA: I was going with Branko for dinner at our best man's and we hadn't been on the road for five minutes before I told him to stop, that I needed to take a breather and fix my make-up. I peed in the toilet, dabbed at myself with paper, flushed, I hadn't even washed my hands yet and there was some kid with a bottle of whiskey there. In my bedroom, as a girl, I had a poster with a couple in the front seat of a convertible and they're driving somewhere, I have no idea where, nor do I care, but it would be nice if you came for me like that once, I wouldn't care where you got the convertible, we would just go and sleep in the car and in the hostels along the road, and it would all be like an American film, but the hostels would be cleaner than my room and the seats of the convertible would be more comfortable than the armchairs in my living room, and the receptionists in the hostels would be nicer

than Branko and Ivana and Marko, and I wouldn't need to cook, we would eat rice at a Chinese place or sandwiches. And we would do what we're doing tonight, every day, several times a day.

MILAN: When I had chicken pox, your capillaries broke, one over here under your left breast and the other there, in the middle of your belly, and that's where I scratched the most and I have a scar under my left breast and one over here in the middle of my belly.

MARA: The kid and I had a couple of the same scars on our bodies, I don't know if it was that my capillaries had broken or he'd made them just now with his nail and tooth. When I got back to the car, Branko asked me what took me so long, I said, I was fixing my make-up and I peed and took a breather. He said you could've taken your breather here.

MILAN: Her husband asks her what took her so long, I gulp my whiskey.

MARA: Took a breather and fixed my make-up.

MILAN: She says she fixed her make-up and took a breather. I gulp my whiskey.

Milan and Mara are still sitting in a sterile, white, public toilet. The tiles in the toilet are still mottled. Everything is still a bit sad, but a bit pretty as well.

THE END

GLOSSARY

By Tanja Šljivar

Edited by Cory Tamler and Željko Maksimović

Scene One

1. *People like to write about what it would be like to shove a wooden plank up the ass of whatever ethnic minority they hate on the walls of the restroom.* – A “joke” which a fellow student from my primary school once made. We all laughed a lot. I thought, at a time, that it was a very brave joke for a child. Now, I am intrigued by the image which is implied.
2. *I buried my son in Jošavka. Or at Crni vrh. Or in Brezičani, or Lađevci, or Šnjegotina. One of those small villages. Definitely somewhere near Čelinac.* – These toponyms are all small villages or municipalities, I barely ever visited any of them, I just like how these names sounded in succession, they are all near Čelinac, which is larger but still very provincial, and near Banjaluka, which is the largest but still provincial. They are options for the setting of Mara's possible childhood(s). Think of a very small girl running through imaginary meadows, yet trapped in a mental space which is a province.
3. *She couldn't call a priest. I didn't die of natural causes.* – It is officially forbidden for an Orthodox priest to attend a funeral if the deceased has committed suicide. I always found this tradition disgusting, although if I give it a second thought maybe I can see more clearly that, in such a

case, it is no longer necessary for a church official to play the mediator between the deceased and the deity when a kind of direct contact might have already taken place.

4. *When I was little, I was convinced that I could jump from the third floor and not get hurt. I thought that because of a dream I had once* – I was always looking at the green grass from the third-floor balcony of my grandmother’s apartment—it seemed inviting, but still not as completely convincing as it had been in my dream.
5. *Mara reads off the restroom wall a song of lamentation she once wrote there.* – Here is the link to the [original song](#). It comes from Croatia, and when one can read the original language then it is easily detectable which parts are appropriated from the song, and which parts I added. At this link there is also more info on the figure of the woman mourner. Stanzas from the original song and my own stanzas alternate: the first stanza is a slightly edited/cut version of the original, the second is mine, and this pattern repeats until the end of the song.
6. *You were sitting on the blue couch [...] then you started to scream.* – The two TV shows referenced in this monologue are, in the original play, the programs *Exkluziv* and *Exploziv*. [Exkluziv](#) is a Croatian version of an originally German show, covering showbiz events and celebrity lifestyles. I really did like the first female host of the show. A lot. *Exploziv*, now playing on the Serbian channel [Prva](#), is bizarrely described as a “TV show whose topics provoked turbulences in public sphere, as well as provided better and more dignified life for many of our fellow citizens.”
7. *Gospodska Street* – The main pedestrian zone in Banjaluka, built in Austro-Hungarian times, nowadays resembling many European cities’ pedestrian zones with shops such as Mango, Nike, etc. In the collective consciousness of Banjaluka’s citizens it stands as a unit of measurement unit for all the other pedestrian and/or shopping zones—e.g., *Kärtner Straße* or *Mariahilfer Straße* in Vienna would be described as “their *Gospodska*.”
8. *Zenit* – A department store in [Banjaluka](#) (I love the trashy photos of the store on its website). It was built in the socialist tradition—very basic brand choice—but in 2001 it relocated and became super trashy. In the About Us section, it says: “Department store ‘Čajavec-Zenit’ Banjaluka is located in the street Vladike Platona 3, in the triangle between the Orthodox Church of the Holy Trinity, the Municipal Court of Banjaluka and the City Stadium. At the present location and in its present form, ‘Zenit’ has existed since 15 January 2001, but it inherited the tradition and experience of the old ‘Zenit House’ which was built immediately after the Great Earthquake of 1969, and located in the very center of the city, between the city hall and *Banski dvori* (Ban’s Court), and was subsequently demolished in 2001 because of its poor condition. As such, it became the subject of our special attention, as the favorite place for shopping in Banjaluka (which I find hilarious, because it is under no circumstances the favorite place for shopping in Banjaluka). Like all significant objects with long-standing tradition and renown, TC ‘Čajavec-Zenit’ has the ability to influence its environment and is destined to be always at the center of the event. At the beginning its location was at a dead end, and today, in its immediate vicinity, a completely new city center has been built with a number of important facilities, such as the Republika Srpska Government Building complex, RTV of Republika Srpska, the ‘Alternative Television’ building, and a brand-new business and

residential city district.” Such a description says a lot to someone who knows Banjaluka, who knows the pre-war city and the post-war one. Street names, architecture, history, and culture merge to form a kind of nightmarish ethno-centric city with a bad marketing strategy. It is under no circumstances the favorite place for shopping in Banjaluka.

9. *Boska* – Also a socialist shopping center, which today is for sure more posh than Zenit, and involved in several scandals—one being that President of Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik’s daughter started her own business there, opening a sushi lounge at the most attractive location, Boska’s rooftop. In the About Us section of Boska’s [website](#) it says: “Department store Boska was built in 1978 in the center of Banjaluka. Boska was immediately imprinted on the hearts of all of Banjaluka’s citizens and became one of the most famous and most memorable symbols of the city. Boska was one of the largest department stores in the former Yugoslavia. In a short time, it achieved the largest turnover in the former Yugoslavia and thus became known not only in Yugoslavia but throughout the Balkans. In 2010, Boska regained its former glory! The reopening was a special event for the citizens of Banjaluka. This department store became once again the center of shopping in Banjaluka and the wider region, because its offerings, on 16,000 square meters, were now enriched with the world’s most famous fashion and sports brands. Here you can spend free time with a loved one, family or friends. Shopping or relaxing and hanging out—it’s up to you to decide. Boska has prepared to fit to all your wishes and requests. After a great shopping experience, you can refresh yourself in one of the cozy cafes and enjoy a variety of specialties and exceptional service. Shopping is the ultimate pleasure, and Boska—the symbol of Banjaluka at its very center—is your favorite place where you can feel all the colors of shopping!” It is also sad to think that under no circumstances should one fall for such marketing—Boska is definitely not the place to find the world’s most famous fashion and sports brands. One is more likely to find poor quality goods, for a decent price.
10. *You kept asking the women if the sneakers they were selling were fakes or the real thing, you were just fucking around, they looked blankly at you and one told you “What do you mean real thing, the real thing costs a hundred marks.”* – I really did this with a friend once when we were very young, and a saleswoman replied exactly the same thing, we laughed about it like crazy back then, and we even laugh about it today. Why is it still so silly to us? I really can’t tell. I guess it is something about long summers in the province and encounters between youth and the uncensored world—atmospheres and events which could never be repeated, not with the same intensity, now that we are grown up.
11. *Boil some coffee for me, son, just as if it’s for yourself, dear son. Aaand I will come around midnight to sit beside you* – Paraphrased from a Bosnian folk song: each instance of the words “my dear,” which denote the male singer’s female object of desire in the original, was exchanged for the words “mother” and “son” respectively.
12. *Budžak* – A suburban neighborhood Banjaluka whose name comes from the Turkish word for “godforsaken corner.” During the Bosnian war, in 1993, it was renamed, together with many other streets and neighborhoods. Its new name, Lazarevo, refers to Knez/Emperor Lazar Hrebeljanovic, known as Lazar of Serbia and an important Serbian historical figure from the

times of the Battle of Kosovo. This battle and this historical figure play the main role in constituting the conscious and subconscious identity of the Serbian nation. The battle was lost to the Ottoman Empire, but in the tradition of epic songs, it was celebrated as a victory. The practice of ideological renamings is not unique to Banjaluka, but is part of broader public policies all around the former Yugoslavia. Despite such identitarian politics, the new names of the neighborhoods never became part of the colloquial language of Banjaluka's residents, and thus Mara uses the old name of the neighborhood, as most locals would.

13. *If I were alive, tonight I wouldn't go play Counterstrike in one of those gaming dens* – Refers to places that gamers would visit in the late '90s and early 2000s, largely because not everyone owned a computer at the time. In these huge halls, which formerly served as warehouses or underground passages, young boys (and, rarely, girls) would gather to play violent games (first-person shooters and RPGs) as an escape from a war-torn reality, each fixated on his own computer screen, in his own personal virtual reality, and yet feeling as if he is part of a larger gaming community. Extremely popular, some of these places still exist today around the former Yugoslavia. I used to enjoy the feeling of being surprised by the sudden darkness outside, which I would experience after spending the whole afternoon in such gaming dens, only to discover upon exiting them that in the outside world sunset was long past and the streetlights were on.
14. *When we were coming home from a Nike shop [...] he never dreamt about her.* – This monologue is somehow central, thematically and formally, to the whole play. The fabrication of individual, familial, and collective memories of the war and war crimes is here represented both through the monologue's content and through the way it is linguistically and stylistically constructed. The woman is and could be interpreted as a war crime survivor, but at the same time her status as such is constantly questioned and doubted, even by herself. Media coverage, as well as personal and public opinions on the nature of the war crime in question, remain obscured and the subject of dispute. The boy, the narrator of the monologue, shows willingness to accept and find out the truth – but the whole system of narratives and ideologies is preventing him from accessing this truth. I used to make ceramic tiles there at the factory – this sentence uttered by the mysterious woman refers to Keraterm, a concentration camp, run and controlled by the police and Army of Republic of Srpska. However, this claim could be questioned, too, since the camp had no female inmates. I have the strongest and weirdest feeling that my grandmother once told me about a similar encounter with an unknown lady somewhere near Omarska, where these atrocities took place. But until today I haven't been able to differentiate between dreams, reality, my own memory, my constructed memory, my family's memory, and my childhood imagination.

Scene Two

15. *Kobatovci, Bakinci and Mahovljani* – Small lowland villages around Banjaluka. Mahovljani today is where Banjaluka airport is located, and where the war airport for the Army of Republika Srpska was.

16. *A locomotive used during the National Liberation Struggle for the needs of the National Liberation Movement in Bosanska Krupa, Gornji Podgradci* – inscription on the locomotive, an artefact from WWII, placed in front of the Ethnographic Museum in Banjaluka. Like all the streets and neighborhoods, the museum’s name has been subject to several ideology-driven changes throughout its history—the most recent one being renaming it from Museum of Bosanska Krajina to Museum of Republika Srpska. I do have a photo made by an analogous camera from my 13th birthday celebration, where me and my classmates all climbed a huge cannon, also dating from WWII, just for fun.
17. *Kajmak* (pronounced “*kaymak*”) – A creamy dairy product similar to clotted cream, made from the milk of water buffalos, cows, sheep, or goats in Central Asia, some Balkan countries, Turkic regions, Iran, and Iraq. Nowadays, as I undergo a dairy-free diet, my memories of kajmak are bitter-sweet.
18. *Ajvar* – A spread made out of red bell peppers. Usually also contains garlic, eggplant, and chili peppers. It is used in the Balkans in several national cuisines. Each autumn my parents buy huge sacks of peppers at the market and spend a whole weekend preparing winter supplies of ajvar. Then they transport it to my place, wherever I might live at the time. Sometimes I just eat their home made ajvar directly with a spoon from a jar—like in that wonderful scene in Dane Komljen’s movie *Bodily Function*. I guess that swallowing ajvar in such a manner is a tangible, oral substitute for home.
19. *Goran Bregović* – frontman of probably the most famous Bosnian and Yugoslav rock band Bijelo Dugme, in the last decades active as a film music composer, most notably for Emir Kusturica’s films. My mum had a stalking episode, as a teenager visiting Sarajevo, when she together with a few girlfriends rang a random doorbell inscribed with the surname Bregović. The line was partly inspired by the event, but also by the confusion and discomfort revolving constantly around many formerly Sarajevo-based artists who do not live there anymore—first and foremost due to the war and siege. The relationship of some Sarajevo-born artist to their hometown is nowadays controversial (most notably Kusturica’s) and difficult for a young girl to understand that someone whose art is so deeply rooted in his hometown might have moved away.

Scene Three

20. *Last night from the ashes, I stole some fire. I’m still sleeping.* – These are the lyrics of one of Ceca’s songs: “[Ja još spavam u tvojoj majici.](#)” Ceca is the stage name of Svetlana Ražnatović. She is the most famous Serbian turbo-folk singer popular throughout the Balkans whose career began in the 80s. A widow of a war criminal and a criminal herself, she is nevertheless adored by many and is also known as the “Serbian mother.”
21. *Partner* – A brand of Yugoslav cigarettes, produced in a tobacco factory in Skopje, Macedonia. My father used to smoke those cigarettes before the war, when I was a child.
22. *Krajina is our destiny* – A quote from a nationalist rock(!) song “[Krajina je naša zakletva](#)” by the band Medeni mjesec (Honeymoon) about Krajina, a self-proclaimed Serbian parastate (formally, from 1991–95) in Croatia during the Croatian War of Independence.

23. *Have you ever loved me as I loved you* – A song by Montenegrin singer Nenad Knežević Knez, “[Da l’ si ikada mene voljela.](#)”
24. *The band that sings this song is Medeni mjesec and their name means Honeymoon and they disbanded, it’s not known precisely when, some members went abroad, others went to rehab at monasteries, and some are still making music* – Comment left by some user under the YouTube video clip of the song *Krajina je naša zakletva*
25. *When I go to war I’ll send you one, me in a rumpled uniform* – Description of a photo inspired by an actual photo I saw on the Facebook page of the Army of Republic of Srpska in 2013, when I wrote the play. Due to the huge number of the photos currently uploaded on the facebook page of the [Army of RS](#) it is impossible to retrieve the actual photo. I remember the photo filled me with a combination of sentimentality and distress, since the young man was so thin and somehow inexperienced that despite the uniform he was wearing his masculinity was, if not deconstructed, then shattered by his facial expression and bodily posture while sitting at that plywood desk and smoking.
26. *Makarska* – Popular but trashy Yugoslav family holiday destination, today belonging to the Croatian coast.
27. *Today, as I become a Pioneer* – Quote from the Yugoslav Pioneer Pledge. Saying this pledge was a significant part of each school generation’s induction into the values proclaimed by SFRY. The last generation of Tito’s pioneers was the one born in 1982, which started schooling in the year 1989/1990.
28. *Slava* – The annual family ceremony and veneration of its patron saint, a social event in which the family gathers together at the house of the patriarch. The Slava also brings friends to the house, regardless of whether they have the same Slava. The family saint is inherited from the patriarch. The tradition is an important ethnic marker of Serb identity. Serbs usually regard the Slava as their most significant and most solemn feast day.
29. *Just say it, General / And we’ll all fly like bullets.* – A popular rhyming graffiti which I saw both in Croatia and in Republika Srpska, referring to two different generals and war criminals in the respective geographic locations—Ante Gotovina and Ratko Mladić. The banality of nationalism is thus nicely presented in that identical “chants” are here used in two different “inimical” localities to reference two different people.
30. *Fly in the air, kid? Better go to school.* – After googling the graffiti once, I found a discussion on it on some online forum—and a male anonymous forum member posted this remark, which I found interesting and suitable for the scene. In the play Milan says that this sentence has been added by someone else on the toilet wall, after he wrote the rhyme of praise for the general, and I find that it matches my idea of inscriptions and writing messages by anonymous people to anonymous people – be it online, or on the toilet tiles.
31. *Dragana Mirkovic* – A folk star, but not the controversial type; she’s more of a countryside girl who became famous for her voice, married a millionaire and ended up with shitloads of money, but (in spite of it all) still acts morally superior in a trashy way. She now runs her own music and entertainment TV channel, DM SAT—Dragana Mirković Satellite Television.

32. *sacramental curtain of the Eucharist* – Some of the formulations like this one have been appropriated from the Serbian Orthodox Church propaganda [website](#). The main ironical point of Mara's advice to Milan here is that no matter what he does he will be able to receive a communion, unlike her, if she is menstruating.
33. *One life, one dream, to be rich and young. And I love you and I love you, love me while I'm fighting and burning, while I'm afraid.* – Lyrics from [Ljubavi moja](#) by Elitni odredi feat. Dado Polumenta. Frontman of this former folk-pop band Relja Popović played a main role in a successful Serbian film *Ordinary People*, dealing with a massacre resembling the one in Srebrenica, in which he portrayed a young soldier being forced to perform atrocities without previous knowledge of what will take place. Relja is married to Nikolija, controversial singer and daughter of one of the greatest Yugoslav and Serbian folk stars, Vesna Zmijanac.
34. *I only know I gave the flower of my youth to him* – Lyrics from Ceca's song "[Pustite me da ga vidm \(Just let me see him\)](#)," in which she sings about the failure of a heteronormative love of her youth.
35. *Paprikovac* – Neighborhood in Banjaluka, whose name was not changed during the 90s due to its innocent and ideology-free name deriving from the vegetable: paprika. The big parking lot in front of the biggest public socialist hospital in town is a popular drinking and hookup spot for youth driving cars and pretending to be leading US-American lifestyles.
36. *Red Star and Partizan* – Two major Serbian, Belgrade-based soccer clubs; Borac is a soccer team from Banjaluka.
37. *Under the blossoming tree, in a white dress [...] and dug out and then buried again under the blossoms when I was eight and you were six* – Mara's whole account of Milan's wedding to follow is a pretty accurate description of Orthodox weddings in villages throughout the Balkans, and in the meantime, of many urban weddings, too. "The wreath" is the metaphor for the fake gold crowns which the priest puts on the couple's heads while performing the (wedding) ritual, and they should symbolize the innocence and virginity of the couple being wed. Many of the wordings here have as well been appropriated from this [source](#).
38. *don't you have more important things to worry about* – Literally, "It would be better to think of your health."
39. *I sold my soul to the devil when I tasted the old wine, how can such a hot girl be sad, can't you see what you're doing to me, you bastard* – Lyrics from pop-folk singer's Ana Nikolić's song *Džukelo*, about a failed love between a younger woman and an older man. I used the song, characters, and video for it as a base for some of the scenes and sketches of characters in my latest full-length play *Regime of Love*.
40. *A mountain, burst into leaf; upon it, a brother and a sister* – This song is a mash-up of folkloric poetry, popular songs, and wedding songs. The largest part has been appropriated from two folkloric poems – "Najveća je žalost za bratom (The biggest grief is for a brother)" and "Brat i sestra i tuđinka (Brother and sister and foreign girl)." The last verses of my song have been appropriated from a turbo folk [song](#), popular at weddings: "Brat i sestra (Borther and sister)" by the duo Beki Bekić and Vera Matović. The topic of the first folkloric song is grief for the deceased males in war or battle. The girl feels sorry about her husband and his brother, but

the biggest and the only irreparable grief is the one she feels for her brother, symbolized in her act of taking her own eyes out. The song “Brother and sister and foreign girl” is especially interesting in regard to connections between patriarchy and incest, because in it, the brother blames his newly wedded wife for not visiting his sister more often. Bekić and Matović’s song is about a brother working as a guest worker abroad and his sister waiting for him at their village house back in the homeland. All these songs are exemplary of pathological feelings and expected sacrifices from a woman in the family, especially from a sister in regard to her brother. I mixed several lyrics from all three of them, by connecting them through the same motifs that appear in them—like the sister’s question about the uncertainty of her brother’s return or like the motif of the sister’s eye (taking it out and crying). In translation, especially for the US American context, Maksimović and Tamler decided to quote Beyonce’s lyric They don’t love you like I love you, from her song “Hold Up”. Since the song ends up with Mara stating that she added the last lines because of the song the wedding band just started playing (“Brat i sestra,” Bekić&Matović), we had fun imagining a band playing “Hold Up” at a Orthodox wedding.

41. *beauty, fashion and music know no limits* – A sentence I came across on some Internet forum, left by a anonymous female user. I found it striking; as far as I can recall now it was a comment on the forum topic/section dedicated to the previously mentioned band Medeni mjesec (Honeymoon), their careers and songs. This was also the title of the photo coverage of the first haute couture fashion show, by the designer Aleksandar Joksimović, in socialist Yugoslavia, in 1968.
42. *Yugoslavia est patria mea* – My father would often, with great pleasure, quote this, in his own words, first sentence of his Latin book.

Scene Four

43. *Happy People (Srećni ljudi)* – Yugoslav TV series that aired from 1993 to 1996, following the affairs of the family Golubović. Created by the Radiotelevision Belgrade (RTB), it was the first Serbian TV show ever produced after the breakup of Yugoslavia. I remember that when I broke my left elbow in 1994 and had to stay for a few days in the hospital, filled with soldiers wounded in the war and old people and lacking a proper children’s wing, my greatest regret was the fact that I would not be able to watch that week’s episode of Srećni ljudi.
44. *Kastel* – Small socialist shopping center named after one of the most important buildings in Banjaluka, a historic castle dating from the Roman era. My father, as a student in the 80s, worked on furnishing the space as his side job.
45. *A row of thin red books, then a row of thin blue books* – Popular edition, Reč i Misao (Word and Thought), in paperback format, of classics of world and national literature published by Belgrade-based Yugoslav enterprise Rad. Due to its affordable prices, the collection served, in some families, just for the purpose of filling in space on library shelves. The book series had the most amazing description on each cover: “The edition Reč i Misao brings the best works of the world and national literature—which everyone could use and need. The books are equipped with style, and have affordable prices.” Through it, the emancipatory potential and

intentions of Yugoslav cultural politics are easily detectable: first of all it was a construction company that printed this edition—so the culture was intertwined with other spheres of social, economic, and political life, and not seen as a separate, elitist, or untouchable entity. Secondly, the print and prices were designed so that everyone was a potential consumer of this literature, primarily working-class people. Last, but not least, the choice of the writers was truly anti-colonial and progressive, due to Yugoslav non-aligned politics and support for third world countries.

46. *Relaks* – Socialist hairdresser’s chain throughout Banjaluka, ruined in the course of the 90s privatization. The thing most specifically remaining in my memory of Relaks is the numerous hood dryers used for the purposes of the permanent wave hairstyle. My grandmother’s special treat for herself was a monthly visit to Relaks, and her own hairdresser Bilja.
47. *park where the stone fountain was, where the metal fountain is now* – Referring to the reconstruction of the park in central Banjaluka, Petar Kočić, which marked one of the most radical changes in the town’s appearance, apart from the destruction of the Ferhadija mosque during the war. Pictures of old Banjaluka always show pedestrians and young and old people together hanging out in the park, by the old fountain. One of the rare photos from my mother’s childhood shows her smiling near the fountain, looking directly into the camera. I had my first kiss in that park, by the fountain. Today the park has something called the musical pavilion which does not really serve that purpose, marking the transitional minimalist architecture style. There is an urban legend that the old fountain was never destroyed, but that it is simply being stored somewhere, just waiting for enough initiative and political will to cause it to reappear on some other spot in town. Pictures of the old and new park can be found [here](#).
48. *poster with a couple in the front seat of a convertible* – Also a very strong memory from my childhood, when I was staying in the countryside, with some distant relatives, in one of the girl’s bedrooms, where I was actually sleeping the whole time, all the walls were covered in posters of heterosexual couples in cars, on motorbikes, on picnic blankets, in erotic poses, representing a girl’s wish for liberation, or at least this is how I read it now.

Why Does Everything

By Rafael Spregelburd

Translated from the Spanish by Samuel Buggeln and Ariel Gurevich

In addition to being a prolific playwright, Rafael Spregelburd is one of Latin America's most prolific translators of English-language plays into Spanish. In developing this translation, Ariel and I were glad for several line-by-line working sessions with him. In these sessions Spregelburd also provided a significant amount of information—often describing a staging moment or clarifying a dramatic beat—that doesn't appear in the original published version of the play. Additionally, after the original text was published, Spregelburd performed in the multi-year Buenos Aires run of the play, during which time a number of textual changes evolved. At the playwright's suggestion, therefore, this version adds a number of stage directions and incorporates some line changes that do not appear in the published Spanish text.

At the playwright's suggestion, some character names have been changed to ones that have a more appropriate connotation to an English-speaking audience.

The original Spanish title is *Todo*, or simply, *Everything*. In Spanish this "Todo" is clearly echoed by the "todo" in the titles of the three parts ("¿Por qué todo Estado deviene burocracia?" "¿Por qué todo arte deviene negocio?" and "¿Por qué toda religión deviene superstición?"). These resonances are much less clear in English, notwithstanding the "every" in "Why does every state become a bureaucracy?" For the English version we agreed to adjust the title both to make this relationship clearer and simply because in English *Why Does Everything* is a better title.

In the introduction to the published Spanish text, Spregelburd describes *Todo's* characters as using "fallacious reasoning, drunk on sophistic velocity and ridiculous seriousness." While I hope most readers will recognize this strategy on the page, I reproduce the note here as insurance that these moments of illogic and inappropriate (and even fake) words are not mistaken for mistranslation.

In perhaps a related vein, when directing this play in other countries, Spregelburd reports finding that casts have at first had difficulties grasping what he calls the "intermittence" or "flickering" rhythm of, if you will, the play's reality principle. He stresses that productions should not strive to resolve questions such as: in Act I, the crossing wires between the story being told and the "meta-story" of the mime being inconsistently used to tell it; in Act II the truth about Dai Chi; and in Act III the identity of the Visitor. On the contrary Spregelburd urges that productions stress the unresolvability of these questions, and not shy away from incompatible and/or logically contradictory choices.

Finally, a note about Buenos Aires theatre in general: Porteño theatre makers (and citizens in general) are unafraid of very fast talking and a lot of chaotic overlap. Many lines can be spoken simultaneously. My frequent experience of watching an Argentine play I've read in advance is of the text coming at me as if out of a fire hose. Spregelburd's company is particularly known for this trait. The running time of *Todo* in Buenos Aires was two hours.

Nominee, María Guerrero Prize
Best National Author: Rafael Spregelburd

Nominee, Florencio Sánchez Prize
Best Director: Rafael Spregelburd

Nominee, Florencio Sánchez Prize
Best Supporting Actress: Andrea Garrote

Quim Masó Prize
for the Catalan production

Projectes Escènics de L'Ajuntament de Palma de Mallorca Prize
for the Islas Baleares production

A play commissioned for the **Schaubühne Theatre**, Berlin, for the festival

digging deep and getting dirty

International Authors' Festival on Identity and History

TODO – a production of El Patrón Vázquez (Buenos Aires)
and **Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz (Berlin)**.

TODO is part of the project “60 Years of Germany. Approximating an uncomfortable identity” – with the support of Kulturstiftung des Bundes.

Première as a work in progress March 19, 2009 in the FIND Festival, Schaubühne Theatre, Berlin

Cast:
Belén / Dai Chi and Narrator (II) / Celina
Nelly / Diana
Guillermo / Del Mónico / Doctor Carpio
Client and Narrator (I) / Fano / Ramiro
Omar / The visitor and Voice of the visitor (III)

Music: Zypce
German Translation: Sonja and Patrick Wengenroth (Suhkamp Verlag)
German Narrators: Urs Jucker, Judith Rosmar, Thomas Bading
Video: Alejo Varisto, Juan Schnitman, Agustín Mendilaharsu
Video postproduction: Alejo Varisto
Scenery and lights: Santiago Badillo
Assistant director: Lalo Rotavería
Photography: Nicolás Levin, Heiko Schäfer
Photography for videos: Dario Feal, Cecilia Szalkowicz
Producer: Corina Cruciani
Director: Rafael Spregelburd

Première in German on January 21, 2010 in the Insel Theatre at the Badisches Staatstheater in Karlsruhe, Germany

Cast:
Nelly / Diana
Belén / Dai Chi and Narrator (II) / Celina
Client and Narrator (I) / Fano / Ramiro
Omar / The visitor and Voice of the visitor (III)
Guillermo / Del Mónico / Doctor Carpio

German Translation: Sonja and Patrick Wengenroth (Suhkamp Verlag)
Music: Zypce
Lights and Space: Steven Koop
Costumes: Ursina Zürcher
Video: Steven Koop, Gunter Essig, Johannes Kulz
Sound: Johannes Kulz
Dramaturg: Bettina Weiler
Assistant Director: Marlene Holenda
Assistant Sets: Bärbel Kober
Assistant Costumes: Mara Fiek
Video photos and art: Steven Koop
Prompter: Stefanie Rademacher
Photography: Jochen Klenk
Program illustration: Isol
Director: Rafael Spregelburd

Première in Spanish October 15, 2010 at the Beckett Theatre, Buenos Aires.

With the support of INT and the Ministry of Culture of Buenos Aires¹

Cast:
Belén / Dai Chi and Narrator (II) / Celina
Nelly / Diana
Guillermo / Del Mónico / Doctor Carpio
Client and Narrator (I) / Fano / Ramiro
Omar / The visitor and Voice of the visitor (III)

Music: Zypce
Video: Alejo Varisto, Juan Schnitman, Agustín Mendilaharsu
Video postproduction: Alejo Varisto
Light and scenery: Santiago Badillo
Costumes: Julieta Álvarez
Assistant director: Ignacio Bozzolo
Photography: Nicolás Levin, Blu Mambor
Photography for videos: Dario Feal, Cecilia Szalkowicz
Program design: Santiago Badillo, Alejo Varisto, Isol
Production: Corina Cruciani
Director: Rafael Spregelburd

Première in Catalan December 10, 2010 at the Theatre La Planeta, Girona, during the Festival de Tardor de Catalunya (Temporada Alta).

With the support of the Quim Masó Prize, Institut de les Indústries Culturals, Teatre Principal de Palma, Institut Ramon Llull, Premi Projectes Escènics de L'Ajuntament de Palma de Mallorca, Casal Català de Buenos Aires and Ajuntament de Girona

Cast:
Belén / Dai Chi and Narrator (II) / Celina
Nelly / Diana
Guillermo / Del Mónico / Doctor Carpio
Client and Narrator (I) / Fano / Ramiro
Omar / The visitor and Voice of the visitor (III)

Catalán translation: Marc Rosich
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Direction: Rafael Spregelburd

¹ Second season, from March 2011.

² Replacing Pablo Seijo from April to June 2011.

Dramatis Personae:

(when changed for this version, original names appear in parentheses)

Why does every state become a bureaucracy?: Part 1. [BUREAUCRACY]

Voice of the Narrator
Nelly
Isabella (Belén)
Óscar (Omar)
Guillermo
Client

Why does every work of art become business?: Part 2. [BUSINESS]

Voice of another Narrator
Nelly
Del Mónico
Steeler (Fano)
Dai Chi
Óscar (Omar)

Why does every religion become superstition?: Part 3. [SUPERSTITION]

Voice of the visitor
Ramiro
Diana
The visitor
Celina
Doctor Carpio

The play may be performed with a variety of cast sizes and doubling schemes. The productions to date, which Spregelburd has directed, have used the following setup, for five actors:

Actor 1: Isabella / Dai Chi and Narrator (Act II) / Celina

Actor 2: Nelly / Diana

Actor 3: Guillermo / Del Monico / Doctor Carpio

Actor 4: Client and Narrator (Act I) / Steeler / Ramiro

Actor 5: Óscar / The visitor and Voice of the visitor (Act III)

Why does every state become a bureaucracy?

Part 1. [BUREAUCRACY]

As the onstage situations tell these stories, an unseen Narrator will simultaneously provide another story, which completes, corrects or complicates what we see. In each act the Narrator will have a different relationship to the world on the stage.

Part 1: A government office. Almost no scenic elements. This is very important. With the exception of Isabella and Óscar's desks and the stamp on Isabella's desk, none of the objects described appear in reality. The actors hold invisible folders and carry nonexistent cups: think that the props have not yet arrived and the cast has been ordered to go on without them, in a semi-improvised situation. This creates a great deal of confusion around the identities of things, made worse by the fact that the actors have different levels of mime skill (none is extremely good) and different responses to the situation. Guillermo takes the task very seriously and sometimes uses invisible items to challenge and/or punish the other characters; Isabella is annoyed and refuses to handle anything unless she absolutely has to, and Nelly and Óscar muddle by as best they can in their different ways. This meta-theatre story overlaps densely with the literal story.

At rise, only Isabella (30s) is onstage. She looks attentively at the rubber stamp attached to the leg of her desk. She tries to stamp something on Óscar's desk, but since the cord attaching the stamp is short, this is impossible. She spends some time at this before giving up.

Narrator: Here's what we're going to do. I'll tell you what I know, you'll see what you see. It's not a big story to tell, barely a fable. But a fable with a moral, like Aesop but no animals. Why does every state become a bureaucracy? Perhaps the offices are staffed with people whose activities are routinized. Boring. And who don't tend to think of their work spaces as being very important or worth keeping up. (*Óscar (60ish) enters*) That's Óscar. This is his office. Óscar enjoys explaining the nature of the job to newer colleagues. Óscar thinks of those Greek gods whose duties are very specific, and very minor. But very necessary.

Meanwhile, Óscar explains to Isabella how to solve the peculiar problem. Instead of bringing the stamp to the other desk, he brings the paper to the stamp. Isabella is reserving judgment.

Nelly (50ish) enters. She goes to Isabella with a document that, in line with the way things seem to be happening, doesn't exist.

Nelly: Is this it?

Isabella: No.

Nelly shows it to Óscar. Óscar can't really tell what it is.

Óscar: So... You have... that's from...?

Nelly: Well I had it, but now...

Nelly leaves, crossing paths with Guillermo (40s), apparently carrying something very heavy.

Isabella: Hey, hey, hey, hey. You're chucking *that* too?

Guillermo: I had to get like twenty vaccines.

Óscar: But is *that* still useful?

Guillermo: *This* is going out on the street. Period.

Guillermo leaves to dispose of the artifact on the street. Isabella silently shakes her head. She has a number of opinions about that, but decides not to say anything. For now.

Narrator: This office has taken the best years of my life. Óscar thinks that sometimes.

Isabella: Óscar, I'm starting to feel like there are no rules around here.

Óscar: No... Listen, Isabella, sweetheart: you don't want to do your whole job in one minute.

Isabella: Ah. In fact I was about to ask if you knew more or less what exactly is my j...

Óscar: No! That's the worst thing you can ask. I know it might seem like the only thing you do is stamp that little stamp. But that little stamp greases the whole conveyor belt. Around here you have to make yourself indispensable.

Isabella: How?

Óscar: Listen. Sometimes I hide a document. I put it somewhere secret, and I start to gauge the effects. When I see everyone's desperate, I pull the document from its stash, sign it and get the belt running again. I make myself indispensable, you understand?

Narrator: He doesn't say this with pride, but like a sort of minor god, a god who's accustomed to having limited gifts.

Nelly: *(Entering with a new document, as invisible as everything else.)* Is this it...?

Isabella: Aiiiiiaaaaa, you aren't looking for it, it's obvious! In your attitude!

Nelly: I am looking for it. It's just there are so many things...

Isabella: I just gave it to you yesterday. So go. Look for it. And find it!

Nelly: And *find it*, she says! This isn't my responsibility, darling. I'm doing the best I can.

Narrator: Óscar wouldn't compare himself to Kronos or Poseidon, the masters of Time and the Oceans; he loves to think of himself as one of the deities poets tend to ignore. His favorites are almost always domestic goddesses—say Juno's washerwoman or Apollo's manicurist. Óscar enjoys playing in the minor leagues of the cosmogonical order. In his dreams, he imagines himself doing delicate, feminine jobs; sometimes like timid Heritrode, poorly attired in foam, bringer of the rapturous inspirations of youth. Or the unrenowned Apedias, smelling

(Exits.)

Isabella: “The best you can” would have been to not lose it. Did she call me “darling”? This is very surprising. What’s the point of asking people for things if they don’t take the responsibility to do them?

of absinthe, a minor servant in the temple of Hera, in charge of the hygiene of childbirth.

Guillermo comes back in from the street.

Guillermo: Done, I got rid of it.

Isabella: How’d that go?

Guillermo: Lean out the window and take a look. Take a look.

Isabella: *(Wants to go to the window. She picks up the stamp, but the cord prevents her from moving more than a meter from her desk.)* I can’t right now. What if [Óscar came and]... *(She indicates the stamp her life depends on.)*

Guillermo: It’s like a party out there.

Like five or six kids.

You throw something out, someone’s gonna pick it up.

I’mna go sort out those filing cabinets in the hall.

Guillermo exits.

Narrator: On his best days, Óscar is Hermes Trismegistus, Mercury: the messenger of the gods, the keeper of the stamp and the wax to conceal what should be illegible to curious eyes. Because, Óscar thinks, certain things should work without being seen. When some things are too visible, they make understanding blind.

Nelly: *(Entering. About Guillermo.)* He’s taking out an insane pile of things. I don’t know if it’s going to be as useful to those folks as he thinks. Lot of enthusiasm, that guy. *(To Isabella, breezily.)* Here it is, Vicki had it with the things she was bringing to Deposits. *(Isabella declines it, offended. To Óscar.)* I already told him he should slow down. And say “excuse me” to people, they’re looking at him like he’s stealing useful stuff...

Nelly’s gesture has left her hands in a position that seems to indicate she’s holding something.

Óscar: *(About Nelly’s purported item.)* And is this useful?

Nelly: Oh, um... I don’t think so. *(“It” dissolves.)*

Óscar: So OK.

Nelly: I'm going to go back and help him find things to throw out. Take it, grab it, Isabella, or you're going to lose it a second time.

Isabella: That's not it.

Nelly: It's identical.

Isabella: But it's not it. And you're putting me in a pretty unfrangible situation.

Nelly: OK well I wouldn't go that far. Vicky already knows you lost it. So fine. Poor Guillermo, his hand looks terrible.

Óscar: Well... Something bit him.

Isabella: Back in there?

Nelly: It could have happened to anyone.

Óscar: Was it a....

Isabella: Something.

Nelly: It had to be a... terrible thing.

Guillermo comes back through, carrying something filthy, a pile of papers or old zip code directories.

Guillermo: I'm throwing this out, it's practically ashes.

Óscar: You found that back... there?

Isabella: Back... where you...

Guillermo: The heck d'you think?

Guillermo goes out to the street to throw them out. Isabella, Nelly and Óscar watch him in silence.

Nelly: I have to say he took it pretty well.

Isabella: It must be horrible, you're working, not expecting a thing, and suddenly *bam!*

Narrator: Yesterday, something bit Guillermo.

Isabella: Something... bit him...

Narrator: Óscar doesn't understand.

Óscar: I don't understand. I think about it and think about it but I do not understand.

Isabella: He got bitten. Think about it all you want. But he got bitten.

Nelly: By what?

Isabella: Something.

Óscar: It was a... it's a nightmare.

Guillermo enters holding the hand of a little friend and introduces him to everybody. The friend is invisible. The other actors are outraged. Invisible objects are one thing, but people?

Guillermo: These are the people I work with. Say hi! Nelly, Óscar.

Nelly: Hi there!

Guillermo: Come here, I'll get you something to drink.

The boy tries to touch the sacrosanct rubber stamp.

Guillermo: Don't touch that. This is Isabella.

Isabella: Don't touch that, take this. *(Gets object X from the desk and offers it to him.)* Take it.

Guillermo: Did he take it?

Isabella: Take it.

An uncomfortable silence. Guillermo leaves, holding the boy's hand.

More silence.

Isabella: He brought in... a kid... from the street?

Óscar: Matías!

Nelly: That's not Mateo.

Óscar: What's Matías' name?

Isabella: Guillermo.

Nelly: He'll answer to either.

Guillermo comes back in.

Óscar: Matías, you just left to throw something out and when you came back, you brought a street kid?

Guillermo: I was throwing stuff out and I told him, "come here, give me a hand." Why?

Isabella: He's so little, very very little.

Óscar: Don't do it again. It's been a heck of a day.

Guillermo: Think so? Yesterday was more of a heck of a day, wasn't it? *(General silence.)* Wasn't it?

Narrator: (*As Óscar solemnly rises to his feet to give a short speech*) Now it's up to Óscar, and this is when his favorite miserable gods always arrive bearing inspiration. They dictate to him with great cleverness, they perform dramatic gestures for him; the wheat sprouts forth, the flies are decimated.

Óscar: Don't go back there alone, Matías. (*And he sits back down.*)

Guillermo: I'm *doing it* all alone. (*To Isabella.*) Alone. (*To everyone.*) Not one guy here, not a single random person, thought this through. Look. This is the Registrar's office, right? The government. Sixty or seventy people come here a day, and those people leave stuff. Flat things, and because they're flat it doesn't seem like it, but those things pile up. After six hours you have a stack. Now it's not flat anymore, now it has volume. Nobody ever calculated how long before all those square meters—cubic!—were gonna overflow? When do records expire?

Nelly: Every four...

Óscar: Three...

Isabella: Ten...

Guillermo: Five years? Nobody ever figured out a system for throwing out the stuff that's more than five years old?

Óscar: (*Guessing where he's going with this.*) Oh please not the urinals!

Guillermo: It's true, Óscar!

Isabella: What about the urinals?

Guillermo: This is a building, right? Therefore somebody designed it, right? Reflect: an architect, or some functionary, got told: put a bathroom on every floor for the people who work here. Right? Somebody had the time, got the request, and felt the dedication to think about that for at least five minutes.

Isabella: So?

Guillermo: So, what. What would you say is the average number of urinals on each floor?

Isabella: I dunno.

Guillermo: Say a number.

Isabella: Two.

Guillermo: *Seven.*

Narrator: This is Guillermo.

Guillermo: Seven urinals per floor.

Narrator: And the urinals issue is complicated.

Guillermo: In case you hadn't noticed, almost all the staff here is female. Want to explain to me why on every floor we have a bathroom with *seven* urinals? A building created so that 70 men can piss at the same time, an insane space designed for an absurdity, and off to the side an entire hallway packed with cabinets bursting at the seams because there is not enough physical space to accumulate so many things, where when you stick your hand in you can't be sure you'll pull it back out in one piece. What asshole engineer calculated that this is the way it had to be?

Nelly: *(Brief pause.)* What happened yesterday, Chris?

Guillermo: Now you want to talk to me? After you all sent me to that shitty hospital alone, now you want to talk to me about yesterday?

Nelly: Well, we were scared.

Guillermo: I was more scared. And more alone.

Óscar: You went alone?

Guillermo: Of course, nobody here believed me! I had to bring back a certificate from the hospital before they'd say "Ew, it's true, he got bit!"

Óscar: They gave you a certificate?

Guillermo: Look. *(He pulls an imaginary paper from his pocket and gives it to him. Óscar doesn't know how to take it, holds it backwards, Guillermo turns it over.)*

Óscar: I didn't know they gave these things out. And yes... it says right here he... he got bitten... Did you ask for this, or did they just give it to you?

Guillermo: And they treated me so *fast* my head was spinning.

Nelly: There wasn't anyone there before you?

Guillermo: How do I know! I arrived and went right in. I didn't even have to wait. Can you believe it?

Óscar: Bad service?

Guillermo: *Fast* service.

All [disapproving]: Ahhhhh.

Óscar: What a shame.

Isabella: Totally, and now if it weren't for that paper you'd feel like you hadn't even been there.

Nelly: Did you tell them something bit you?

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Guillermo: Yeah I told them, but I didn't need to, they knew as soon as they looked at my hand. They're doctors, Nelly, not short-order cooks.

Óscar: Did they give you something?

Guillermo: Like twenty vaccines. OK, enough. You wanted to talk? They gave me like twenty vaccines. You want to keep talking? OK: they got to give me twenty more vaccines, every single one on a schedule. On top of that, it's all preventative, they don't cure anything. And I've got no witnesses to it because I went alone.

Óscar: Look, Matías...

Guillermo: Guillermo.

Óscar: I'm sorry. Guillermo. I mix you up with...

Guillermo: Yes I know.

Óscar: Have you thought about what you're going to do? Because—whatever you decide—we will support you one hundred percent.

Everyone stands up in a ritual gesture of solidarity. Guillermo is moved.

Guillermo: No. I haven't thought about what I'm going to do. Still haven't thought about it. The wound is still fresh, Óscar. I need to clear my head a little.

Nelly: What do you have to do going forward?

Guillermo: More vaccinations! That don't cure you! If I'm already infected, great, screwed, a thousand needles in the ass for nothing!

Nelly: Do you need to take time off? Did you show Vicki your certificate? Are you going to keep throwing things out?

Guillermo: If I don't, who will? Do I have to wait for someone else to get bitten before I get a tiny bit of support? Those people don't even look at me. Their eyes are glued to their monitors. I'm going to keep throwing stuff out until we can see each other's faces. White walls. Clear hallways. That's all I ask. And we'll see if I keep working or if I take some time off. Vicki can suck an egg.

Nelly: No, no, no, I meant about your hand...

Guillermo: Ah. No, not one day. They told me not to get myself bitten again.

Óscar: Incompetents.

Guillermo: Not to *get myself bitten* again. I'm going to go throw more stuff away.

Exits up to find things to toss.

Nelly: Óscar, you're going to have to draw a thick line around this situation:

Guillermo comes back through carrying something very heavy. He brings it towards the street.

Nelly: ...if he wants to throw things out go ahead, but it's not appropriate to bring street kids into the office. Poor things.

Narrator: Nelly doesn't trust Óscar. At one point they were in a kind of relationship. Pfff, relationship. Nelly had just gotten a divorce, and her first goal was for her ex-husband Ricardo to believe that her social life, and why not her sex life, had remained active notwithstanding the breakup. So Nelly would find any excuse to invite Óscar to her house.

A client appears (40s). A citizen who has to take care of some kind of paperwork. Later we'll find out this is Ramiro, but for now it doesn't matter. He waits to be noticed.

Nelly: Óscar...

The client shows them a form. Nelly indicates that he should see Isabella.

Isabella: *(To Nelly, re Guillermo)* OK, but eventually it's gonna get out of hand, and before you know it it's like Lydia. *(To the Client.)* I'll be with you in just a sec.

Nelly: What happened to Lydia?

Isabella: Apparently there was a fire in Lydia's office.

Nelly: Lydia's office? That's terrible.

Isabella: It all burned.

Nelly: Again?

Isabella: Apparently the office is a total loss, they have to relocate her. *(Off the paper the client gave her.)* You see? They're already starting to send people here for Lydia's stuff. *[i.e. her tasks]*

Nelly: And... But over here, that...

Óscar: I don't know... Over here that color isn't...

Nelly: You should check with Santorino on four.

Extended minimalist procedure in which the paper passes from one person to the next and returns to Isabella, who delivers it to the Client and explains to him to check on another floor. Guillermo returns from throwing out more stuff, and offers to show him how to get to the supposed fourth floor. Isabella, Guillermo and the Client exit.

Narrator: So Nelly often invited Óscar to her house, trusting that her 15-year-old son Enzo would take it upon himself to tell his father about these visits. Almost nothing ever happened during these visits, they usually talked about work, watched some movie, or had coffee and graham crackers. One

afternoon, Nelly went into Enzo's room and Óscar was there. Óscar had shown up a bit early for the date and Nelly had gone to pick up sandwiches. Enzo was showing Óscar an Excel spreadsheet and explaining how to import it from Office 2000. Enzo wasn't wearing a shirt. Óscar was looking at the screen and had one hand on Enzo's naked shoulder. Nelly took it very badly. She never talked about it with Enzo. Not with Óscar either.

Isabella: (*Entering.*) I sent him to four. But it's Lydia's thing.

Narrator: Bit by bit, she started to find excuses to not invite him to her house.

Nelly: She'd better not come here.

Narrator: She was receiving fewer and fewer male visitors, and keeping a close eye on Enzo.

Óscar: It's not the first time. It's happened to her two or three times.

Nelly: That's why she'd better not come here.

Isabella: But what bad luck.

Narrator: Enzo's relationship with his parents had not been very smooth since their divorce.

Isabella: 'Cause she's got nothing to do with it, but there's always some idiot jumping to conclusions.

Óscar: It's the fourth time it's happened. There were fires at Reconquista, Virrey Cevallos, Alsina...

Nelly: (*to Óscar*) And that's why I'm telling you, because you're the only one who can tell Lydia no. They need to relocate her somewhere else.

Óscar: How am I going to tell her that? "Sorry Lydia, the thing is, you're bad luck".

Nelly: You see? Everyone's terrified of that fatso.

Óscar: Not terrified, it's just something you can't say, not officially. Maybe if someone more junior said it to her... (*Isabella doesn't seem to get it.*) But if you say it to her in an official capacity you're toast 'til the cows come home.

Nelly: She'd better not come here.

Narrator: Enzo didn't talk very much.

Óscar: How's Enzo doing?

Nelly: (*Brief pause.*) Fine. Totally fine.

Óscar: Did he find a solution for the...? The thing he...?

Nelly: Yes, it's all fine.

Narrator: Óscar didn't come over any more, but Nelly was starting to notice someone was leaving silent messages on her answering machine.

Nelly: His father knows a police commissioner, they renewed all his documents, he didn't even have to wait in line.

Óscar: Oh, great.

Narrator: Nelly erased the silent messages. She never asked Enzo if he knew who it could be.

Óscar: I'd promised him I'd try to track down that guy from... what's his name?... the guy from...

Nelly: Yes but it's taken care of. *(To Isabella).* OK, this is yours, I'm giving it to you, don't lose it. *(Exits.)*

Isabella: I'll tell you the truth. I'm having a hard time believing this. I'm having a hard time. I'm having an extremely tough time.

Óscar: What's up?

Isabella: Nothing, she gave me something very similar. But not the thing.

Narrator: Let's see about all this.

Óscar: But it's similar?

Isabella: But it's not it.

Óscar: It's similar? If I were you I'd just grab it. I'm sure that thing's lost somewhere on Vicki's desk.

Isabella: I'm—and this is the truth—I do not know what she does.

Óscar: Who?

Isabella: Nelly.

Narrator: Isabella is new here and occupies a much lower position on the hierarchy than Nelly. But this isn't immediately visible, because Isabella is always sitting, while Nelly seems to run from one end of the building to the other. This privileged position of Isabella's—seated, expectantly, passive for the great majority of the time—allows her to think a lot of things.

Isabella: I don't know what Nelly does, I don't know what Vicki does. It's like they're here to screw things up without any rhyme or reason. And you know what's gonna happen? The time is going to come when I'm going to have to bring this down to two, and it's all going to be on me.

Óscar: You think on two they're going to notice the difference?

Isabella: It's not my job to think about that. I don't want to even think about that possibility.

Narrator: Isabella quarrels with Nelly. She knows Nelly is scandalized by her ideas, which is maybe why she mostly discusses them with her.

Nelly returns.

Isabella: Nelly!

Nelly: He's taking away records I don't think we're supposed to touch. Is he going to keep throwing out everything he sees?

Óscar shrugs.

Isabella: You gave me something very similar, but it's not it. Please go look for it, Nelly. *(She returns the thing she'd been given.)*

Nelly: But it's similar? Then let's try this. *(Flips the document over and tries to give it back.)*

Isabella: I don't understand. I'm having a hard time understanding this.

Óscar: *(To Isabella.)* Take it, they're going to accept it fine.

Isabella: They're not going to accept it. I don't want to go through this again tomorrow.

Nelly: You're not going to go through this again tomorrow because I already gave it to you.

Isabella: What if they ask me for it?

Nelly: They're not going to ask you for it because I've already given it to you.

Isabella: But it's not it!

Nelly: Yeeeessss iiit iiiiiissss.

Isabella: Óscar, do you happen to have a second?

Óscar: Yep.

Isabella: Listen, she gave me something very similar, but it's not mine.

Óscar: Just puut your haaands oontoo iiit. If it's similar, it'll get by.

Isabella: Great. Delightful. *(She crosses her arms, offended.)*

Óscar: Wow, I have to say... some luck Lydia's got! Why do all her offices catch fire?

Nelly: Well... everything's flammable. Paper, folders, toner for the photocopier...

Óscar: Toner is flammable?

Nelly: Totally, it's a petroleum derivative, it's carcinogenic.

Guillermo enters with a pedestal, a column, something large whose identity we can't discern.

Belen: You're going to throw that out?

Guillermo: Is it yours?

Isabella: No.

Guillermo: Is it anybody's? No. I'm throwing it out.

Nelly: (*Scandalized*) It's always been there, it belongs here. It doesn't get thrown out.

Isabella: It's been there longer than we have. It's very iconic.

Guillermo: Oh, it's "very iconic"? You want to explain to me what it's been there *for*, all this time?

Nelly: Don't you dare throw that out.

Óscar: Look, Matías: that's been there since before this office was occupied by humans. It's absurd to get angry about it, nobody put it there.

Guillermo: Do you guys seriously think this was literally put here by NOBODY?

Narrator: Matías' real name is Guillermo.

Guillermo: *Nobody* put it here?

Narrator: But Óscar calls him Matías, because the guy who used to occupy Guillermo's position was named Matías...

Óscar: It was there from before, it doesn't have a purpose...

Narrator: ...but Óscar—at the time—never quite learned Matías' name correctly.

Óscar: It's an object that has no purpose, so leave it there.

Guillermo: Let's all do something. (*With effort he moves the object to the center of the office.*)

Narrator: He always called him Mateo, and then immediately corrected himself and said Matías. So now Óscar can't stop calling the new guy Matías, even though his name is Guillermo.

Guillermo: I'm going to leave this here, smack in the middle.

Narrator: He'd learned it wrong, and too late. Guillermo doesn't care either way. What does it matter?

Guillermo: And when you're all fucking tired enough of banging into it, you're going to beg me to throw it away. (*He exits.*) "Matías, Matías, please throw it away, pleeeeeease!"

Nelly: No, you're not putting that there. Guillermo! (*Exits after him.*)

Óscar: Matías!

Guillermo: (*Peeks back in.*) Anyone want a coffee? The coffee people are here. Frappolatte?

Isabella and Óscar (*Because Guillermo will want to borrow money*): No.

Narrator: Something absurd is happening to Matías / Guillermo.

Guillermo: OK. (*He stays there, looking from one to the other, as if he were going to say something else.*)

Narrator: Since the day Isabella arrived, he's been trying to impress her. And Isabella often comes on to him fairly explicitly, but then she always backs off, almost always leaving him in the uncomfortable position of having said something vulgar.

Isabella: You're seriously going to leave that poking up like that?

Guillermo: Yeah. They're gonna have to suck my bone if they want me to get rid of that piece of shit.

Narrator: That's Guillermo: both shy and vulgar. Whenever he wants to slip in a funny comment, he always winds up saying something rude.

Isabella: As far as I'm concerned it can stay.

Guillermo: Here it stays. Coffee? Anyone want a coffee? (*They shake their heads "no".*)

Nelly enters, followed by the Client, who remains standing off to one side of Isabella's desk while Nelly checks something with Óscar in a low voice.

Narrator: Guillermo doesn't really know why, but he heard that Isabella thinks he's Jewish. He isn't. Why would she think he was Jewish? It bothers him a lot. He has nothing against Jewish people, who have always seemed very cultured to him. But he has nothing to do with those traditions, nor that food. He's never managed to explicitly correct the misapprehension. (*Nelly finally gives some new instruction to the Client, sending him to another floor.*) There's no scenario in which he can face her and say: "why do you think I'm Jewish when I'm not?" He heard it through the grapevine, and he doesn't want to seem to be paying too much attention to her, which would be bad for his plan. His plan is to have outrageous sex with Isabella and then never call her again. It's the same plan he used on Isabella's predecessor, a very cute but very unstable girl named Judith.

Óscar: Nelly... What I was trying to tell you before...

Nelly: What?

Óscar: The thing about Enzo's papers...

Nelly: It's done, I told you it's done. His father has a friend who's a POLICE COMMISSIONER.

Óscar: I know. But tell him again I can get them for him. I talk with the security guys here, and listen... Listen to me, in two days they can get me everything... Passport... ID...

Isabella: Driver's license?

Óscar: Well... no, not that.

Guillermo: Why not? You got one for Judith...

Óscar: Yeah. Uch, I dunno, huh? You never know... They did slip it to Judith...!

Isabella: Who's Judith?

Guillermo: (*Sharp.*) Nobody.

Óscar: Nobody... she used to work here...

Narrator: The previous week was Rosh Hashanah, and before she left Isabella wished him a happy new year.

Isabella: I'd love to have a B1 license.

Narrator: It was his opportunity to explain to her that he wasn't Jewish...

Nelly: But do you drive?

Isabella: No.

Narrator: ...That his mom was Catholic...

Isabella: That's why I want to find out if I can get one.

Óscar: No, you're crazy. With Judith it was different. She knew how to drive, she used to have a license, but then I don't know what happened... some health problem...

Narrator: ... and that they didn't know much about his father because he'd left them when he was two, and that his mother's new husband did come from a Jewish family, but that they weren't practicing.

Óscar: What was it that happened to her?

Guillermo: How the fuck should I know?

Narrator: "Nobody's practicing", Isabella replied.

Óscar: Some nervous thing, you know how you have to copy a bunch of little drawings to pass the mental health part?

Óscar: I don't know exactly what she drew, but it was weird enough that they didn't want to renew it...

Narrator: Guillermo knew she was still confused. Still thought he was Jewish, from a Jewish family.

Guillermo: OK, I'm going to keep looking for stuff to throw out. *(Exits.)*

Narrator: Sometimes he'd quote the acts of some Catholic saint.

Óscar: And she couldn't renew it. And the Security guys here took care of the whole thing.

Isabella: This was Judith?

Narrator: But at almost all of these moments Isabella wasn't paying attention.

Guillermo: *(Entering.)* Do you know how Saint Genevieve died? No? Google it. Google it. *(Exits.)*

Óscar: Poor girl. But she'd already had a license. It's a different case.

Isabella: No, it's fine. I don't want one.

Óscar: Or in Enzo's case. The kid drives... Does sports...

Nelly: Less and less.

Óscar: But he does them! He's got quite a little body!... You can tell he does them.

Nelly: Yes, with his dad. They're very close now.

Óscar: You see? So beautiful.

Nelly: What is?

Óscar: Father and son, planning things together, going fishing, trusting each other, sharing things.

Nelly: Oh yes. They share things. Enzo tells him everything, you understand?

Óscar: Yeah, and I was a bad sport... I told him I'd call him to see about going to a movie some time...

Nelly: You called him?

Óscar: No... I let him down, I couldn't.

Nelly: I can't tell him anything I don't want his father to find out. Enzo goes and tells him everything. Everything. It's dangerous.

Óscar: Well... that's OK. But it's beautiful...

Nelly: Who is?

Óscar: *That* is, between a kid who's so... young, and sweet... and his dad.

Narrator: Until one day, after a few glasses of cider at a party, Óscar told Guillermo that Isabella had asked him with real curiosity whether Matías was circumcised.

Guillermo returns, with something else to throw out: this time it seems to be a pipe or a heavy rolled-up carpet.

Guillermo: Watch out, watch out.

Nelly: OK but... for a couple of weeks you should stop throwing things out and going back there. At least 'til you see how your hand is doing... *(It's useless, because he's gone out to the street. Nelly exits after him.)*

Narrator: It never became clear to Guillermo whether Isabella was actually referring to him or to his predecessor, Mateo— Matías, who he had never even met. But since then it seemed to him that the only way to clarify his origin was to show Óscar that he was not at all and never had been circumcised, so Óscar could clarify the situation to Isabella for once and for all. It was a perfect plan, and it only required making sure that Óscar saw his penis.

Nelly returns.

Nelly: I'm feeling anxious. This morning I was just fine and now I'm feeling anxious. On top of it all, he owes me a hundred and fifty pesos...

Guillermo: *(Coming in from the street.)* What?

Nelly: You should have that hand looked at.

Guillermo: Again with that?

Narrator: Guillermo would try to find his way to the office urinals at the same time as Óscar, and to urinate standing as far as possible from the wall, so that Óscar might catch an innocent glance.

Óscar: I'm going to the bathroom.

Guillermo: Oh, me too. Cool.

Narrator: These urinary exercises almost always produced disgusting results. Guillermo would wet his shoes and Óscar would be repulsed. Óscar now avoids going to the bathroom whenever Matías is there.

Óscar: Oh, no, I need to find out if they've sent me the thing for that guy yet, he should be back any second and we don't have the um... the um... *(He pretends to look for something on his computer, but his mime is terrible, he's just scratching at the surface of the desk.)*

Narrator: Óscar had no problem, on the other hand, bumping into other young colleagues in the bathroom...

Guillermo: OK, I'll hold out too. *(To Isabella.)* I'll tie a knot in it.

Narrator: Mostly the newest hires, who he always treated very paternalistically, offering to acquaint them with the different aspects of the job.

The Client reappears. Isabella looks at what he shows her, nods. Refers him to Guillermo. Who guides him to Óscar's desk, avoiding a collision with the imaginary pedestal, which has remained there, although its location seems less and less clear to the actors. The Client is given a seat and the three simultaneously express contradictory thoughts about the correct destination for his paperwork. Nelly, on the other hand, remains off to one side, thinking about her adventure in the urinals.

Narrator: Since Óscar had an important position, everybody thought of this as absolutely normal. Except for Nelly, who had never quite approved of these gatherings of junior employees which—according to reports—took place in the men's restroom on the third floor, which was not the closest restroom to Óscar, but it was the one—as Nelly was once furtively able to ascertain—that lacked dividers between the urinals, which denied gentlemen some minimum of privacy, (*the Client stands up, confused*) but definitely saved a certain amount of that vital space that was steadily being reclaimed by the files and folders that idly accumulated in whatever little territory remained free in that architecture.

The Client leaves.

Guillermo: Done. We gonna go take a piss?

Narrator: Nelly had, in fact, counted seven urinals.

Óscar: You go, I'll catch up with you.

Narrator: And then discreetly slipped out of the bathroom without having been seen.

Guillermo: I'll wait for you, that way on the way back you can help me move the waddayacallit.

Nelly: Stop throwing things out, you're going to hurt your hand worse!

Guillermo: Do you guys think there's zero, I mean zero relationship between my hand and the fact that I'm throwing things out? Did it never occur to you this is for everyone's good?

Isabella: For my *good*? You're throwing things out for fun...

Guillermo: What fun?

Isabella: It's obvious.

Guillermo: There are things that are obvious to you that might not be the way you think they are...

Isabella: Everyone likes throwing things out. All cultures.

Guillermo: What cultures?

Isabella: The city dweller, the isolated tribe in the desert...

Nelly: (*quite interested*) You throw things out?

Isabella: Sure. Clothes, Tupperware, pots.

Nelly: (*disappointed, ironic*) How fabulous of you. Stuff you don't need anymore.

Isabella: Clothes, lots of clothes. I keep them moving. First they go in the closet with the clothes I wear, then I pull them out and put them on the other side of the rack. Then I take them down and put them in a plastic bag I have, I stack them in that... and put them up high. They go one section to the next. Then I take them down and put them under the bed, so I don't have to look at them. Then, when under the bed is full, I move them to the top of the closet and that's where they spend the longest time. Then later, maybe some long weekend I open the bag, if there's something I like it goes back into circulation, but most of it I put in a bag next to the door to the street, and out it goes.

Óscar: Like a conveyor belt.

Isabella: Oh, did you see the coat I wore today?

Nelly: It's beautiful.

Isabella: Do you guys know I bought that coat in the eighties? I bought that coat for three hundred dollars, which at the time was the same as three hundred pesos.

Óscar: No, if it was in the eighties it would have been Australes...

Isabella: No, the end of the eighties.

Nelly: What did we have in the eighties? Australes? Argentine pesos? Law pesos?

Óscar: No, we stopped using the law peso in...

Narrator: Nobody, including myself, could remember what currency was in use at that time. It doesn't matter.

Óscar: Just let me think... they were the little brown ones...

Isabella: It doesn't matter. It was when it was "one on one".

Óscar: "One to one."

Isabella: Right. A peso was worth a dollar. And vice versa. OK, so I bought it for three hundred dollars...

Óscar: ...then.

Isabella: And since then, the coat did that whole circuit— pile, closet, bed, up, down—but when I was going to throw it out, instead I sold it in a street fair in Pompeya, for twenty pesos.

Nelly: Nothing.

Óscar: Five dollars, more or less. Today.

Nelly: (*Upset, doing the math wrong.*) That's like ten times less than what you bought it for!

Guillermo: (*Under his breath*) Two hundred times less...

Isabella: Doesn't matter. The thing is that a long time after, one day walking in Palermo, I go into a new store, vintage, you know, beautiful things restored, and I see it! The same coat, same pattern, nothing deconstructed, nothing reinvented, there it is, boom: four hundred pesos.

Óscar: Today pesos.

Isabella: Of course, in Palermo. I go back to look at it, gorgeous! I fall in love with it all over and I buy it again.

Óscar: You bought it again?

Isabella: Yup, for four hundred pesos.

Óscar: Today pesos.

Isabella: Palermo pesos. But anyway, that's taste.

Óscar: Wait, wait, that's— in accounting terms— that's a mess.

Isabella: No, it doesn't matter. Don't kill yourself calculating it because the important thing is I wanted it cause I liked it.

Óscar: Well depending how you look at it, maybe you came out on top.

Isabella: How did I come out on top?

Óscar: Because before it was three hundred dollar-pesos and now you're buying it cheaper.

Nelly: Four hundred is cheaper than three hundred?

Óscar: Well sure but... how weird... Because, from another side, you lost out.

Nelly: How did she lose out?

Óscar: Because before she paid three hundred pesos and now she paid four hundred. She lost a hundred.

Isabella: You think that, because it's the same coat, but if it was a different coat you wouldn't think so.

Nelly: It's really nice. The one you wore today?

Isabella: Yeah, wait a sec, I'll get it. (*Exits.*)

Nelly: It's gorgeous. I don't know why she sold it, the stupid cow. The way it's cut you can't find anymore, English draping. Put together like a brick shithouse.

Isabella brings in the imaginary coat and shows it off.

Isabella: So? What do you think? Was it worth it or not?

Nelly: It's spectacular. (*She tries to feel the miraculous fabric.*)

Isabella: Yeah. But I think now I'm gonna throw it out, the color... it's like it doesn't say anything.

Nelly: You're gonna throw it out?! It's gorgeous!

Isabella: Yeah, it just came down from the high shelf, it's about to go to the street.

Nelly: But it's so nice.

Isabella: OK, I'll bring it back for them to sell in the fair.

Óscar: They're going to give you twenty pesos again.

Isabella: Oh well...

Nelly: OK, I'll buy it from you.

Isabella: No, no, I'm going to sell it at the fair, find out how much they give me for it at the fair.

Óscar: But why not to her? If she likes it...

Nelly: You're cutting out the middleman.

Isabella: But I don't know how much to sell it for. I like middlemen. They're the salt of the earth. I don't know how much you're going to offer me.

Nelly: Wait. If you want we can go to the fair together and I'll pay you whatever they offer. And if you want a little bit more.

Isabella: But you know it's worth more than that. You're screwing me. You know it's worth more, I paid for that in dollars!

Nelly: Fine, if they offer you thirty I'll pay fifty. Better to sell it to me than give it to some stranger.

Isabella: Really? So I can show up at the office and you're here wearing it?

Nelly: If you want we can agree I won't wear it to the office, that way you won't be tempted. Who knows, you might want to buy it back from me for another fortune...

Isabella: But I paid four hundred pesos for this, and you want to offer me fifty. It's sort of like I don't understand you, Nelly.

Guillermo: It's better to get screwed by someone you know than someone you don't.

Óscar: That's kind of true, because if you wanted to go buy it you'd have to pay four hundred. It's like this: the purchase price is always four hundred, but the selling price is twenty. It's crazy. There's this gap between the two things and say what you will, it gives me goose bumps.

Isabella: And for her the purchase price would be twenty. You see? I can't sell it to you.

Nelly: No, no, wait. We're doing the math wrong.

Isabella: Look, Nelly, I like you and everything but if you don't have the four hundred pesos this is worth, you can't buy it, period.

Óscar: Obviously.

Nelly: I'm not paying four hundred pesos for something that used.

Óscar: Fine then, she's not asking you to buy it!

Nelly: But you were going to throw it out!

Isabella: Anyway now I don't know if I want to get rid of it. If you think it's worth that much, it must be true.

Nelly: Ohhh you are a total bitch! She's going to throw it out, I say, "don't throw it out, I like it", she takes that and tarantalizes me!

Óscar: But you... you're... you want to buy it for less than it's worth.

Guillermo: Yeah, Nelly: You never want to admit when you've got the upper hand. You stir up the water, swipe the fisherman's profits and then play innocent. It's worth four hundred.

Nelly: It's not worth four hundred!

Óscar: This is why I don't like to get involved in women's questions.

Nelly: The fact you're not interested in women's questions has become obvious. And you can stick your coat up your ass. So *shallow*.

Isabella: Oh thanks for the tip, Nelly. And now *I'm* shallow? Who kicked up the whole stink over a shitty coat?

Nelly: It's not shitty! I like it. (*Bursts into tears.*) I like it a lot.

The Client reenters. He sees that the situation is delicate, and remains at a prudent distance. So prudent, in fact, that he remains there for some time, doing nothing but watching everyone. Finally he decides to seize the stamp himself and stamps all the papers he's brought. He exits.

Nelly: You come here and pretend you're some big I don't know what, "oh, look at my values", "look what I do", and in fact you're just shallow, the stuff you throw away is totally worthless. That's easy, anybody can do that. (*to Guillermo*) Same as you, obviously, of course, with the perfect excuse that you got bitten, with your fucking alibi, now you're dicking around in accumulated capital and other peoples' work. And in case you forgot: you've owed me a hundred and fifty pesos for two months now, if it's not too much trouble I'd like them back please.

Guillermo: What do the two things have to do with each other?

Isabella: They have NOTHING to do with each other.

Guillermo: And I'm going to pay you back. You know when? When I'm finished paying for vaccines and the swelling in my fucking ass goes down.

Nelly: Great. You know what? Why don't you throw away everything you want, but give me back the hundred and fifty pesos I loaned you. Because I have to buy myself a coat.

Isabella: It's not for sale.

Nelly: A hundred and fifty pesos!

Isabella: It's not for sale. And certainly not for a hundred and fifty pesos. What is that? What is that price? Where did it come from? Did it come from the labor value of the coat? Did it come from the supply-demand curve? No, came out of the blue. It's witchcraft. It came out of some debt between you guys, what does that have to do with me?

Nelly: You're seriously going to throw it out?

Isabella: Now it seems I basically have no choice.

Nelly: But why? You're throwing out something that has no value to you! If you think you're so fabulous, throw out money.

Isabella: That's not the same.

Óscar: No, it's not the same.

Nelly: It is the same. Get together four hundred pesos and throw 'em away. See how it makes you feel.

Isabella: Throwing away money isn't throwing away stuff. Think! I toss money, some street kid picks it up and buys skim milk. See? I threw away dough but the kid picked up milk. Not the same case. Money transforms things, it's a magic wand. I want to throw away this thing that completed its cycle. You want it? Go get it when I've thrown it out. Like the street kid who'd pick up that four hundred pesos, which I think I'm not going to throw out, because I don't have 'em.

Nelly: I'm not going to humiliate myself. What, you want me to follow you around to see where you're going to throw out the coat?

Isabella: Not at all. I'll tell you where I'm going to throw it out.

Nelly: I'm not gonna get sucked into your sick dialectic. *(Brief pause.)* Where?

Isabella: *(Thinks of a random place.)* Sáenz Avenue at Beazley.

Nelly: But that's in Pompeya! It won't last a second there, some homeless family will pick it up. On top of everything else you want me to fight a bunch of homeless people for a coat you don't like anymore? You want to let me know what I ever did to you? Since you got here.

Isabella: What? What are we talking about? Are you trying to tell me where I can and can't throw out my old clothes? I'm having a hard time understanding what you're saying. You're moving your lips but I'm not understanding, I see movement but that's all. And I still don't have my form you gave to Vicki, I think I asked you for it politely.

Óscar: Alright, alright. If you're going to fight like this... I'm leaving.

Nelly: You're not going anywhere. We're gonna go through point by point what's happening here. She throws out *worthless* things and comes here talking about "creating space", about "renewal", about "innovation", she says "she sees movement"! She should throw out money, which *is* worth something.

Óscar: You can't throw out money, Nelly. It's not possible. It's self-contradictory. She already explained it to you.

Nelly: Fine. Let her burn it!

Isabella: You want me to burn money to demonstrate what exactly?

Nelly: That it doesn't matter to you. You see? Don't throw it out, burn it so nobody can turn it into rice or milk.

Isabella: OK. Fine.

Nelly: Burn money.

Isabella: I'd do it but I don't have any money.

Nelly: Here, fifty pesos. Take 'em, burn 'em. Cut the fucking conveyor belt of this fifty pesos, if you're so free. Go on, show us. If you can burn fifty pesos I'll believe that coat actually means something to you. If you don't burn the fifty pesos I'll think you're a bitch who's got style, and that's all.

Isabella: So I'm not burning fifty pesos, I'm buying your trust.

Nelly: No no no no no.

Isabella: OK, you want me to prove it?

Narrator: This is horror itself. Even the minor gods who inspire Óscar are watching in stunned silence. It's the beginning of the end.

Isabella: Fine, I'm going to burn the fifty pesos.

Guillermo and Óscar: No, no!

Isabella: You want to let me do this so you can prove to yourself I'm not selfish? Just *look* who's selfish!

Isabella burns the bill.

Narrator: Apedias faints and the Olympian winds dissolve her like sand, Heritrode bursts into tears and becomes water. You can't see the fire, because the fire marshal won't allow it, but the bill is burning.

Nelly: You're crazy!

Isabella: Oh... Now I'm crazy, when you begged me to do it.

Óscar: I didn't beg you to do anything.

Isabella: You're a voyeur.

Nelly: Are you aware of what it is you're burning, you dickhead?

Óscar: OK, don't call her that. You were egging her on.

Nelly: All because of a shitty coat.

Óscar: It's not a coat, it's trust! You said it yourself! People tell you things and you refuse to understand them until they start making sacrifices. Here! Burn this. *(He takes money out of his wallet.)*

Isabella: *(Loving this.)* You burn it.

Óscar: No, I don't think I could.

Isabella: A hundred pesos. Burn 'em, go ahead.

Óscar: No, no. Not in a million years.

Isabella: OK, give him a smaller bill, maybe he can do it with something smaller.

Guillermo: Yeah, we have to make space. Burn a two peso bill and see how it goes.

Óscar: I don't have two pesos.

Guillermo: Ok, ok, Nelly, can you lend me ten pesos in small bills?

Nelly: I'm telling you you owe me a hundred and fifty and you want me to lend you ten more to give to him so he can burn them!

Guillermo: Exactly.

Nelly: This is crazy. This is evil. This will be punished.

Guillermo: Not at all. You just burned fifty pesos. So now I only owe you a hundred. Burn another hundred and I won't owe you anything.

Nelly: You want me to burn my money so you won't owe it to me? You want me to be out twice as much? I'm not burning any money.

Guillermo: Fine, give it to her.

Isabella: I loved doing it.

Nelly: Because the money isn't yours!

Isabella: It's mine. You gave it to me and I burned it.

Nelly: It's not yours! Where'd money come from, huh? Who owns it?

(She meant to say "Where'd the money..." Her misspoken question hangs in the air for a moment.)

Óscar: *(Scrambling a bit)* Well... you gave it to her, it's hers. She didn't have to burn it, she could have kept it and bought a blouse or something.

Nelly: We're mixing everything up here. Trust with money, dignity with reason... You still owe me a hundred and fifty, what business is it of yours what I do with the money you owe me. I can give it to her to burn if I want to.

Isabella: Now I'm the black hole, huh?

Guillermo: *(To Isabella)* Wait, don't burn that hundred pesos. Just a sec. Give them back to him. *(Isabella gives them to Óscar.)* Óscar, will you lend me a hundred pesos? I give them to Nelly, now I only owe you fifty, and you give them to Isabella to burn. Done.

Isabella: Here it goes!

They all watch, moved, as the bill burns.

Guillermo: That's amazing. Do you have any more?

Óscar: Well yes, but I don't think...

Isabella: Burn it, burn one yourself, Óscar.

Óscar: But I only have hundreds...

Guillermo: Give me one and I'll get change from the coffee guy. You guys want coffee?

Óscar: Yeah, I'd have one now.

Isabella: I'll have an espresso.

Guillermo: I'll be right back and we'll burn all the change. *(Exits to change the bill.)*

Nelly: You people are crazy.

Óscar: That could be.

Guillermo enters with a government document hidden under his sweater.

Guillermo: Hey! How much does it cost to get a form stamped? Three thousand pesos? (*Burns the document.*) I burned it!

Óscar: What did you do?

Guillermo: I burned it!

Óscar: Where did you get that?

Guillermo gestures outside.

Óscar: And what was it?

Guillermo: Beats me! Paperwork, bureaucracy.

Óscar experiences a profound, sudden anguish. He's having trouble forming words.

Óscar: No. No. You don't understand.

Guillermo: It's like burning three thousand pesos.

Óscar: No! It's not like that. You wanted to burn money? You could have asked. That was a form. *Somebody's* form.

Guillermo: It's the same thing, Óscar.

Isabella: Now the dude's going to show up asking for his form and it's not gonna be here.

Óscar: A hundred-peso bill is the same as any other hundred peso bill. But that form isn't the same as the money it's worth. We have to have a minimum of bureaucracy, are you idiots? Without bureaucracy the conveyor doesn't run. Without bureaucracy we'd all be living in caves. Without a minimum of all this you can only manage bearskins and mammoth tusks. I don't like your looks, I hit you with a stick, I break into your cave to attack your family, anybody can get away with anything because nothing's on the books anywhere.

Isabella: OK, you don't have to go crazy about it either.

Óscar: The thing is there's been a case like this. In the past. Apparently, a guy'd gotten fired. I'd just started here. They were reducing staff; the guy was pissed off and opened some files and took out a random folder. Oh god, when we found out! I still dream about it... I dream I'm perfectly calm, and a client comes in. He brings me the file number. 56055/89. This was in 1989. And it's not there. It's

not there anymore. I wake up, I go to the office, and everyone who comes up to the counter has the face of the guy in the dream.

The Client enters, transfigured. As if he were Óscar's vision.

Óscar: I know sooner or later he's going to come, he's going to look me in the eyes and ask for number 56055/89.

Pause. Óscar and the Client look at each other in silence. The Client looks at his file. He could very well be a ghost.

Isabella: I may not have been working here very long, but I want to thank you guys because even with our ups and downs and all that, I still think you guys are good people, and the truth is this is a job like any other job, and you have to live on something, and it's a good atmosphere, and honestly, I have nothing to complain about. *(Pause.)* I want to tell everybody: I'm going to report you guys.

The Client, or the ghost, smiles semi-contentedly and leaves.

Óscar: What?

Isabella: I'm going to report you. You burned government property, the property of the people, unrecoverable property.

Nelly: And who are you going to report us to?

Isabella: *(Very aggressive, re: the stamp she ceaselessly guards.)* You know what this is, don't you? You know what this is?

Guillermo: Stop, stop, Isabella. How're you going to report us for a trivial thing like that?

Isabella: Trivial?

Guillermo: We were all together...

Isabella: Don't include me.

Nelly: And me neither.

Óscar: He's not well, Isabella. He got bitten!

Isabella: I'm going to report him.

Óscar: If you have to report someone, report me.

Isabella: OK, both of you, I'm going to report both of you. I don't discriminate based on religion.

Guillermo: I am not J/...!

Óscar: Wait, Isabella sweetheart, why are you going to report me?

Isabella: You didn't stop him.

Óscar: Neither did you.

Isabella: That's not my job.

Silence.

Óscar: And what is your job?

Silence. Perhaps nobody knows.

Óscar: What is it?

Pause.

Isabella: Hah, you guys believed me? I wasn't going to report you!

Guillermo: Oh my god you're a bitch. I shit a brick sideways.

Isabella: Anyway how can I report you guys, the reports all go to Lydia!

Óscar: Lydia... Ha ha. Oh, that was a scare.

Isabella: All righty. You want to go get a drink, Nelly? Or we gonna keep burning money?

Nelly: Let's go to happy hour, that pub on Mayo Avenue.

Guillermo: No, wait, let's burn a little more money. I'm gonna go get the coffees.

Isabella and Guillermo exit.

Óscar: Nelly, you think in the end your brother might have been right? That thing he said about Lydia?

Nelly: My brother?

Óscar: Yeah, you remember? That weird Christmas we spent at your house...

Nelly: Oh yeah, he brought that... Korean girl...

Óscar: Exactly, you remember? The... Korean girl! What was it he was saying about Lydia, and the offices, and how one day I'd... how one day I'd get to the office and... and...

(He looks around the office with sudden terror; we don't know why. He shakes his head and exits after Nelly.)

Blackout.

Scene change.

Why does every work of art become business?

Part 2. [BUSINESS]

It's the previous Christmas Eve. At Nelly's house. Her son Enzo is shut in his room, absorbed in the computer. Nelly is taking care of finishing touches. Del Monico is dealing with some item in the kitchen, offstage. During the scene change, we see projected the chatroom conversation between Enzo and a virtual friend:

NZvrtl10 fkdup. my old man dates grlz

GhostRider so?

NZvrtl10 no way im doing xms w/him

GhostRider was it his trn???

NZvrtl10 yup. alredy told mom im not going

GhostRider were was it gonna b?

NZvrtl10 friends ranch. escobar. evrbdy crzy old like 40. folk music. evrbdy shtfcd. falling drunk in the pool n we have to pull em out. drinkn naked til there clothes dry

GhostRider rofl

NZvrtl10 i wish. ones a psycoanalyst. always the same blsht. bald like a lightblb. puts a bottle on his head and dances some kindo calypso. ya wanna throw up. thinks hes mr suaveee. stinkin drunk

GhostRider whats calypso?

NZvrtl10 music

GhostRider 4 old people?

NZvrtl10 ya. srsly cheezy

GhostRider don't go

NZvrtl10 not on yr life. staying home

GhostRider cool. we cn chat

NZvrtl10 there all comin here

GhostRider old man 2?

NZvrtl10 yup

GhostRider gross

Narrator: It's Christmas eve of last year. We're going to spend it at Nelly's house. This is not a good idea. But holidays are like that, they pervert things. Also, Nelly insisted. Because Nelly has a plan to solve some of her fundamental problems. Most of Nelly's fundamental problems involve her ex-husband, Robert.

Nelly: Robert, can I not ask you for a simple favor?

Del Monico: (*From the kitchen.*) You're leaving me alone with the electric knife? Like I know how to use this. Enzo!

Nelly: I don't know which end is the handle and which is the blade, it has teeth on both ends. Here. (*Exits into the kitchen.*)

Narrator: Her ex-husband is a philosophy professor. His name is Robert Del Monico, and we'll see him come out of that door in a few moments. He once wrote a short book and managed to get it published: a reading of Hegel, a teaching text more than a critical one, which wound up being adopted by a fair number of high school teachers. It seems that Hegel is complicated.

Nelly and Del Monico are arguing in the kitchen.

Nelly: Everything is complicated for you!

Nelly comes back in with plates of food.

Narrator: But the little book "Hegel at the Schoolhouse" is more accessible. Since then, Robert has called himself by his surname, "Del Monico", instead of his first name, as if he were expecting people to recognize him as the author of that little book, a sensation in the 80's, and say "how great, how great".

Del Monico: (*Appears. Struggling with the knife.*) I may be a man but that doesn't mean this is a tool. It's a kitchen utensil, it's designed for a woman's hands. Enzo! Can you help out your poor suffering father?

Narrator: He now teaches philosophy in a girls' prep school. It's unusual for Catholic girls to be taught philosophy. When it happens, the subject matter is deceptive. They're given a kind of tempered theology.

Del Monico: Enzo! Can you unhook yourself from the computer for a second and help set the table?

Narrator: The extent to which this hidden catechesis can be tempered depends on the ability of the teacher.

From his room, Enzo replies something we don't hear.

Del Monico: “A dick”? Are you kidding me? What do you mean “this isn’t my house”? Look out or you’re gonna get a smack. *(He starts to page through the instruction manual of the electric knife.)*

Narrator: He has his girls read Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, pretending it’s a very wrong and fallacious book...

Del Monico: *(about the instruction manual.)* This is the worst ever...

Narrator: ...but they read it from A to Z...

Del Monico: I’ve read the entire thing.

Narrator: ...making sure that *his* Catholic high school girls have the personal tools to refute any mystical explanation of our origin.

Nelly: But did you stick the pokey thing in the...?

Del Monico: Yes, Nelly, I stuck it in.

Narrator: And he secretly introduces his schoolgirls to Marxist concepts via his famous little book on Hegel, smack there in the place where Marx is a forbidden word.

Del Monico: These things should be banned.

Nelly: It’s super practical. I won it saving up points at the supermarket.

Del Monico: If it’s so practical, come carve the turkey yourself.

Nelly: I told you, I’m scared of it.

Del Monico: Oh great, if somebody’s going to hack off a member it better be me? *(Exits to the kitchen.)*

Narrator: The fact is, his students are neither Catholics nor atheists; they’re girls in a state of hormonal explosion, ready to fly into a tizzy over any strong-voiced professor who wears a pair of pants rather than the habit.

As we listen to Del Monico cut the turkey, Nelly tries to turn on the Christmas tree lights. The plug doesn’t seem to be working.

Del Monico: *(Returns and watches Nelly’s futile efforts.)* You still haven’t gotten that plug fixed? One of these days you’re all going to get electrocuted! Like French fries. I’m gonna find out from the headlines in the Sun.

Narrator: The thing is that for three years now Robert has been having relations with some of his pupils.

Del Monico: We’re going to fly through the air. *(He sits idly, comfortably on the couch, thinking his thoughts.)*

Narrator: Robert can never resist the temptation of these brazen creatures, connected to their magical iPods, who challenge him with their feline, virginal gaze every time he introduces them to Kant's categories. For the first time in his life, in this insignificant prep school, when he was least expecting it, Del Monico has found his place in the world. "It's just for now," he tells himself. In any case, philosophy is a senior class, so the girls are exiting into the real world and there's very little danger his amorous adventures will be found out. After classes are finished, they continue for barely a few weeks.

Nelly: Robert... Are you... are you still seeing... um...?

Del Monico: Yes.

Narrator: And then those pre-university girls forget him. They forget "Hegel at the Schoolhouse." Sooner or later they all forget him: Christina Diaz Caprone, María Luisa Mendizabal, Sophie Vanini. Sophie! And now, like every December, now that the school year is over Robert doesn't know what to do to hold on to these warm, elusive girls, so nervous and so bold. How to hold onto them at least until autumn, when classes begin again and a new set of anxious eyes appears behind scandalous bangs. Seeing him and Nelly together, it's impossible to imagine these two people having anything in common.

Del Monico and Nelly: Enzo!

Narrator: OK: Enzo.

From his room Enzo replies something we don't hear.

Nelly: Enzo, listen to your father and put on something nice OK, your uncle's coming.

Narrator: Nelly and Robert have a son in common, Enzo, barely younger than the creatures with whom Robert abandons himself to pleasure in his studio apartment.

Del Monico: Is he doing OK?

Nelly: Beats me. Go find out.

Del Monico: Why don't you go deal with him.

Narrator: Robert deeply loves his son Enzo. However the system that allows him to only see Enzo on the occasional weekend is ideal for Robert to dedicate himself to his true middle-aged passion: *(Robert's cellphone rings)* Christina, Maria Luisa, and Sophie... especially Sophie.

Del Monico: *(answers his cell)* Sophie! *(Lowers his voice and continues talking with her.)*

Narrator: Robert has been more and more absent, and by the time he noticed it, Enzo had become a kind of cyberpunk emo-boi, lashed to the keyboard, unknown to anyone in the world except his virtual friends on the network. Robert thinks his son's... a bit of an asshole, but what can he do about it? He

makes efforts to feel less guilty. For example, he'd insisted that he and Enzo spend Christmas together at the ranch of some friends in Escobar.

Del Monico: *(We've been hearing quiet fragments of his chat with Sophie.)* At home, silly. Where do you think I'm spending Christmas?

Narrator: Enzo can't stand his father's friends.

Del Monico: *(On the phone.)* I'm stuck here rereading the Greek classics. *(They laugh.)*

Narrator: Enzo told Nelly they were a bunch of self-proclaimed intellectuals who got messily drunk within five minutes.

Nelly: Did you chop up the turkey?

Del Monico: *(To Nelly.)* As best I could. *(Phone.)* My ex. (...) Yes. I'm spending Christmas with my son. (...) Yeah, your age.

Nelly becomes visibly upset.

Narrator: So Enzo said no: he told Nelly who told Del Monico. Since Sophie wasn't going to be available on such a family-friendly day, Robert insisted on spending Christmas with Enzo anyway. Nelly decided they'd all spend it together.

Nelly: If you prefer to spend it with friends, go on, it's fine. I'll tell Enzo you had plans.

Del Monico signals for her to stop bugging him.

Nelly wanders around the house not really knowing how to stay busy.

Narrator: When Del Monico moved out, Nelly completely fell apart. She started to take anti-anxiety medication, and to channel her grief into her work.

Nelly looks at Robert, checks to see if there are any messages on her phone, unplugs the tree, plugs it in again. Turns on the radio, which explodes at an earsplitting volume, immediately turns it off. Walks around. Does nothing of use.

Narrator: But the truth is that Nelly's work is routine and doesn't reward change. Nelly constantly tells herself she's ready to get her life up and going again. That's how she says it: "get her life up and going again". But every time she sees him, she realizes she still loves him.

Del Monico: *(Phone)* Me too.

Narrator: Or maybe she loves the life she'd had with him. So now Nelly is trying to focus on the Óscar thing. *(Nelly looks impatiently towards Enzo's room.)* Óscar is a co-worker, and even though nothing has really happened between them, Nelly enjoys indirectly letting Del Monico know she's "getting her life up and going again". *(Nelly pretends to relax, posing "naturally" on the sofa.)* In order to disguise the true

purpose of the evening, which is to display Óscar and her looking natural together, Nelly also invited her brother Steeler.

Bell.

Nelly: Uch, Steeler!

She goes to open the door.

Narrator: Steeler lives far away, he's a visual artist of some renown, and his private life is a bit of a mystery. He makes conceptual art, it's been years since Nelly saw a single painting of his. Steeler does not paint paintings.

Steeler and Dai Chi enter. Steeler is carrying a present from the Duty Free. Steeler and Nelly hug affectionately.

Narrator: They hug affectionately. But it's clear there isn't much intimacy between them. Nelly thinks he's an eccentric.

Nelly: What did you bring me? A present?

Narrator: But it happens to be Christmas and Steeler is in Buenos Aires. Nelly thought that by inviting more people, her project—of showing herself and Óscar off to Del Monico—would seem more natural. I don't know them very well, but I'm already realizing this decision is going to have catastrophic results. Let's hope for the best.

Nelly opens the gift: a box of pasta.

Nelly: Noodles.

Steeler: Yeah, I didn't know what you were going to make.

Nelly: So you... There's turkey, holiday food. What am I supposed to do with this?

Steeler: Whatever you want. Free country. Peronist but democratic. This is my new girl: Dai Chi.

Narrator: And Dai Chi is me.

Nelly: She's much younger than you.

Steeler: You noticed? I've got twelve years on her. But we're the same sign in the Chinese horoscope, right?

Nelly: Really? What sign?

Steeler: How do I know, Nelly. It's a figure of speech. *(Sees Del Monico, who is still talking to Sophie.)* Del Monico, my friend!

Del Monico makes a frugal gesture as he finishes his conversation. He takes refuge in the kitchen.

Nelly: Well because this is the year of the Buffalo.

Steeler makes some strange signs to Dai Chi. He imitates an animal.

Nelly: What are you doing? Is she deaf-mute?

Steeler: I don't think so. But I don't speak Korean. And she doesn't speak Spanish.

Dai Chi smiles, nods several times, puts her hands together as if praying, and then murmurs some syllables in her native tongue.

Dai Chi: Taw-kee orra-saymee.

Dai Chi wrinkles her snout and acts as though she were nibbling a nut. She emits indecipherable syllabic sounds.

Nelly: What's she saying?

Steeler: Mm.

Nelly: But you guys can understand each other?

Steeler: Squirrel. No.

Dai Chi: Lat. Rittle LAT.

Steeler: Rat, she's saying. She's a rat.

Nelly: Ah, the most intelligent sign. The rat was the first animal to reach Buddha.

Dai Chi *Says something in Korean that sounds dangerously close to:* Sheet a shelf raffing!

Nelly: Robert, hang up and come say hi to my brother!

Steeler: *(Low.)* Did you invite him or did he just show up?

Nelly: Enzo insisted on spending Christmas with his father, what do you want me to do.

Steeler: You could have warned me.

Nelly: Is this the books?

Del Monico enters from the kitchen.

Del Monico: *(A tense wave.)* So? How's it going?

Pause.

Steeler: Fine.

Del Monico: Merry Christmas.

Pause.

Steeler: Yes.

Del Monico: *(Crosses to Dai Chi, offers his hand.)* Del Monico, pleased to meet you.

Dai Chi is startled by this large hand so close, covers her chest in alarm, retreats and performs some Asian reverence. It's all unfortunate. Murmurs something in purported Korean, something that sounds like:

Dai Chi: No-poka tee-tee! Mudda fukka!

Steeler: That's my girlfriend. She's Korean. She has other customs. Don't get too close, she might think...

Del Monico: *(Doesn't believe one word of it— which is logical since Dai Chi doesn't look remotely Asian— but opts to play along with the game in a civilized way.)* Korean?

Dai Chi: Fo-rean.

Steeler: Her name is Dai Chi.

Dai Chi: Dai Chi.

Del Monico: Oh how nice. How do you say Merry Christmas in Korean?

Dai Chi: Tu ply-cee.

Steeler: No idea.

Del Monico: OK, Merry Christmas.

Nelly: They don't celebrate Christmas there.

Dai Chi: Tuuu ply-cee.

Nelly: Enzo! I'm not telling you again!

Óscar emerges from Enzo's room. They all look at him in surprise. They hadn't known Óscar was with Enzo.

Steeler: You grew up a lot since I last saw you.

Óscar: Hi. No! *(Introducing himself.)* Óscar. Óscar Castrilli.

Steeler: Castrilli? This is him? Your new boyfriend? *(Makes a vulgar gesture. Óscar is startled.)*

Nelly: Oh please, no, he's a friend.

Steeler: Oh wow sorry, pleased to meet you, I'm Steeler. I'm Nelly's brother. The baby.

Óscar: Nice to meet you. Merry Christmas.

Del Monico: *(Introducing himself very formally.)* Del Monico.

Pause.

Steeler: Don't tell him your last name... It's creepy, Robert...

All at once.

Nelly: He uses his last name... He wrote this book that...

Del Monico: A book on Hegel, it's not a big deal...

Nelly: Of course, on philosophy, he goes by his last name, he's Enzo's dad....

Steeler: A book on... on...

Del Monico: *(To Óscar.)* I'm Enzo's dad. Hegel. *(“Hegel” was to Steeler.)*

Óscar: Yes of course. The dad.

Del Monico: Yeah, Enzo's grown now, he understands these situations, no need for awkwardness.

Óscar: What?

Del Monico: Well, now that Enzo's... how old is Enzo, Nelly?

Nelly: How bout keep track of it yourself. *(To Óscar.)* What do you have there?

Óscar: Well you see...

Narrator: Óscar is so solid as to be boring...

Óscar: The truth is I did everything a bit wrong...

Narrator: Rather taciturn.

Óscar: I wanted to bring a Christmas present, but I'm terrible at figuring kids' ages, and well...

Narrator: Sensitive, but slightly ridiculous.

Nelly: What?

Óscar: Well I bought him a book, but then I saw he's much more... mature, and I didn't have the heart to give it to him, I'll return it.

Steeler: He's not that mature. What is it?

Del Monico: “The Snake who was Opaque”.

Nelly: But that's a children's' book...

Óscar: OK, yes, but it's a sweet idea... It's about this snake, who's opaque, and so you can't see through her. *(Pause.)* And for example she lies in front of a stick, the snake... And along comes a doggy... And wants to pick up the stick but can't see it...

Dai Chi: Beech-y sake-y pake-y.

Óscar: No, the snake isn't a bad person, it's just that since she's opaque...

Nelly: Ah. OK, don't worry, you can return it.

Óscar: Yeah, I'll buy him something more... I don't know... Something by Hermann Hesse.

Nelly: Do we want to sit down? What's Enzo doing in there?

Óscar: ...dialoguing?

Del Monico: You mean "messaging"?

Óscar: Mm... He and his friends are typing things.

Nelly: They're not friends. They don't even know each other.

Óscar: Wow. They're dialoguing like they know each other.

Steeler: They are friends. Friendly little voices of binary code, half-words that have transcended the pestiferous flesh. I wish I had a million linked-in friends. I'm going to open an account, pass myself off as a tortured teenager with an ecological conscience, see if I catch anything good. *(He introduces Óscar to Dai Chi.)* This is Dai Chi, my flesh and blood girlfriend. *(Heads into Enzo's room.)* Enzo, can you open an account for your uncle the snob?

Óscar: Hello, pleasure to meet you.

Dai Chi performs some obeisance and laughs hysterically for a longish while, which disconcerts everybody. She says things in Korean that seem to be other things, for example:

Dai Chi: Udda mudda fukka no poka!

Nelly: She's Korean.

Óscar: Ah. *(He doesn't understand if this is a joke or what.)*

Nelly: Guys, Steeler says she's Korean, she doesn't speak a word of Spanish.

Dai Chi: Data sow-ryke boor-sheep.

Óscar: Ah.

Suddenly Dai Chi hands out little cards to everyone. They seem to be some kind of Pokémon.

Narrator: Maybe this is a good time to clarify the animosity between Steeler and Del Monico. I'll tell you what I was told, but I might not have all the information. Robert never much liked Steeler. He is pretentious and arrogant, but the worst thing was the books. In 1989, Steeler presented a work in the "Youth for Democracy" Biennial.

Dai Chi offers them cards that seem to bear characters, selecting one for each person. Nobody understands if it's a game or what. She gives Óscar, Nelly and Robert names like: "Ka-Tok", "Brokka Finga-nel", "Ho-Chi-Min" respectively.

Óscar: Oh, look, how nice.

Nelly: It must be her business card.

Óscar: All these little drawings.

Narrator: Everybody was young once. And so was Argentina's democracy.

Nelly: Oh look, mine is different. They're so pretty, how original.

Óscar: Wait, I'll give you my card.

Óscar looks in his wallet and gets out a business card.

Gives it to her.

Dai Chi doesn't understand what she's been offered. Bows in thanks.

She raises Óscar's card to her mouth.

Narrator: The Berlin wall had just come down, everywhere you looked there was an indefinable effervescence. In the end, his piece was very commented upon. Hostile reviews appeared in newspapers. It was a performance in which Steeler himself, seated on a stool, read fragments of philosophical texts and then threw them in the fire.

Nelly: What's she doing?

Dai Chi licks the card and discovers it's not for licking. Smiles in embarrassment. Indicates the cards she gave them.

Narrator: A pile of two hundred philosophy books. Steeler would open one randomly, select a fragment, read it to the auditorium, and then tear out the page and throw it into a bin in which he'd started a fire with lighter fluid and charcoal.

Dai Chi: Rick! Rick! Handy-mowf! Suh-kit beech!

Óscar: Oh, they must be sweets.

Nelly: How original!

They lick them. Long pause. Nelly and Óscar try to eat the cards. Dai Chi makes signs that the cards aren't edible: she mimes licking the card and putting it on the back of her hand, thus transferring the image, then looking with delight

at the image on the back of her hand. We may understand the meaning of this sequence of gestures, but Óscar, Nelly, and Del Monico do not.

Narrator: The performance lasted all day, from 10 to 6. Steeler only took one five minute break to eat a hot dog (the hot dog was much discussed), and then around four in the afternoon, instead of single pages Steeler started throwing entire volumes into the fire. He'd read the title and toss the book to the flames.

Dai Chi: Foto?

Dai Chi takes photos of them licking the cards.

Narrator: The polemics and insults Steeler received were great for his career, and suddenly he became part of certain neoconceptualist art circles. That's when he definitively stopped painting. Nelly never understood why.

Del Monico: This is paper.

Nelly: Of course, they must make it with rice paper, squid paper, they're like treats.

Narrator: Cultural institutions the world over began to commission works. Steeler received scholarships and traveled widely. He ended up living in Zurich. Or Basel.

Óscar: It's kind of... mentholated, is it?

Narrator: The point is that most of these books belonged to Del Monico. One day, Steeler had come to Nelly and Robert's house and asked to borrow some books from the library. Or he just took them. He didn't mention he was going to burn them. When Del Monico found out, he was very angry.

Dai Chi wants to take a photo of Del Monico, but he declines.

Del Monico: It's ink. *(He takes the card out of his mouth and throws it in the garbage.)*

Narrator: Some of the books had been signed by friends, by ex-girlfriends, by some university professor, he said. They were irreplaceable.

Nelly: OK, that's enough. Very tasty, you.

Dai Chi bows her head. Then she sits to look at the photos in her little Asian camera.

Narrator: Included were the complete works of Heidegger in hardcover with burgundy cloth lining. Steeler never apologized. Del Monico asked him several times to give back his books. Steeler always replied evasively and then left the country. But now it was Christmas, and Steeler had come home. As had Del Monico. Everyone had come home.

Steeler enters carrying the sleeve of a shirt, apparently violently torn off. He also has a bit of blood on his nose.

Steeler: Let's see if this can be sewn back on.

Nelly: That's Enzo's new shirt.

Steeler: You don't know what we got into. He'll tell you.

Nelly: What were you doing?

Steeler: Nothing. Just dicking around. Is dinner ready?

Del Monico: You want to eat? Why don't you put those noodles on the fire?

Nelly: Drop it, we're not eating the noodles.

Steeler: Course not, if there's other good stuff. But—seriously—eat them some other time if you want, I'm not bringing them back.

Del Monico: (*With heavy irony.*) No, no, take the Ronzoni back if you want. You're happy to eat Nelly's green bean casserole and turkey, right?

Steeler: Right. Did you bring anything for dinner?

Del Monico: Doesn't matter. Now that you mention it, will you be in Buenos Aires for long?

Steeler: Maybe. Between Buenos Aires and Montevideo. I have a little project there.

Del Monico: Oh, Montevideo, how lovely. Could I ask you something else, could you please give me back Volume I of the Complete Works of Heidegger that you took in 1989?

Steeler: Course. I'll give it to Nelly.

Del Monico: You'll give it to her? You know the one I'm talking about, right? The hardcover with the nice burgundy cloth lining?

Nelly: Please let's not start up with the book routine. You both know the books got burned.

Del Monico: They "got burned"?

Nelly: Can we try to make peace. Or go outside and fight a duel. But this is my house.

Del Monico: Your house? This is *your* house?

Nelly: (*Confronting him.*) As far as I'm able to understand, *now* this is my house. Yes. And I'll invite whoever I like. (*To Óscar.*) Óscar, have a seat. And thanks for talking to that friend of yours about getting Enzo a new passport.

During all this, Dai Chi has taken a yogurt out of her bag and is eating it with her fingers.

Del Monico: A new passport?

Nelly: I've been telling you for two months they don't want to renew it because he tore his ID card, you told me you'd take care of it. Well fine, Óscar's taking care of it now.

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Óscar: Sure. It's not hard for me, some of the guys in security...

Del Monico: Why does Enzo need a passport? Is he leaving the country?

Nelly: You know what, Robert? If you only came to make trouble, you shouldn't have come.

Del Monico: I came for Enzo, and now it would seem he's about to leave the country and I don't even know where to.

Steeler: I told him if he wanted he could come see me...

Del Monico: Oh fine then, if it's to visit his uncle in Zurich...

Steeler: Basel.

Del Monico: ... his uncle the pyromaniac, no problem!

Steeler: Mm. I wouldn't go that far. Burning things is as old as mankind. Entire civilizations have had to burn so we could be here eating turkey and being what we are.

Dai Chi throws the yogurt container on the floor. Nobody dares say anything.

Steeler: And you, Óscar? Don't you burn things? You've never tried burning anything?

Óscar: Noo, I've always had too much respect for fire. Oh, Nelly, did you hear what happened to Lydia?

Nelly: To Lydia? No, what?

Óscar: Oof, you don't know. *(To Steeler.)* A colleague. *(To Nelly.)* You know how they transferred her to Alsina because the Virrey Cevallos office burned down?

Nelly: Yeah.

Óscar: Can you believe, yesterday Alsina burned down.

Nelly: No! The poor thing! Twice in a row!

Óscar: Well... kind of three times, because she'd come from Reconquista, remember?, where it seems there was some kind of short in the electrical system...

Steeler: It's her. She burns the offices.

Óscar: Pardon?

Steeler: Nothing. Just offering the most logical explanation. Why don't I shut up and we can whack into that turkey.

Óscar: The thing is, fire is uncontrollable. It has this destructive power that...

Steeler: Depends in whose hands. It can be a greatly constructive force, if we dive into its contradictory capacities. You know, Óscar, I once did a piece where...

Del Monico: Did you really?

Steeler: ...yes... where basically fragments of some of the “great ideas” were publicly read, pulled from some... volumes... of philosophy, and after reading them, the pages were burned before everyone’s eyes.

Óscar: ...and?

Steeler: The philosophical idea lasted—in this country—no longer than it took to be read.

Del Monico: False, the idea lived on, printed in other copies of the same books.

Steeler: It was a representation. Like a painting. A landscape, but of morality. The represented object in a painting stays frozen— it doesn’t matter whether the actual landscape continues to exist as a mirror image of the painting, or whether now it’s raining on that flowery meadow.

Del Monico: How lovely. So the flowery meadow mirroring your fabulous piece would be, oh, Heidegger and Kant... now all rained upon of course.

Nelly offers Dai Chi some cheese cubes skewered with toothpicks in a cheese hedgehog. Dai Chi lets out a shriek of terror (it may resemble a Pokémon villain that has been haunting her dreams). When she realizes it’s unthreatening she seizes a huge number of toothpicks.

Nelly: Now that you say landscape... Why did you stop painting after that?

Steeler: I have an enormous capacity for surpassing myself. I stopped painting. Now I’ve stopped representing altogether.

Del Monico: Aha. You don’t paint, you don’t write...

Steeler: Words? No!

Del Monico: You don’t represent...

Steeler: I try not to.

Del Monico: So what do you sell to these biennials?

Dai Chi: *(Says something in Korean that seems to sound like) Bour-sheep. (And begins to fix the cheese cubes to the branches of the Christmas tree as if they were snow.)*

Steeler: Well... It gets harder and harder. I mean, to extricate oneself from the fetishism of the commodity ...

Del Monico: ...and still figure out how to sell it.

Steeler: Mm. I'm a survivor. You have to live on something.

Del Monico: Fine, on grants. Subsidies.

Steeler: Subsidies? Please! A cheap toll! A few coins cultures toss artists so we can show them what road to follow.

Del Monico: A cheap toll? Wow. I'd have been delighted if some ministry had given me a grant to continue my work on Hegel.

Steeler: We all would have been delighted.

Del Monico: What's that supposed to mean?

Nelly: Nothing. Basta.

Del Monico: No, "basta" with the bullshit. Check it out, Óscar my friend: Culture is a joke. Here you have one guy who burns books, and one guy who writes them. Tries to write them. Who do you think gets welcomed into the warm embrace of Culture?

Steeler: Alright, it's not that big a deal, I only burned books the once, it's not like I made a career of it.

Del Monico: Only once? Wow, that's great. And I only wrote one book, just the one time.

Nelly: And you did great, they read it in all the schools, "Hegel with the Schoolgirls"!

Steeler can't avoid letting out a cackle at the freudian slip, spitting and/or spilling his drink on Óscar's pants. He may ad-lib something like "That's the second edition!"

Nelly: Agh, what an animal!

Del Monico: Wait, I'll get you some paper towels. *(Exits to the kitchen, really so as to avoid punching Steeler.)*

Steeler: I'm sorry.

Nelly: You're an animal. Please, I'm asking you: don't start up again with the books.

Steeler: I didn't start it.

Nelly: Then end it. Buy a handful of random books somewhere and give them to him.

Steeler: But doesn't he understand that the books no longer exist, that they were burned in all their glory? Can he be that—I mean, *that* naïve?

Nelly: You're a moron.

Óscar: What books?

Nelly: Nothing, my ex lent him some books and he burned them as a work of art.

Steeler: Stop, Nelly, seriously. When you say it like that I sound like a monster.

Nelly: Well if you want to say it another way, go for it. But that's what happened.

Steeler: Yeah but if that's what happened, Robert must be waiting for me to apologize. *(dawning)* I never apologized, did I?

Steeler sees Dai Chi decorating the tree with the cheese and indicates to her that the cheese is for eating. She begins to eat it off the tree. He indicates that no, it should be eaten from the hedgehog. Dai Chi begins to carefully transfer the cheese back from the tree to the hedgehog. In her mouth.

Nelly: I don't want any more drama. Come here, Óscar, let's see if we can get Enzo to lend you some pants, we'll get you out of these, I'll dry them with the iron.

Óscar: It's fine, we don't need to.

Nelly: You're not spending Christmas in my house with pissy pants.

Óscar: It's only a little water.

Nelly: Enzo! See if you can lend Óscar some pants! *(And pushes Óscar into Enzo's room.)* And you, listen here, look in my eyes. We're gonna wrap up the joke and be adults for once. How the hell is that girl Korean? You think we were born yesterday?

Steeler: Dai Chi? She's Korean.

Nelly: Please, Steeler. Koreans are from Asia.

Dai Chi seems to understand that they're talking about her, or maybe understands the supposed joke has gone far enough. She gets up in an extremely Western manner, as if she were ending the scene, and fed up, picks up her purse and leaves for the kitchen shouting indecipherably.

Steeler: *(Trying to calm her down, maybe in German or a made-up language.)* Wait, darling. *(To Nelly.)* See what you did?

Nelly: Fine, keep it up. Adults.

Steeler: She's Korean. *(Pause.)* She was adopted. By a Korean family. They found her abandoned. A Korean husband and wife were on vacation, they found her as a baby on the beach. They asked around there on the beach, she didn't belong to anybody. They adopted her. She grew up Korean. It was after a tsunami. Her biological parents probably died.

Nelly: Seriously?

Long pause.

Steeler: Hand to god.

Nelly: Tourist parents?

Steeler shrugs. Silence. If it were true, and it could be, it would be nothing to laugh about.

Óscar: *(Emerges from Enzo's room, wearing his own shoes and socks with a pair of shorts from some soccer team, which fit him quite snugly.)* Great, he loaned me some lil shorts.

Nelly: You're not wearing those? Enzo!

Óscar: The long pants were all too small.

Nelly: So are those.

Óscar: I tried on everything.

Nelly: You're not going to spend Christmas Eve in those. Enzo! *(Exits to find another pair of pants.)*

Del Monico enters with a roll of paper towels. Sees Óscar. Is about to ask him something. Thinks better of it.

Steeler: Robert, I'd like to apologize to you.

Del Monico: My goodness, OK. That's interesting.

Steeler: About the books.

Del Monico: Yes?

Steeler: I... well, that. I apologize.

Del Monico: And that's it? I mean... let's say for me... I don't know... that's not good enough, and I don't accept your apology... then I'm a son of a bitch on Christmas. Is that why you're here?

Steeler: No, I don't think so. What happened is, the way my sister put it just now, it made it sound like I burned your books like some totally run-of-the-mill insensitive guy.

Del Monico: That is what happened.

Steeler: Mm. It was a piece of art.

Del Monico: To whom? To Culture? To Biennials?

Steeler: You loved those books that much?

Del Monico: I adored them.

Steeler: You shouldn't have lent them to me. *(The next lines overlap.)*

Del Monico: I didn't lend them to you! You see? There he goes again.

Steeler: You lent them to me. *(To Óscar.)* He lent them to me!

Del Monico: I didn't lend them to you! You didn't even tell me what you were going to do with them.

Steeler: Obviously. I didn't know what I was going to do with them. I asked you for them, I read them—OK, I flipped through them—and then I made them immortal. Óscar my friend, those were years when people could still be scandalized by legible actions. (*To Del Monico.*) Seen from another perspective, which because of your personal affective situation you obviously can't occupy, you could feel thankful to me.

Del Monico: This is over. I don't want to fight.

Steeler: Because you don't want to lose. I apologized to you, which obviously... I don't know... is a little hard for me. You could say thanks, couldn't you?

Del Monico: Am I the only person who can see the potential for this to become really disagreeable?

Steeler: (*to Óscar*) Disagreeable? What a word! Don't be afraid, since when do we all have to agree? Not everything in the world can be agreeable. The world is *filled* with contradictions. For that matter the world isn't even the world, it's an ideological construction of *a* world. And by the way, that construction is governed by the logic of capital. Of money.

Del Monico: Not all worlds are.

Steeler: But this one, where you and I are having this conversation, is. The fact that money is constantly tightening the threads of this construction we call the world is why no everyday action, (*as Nelly is drying the pants on a fan, condoms and a lollipop fall out of the pockets*), no contemplation, no bean casserole, no quest for beauty, can opt itself out of the cruel symptom of ideology.

Óscar: How is that?

Steeler: I... see you in those shorts and contemplate the possibility of not explaining anything to you.

Del Monico: No, no, no, please. Go ahead, enlighten us. (*to Óscar.*) I didn't know this one could defend an argument in addition to being a pyromaniac.

Steeler: Defend! That's a piece of cake. The hard thing is the attack. And anyway, it's not my argument. It's pure postmarxism. Look: all around, postmarxism oozing out of everything.

Del Monico: Congratulations. Obviously you read those books carefully before you burned them.

Steeler: Obviously. Turn on the tap and what comes out?

Óscar: Water?

Nelly: Postmarxism, Óscar.

Steeler: Postmarxism. (*Gestures all around. Dai Chi comes back from the kitchen.*) This is a sphere of ideology, gentlemen. There are ideas here. Ideas are inevitable. They come and go. But they're all false.

Óscar: All of them?

Steeler: All of them. They all have a blind spot spiked into their souls, a fatal flaw in their categorical definitions.

Nelly: It's going to be midnight and we won't even have started the potato salad.

Steeler: Exactly! That's what I'm saying. Give me a value, an example, a universal value. A strong idea. Whatever you want.

Dai Chi: (*Sings, plugged into her Asian i-pod.*) That's amor-ee.

Steeler: What?

Dai Chi: Amore.

Steeler: What?

Dai Chi: Amore.

Steeler: Love! Of course. Love is a universal idea. And it's good, right? Love is something very good, isn't it?

Óscar: Most beautiful word in the world.

Steeler: Beautiful! We all say it: love is great! Filial love. Erotic love. Sexual love. What a rogues' gallery! (*Indicates Del Monico.*) Love for friends, (*kisses Nelly*) for family. (*The tree:*) Love for art. Love for little girls. (*Nelly looks at Del Monico.*) For handsome youths. (*Óscar chokes.*) Self-love. (*Steeler indicates himself.*) It's a disaster: it's all gonna add up to love being a piece of crap, or at least to "love" occasionally designating its opposite.

Óscar: But "self-love"... That's not love...

Steeler: What is it?

Óscar: Well... it's narcissism.

Steeler: (*Feigning defeat.*) Oof, yes. And what's that? How would you define it?

Óscar: An excessive... love... for oneself.

Steeler: Oh, love. It is love.

Óscar: OK I used the word but...

Steeler: Of course you used the word! We all use words and we forget that every word is actually an enormous set that includes among its subsets concepts that signify the contrary. Same thing with any other universal value. Whatever you like. Justice. What's just, what's unjust. Beauty. What's beautiful, what's horrible...

Del Monico: Freedom.

Steeler: Freed... (*Pauses.*) Ooh, you nailed me, huh? Perfect. Freedom. (*Hesitates.*) No, I'm not saying anything. Freedom is good. Isn't it?

Óscar: Yes.

Steeler: Global idea. Universal. And it's very good. We say: "Oh boy freedom is really good". "Ugh, those poor people who don't have their freedom".

Óscar: Yes. Look at Iraq.³ Or Cuba, right? I've never been there, but they have it tough.

Steeler: But it's false, you dimwit, it's false. This universal idea of freedom— which is so good— contains more *specific* ideas, concrete examples of freedom: freedom of the press, freedom of expression...

Del Monico: Freedom to burn someone else's books in a biennial...

Steeler: Absolutely!, freedom of commerce (which is also known as usury), freedom of religion (as long as you don't want to wear a turban on an airplane), whatever you like. And at the same time, as you can see, it includes at least one aspect, even if it's just one concrete aspect ("turban") of this global freedom ("religion"), that refutes the universal concept ("freedom") itself.

Óscar: So the real thing goes against the idea it's supposed to be an example of? How does that work?

Steeler: For example: the idea that a laborer has "freedom", that he's "free" to sell his own work on the market that suits him best. That fantastic idea, whose actual name is "exploitation", gets sold to you in a pretty box labeled "freedom". This ugly thing hides there in the pretty box, mixed in with the very opposite concept: freedom. The box, by the way, is called "the idea." What do they sell you in the "love" box? (*re: Del Monico*) Fidelity, (*re Nelly*) family, (*putting his hand on Óscar's thigh*) sexual repression... Every single idea works like that. (*To Del Monico.*) All your ideas work like that. (*To Óscar.*) And all words are ideas. OK, Óscar. How many hours a day do you work?

Del Monico: How many do you?

Steeler: None. I've opted out. But let's check this with our laborer friend.

Óscar doesn't at all like being referred to as a "laborer".

Óscar: Listen: I *am* free to sell my own work on whatever market suits me best. For example, if I decide to walk out of my office...

Steeler: Where do you go?

Óscar: To another division.

³ Or, at the time of this translation, perhaps Syria. Update as needed.
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Steeler: Oh, you *are* free!

Óscar: Yes, “Legal and technical” have asked for me more than once... Haven’t they, Nelly?

Steeler: At this point I’m not sure if it’s the shorts or you, but something here is definitely not OK. *(Pause.)* The very work you sell on your free market is the enslavement of the laborer to capital.

Óscar: Fine, if you guys don’t want I won’t say anything.

Del Monico: And you, do you even know what a laborer looks like?

Steeler: *(Laughs.)* No, but I always pictured him more or less *(describes Óscar)* this height, balding, wearing hot pants...

Óscar: I thought we were allowed to have an opinion.

Steeler: Mh. “Freedom of opinion”. Of course you’re allowed. Let’s opine! But first let’s accept that we’re all united by this primal trauma.

Dai Chi: *(Says something that sounds like)* Ne-rry, tutu menny peenie heeah.

Steeler: We use words, we believe they’re universal, but we apply the particulars however they suit us best, basically words are our alibi! And we justify this sneaky and reprehensible move via the abstract universal idea—“freedom.” We gnaw like rodents.

Dai Chi: Lat! Rittle Lat!

Steeler: We gnaw our words.

Del Monico: Some gnaw harder than others.

Steeler: Well no, some have more success than others. But everybody gnaws. He does, she does, everyone does. The brilliant winners and the born losers. *(Switching referents quickly to avoid getting punched.)* Who live off of Swiss government subsidies.

Óscar: What I think is, maybe we should find another word for the so-called “freedom” of the laborer.

Steeler: No. Error. The exact opposite. It’s terrific that all those freedoms have the same name; in fact *that’s* the basis of the concept of “freedom,” *not* thing we usually think of as freedom, which the cheapest dictionary in the world can define.

Óscar: So the dictionary lies.

Steeler: Hoo-ha!

Óscar: We’re really gonna have to find another word.

Steeler: Look out, you’re starting to get excited...

Óscar: Why shouldn't I?

Steeler: Hey don't get me wrong, it's fabulous. This is what I do for a living! I'm just afraid if we keep going like this, one of these days you're going to show up at your office and light everything on fire. Or this dimwit's going to thank me for burning those fucking books he loaned me.

Del Monico: I didn't loan them to you. And you burned them because you were a long-haired, dope-smoking post-hippy douchebag. Or are you gonna tell me that eyebrow piercing had opted out of the symptom of ideology?

Steeler: (*unfazed*) No. I burned them because, exactly like you— like our new friend Óscar in his hotpants— I'm trying to look for that word. That word that isn't in the dictionary.

Del Monico: Ah, you're an artist! Of course. How wonderful, get paid to not give a fuck about anything.

Steeler: There are a couple things I give a fuck about.

Del Monico: Not words.

Steeler: Well that might be true.

Del Monico: And not my philosophy books.

Steeler: I didn't know how much they meant to you. Period. And anyway, the more they meant to you, the more sense my piece should have made to you. You didn't even come see me at the biennial. You didn't see me eat that hot dog.

Del Monico: I wasn't invited.

Steeler: Ah. Oh. Well um, I'm... I don't know. That could be... That may be the case. Well, I apologize again.

Del Monico: I wouldn't have gone in any case.

Steeler: Fantastic. Nelly, are we going to eat? Nelly, are you OK?

Nelly: No. I can't take another second of this. (*To Del Monico.*) I invited you for Enzo. But as you can see, I'm getting my life going again, so now Óscar's here, and the truth is I'm going to have to ask you to go spend Christmas alone, or with one of your schoolgirls, I don't give the slightest fuck, you can explain it to your son when he's old enough to understand why you abandoned us.

Del Monico: What?

Óscar: What?

Nelly: I don't know what exact type of freedom you're exercising with your little girlfriends. But my brother is right.

Steeler: Nelly... No...

Nelly: He's right about one thing. Freedom sucks. (*Exits, very upset.*)

Pause.

Narrator: Nobody has much more to say. This sort of thing happens at Christmas.

Del Monico: Perfect. This is the thing. I love a girl. Her name is Sophie. Maybe I'm a lot older than she is. But I love her. Right now, while I'm thinking about whatever else, (*to Steeler*) for example punching you in the face, I'm also thinking about her. It's not just a crush. It's not just any love, some universal idea. It is particular, and concrete, and instead of wasting my time here while my ass-hat son tweets and looks at porn, I'm gonna cross this fucking city, I'm gonna seek her out in her house, I'm gonna drag her from the family table and I'm gonna get the hell out of here. With Sophie. To the Bird Sanctuary.

Steeler: (*Wants to respond to Del Monico, but his telephone rings.*) Excuse me. It's the guy from the Montevideo Biennial.

Dai Chi explodes into tiny hysterical applause, and goes to sit at his side.

Narrator: The next day things always return to square one.

Steeler: (*Gesturing to Del Monico that he'll be with him in one sec.*) Hello! Yes, how are you. Merry Christmas!

Dai Chi searches among various absurd objects in her purse and finally passes him a daybook bearing some notes and calculations. Steeler speaks on the telephone but maintains a strange relation of signs and gestures with her.

Narrator: But not yet. This magical hour is still in effect, the system's terrible blind spot where words slowly, painfully die.

Steeler: Right. I've been calculating how much it would cost to do the piece and...

Narrator: Words are all contradictory, and say what they're supposed to say but also contain their opposite.

Steeler: It's not good business.

Narrator: Because words aren't sound.

Steeler: No. I don't think you're going to be able to afford it.

Narrator: They aren't noise.

Steeler: I think you should call someone else.

Narrator: They aren't useful.

Steeler: No.

Narrator: They aren't beautiful.

Steeler: You're not gonna be able to.

Narrator: They have no purpose.

Steeler: No, the piece itself isn't complicated. But you aren't going to be able to afford it.

Narrator: Words are at best our way of existing in the world.

Del Monico sees that the grand exit he'd announced has no spectators, and leaves slowly and in silence. He gets his coat, thinks about saying goodbye to Enzo, but changes his mind and leaves.

Steeler: OK, if you want I'll explain it. You have a sec? We're going to have two or three people, at first they'll talk a bit ... I can send you some sketches for the script. That part's cheap. The interesting thing is that at a certain point in the discussion, they start to burn money.

Óscar, who was about to slip quietly into Enzo's room, stops, a little surprised by this déjà vu. Then he goes into the room.

Steeler: Yes, real banknotes.

Dai Chi undergoes strange contortions of faux-Asiatic laughter. She's a Tasmanian devil.

Steeler: That's the problem. (...) No, it has to be real money. (...) Wait wait wait wait. If an artist asks you for oils and you offer him tempera, what does that make you? (...) No. Why? My piece will cost you exactly the amount of money you're prepared to burn in public. (...) Well... no, it doesn't make sense to do it with that little. I won't put my name on it. It doesn't make sense.

Dai Chi: To-don-to!

Steeler: I can do it in Toronto, they want to burn three times that. (...) How much? *(He makes a sign to Dai Chi. She declines.)* No, I don't know. It doesn't speak to me. I don't know about you guys. (...) What laws of supply and demand? Please, don't come to me with that, it's complete witchcraft! My piece is not a product. (...) I don't know why Toronto offered triple! And I don't care! I'm talking about the *real* value of this piece. Not a pair of Cartesian axes, go argue about that with your bookkeeper. Listen, I mean, I don't know what kind of piece you want: the work of an artist, or an accountant. (...) OK, well we're negotiating, right?

Blackout.

Scene change.

Why does every religion become superstition?

Part 3. [SUPERSTITION]

The dining room in Celina and Ramiro's house. A feverish baby in the adjoining bedroom. A door to the street, another to the baby's room.

The first thing we hear is an intense, persistent rain. Then the Narrator.

Voice of the Visitor (*off*): Many more than two thousand years ago—as we are told in Exodus—the Pharaoh of Egypt, Tutmosis III, was holding the Chosen People captive. The Jews implored him to let them return to the promised land. But the Pharaoh refused.

The god of that people then rose into a patient rage. An organized wrath.

And lashed the Egyptians with ten terrible plagues. He was a god, and his preoccupations didn't go so far as the subtle distinctions between tyrannies and democracies, so to simplify things and make a great story of it, he not only punished the stubborn Pharaoh, but also the entire Jewish people. At least with the first three plagues. With the other seven he protected his people and only punished the Egyptians.

But how did he recognize his people?

How does one recognize a people?

Ramiro and Diana enter, dying of laughter, soaked to the skin. The Visitor enters with them, a very silent man who will never wind up becoming completely part of the scene, but who has a place in it. As if he'd been invited in, and then forgotten. He is often about to speak and thinks better of it. Ramiro is completely and comfortably aware of his presence, Celina not yet.

Ramiro: But who the heck was she? Did you know her?

Diana: No, no. I must have met her at some point, but she's crazy.

Ramiro: I cannot believe that happened.

Diana: Oh please, she was just messing with you!

Ramiro: Messing? No, no, no. I swear (*with a hand puppet gesture*) she totally believed...

Diana: What a son of a bitch. She liked your book, and you mock her like a psychopath...

Celina appears from the baby's room. Very preoccupied.

Diana: Ah, Celina, your husband's a jerk.

Ramiro: Not news to you, my darling. (*Crosses to give her a kiss, eventually kisses her on the forehead.*)

Celina: You guys are soaked.

Voice of the visitor (*off*): Like a sigh.

Diana: It's raining like it's the last time it'll ever rain.

Voice of the visitor (*off*): It could be the last one. This storm. They say the first plague was released by Aaron: he struck the waters of the Nile with his rod, and all the great river ran blood. But the Pharaoh refused to give the Jews their freedom.

Ramiro brings cocktails to Diana and the visitor.

Celina: How was it?

Diana: The book event? Very good...

Ramiro: Total bore.

Celina: Did you sign a lot of books?

Diana: Of "The Snake who was Opaque"? A shit-ton.

Ramiro: I was only signing the old book, as usual, and it was going fine, I guess, until I got ambushed by a muppet.

They laugh like crazy. Celina wants to laugh but doesn't know what's so funny.

Voice of the visitor (*off*): With the second plague, Aaron extended his hands over the waters, and all Egypt was visited with a plague of disgusting frogs, with slimy skin and piercing eyes.

Celina signals to them to lower the volume, gesturing towards the baby's bedroom.

Ramiro: Is he asleep? Sorry, you don't know what I've been through. So I'm signing the book, everything's lovely, I'm talking my head off about "The Snake who was Opaque", a very curious non-transparent snake, she goes here, she goes there, but if she stops in front of something you can't see it because she's opaque, anyway a ton of people are in line for me to sign it, full of kids looking at me like I'm some kind of god, poor kids!, the god who feeds the snake, when this crazy woman shows up, a kind of Shari Lewis with a hand puppet...

Diana: This disgusting frog...

Ramiro: ...this imbecilic, this horrifying thing...

Diana: And this crazy bitch starts talking to him and... (*She's laughing too hard to continue.*)

Ramiro: And she's making the frog talk to me!...

Celina: Like a ventriloquist?

Ramiro: No. No. Like a giant talking turd! She was moving her lips kind of off to the side, “Hello, I’m froggy whatever-my-name-is, and I want to tell you that Ferchu and I loved your snake that was opaque ...”

Diana: And this asshole thanks it, very seriously, putting on his best business voice: “Well thank you very much, Ferchu”...

Ramiro: (*As the frog.*) “Would you sign our copy?”

Diana: And the woman isn’t talking to him, won’t look him in the face...

Ramiro: That fucking bitch forced me to have a conversation with a sock frog!

Diana: No, a toad!

Ramiro: In front of everybody!

Celina: Can’t win for losing, huh?

Diana: All the kids looking at him, he’s stiff as a board, oh god I should have taken a picture for you!

Celina: Was Ferchu the frog’s name? Or the woman’s?

Ramiro: Huh? Beats me! She’s going “Ferchu”, “Ferchu”. Celina, I almost passed out.

Celina: OK, well I hope you were nice at least.

Ramiro: Nice? Me?

Diana: He was almost choking, poor darling. I’m thinking: “Ciao, we’re sunk. Illustrious children’s author punches astonished puppeteer in the middle of the Children’s Book Fair.”

Ramiro: Yeah, that’d be a big problem for you. The goose that lays the golden egg self-destructs in front of your eyes!

Doctor Carpio emerges from the baby’s room. He’s an emergency house-call doctor.

Carpio: Evening...

Ramiro: What happened?

Celina: Nothing.

Ramiro: Did something happen to the baby?

Carpio: No. No, he’s fine.

Celina: He was very squirmy and I called the doctor.

Ramiro: Why?

Voice of the visitor (off): With the third plague, all the sands of Egypt became lice.

Celina: He was very squirmy.

Voice of the visitor (off): But the Pharaoh still refused.

Celina: He had a fever. But by the time the doctor came he was already better.

Carpio: Yes, he's fine. The lil tyke was probly a bit hot with the blanket.

Celina: I was scared.

Carpio: It was good to call. But there's nothing to be worried about. Can I just getcher John Henry here?

Ramiro: Of course, of course.

Celina: I couldn't find the insurance emergency number.

Ramiro: I left it in the drawer with the bills.

Celina: Yes, yes, I know, but I don't know what happened to me, you weren't here, you weren't answering your cell...

Voice of the visitor (off): With the fourth plague came the flies. All kinds of filthy flies.

Ramiro: It was packed. I had to turn it off, it was packed with people... I was signing books.

Celina: Yeah I figured. But I also called you in the morning and...

Ramiro: I was doing an errand all morning.

Celina: And I tried to... What errand?

Ramiro: It doesn't matter what errand, Celina.

Celina: Yes it matters!

Ramiro is quiet. He goes to his briefcase and pulls out the invisible paper from Act I and places it on the table with contained violence.

Ramiro: Here it is. I spent the entire morning bouncing from one office to the next. They had a great time denying me that magical stamp. You know what I did in the end?

Celina: Ah. Well I called you to find out the number of the insurance...

Ramiro: No, no, the thing is you didn't call me. *(Pause.)* He's not in our network?

Carpio: I don't know. Which company?

Celina: I just looked in the yellow pages.

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Ramiro: Ah. There are doctors in the yellow pages?

Celina: There's everything in the yellow pages.

Ramiro: Ah.

Celina: I called the closest guy.

Carpio: Yes, well I'm not that close. The office address is, but by then I was cozy at home.

Celina: Ugh, I made him come all the way from... where do you live?

Carpio: Me? Belgrano.

Celina: *(on the verge of tears)* Ugh, what a long trip for nothing, in all this rain.

Carpio: Don't worry about it, it was good to call, and if your lil guy still has a fever tomorrow you can check with your pediatrician. So you just cheer up, little lady.

Celina: Yes, yes.

Ramiro: Thanks.

Carpio: OK.

Pause.

Ramiro: How much do we owe you?

Carpio: Seven hundred pesos.

Silence. Nobody wants to say anything about the astronomical figure.

Carpio: Make sure he doesn't get too hot, and take his tempie again in a couple hours.

Ramiro: Yes. Um... just a sec.

Checks in his pants pockets, in his soaked suit jacket.

Voice of the visitor *(off):* With the fifth, the livestock died. The horses, the mules...

Celina: I don't have it.

Voice of the visitor *(off):* The camels.

Diana: Well how much are you short?

Voice of the visitor *(off):* The cows, the sheep.

Ramiro: No, wait, I'll go get some cattle.

Diana: Some what?

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Ramiro: Some cash. At an ATM.

Diana: In this rain? You're crazy.

Ramiro: Alright, well I'll pay you back later.

Diana: How much do you need?

Ramiro: Mm... I have a hundred and thirty.

Diana: I have five hundred pesos here. They gave me an advance on the distribution at the book fair, so in any case this week we'd have to pay you out...

Ramiro: Ah. Well it's mine then. Were you ever going to tell me? How's this supposed to work? *(They laugh. To the doctor.)* I'm seventy short.

Doctor Carpio is unmoved.

Voice of the visitor *(off):* For the sixth, Moses took ashes from an oven, threw them into the sky, and God sent them back to earth as itching boils, ulcers and death.

In rhythm with the previous speech, the visitor takes seventy pesos out of his pocket and puts them on the table.

Ramiro: Oh great. Here you go, doctor.

Carpio: Oh, thanks for the change. I'll need it for the taxi.

Ramiro: Right, the taxi. You're not going to be able to hail one in this rain. Can I call one for you?

Carpio: If you'd be so kind.

Ramiro: Yes of course. Just a sec. *(Moves to the side to call a taxi.)*

Voice of the visitor *(off):* With the seventh, the heavens were brought low: rain, hail. Lightning and fire. The sky rained fire mixed with ice. And yet the Pharaoh refused to believe.

Celina: Did you eat?

Diana: No, some teeny sandwiches at the fair, they were disgusting. You know those hors d'oeuvres.

Voice of the visitor *(off):* With the eighth came the locusts.

Diana: Thirty sausages on toothpicks...

Voice of the visitor *(off):* The locusts devoured everything in their path.

Diana: They last about a second.

Voice of the visitor *(off):* The Pharaoh saw famine looming over his subjects. But still he refused.

Celina: We can heat something up.

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Diana: No, it's fine, don't worry about it. I have to go, I'll be eating something at home in no time.

Celina: How are you going to go, in this rain?

Diana: I'll call another taxi. Ramiro, ask them for another one.

Ramiro: *(Still on the phone.)* Oh, sorry, can you make it two? (...) Yeah, same address. How long will that be? (...) *How long?* (...) No, no, send them anyway. *(Hangs up.)* It'll be like half an hour.

Nobody says anything. The atmosphere is unbearable.

Celina: OK, I'll heat up the lamb a bit.

Nobody says anything.

Celina puts a pot on the stove. Then goes into the baby's room. We can hear her weeping. Doctor Carpio lowers his head.

Voice of the visitor *(off):* With the ninth, God—by now fed up— sent darkness. For three consecutive days the sun refused to shine on Egypt. The darkness was so thick you could touch it with your hands. But the Pharaoh claimed to be stronger than God. And refused to free the Jewish people.

The visitor catches Ramiro's eye, as if he were asking permission, and then exits to the baby's room where Celina is.

Ramiro: Sit down, Doctor, please. It's going to be a while. Can I get you something to snack on, or...?

Diana: No.

Carpio: Sure. Thank you.

Ramiro: *(Goes for some snacks.)* What a night.

Diana: You can't see a thing...

Ramiro: Yeah, it's freezing.

Carpio: You guys should dry yourselves off right away.

Ramiro: Yeah, yeah. I was just about to... get a towel... *(We hear Celina weeping through the baby monitor on the table.)* She's a little bit like that, about the baby... It's all so new. He came without instructions.

Carpio: It's OK. What's his name?

Ramiro: The baby? Of course. She didn't tell you his name?

Carpio: No.

Ramiro shakes his head silently.

Diana: (*Joking*) Because he's so ugly.

Ramiro: (*Laughing*) What did you say!?

Carpio: Oh yes. He's homely.

They look at him in silence.

Carpio: Well, all babies are kind of ugly.

Ramiro: Are you a GP or a pediatrician?

Carpio: (*miserable*) Pediatrician. Pediatrician.

Ramiro: Ah.

Voice of the visitor (*off*): So God was getting tired. And sent the tenth plague.

God whispered the plan to his oppressed people. (*Through the baby monitor we hear Celina sing a lullaby.*) "Around midnight shall I finally descend into Egypt", he told them, "in the form of a sigh. And all the firstborn shall die. But do not be afraid, because my breath will not touch our own people." In return for this magnanimous gesture, God asked of his people a single, strictly practical, act of faith: "You shall mark the doors of your houses with the blood of a lamb. And my mortal breath shall pass over the houses which bear that mark". During the day, the patient Jewish people went to find lambs and sacrificed them in His honor, and before night fell, full of terror, they did what their God had asked. And marked the doors of their houses. Then they embraced their children, and all waited, in silence, as the sun set.

The visitor re-enters and sits again in his chair. We hear Celina weeping.

Ramiro: I'm sorry. (*Exits to the bedroom.*)

Diana: Did the baby have a high fever?

Carpio: Nope.

Diana: Mm.

Voice of the visitor (*off*): The story—like all good stories—is full of contradictions. (*Over the baby monitor we hear Celina and Ramiro arguing.*) How is it possible, for example, that the plague of frogs was borne from the waters of the Nile, when it would seem the Nile was still running with blood? Or where did the Jewish people get the lambs to sacrifice, when the fifth plague had killed all the lambs? How did the Jewish people wait for nightfall if the ninth plague had brought darkness, so it was always night? Exodus doesn't explain how all this could have happened in so little time. Nobody explains. If one asks about these discrepancies, they tell you the story is constructed entirely of symbols, as if that freed it from responsibility to the truth. Sometimes it's hard to believe in symbols.

Celina and Ramiro come out of the bedroom. They've been arguing.

Celina: Alright, Doctor. I have to ask you a question. If you have a new car, and you hear that the basilica in Luján performs a mass of healing to bless cars, and you don't believe in anything like that, what is the problem in going to Luján anyway and buying an oilcan of holy water to use for windshield wiper fluid?

Carpio: None.

Celina: You see?

Ramiro: What? What do you want now? You want to go to Luján with the doctor to buy a plastic jug of holy water?

Celina: No. I want to go with you.

Ramiro: Why? I don't believe in any of that.

Celina: Me neither.

Ramiro: Agh!

Celina: The doctor doesn't either.

Ramiro: Agh!

Celina: But we go anyway, you see? That's the difference between you and me. I go anyway. What part don't you understand?

Ramiro: None of it.

Celina: I don't get your problem with blessing the car.

Ramiro: Is it going to protect me from an accident? Is it like insurance?

Celina: How do I know? But it's free. It doesn't cost anything.

Ramiro: No! It costs your *belief*.

Celina: No.

Carpio: No.

Celina: It's a tradition, it's free.

Ramiro: I don't like that kind of thing.

Celina: Why is what you *like* so important to you?

Ramiro: I know my tastes are of no importance to anybody here, but they might be the only thing I've got left.

Diana: That's an impoverished life, if the only thing you've got is your own point of view on everything.

Ramiro: Oh, please, Diana, soo open-minded! I wanna see what you'd do if some imbecile talked to you with a frog.

Diana: *(They both laugh.)* I don't think it'd bother me that much.

They all abruptly look towards the baby's room as if he'd somehow shot himself. We didn't hear anything.

Ramiro: It was outside. It wasn't there. It was next door.

Celina sits down. She's very upset. For the first time she seems to notice the visitor. She looks at him oddly. Then at the doctor.

Celina: Your taxi's on its way, doctor.

Carpio: Thanks.

Ramiro: Look at these bread sticks, Diana. Want to know what they say? "Kosher".

Diana: They're addictive.

Ramiro: No, no, they're "kosher". So they package this homegrown imitation of a German delicacy and slap a stamp on it that says "kosher." But is that true? Kosher means "suitable." Suitable for what? As far as I can tell, Kosher foods follow hygiene rules that are older than the Torah, most of which no longer make sense. So conservative Jews don't eat pork for fear of infections that may have been common then but *don't happen now*. But the precautions get taken all the same. Just because. Because of tradition. So a shit-ton of people see this package says "kosher" and buy it, not because they taste good but because they say "kosher". Tradition!

Celina: We buy them because they taste good. What do I care they say "*kosher*".

Carpio: It's actually pronounced "kahsher".

Ramiro: No.

Diana: No.

Carpio: Yes. Well, it's the same.

Ramiro: So? Are they healthier?

Carpio: Healthy, healthy... nowadays nothing is. Everything's genetically modified.

Ramiro: There you have it. When the word “*kosher*” was invented this genetically modified barley didn’t exist, so it wasn’t prohibited by *kosher*. I mean so it can be *kosher*, comply with all the rules, and be a carcinogenic chemical.

Carpio: Well, it’s never been proved that genetically modified food is bad for you.

Ramiro: That’s my point. Nothing’s proved. It’s also not proved that an oilcan of holy water will protect a Ford Fiesta in a head-on collision. But we go and do it all the same. Out of tradition. Because it’s free. Because it doesn’t do any harm.

Carpio: What harm does it do?

Ramiro: What harm? (*Starts to reply, doesn’t.*)

Suddenly Celina stands up from the table, goes towards the pot where the lamb is heating up, puts her hand in it, burns herself, takes out her hand, covered in sauce, goes to the door and draws an X on it. She curls up on the floor.

Celina: Ow, I burned myself.

Pause.

Ramiro: Excuse me, could you leave us alone please?

Diana: Yes of course. We’ll wait for the taxi in the lobby.

Carpio and Diana solemnly pull together their things. Celina sobs on the floor. The visitor looks at her. Before Carpio can leave, Ramiro flies into a rage at him.

Ramiro: What harm does it cause, doctor? You want to know what harm? My wife lives in terror.

Celina: That’s not true!

Ramiro: Terror! Three months ago we had a son she’s afraid to call by name, for fear he’s going to die. “What’ll I do if he dies?”, she says. “What’ll I do if I’ve spoken his name and then he dies? Huh? What?” (*He starts to cry.*) She’s terrified. I don’t understand the relationship between a plastic oilcan and her terror, between Luján and death, but don’t ask me what harm it does. Seven hundred pesos! That’s the harm it does!

Carpio: Good night. (*Exits.*)

Diana hesitates a moment more in the doorway. Goes to Celina and tries to console her.

Diana: Don’t pay any attention, it’s not you. He’s angry a moron at the fair made him look ridiculous.

Ramiro: She didn’t make me look ridiculous! I *am* ridiculous! I’m the biggest joke I know!

Diana turns off the burner where the dinner is boiling. Goes to the door and cleans off the dripping sauce stain. Leaves the rag there. Makes a small gesture of goodbye. Exits.

The visitor stands, making the chair available for Celina. Celina sits.

Ramiro and Celina, alone with the visitor.

Celina: I'm sorry. I was afraid.

Ramiro: I know.

Celina: What's going on with you? Is it his fever?

Ramiro: It's everything. It's everything.

Celina: He'll be better tomorrow.

Ramiro: Who will?

Celina can't answer.

Ramiro: Who, Celina?

Celina can't answer.

Ramiro: Who will be better?

Voice of the visitor (*off*): And god came down to earth in the form of a sigh.

The visitor arranges things, gets the glasses together, cleans the table. Then he stays very still.

Voice of the visitor (*off*): The darkness was thick, and an icy breeze entered through every crack, filtered through windows, slid below doors. And as had been written, all the firstborn perished. They lay still in their cribs, in their beds. They sighed no more. They all died. Except for the sons of the chosen people. The Pharaoh was forced to submit to the evidence. And the Jews left in freedom. There began the *pessaj*. The passage to the promised land. Let's go back home. Now we can all go home.

Celina: My son's name is... (*Celina whispers the name of her son.*)

Ramiro: At last.

Voice of the visitor (*off*): Let's go home.

The visitor slowly moves to the child's bedroom.

Celina: I'm afraid he's going to die.

Ramiro: That isn't going to happen.

Celina: How do you know?

Ramiro: I don't know. But I'm not afraid.

Celina: Do you think everything we're doing is... OK? *(Pause.)* I don't want to be afraid.

Ramiro: It's alright.

Celina: What's it like to not be afraid? *(Pause.)* How is it done? To not be afraid?

Ramiro thinks for a moment. He can prove nothing. He has nothing to offer. He looks around. There's the visitor. Ramiro breaks. He stands with difficulty. Puts his hand in the lamb. Is burned. Crosses to the door, makes the mark. Smiles at Celina.

Before going into the child's room, the visitor sees the X and changes direction. Celina follows this movement as if watching a ghost.

The visitor exits through the main door.

Ramiro and Celina look at each other.

Celina smiles for the first time. And with infinite care takes her husband's hand.

Blackout.

Rafael Spregelburd

January 18, 2009

Trans. Samuel Buggeln/Ariel Gurevitch

May 2013

Inching Towards Yeolha

By Sam-Shik Pai

Translated from the Korean by Walter Byongsok Chon

In October 2010, Columbia University saw the staging of *Walkabout Yeolha*, an adaptation of a Korean play by Sam-Shik Pai. This production, an MFA thesis project for Korean director Kon Yi ('11), marked an encounter that, in my opinion, has yet to become more frequent: an exposure to contemporary Korean playwriting for U.S. audience. It was with great pleasure and pride that I became part of this project as translator of the original play by Pai.

It was in the summer of 2010 that the director Yi contacted me about this play, which, in Korea, premiered at Towol Theater in Seoul Arts Center, directed by Jin-Taek Sohn, in March 2007. A literal translation of the original title would be *Inching Towards Yeolha*, Yeolha being the destination of Jiwon Park (aka Yeon-Ahm), an eighteenth-century Korean philosopher who traveled to China in pursuit of practical ideas to modernize the traditional Korean society, which was driven by Confucianism. Based on Yeon-Ahm's travelogue, *The Jehol Diary*, Pai created an allegorical satire, exploring the questions of tradition and innovation. Pai introduces us to a nearly-fossilized, fictive village in a desert, and guides us through the turbulence the village undergoes at its first encounter with what the villagers call the "exotic." Yeon-Ahm, the narrator of the play, is a "four-legged beast" and, as she tells the villagers of the world outside the village, provides the initial conflict of the play. Her talking eventually makes her the scapegoat to save the village from being "erased."

In the American theatre scene, contemporary Korean playwrights are only to be found by avid researchers aiming to find them. Part of the reason is that Korea's theatre development suffered a disconnect in the early twentieth century while it was under the occupation of Japan. Only after 1950 could Korean theatre emerge again. In the director's note, Yi mentions he found only three Korean playwrights whose works had been translated into English—Taesuk Oh, Yun-taek Lee and Kang-baek Lee—which gave him a strong incentive to bring *Yeolha* to life in New York. The three aforementioned playwrights are some of the most recognized playwrights in Korea, yet hardly any of their work has received a professional production in the U.S.

In theatre history education, the significance of Korean theatre is mostly allotted to the ritual tradition of *Kut* and mask dance called *Talchum*. However, the modern and contemporary playwrights are hardly covered compared to well-recognized Asian playwrights such as China's Gao Xingjian (*The Bus Stop*, *The Other Shore*) or Japan's Yukio Mishima (*The Lady Aoi*). While Korean-related themes have been depicted by playwrights such as Young-Jean Lee (*Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*), Julia Cho (*Aubergine*), and Lloyd Suh (*American Hwangap*)—to name a few—it is reasonable to say that these two authors write from a distinctive Korean-American perspective.

The American audience was first exposed to a Korean theatre production with the LaMaMa production of *Prince Hamyul*, an adaptation of *Hamlet*, directed by Minsoo Ahn, in 1977. A revival of this piece called *Hamyul/Hamlet* played LaMaMa in July 2011, directed by Byungkoo Ahn, the son of

Minsoo Ahn. Recently, more Korean troupes have been bringing their acclaimed productions to the U.S. In 2009, Sadari Movement Laboratory performed their adaptation of Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*, directed by Do-Wan Lim, at the Public Theater as part of the Under the Radar Festival. Seoul Factory for the Performing Arts (SFPA) put on their adaptation of Euripides' *Medea*, called *Medea and its Double*, at LaMaMa in January 2010. These companies imaginatively fused western classics with traditional Korean performance elements and created original works crossing over both cultural traditions.

For *Walkabout Yeolba*, the guarantee of performance, combined with the significance of representing a new Korean play to the New York audience, was certainly a big advantage as I entered into the translation process. Picturing the performance venue, I imagined how the words of Pai could be delivered to the audience. My primary objective was to enable fluent communication between the two cultures: making what is Korean in Pai's text *present* and relevant for the American audience. As is frequently touched upon, translation entails "cultural interpretation" and, therefore, requires not only proficiency in both languages but also a complete embracing of both cultures.

In *Yeolba*, my first challenge was to make explicit and active what is innately Korean. The village in the play takes after a traditional Korean village that operates on a hierarchy based on patriarchy and gerontocracy. What is unique in terms of language among people who have become so familiar with each other is that they often use insinuating and provocative remarks in place of straightforward statements. For example, to a prodigal son who returned home after a long absence, a Korean mother would sarcastically say, "You're back already? Are you sure you had enough fun out there?" instead of bursting into tears and showing her joy at the reunion. In the play, the villagers by now have absorbed this kind of language pattern, which reflects the intimacy among them. The language among the villagers also reflects the hierarchy. For example, a village senior could throw a denigrating comment to a village woman or boy without being considered the least bit insulting. Showing respect for elders is, after all, deep in the Korean cultural genes, and elders, if not receiving the proper respect, actively demand it. While the play clearly provides the appropriate context for the tone of each word, it was my responsibility, when it came to the underlying Korean sentiments, to find the right expressions to convey the subtle nuance.

More broadly, delivering the right tone was of utmost importance for the allegory and satire in this play to be fully realized. The idea which prevails in the story—tradition being threatened by innovation—establishes this play as an allegory about the danger of complacency, while the chaos the villagers go through in the struggle brings out comic and satiric elements. Conflict occurs more often between groups or between individual and group than between individuals, so each character needed not only to breathe as an individual, but also to be characterized as a type, that is, as a member of a certain group. For example, the men, in general, give straightforward addresses, while the women speak more in a scrupulous manner. The seniors, to show their authority, use formal and commanding vocabulary, while the boys talk in fragments and colloquial idioms. The main characters are given their own particular ways of speaking: Yeon-Ahm, the narrator, speaks articulately and objectively, just like the Stage Manager in *Our Town*; and the Inspector, to emphasize that he belongs to a completely

different world, uses bombastic phrases and terms.

Since the premiere of *Walkabout Yeolba*, several new Korean and Korean-American voices emerged, including Hansol Jung (*Cardboard Piano* at Humana Festival, *Among the Dead* at Ma-Yi Theater Company), Celine Song (*The Feast* at MAP Theater in Seattle), and Jihae Park (*Peerless* at Yale Repertory Theatre). Moreover, the growing popularity of K-Pop, currently at its peak with the global phenomenon BTS (Bangtan Boys), has put Korea on the mainstream cultural map as well. Yet translation of contemporary Korean plays still remains an underexplored field. In the current climate where theatres actively pursue diversity and inclusivity, translations not only open up intercultural communication but also address and reflect the present from a global perspective. In a time of multiple tumults, *Inching Towards Yeolba* offers us questions about complicity and its consequences, the need for as well as danger of innovation and new ideas, and how to find footings in moments of transitions. It is my hope that this play can generate more curiosity about Korean theatre and initiate more opportunities for contemporary Korean plays to be introduced.

The original Korean production of *Inching Towards Yeolba* premiered at Towol Theater in Seoul Arts Center, directed by Jin-Taek Sohn, in March 2007.

Walkabout Yeolba, an adaptation of this translation, premiered at Columbia University, adapted by Kyoung H. Park and directed by Kon Yi, in October 2010.

A passage from Act II and Act III was presented as a staged reading, directed by Sam Buggeln, at the conference Drama Across Borders: the Politics and Poetics of Contemporary Theatre in Translation, held at Cornell University and The Cherry Arts Space in Ithaca New York in May 2018.

The English translation of Act I is published in *Asymptote*, October 2018.

SAM-SHIK PAI is an acclaimed contemporary Korean playwright and a professor of playwriting at Dongduk Women's University in Seoul, Korea. He launched his career with his play *November*, which premiered at the Seoul Performing Arts Festival in 1999. He has written award-winning plays including *The Woman from Afar* (2014 Cha Beom-Seok Drama Award for Best Play), *The White Cherry* (2009 Donga Award for Best Play), *Inching Towards Yeolba* (2007 Donga Award for Best Play, Dae San Literary Award), and *A Fairy in the Wall* (2005 Donga Award for Best Actress). His recent play *1945* premiered at Myeong-Dong Art Theater in July 2017. He holds a BA in anthropology from Seoul National University and MFA in playwriting from Korea National University of Arts.

WALTER BYONGSOK CHON is an Assistant Professor of Dramaturgy and Theatre Studies at Ithaca College. He served as dramaturg at the Yale Repertory Theatre, Yale School of Drama, the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, the Great Plains Theater Conference, and the New York Musical Festival. His articles have been published in *Theater*, *Praxis*, *The Korean National Theatre Magazine*, and *The Mercurian*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Fall 2018)

The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy. He translated Sam-Shik Pai's *Inching Towards Yeolba* from Korean to English, an adaptation of which premiered at Columbia University as *Walkabout Yeolba* in 2010. His Korean translation of Charles Mee's *True Love* premiered at Seoul Performing Arts Festival in October 2012. Recently, he became the managing editor for South Korea for the online magazine *The Theatre Times*. Walter received his BA in English from Sungkyunkwan University in Korea, MA in theatre studies from Washington University in St. Louis, and MFA in dramaturgy and dramatic criticism from Yale School of Drama, where he is currently completing his doctoral dissertation.

INCHING TOWARDS YEOLHA

열하일기만보

CAST OF CHARACTERS AND ETYMOLOGY OF NAMES

THE INSIDERS

Village Seniors

HO-CHEH (豪彘)	Despotic pig, First Senior of Yeolha, 60s.
GANG-RYANG (疆良)	Righteous and benign, Second Senior of Yeolha, 60s.

Village Chief

CHOO-OH (騶吾)	Keeper of the cattle, Chief of Yeolha, 50s.
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Village Men

CHANG-DAE (昌大)	Flourish and prosper, Yeon-Ahm's owner, 60s.
JANG-BOK (長福)	Lasting luck, 60s.
BOO-HYEH (晷僊)	Patiently waiting, 40s.
YOO-YOO (筱筱)	Name of a legendary beast, 40s.
KYO-CHOONG (驕蟲)	Arrogant bug, 40s.

Village Women

CHO-MAE (草味)	The world still in darkness, Jang-Bok's wife, 60s.
GEE-YUH (鶻鷄)	Bird name A widow, 50s.
GOO-YUH (瞿如)	Easily taken by surprise Boo-Hyeh's wife, 40s.
SAHN-YUH (酸與)	Sympathetic, Kyo-Choong's wife, 40s.
MAHN-MAHN (蠻蠻)	Barbarian, savage, Village "Educator," 20s.

Village Boys

GUH-BOH (舉父)	A doer, leader, A teenager.
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SAHN-GOH (山高)	High mountain, Kyo-Choong and Sahn-Yuh's son, a teenager.
JEH-GUN (諸犍)	Totally castrated (cow), Boo-Hyeh and Goo-Yuh's son, a teenager.

THE OUTSIDERS

YEON-AHM (燕巖)	Swallow's rock, A scholar of <i>silhak</i> (practical studies, promoting industrialization, commerce, and the introduction of foreign technology) from the Joseon Dynasty. The narrator of this play.
INSPECTOR	Touring Inspector of Internal-External-Private-Public-Individual-Communal-Commonplace-and-Mysterious-Affairs-Executive-Bureau
PAN-CHEN (班禪) LAMA	Zen-sharing camel, a camel
CHO-JUNG (楚亭)	Cho Cynasty's gazebo, a tiger
MOO-KWAN (懋管)	Exuberant pipes, a silkworm

ACT I

An open field. A sandstorm has just come and gone. A bell rings from a distance.

YEON-AHM: How it happened, what caused such a mystery, who could ever guess what God has in mind. Once upon a time in a tiny village called Yeolha, there used to be a spring, known for its limitless outpouring of hot water throughout the seasons. Yet over time, the village turned into a desert, lost its legacy, and fell into oblivion. Now all you can see is land, plain land, which directly meets the sky...

(The stage gradually lights up while YEON-AHM is speaking. A post at downstage center. A rope, tied to the post, is extended to both ends of the stage. Other than that, it is an empty stage.)

YEON-AHM: ...too small for a Manchurian horse, too big for a pony, not a donkey, not a mule, from a certain angle resembling a dog but is certainly not a dog, there was an eccentric four-legged beast embodying some characteristics from all the aforementioned animals. She had double eyelids, and while her hair was shiny and reddish, her ears were huge and whitish.

(While speaking, YEON-AHM turns into the "four-legged beast.")

YEON-AHM: It all started on a spring day when the beast's senile owner, thinking she is fully grown, decided to put a yoke on her and gag her, a spring day when a sandstorm blurred the boundaries between land and sky, erasing what little was left of the barren landscape.

(Senile CHANG-DAE enters, with one hand carrying a fodder bucket and with the other holding on to the rope. CHANG-DAE is wearing sand-protection glasses. He puts down the fodder bucket, catches his overdrawn breath, and takes off the glasses.)

CHANG-DAE: Mee-Joong! Mee-Joong... Are you deliberately starving yourself to death? (putting fodder in front of her) Eat. Eat, please. Have a shot at it.

(The BEAST looks away. A GIRL with protection glasses swayingly enters, holding onto the rope. She is wearing high heels, surprising footwear for the desert. The heels get stuck in the sand, making it hard for her to proceed.)

MAHN-MAHN: Mr. Chang-Dae!

CHANG-DAE: Who is it? Mahn-Mahn?

MAHN-MAHN: Yes! Can you help me?

(CHANG-DAE helps her to the post. MAHN-MAHN takes off her glasses and catches her breath.)

MAHN-MAHN: What a sandstorm! I can't see a thing.

CHANG-DAE: You can easily get lost on a day like this. Why didn't you stay inside?

MAHN-MAHN: *(approaching the BEAST)* Curiosity. Not yet?

CHANG-DAE: No.

MAHN-MAHN: *(bugging and rubbing the BEAST's neck)* Mee-Joong, Mee-Joong...

(The BEAST sullenly frees itself)

MAHN-MAHN: What is the matter with you?

(The village boys—GUH-BOH, SAHN-GOH, and JEH-GUN—noisily enter, holding the rope, calling after CHANG-DAE)

GUH-BOH: Not yet?

SAHN-GOH: No?

JEH-GUN: Did she?

CHANG-DAE: No.

GUH-BOH: Two weeks!

SAHN-GOH: Fifteen full days!

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JEH-GUN: No eat. No sleep!

GUH-BOH: What a freak!

SAHN-GOH: A wonder! A true wonder!

CHANG-DAE: (*boxing their ears*) You rascals! What's so exciting about that?

GUH-BOH: The thrill.

SAHN-GOH: And the fun.

CHANG-DAE: Fun? I am dying of anxiety, and you say "fun"? Can't you find any other "fun" stuff?

SAHN-GOH: No, sir.

JEH-GUN: I'm bored to death.

MAHN-MAHN: Hey. I play with you.

SAHN-GOH: Yeah. Like every day.

GUH-BOH: How come there is not a single soul getting lost and coming into the village this year? Remember last year? That three-legged man?

JEH-GUN: Him? The village seniors hid him in the dugout, forbidding any contact with him.

GUH-BOH: You are so stupid.

JEH-GUN: What? Then you?

SAHN-GOH: Went to see him every night.

JEH-GUN: You, too, Sahn-goh? Without me?

SAHN-GOH: If we brought you, you would have told the seniors right away.

GUH-BOH: Those weird stories he told. He wouldn't shut up.

JEH-GUN: What kind of stories?

SAHN-GOH: None of your business.

JEH-GUN: I can still tell the seniors. You know what they say. Anyone from outside this village is a spy from the enemy.

SAHN-GOH: Traitor. We couldn't tell you if we wanted to. We couldn't understand a thing.

JEH-GUN: Are you kidding?

SAHN-GOH: You dumbass. That's the weird part. Why would it be weird if we could understand everything?

JEH-GUN: I bet he understood everything you said. Spies can do that.

GUH-BOH: You think we're that stupid? We did the same to him.

(GUH-BOH and SAHN-GOH speak to each other in nonsensical sounds. They laugh.)

SAHN-GOH: All night long.

GUH-BOH: Man. What fun we had!

JEH-GUN: No way!

SAHN-GOH: You have no idea. But we expect none from you anyway, Jeh-gun!

(The VILLAGE WOMAN—GEE-YUH, GOO-YUH, and SAHN-YUH—enter along the rope.)

GOO-YUH: Are you here, Mr. Chang-Dae?

CHANG-DAE: Who is it?

GEE-YUH: Not yet?

CHANG-DAE: No.

SAHN-YUH: Did she die?

CHANG-DAE: No!

SAHN-YUH: How bizarre.

GEE-YUH: That's it! She's pretending to be sick so she doesn't have to be gagged and put to work.

GOO-YUH: That's not it. I think she ate something bad. I'm sure of that.

SAHN-YUH: Maybe a worm got in her head?

CHANG-DAE: Cut it out, you handfuls! You're not helping.

GEE-YUH: We're simply concerned.

CHANG-DAE: Concerned? You're just waiting, aren't you? For this hairy thing to...

GEE-YUH: *(Cutting him off)* Speaking of death—which, by the way, is just awful, awful! —if she does die, can I keep the tail? It's supposed to prevent hair loss.

GOO-YUH: I call foot!

SAHN-YUH: Ribs!

CHANG-DAE: Don't even think about it. Even if she dies, you will not get a single hair. Because I will cremate her and throw her into thin air.

GEE-YUH: What? You're going to burn her?

GOO-YUH: That's not fair!

CHANG-DAE: Why is it any of your business what I do with my pet?

SAHN-YUH: Because she is all of our business! Where did all the millet stalks that she devoured come from? From our fields in our village!

GEE-YUH: You said it! It is our business.

(From the other side enter the VILLAGE CHIEF—CHOO-OH—and VILLAGE MEN—BOO-HYEH, YOO-YOO, KYO-CHOONG, and JANG-BOK)

JANG-BOK: *(yawning)* I will kill myself first before seeing the damn donkey die!

CHANG-DAE: Donkey? Watch your mouth! She's a horse.

JANG-BOK: Whatever that thing is, her whinnying keeps me awake all night long. How long has it been?

GUH-BOH: Two weeks!

JANG-BOK: Don't I know that? We should do something about it!

CHANG-DAE: I did everything I possibly could.

CHOO-OH: Did she?

CHANG-DAE: *(Sighs.)*

JANG-BOK: I told you. She's horny. She misses her other half!

CHANG-DAE: That's not what it is.

JANG-BOK: I'm telling you!

CHANG-DAE: Believe me. I took her to Boo-Hyeh's horse, Yoo-Yoo's mule, and Kyo-Choong's donkey. You all saw that, didn't you?

BOO-HYEH: Yeah. How she fought.

YOO-YOO: Tell me about it. She kicked and broke our mule's front teeth. All of 'em.

JANG-BOK: What happened to Kyo-Choong's donkey?

BOO-HYEH: Took off. Like the wind.

JANG-BOK: Coward. Just like his owner!

KYO-CHOONG: Shut your mouth! He's smart like me!

JANG-BOK: Then what is the matter? *(To VILLAGE CHIEF)* Hey, Chief. Any clue?

CHOO-OH: *(Examining the beast from all sides)* Even on close inspection, I don't see anything wrong.

JANG-BOK: It's hopeless! There is no point in keeping this thing alive. Let's eat her before she loses more weight.

CHANG-DAE: Eat your wife!

JANG-BOK: What did you say?

CHANG-DAE: Your wife. There's no point keeping her alive!

JANG-BOK: You little...you better watch yourself...even when you tell the truth!

CHANG-DAE: Look who's talking about the truth! Do you know what she means to me? In my sixty years, my son Mee-Joong was all I had, and now it's this hairy thing...

CHOO-OH: Can we maybe leave her in the field?

CHANG-DAE: What if she runs away, just like Mee-Joong? I won't be able to catch up with her. *(Sighs.)*

GOO-YUH: You pamper her too much.

SAHN-YUH: She's right. You regard her as your son but treat her like a village fool.

YOO-YOO: Spare the rod, and spoil the child.

CHANG-DAE: I tried the rod. Only I couldn't. Look at her huge round eyes. They were filled with tears, begging me...

GEE-YUH: Mr. Chang-Dae's a softy, and it's no good.

YOO-YOO: I've had it! Give me the rod. I will correct her in a second.

KYO-CHOONG: Are you that stupid?

YOO-YOO: What did you say?

KYO-CHOONG: I am well aware of her symptoms. When hair first grew in my fire pot, I had the same predicament.

YOO-YOO: Which is?

KYO-CHOONG: Depression.

ALL: Depression?

KYO-CHOONG: One aggravated by insomnia and anorexia.

JANG-BOK: When you had that, your father beat the hell out of you.

KYO-CHOONG: That did not cure me. It rather...

GEE-YUH: Okay, we get it. You had it and now she's having it. But what the hell caused the depression? What's the reason?

KYO-CHOONG: It is...my father beat the reason out of me. Anyway, that beating ruined my life!

YOO-YOO: That beating made you who you are! You should be thankful. Depression? What a joke! We should beat the hell out of her so that there's no room for depression!

KYO-CHOONG: What did she do? This is all Mr. Chang-Dae's fault.

CHANG-DAE: My fault?

KYO-CHOONG: Just look at yourself! You're like a ghost.

CHANG-DAE: I don't sleep, I don't eat, all because of her.

KYO-CHOONG: That's the problem! A beast takes after her owner. But the owner shouldn't take after his beast! Why don't you try being all happy and smiley first? You show your melancholy, filthy face to her, and no wonder she doesn't sleep or eat.

CHANG-DAE: Is that so?

KYO-CHOONG: Smile! Make her laugh! Try it!

CHANG-DAE: *(laughs awkwardly)*

JANG-BOK: What the heck! Did you chew sumac? What was that?

CHANG-DAE: It's been a million years since I laughed myself.

(CHO-MAE, JANG-BOK's wife, calls for him from outside.)

CHO-MAE: *(voice)* Ao! Ao! Oe ou oe aa uu, uu ae! Aa uo oe ue eea!

(Jang-bok! Jang-bok! Where the hell are you, you brat! I'm going to break your legs!)

(ALL are startled.)

SAHN-YUH: Go! Before she catches you.

JANG-BOK: On my way! *(to CHANG-DAE)* If I hear her cry one more time when I'm sleeping, I am going to break her neck!

GOO-YUH: Let's hit the road! Or we'll get the rod ourselves.

GEE-YUH: Cho-Mae is so bizarre! She can't hear! She can't see! Oh God, here she comes!

YOO-YOO: *(exciting)* Listen to me! A kick in her ass will do the job!

KYO-CHOONG: *(exciting)* Laugh! And make her laugh! Don't let a kick in the ass ruin another life!

GOO-YUH: *(exciting, to CHANG-DAE)* Speaking of kicks, I get the feet!

GEE-YUH: I get the tail!

SAHN-YUH: Ribs!

BOO-HYEH: Women!

(The Village people exit from CHANG-DAE's house in all directions. CHO-MAE enters, holding the rope and swinging a rod. Her gait mimics an elephant's. She is hard of seeing and hearing. Therefore, she is loud and swings her rod recklessly.)

CHO-MAE: Ae eue ae ou! Ouo Ae uo uo ae ee een aa ae un ee ae oua uo ae!

(Get here at once! Or I'll put your head between my legs and piss all over your face!)

JANG-BOK: I am right here!

(CHO-MAE grabs JANG-BOK's nape.)

CHO-MAE: Uou ue ie ou! Uea ou ea ae uou eae?

(You useless bum! Where on earth have you been?)

JANG-BOK: It won't happen again. It is all my fault.

(CHO-MAE beats JANG-BOK with the rod. JANG-BOK does not resist.)

CHO-MAE: *(sniffing)* Oaa? Oa ee oou uee?

(What? What's that odd smell?)

(CHO-MAE exits with JANG-BOK, tilting her head.)

CHANG-DAE: Is that so? All my fault? I look like a ghost? Damn! It is all my fault. It's always like this. If anything goes wrong, I am to blame. (sigh) Okay. I will laugh. Mee-Joong, Mee-Joong, look at me. Alright...laugh. What's not to laugh about! So, look at me...

(CHANG-DAE tries to laugh for his BEAST (= MEE-JOONG = YEON-AHM). He laughs this way and that way and later uses his hands, feet, his whole body, and tries everything he can to make the BEAST laugh. While CHANG-DAE is making an effort, the BEAST speaks.)

YEON-AHM: That's right. This beast is suffering from depression combined with insomnia and anorexia. This critical condition started one morning, from the top of her nose. Just a regular itch. Something that would go away if she ignored it. But that morning, she just couldn't let it go. It was unbearable! She would rub her nose on the stable post, roll on the floor, and do everything imaginable to stop the itching. Did it go away? It only got worse! This poor beast was a complete prisoner of the itching. All day long she would fight the itch, only to find herself totally exhausted in the evening. Sensing the strange smell of her own blood filling her nose, the beast lay her chin on the stable post, looked out at the sandy whirlpool in the darkness... and asked herself: "What is making me so itchy?" It all started from this question. The beast began to 'think.'

(CHANG-DAE now sings and dances in merriment.)

CHANG-DAE:

Over the stove, the millet rice is boiling, boiling, boiling.

Why not take a bite? Oh God, how yummy, yummy, yummy.

Over the stove, the millet gruel is boiling, boiling, boiling.

Why not take a bite? Oh God, how yummy, yummy, yummy.

Over the stove, the millet cake is frying, frying, frying.

Why not take a bite? Oh God, how yummy, yummy, yummy.

Over the stove, the millet rice cake is ripening, ripening, ripening...

(While the song continues with the same cooking motif, the village PEOPLE enter from the back of the stage and enact what is happening in the BEAST's mind. This can be referred to as 'the brief history of the world.' They pass through the storm and build a road with the ropes. They connect separated roads or build new ones. The ropes are entangled like a spider web. While all this is happening, the BEAST speaks.)

YEON-AHM: The beast was snowed in with numerous questions, as many as the grains of sand from the storm in the dark field. That night she stayed up, with her eyes wide open. Also, the next day, and the day after that. Who can say that, among the many, many dayflies that ever set foot on the earth, not one of them learned the fundamental truth? Suppose there was one, then we can say what happened in its mind is now happening to this beast. On the seventh day, this beast became omniscient, and her greedy spirit transcended space and time and roamed between the past and the future. Among the memories of the past, the present, and the future, she got lost. On the second seventh day—that is yesterday—the beast couldn't go on any longer. If only the senile owner had a little more patience, the countless memories jamming this beast's head would have vanished—poof!—during a doze. Dulled by exhaustion, the beast felt terribly lonely. At that moment came the old man's merciless beating and the lonely spirit had to hold on to that. At that moment, the beast recognized herself in the old man for the first time and chose to stay with him.

(The BEAST (YEON-AHM) absent-mindedly observes CHANG-DAE's performance, clucks her tongue, and, like an almost subconscious habit from the past, tries to fold her legs and sit. However, she loses her balance and topples over. CHANG-DAE looks at this.)

CHANG-DAE: Look at you. Your legs are wobbly, and you can't support yourself! Up! Now! If you fall now, you will never stand again!

YEON-AHM: Chang-Dae.

CHANG-DAE: *(looking outside)* Who is it? Jang-Bok?

YEON-AHM: Something's wrong. Very wrong.

CHANG-DAE: *(blankly stares at YEON-AHM for a few seconds and then shakes his head)* How bizarre. Well, this hairy thing kept me awake for days.

YEON-AHM: My body, there's something wrong with my body. Chang-Dae. Help me up. A terrific story just popped into my head. But then I got stuck. On such occasions, I must sit, fold my legs, and cup my chin in my hands to continue thinking. *(She attempts the posture she just mentioned but keeps falling down.)* Ouch. What is happening to me? I cannot sit.

CHANG-DAE: No. This, this can't be...

YEON-AHM: What are you muttering to yourself? Like you're crazy or something. Come help me up. Now!

(CHANG-DAE stares at YEON-AHM for a moment and starts screaming and swinging the rod, in order to keep the beast away rather than to beat her.)

CHANG-DAE: Shoo! Shoo! *(Runs out of the house)* Help me! Help! A ghost! A real ghost!

YEON-AHM: Is he really crazy? Chang-Dae! Chang-Dae!

(YEON-AHM, in distress, tries her ideal thinking posture. She falls again.)

YEON-AHM: Why can't I...? *(She scratches her head with her front foot and then notices the foot.)* Ahh! What is that?

ACT II

The stage darkens with the increasing sound of bells ringing. In the dark, rumor spreads in the village. PEOPLE with protection glasses come and go, holding on to the ropes, and gossip. The ropes are dizzyingly spread all over the stage. At one spot, the WOMEN gossip.

GEE-YUH: No way! That old man's gone insane!

GOO-YUH: Tell me about it! People go crazy at this time of the year, especially the old ones.

GEE-YUH: Who was it last spring? Who said the kettle kept singing?

SAHN-YUH: Boo-ok's grandpa. He went out to throw it away and never came back.

GOO-YUH: After the sandstorm, that kettle was found on the village border.

GEE-YUH: That's when Mo-Ma's grandma disappeared.

GOO-YUH: They had a little something something going on.

SAHN-YUH: I don't believe that!

GEE-YUH: Believe me! They never came back because they chose not to come back!

(The WOMEN giggle. BOO-HYEH rushes in, holding the rope. He is out of breath and tries to gesture.)

GEE-YUH: What is it! What? Talk! Talk!

BOO-HYEH: She talks! She talks!

GOO-YUH: She what?

BOO-HYEH: She talks!

SAHN-YUH: Who talks?

BOO-HYEH: That horse, or mule or donkey? Whatever she is, she talks!

GEE-YUH: Really?

BOO-HYEH: I heard it. Clear! For sure!

GOO-YUH: What did that horse or mule or donkey say?

BOO-HYEH: I don't know. I couldn't understand.

SAHN-YUH: You call that 'talk' if you couldn't understand it?

BOO-HYEH: She said things too intellectual for me, and she kept going on and on and on.

GEE-YUH: That thing's not intellectual. You're just dumb!

BOO-HYEH: Anyway, don't you think she's better talking than crying all night long?

GOO-YUH: Well...I don't know. Let's go and check ourselves!

(The WOMEN exit. SAHN-GOH and JEH-GUN, each holding a small sack of grain, get in line in front of MAHN-MAHN. SAHN-GOH hands the sack to MAHN-MAHN. MAHN-MAHN assumes the position.)

SAHN-GOH: Not that.

MAHN-MAHN: Then what?

SAHN-GOH: Lie down.

MAHN-MAHN: This position is better at this time of the year. Your knees will get bruised in the sand.

SAHN-GOH: I don't care about bruises. I'm sick of that position.

JEH-GUN: You only think of yourself, selfish bastard! If she gets sand all over her, what am I gonna do? I am allergic to dust.

SAHN-GOH: Damn!

(SAHN-GOH and MAHN-MAHN have sexual intercourse. There is neither lust nor guilt. It looks like mere exercise.)

MAHN-MAHN: What did Mee-Joong say today?

JEH-GUN: Not Mee-Joong. Yeon-Ahm.

MAHN-MAHN: Okay. What did Yeon-Ahm say today?

SAHN-GOH: A lot of things.

MAHN-MAHN: Like what?

SAHN-GOH: Will you stop talking? One thing at a time. You can't eat your cake and have it, too.

MAHN-MAHN: Alright. Why don't you eat your cake. And, Jeh-Gun. You tell me.

JEH-GUN: Way back in the past, when Yeon-Ahm was old Mr. Chang-Dae's master, they passed by our village and it was full of birches.

MAHN-MAHN: Birches?

JEH-GUN: Yeah.

MAHN-MAHN: That's what my mother said, too.

SAHN-GOH: Don't talk about mother!

MAHN-MAHN: She saw birches when she was my age.

SAHN-GOH: Don't talk about mo...! (He finishes the exercise.) Damn it! (gathering himself) Jeh-Gun. Don't tell my mother. She worked hard for my tuition, and she will be disappointed.

JEH-GUN: *(handing his sack to MAHN-MAHN)* Don't worry. I'll tell her you lasted for an hour. *(He starts the exercise with MAHN-MAHN.)*

MAHN-MAHN: She said birches are yellow and red, like flames.

JEH-GUN: No, like moonlight. So, white, like your bottom.

MAHN-MAHN: Really?

JEH-GUN: Your mother, was full, of shiiiiit.

SAHN-GOH: Hurry up! It's time to go listen to the story.

JEH-GUN: Birches, would sing, a lullaby, hushaby, hushaby.

MAHN-MAHN: Really?

SAHN-GOH: Today, Yeon-Ahm, sang that song.

MAHN-MAHN: Sing it.

SAHN-GOH, JEH-GUN:

(sing) Over the stove miso soup is boiling, boiling, boiling.

One bubble, one mississippi two bubbles two mississippi.

One drop one mississippi two drops two mississippi.

Bubble pop I pop Drop pop I pop. Pop pop pop pop

where did it go, where did it go pop pop pop pop!

(JEH-GUN finishes the exercise.)

MAHN-MAHN: What happened to Guh-Boh? Is he not coming again?

SAHN-GOH: He's weird nowadays.

JEH-GUN: Talking gibberish and shit.

SAHN-GOH: Let's go. We're gonna be late.

JEH-GUN: *(To MAHN-MAHN)* Aren't you coming?

MAHN-MAHN: No.

JEH-GUN: Why not?

MAHN-MAHN: No reason.

SAHN-GOH: Let's hurry! She's not coming.

(SAHN-GOH and JEH-GUN exit. From the other side GUH-BOH enters and calls MAHN-MAHN)

GUH-BOH: Mahn-Mahn!

MAHN-MAHN: Hey Guh-Boh! What took you so long? *(Happy to see him, she gets into position.)*

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GUH-BOH: Mahn-Mahn.

MAHN-MAHN: Don't worry about the tuition. I'm giving it to you for free today.

GUH-BOH: Mahn-Mahn! Just stop! Stop torturing me!

MAHN-MAHN: Why are you acting so strange? I'm torturing you?

GUH-BOH: This is not what I want!

MAHN-MAHN: No? Then what do you want? This is all I can do for you.

GUH-BOH: Silly girl, I told you! It's not that I don't want to do it. I know we are supposed to do it, but what I want is, I want you only for myself, I don't want to share you with others! Did you think about my suggestion?

MAHN-MAHN: I did. I thought about it carefully, but I can't do it.

GUH-BOH: Why not? You don't like me?

MAHN-MAHN: Yes, I do like you. But I also like Sahn-Goh and Jeh-Gun. What will they do if I don't play with them?

GUH-BOH: They have their fiancées!

MAHN-MAHN: So do you.

GUH-BOH: I will tell Boo-Ok to find another man.

MAHN-MAHN: Don't do that! You're all she's got.

GUH-BOH: I'm all yours.

MAHN-MAHN: I can't do this. My late mother used to say, 'You are an important person. You are working for the chastity of this village. You are protecting the village women's chastity until their right moment. To compensate for the women's patience, boys had better be good and experienced. It is your job to turn them into men, real men. Don't forget. An educator should always be fair to everyone. If you're not, some people will get hurt.' I have done everything my mother told me, always fair to everyone.

GUH-BOH: Fair? To everyone?

MAHN-MAHN: Yes.

GUH-BOH: We are not animals. We're human!

MAHN-MAHN: You're right! That's why I have to be fair!

GUH-BOH: Do you think this is fair for you? Living like this?

MAHN-MAHN: Yes. Absolutely.

GUH-BOH: Absolutely?

MAHN-MAHN: Yes. But you're confusing me with your weird behavior.

GUH-BOH: Oh, Yeon-Ahm couldn't be more right! You tell a snorer to stop snoring, and he will snap right back at you.

MAHN-MAHN: I don't snore.

GUH-BOH: You need to look at yourself for once. How pathetic you are.

MAHN-MAHN: I'm pathetic?

GUH-BOH: Yeah! Beyond description!

MAHN-MAHN: I never saw myself that way. What makes you think so all of a sudden?

GUH-BOH: Not all of a sudden. I've been feeling that way for quite a while. But Yeon-Ahm made me see it more clearly. Once I told her about you, she cried silent tears. Those tears made me realize... how much I, Mahn-Mahn, how much I...

MAHN-MAHN: What?

GUH-BOH: ...What's that word...Anyway you're torturing me. I can't sleep. I can't eat!

MAHN-MAHN: I think that's because you haven't done it with me lately. Let's just do it and then see what happens. You might change your mind after that?

GUH-BOH: Ah, you're not getting it. But I won't give up. I am going to save you from this shithole. Just wait. Don't do it with anyone until I come back! Please!

(GUH-BOH runs out.)

MAHN-MAHN: What in my mother's name is he talking about? What's gotten into him? Yeon-Ahm cried? For me? Why? *(pause.)* If that happened for real, I am glad I didn't go. It would have been an ordeal seeing her cry...

(MAHN-MAHN enters her house. Limping. CHO-MAE crosses the stage. She still blurs her words, but they are much clearer than earlier.)

CHO-MAE: Jang-Bok! Jang-Bok! Where the hell is he? Jang-Bok! Jang-Bok!

(JANG-BOK answers, running towards CHO-MAE.)

JANG-BOK: On my way! Right here!

CHO-MAE: *(Hitting him abruptly)* Where the hell are you going so much nowadays?

JANG-BOK: Chang-Dae's donkey is talking. *(to himself)* What's the use?

CHO-MAE: Whether a donkey talks or not, what's that got to do with you?

JANG-BOK: *(in surprise)* Can you...hear me?

CHO-MAE: Yeah. It's strange. Isn't it? I hear stuff, weird stuff. And I see things. I'm getting dizzy. What's happening? For the very first time in sixty years?

JANG-BOK: Is it true? Can you hear me? Can you see me?

CHO-MAE: *(poking him with the stick)* This is you, right?

JANG-BOK: So you can!

CHO-MAE: How ghastly.

JANG-BOK: Ghastly? It's a miracle! A miracle!

CHO-MAE: Miracle, my ass! I almost got lost because of that miracle. Call this a bolt from the blue! That's an understatement! What the hell. I am going through all this, and you are out I don't know where? Grab my hand. Take me home, you shitball! All this sound and sight are making me nauseous! I can't walk!

JANG-BOK: *(to himself)* This wench is making this all up, to keep me by her side.

CHO-MAE: What did you say?

JANG-BOK: No, nothing. Let's go home.

CHO-MAE: What the hell is going on in the village?

JANG-BOK: I told you. Chang-Dae's donkey...

CHO-MAE: Not that.

JANG-BOK: Then what?

CHO-MAE: You don't hear anything?

JANG-BOK: Hear what?

CHO-MAE: Sounds like a stone mill or a thunderstorm.

JANG-BOK: The wind?

CHO-MAE: No. This is not just the wind.

JANG-BOK: You got sand in your year? A worm? Let's see.

CHO-MAE: No! I still hear it. It's getting closer. It's getting louder, my head, no my stomach, no my whole body's going to explode!

JANG-BOK: *(covering her ears with his hands)* How do you feel now?

CHO-MAE: That doesn't help. What is it? What can it be?

(JANG-BOK exits with CHO-MAE. From the other side enter the VILLAGE CHIEF—CHOO-OH—and the seniors—HO-CHEH and GANG-RYANG)

HO-CHEH: What? Who's that bastard? I am the village storyteller! Who's telling stories without my permission?

GANG-RYANG: A donkey talks? A donkey?

HO-CHEH: You, chief! What kind of a chief are you? You think we're smelly, old, stupid farts, or what? For such a scandal, you should have informed us immediately!

CHOO-OH: It was such nonsense, I thought it would go away.

HO-CHEH: How much of a talker is that damn thing anyway?

CHOO-OH: Not just much. The things she utters are so unexpected and uncontrollable, hopping here and there, bottoms up and top down, pushing you away and pulling you back, hitting-you-right-in-the-face sheer absurdity. But once you think about them, they sound like they contain some kind of a substance...

HO-CHEH: What? So you've been there yourself?

CHOO-OH: Just once...

HO-CHEH: Traitor! You're the chief!

CHOO-OH: It was more for surveillance and information than entertainment.

GANG-RYANG: So what is the substance?

CHOO-OH: Well, it's hard to summarize...they're things never seen nor heard of before.

HO-CHEH: Never seen nor heard of?

CHOO-OH: That's right. But they seem to make much sense in a way, so even if you resist yourself, you can't help but fall into the narrative of the stories, and in the end you find yourself believing everything, and then you wish you had seen all that for real.

GANG-RYANG: Enough!

CHOO-OH: Not that I believed them. But that's what people say.

GANG-RYANG: So I gather that thing doesn't talk about our village?

HO-CHEH: So I gather, that thing rambles on about the outside?

CHOO-OH: Mostly, yes.

GANG-RYANG: How long has it been talking?

CHOO-OH: About a couple of weeks...

HO-CHEH: A couple of weeks? What a disaster!

GANG-RYANG: This is an emergency!

HO-CHEH: We let this go on, and our village will be ruined.

GANG-RYANG: Village meeting! Right away!

The SENIORS ring the bells.

ACT III

Loud bells in the dark. Once it brightens, the village PEOPLE spread the ropes in a way that the ends form a circle. They sit at each end. In the center of the circle is YEON-AHM.

HO-CHEH: Have you all gone completely insane? Where do you put your heads, people? Don't you remember it is absolutely forbidden to talk about the outside in our village?

GANG-RYANG: It is only us, the seniors, who can talk about the outside!

GEE-YUH: Don't get too upset.

GOO-YUH: Who in this village would believe such stuff?

SAHN-YUH: That's right. It's just for fun that we listen to her.

HO-CHEH: How many times do I have to tell you? That's the enemy's strategy! First, they entertain you, then they take your arms and legs!

GANG-RYANG: Poor wretched souls! Did you forget how we ended up here? Did you forget what our ancestors have been through?

GEE-YUH: No.

HO-CHEH: If you didn't, how dare you still say 'fun'!

GANG-RYANG: Take out our ancestors' sayings!

(The village PEOPLE take out a booklet from their clothes.)

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GANG-RYANG: Chapter 3, Paragraph 17! “On Fondness for the Exotic!” Chief! Go first!

(The PEOPLE open their booklets with a rustle.)

CHOO-OH: “As our ancestors say, stay away from the exotic!”

PEOPLE: “All the evil in the world originated in the fondness for the exotic!”

CHOO-OH: “Those who are fond of the exotic are those who are fond of victories!”

PEOPLE: “All the battles in the world originated in the fondness for the exotic.”

CHOO-OH: “How vast and endless! The fondness for the exotic! Like seawater that never quenches your thirst!”

PEOPLE: “Vain, vain, and ever vain!”

GANG-RYANG: The world outside is still dominated by the exotic. Every Jack and Jill is so absorbed in acquiring the superficial, the vain, the filthy, the exotic that not a day goes by without multiple battles. Where can you find our ancestors’ beautiful tenets? Only in this village! Don’t let the outside world lead you into temptation! Soon that vain world will perish into oblivion, and someday, I strongly believe, our ancestors’ beautiful tenets will drive away the evil and rule over the earth!

PEOPLE: Revenge! No more shame!

YEON-AHM: Revenge? When’s that coming?

HO-CHEH: How dare she!

CHANG-DAE: Mee-Joong. Please stay put and be quiet! Say you’re sorry and beg for forgiveness. Say ‘I won’t utter a sound again.’ Come on, Mee-Joong!

YEON-AHM: I told you time and time again. It is a breach of decorum to address your elder by the name.

CHANG-DAE: My Goodness! What am I going to do with her?

HO-CHEH: Reveal yourself! What is your intention of spreading propaganda about the outside!

YEON-AHM: I am only passing on what I have heard and seen.

HO-CHEH: You have no clue about what’s outside! You were born here and never set foot outside this village!

YEON-AHM: There is more than what you see. Like, this body of mine doesn’t represent all that I am. Then what do you people know about the outside? Have you got a glimpse, at least?

HO-CHEH: There’s no need for a glimpse. It’s dangerous out there. We should stay away. Don’t go asking for trouble. You will get hurt!

YEON-AHM: Ignorance creates fear. But if you want to catch a tiger, you have to enter his cave.

HO-CHEH: How dare you say that?

YEON-AHM: Ruling the world, it all comes down to power. How can one acquire that power? By getting a grip of the exotic. The more, the mightier.

HO-CHEH: We have our tenets!

YEON-AHM: Without power, those tenets are a hurricane in a teacup.

HO-CHEH: You sound just like the Outsiders!

YEON-AHM: I am well aware of what your ancestors were like. Simply put, they were exactly like those you call the Outsiders. The atrocity your ancestors committed back when they had power...it was no less, maybe even more than that of the Outsiders. You can shove your tenets up your mighty asses! A cowardly excuse for losers, the last cry for the appearance of pride for those who had power but lost it and are ousted.

HO-CHEH: How dare you make such an insult to our ancestors!

GANG-RYANG: Enough!

HO-CHEH: She called our tenets a hurricane in a teacup! A cowardly excuse!

GANG-RYANG: She's a mere donkey and has no influence over our tenets. This is beyond our tolerance. We would only give this thing more chance to spread her words. It's crystal clear now. Who can trigger something of such scandalous proportion?

HO-CHEH: Who?

GANG-RYANG: The Outsiders. This one's their spy.

(Whisper among the PEOPLE)

GANG-RYANG: Silence! Only one sentence can serve her right. Death!

(More whisper among the PEOPLE)

CHANG-DAE: No, please, stop! May it please your honors, spy? There's no way. Please spare her for now. She's very sick. She's suffering from grave illness. Hasn't eaten a thing nor slept a second, for two weeks. Haven't we all been there, you know, being extremely sick? Feeling like a stranger in our own bodies, having dreams that make no sense and believing them to be real? I assure you. She's having such dreams right at this moment. Please, cut her some slack. It will pass. Like a sandstorm that comes and goes, she will wake up sane and healthy. In fact, she just started eating and sleeping.

HO-CHEH: You're saying all that to save this silly donkey?

CHANG-DAE: She is not a donkey but a horse. And she is like my son. I dream of growing old with her.

HO-CHEH: That kind of attitude is the cause of all this!

GANG-RYANG: Ten thousand to one, should she turn out not to be a spy, we still can't keep her alive. Not as long as she keeps chattering.

CHANG-DAE: Mee-Joong. No, Yeon-Ahm. Promise them. Never to utter a word again. Now!

(YEON-AHM is silent.)

GEE-YUH: Death is a little too severe.

GOO-YUH: Tell me about it. It's not like she killed someone. She only talked.

HO-CHEH: Talk! That's the problem! If we don't stop it, we don't know what we're getting ourselves into!

BOO-HYEH: Then what do we do before bedtime now?

HO-CHEH: What do you do? Like before. You come to me to hear stories.

SAHN-GOH: But your stories suck. With all due respect, sir.

HO-CHEH: What impudence!

JEH-GUN: He's right. They're all about millet and grain and fences and what not.

HO-CHEH: You ingrates! That's all for your own good! You think her stories will ever produce a single grain of rice?

SAHN-YUH: Your honor?

HO-CHEH: What is it?

SAHN-YUH: If you're going to kill her, would it be ok to kill her after she finishes the story about the tiger? We were cut off in the middle.

(The PEOPLE agree.)

YOO-YOO: So the widow and the teacher did it and were kicked out? Or was it before they did it?

KYO-CHOONG: That's not the point of the story.

YOO-YOO: It is to me. Did they do it or not?

BOO-HYEH: Of course they did it. What else could they do?

GEE-YUH: Were you even listening to the story? They could not! Am I right, Yeon-Ahm?

BOO-HYEH: That's not fair!

SAHN-YUH: Maybe they were in the middle?

GEE-YUH: In that case, the sons are sons of bitches. They should have let them finish at least.

GOO-YUH: Thank you! A son doesn't care an inch about the mother's feelings.

KYO-CHOON: That's not the point of the story!

(The PEOPLE loudly voice their different opinions.)

GANG-RYANG: Attention! We cannot postpone the death penalty by one second. Whether they did it, couldn't do it, or were in the middle of it, that's all part of a story. In other words, fiction, empty and false. Look at yourselves, arguing about who's right or wrong over such pointless fiction. She is a curse to our village! We must kill her now!

CHOO-OH: *(to CHANG-DAE)* Mr. Chang-Dae. You can always get another beast, but not another village. Will you please let it go? Instead of this half-breed, we will get you a genuine deal, that's right, a stallion. We can all chip in...

GEE-YUH: Wait, Chief? Did you just say "chip in"?

CHOO-OH: This concerns the whole village, so...

GEE-YUH: I will not eat her, and I will not pay. A donkey tastes like rubber.

GOO-YUH: Don't you think that one would taste like human?

BOO-HYEH: What's the difference? Way back when, we would have killed for a piece of that.

GOO-YUH: Why are you bringing that up?

BOO-HYEH: You started it!

GEE-YUH: Anyway count me out. Meat isn't even good for your health. Especially donkey meat.

SAHN-YUH: You're right. At this time of the year, with the sandstorm and all, we must preserve our grain.

CHOO-OH: This is not about whether you eat meat or not!

GEE-YUH: No?

SAHN-YUH: Your honor?

CHOO-OH: Be brief.

SAHN-YUH: I've been thinking. She is out of her mind, right? If she is out of her mind, that means she is in some other mind.

CHOO-OH: I told you. Be brief!

SAHN-YUH: That means she's got a spirit on her, that means, even if she dies, that spirit will survive, right? Where would it go?

WOMEN: You're right! You're right!

SAHN-YUH: Ten to one, it would go to one of us, right?

GEE-YUH: That's right. Fortunately, it is stuck with the beast now. But what if it sticks with a human? That'll be a disaster.

GOO-YUH: Now she's only talking, but soon, wouldn't she tell on us to the Outsiders? After all, we did try to kill her.

GEE-YUH: What is it, then? The human who gets her spirit is going to be killed as well?

SAHN-YUH: How horrific!

YOO-YOO: Why don't we leave it at that? Let sleeping dogs lie.

KYO-CHOONG: Sleeping dogs? That's the point of this predicament.

YOO-YOO: You with your points.

KYO-CHOONG: There is something that you missed, your honors.

HO-CHEH: What is it?

KYO-CHOONG: If Yeon-Ahm is a spy as you concluded, although I do not agree with it at all, we must be extra careful before considering killing her. If we kill a spy from the Outsiders, would they just watch her die? Killing Yeon-Ahm is equivalent to a direct declaration of war. What will you do about that?

PEOPLE: That's right. Good thinking.

KYO-CHOONG: Killing Yeon-Ahm is acting exactly by their scenario.

(PEOPLE agree. The SENIORS talk among themselves.)

CHOO-OH: Your honors.

HO-CHEH: What's our plan?

GANG-RYANG: His theory makes sense, as hurtful as it might be to admit it. There's only one alternative.

HO-CHEH: Which is?

GANG-RYANG: Banishment.

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HO-CHEH: In this sandstorm, she would most likely die anyway. That doesn't make any sense.

GANG-RYANG: Uhm...

HO-CHEH: Why don't we spare her for now as Mr. Chang-Dae requested?

GANG-RYANG: So we just let her talk and spread her words?

HO-CHEH: We can gag her and keep her silent.

GANG-RYANG: It's temporary, but there's no alternative for now.

(The SENIORS face the PEOPLE.)

GANG-RYANG: Silence! Okay. Justice demands that this beast be killed immediately. But in these special circumstances, we decided to give her another chance and keep her under our observation until the sandstorm passes. Then we will make the verdict.

CHANG-DAE: Thank you, your honors! Thank you!

GANG-RYANG: Instead, we forbid you, from this very moment, to visit Mr. Chang-Dae's and listen to the beast talk! You will forget all the gibberish rambled on by this beast and you will not spread any of that! Anyone who does not obey this will be banished! We order upon this beast a gag law. Mr. Chang-Dae will immediately gag her and will teach her to make the appropriate animal howl until the due date. Is that clear?

CHANG-DAE: Yes, your honor!

GANG-RYANG: Dismissed!

The PEOPLE agitatedly disperse.

ACT IV

CHANG-DAE's house. YEON-AHM is gagged. CHANG-DAE.

CHANG-DAE: So you're saying, in our former life, we traveled far, far away together? Crossing nine rivers a day, climbing mountains, passing through fields, and encountering all the eccentricities of the world? (laughs) Quite intriguing for such nonsense. Except for the part that you were the master and I was the stable boy. (ungagging YEON-AHM) Now, try it?

YEON-AHM: Try what?

CHANG-DAE: Don't talk but neigh, like a horse. After all, you are a horse.

YEON-AHM: My, my, my. Never have I thought I would go through such an ordeal.

CHANG-DAE: That's for me to say. If everything you said were true, you are a shameless ass. Riding me to the grind in the former life, and coming back to give me more? How did you end up like this?

YEON-AHM: Like what?

CHANG-DAE: How did you get to talk?

YEON-AHM: Let me see...I couldn't stand the itching.

CHANG-DAE: Itching? What you needed was scratching, not talking.

YEON-AHM: You ignorant peasant. That's a metaphor.

CHANG-DAE: A metaphor? Is that some kind of a skin disease? Is that contagious?

YEON-AHM: (*laughing*) Yes. A metaphor is very, very contagious.

CHANG-DAE: That explains the itching I've been getting. Damn. Let's practice. Now, neigh, like a horse!

YEON-AHM: No.

CHANG-DAE: No?

(*GUH-BOH brings MAHN-MAHN into CHANG-DAE's house along the rope.*)

MAHN-MAHN: No. I said, no!

GUH-BOH: Shhhh. Quiet!

(*CHANG-DAE feels their presence and hurriedly gags YEON-AHM.*)

CHANG-DAE: Who's there?

GUH-BOH: It's me, Guh-Boh.

CHANG-DAE: What are you doing here? What if someone sees you?

GUH-BOH: I came to see master Yeon-Ahm.

CHANG-DAE: Mee-joong no longer talks.

GUH-BOH: I heard it all.

CHANG-DAE: Heard what?

GUH-BOH: Your conversation.

CHANG-DAE: Watch your mouth.

GUH-BOH: Don't worry about it. I'm on master Yeon-Ahm's side. (*seeing YEON-AHM in gags*) Oh, putting a gag on honorable master Yeon-Ahm! What a shame...

CHANG-DAE: Don't touch her.

(*GUH-BOH un-gags YEON-AHM.*)

CHANG-DAE: Alright. What is it? This late?

GUH-BOH: I can't take it any longer.

CHANG-DAE: Take what?

GUH-BOH: Master Yeon-Ahm is right. Our village is rotten to the core. We are turning into living skeletons here. So, I'm leaving.

CHANG-DAE: Leaving? You, too, Mahn-Mahn?

MAHN-MAHN: This is the first I've heard of it.

GUH-BOH: (*To YEON-AHM*) Master, please help us. You know the way out. Please help us out of here. Take us to the birches, a place just for Mahn-Mahn and me.

CHANG-DAE: Don't be a baby and go back home.

GUH-BOH: Don't treat me like a child. I thought this village was the whole world. That is, until I met master Yeon-Ahm. I saw Mahn-Mahn as nothing more than what she did here. But everything changed since I met master Yeon-Ahm. She opened up my eyes to the world beyond this village, made me see Mahn-Mahn's pain, and that pain made me realize how much I loved her! That's it! I got it! Love! I love Mahn-Mahn! I cannot leave her like this.

MAHN-MAHN: But I want you to leave me like this. Like you used to.

GUH-BOH: How is that possible? I love you!

MAHN-MAHN: Love? I don't understand that word, but it's driving me crazy.

GUH-BOH: Me, too.

MAHN-MAHN: Then why are you doing this to us?

GUH-BOH: Why?

MAHN-MAHN: You love me because I'm going crazy? I was fine before you loved me.

GUH-BOH: Do you feel crazy now?

MAHN-MAHN: I think so.

GUH-BOH: So do I! Mahn-Mahn! You're doing it to me. Am I doing it to you?

MAHN-MAHN: Well. Not exactly. No.

GUH-BOH: What? How come?

MAHN-MAHN: *(looking into YEON-AHM's eyes)* It's gone.

GUH-BOH: What is?

MAHN-MAHN: My favorite part.

GUH-BOH: What is it?

MAHN-MAHN: Mee-Joong's eyes.

CHANG-DAE: Mee-Joong's eyes? They're right there.

MAHN-MAHN: No! They're not the same!

GUH-BOH: You don't see me as your...?

MAHN-MAHN: Sorry. But I really can't go with you.

(MAHN-MAHN exits along the rope.)

GUH-BOH: What? *(looking into YEON-AHM's eyes)* What did you do to my Mahn-Mahn? I thought I could trust you. *(running outside)* Mahn-Mahn! *(turning to YEON-AHM)* How can you do this to me? Mahn-Mahn?

(GUH-BOH and MAHN-MAHN vanish into darkness.)

CHANG-DAE: My, my, my...Mahn-Mahn is right. This is all your fault. You don't talk, and everything will be fine.

YEON-AHM: I wish I could, but I can't neigh like a horse.

CHANG-DAE: That's why you have to practice. There's no time to lose. The sandstorm will pass by soon. Before that happens, you have to prove to the village that you are indeed a horse. That is, if you want to live.

YEON-AHM: Is that really necessary? What about learning from that kid and getting out of here? Yes. Let's get out of here right now.

CHANG-DAE: Out in this sandstorm, with a deranged horse like you? We'll get lost on our first step out of this village.

YEON-AHM: Even better. We'll take the road less taken.

CHANG-DAE: Lunatic.

YEON-AHM: Isn't that what you wanted?

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CHANG-DAE: Shit! But we can't leave now. Let's leave after the sandstorm passes! But we have to survive until then.

YEON-AHM: So much ado about a talking horse...Alright. Like you say, I won't utter a word. And I'll practice the neigh.

CHANG-DAE: That's more like it.

YEON-AHM: Except.

CHANG-DAE: Except?

YEON-AHM: Show me the proper respect.

CHANG-DAE: What? You clueless beast. You're a horse, and I'm your owner.

YEON-AHM: Wrong. I'm your master, and you're my stable boy.

CHANG-DAE: Don't stretch yourself. Just because you can talk doesn't make you human.

YEON-AHM: Look, kid. How many times have I told you that there is always more than what you see? Can you carry your own house on a pilgrimage?

CHANG-DAE: Where did that come from?

YEON-AHM: The same principle applies to the body. Once a piece of wood is burnt up, the fire moves on to the next piece of wood. That piece of wood can become an oak tree, a pine tree, or an empress tree. Though I am stuck in the body of a horse, the principle that I am your master stays the same.

CHANG-DAE: Silence! Stop talking and practice your neighing!

YEON-AHM: Unless you show me the proper respect, I will keep talking and not practice anything.

CHANG-DAE: Suit yourself! They will kill you. Not me.

YEON-AHM: I'd rather die than being patronized by my own damn stable boy. Bring 'em in. I'm ready.

CHANG-DAE: Give me a break...Fine. Would it please you if I showed you some respect?

YEON-AHM: The proper respect. "Master" Yeon-Ahm.

CHANG-DAE: The proper respect. Master Yeon-Ahm. Now, would you follow me, please? (*imitates a horse*)

YEON-AHM: That's pretty good. You can always tell a stable boy.

CHANG-DAE: Shut your...(*calming himself*) Would you please stop talking and follow me? (*neighing*)

YEON-AHM: *(follows him slovenly)*

(While CHANG-DAE and YEON-AHM are practicing neigbing, stars in the sky start shining one by one. It gets dark. A cry in the dark.)

VOICE: The sandstorm has passed!

Bells ringing all over the village. The bells stop ringing at the same time. Silence. Faint music, as if it is coming from a radio.

ACT V

Blue sky at dawn. Once it lightens up, we see a wagon in the center of the village field. It is tilted, with one wheel in the sand. The covering tent is raggedy, but there are still full-colored drawings, showing traces of the wagon's prosperous past. Only a few of the many tiny light bulbs on the wagon manage to flicker. The music is coming from the speaker on top of the wagon. The village PEOPLE are in awe at this unexpected sight. The VILLAGE CHIEF enters with the SENIORS. Everyone silently gathers around the VILLAGE CHIEF.

CHOO-OH: There.

(SENIORS are startled at the sight of the wagon.)

CHOO-OH: What on earth can that be?

GANG-RYANG: *(to HO-CHEH)* What is it?

HO-CHEH: *(going through the book in his hand)* Uhm...I can't find it. It's not registered.

GANG-RYANG: Not registered?

HO-CHEH: No.

GANG-RYANG: *(to the PEOPLE)* Was that here before?

YOO-YOO: There's no way that was here before.

GANG-RYANG: Of course. Of course.

GEE-YUH: Maybe that was here before, but we never saw it.

BOO-HYEH: It was not here before the sandstorm. That's for sure.

GEE-YUH: How long has it been? Since its appearance?

GOO-YUH: I saw it, at dawn, on my way to the field.

YOO-YOO: How careless!

GOO-YUH: What did you say?

YOO-YOO: If you hadn't looked at it, it could have disappeared.

GOO-YUH: You're not making any sense!

CHOO-OH: Shhh. Keep it down!

HO-CHEH: Yoo-Yoo is right. This is Goo-Yuh's fault.

GOO-YUH: Excuse me?

HO-CHEH: Yes. Do you know why there are no mountains in our village?

GEE-YUH: What's that got to do with this?

HO-CHEH: That's because the women in our village sleep through dawn. When the world was being created, mountains would rise from the earth at dawn, some would reach the sky, while others would get spotted by the early women and settle on earth. But the women in this village, since our ancestors, have traditionally been sound sleepers. That's why all the mountains vanished into the sky.

GOO-YUH: That makes lousy sense. So what are you saying?

HO-CHEH: That this is all your fault, Goo-Yuh! You broke the village tradition and caused this mayhem!

GOO-YUH: We have tons of work and you, men, are not moving an inch. What do you expect me to do?

CHOO-OH: I said, keep it down! *(to GANG-RYANG)* What do we do? Shall we set fire on it?

GANG-RYANG: No. That's against our principle. That thing is not there, it doesn't exist. What's the use of setting fire on something that doesn't exist? That confirms its existence.

CHOO-OH: Then what do we do?

GANG-RYANG: Pretend we never saw it.

CHOO-OH: For real?

GANG-RYANG: Listen up, everybody. Our involvement would only make matters worse. We are not the cause of that thing. It just appeared all of a sudden. So let's leave it alone. Let it disappear on its own. Am I understood? We never saw that thing. That thing does not exist. Let's get back to work.

GEE-YUH: Goo-Yuh. You should be ashamed of yourself.

(The music stops. A MAN crawls up from under the wagon. He is wearing colorful clothes and is heavily covered with dust. The PEOPLE are stunned.)

INSPECTOR: *(tapping on the radio at the front seat of the wagon)* Damn thing's broken again.

(The INSPECTOR senses other people's presence and notices the PEOPLE. Both sides are startled. The PEOPLE try to leave the scene.)

INSPECTOR: Hey!

CHOO-OH: *(whispering)* Ignore him.

INSPECTOR: You, there!

SAHN-GOH: But I can hear him.

CHOO-OH: You haven't heard anything.

INSPECTOR: Can you hear me?

SAHN-GOH: We can't hear you! We can't see you!

CHOO-OH: Don't answer, you dumbass!

BOO-HYEH: What a beautiful day. The sandstorm's been unusually long this year!

YOO-YOO: It's time to sow the seeds!

INSPECTOR: *(laughing)* So you're ignoring me? Do I look like I'd go away in distress and embarrassment if you ignore me? Well, I will not. I, as Touring Inspector of Internal-External-Private-Public-Individual-Communal-Commonplace-and-Mysterious-Affairs-Executive-Bureau in the Internal-External-Private-Public-Individual-Communal-Commonplace-and-Mysterious-Affairs-Executive-Bureau under direct order of Emperor Almighty, command you in the name of Emperor Almighty!

(The PEOPLE are frozen, trying to figure out the INSPECTOR's nonsensical terminology, rather than being intimidated by his authority. The INSPECTOR, tapping his radio, gives a command.)

INSPECTOR: Stay where you are!

The radio plays majestic grandeur music. The PEOPLE, overwhelmed by the music, bow deeply in bewilderment. It darkens.

ACT VI

When it dawns, we see the INSPECTOR sitting in front of the wagon, devouring millet rice cake and drinking water. The PEOPLE, seated in front of him, are watching politely.

GEE-YUH: Take your time.

GOO-YUH: He must have been lost and starved for days.

INSPECTOR: What was that? How dare you say such a thing? Me, lost? Do you think it possible for an inspector under the Emperor's service to be lost? I've got enough food and water! But how can I refuse what you have so sincerely and devotedly prepared? Everything's on schedule. I arrived here at the exact time of my scheduled arrival.

GANG-RYANG: On schedule?

INSPECTOR: Exactly. (*looking at his memo*) Exactly 586 years ago today, this wagon reached this village, and today's visit has been planned since then! This is a once-in-586-years periodic inspection. You should consider yourself fortunate beyond belief! And you tried to ignore me like that?

HO-CHEH: It was such a surprise that we lost our sense of decency.

INSPECTOR: Surprise? Did I not tell you this inspection is periodic?

GANG-RYANG: We never dreamed you'd honor our secluded, tiny village with your visit.

INSPECTOR: That's why it took 586 years. The Empire is....vast. (*standing up*) Now, shall we get started?

CHOO-OH: Started with....?

INSPECTOR: The inspecting business I came here to do.

CHOO-OH: Forgive my impudence. But what is your business again?

INSPECTOR: Ignorant bumpkins! Touring inspection of Internal-External-Private-Public-Individual-Communal-Commonplace-and-Mysterious-Affairs-Executive-Bureau under direct order of Emperor Almighty.

CHOO-OH: Pardon?

INSPECTOR: In short, I am in charge of discovering and collecting mysteries in the world.

KYO-CHOONG: What do you do with them?

INSPECTOR: Do?

KYO-CHOONG: Yes. What I mean is, what is the purpose of gathering all that?

INSPECTOR: For mother's sake! Their stupidity is appalling. Why do you breathe?

KYO-CHOONG: To live.

INSPECTOR: Why do you live?

KYO-CHOONG: (*He is touched and in tears.*)

INSPECTOR: I asked you why you lived, and you're in tears?

KYO-CHOONG: *(crying)* I'm touched. You have no idea how long I've been waiting for someone to ask me that very question. All I've been asked was: Did you eat? Did you finish work? How did you sleep?...

INSPECTOR: My goodness, this is pathetic.

KYO-CHOONG: I've been asking myself that question all my life. That's right. The act of ...asking oneself such meaningful...as human beings...you know, it's kinda like...

INSPECTOR: You can be frank with me. You never asked yourself anything, did you?

KYO-CHOONG: Yes, I did! I always asked myself many things! I never got any answers, but I know there's an answer to why I live.

INSPECTOR: Silly kid! You live because you exist. There's no answer or purpose to your existence. Even if there were, you'd never know, you'd never need to know. Once you find out, you'll go insane.

KYO-CHOONG: *(bowing his head)* I don't care if I go insane. Please give me the answer!

INSPECTOR: He's hopeless. Take him away from me.

(YOO-YOO and BOO-HYEH take KYO-CHOONG away from the INSPECTOR.)

INSPECTOR: Same principle here. Emperor Almighty is in full comprehension of all the mysteries in the world. Otherwise, he wouldn't be Emperor Almighty. Do you now understand the gravity of my task here? Ok, let me condescend to your level. The collecting is in itself the purpose, and this task is in itself Emperor Almighty! *(The PEOPLE mutter in incomprehension.)* Enough, enough! I can't waste any more time answering your below-moderate-intelligence questions. Chief. What's the mystery in this village?

CHOO-OH: I don't know.

INSPECTOR: I will stay here all day long, just like 586 years ago. And you have one day to find a mystery that will intrigue Emperor Almighty.

HO-CHEH: Well, we'll do our best, but I'm not sure our village holds anything worth a mystery...

INSPECTOR: Is that so? You'd better think before you speak. I traveled thousands of miles through the sandstorm and learn there is nothing worth a mystery in this village. How pathetic would that look like? That's why we decided to erase all the villages without mysteries from the Empire's map during this inspection.

CHOO-OH: Erase?

INSPECTOR: In other words, exterminate their existence. The village, the people, everything.

PEOPLE: Holy shit!

SAHN-GOH: Sir inspector?

INSPECTOR: Don't call me 'Sir inspector'! Repeat after me. Touring Inspector of Internal-External-Private-Public-Individual-Communal-Commonplace-and-Mysterious-Affairs-Executive-Bureau.

SAHN-GOH: Touring...Inspector...Interior...Affairs...

INSPECTOR: Damn! What do you want?

SAHN-GOH: I don't think that's fair.

INSPECTOR: What's not fair about that? Villages without mysteries and, of course, their inhabitants have no reason to exist. They're worthless!

SAHN-GOH: Would it be ok to just erase us from the map?

INSPECTOR: What? Do you have any idea what you are saying? That's high treason, deserving decapitation, if you weren't a child! How dare you insult the Empire's map and Emperor Almighty! The Empire's map should reflect the topography to the last inch! Not on the map, not on the earth!

(The PEOPLE fall into grave silence.)

CHOO-OH: Sir Insp...

INSPECTOR: What did I say?

CHOO-OH: Touring Inspector of Internal-External-Private-Public-Individual-Communal-Commonplace-and-Mysterious-Affairs-Executive-Bureau!

PEOPLE: Wow!

INSPECTOR: What is it?

CHOO-OH: I know you are on a tight schedule, but a day is way too short for us.

INSPECTOR: Too short? A day is a luxury for a village like this! I don't need to do this, you know. I thought about just passing by and erasing this village.

WOMEN: My goodness!

INSPECTOR: But Emperor Almighty granted this village an equal opportunity. Because equality is his utmost priority.

WOMEN: Equality! That's a great Emperor!

INSPECTOR: You should be thankful to have me as your inspector. Any questions?

GANG-RYANG: Yes. So, in the previous inspection, that is 586 years ago, what did our ancestors offer you?

INSPECTOR: (*looking in his notes*) Let me see...a handful of millet. A breed that grows well even in sand.

CHOO-OH: (*excitedly*) Millet grows in profusion in our village!

INSPECTOR: (*jeeringly*) Now, it grows in profusion in many other villages. There's nothing mysterious about that. (*looking at his notes*) In 1172, a ball-less maiden. A woman without balls.

GEE-YUH: Women don't have balls.

BOO-HYEH: Did women have balls back then?

KYO-CHOONG: Nonsense. They must have meant "gut" when they wrote "ball." It's not too uncommon in ancient documents. Is that right? A woman without guts, so a coy maiden! A woman that's coquettish and, therefore, keeping it to herself.

GOO-YUH: A crazy woman? Or a retard?

INSPECTOR: That's your limit. You haven't got a grain of imagination in you. When they wrote "balls," they literally meant "testicles." Can you imagine how much sweat the record keeper must have drenched to come up with the expression, "ball-less-maiden," a woman without balls, to refer to this thing that is neither man nor woman? And you talk about guts and crazy woman and retard?

KYO-CHOONG: Now I get it!

SAHN-YUH: (*to herself*) I'd rather have ball-ed that wench.

INSPECTOR: Anyway this man or woman served Emperor Almighty for life and was loved as his favorite.

KYO-CHOONG: Now I get it!

INSPECTOR: Am I moderately understood?

GEE-YUH: I get an idea, but only vaguely.

GOO-YUH: Yeah. Can you give us a specific example?

SAHN-YUH: Exactly. If you showed us some of your collections, we'll have a much better idea.

INSPECTOR: You're really determined to put me to the task, aren't you? Well, what could these country bumpkins know about the current trend? Alright. I will grant you a huge favor. The theme of this year's inspection is...ideology.

(The PEOPLE remain silent in incomprehension.)

GOO-YUH: Ideology?

GEE-YUH: Is that some kind of a spice?

INSPECTOR: You're getting close. Something like that. You have too much, and you'll ruin the taste. But too little, and you won't have any. We used to have plenty in the good old days, but now it's a rarity. The youth of today, they don't give a damn about spice or ideology. They devour it raw, just the way it is. Now, be prepared for the wonder!

(The INSPECTOR turns on the radio. The theme music of 'Panchen Lama' is playing.)

INSPECTOR: Camel Panchen Lama!

(Through the tent of the wagon enter CAMEL PANCHEN LAMA. The PEOPLE applaud and cheer.)

GEE-YUH: What a strange-looking creature!

GOO-YUH: It's saying something?

SAHN-YUH: Quiet! I can't hear.

(PANCHEN LAMA, gesturing in a way that suggests penance and discipline, mutters.)

PANCHEN LAMA: I, the 689th Panchen Lama, say. To the ship crossing the desert. If the desert is too hot make yourself hotter if the desert is too cold make yourself colder if the desert is too vast make yourself vaster if the desert is too dark make yourself darker if life is too painful make yourself more painful, so I, the 689th Panchen Lama, say. Everything I said so far is bull. What I just said is bull is also bull. Everything in this world is bull a desert is not a desert you are not a ship I am not the 689th Panchen Lama then what are you looking at?

(PANCHEN LAMA sits, crossing his legs, and closes his eyes. The PEOPLE are at a loss.)

GEE-YUH: A spice or ideology or whatever is supposed to be salty or sweet or sour or hot, but this is just...

INSPECTOR: That's what this ideology is all about.

GOO-YUH: He's got no strength left. He's almost a skeleton.

INSPECTOR: He's been fasting for 689 days.

GEE-YUH: How come?

INSPECTOR: That's his ideology. *(to PANCHEN LAMA)* Get back inside.

(PANCHEN LAMA slowly enters the wagon, still muttering.)

KYO-CHOONG: I still don't get it. Could you give us a summary?

INSPECTOR: In short, that's the ideology of suffering. Where does suffering begin? The inside. So bring it out. Still that animal insists he's been Panchen Lama for 689 generations.

BOO-HYEH: It still doesn't make much sense to me.

INSPECTOR: That's why he was granted a spot on the wagon.

YOO-YOO: Oh! So an ideology is not supposed to make much sense?

INSPECTOR: More likely so. The less sense, the better. Okay, next. Cho-Jung, the tiger.

(The theme music of CHO-JUNG plays. Through the tent of the wagon, CHO-JUNG runs out terrifyingly. CHO-JUNG is tied to chains.)

CHO-JUNG: Wake! Those of you who are oppressed! Free yourselves! Overturn! Overthrow! The old and corrupt institutions! Don't go after rotten meat but rather die of hunger! Take him down! The Emperor! Tear him apart! Start a new world with your fang!

BOO-HYEH: This I can understand.

YOO-YOO: Isn't this rather dangerous?

INSPECTOR: Not at all.

YOO-YOO: What if he attacks the Emperor with his fang?

INSPECTOR: It happens once in a while. That's his calling. Emperor Almighty would look at this beast and be reminded of the impending danger. In fact, he doesn't exactly qualify as mystery, but we still need him, so that Emperor Almighty has something to shoot with an arrow whenever he is irritated. This one's not a fine breed, but there's not enough in stock, so I took him for what he's worth. Get back. The next one...can't make an entrance on its own.

(The INSPECTOR enters the wagon and brings out a small potted plant.)

INSPECTOR: I never imagined I'd still find one of these. This one's a true rarity and also a hazard.

BOO-HYEH: It doesn't look much like a hazard.

INSPECTOR: You have no idea. Small as this might look now, it used to be a tree with branches and leaves, covering the whole world! Heaven and earth were under the shadow of this creature.

KYO-CHOONG: Tree?

INSPECTOR: This tree grows on human blood and produces a fruit called money, and that's why it is called democratic tree. Anyone who goes under its shadow believes they are the Emperor of the world. *(laughs)* Can you believe that? There ever were such primitive times!

KYO-CHOONG: Where was Emperor Almighty back then?

INSPECTOR: Sitting on top of a tree, enjoying his vacation. Look closely. Do you see something like a chrysalis?

(The PEOPLE all approach the plant.)

INSPECTOR: That is not a chrysalis but a human being. He's called Moo-Kwan and is the sole survivor of that era.

GEE-YUH: This is a human being?

GOO-YUH: How did he shrink so tiny?

INSPECTOR: Think about it. Everyone's claiming himself the Emperor of the world, but since the world is so small, this one had to adjust his size to the world. That's why he shrunk. It looks like he decided to stay put, reeling silk, so that others wouldn't bother him. He's still muttering something.

YOO-YOO: I don't hear a thing?

INSPECTOR: Listen close! 'Who am I? Who am I?', he's asking himself.

KYO-CHOONG: Ah. I hear it. I hear it!

INSPECTOR: Was that enough for you? Now go look.

(INSPECTOR takes the plant and enters the wagon, yawning.)

CHOO-OH: Everyone! Let's hurry! Turn every grain of sand if you have to. But by tomorrow morning, you have to find this thing called ideology!

It gets dark. Loud and discordant music plays. PEOPLE run around, ringing bells. The village is now dusty with sand. YEON-AHM's neighing resonates.

ACT VII

Lights up in CHANG-DAE's house. The PEOPLE have gathered there. CHANG-DAE and YEON-AHM look at the PEOPLE in surprise. The PEOPLE are covered in sand and are panting. Pause.

GANG-RYANG: *(panting)* That's what happened.

(pause)

CHANG-DAE: No...way.

HO-CHEH: Nobody signed up for this.

CHANG-DAE: You're messing with me, right?

GANG-RYANG: Do we look like we're messing with you?

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GEE-YUH: All day long, we looked under every grain of sand, but everything's been rejected. We don't even have a grain of sand to offer him.

GOO-YUH: That's no surprise, actually! Whenever we found anything remotely exotic, we threw it all away. For how long.

BOO-HYEH: We even brought him Boo-Ok's kettle, but it wouldn't sing.

YOO-YOO: I dug up a corpse in the sand. There was no sign of life, but it was perfectly preserved, with life-like complexion. When I brought it to him, he said there's a ton of those out there. So I buried it again.

HO-CHEH: Kyo-Choong tried to cut off his balls. But the Inspector said ball-less men were no rarity. If it wasn't for Sahn-Yuh, he would have lost his balls for nothing.

GANG-RYANG: Can you get ideology by cutting off your balls?

KYO-CHOONG: Who knows?

SAHN-YUH: Shut your mouth! (*bitting KYO-CHOONG on the head*) Who says your balls belong to you? They're mine!

KYO-CHOONG: I was only trying to save our village!

SAHN-YUH: (*pinching him*) What about me? Huh!

HO-CHEH: Save our village. You were thinking of yourself. Selfish bastard.

SAHN-YUH: How can you say that? How desperate must he have been to dare try such a thing! Speaking of desperate, isn't it the seniors who should be in charge in this situation? Have you done anything while he was trying to cut off his...

BOO-HYEH: That's not right. What difference does it make, balls or no balls?

HO-CHEH: What difference? You bitch! Have you seen them? Huh? Have you?

BOO-HYEH: Do I need to?

HO-CHEH: You better watch your mouth, or I'll...

CHOO-OH: Enough! Please, enough! We've all been so out of our minds that we completely forgot about this one (*pointing at YEON-AHM*).

GEE-YUH: Yeah. We ran around for nothing.

BOO-HYEH: She's the only one that can impress the Inspector.

YOO-YOO: Yeah. She doesn't make much sense, so she's got an ideology.

GANG-RYANG: Does she still talk?

CHANG-DAE: Not at all. She's completely normal now.

(On CHANG-DAE's gesture, YEON-AHM lets out a long neigh.)

PEOPLE: *(in despair)* No!

HO-CHEH: No. She must talk!

GANG-RYANG: What a disaster! How long has it been?

CHANG-DAE: A few days.

GEE-YUH: It's probably not too late.

GOO-YUH: Make her talk again!

CHANG-DAE: Now you want her to talk? You were going to kill her for that.

SAHN-YUH: It wasn't us. It was the seniors.

CHANG-DAE: Do you know what I've been through to teach her?

HO-CHEH: For our village, please make her talk again!

BOO-HYEH: Yes. She's the only one that can save our village.

YOO-YOO: If we think about it, she's the cause of all this. Her talking was an omen of terrible things to come.

CHANG-DAE: That's why she stopped talking! What more can you want?

GEE-YUH: Her not talking will not solve anything now, will it?

GOO-YUH: No! Do you think the touring inspector of Internal-external...whatever was simply passing by? He sensed something. That thing invited him here!

SAHN-YUH: One who has tied a knot must untie it. It all started from her mouth and so should it end!

GEE-YUH: Let's stop talking ourselves and make her talk!

(The WOMEN surround YEON-AHM.)

GOO-YUH: Hey! Talk!

SAHN-YUH: Sure, that will make her talk. Hey! You are so full of bull and shit! Pretentious, good-for-nothing thing!

GEE-YUH: You are all surface and no substance. You always get away with it, but that's all you're good at, slimy mudfish!

GOO-YUH: You can talk all you want about life and tenets and morals, but it's all a hurricane in a teapot. You're not even a horse. You're an ass. Get it?

SAHN-YUH: You ramble on about the outside and what you saw and heard, but this is all you got? You're going to make us all die!

(YEON-AHM, instead of answering, lets out a long neigh. The WOMEN pinch, scratch, and make a mess out of YEON-AHM, saying 'Talk! You're still not gonna talk?' etc.)

CHANG-DAE: *(pushing the WOMEN away from YEON-AHM)* Stop! How can you be so cruel to an animal that can't even talk?

GEE-YUH: That's why you have to make her talk!

CHANG-DAE: It's all over. She is completely cured.

GEE-YUH: *(falling on the ground)* Shit, we're ruined! We're all going to die!

GANG-RYANG: Please grant us this favor. Since you made her stop talking, can't you make her talk again?

CHANG-DAE: I'd rather not.

HO-CHEH: What?

CHANG-DAE: If she talks, the inspector will take her. That means I'll never see her again.

GOO-YUH: How can you be so selfish?

SAHN-YUH: Tell me about it! My man almost cut off his...*(sob)*!

GOO-YUH: Do you think you'll be happy if everyone dies because of your horse or ass or whatever?

GEE-YUH: We're all going to die anyway! That freaking beast, and you as well!

CHANG-DAE: I really don't...

HO-CHEH: We really will!

(Pause. EVERYONE is staring into CHANG-DAE's eyes.)

CHANG-DAE: You can't just threaten her to...

HO-CHEH: *(rejoicing)* Ok, ok! Then what can we do?

CHANG-DAE: You have to respect her feelings.

HO-CHEH: How?

CHANG-DAE: First, you have to treat her with respect. With utmost politeness, address her as Master, Lady, Your Honor, or Madam Yeon-Ahm.

BOO-HYEH: *(laughs)*

GEE-YUH: *(boxing BOO-HYEH's ear)* Don't laugh! Then what?

CHANG-DAE: By the way, when does she have to start talking?

GANG-RYANG: By tomorrow morning.

CHANG-DAE: That soon? It took me two weeks to get her to stop talking.

GANG-RYANG: But we don't have two weeks!

HO-CHEH: We will all be dead in two weeks!

CHANG-DAE: *(after a moment of contemplation)* Liquor used to turn her into a chatterbox.

CHOO-OH: Liquor? No!

CHANG-DAE: *(realizing his mistake)* I know, of course. Our village strictly forbids the brewing of liquor. But this hairy thing, I mean Master, kept asking for it.

GANG-RYANG: Alright! Everyone, Go brew liquor!

CHOO-OH: But abstinence is our village's tradition for hundreds of years.

GANG-RYANG: Where there is a village, there is tradition.

GEE-YUH: Doesn't it take like a long time to brew liquor?

GANG-RYANG: Do you have a better idea? We should apply every means possible. Now! Brew liquor! Make it quick and reassemble! Do you all remember what the beast, I mean her honor, has taught you?

BOO-HYEH: You gave an order to forget everything.

GANG-RYANG: Re-remember! Let's bring it all back for Master Yeon-Ahm! So that she can finish what she started. She should be dying to utter the next word! Hurry up!

The PEOPLE scatter. YEON-AHM lets out a long neigh, as if laughing at them. It darkens.

ACT VIII

Night. Stars fill the sky. JANG-BOK's field. Underneath the stars, CHO-MAE is plowing the field with JANG-BOK as the cow. CHO-MAE's eyes are closed.

CHO-MAE: Yo-ho! Yo-ho! There you go! There you go!

JANG-BOK: Is it really necessary to plow the field this late at night?

CHO-MAE: Day or night, it doesn't make a difference to me! Besides you sleep through the day anyway.

JANG-BOK: That's because I spend the night doing this!

CHO-MAE: I am making you do this, only because you're no good in bed.

JANG-BOK: What more can you possibly want in bed?

CHO-MAE: You talk back. That's what's wrong. *(hitting him hard)*

JANG-BOK: Ouch! *(falls with his hands on his back)*

CHO-MAE: Up.

JANG-BOK: My back! It hurts!

CHO-MAE: Don't play a trick on me!

JANG-BOK: I am sixty years old. Can we at least take a break? My back's not my own anymore.

CHO-MAE: And you call yourself a man.

(JANG-BOK takes off the plow and drops himself on the ground.)

CHO-MAE: Jang-Bok.

JANG-BOK: Yes, ma'am?

CHO-MAE: How's the sky? Any stars?

JANG-BOK: Open your eyes and see for yourself.

CHO-MAE: *(boxing his ears)* Answer me! Are there any stars?

JANG-BOK: Plenty.

CHO-MAE: So you're sixty already?

JANG-BOK: I told you.

CHO-MAE: So forty years since you married me?

JANG-BOK: That's about it.

CHO-MAE: What on earth happened to you?

JANG-BOK: What do you mean?

CHO-MAE: You used to be...a man. Don't you remember?

JANG-BOK: No.

CHO-MAE: You stupid blockhead!

JANG-BOK: What did I do?

CHO-MAE: Are you crippled or something?

JANG-BOK: Can't you leave me alone for one second? For a brief moment of peace.

CHO-MAE: You hate me, don't you? You wish I'd just die, don't you? You wish to kill me, don't you?

JANG-BOK: Where are you going with these questions?

CHO-MAE: Nowhere...Plenty of stars?

JANG-BOK: It looks like they're falling all over you.

CHO-MAE: Are they?

JANG-BOK: A falling star. Another one. Right there.

CHO-MAE: Right there?

JANG-BOK: Yes.

CHO-MAE: Right there...

(Pause)

CHO-MAE: Jang-Bok.

JANG-BOK: Yes, ma'am?

CHO-MAE: Jang-Bok.

JANG-BOK: What?

CHO-MAE: Do you know who I am?

JANG-BOK: What?

CHO-MAE: Do you, or don't you?

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JANG-BOK: Of course I do.

CHO-MAE: Then, aren't you scared?

JANG-BOK: I'm sorry?

CHO-MAE: Because I am, scared of myself.

JANG-BOK: So am I, a little.

(CHO-MAE hits JANG-BOK with the stick.)

JANG-BOK: Why are you hitting me? I haven't done anything.

CHO-MAE: *(She giggles, firmly hugs JANG-BOK, and they roll over the sand.)*

JANG-BOK: *(Stuck tight in CHO-MAE's grip, rolling over the sand)* Ouch! Ouch! My back! My back!

(CHO-MAE releases him after a while.)

JANG-BOK: Holy cow.

CHO-MAE: Up.

JANG-BOK: I can't.

CHO-MAE: Let's call it for tonight and go home.

JANG-BOK: *(He stands up immediately, is about to head home, and then stops.)* You're not coming?

CHO-MAE: I'll enjoy the cool air for a while.

(JANG-BOK, after a short moment of confusion, takes the plow and heads home. CHO-MAE, after a few seconds of hesitation, opens her eyes. In fear, she closes her eyes again. She covers her eyes with both hands.)

CHO-MAE: ...Tickling. Tickling...you little ones...When was it...tens of years...hundreds of years...thousands of years...millions of years...when you left me...I cannot see, but I hear the bell. The bell ringing...No. I said no...Why me? Why does it have to be me? Go away. Don't come near me. Get out...Jang-Bok. Jang-Bok...Jang-Bok....

(CHO-MAE puts down her hands that were covering her eyes, lifts her head, and stares into the starry sky. CHO-MAE gets up and strides into darkness. On the other side, GOO-YUH, GEE-YUH, and SAHN-YUH cross the sand, with liquor buckets in their hands.)

GEE-YUH: How'd you get that? I won't tell. You had that for a while, right?

GOO-YUH: Speak for yourself.

(The THREE WOMEN laugh.)

SAHN-YUH: But won't they get suspicious? We're apparently way too early?

GEE-YUH: Let's keep our focus to the present. Who cares what tomorrow brings?

GOO-YUH: Ain't nobody with sober hands in this village.

SAHN-YUH: Even so, let's slow it down.

GEE-YUH: Shall we.

(The THREE WOMEN stop.)

GOO-YUH: Damn. Look at all those stars.

GEE-YUH: The only asset worth a view in our village.

(SAHN-YUH drinks from the bucket.)

GEE-YUH: What the hell you are doing?

SAHN-YUH: I'm drinking.

GEE-YUH: Are you insane?

SAHN-YUH: Who cares? I don't give a shit!

GOO-YUH: Are you upset about Kyo-Choong?

GEE-YUH: He still got his balls.

SAHN-YUH: Who gives a shit about his balls? I'm upset about his thoughts. He decided to offer himself without saying a word to his wife. Can you believe that? Even for the sake of saving the village? Why do I have to suffer for that? This sucks. Life sucks. *(drinks)*

GOO-YUH: Hey, stop drinking!

GEE-YUH: You don't know what you're saying. Thoughts? Those are useless. All you need is balls.

GOO-YUH: Pish. *(drinks)*

GEE-YUH: Hey...why are you drinking?

GOO-YUH: Who needs balls if they're grains of sand?

GEE-YUH: Are you kidding me? Showing off before a widow? I'll be damned. *(drinks)*

GOO-YUH: I'm getting tipsy.

SAHN-YUH: What're we going to do?

(The THREE WOMEN sigh and head toward CHANG-DAE's. On the other side of the stage, BOO-HYEH, YOO-YOO, and KYO-CHOONG, standing in a straight line, are peeing on the field.)

BOO-YEH: Starry fucking night.

YOO-YOO: Those stars are all part of land? This land we're stepping on is a freaking bubble floating in the air...

BOO-HYEH: What the fuck are you talking about?

YOO-YOO: That's what the donkey said. You were there.

BOO-HYEH: Bullshit.

YOO-YOO: You're right. But somehow today I feel like I'm floating in the air, just like she said. Do you remember?

BOO-HYEH: Remember what?

YOO-YOO: When I was fourteen, I got lost in the sandstorm on my way back from the millet field.

BOO-HYEH: It wasn't even spring, but it was wild.

YOO-YOO: What would have happened if I didn't return to the village back then?

BOO-HYEH: You would have died.

YOO-YOO: What if I didn't die but found another village?

BOO-HYEH: You would have died anyway because they would have banished you.

YOO-YOO: Why are you always being so negative? They could have welcomed me as their guest.

BOO-HYEH: Maybe me. But you, I don't know...

YOO-YOO: You sucker! In that sandstorm, I imagined meeting people from other villages. Then I tripped over something, missed my balance, and fell, and that was the way back to our village. I held on to the rope and ran. I heard my mom calling me right there. Thank heavens, I was alive, I thought. But something wasn't right. It felt like somebody was choking me.

BOO-HYEH: What's with you bringing up old memories and stuff? You ready to kick the bucket?

YOO-YOO: What is it with me? If I'm to kick the bucket, I'll kick it all the way to the moon! Hey, Kyo-Choong. What do you think?

BOO-HYEH: Why do you have your hands on your balls? Are you performing a ritual?

YOO-YOO: You finally did it. You cut them off?

BOO-HYEH: Let's see.

KYO-CHOONG: Shhh!

YOO-YOO: What are you shushing about, dickhead!

KYO-CHOONG: Please, guys. What is wrong with you? Can't you leave me alone?

BOO-HYEH: So that you can cut off your balls?

KYO-CHOONG: Balls or no balls, I'm trying to create an ideology.

YOO-YOO: Ideology? You?

KYO-CHOONG: What if Yeon-Ahm doesn't talk again? We should still create an ideology out of what she said, one way or another.

BOO-HYEH: Create an ideology?

KYO-CHOONG: You know I have a good memory.

YOO-YOO: Only for things not worth remembering.

KYO-CHOONG: I remember everything that Yeon-Ahm told us.

BOO-HYEH: But?

YOO-YOO: You can't make head or tail of them?

KYO-CHOONG: I can make too many heads and tails of them.

BOO-HYEH: Too many heads and tails?

KYO-CHOONG: They said an ideology was not supposed to make much sense in the first place. That's what I thought of Yeon-Ahm's words at first, but the more I think about it, the more sense they make. I don't know...*(in thoughts again)*

YOO-YOO: I can't make head or tail of what you're saying.

BOO-HYEH: Damn it! Will we see another day, peeing on the field like this?

(The stage darkens on the MEN's side and brightens on the wagon's side. SAHN-GOH and JEH-GUN are holding MAHN-MAHN. GUH-BOH is beaten up on the ground.)

SAHN-GOH: That was close, man! Really close!

JEH-GUN: Did you have to be so harsh on him?

SAHN-GOH: He deserved it big time, man. Running away with Mahn-Mahn when everyone else is trying to save the village? Does she belong to you?

(SAHN-GOH gives GUH-BOH several hard kicks. GUH-BOH faints.)

MAHN-MAHN: Stop it! Stop! I will do anything you want. So please stop it!

(The INSPECTOR comes out of the wagon.)

INSPECTOR: What's going on out here?

SAHN-GOH: We brought you something.

(SAHN-GOH and JEH-GUN bring MAHN-MAHN to the INSPECTOR.)

INSPECTOR: What?

SAHN-GOH: *(pushing MAHN-MAHN)* This wench.

INSPECTOR: Who is this wench?

JEH-GUN: Mahn-Mahn.

INSPECTOR: Mahn-Mahn? What does she do?

SAHN-GOH: She sleeps with us.

INSPECTOR: Sleep?

JEH-GUN: You know. *(Sex.)*

INSPECTOR: Is she a prostitute? They're everywhere.

MAHN-MAHN: What's a prostitute?

INSPECTOR: It's a filthy thing.

MAHN-MAHN: That can't be me. I am doing it for the chastity of this village.

INSPECTOR: That's what prostitutes do.

SAHN-GOH: Then, what about these high heels? These were our initial offerings, but we couldn't take them off of her, so we brought the whole package.

INSPECTOR: What about these high heels?

JEH-GUN: Let me enlighten you. A long time ago, her ancestors took over our village and had all the women in our village wear these heels.

SAHN-GOH: But when her ancestors were kicked out of our village and had to run for their lives, there was one woman who failed to escape, who was her grandmother's grandmother's grandmother's... grandmother.

JEH-GUN: Our ancestors made her grandmother wear these heels so that she would be reminded of the shame of defeat, whenever she...you know what (*gesturing sex*). Those heels have been passed down to this one. (*pointing at MAHN-MAHN*)

INSPECTOR: Uhm. The filthy heels of chastity...

SAHN-GOH: I knew you'd recognize them! What do you think? Would you call them an ideology?

INSPECTOR: Mahn-Mahn.

MAHN-MAHN: Yes, sir?

INSPECTOR: Don't you feel mistreated?

MAHN-MAHN: No.

INSPECTOR: Aren't you ashamed?

MAHN-MAHN: Of what?

INSPECTOR: Aren't you in pain?

MAHN-MAHN: Not at all. At least not until a few minutes ago.

INSPECTOR: A few minutes ago? What about now?

MAHN-MAHN: I'm not so sure.

INSPECTOR: Uhm. I can't do this yet.

SAHN-GOH: Why not?

INSPECTOR: It's...too risky.

JEH-GUN: Tell him you feel mistreated! Now!

SAHN-GOH: You're ashamed and in pain. Tell him!

(*MAHN-MAHN is at a loss.*)

INSPECTOR: That's all. And please keep it down.

(*The INSPECTOR enters the wagon. MAHN-MAHN caresses GUH-BOH on the ground.*)

MAHN-MAHN: Guh-Boh. Guh-Boh.

JEH-GUN: Is Guh-Boh your other half or something? What does he have that I don't? I'm hurting just as much!

SAHN-GOH: Yeah! We're gonna die tomorrow anyway! Mahn-Mahn! You changed.

JEH-GUN: Yeah! You only care about Guh-Boh!

MAHN-MAHN: That's not true. I didn't change. I like you all, equally.

JEH-GUN: You tried to run away with Guh-Boh and leave us here!

MAHN-MAHN: I told him no. But he forced me...

GUH-BOH: (*managing to open his eyes*) Mahn-Mahn...be true to yourself.

SAHN-GOH: This is pathetic!

JEH-GUN: Do you really think he'll kill us? Like all of us?

SAHN-GOH: (*sarcastically*) What do you think?

JEH-GUN: How do you think he'll kill us?

SAHN-GOH: He said, "exterminate."

JEH-GUN: But what does he mean by "exterminate"? Is it like rubbing dirt off our skin?

SAHN-GOH: Not just rubbing but chafing it off until it's completely gone.

JEN-GUN: (*almost in tears*) That would hurt a lot.

SAHN-GOH: (*almost in tears*) It even hurts to rub.

JEH-GUN: Ah, I wish this was all bull!

SAHN-GOH: (*standing straight all of a sudden*) Shit! Mahn-Mahn! Let's go! I feel like doing it!

JEH-GUN: Me, too!

MAHN-MAHN: No.

SAHN-GOH, JEH-GUN: No?

SAHN-GOH: Did you just say no?

MAHN-MAHN: Yes. No.

SAHN-GOH: Did you hear that? She said no?

JEH-GUN: Wow. This is turning me on!

SAHN-GOH: I've never felt this way before! Let's go do it!

(*SAHN-GOH and JEH-GUN take MAHN-MAHN by force and run out.*)

MAHN-MAHN: No! Let me go! I said no!

(GUH-BOH manages to get himself up.)

GUH-BOH: Mahn-Mahn...Mahn-Mahn...If I can't have you, I don't have any other choice...Stars up there, I have no other choice ...

ACT IX

CHANG-DAE's house. Almost dawn. The PEOPLE are sitting around YEON-AHM, anxiously waiting for her to open her mouth. Pause. YEON-AHM keeps sipping liquor.

KYO-CHOONG: So your honor, and then you said, the greatest profit of the greatest number is the foundation of the welfare of citizens, and the welfare of citizens is the standard of justice in the society? That's what you taught us, wasn't it? The problem is that the act of making profit inevitably accompanies unequal distribution. One's profit is another's loss. Based on this principle, the welfare of citizens cannot but be the welfare of a certain group of citizens, and, in the same way, justice is the virtue of only the selected few. In this case, can we still call it justice? The only thing that remains intact in your teaching is the greatest profit of the greatest number. The welfare of the citizens and justice in the society are all lies. How can you respond to that?

(YEON-AHM keeps silent.)

KYO-CHOONG: You don't have an answer? Of course you don't. Your honor's teachings are noble, but the world isn't so.

(JANG-BOK runs in.)

JANG-BOK: Excuse me.

HO-CHEH: What is it?

JANG-BOK: Has any of you seen my wife? She didn't come home last night.

HO-CHEH: She must have. Where could that earthworm go?

JANG-BOK: I looked everywhere. If she's not here, where is she?

YOO-YOO: If she's gone, isn't it one less thing to worry about?

GANG-RYANG: We haven't seen her. Look elsewhere. You're causing a diversion.

JANG-BOK: *(runs out in distress)* Where could she be?

GANG-RYANG: Continue.

KYO-CHOONG: And then, your honor said that virtue lies neither there nor here but somewhere in between. What did you mean by that? Your honor made it sound like it contains something

profound, but it is nothing but a play on words. What we are truly in need of is not profound chaos but simple and clear order.

BOO-HYEH: What do you mean by that?

KYO-CHOONG: Don't distract me. I'm on a profound subject.

GEE-YUH: Who would want to talk if you keep pushing like that? I certainly would not.

YOO-YOO: Start with something light and concrete. Ask her if the widow and the teacher did it or not. You're giving me a headache!

GOO-YUH: Your honor. Did they do it? Or not? Please tell us. I am dying to find out.

(YEON-AHM keeps silent. Lights change. The other side of the stage. MAHN-MAHN, fully covered in sand, is running away from something. After she has run for a while, she looks around, panting. In the dark, CHO-MAE comes out of nowhere and blocks MAHN-MAHN. MAHN-MAHN is startled and tries to run away, but as CHO-MAE grabs MAHN-MAHN by the hand, MAHN-MAHN falls down on the sand. CHO-MAE grabs MAHN-MAHN's ankle and looks closely at the high-heels she's wearing.)

MAHN-MAHN: ...Please don't do this...these heels are my mother's only legacy! Ouch! That hurts! Are you trying to break my ankle? Please! Stop...!

(CHO-MAE takes off the heels from MAHN-MAHN's feet. She looks at them in silence. CHO-MAE throws the heels back to MAHN-MAHN. MAHN-MAHN picks them up and looks at them. Tears in her eyes. Her silent tears turn into sobbing, and then into a wild burst of crying. Pause.)

MAHN-MAHN: Who are you? Who am I?

(CHO-MAE reaches out her hand to MAHN-MAHN. MAHN-MAHN, after blankly staring at CHO-MAE's hand, grabs it and stands herself up. They vanish into the dark. Lights darken on this side and brighten on the other side again.)

GOO-YUH: Man! I'm going insane!

YOO-YOO: Shit! What the heck are we doing!

BOO-HYEH: It's over. We're through!

SAHN-YUH: The sun is rising. *(offers more liquor to YEON-AHM)* Please, talk! I'm begging you.

YOO-YOO: *(taking the liquor bottle away from SAHN-YUH)* That's enough! We're done! Don't waste good liquor! *(drinks from the bottle)*

BOO-HYEH: *(She drinks.)* We should have listened to the chief in the first place and set the inspector on fire!

YOO-YOO: *(He drinks.) (to KYO-CHOONG)* You've always said! The Outsiders are responsible for our misery in this village. We must have our revenge.

BOO-HYEH: That's right. What are we waiting for? Let's have it!

HO-CHEH: Don't be ridiculous! It's the Emperor, the Empire that we're up against. It takes 586 years just for a tour.

GANG-RYANG: It's not that I don't sympathize with you. I do and I'm more than eager to bring it on! Their retribution does not terrify me. In fact, I have done some thinking, about how to defeat them for good.

BOO-HYEH: We'll leave the thinking to you, seniors. But we are ready to fight!

YOO-YOO: Why all this talk? It's all or nothing!

GANG-RYANG: Listen, everyone! We are not like those savages. We should be proud of that. If we go and fight them, and if we take them down by force, we're turning into savages ourselves.

HO-CHEH: You're right. We still have time. But if the beast doesn't talk by morning, it's not too late to reconsider the attack.

BOO-HYEH: Not too late! That's why we are always defeated!

YOO-YOO: We're not asking you to come with us, so let us go!

HO-CHEH: What?

(There generates great tension between the SENIORS and the MEN. Somebody claps and breaks into a laughter.)

YOO-YOO: Who's laughing? Who is it?

YEON-AHM: That's what I wanted to see! That's what I've been waiting for!

GEE-YUH: She talked! Yeon-Ahm talked!

(The PEOPLE are applauding in cheers.)

WOMEN: Hurray! Hurray!

GEE-YUH: We're saved!

GOO-YUH: Our ancestors are watching over us!

HO-CHEH: What did I say? I said it's not too late!

GANG-RYANG: Don't underestimate our age-old experience!

(The PEOPLE are chattering in excitement.)

YEON-AHM: Silence! Silence!

GEE-YUH: Yes, sir! Yes, ma'am! Whatever you say, don't stop talking.

YEON-AHM: Don't get too excited! I'm talking now, but who knows if I'll open my mouth for that Inspector fellow.

YOO-YOO: What? You obviously haven't learned your lesson!

YEON-AHM: Watch your mouth!

GEE-YUH: She's right. Don't provoke her. What if she plays dumb again?

YEON-AHM: Listen up. I opened my mouth again, not because I care about my life. I'd rather die than follow the inspector and be the Emperor's bitch. I mean it. But your trivial bickering and despicable conducts made me too impatient.

HO-CHEH: So, for the inspector, are you going to talk or not?

YEON-AHM: If you keep interrupting me, I will definitely not.

GOO-YUH: Don't interrupt!

YEON-AHM: Let's measure the options. What happens if I talk for the inspector?

SAHN-YUH: Everything's going to be okay.

YOO-YOO: We will live, and you will live in Imperial luxury.

YEON-AHM: Everything okay? It will be for only 586 years. But what happens after 586 years?

BOO-HYEH: Who cares? That's none of our business!

YEON-AHM: If your ancestors had been a little more considerate 586 years ago, you wouldn't have had to go through all this. If you send me away now, it will only be a temporary remedy. You will be burying your heads in the sand. That's no fundamental solution. Next, what happens if I don't talk for the inspector?

YOO-YOO: We will finish him ourselves.

YEON-AHM: Finish him? Will that solve anything? Imagine the aftermath. You can't fight the army of the Empire.

GANG-RYANG: So what are you suggesting?

YEON-AHM: I'm suggesting a plan that guarantees not only my own but also all of your safety. Of course, we wouldn't have to go through the trouble of killing the inspector.

CHOO-OH: Enlighten us.

YEON-AHM: Be the subject, not the object, of the erasure.

BOO-HYEH: What is she talking about?

YEON-AHM: Go back home and pack your things. Lightly. Only the essentials.

GEE-YUH: Pack our things?

YEON-AHM: We're leaving. Before the break of dawn.

(Pause)

GANG-RYANG: Leaving? Did you just say "leaving"?

YEON-AHM: That's what I said. It's this ground, this land that's causing you all this pain and suffering. What is it that's keeping you here? Look around. It's all sand, sand, and more sand. You can't take three steps forward without panting out sand. What little this village possesses is a few pieces of millet, which you'd always have to dig up from the sand, and a few shelters, so brittle and low that you can't even sit up straight without worrying about collapse. Have you got anything else?

BOO-HYEH: ...No. Nothing.

YEON-AHM: Look at yourselves. Your vision is blurred in the sand and dust, your body is all withered by the lack of nutrition, and your spirit quailed like a dried-up ear of millet. Yoo-Yoo. Tell me. What difference is there between the corpse you dug out from the sand and yourselves?

YOO-YOO: ...not much. Not at all. We're just like the corpse.

YEON-AHM: What can you gain, staying here? Why would you want to stay here? Leave! Get out of here! Vanish!

HO-CHEH: But what will the Emperor do to us?

GANG-RYANG: He'll catch us and kill us all.

YEON-AHM: You move with the Emperor's wagon! Take the lead! Don't stop, keep moving! The wagon will never find you. Because we will never settle! We will erase and erase further and move on! I've seen them. Plains with green grass...mountains covered with trees...valleys with crystal clear springs...rivers...velvet flowers on the hills...the sea!

YOO-YOO: Green grass...

BOO-HYEH: Trees...

SAHN-YUH: The sea...

YEON-AHM: Yes! We will pass all of them, and you will stand up straight, you will see the world with vigor, you will take spry steps, and you will sing your heart out about the joy of life! It's the break

of dawn! Let's move! Before the inspector wakes up, before the Emperor gets out of bed, let's make no sounds, leave no trace, and be out of here in an instant! Vanish! If you welcome me, I will join you!

(Pause)

YOO-YOO: Absolutely! She's right! This is no place to live.

BOO-HYEH: Damn! Let's see how far we can go!

GANG-RYANG: Calm yourselves! It's easier said than done.

CHOO-OH: It's better than death.

GANG-RYANG: Et tu, Chief!

HO-CHEH: Why all this chaos? We offer this beast and have a happy ending!

CHOO-OH: That's for cowards, with no vision for the future.

HO-CHEH: What did you say?

CHOO-OH: I am all on board with Master Yeon-Ahm. We must look ahead. Ages ago, our ancestors settled here and cultivated this land. But now it is barren. There's hardly any trace of life here.

SAHN-YUH: Yes. No matter where we go, it can't be worse than this.

GOO-YUH: It will not be easy. But think of our children.

YOO-YOO: Agreed! It's our turn to venture into the world! Follow the example of our ancestors!

GANG-RYANG: We are not ready yet!

BOO-HYEH: When will we be ready?

YOO-YOO: Right now! Now!

CHOO-OH: We must make a choice! Will we bravely step up and promise our children a future of prosperity? Or will we remain and leave our children the pain, the poverty, and our shame? Those in favor of leaving, please put on your protection glasses!

(The PEOPLE put on their protection glasses one by one.)

HO-CHEH: No! It's time to sow the ground. Where do you suppose you're going?

CHOO-OH: With all due respect, dear seniors, we have made our decision. Everyone. Go back home and pack your things swiftly and silently! Most lightly! Only the essentials!

The PEOPLE scatter in determination. The darkness right before dawn.

ACT X

When it brightens, the VILLAGE CHIEF and CHANG-DAE are waiting, with bundles. The VILLAGE CHIEF is wearing protection glasses and YEON-AHM is standing next to him.

CHANG-DAE: Hey, Chief. I'm not so sure about this.

CHOO-OH: Shut up.

CHANG-DAE: I have to wait for my son, Mee-Joong. What if he comes back and I'm not here?

CHOO-OH: Mee-Joong is dead.

CHANG-DAE: He might be alive.

CHOO-OH: What is everyone taking so long?

(GEE-YUH enters, empty handed.)

CHOO-OH: Ms. Gee-Yuh. Where is your stuff?

GEE-YUH: I've been thinking, you know, my husband's buried here. Who's going to take care of him if I leave...Go ahead. I'll stay.

CHOO-OH: Ms. Gee-Yuh!

(The family, SAHN-YUH, KYO-CHOONG, and SAHN-GOH enter, all empty-handed.)

CHOO-OH: You, too?

KYO-CHOONG: It looks like my wife...

CHOO-OH: What about your wife?

KYO-CHOONG: She's been getting nauseous lately, and I think she's having morning sickness.

SAHN-YUH: I can't give birth on the road.

CHOO-OH: Why not?

KYO-CHOONG: It's not only that, but you know, all I was ever good at was remembering things. I remember every single event that transpired in this village, but if I leave, what happens to my memory? One day, I'd like to create my own ideology based on my memory. So ...

(The family, GOO-YUH, BOO-HYEH, and JEH-GUN enter, empty-handed as well. They are furious.)

BOO-HYEH: Why the hell would you insist on bringing that crappy cupboard?

GOO-YUH: Crappy cupboard? Watch it! This was my wedding gift from my mother. I'm keeping this, forever!

BOO-HYEH: Fine! Then carry it yourself!

GOO-YUH: How can I carry this myself?

BOO-HYEH: It's not just the cupboard! The table, the door...

GOO-YUH: How can we leave without them? Don't you remember what I went through to get them?

BOO-HYEH: Why don't you bring the cornerstone as well?

GOO-YUH: You don't think I can?

BOO-HYEH: Give me a freaking break!

CHOO-OH: So what's the verdict?

BOO-HYEH: It's not that I wouldn't go...But look at her! She's not making any sense!

GOO-YUH: Speak for yourself!

CHOO-OH: (*in distress*) What about Yoo-Yoo? And the seniors?

KYO-CHOONG: Yoo-Yoo is sick in bed at my place.

CHOO-OH: What happened?

KYO-CHOONG: He was tearing down his house...

CHOO-OH: Tearing down?

SAHN-YUH: He insisted on tearing it down before leaving this place for good. Then it fell on him and he got hurt bad. He barely survived. He keeps saying "let's get out of here. Let's go." But he can't move an inch.

(*The SENIORS enter, of course, empty-handed. The INSPECTOR enters behind them.*)

CHOO-OH: Dear Seniors!

GANG-RYANG: (*ignoring him*) There was no other way.

INSPECTOR: There's no need to put the blame on them. They are, at best, belated informers. Don't underestimate the Touring Inspector of the Internal-External-Private-Public-Individual-Communal-Commonplace-and-Mysterious-Affairs-Executive-Bureau. Eating millet rice cake and sleeping in the wagon were merely a camouflage. I knew all about this beast from the beginning. I was simply waiting for you to complete the task. Good job.

(*The INSPECTOR steps toward YEON-AHM. The PEOPLE move out of his way.*)

INSPECTOR: Exactly what I was looking for. Something dramatic but not threatening...Yeon-Ahm, is it? There is one thing you didn't realize. Maybe you did but pretended not to. All the places that you mentioned are already occupied. You may pass by. Maybe take a tour. But you can't settle there. No stopping and keep moving? Happy with a glimpse? Do you really believe that will be enough for these people? I wouldn't imagine. Man is bound to settle down eventually. What can you say about that?

YEON-AHM: I won't talk any more. You can take me, but I'll only be a shell of a creature.

INSPECTOR: That's exactly what I need, the shell. I don't need your words any more. They are all recorded.

YEON-AHM: Oh!

INSPECTOR: Bind her.

HO-CHEH: You heard her! Bind this beast! The inspector wants to take her. Problem solved!

(The PEOPLE are reluctant.)

GANG-RYANG: What are you all waiting for? Do it!

(GUH-BOH who has entered running at some point runs toward YEON-AHM and puts a rope on her neck.)

GUH-BOH: Stay back!

INSPECTOR: Who the hell are you?

GANG-RYANG: Guh-Boh, you bastard! What do you think you're doing?

GUH-BOH: I'm going to kill this beast!

HO-CHEH: You what? Have you gone completely insane?

GANG-RYANG: Do you realize the consequence of your action? She dies, we all die.

GUH-BOH: That's exactly what I want. This trash of a village is better off dead! Erased!

GEE-YUH: What's gotten into him?

SAHN-GOH: It's all because of Mahn-Mahn.

HO-CHEH: Mahn-Mahn?

GUH-BOH: That's right! I want Mahn-Mahn!

GEE-YUH: Then, take her! What's stopping you?

GUH-BOH: I want her for myself! I'm in love with her! But, in this village, I know I can't have her for myself!

INSPECTOR: My, my. What a clown.

GUH-BOH: Ideology? This, you call ideology? If your ideology cannot save a girl from pain and shame, you can throw that ideology to the dogs! This ideology is better off dead! Stay back!

(GUH-BOH stifles YEON-AHM with the rope. YEON-AHM is choking.)

PEOPLE: Stop! No!

CHOO-OH: Somebody go find Mahn-Mahn! Quick!

INSPECTOR: Dead or alive, do it fast. It's almost time to go.

All of a sudden, a strong sandstorm comes. The PEOPLE are running around in confusion.

ACT XI

INSPECTOR: What the hell? Where did that come from? Don't panic! Stay where you are!

(The sandstorm calms and the wagon has appeared out of nowhere. A voice is heard from inside the wagon.)

VOICE: A moment of cosmic transition occurs with a wind of change.

INSPECTOR: Who's in there? How dare you!

(The tent of the wagon opens, revealing CHO-MAE sitting inside. MAHN-MAHN is sitting next to her.)

JANG-BOK: My wife! Honey!

GUH-BOH: Mahn-Mahn!

INSPECTOR: What's all this? Who are you to be sitting there? Where the hell is all of my stuff?

CHO-MAE: This wagon was too damn packed, and what is worse, they wouldn't shut up, so I kicked them all out.

INSPECTOR: You what? Kicked them out?

CHO-MAE: They ran for their freedom.

INSPECTOR: Do you have any idea what I've gone through to collect them all!

CHO-MAE: Don't make a scene! This touring inspection was not meant for that rubbish. It was meant for me.

INSPECTOR: You? What are you?

CHO-MAE: What am I? You are practically blind. Don't you recognize me?

(The INSPECTOR is startled.)

CHO-MAE: Wasn't it you who brought me to this village 2344 years ago? Wasn't it you who told me all about what's going to happen today?

(The INSPECTOR steps back in fear.)

CHO-MAE: That's right. I am the new Emperor.

(Music is playing from the radio. The INSPECTOR gets down in his knees and bows his head. The PEOPLE, bewildered, kneel and bow their heads as well.)

CHO-MAE: I've finished my period of exile. It's time to return. Inspector, pull the wagon.

(The INSPECTOR approaches the wagon. GUH-BOH steps in front of the wagon.)

GUH-BOH: Mahn-Mahn!

(CHO-MAE throws MAHN-MAHN's high-heels to GUH-BOH.)

CHO-MAE: That's your beloved Mahn-Mahn!

(GUH-BOH, in awe, picks up the heels.)

CHO-MAE: *(smoothly touching MAHN-MAHN)* Mahn-Mahn! There's sand all over you. Let me wash you. Clean and clear. You will bear no pain, no shame, no anger, no despair, and no desire, but people will remember you with pain, shame, anger, despair, and desire. Because you are my daughter and my successor.

MAHN-MAHN: Mother.

CHO-MAE: Let's go.

Another sandstorm blows over the knelt down PEOPLE. The wagon is gone. It gets dark.

JANG-BOK's silhouette is visible in the dark. JANG-BOK is overwhelmed with the unexpected freedom. He hops around in joy and cheers, "Hurray! I'm free! I'm free!" After a while, he stops. Silence. His silhouette disappears in the dark.

ACT XII

When it gets bright, we see the field and the starry sky. JANG-BOK, in the middle of the field, is sobbing. He is at a loss of what to do, just like a string-less marionette.

JANG-BOK: She's gone. She's gone...

(CHANG-DAE and YEON-AHM enter the field.)

CHANG-DAE: Master...What happens to me if you leave by yourself?

YEON-AHM: You can join me.

CHANG-DAE: I'm too old.

YEON-AHM: That's what you used to say.

CHANG-DAE: Here it comes again.

YEON-AHM: A horse stepped on your foot. You were suffering from a severe cold. You couldn't walk. You could barely crawl. And still you cried out in tears, "Master! What happens to me if you leave by yourself?"

CHANG-DAE: You let me ride the horse, put a blanket on me, and you walked?

YEON-AHM: No. I left by myself.

CHANG-DAE: ...

YEON-AHM: But you still followed me, persistently.

(Pause)

CHANG-DAE: You may not remember this, but when you were young, that is, before you started speaking, you had beautiful eyes. I enjoyed looking into them. They created this yearning in me...That's right. I used to have a yearning. To get out of this village and travel far away. I was twenty-five when I could afford a horse. I would have left. If only it wasn't for that woman. She wanted to have a child. She said I could leave after our first child. Crying. Her tears turned my horse into an apron, a pot, and a piece of millet. It took ten years until we had Mee-Joong, but then what happened. This creature of a wife died in childbirth. Eighteen years passed by, and I finally thought I could leave this village, now that Mee-Joong was an adult. But guess what. It was his turn...Forgive me for all this grumbling. You must think I'm a...

YEON-AHM: No. I don't.

CHANG-DAE: You don't?

YEON-AHM: I'm just a phantom, given a shape by people like you. Only those who feel an itch can feel pain...But the pain is more than what you feel, so what can we do about that.

(Pause)

CHANG-DAE: Isn't it strange? I barely remember what my wife or my son looked like, but I can vividly picture the horse I did not get to buy.

(YEON-AHM, in silence, takes a few steps.)

CHANG-DAE: Master...Where's your destination?

YEON-AHM: Nowhere.

CHANG-DAE: What's your plan?

YEON-AHM: Just...wandering. We are born to walk about.

(YEON-AHM exits, humming a song.)

YEON-AHM

Over the stove miso soup is boiling, boiling, boiling.
One bubble, one mississippi two bubbles two mississippi.
One drop one mississippi two drops two mississippi.
Bubble pop I pop Drop pop I pop.
Pop pop pop pop where did it go,
where did it go pop pop pop pop!

JANG-BOK: *(in tears)* She's gone. She left me...gone!

(Another sandstorm erases YEON-AHM from sight. The song becomes faint, the bell silently continues ringing, and then there is a long cry from neither a horse, nor a donkey, nor a mule, neither happy nor sad, neither angry, nor pleasant, but somewhere in between. The sandstorm erases CHANG-DAE and JANG-BOK from sight. In the dark, we hear YEON-AHM's voice.)

YEON-AHM: People soon forgot the beast and the events of the day. Chang-Dae and Jang-Bok, finding comfort in each other's sadness, moved in with each other. The boys played with themselves, picturing Mahn-Mahn, but one sand-stormy day brought another girl and she replaced Mahn-Mahn. Guh-Boh drank the extract from boiling Mahn-Mahn's heels, slept for a couple of weeks, and woke up with no memory of Mahn-Mahn...

(While YEON-AHM is speaking, the PEOPLE enter one by one and engage in their everyday life. On one side are the WOMEN.)

GEE-YUH: So you're saying that Yeon-Ahm was drunk dead in the middle of the market place?

GOO-YUH: They could tell by her reddish hair and white ears!

SAHN-YUH: She loved that liquor.

GEE-YUH: After all she taught us, she is nothing but a drunkard?

(On the other side of the stage are the MEN.)

BOO-HYEH: I heard she climbed up Mount Chun to dig up herbs, but then fell down the cliff and died.

YOO-YOO: She didn't die but hid herself from the world in a remote cave in that mountain and is in search of the fundamental truth. You can see a light coming out of the cave, and they say that's Yeon-Ahm's eyes. They can even hear her yawning, down at the village!

KYO-CHOONG: That's old news! She found the fundamental truth and is now leading a band of robbers.

CHOO-OH: That must be it! Remember, she had a lot to complain about.

(On another side are the BOYS.)

SAHN-GOH: Can you believe that? Yeon-Ahm rode a rainbow up to the sky?

JEH-GUN: No way.

SAHN-GOH: It can only be true. This is coming from a guy with five eyes.

JEH-GUN: He tricked you into giving him your millet rice cake.

SAHN-GOH: No. I can see Yeon-Ahm doing that. *(to GUH-BOH)* Can you?

GUH-BOH: *(obliviously)* What?

JEH-GUN: That must have been one bitter medicine.

SAHN-GOH: We had a lot of fun, right?

JEH-GUN: She was one funny beast.

SAHN-GOH: If she's not in the sky, where could she be?

JEH-GUN: If she's not dead, she'd be spreading her bull somewhere else.

GUH-BOH: What?

SAHN-GOH: What are you what-ing about, silly?

YEON-AHM: That's right. This village, which would be lost in oblivion throughout most of the year, had a few visitors in sandstorm season. Some of them shared news about a certain beast. The people, while doubting the authenticity of the visitor's stories, still traded them with a warm meal, they cast a long gaze over the vast sand-stormy field, and was reminded of the reddish haired, white-eared, liquor-loving, eccentric-lesson-spreading, non-stop-talking beast, sighing or smiling without knowing exactly why, then shook their heads, and ran into their houses to shovel out the piling sand.

(While YEON-AHM is talking, the PEOPLE stopped working. They look like they are daydreaming. The stage gradually darkens, the SENIORS ring the bells.)

HO-CHEH: *(voice)* Village Meeting! Village Meeting!

GANG-RYANG: *(voice)* Everyone. Take out our ancestors' sayings! Today we are reading Chapter 3 Paragraph 18! "On the Virtue of the Ordinary." Chief! Hit it!

Gradual black out.

End of Play.

The Invasion

By Arthur Adamov

Translated from the French by David Carter

Popular throughout the francophone theatrical space, Adamov has exerted profound influence on the French stage, though his work suffers from a lack of exposure in the English-speaking world. Cited in Martin Esslin's landmark, *Theatre of the Absurd*, Adamov's works, though highly influential and recognized for their brilliance early on, have sustained an English-language silence excepting a few small plays translated decades ago.

When I first began translating *The Invasion*, the contemporaneous feel of the work caught me off guard. How could a play, written in the 1940s and later dismissed by the playwright in the 1960s, resonate so strongly in today's world? While Adamov could never have anticipated (nor could many of us today!) our contemporary global political issues with the environment, immigration, refugee status and women's rights, we find them bubbling up throughout the play. Never the direct focus of the work, within the play there lives a churning undergrowth of political discontent. It is important to remember that Adamov lived as a political refugee himself and directly witnessed the politics of Nazi Germany and Vichy France and the Armenian genocide.

Outside the political dimensions of the play, an almost meta-concern for any translator sits at the center of the work. The main character, Pierre, struggles with transcribing and preserving the writings of a (unknown?) writer and deceased friend. Throughout the work Pierre wonders and argues about the act of transcribing these writings: does he directly copy the writings, disregarding errors and preserving misspellings, or does he mine the work for the author's intent and clean it up as he goes. Here we ask, do we value the writer or the reader and how do we faithfully display the genius of a work between languages, a concern squarely planted at the feet of any translator. In translating the script, I felt this tension, and attempted my best tightrope-walking with my choices. Highlighting these concerns of communication, the play focuses around themes of isolation and expression. There is a loneliness in this struggle to communicate correctly.

The piece, a mediation on artistic creation, the communication of ideas, and the power of language furthers the predominate concerns of the French Absurdist stage of the 1940s and 1950s and its fixation on existentialism and semiotics. *The Invasion* was first produced at the Studio Champs-Élysées in November 1950, directed by the acclaimed Jean Vilar, an early supporter of Arthur Adamov's theatrical experimentation. Not only historically significant for its placement in and influence on the absurdist movement, the play remains a relevant force for today's audiences.

Born in 1908 in Kislovodsk of the Russian Caucasus, **Arthur Adamov** moved to Paris, France with his family, spending his infancy and childhood in transit through Switzerland and occupied Germany. Beginning in 1922, Adamov remained in Paris—excepting his time as an internment camp prisoner in 1941—until his suicide in March of 1970.

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Attracted to the power of languages and their abstraction of the human experience, Adamov began writing poetry and drama at an early age, influenced by symbolist writers and later surrealist dramatists. Once in Paris, he immediately attached himself to the Surrealist groups, editing and publishing the first edition of *Discontinuité*.

During World War II, Adamov was interned under the Vichy Regime. This internment radicalized his political ideals about language in political and personal spaces. Always attracted to the theatre, Adamov's dramatic output during and after the War produced major successes and proved highly influential on writers such as Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, and Fernando Arrabal. Cited as a founder of the Theatre of the Absurd, his influence directly changed the course of French literature. Furthering his stage writing through publications on dramatic theory and criticism through the 1950s and 1960s, Adamov shifted his writing to directly engage in a political world.

At a time in French dramatic history when an abstracted fascination with existentialism and man's ineffectual and nonsensical actions dominated the stage, Adamov broke from the mainstream and delved into a highly caustic political space, bringing alienation and Epic dramatic ideals to the French stage. The first dramatist to adopt absurdist tendencies in his work, he was also the first to abandon them.

Struggling with depression and alcoholism for much of his later life, Adamov committed suicide as a successful, though deeply impoverished writer. An eccentric and outsider, Adamov's poetry and his plays enjoy continued success and sustained productions throughout the French speaking world.

David Carter is a dramaturg and theatre and visual artist interested in mining the connections between audience and art through a range of artistic mediums, from cross-cultural theatre and opera to site-specific sculptural landscapes. David holds an MFA in Dramaturgy and New Play Development from Columbia University, and has worked on productions in New York, Paris, Washington DC, and Santa Fe, including producing the second largest Fringe Festival in North America. As a teacher, David has taught courses on Shakespeare while in Paris to French language speakers, as well as brought French artists to America to speak on the significance of their work. Most recently, David has collaborated on the major Land Art project, Star Axis. David is currently engaged in translating the complete poetry and dramatic writings of Arthur Adamov, as well as an upcoming new translation and production of Molière's *The Miser*, debuting in Santa Fe in March 2019.

The Invasion

Cast of Characters:

Pierre

Agnès

The Mother

The First Passerby

The Friend

Tradel

Madame Tradel

The Child

Act 1

Stage in dark

Man's voice: Agnès, Hey, do you hear me?

A Woman's voice: (*Drowsy*) What's the matter?

Man's voice: I can't find them. Where'd you put them? You promised never to touch them again.

The light gradually comes up. We see in the light a messy studio where Pierre—tall, lean, nervous—paces back and forth.

On the wooden floor, there are two different piles of paper arranged like decks of cards.

Hanging from the ceiling, a small lamp with a complicated system of pulleys.

Left, downstage, a sofa where Agnès is laying. At the head of the sofa, two folding chairs. Close by, a night stand also covered with papers.

Right, downstage, and turned three quarters to the left, a voluminous armchair upholstered in velvet: the armchair of the Mother.

Upstage to the left, a window. Close to the window, a table. On the table, a typewriter, and again papers. Upstage to the right, a chest of drawers: it is also covered in papers, and an overly full hat stand.

On almost the entire length of the walls, there are shelves of a library where some books are shelved with still, more piles of paper.

Here and there, chairs. On almost all the chairs, some papers, some laundry, some clothes.

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Three doors: right, left, and upstage.

Agnès: You must have put them under the bed. Look again, they must be there.

Pierre: *(Bending down)* I can't see a thing.

Agnès: *(Leaning on an elbow)* Open up the curtains.

Pierre goes to the window clumsily attempting to open the curtains.

Agnès: They're caught in the sill. Pull the top. You're tall, reach up, you can do it.

Pierre tries again to pull the curtains, but again without success.

Agnès: Hold on.

Agnès throws off the covers, rises, putting on a robe. She is a young graceful woman, slightly pallid. She takes a chair and drags it to the window, climbs on top of it and pulls the curtain. Light shines in. Morning light, which will become brighter and brighter.

Agnès will sit on the sofa. Pierre stops himself before the laid-out piles of papers on the ground. He kneels down and shakes them out.

Pierre: They're not here. I did not put them on the floor. *(He gets up)* Ya' know, it was the paper bearing the letter head of that hotel where you both lived. I forget the name now.

Pierre goes to the chest and searches through (still more) papers.

Agnès: *(She gets up, and, in a voice almost joyous)* Oh yes, one day, you wanted to get a room but they had no rooms for you. So then we strolled down the boulevard, and the wind began to blow so strong that we just had to stop *(Laughing)* and then we had to stay there.

Pierre: *(He has gone to the night stand with some papers)* Again, you are messing it up. You don't get it, I cannot waste time, not even a second. *(Agnès begins to sit down at the typewriter and types, slowly, jerkingly)* I stayed up all night trying to figure out these pencil scratchings, but I couldn't do it. *(Pause)* It would have been better if I did not follow a chronological order. But I had to begin with the oldest, most faded paper, otherwise it would have been much more difficult. Who knew that pencil fades so quickly? But if I could just find a word scribbled like it somewhere else in the work.

Agnès: You are working too hard, you will go blind like this.

Pierre: I would be less exhausted if you would help a little more.

Pierre sits on the sofa and works with the papers on the night stand.

Agnès: But why did you take all the papers from me? You know full well that if we stick together, I can figure out all kinds of things. We will eventually manage. Nobody knew him the way we did. I was, after all, his sister, and you were his best friend. *(Pause)* I know sometimes I am wrong and make

a mistake with a word. But I always find Jean. *(Pause)* What hurts the most are the pages where the pencil point breaks or his lines run off the page. It is in those tattered pages where I see him clearest!

Enter the Mother, a newspaper and an electric iron in her hand. She is a fifty-year-old woman, robust and determined looking. She goes directly to Pierre and kisses him.

Mother: What, already working? Did you at least sleep? Surely you are not sleeping enough. *(Goes towards Agnès)* Take this. You could iron Pierre's shirts...after you wash them. *(Whispering)* Agnès take care of him. You know his eyes are fragile. Working like this for two years, he risks losing his vision. *(Mother moves to her armchair and opens the newspaper. Agnès types.)* Incredible! This immigration thing has been dragging on for months and we still cannot find a solution. It's always the same: no one is capable of taking an initiative. *(Pause)* Naturally, they take advantage of it, but if they honestly have no work wherever they're from, why must they come here looking for it?

Agnès: But who else would do the work that nobody wants to do? And at half the rate as everyone else.

Mother: You don't understand: they are spreading the sin of their laziness, whoever they are.

Pierre: *(He gets up and goes towards Agnès)* I've found it!

Agnès: What? The word you were looking for?

Pierre: Better, the whole sentence! I was stuck on this one word trying to understand it, so I tried to see what was written around it; it was so illegible. But, suddenly an incredible clarity: first, the words on both the right and left of it. And then, the sentence came to me. *(Pause)* If only Tradel had had half of my patience...

Mother: I admit that I advised you to entrust him with this. But since I have seen him work, I realize it was not such a good idea.

Pierre: He is not thorough enough in his work. When he can't decipher a given word, he just makes it up. As long as he catches the idea, he is satisfied. I can't get him to understand that we don't have the right to do that. *(He goes to look for a book positioned on the chest)* Basically he is satisfied with an approximate word; it's due to his lack of conceptualizing a focused idea. *(Opening the notebook)* Listen, for example, what he "deemed" incoherent: two parts of a sentence that he just threw together. Fine, he joined them together with the word "for," but it makes no sense. Oh, I fully understand the temptation but it's dangerous. Because he lacks discipline: how do we know if such errors were originally written intentionally, accidentally...or even out of fear? Obviously, nothing can be proved. What if all this was caused by working himself too hard.

Mother: You know Tradel does nothing on his own. Remember way back in school he would be lost as soon as either you or Jean were not there to help him...to listen to him. *(Pause)* But after all, it's not all bad, just think of his personal attachment to the work.

Agnès: He will definitely come here again today. I only hope that he does not stay all day like yesterday.

Pierre: I wonder if it was wrong to give him one of the notebooks. They were easier to read, but they do have their own difficulties. If Jean could have instructed us on exactly what he would do...but in those last months we lost sight of him.

He becomes absorbed with his papers.

Mother: I have never understood why, Agnès, who was always so close to her brother cannot make more sense of it to you.

Agnès types faster.

Pierre: I thought so! It is not “importantly” but “impotently.” If only I had more time I could be more patient. *(Pause)* I have to stop, I cannot see anything anymore. Agnès, the light, would you?

Agnès rises, turns the light on and returns to her place. She removes the papers from the typewriter and places the carbon copies backwards. She gets upset, and frustratedly replaces the papers with difficulty in the correct order and restarts her work on the typewriter.

Enter the Friend, a large hand bag under her arm. She resembles a parakeet: tall, lean, and speaks with an affected tone. She wears a frilly dress and a feathered hat with a half-risen veil. Without a care for those working, she enters the stage.

Friend: *(To the Mother)* I just came from the Comité. All our friends are asking for you. *(Pause)* I knew I would find you at Pierre’s house.

Mother: How insightful of you!

Friend: We decided to get together before noon and write up the protest letters. Now is the time to act if we want to stop them from taking the best jobs. If they get them, we will never be rid of these people.

Mother: I do doubt the effectiveness of your protest.

Pierre: But if I made one idiotic mistake, I can very well have made others elsewhere, everywhere!

Friend: *(Going towards Pierre)* It seems like things are not going well today, Pierre? *(She waits expectantly for a response, steps towards Agnès, then, changing her mind, goes towards Mother)* I see Agnès has adapted to her new line of work.

Mother: She has no other choice.

Agnès types faster.

Friend: May I sit? I should start on this.

She sits, pulls a packet of paper out of her briefcase and writes on her lap.

Agnès: (*Approaching Pierre, paper in hand*) There is a word I don't understand. What are you trying to say here? You should try to write clearer.

Pierre: Listen. I have asked you to stop deciphering. I am fully aware that it is beyond your abilities. So now, all you need to do is copy the pages that I have already figured out. You should be able to handle that all by yourself. The pages that you are currently typing are not finished, of course if they were I would not have this anxiety. Don't tell me it is difficult to competently type. (*Pause*) You know full well that I must have several successive versions so I can read each manuscript with fresh eyes.

Pierre rises, placing the lamp on the floor and hangs it by a nail above the night table. He kneels down under the lamp and closely examines his papers.

Mother: Tell me, Agnès, is it true that your brother never wrote to you?

Agnès: No. We never left each other. Whenever he left the house, I followed along.

Friend: His death must have been terrible for you.

Mother: It's a pity that his handwriting is so unfamiliar to you.

Agnès: He hated writing. (*Pierre raises his head*) I know that better than anyone. (*Pause*) There were moments, at the end, where to just hold a pencil was torturous for him.

Pierre: (*Rising*) And yet, he must have written from time to time. (*Showing the papers which are strewn about everywhere*) The proof!

Mother: Agnès says that he wanted to destroy his papers.

Agnès: (*Rising*) Exactly! He hated them. They reminded him of his suffering.

Pierre: (*Gets up and walks*) In any case, he did not destroy them. (*Agnès sits down again*) It's useless to bring this up again. (*Stopping himself in front of Agnès*) You can imagine that even before starting, I assumed this responsibility. I thought we resolved this issue (*Enunciating his words*) once and for all. Of course, he spoke of destroying his papers, and quite often enough. But it was during terrible moments when all seemed so pointless. But if he had never experienced such moments I wonder whether he would have ever written. As long as I am around, the papers will neither be published nor destroyed.

Friend: Death poses cruel dilemmas.

Friend rises, puts on her gloves and takes some steps while readjusting her hat. Pierre leans on the chest and examines the papers that he has kept in his hand. Enter Tradel. He seems like a caricature of Pierre, of whom he copies certain manners. He speaks very fast and often right in the face of people. He is dressed rather poor. Pierre continues to work. Agnès types anew. The Friend looks at Tradel and again sits in her chair. She follows Tradel with her gaze, mocking him with her eyes.

Tradel: So I was right. I saw it coming. The family has decided to take us to trial. They have begun the procedures.

Pierre: They can do nothing against me.

Tradel: But I've seen the lawyer. He told me. He is not at all so sure we are right.

Pierre: We don't have to worry about it until we know more. For now, do not stress about it.

Tradel: All I know is that we must defend ourselves. What's preventing them from coming and looking for the papers, today, tomorrow, I don't know...And once they have taken them, they won't know what to do with them. Will they go so far as destroying them...or sell them?

Agnès: They will never sell them!

Mother: Agnès is right. What parents would sell the cause of their child's death?

Friend: Assume nothing! They could use the money.

Tradel: Something must be done, now.

Pierre: Well, here it is, another day wasted. Like I could afford to be interrupted all the time. (Pause) I do not even dare to open my files anymore. I am constantly pulled away from a pile of work that still is nowhere near finished. (*To Agnès*) You know, I have found so many mistakes that I am deciding to begin again from start to finish.

Friend: Work can be full of surprises!

Busily, she rearranges her papers.

Pierre: (*Appearing to leave, to Tradel*) I will see the lawyer.

He is again absorbed into his papers.

Tradel: (*Approaching Pierre*) Did you have a chance to look over the work that I did?

Pierre: Hardly. I cannot talk about it now.

Tradel: I need you to comb through it carefully. But first, I need to explain certain things about it. It is absolutely necessary...Our well...I am sure that we will agree on the essential. (*Pierre goes to the door, Tradel follows*) I'll accompany you, we'll talk on the way.

Pierre: Excuse me, but I need to be alone.

He looks again at his papers.

Friend: (*Rising, to Mother*) Should we go about our business as well?

Mother: Yes, in a moment. *(To Tradel)* Tradel, why don't we profit from Pierre's absence and unravel the mysteries and difficulties of your work.

Tradel, at a loss looks at Pierre who goes towards the door, then to the Mother.

Agnès: *(To Pierre)* Don't come home too late.

Exit Pierre

Friend: I have known this boy for...twenty years and he still manages to amaze me.

Agnès takes her work and exits by the door in the back. The Mother rises and begins looking at some clothes piled on the chair. Tradel stands motionless, arms dangling.

Mother: *(Bringing the clothes to Tradel who takes them)* You can take these back. If they are not done to perfection, you report right back to me. This arrangement is still working for you, right?

Friend: *(She approaches Tradel and feels the cloth.)* Oh Ravishing! Your wife is an excellent seamstress.

She sits close to the Mother. Tradel puts the clothes down.

Mother: You will not have such a hard time selling them. Well, now that you have some free time since you're out of work. *(Pause)* Assuming from what Pierre has told me of certain things which are not satisfactory.

Tradel: What has he said?

Mother: Oh, nothing big. Simply, he does not agree with your style of work. *(The Friend raises her head)* But don't worry your little head over it. *(Pause)* You do not understand him, but you are not alone. His thoughts are so difficult, so deep...

Tradel: But, why does he disagree with me?

Mother: He suspects you of erasing away...or adding...or of inventing...I don't know anything more...

Tradel: He doesn't want to understand that we will never finish this if we do not decide to recreate what is missing, that which escapes us. I have explained this to him a thousand times...

Mother: Recreate?

Tradel: Recreate, no, of course not recreate. But I have found passages absolutely impenetrable. I have been forced to...to fill in the gaps.

Mother: I would never have guessed so many things were unclear to you, especially in the notes of your friend.

Tradel: Obviously, for me, it is clear. But I don't work just for me.

Mother: True. What you want above all is to be published.

Friend: If it would help, I know an editor. Only, these notes, they are very special, right?

Tradel: I always wanted to fully compile the collected works of Jean. But doing it this way, it condemns them entirely to obscurity...

Mother: If you desire to publish some of these pieces, I would advise you to speak about it with Pierre.

Tradel: That is exactly what I wanted to do today. But you saw what happened. *(Pause)* Well, we have plenty of time to think about it...granting...we take immediate action...of this idea...*(Pause)* More importantly is what Pierre thinks of the work that I just finished.

Mother: I don't believe he will talk to you about it because for him it is...very painful to be at such odds with you...even on a point of detail.

Tradel: Yes, my alleged errors. If only I knew where Pierre had put my notebook, I could show you one by one all those passages and then you would understand...

Mother: *(Designating the chair on which is positioned Tradel's notebook)* It is over there. *(Tradel searches for the book with his eyes)* On that chair.

Tradel quickly takes the notebook and returns towards the Mother, examining it.

Friend: *(Rising to the Mother)* You coming, Blanche? They will die of impatience waiting for us!

She laughs, looks in the mirror and goes to the door on the right.

Mother: Yes, we can go now.

She rises and brushes herself over. The Friend waits for her close to the door.

Tradel: *(Notebook in hand, he follows the Mother getting dressed to leave)* I have not betrayed the text...I added nothing of my own...I have perhaps modified it, but it wasn't arbitrary...I was guided by an infallible intuition...Okay and this intuition, it is utilized throughout with the most thorough logic...*(Opening the notebook)* here for example, I read "apparently" and at the side, without nothing "illusory." If Jean had had the time to re-read this, he never would have allowed such a hole...

Mother continues to not pay attention to Tradel. Tradel stops abruptly, notebook in hand. The Friend laughs and pokes fun at Tradel with the Mother while pacing about waiting for the Mother to get ready. The Mother laughs in her turn. The two women prepare to leave. Enter, by the back door, Agnès, smartly dressed, holding her robe.

Mother: *(Turning her head towards Agnès)* It is such a pity that you did not have the furniture delivered here yet. Believe me, this would all be better if you would finally move in.

The Friend laughs. Agnès looks desperate standing in the middle of the stage. Tradel continues to pace. The Friend turns politely towards the Mother to let her exit first.

Curtain.

Act 2

The same decor, but the room is now cluttered with various furniture thrown about: all in a disarray with one or two small tables, a coffee table, and some chairs. Some parts of a credenza, and on all the furniture: papers.

The armchair of the Mother is in the same place, at right, a little up stage.

Agnès takes a few steps, looks around. She seems to be looking for something.

The Mother is seated in her chair. Tradel, in an overcoat, paces back and forth. In a general manner, he stops, picks something up, and then begins pacing again.

Mother: *(Without raising her eyes from the newspaper)* If it is the broom you are looking for, it's behind you.

Agnès: *(Taking the broom)* I never would have found it by myself.

She sweeps, at times the floor, the wall, and then the ceiling.

Mother: *(Positioning the newspaper on her knees)* Of course, anxious, we just sit here idly. All this time and instead of facing the problem head on, we act as if we're all asleep. Now that these foreigners have stolen all of our jobs, finally our men rouse themselves to discuss closing the border. But they know how ridiculous they are and nothing will happen.

Tradel: *(Approaching the Mother)* Pierre's ridiculous. He only comes to me when he needs me. So where is he? I am always waiting for him!

Mother: We all wait for him. *(Pause)* You see, Pierre is a little disorganized at the moment. *(Pause)* To speak truthfully, I don't know how he can support the weight of such work all alone.

Tradel: If he's alone, it's his fault. And for that matter, if he wants me to help him redo all of this work starting from the beginning again he is going to do it my way by my rules.

Mother: He who will force his conditions on Pierre has yet to be born. *(Pause)* Just between us, I don't believe that he will let you work in the house again. Things have really changed over these two years. *(Pause)* Pierre is busy with...this article he found by accident in a newspaper. You published it, yes? And without telling anyone...

Tradel: Pierre has long known my intentions. It is useless to continually revisit the past. What's essential, is to complete the work right away.

Mother: In any case, Pierre cannot count on Agnès anymore. Before writing to you, he had asked her to help him, and she refused.

Agnès: (*Stopping for an instant from sweeping*) What could I have done? Since it seems that I am not as capable of typing on the typewriter!

Tradel: I get it: after Agnès refused him then he resorted to me.

Mother: Yes. (*Pause*) I suppose that he is willing to try again with you. So straighten up and do better this time around. Don't let this opportunity pass you by, as there will not be another. (*Agnès while sweeping, sweeps up a rubber ball.*) Take this ball. It's your little kid's, Tradel, he must have left it here. (*To Agnès*) You really don't sweep very often, do you Agnès.

Agnès, annoyed, positions the broom and goes to the window and opens it.

Noise of opening it. Enter the First Passerby in sport jacket, a briefcase in hand. Slick, He walks about confidently; one notices not only the ease by which he moves in his own body, but also that he enjoys his body and takes pleasure in looking well kept.

First: Hello ladies. I'm looking to speak with Mr. Weisenhauer.

Tradel: You are mistaken, this isn't it.

First: Well that's surprising.

Mother: The nerve, Mr. Weisenhauer is dead.

First: Really? I must see him about his apartment.

The First Passerby notices Agnès standing at the window; he takes a step towards her.

Tradel: (*Approaching the Mother*) You are not telling me everything. Don't leave me in such suspense...

Mother: (*Disregarding Tradel, to the First Passerby*) Are you looking to rent the apartment across the hall?

First: (*Serious*) Is it big enough to move some desks in?

Mother: Ah, so you run a successful company?

First: (*Mysteriously*) Maybe...But tell me, did Weisenhauer die recently? Was it bad?

Agnès: (*Turning around*) His wife let him die carelessly. And yet he loved her.

The First Passerby, very interested, takes a step towards Agnès. He does not stop looking into her eyes, so to speak, until the end of the act.

Mother: Agnès, watch what you say. You speak too freely. (*To the First Passerby*) He was already dead.

Tradel: *(To Mother)* But his letter, so, according to you, what is it that he has to tell me? *(Searching his pocket)* I know he wrote me, I didn't dream it.

First: This place works for me. But what's with all the furniture laying about down the hall?

Tradel: If you want to, go find out yourself.

Mother: There's nobody there. *(To the First Passerby)* Except maybe the nurse. I think she took over the apartment. But she went out for the newspaper. *(Pause)* Since it is raining, you should wait here for her. *(Pause)* Please, sit, you're more than welcome.

She designates a chair for the First Passerby. The First Passerby sits down and straddles his chair which he will continually inch closer to Agnès who remains at the window. The Mother lets out a small self-satisfied snicker.

Tradel: *(To Mother)* Well, did Pierre tell you anything specific? *(The First Passerby rises, puts his hand on the back of his chair and begins to rock back and forth)*

First: *(To Agnès)* Such a beautiful view.

Agnès quickly closes the window and busies herself. She nervously looks for something. She eventually finds the electric iron, takes it and puts it on the table, but continues to look for something else. The First Passerby follows Agnès with his eyes. Following each of her movements, he turns on his heels. Tradel has taken the papers from the typewriter and examines them. The Mother dusts the arm of her chair. Tradel, after a moment of hesitation, abandons the papers and continues to walk around nervously.

Agnès, who has not found what she has been looking for, exits upstage. The First Passerby, who watches her leave, stands with his back to the audience.

Mother: *(She gets up and approaches the First Passerby)* My, that's a Medal, the Croix de Geurre.

First: *(Proud)* No, it's the Croix du Mérite.

Mother: We need more men like you. *(Pause)* In your opinion, what do you think? Is our country ready to take charge, show the world what we are made of?

First: I hope so.

Tradel: *(Stopping for a moment, furious)* You know as well as I do that we will do nothing.

Agnès re-enters, a pair of pants on her arm. She plugs in a wire, then she kneels down, downstage left, to iron on the floor.

The First Passerby, after pivoting on his heels following her movements, takes a step towards her.

Mother turns around and sits on her armchair. Tradel stops and briefly observes what's happening between Agnès and the First Passerby.

First: *(To Agnès)* What? You don't have an ironing board? This is no way to live! *(Pause)* You are not made for such...hardships.

Agnès: *(Ironing)* I ask myself, for what am I made.

Agnès does something wrong. The wire becomes unplugged. The First Passerby goes to plug it in and returns to his place. Agnès grateful, nods her head and continues to iron.

First: *(To Agnès)* Why are you so sad? Pretty as you are...you certainly have something weighing on you. Tell me what's up! Something troubling your heart, something on your mind?

Agnès: *(Raising her head)* I never talk about myself.

First: But Why? A woman's secrets are safe with me. *(Pause)* Who has made you sad?

Agnès: *(Ironing)* It does not matter, the pain you have or the pain you give to others. It's nothing, nobody is responsible for it. *(Pause)* I have no right to complain about Pierre.

First: Pierre?

Agnès: *(In the same manner)* My husband. I do not like to talk about him.

First: Why?

Agnès: *(Same tone)* Because nobody can judge him, me, least of all.

First: Oh, oh! He's that incredible, is he. Well I have the impression that you too are no ordinary girl.

He laughs.

Agnès: *(Same tone)* I am an ordinary girl.

Tradel: *(Approaching the mother, in a low voice)* She speaks about Pierre to the first person who comes along!

Mother: Look Tradel, one can speak of Pierre however, whenever they want. Would it even bother him?

Sound of an elevator. Enter Pierre feverishly as he goes to kiss Mother, then Agnès, still on her knees, who does not turn around.

The First Passerby, intimidated, moves upstage left. He immediately finds the rubberball. He places it between his feet, and without dropping it, takes a few small steps, almost in place. Upstage, he observes everyone.

Pierre: *(To Tradel)* I am grateful that you came, sir. *(Tradel is startled at the 'sir')* Don't worry about the sir, from now on I am addressing everyone formally. *(Pause)* Except Agnès, of course.

He paces.

Mother: Agnès, you have not done the introductions. *(She signals to the First Passerby who leaves the ball and advances)* Monsieur came to see Mr. Weisenhauer. Since there was no one there, we offered him our hospitality.

Pierre stops, the First Passerby goes to meet him. The two men shake hands.

First: *(To Pierre)* Allow me to introduce myself...

He makes a gesture of digging in his pockets, but finds nothing. Pierre goes towards Tradel.

Pierre: *(To Tradel)* Have you read my letter? I hope you are able to understand me. The work is done at last, we can consider it as if it were done...But I distrust my methods...We can properly sink into it right away...One becomes, when so confused...I can no longer see things clearly.

Tradel: I understand...That is exactly that what brought me here two years ago, with the green notebook...I had to put it down and come to terms with the fact that I could not see anything anymore.

Pierre: You finished? I knew this would come up again. *(Changing his tone)* You cannot understand the pain of questioning when you think all is finished and one can see, turning around, how little was actually achieved along the way.

Tradel: But one doesn't need to look back! I don't know, I see things a lot simpler...

Agnès rises, takes some steps, then goes to sit down, and takes a book that she flips through distractedly. The First Passerby wants to follow her, but thinks again and stays in his place. Agnès drops her book on the sofa. The First Passerby advances towards her.

Pierre: *(To Tradel)* Listen to me. I have arrived at the point where I arrange, for each questionable word, various hypotheses. Before, I did not want to choose. But now, it is necessary that I establish the correct word.

First: *(Taking a step towards Pierre)* Excuse me. I am not fully aware of the situation. But my advice...

The Mother signals to the First Passerby to check himself. He slowly obeys and comes to position himself behind Agnès where he tries in vain to make himself noticeable. He takes the book off the sofa and glances through it. Observing throughout, Agnès, who does not notice him.

Pierre: *(To Tradel)* Unfortunately, I myself am too familiar with all the varying possibilities. The right word is choked, it won't come out. In working with you, I could become indifferent to each possible word. It is the only way for me to find the truth.

Tradel: I know that working together, we can do this again.

Pierre: Nothing is finished. We still have long work ahead of us. For once I will ask you to be patient.

Pierre goes to the chest and looks through the papers which are wrapped up. Tradel follows.

The First Passerby holds the book out to Agnès.

First: *(To Agnès)* I have heard some things about this. It's got some good reviews.

Agnès: I have not read it.

The First Passerby slightly deflates then begins to pick at his fingernails. He begins to busy himself: adjust his clothes, his hat, etc.

Pierre takes a paper from the chest and comes to show it to Tradel.

Pierre: Take this, there is a missing word between the others. You don't even want to know the suffering I have endured over this one. I've cried trying to figure the thing out. However, I can see four possibilities. *(Pause)* Is it 'pleading'? is it 'torturing'?...

Tradel: *(Leaning on the paper)* Wait...it seems familiar. Of course...it's the page stained with ink at the top. But I remember...there is no problem here. *(Pause)* If I had a little quiet, I could reconstruct all of the sentence, and even more, all of the conversations we had on this subject, it left such a strong impression on me...

Pierre: Listen, I don't want impressions, or approximations, or maybes. I need the right word.

Tradel: But who would know it? Who would recognize it? And then, who would dare argue with us on the errors that nobody can prove, and nobody would even know that there are errors. What counts, before all else, is the reader, that's the beauty.

Mother: The reader? Do you always keep the reader in mind?

Pierre: *(Wearily)* So, after all my effort, we begin again to argue on an already absolutely established point. We will not publish. At least not until there is here or elsewhere, a worthy man to receive this work for which I am responsible.

First: *(Leaning towards Agnès)* Your husband is completely right. In life it is necessary to know what one wants.

Agnès rises, takes some steps, hesitates, then goes to the window. The First Passerby follows her, Pierre watches Agnès and the First Passerby.

Tradel: *(To Pierre, infuriated)* Of course, you are full of responsibility. And this responsibility will be catastrophic if you let the chance pass by to find this man of whom you speak and who may not even exist...how do you even know? In any case, I will not follow you down this dead-end. *(He takes a large step to the right door, then turning)* Apparently, you agree with the family: like them you too are scared of yourself.

He exits

Mother: Poor Tradel! This time, I think he went too far.

First: (*Approaching Pierre with a light step*) Your friend is nervous.

Pierre: (*He hesitates, then going towards Agnès who remains at the window*) Did you remember to go and buy paper?

Agnès: No.

Pierre: Do you even want to work with me anymore?

Agnès: (*She turns around, hesitates*) No.

Pierre: Well, it seems that I must go and look for the paper myself.

Mother: Pierre, since you are going out, bring me back the newspaper, would you?

Pierre: Fine.

Instead of leaving, he goes towards the chest.

Mother: You must not leave without your coat at such a time.

The Mother goes to look for an overcoat hanging on the coat rack, returning towards Pierre, he holds it. He wants to throw it over his shoulders, but she forces him to put it on, while slightly pushing him to the door on the right. Agnès takes a step towards Pierre. The Mother turns her head towards Agnès.

Pierre: (*He puts his coat on at the door*) Thanks.

He exits.

The Mother stays before the door. Agnès does not move.

First: (*He advances, with a pompous air, towards Agnès, juggling the ball*) I am sorry for you. You didn't tell me that your life was so complicated.

He puts his hand on Agnès' shoulder, she disengages herself.

Agnès: I will go and catch up with him.

Mother: (*Barring access to the door from Agnès*) It is not a good idea. You are already in so much pain. You do not need to catch a cold on top of it all.

Agnès stays a minute immobile, then she does a half turn to go towards the door on the left and finds herself face to face with the First Passerby. The First Passerby begins to laugh. Mother laughs in her turn. Agnès is surrounded.

Curtain.

Act 3

The same decor, but the papers are no longer all over the furniture: they are arranged in piles on the chest.

Upstage left, Agnès is up on a stepladder, cleaning the window panes. The window is opened, the First Passerby is on the arms of the chair standing behind Agnès with his legs slightly apart, hands behind his back.

The Mother reads her newspaper, seated within her armchair, remaining in the same place, at right.

First: *(One foot now the top step of the stepladder, to Agnès)* Leave it like that. *(Low)* Since the two of us will leave together...

Agnès turns around and stays a moment with her arms raised, the rag in her hand.

First: You will see at my house, all your worries will be taken care of. And all of your time will be devoted to yourself...and to me.

He laughs.

Agnès: I don't understand, Pierre should have returned by now.

She leans on the window; the First Passerby descends from the stepladder.

Mother: He set up camp down at the café to work. Per usual. *(Pause)* Soon they will start to get annoyed. I can just see him now, alone, occupying three tables.

She laughs.

First: *(Positioning a foot on the first step of the stepladder, low to Agnès)* It's fine if he doesn't return. You wouldn't even like it if he came back anyway. We don't have time.

Agnès: I don't know what I want.

First: Luckily, for me, I know it for you.

He raises his shoulders, descends the stepladder and takes some steps to the right.

Mother: *(Dropping the newspaper. To the First Passerby)* Between us, how do you think this will play out?

First: *(Mysteriously)* I can't really say.

Mother: Yet you should have an inside scoop.

First: Hap...Of course.

Mother: If you want my opinion, they will do absolutely nothing. When push comes to shove, no one will have the courage to use force even though it is the only solution to returning employment back to as it was before all this.

First: Sure, sounds good to me!

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The First Passerby turns his head towards Agnès who has not moved. She continues watching for Pierre from the window. The Mother, rises, taps the shoulder of the First Passerby and laughs indicating Agnès. The First Passerby shakes his head, laughs in his turn and with an air about him, goes resolutely towards the stepladder. He grabs Agnès by the waist and places her on the ground. The Mother sits down again, laughing.

Agnès: *(To the First Passerby)* What do you want?

First: I don't want you to catch cold, that's all...

The First Passerby leans on a step of the stepladder, with a conquering air and watches Agnès. Agnès takes some hesitating steps, then returns to the window and leans her forehead against the window. The First Passerby flexes his muscles.

Enter, at right, Tradel. He takes one or two steps then stops.

Mother: Agnès, Tradel came to look for that old overcoat of Pierre's. Remember, he set it aside for him.

First Passerby laughs.

Agnès: *(Turning around slightly)* Which overcoat? I am a little out of it these days.

Mother: *(To Tradel)* Honestly these last few days we have had other things on our mind.

Tradel has an annoyed look signifying: "Leave it, it is not about that."

Tradel: *(Going towards the Mother)* I came to warn Pierre. We must immediately arrange for the papers to be secure. Whatever they intend to do, we will not be able to stop them. They have the law on their side.

First: *(Placing a hand on Tradel's shoulder, paternally)* Do not worry over such things: it will all work out!

Tradel: *(Disengaging himself)* Pierre's not here?

Mother: As you can see.

The First Passerby laughs.

Tradel: *(To Mother)* I am sorry if I was a bit anxious the other day. But after all this time, Pierre knows me. I lose my temper quickly, but I calm down quickly...But realize I have not changed my opinion...

Mother: You came too late. Oh, it's not of importance. Thank god, he has succeeded in finishing his work, and I must say, to complete satisfaction.

Agnès: You are always satisfied with everything!

Mother: Yes! I am even satisfied before being so.

Tradel: *(Approaching Agnès)* In any case, you seem to bear his absence rather well.

First: *(To Tradel)* One does all that one can. *(Pause)* You are not satisfied?

He advances threateningly on Tradel.

Tradel: *(Covering away)* I did not expect to meet the new guy here.

The First Passerby newly advances on Tradel, but very quickly, turns around, raising his shoulders. Tradel paces back and forth.

Agnès: *(Turning around)* What noise you all make!

She nervously takes a few steps. The First Passerby goes towards her.

Mother: You should go take a walk for now, Agnès. The air would do you good. But don't go out alone. The streets are full of soldiers. Unless you're not afraid that...

The First Passerby laughs.

Noise of an elevator. Agnès and Tradel stop. Enter Pierre. He slowly walks, head lowered. Tradel and the First Passerby go to meet him. Agnès stays in her place and watches Pierre. The Mother does the same.

Tradel: *(Who has moved away from the First Passerby to Pierre)* I apologize for the other day. I should not have been so angry. But you will see why, just let me explain.

First: *(Interrupting)* Have you had a good walk M. Pierre?

Pierre, absent, continues to walk slowly. Tradel follows him. The First Passerby watches Agnès.

Agnès: *(She goes towards Pierre and mumbles)* Your friend came to accompany you. He was scared that the news had frightened us. *(Pause)* He got ahold of some information... Apparently, though we don't know yet, but the negotiations are moving along.

The First Passerby shakes Pierre's hand who continues to walk without paying attention to him. He seems disengaged, putting his hands in his pockets. Agnès takes a step towards Pierre, then takes a step towards the First Passerby.

Tradel: *(Face to face with Pierre)* The news that was given to me is not reassuring. This time, they seem prepared to act. *(To Agnès)* I am convinced that it is your father who has put all this into motion... you should have warned us.

Agnès: You are fully aware that I never see him.

Pierre goes to take Agnès by the hand and guides her near the Mother who remains in her chair. Agnès lets him. Tradel follows Pierre. The First Passerby turns towards the Mother looking at her knowingly. She disregards him, he postures: hands on his hips, torso extended, etc.

Pierre: *(To Agnès and the Mother)* I must speak with you both.

Tradel: *(To Pierre)* Should I go outside?

Pierre: *(Continuing)* I have made a very determined choice. I would like for you to understand the reasons which pushed me to it. But for the moment I am incapable of explaining. I need you to trust me. I am sure that soon all will be well. *(Pause)* I cannot continue to work under these conditions, it is crucial that I leave. That is to say...that I be alone for a certain time...it is necessary.

Agnès: But in all senses of the word, you are alone. I don't even feel like we live together.

The Mother takes Pierre's hand and holds it to her breast.

Tradel: So this is your way out. Fine. I hoped that there was another way.

The First Passerby, downstage, seems to listen attentively to the conversation.

Pierre: *(In a weary voice)* I leave you to understand my difficult position. But, to return at each stage of my work, to expose you to each obstacle, all the problems that I have had to resolve, and that I still have to resolve even now. I have no more will. I can simply tell you this: all that I have drawn out from the shadows, called up to me, and recovered, all is so tiresomely boring. Flat. *(He repeats the word 'flat' several times like a man who does not understand the sense of words, but who is hypnotized by their sounds, as if he has never heard a word.)* Do we ever understand why a thing is suddenly discarded? Disposed? Suddenly rejected out of hand?

The Mother releases Pierre's hand. One has to feel that Pierre's words provoke a general terror.

Tradel: But you are crazy! Now you are insulting Jean like a...critic.

Pierre: I will not rest in peace as long as these things remain unfinished.

Tradel: But these things have nothing to offer; they are as they are, that's all. If you're disappointed, it is because you no longer have faith in the work.

Pierre: It was not so long ago that I could not even work till the end of a sentence; I torture myself during these hours with the simplest questions. *(Detaching his words)* Why does he say: 'he appears'? who is this 'he', what does he want from me? Why does one say 'on the ground' rather than 'at' or 'over'? I have lost too much time thinking of these things. *(Pause)* I don't want the meaning of words, but their shape and movement. *(Pause)* No longer will I hunt them down. *(Pause)* I will wait within the silence, motionless, I will become very attentive. *(Pause)* I must leave at once.

Agnès: But not right away.

Tradel: You can't leave now when the papers could be taken from us at any moment.

Mother: Will you be absent for a long time?

Pierre: Rest assured. I do not want to go far. I want only to spend some days there. *(He points to the back door)* In the crawl space.

Agnès: But you cannot live there. You will suffocate.

Mother: We can make the room more hospitable.

Tradel: But where will you put the papers?

Pierre: I will not take them. It is the only way for me not to fall back into desperation.

Tradel: *(He rushes towards Pierre and he grabs his arm)* Stay! I beg you to stay! I feel, I am sure, that together, we will find a better solution.

Pierre listens to Tradel and begins to pace. Tradel stands stupefied in his place. Agnès goes in front of Pierre, as if to speak to him, but the First Passerby advances resolutely towards her. Pierre stops and watches Agnès and the First Passerby.

First: *(Low, to Agnès)* Do you have anything to say to him?

Agnès: *(Making a half turn, in a whisper)* No, it's all been said.

Agnès goes to sit down again. Pierre follows her for a moment with his eyes. The First Passerby approaches Agnès. The Mother makes a sign to him to distance himself. He goes to the window, opens it and leans against it.

Pierre: If anything has yet to be done, it can only be done in there.

Agnès rises. Pierre goes to kiss the Mother, then Agnès who is unresponsive. Pierre heads towards the back door.

Tradel: *(Barring the way to Pierre)* You don't know what you are doing!

Agnès: *(She goes to put her hands on the shoulders of Pierre who does not decide to exit)* Do not go in there.

The First Passerby turns around and closes the window. Tradel has stayed in front of the door in the back.

Pierre: *(Cautiously escaping Agnès' grasp)* You can wait for me with peace of mind.

Agnès distances herself.

Mother: I will arrange for heating in the room.

Pierre: Not now, thank you. Later we will see.

Mother: I will bring you your meals regularly.

Pierre: I will ask of you never to speak to me. *(He goes towards the chest and designates the papers)* I am confiding this to you; I know that you will take care of them.

Mother: Just you relax.

Tradel: *(He erupts)* You know what you're risking. I warn you. I can do nothing else to stop you. *(He goes to the door)* Oh well, let them take it. When they take it all, then you will realize what you truly lost!

He exits.

First: (*Advancing towards Pierre in a rolling gait*) Finally we are rid of that moron!

Agnès: (*To Pierre*) Can I come see you?

Pierre: (*Still near the chest, visibly indecisive*) Later, we will see.

Agnès: Fine.

Pierre goes briskly to the door upstage center and exits. Agnès at first remains in the same place, puts her hand to her face and remains thus.

The First Passerby questions the Mother. They fix eyes. The Mother responds to him with a gesture that signifies "You can go to her." The First Passerby approaches Agnès.

First: (*Advancing towards Agnès his arms open*) And me, who only dreams of you.

Agnès: (*Showing her face, heartbroken*) You are nice.

Mother: I did not want to oppose Pierre's will. Nobody, for that matter, has the right to, or will.

The lights quickly go out. Total blackout. One hears the First Passerby murmur, then speaking in a whisper. During the last words, the voices become again definitively distinct.

Agnès: No, not now. I can't leave like this, without anything.

First: We will find your things. I will help you.

Agnès: I will never be able to write a letter in this darkness. I want to leave him at least a word.

First: You could write to him tomorrow, relax.

Agnès: I cannot leave without my notebook.

First: Which notebook?

Agnès: The notebook that Jean gave to me, I am never without it. That promise, at least, I want to keep.

First: Remember you are mine Agnès.

A long silence.

Agnès: The overcoat. You're keeping it?

First: Yes...and you with it.

Agnès: (*In one breath*) Say, you will take me far from here. We will go to the edge of the Nive. I only went once with Pierre, the first time...it was hidden by fences along both coasts. But, nevertheless, I saw it. (*Pause*) It rained, we were soaked. (*She laughs nervously*) I ask myself, if there was always this work. (*Pause*) I would like so much to see it again, and at the same time, I am scared.

First: Not of me, I hope.

Agnès: No, with you I have never been scared. You lift me up in your arms. I will come to see this as a good thing. You are so big...

First: And you so small!

Agnès: Hold me in your arms.

The lights come back on. Bright lights. One sees the First Passerby, Agnès in his arms, heading towards the right door. Agnès holds the overcoat that she leaves trailing along the ground. The First Passerby is grabbing the two coats.

The Mother explodes into a coarse laugh while hitting her thighs.

Curtain.

Act 4

Same decor. But order and comfort reign: The furniture is in order, there are no more papers. Lots of rugs and drapes.

The Mother's armchair is now front and centerstage, facing the house.

The typewriter is no longer in the same place and it is covered by a dustcover. On the chest, an electric stove with a kettle. At the side, a rolling table with a tray on it on which is arranged a tea service. At the front of the stage, a little left, a large mirror. The floor is completely covered in a rug.

The Mother is seated in her chair. She no longer has her newspaper. She is wearing a comfortable house robe. One must feel, as the curtain is rising, that she has become the mistress of the house.

The Friend, before the mirror, looks at herself complacently from head to toe. She holds her hat: she is visiting.

Mother: *(She gets up, goes to the chest and prepares the tea)* It has been so long since I have been so happy.

Friend: In any case, we have escaped it beautifully.

Mother: I knew that all would end well. *(She pours the tea in the cups)* Only, I can't imagine when all will return to normal.

Friend: We have not had a moment of relaxation.

Mother: *(Pushing the rolling tea set upstage)* I just wanted peace, no matter the price. *(Pause)* Get this, you won't believe me, but yesterday, regarding the immigration problem, on which I am now an expert, it finally stopped, and what a relief, more than a relief, an expanse of joy.

The Mother takes the cup from the Friend, who is approaching her. The Friend sits, the cup in hand.

Mother: *(Sitting in her chair)* Pierre returns today.

Friend: It's not possible! Really! *(She rises)* Let me kiss you!

She leans towards the Mother, kisses her, then sits down again.

Mother: He announced it earlier, when I gave him his meal. He could appear at any moment.

Friend: I ask myself how he could have held on after fifteen days under such conditions!

Mother: Fifteen days! Really, it was only fifteen days. It seems to me so much longer.

Friend: And Agnès? Have you any news?

Mother: For all I know, her situation has become more and more precarious.

Friend: How is that possible? I thought her friend successful?

Mother: All is in order. We can only wait to see how it will unfold.

Friend: He was such a beautiful boy, but oh so naughty! *(She has a good laugh)* Naturally, Pierre knows nothing?

Mother: *(Changing her tone)* Not yet.

Enter upstage, Pierre, very weary, absentminded. His clothes are unkempt, he has a beard of fifteen days. He slowly takes a few steps, looking all around him. Visibly he looks for something.

Mother: *(Rising)* I could not be happier, all is finished. Come so that I can kiss you.

Pierre goes to his Mother and kisses her mechanically.

Friend: *(Stretching out her neck)* And me, no one kisses me anymore?

Pierre does not seem to notice the Friend, he paces.

Mother: Promise me, from now on, to spare your strength.

Pierre: *(Stopping)* Be quiet. I am no longer excited by either my research or my work.

Friend: But...

The Mother signals her to be quiet.

Pierre: You are content. I have fully decided to live like everyone. That is what I have understood there. *(He points to the upstage door)* I will understand nothing unless I find a way of leading a completely ordinary life.

Pierre looks one more time around him, takes a step towards the Mother, seems to want to speak with her, but changes his mind. The light begins to lower.

Mother: Are you looking for your papers? I rearranged and placed them in the box. *(She points out a voluminous object covered by a red drape)* There, behind you; you only have to raise the drape. *(To the Friend)* Oh, the light, this electricity...

The Friend rises and goes to the right.

Pierre: I see. You have put them in order.

Pierre goes to the chest, opens and stays before it. The Friend turns the switch.

Friend: If at least we could see clearly!

The Friend goes to sit down.

Pierre still stays in front of the open chest, back to the audience. He kneels, sorting slowly through the papers from the box, looking at them for some minutes and placing them on the floor. He contemplates them, immobile, for at least a minute, then collecting several of them, he tears them, first very quickly, but soon very slowly. The debris of the papers accumulates. Pierre is as if drowning in the middle of them.

Since Pierre's entrance, the Mother has not stopped watching him. The Friend, who is observing him from the side, briskly rises and goes anew to try to fix the light. The light is not going back to normal.

Friend: Always this light, it's insufferable.

Pierre: *(Interrupting himself from tearing papers for a moment, he whispers)* Excuse me for not having understood you earlier.

Pierre takes the last papers that he has before him, he rises and tears them all while walking about as a sleepwalker. The torn papers are strewn about now over the greater part of the stage.

Friend: *(To the Mother)* I would have so much wanted to stay. But, excuse me, you know? I am already very late.

She goes towards the right door.

Mother: Of course, of course.

The Friend prepares to leave.

Pierre: *(Dropping himself into a chair, a little withdrawn, stage left)* Where is Agnès? I want to see her.

The Friend stops in the doorway, then positions herself close to the window where she observes Pierre.

Mother: *(She rises and stands, her hand positioned on the back of her chair)* Pierre, it is time that you heard the truth, Agnès is gone.

Friend: *(Raising her voice)* With the first person to come along!

Pierre: What do you mean, left? You mean to say that she went out?

Mother: No. She is gone, right after your departure.

Pierre: Right away!

Mother: *(Laughing)* There have been some troubles. I suppose that she profited by the occasion.

Pierre makes an effort to rise, but stays seated.

Pierre: She could not do it anymore, of course. Where could she have drawn the strength to support such a disordered life?

Mother: *(Going to Pierre)* But the trouble, it was her and her alone who was responsible for it. It was her who intruded on our life.

Pierre: She left too late, or too early, if she would have had a little more patience, we could have started anew.

Mother: Oh well, this is better. Your sensitivity will support you in your loneliness. And then...you will restart your work.

Pierre rises and heads towards the upstage door.

Friend: *(To Pierre)* Have you forgotten something in there?

Pierre: Yes.

Pierre exits. The Mother goes slowly to sit down again in her chair. Pause

Friend: *(To Mother)* You always had been too lenient on her.

The Friend take a few steps. The Mother does not move. The light lowers again. It is now rather somber. Suddenly a small noise. Tradel appears on the doorstep. A suitcase in hand. The Friend is immediately amused again. She will not stop turning and laughing around Tradel.

Tradel: Nobody came?

The Mother makes an evasive movement. Tradel makes a gesture towards offstage as if to invite someone to enter.

Enter Mme Tradel, a young woman very thin and very pale, followed by the Child, a boy of seven years and a dull disposition. They are both poorly dressed and carry under each of their arms, a canvas bag.

Tradel: *(Very quickly)* They could arrive at any minute. Don't you understand? I told them to come. Yes, it's really happening, but I will not be here, and they will find that we are not interested anymore. *(Pause)* What have I done? All this for a moment of vengeance. *(Pause)* Where is Pierre? Where are the papers?

Mother: Look under your feet. You are walking on them.

Tradel bends over, feverishly collecting the paper debris, seeing others further off and others even further away, panicking, he runs to get them all, and almost ends up on all fours.

The Friend bursts out laughing. Mme Tradel, stationary, watches Tradel. The Child sits on the ground.

Mother: You've come five minutes too late. Pierre just tore them.

Tradel and Mme Tradel collect the papers and place them in the suitcase and bags. They position their bags on the chair at left, the other bags and the suitcase at the chair's feet.

Friend: *(To the Mother)* You are letting them do this?

The Mother makes a gesture signaling "This is ridiculous."

Tradel: *(Holding Mme Tradel's bag)* Go head. I'll catch up to you.

Mme Tradel: *(Taking back the bag)* But if I meet them, what would I do? I'd rather wait for you.

Sound of the elevator. Tradel grabs the drape which covered the case were the papers were and throws it on the suitcase and the bags. The chair disappears under the drape. The lights come back.

Friend: Finally.

She goes to sit close to the Mother.

Agnès appears on the doorstep of the stage right door. She is dressed in her overcoat. Mme Tradel takes a step towards Agnès, then stops.

Mother: *(Turning her head towards Agnès)* But come in, Agnès.

Agnès: *(She advances timidly, looking around her, as if scared)* Nothing has changed. *(Pause)* Yet, one could say, that it does seem clearer.

Agnès takes some steps upstage, the Mother rises briskly, but Agnès changes direction, the Mother sits down again. Tradel watches the Mother's movements. He paces.

Agnès: *(Walking at random with hesitating steps)* I don't see the typewriter. *(To Mother)* I apologize for speaking so openly but I am so accustomed to seeing it there. *(She looks where the typewriter once was)* Otherwise...I only came to rent it from you...I have tried to rent it from different offices but...

Mother: I know, you cannot find them anywhere.

Agnès: *(Mumbling)* Yes...we are in such a predicament that I promised myself...Pierre uses it a lot, I know. But we were not going to keep it for a long time. Just a few days...

Friend: We wish to see you no more.

She rises and goes to look at herself in the mirror

Mme Tradel: (*Going to kiss Agnès*) I have been thinking of you ever since your departure.

Mother: (*To Agnès*) Actually, Pierre spoke to me of you.

Agnès: How is he doing?

The Friend laughs. Mme Tradel distances herself. Agnès paces.

Mother: He asked of you. (*Agnès is startled*) But without much insisting. (*Agnès wants to speak*) To tell the truth, the typewriter is not in good shape. It will have to be repaired. I believe that it did not cost you much and that you could procure another one.

Agnès: (*Mumbling*) I thank you.

Friend: (*Still in front of the mirror, turns around*) Your friend still has his position?

Agnès: (*To the Mother*) I wanted to ask another thing of Pierre. Do you think that he will return soon? I could wait. I have a little time.

Mother: (*Rising*) You know very well that Pierre never tells anybody of his comings and goings. (*She takes a step towards Agnès.*) You risk waiting for nothing, and since you are pressed...

She takes another step towards Agnès, who does not move.

Mme Tradel: (*To Agnès*) Promise me you'll come see us.

Agnès: (*Absently*) I will come.

Agnès takes a step towards the stage right door. The Mother, still standing, does not move. The Friend approaches Agnès.

Friend: Do you still have some time?

Agnès: Oh no! I need to leave. I have to be returning...visit from the doctor...He has fallen ill. I administer the needles...

Friend: What, is your friend suffering? Such a strong man...

Agnès: He fell ill suddenly. There were no warnings.

Friend: But that's terrible! Who takes care of his business?

Agnès: Nobody for the moment. I am not capable of doing it myself. I have never been able to learn accounting. The figures, for me, they are a mystery...

Mother: (*She walks up to Agnès and pushes her towards the stage right door*) You have always been a quick learner.

The Mother takes Agnès by the arms and pushes her outside, slamming the door behind her. The Friend chuckles.

Mme Tradel: *(In a whisper)* Poor Agnès!

The Friend, laughing, pats the shoulders of the Mother. The Mother brushes herself off and painfully sits down into her armchair. She sits and positions her hands on the arms.

The Child abandons his game. He has lifted a corner of the curtain which covered the chair and the bags. He opens the bag and places on the ground all around him some of the paper debris. Tradel continues to pace back and forth.

Tradel: *(Briskly stopping, to the Mother)* You lied! *(Pointing to the upstage door)* Pierre is there, I know it.

Mother: Yes, he is there.

Tradel, who has hastily gone towards the upstage door, exits. The Mother does not move. Mme Tradel takes a step as if to follow Tradel, but stops. The Friend glues her ear to the door. The Child continues to empty the bags at the feet of the chair and scatters the papers around him. Nobody watches him.

Tradel: *(He reappears at the door, knocking into the Friend)* Pierre...Pierre is dead. I will never forgive myself!

Mme Tradel holds her face between her hands. The Friend stops, immobile, her mouth is open: we see her profile. The Mother turns her head slowly leaning against the back of her chair: she keeps her hands positioned on the arms. The Child continues to play with the papers. Tradel, after standing still a moment, hurriedly goes to the stage right door and exits. Mme Tradel follows him with the Child, who at first resist a little, then gives in. He has had some time to gather some bits of paper which he carries. The Friend bustles around the Mother.

Friend: *(Wrapping her arms around the shoulders of the Mother, in a voice more false than ever)* I know how it feels.

Curtain

The End.

Abu Hassan: Musical Farce in One Act

Music by Carl Maria von Weber (1786-1826)

Libretto by Franz Carl Hiemer (1768-1822)

Translated from German into English by Mark Herman and Ronnie Apter

Abu Hassan (1811), with music by Carl Maria von Weber, is a German *Singspiel*, that is, a theatrical piece with sung numbers separated by spoken dialogue, similar in structure to an American musical. The musical style is Classical, though the shift to Romanticism in German opera was largely brought about by Weber's later opera, *Der Freischütz*, in 1821.

Much of *Abu Hassan* parallels the actual experiences of its creators. In 1810, Franz Carl Hiemer, Weber's friend and accomplice from their frivolous Stuttgart days, sent Weber an exuberant libretto that paralleled their own constant need to borrow money. In fact, at this time, Weber was actually banished from Württemberg under indictment for embezzlement. Hiemer based his libretto on the part of the tale of Abū al-Hasan the Eccentric told by Shahrazād to King Shahryār on the 647th through 653rd nights of the *Thousand and One Nights*. Hiemer probably worked from the popular European translation by Antoine Galland (1646-1715), who had translated the *Nights* from Arabic into French early in the eighteenth century. Galland's version of the story is called *Le dormeur éveillé* [*The Sleeper Awakened*].

Weber began by composing the No. 3 Chorus of Creditors, dramatically characterizing his own Stuttgart tormentors. With the composition of the Overture in January 1811, the work was finished, except for the No. 4 Duet, added in December 1812, and Fatima's mock dirge No. 8, added on the occasion of the Dresden revival of the work in March 1823. At the completion of *Abu Hassan* in 1811, Weber was living in Darmstadt and, as usual, was in debt. He dedicated the work to the Grand Duke of Hesse Ludwig I, who liked it well enough to send Weber the truly princely honorarium of 440 gulden. Thus, this *Singspiel* saved at least one debtor (if only temporarily) from the stiff-necked creditors it parodied. Others also liked it, and *Abu Hassan* quickly became popular throughout Europe. However, contemporary performances have been few and far between, though this English translation has thus far received six productions in the United States and England.

Harun al-Rashid (764?-809), the Calif in the story, is a historical figure. A Calif was the secular and religious head of a Moslem state. Harun was Calif of Baghdad from 786 to 809, one of the greatest of the Abbasides, the Calif dynasty which ruled at Baghdad from 750 to 1258, and claimed descent from Abbas, the uncle of Muhammad.

One fact about *Abu Hassan*, rarely mentioned, is that it is one of the very few nineteenth-century operatic works in which the protagonists are happily married when the curtain rises, remain happily married (mostly) throughout the action, and are still happily married when the curtain comes down.

On sources: This translation of *Abu Hassan* is based, for the sung lyrics, on the critical edition edited by Joachim Veit (Piano-vocal score, Vol. 8.2 of Carl Maria von Weber, *Sämtliche Werke [Complete Works]*, WeV C. 6a, Mainz: Schott, 2003), and, for the spoken dialogue, on the edition edited by Willy Werner Göttig (Orchestral score, Offenbach am Main: Seiboldschen Buchdruckerei Werner Dohany, 1925; Republication: 1 Westmead, Farnborough, Hants., England: Gregg International Publishers Limited, 1968), in which the dialogue is considerably shortened from that presented by Veit.

On the translation of the sung lyrics: Because the lyrics must be singable to pre-existing music, with suitable rhymes, meter, and singable vowels, the English words sometimes deviate considerably from the literal meaning of the original German text. As sung, there is much verbal repetition, most of which is not indicated in this libretto since the repetitions often make little sense without the music.

On the translation of the spoken dialogue: Spoken dialogue in a musical is often perceived by a contemporary audience as a bridge between musical numbers. It therefore needs to be kept to a minimum, and be much shorter than was customary for *Singspiele* in Germany in the early nineteenth century. Accordingly, though we began with Göttig's shortened German version, our English version is somewhat shorter still, and we fully expect stage directors to shorten our dialogue even further.

Göttig's intersperal of dialogue and music in the No. 3 Chorus of Creditors does not appear to be dramatically viable. Therefore, we have made our own arrangement of alternating dialogue and music for this chorus.

There is a *Singspiel* tradition, continuing to the present day, that actors with small speaking parts embroider their roles with comic ad-libs. Though this is not shown in this libretto, our German-English piano-vocal score does show some directions such ad-libbing might take, by including alternate dialogue versions for the characters Mesrur and Zemrud, in British dialect for Mesrur and in Yiddish dialect for both Mesrur and Zemrud. These alternate dialogues are available on request.

On *das Kabinett*: In the No. 7 Trio, Fatima locks Omar into *das Kabinett*. In early nineteenth-century German, *Kabinett* meant any small private room, but would probably mean “bathroom” to most modern German speakers. We have translated it by the more general word “closet.” As the staging requires, the room can be a closet in the contemporary sense, a bedroom, or a bathroom, and the word “closet” in our text changed accordingly. In the original New York production of our translation, the cabinet was replaced by a lockable trunk with drawers: “unlock the closet” became “unlatch the locker,” and “door” became “trunk.”

—Mark Herman and Ronnie Apter

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University and the President's Award for Outstanding Research and Creative Activity from CMU. Translations by Herman and Apter of works for the musical stage have been performed in the United States, Canada, England, and Scotland, and praised in publications ranging from *The New York Times* to *The [London] Times*. They have also translated numerous poems and children's books, and published articles on translation and on opera. Their own books include *Translating For Singing: The Theory, Art and Craft of Translating Lyrics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016); the multi-media (book and compact disk) *A Bilingual Edition of the Love Songs of Bernart de Ventadorn in Occitan and English: Sugar and Salt* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1999); and *Digging for the Treasure: Translation After Pound* (New York, Berne, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Publishing, 1984; paperback reprint, New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1987).

Abu Hassan was first performed in Munich on 4 June 1811

This English translation was first performed in 1981 and revised in 2017

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Abu Hassan

1811

Characters

Abu Hassan, a favorite of the Calif.....	Tenor
Fatima, Abu Hassan's Wife	Soprano
Omar, a money lender	Bass
The Calif Harun al-Rashid.....	Speaking Role
Zobeida, the Calif's wife	Speaking Role
Mesrur, the Calif's Lord High Chamberlain.....	Speaking Role
Zemrud, Zobeida's Nurse	Speaking Role
Creditors.....	Men's Chorus
Attendants of the Calif and Zobeida	Mixed Chorus

Die Handlung geht in Bagdad vor. Abu Hassans Zimmer im Palaste des Kalifen. Zu beiden Seiten desselben Divans, bei dem zur Rechten ein Tischchen, worauf sich Brod und Wasser befindet. Rechts und links Seitentüren. Über der Tür links, an welcher der Schlüssel steckt, ein Gitter. Im Hintergrund ein breites Fenster mit Blumentöpfen und Gewächsen geschmückt.

Baghdad, about 800 A.D. Abu Hassan's apartment in the palace complex of the Calif. In the visible main room are two identical divans. On a small table by the right divan are bread and water. On the right side of the main room is a practical door to the apartment. On the left side, there is a practical door to a closet, over which is a grating on which a key is hanging. At the back is a wide window with flower pots and decorative plants.

Erste Szene

Abu Hassan liegt auf dem Divan rechts. Fatime steht in der Mitte des Zimmers.

No. 1. Duett: Abu Hassan & Fatime

HASSAN: Liebes Weibchen, reiche Wein,
liebes Weibchen, reiche Wein.

FATIME: Weder weißen, noch roten,
Mahomet, Mahomet hat es verboten!

Scene One

Abu Hassan lies on the right divan. Fatima stands in the middle of the room.

No. 1. Duet: Abu Hassan & Fatima

HASSAN: Fill the flowing bowl with wine,
fill the bowl with flowing wine.

FATIMA: Neither sherry, nor claret.
Alcohol is forbidden by Muhammad.

HASSAN: Darum schenk' ihn heimlich ein.
Gib Sorbet!

FATIME: Ha! du willst Wasser?

HASSAN: Nein, das Wasser ist mein Tod!
Fische, Konfitüren,

FATIME: Prasser!

HASSAN: (*schmeichelnd*) ein Pastetchen.

FATIME: Hier ist Brod!

BEIDE: Kann sich da der Geist erheben?
lohnet sich's der Müh' zu leben?
stille Zeugen meiner Not,
Brot und Wasser, Wasser, Brod.

FATIME: Ich will dir das Liedchen singen:
(*parodierend*) Mit Aurorens erstem Strahl,

HASSAN: Zur Verzweiflung wird's mich
bringen!

FATIME: nein es stillt des Hungers Qual!

HASSAN: liebes Weibchen, liebes Weibchen,
liebes Weibchen,
liebes Weibchen, reiche Wein, *usw.*

Dialog

HASSAN: (*steht vom Divan auf*) Eine herrliche
Mahlzeit! —Brot und Wasser! —Aber so geht
es allen Männern, deren Weiber besser zu
singen als zu kochen verstehen!

FATIME: Allerliebtest! Der Herr Gemahl
praßt, so lange er noch eine Zechine im
Hause weiß. Ich schweige aus Zärtlichkeit,
esse mit aus ehelicher Treue—und wie dankst
du mir das? Wahrlich, du verdienst auch das
einzige Kleinod zu verlieren, das du noch dein
nennst.

HASSAN: What is hidden leaves no sign.
Quench my thirst!

FATIMA: A glass of water?

HASSAN: May I first be stricken dead!
Mutton, and a pastry,

FATIMA: Glutton!

HASSAN: (*cajoling*) something tasty.

FATIMA: Have some bread!

BOTH: What do toil and sweat avail us, when
both flesh and spirit fail us?
Man lives not by bread alone;
bread and water, skin and bone!

FATIMA: I will sing a little ditty:
(*parodying*) "In the rosy fingered dawn...

HASSAN: O Fatima, have some pity!

FATIMA: ...let your mouth be filled with
song!"

HASSAN: O Fatima, o Fatima, o Fatima!
Fill the flowing bowl with wine, *etc.*

Dialogue

HASSAN: (*getting up from the divan*) Bread and
water! A fabulous feast! What do you propose
to do? Sing for our supper?

FATIMA: Most honored lord and husband,
there is not one zecchino in the house. You
have spent them all on your fabulous feasts.

HASSAN: You never warned me!

FATIMA: A loyal wife doesn't nag.

HASSAN: You helped me spend it.

HASSAN: Noch ein Kleinod hätt' ich? — Beste Fatime, laß dich umarmen und dann eile, es zu verkaufen!

FATIME: Unverschämter! Ich glaube, du wärst fähig, deine Frau zu verkaufen!

HASSAN: Was höre ich? Du—du bist das Kleinod—und ich habe mich umsonst gefreut.

FATIME: Grobian! Es gibt Leute, die jeden Augenblick bereit sind, mir alle ihre Reichtümer zu Füßen zu legen.

HASSAN: Reichtümer will man dir zu Füßen legen? Goldene Fatime! schone mein Zartgefühl nicht; sie sollen nicht lange liegen bleiben! —Aber nein—sprich, wer ist der Schurke, der dich untreu machen—eigentlich der brave Mann, der deine Untreue so königlich belohnen will?

FATIME: Omar, des Kalifen demütiger Wechsler und Abu Hassans übermütiger Gläubiger.

HASSAN: Omar? nicht möglich! dieser Geizhals!

FATIME: Wenn du mir nicht glauben willst, so glaube diesem Briefe, (*sie zieht einen Brief aus der Tasche und reicht ihn Hassan*) den er mir erst vor ein paar Tagen durch eine Sklavin zu-stecken ließ.

HASSAN: (*liest*) “Schönste Fatime! Mein Herz lodert in Liebe gegen dich! Lösche die verzehrende Flamme und gebiete dafür über alle meine Schätze! Dein ist, was ich besitze, and glücklich werd' ich mich preisen, wenn du deinem Sklaven vergönnt, den Staub von deinen Füßen zu küssen! Omar.”

FATIME: Zweifelst du noch immer?

FATIMA: A loyal wife share's her husband's fortune. Really, Hassan, you deserve to lose the one treasure you may still call yours.

HASSAN: A treasure! (*embracing her*) Darling Fatima! Run and sell it!

FATIMA: Shame on you! Sell myself?

HASSAN: Oh. You're the treasure.

FATIMA: Some people long to lay their riches at my feet.

HASSAN: Golden Fatima! Don't leave them lying limp! —I mean, what wretch would so sully my wife's honor! —I mean, who is the fine, upstanding fellow who would so royally reward your peccadillos?

FATIMA: Your creditor-in-chief.

HASSAN: Omar? That penny-pincher? Impossible.

FATIMA: Read this! (*She pulls a letter out of her reticule and gives it to Hassan.*)

HASSAN: (*reads*) “Beautiful Fatima, my heart burns with love for you. Quench the all-consuming flame that pervades me, my darling, my dearest! All I have is yours,” (*aside*) and vice versa. (*reads again*) “I will count myself fortunate should you permit me to kiss the dust of your feet. Omar.”

FATIMA: Well?

HASSAN: And you answered?

FATIMA: That I loathe him, abhor him, detest him, abominate him—

HASSAN: Bravo! And yet—There must be some way to fleece your flame. Our backs are to the wall! We've got to raise money. Think!

FATIMA: (*after a beat*) Nothing.

HASSAN: Und was hast du ihm antworten lassen?

FATIME: Das ich ihn hasse, verabscheue!

HASSAN: Bravo! Aber den Spitzbuben hättest du zu unserem Heil ein wenig an der Nase herumführen sollen! Geld muß irgendwie herbeigeschafft werden! Hilf mir wenigstens auf Mittel denken, uns aus unserer trostlosen Lage zu befreien! “Besinnst du dich auf nichts?”

FATIME: Nein!

HASSAN: Gar nichts?

FATIME: Ganz und gar nichts!

HASSAN: Ich auch nicht! —Halt!

FATIME: Was?

HASSAN: Ich hab’s!

FATIME: Er hat’s! —Laß hören!

HASSAN: Stirb—und du machst mich zum glücklichsten Manne.

FATIME: Bist du von Sinnen? —Sterben soll ich?

HASSAN: Verstehe mich recht! —Nur die Maske des Todes sollst du annehmen, und ich hoffe, dieser Spaß soll uns retten!

FATIME: Ach, das ist was anderes!

HASSAN: Also du stirbst—schön. Aber, ich besinne mich—der Spaß wird erst vollkommen, wenn wir Beide sterben—und aus Höflichkeit will ich den Anfang machen!

FATIME: Noch begreif ich nicht, wohin die Gaukelei führen soll.

HASSAN: Laß mich ausreden! Wenn Zobeide meinen Tod vernimmt, wird sie dir,

HASSAN: Nothing?

FATIMA: Nothing.

HASSAN: Aha! I have it.

FATIMA: Well?

HASSAN: Die and you will make me the happiest of men.

FATIMA: Have you gone mad?

HASSAN: You will only pretend to die.

FATIMA: That’s different.

HASSAN: You die. But the plot is complete when I die too. And I, polite to the last, will perish first.

FATIMA: But I don’t understand.

HASSAN: Allow me to finish. I die. Grief-stricken, you go to the Calif’s wife, and she, as is customary, gives you brocade for my winding-sheet and money for my funeral. You come back with your booty, and I, in turn, play widower for our ever-generous Calif.

FATIMA: *(tearing at her clothing)* Farewell, my poor dead husband! I hope to see you waken to a better life. *(She exits right.)*

wie es Sitte ist, eine Summe Geldes zu den Begräbniskosten und ein Stück Brokat zum Leichengewande für mich schenken. Sobald du mit deiner Beute zurückkommst, spiele ich dieselbe Rolle bei dem Kalifen und hoffe, ihn nicht weniger freigebig zu finden.

FATIME: (*bringt ihren Anzug in Unordnung*)
Adieu, mein toter Herr Gemahl! Ich hoffe dich bald wieder zu einem besseren Leben erwacht zu sehen! (*Sie geht rechts ab.*)

Zweite Szene

HASSAN: (*allein*) Das Possenspiel hat begonnen—nun Glück, sei uns günstig! Beim großen Propheten! Mein holdes Weibchen, für den Schein des Todes will ich dir bald ein frohes Leben bereiten.

No. 2. Arie: Abu Hassan

HASSAN: Was dann zu machen,
um mit Geschmack
die kleinen gold'nen Schelme
in alle Welt zu senden?

Ich gebe Gastereien,
mit Liedern und mit Tänzen,
Gastereien, mit Liedern, mit Tänzen.
Die erste Stelle nimmt mein Weibchen
ein,
mit Blumen will ich sie bekränzen,
sie soll an meiner Seite glänzen,
und Königin, und Königin,
und Königin des Festes sein!
He! Sklave! Chierwein!
doch streue Rosen d'rein,
und mit den Purpurlippen
soll erst Fatime nippen,

Scene Two

HASSAN: (*alone*) The farce begins!

No. 2. Aria: Abu Hassan

HASSAN: Farewell misfortune!
Go tell the world
that Hassan's poor existence
has been abruptly ended.

I'll feast on breast of pheasant!
My friends will all be present
at a banquet with singing and dancing!
Entrancing Fatima enchants the company;

a sheathe of satin will gown her,
a plaited wreath of flowers crown her—
all hail the queen, all hail the queen,
the queen of the revelry!
Hey! Eunuch! Cherry wine!
a liquid valentine
bestrewn with purple petals
for lips incarnadine!

so! jetzt den Becher her!
Auf unser Wohlsein, Liebe,
auf daß es stets so bliebe,
trink' ich dies Gläschen leer.

Doch heute muß man singen,
drum laßt die Lauten bringen,
eilt, eilt in schellem Lauf.
Durch Trinken, Singen, Tanzen,
lös't man die Dissonanzen
des Lebens wieder auf,
lös't man die Dissonanzen
des Lebens wieder auf.

O Fatime! meine Traute,
die so zärtlich
zu mir spricht,
glaub' mir, der Ton der Laute
mahlet meine Liebe nicht.
Ewig, ewig, ewig
dir ergeben, freut das Herz der Fesseln
sich,
ach! für dich nur will ich leben,
and auch sterben nur für dich!
O Fatime, meine Traute, *usw.*

Umschwebt nun mein Liebchen,
umschwebt nun mein Liebchen
in flüchtigen Tänzen,
der Holden mit Blumen,
der Holden mit Blumen
den Schlaf zu bekränzen.
Schön! Bravo! Vertrefflich!
Sie nahet sich schon,
und schalkhaft reicht sie
mir ein Küßchen zum Lohn, und
schalkhaft,
und schalkhaft reicht sie mir ein Küßchen
zum Lohn,
und schalkhaft, und schalkhaft ein
Küßchen zum Lohn.
Doch, sollte mein Plänchen scheitern?
Doch, sollte mein Plänchen scheitern?

Now, lift the glasses high!
To life, to love and leisure,
to pulchritude and pleasure,
I drain this goblet dry!

Now raise your voices, singers!
Musicians, run your fingers
across your gay guitars!
For music leads to concord,
resolving every discord,
and harmony is ours.
Let music banish discord
and harmony be ours!

O Fatima, my beloved,
when guitars are strumming,
I rejoice.
Yet sweeter than the thrumming
is the music of your voice.
Never, never, never
was a lover as extravagant as I.

O my love, it's you I live for,
and for you alone I die!
O Fatima, my beloved, *etc.*

The party is ending,
the moon is descending
and daylight advancing.
As eyelids are closing
and others are dozing,
Fatima is dancing.
Fine! Bravo! A triumph!
Fatima comes by,
a gleam in her eye
as she gives me a kiss in triumph,
in triumph she plants a playful kiss.

In triumph, in triumph she kisses my lips!

But, what if my plan is fruitless?
But, what if my plan is fruitless?

scheitern?
Was kümmert's mich und sie?
was kümmert's mich und sie?
mit Liedern und Tänzen,
mit Blumen sich kränzen,
als Königin glänzen,
bravo! herrlich! ja vortrefflich!

Dialog

Man hört Geräusch an der Tür rechts.

HASSAN: Wer ist draußen?

Dritte Szene

Abu Hassan wendet sich gegen die Tür. In diesem Augenblick tritt ihm Omar an der Spitze der Gläubiger aus derselben entgegen. Hassan prallt zurück. Die Gläubiger zeigen Wechsel und Schuldscheine, die sie in den Händen haben, vor.

No. 3a. Chor der Gläubiger

MÄNNERCHOR: Geld! Geld! Geld!
ich will nicht länger harren,
sonst sind wir wie die Narren
am Ende nur geprellt,
geprellt, sonst sind wir wie die Narren
am Ende nur geprellt.
Geld! Geld! Geld! Geld! Geld! Geld!

Dialog

HASSAN: *(bei Seite)* O weh! o weh! daß auch gerade jetzt die verdammten Kerle mich aus meinem schönen Traume wecken mußten!

OMAR: Du kennst mich doch, Abu Hassan?

fruitless?
I'll lose no time in dreaming:
I'll try another scheme.
And satin will gown her,
and flowers will crown her,
admirers surround her!
Bravo! Splendid! What a triumph!

Dialogue

Noise is heard from behind the right door.

HASSAN: Who is it?

Scene Three

Abu Hassan turns to the door, but before he reaches it, Omar bursts in at the head of a flying wedge of creditors. Hassan recoils. The creditors wave promissory notes at him.

No. 3a. Men's Chorus of Creditors

CHORUS: Gold! Gold! Gold!
No further subterfuges!
Though vilified as scrooges
we have standards to uphold.
Behold: we will not play the stooges
in comic opera mold.
Gold! Gold! Gold! Gold! Gold! Gold!

Dialogue

HASSAN: *(aside)* Rude reality intrudes upon my dream.

OMAR: You must know me, Abu Hassan.

HASSAN: It seems you know me.

HASSAN: Da du meinen Namen nennst,
muß ich wenigstens dir nicht unbekannt sein!

OMAR: Willst du bezahlen?

HASSAN: Wenn ich Geld hätte, o ja!

OMAR: Wir Alle, wie du uns hier siehst, sind
entschlossen, nicht länger zu warten.

GLÄUBIGER: Ja, das sind wir!

HASSAN: Nun, nun—Geld sollt ihr haben;
wenn auch nicht alles, doch einen Teil!

OMAR: Wir lassen uns nicht länger
hinhalten—wir wollen das Ganze!

GLÄUBIGER: Ja, wir wollen das Ganze!

HASSAN: Mein Weib ist soeben zu
Zobeiden gegangen, um bei ihr eine Summe
Geldes zu erheben. Sobald sie zurückkommt,
gehe ich in gleicher Absicht zum Kalifen.

OMAR: Das sind leere Ausflüchte! Wenn dir
der Kalif Geld geben wollte, würde er's schon
längst getan haben.

No. 3b. Chor der Gläubiger

MÄNNERCHOR: Nein, nein, nein,
der Wechsel ist verfallen,
und ich, und ich,
und ich muß nun vor Allen
zuerst bezahlt sein.

Dialog

HASSAN: Freund, es ist nicht schön, daß du
an der Wahrheit meiner Worte zweifelst; aber
ich habe mirs wohl gedacht, obwohl Fatime
das Gegenteil behauptet.

OMAR: Do you intend to pay us?

HASSAN: Of course. As soon as I have the
money.

OMAR: But, as you see, we mean to have our
money here and now.

HASSAN: Yes, yes. Only give me half an hour.
I am momentarily expecting a sizable sum. My
wife has gone to Zobeida for money, and, as
soon as she returns, I myself am going to the
Calif.

OMAR: Empty promises. Had the Calif, or his
wife, meant to subsidize your extravagances,
they would have done so before now. I, for
one, am not willing to wait. Gentlemen, are you
willing to wait?

No. 3b. Men's Chorus of Creditors

CHORUS: No, no, no!
you promised us a payment!
Pay me, pay me,
your first and foremost claimant,
pay everything you owe!

Dialogue

HASSAN: Ah, Omar, this ugly distrust is your
true face. I have always known it, but Fatima
argues otherwise.

OMAR: (*attentive*) Fatima? What does Fatima
say?

OMAR: (*aufmerksam*) Fatime? Was glaubt sie denn?

HASSAN: Sie lobte deine Großmut und Güte!

OMAR: Ja, großmütig bin ich—oder kann es wenigstens sein.

HASSAN: So beweise es nun!

OMAR: Wenn ich auch warten wollte—diese wollen nicht!

GLÄUBIGER: Nein, nein, wir wollen nicht!

OMAR: Da hörst du's!—Sie wollen dich in das Gefängnis schleppen lassen.

HASSAN: Fatime läßt dich bitten.

OMAR: Wirklich?

HASSAN: Recht dringend! Sie hat mir ausdrücklich aufgetragen, es dir zu sagen.—

OMAR: Was kann ich tun?

HASSAN: Alles!

OMAR: Was verlangst du denn?

HASSAN: Aufschub!

OMAR: Dir zu Lieb' nicht, wohl aber Fatimen.

HASSAN: O ja, Fatimen.

OMAR: Die arme Frau dauert mich, daß dein Leichtsinns sie so unglücklich macht!

HASSAN: Laß es nicht beim bloßen Mitleid bewenden.

OMAR: (*zu den Gläubigern*) Kommt mit in meine Wohnung, dort will ich eure Forderungen tilgen. Seid ihr's zufrieden?

HASSAN: That you are just and generous.

OMAR: Generous. I am—I could be generous.

HASSAN: Then be generous now!

OMAR: Even if I were willing, they want to be paid now.

HASSAN: Fatima entreats you.

OMAR: She does?

HASSAN: Earnestly entreats you.

OMAR: What could I do?

HASSAN: Everything.

OMAR: Ah, in that case, state your needs.

HASSAN: Rescue! Reprieve!

OMAR: Not for you, but for Fatima.

HASSAN: Oh, yes, Fatima.

OMAR: (*to the creditors*) Gentlemen, I have a proposal to make.

HASSAN: (*aside*) Take it, you leeches! (*to the creditors*) Gentlemen, be charitable. Remember, Allah sees your every deed.

OMAR: (*to the creditors*) If you agree, I will redeem all his debts. All in favor say aye.

No. 3c. Chor der Gläubiger, mit Omar & Abu Hassan

MÄNNERCHOR: Ja, ja, ja.

OMAR: *(to Hassan)*

Du bist's doch auch zufrieden?

HASSAN: Ja, ja, ja, und du?

OMAR: Ja, ja, ja,

ich bin es wohl zufrieden,
(bei Seite) doch nicht auf lang' geschieden,
bald bin ich wieder da!

[HASSAN:] *(bei Seite, gleichzeitig mit Chor und Omar)*

Ihr Schurken, reis't in Frieden,
euch hab' ich längst gemieden,
wenn ich von fern euch sah,
wenn ich von fern euch sah.
Ihr Schurken reis't in Frieden,
euch hab' ich längst gemieden,
wenn ich von fern euch sah,
euch sah,
ihr Schurken reis't in Frieden,
euch hab' ich längst gemieden,
wenn ich von fern euch sah,
reis't in Frieden!

[MÄNNERCHOR:]

Wir sind es wohl zufrieden,
vergeßt nun, was geschah,
und so sind wir geschieden,
vergeßt nun, was geschah.

[OMAR:] *(bei Seite)*

Ich bin es wohl zufrieden,
ich bin's zufrieden,
doch nicht auf lang' geschieden,
bald bin ich wieder da,
bald bin ich wieder, wieder da,
bald bin ich wieder da, bald wider da,

No. 3c. Men's Chorus of Creditors, with Omar & Abu Hassan

CHORUS: Aye, aye, aye.

OMAR: *(to Hassan)*

Does this arrangement please you?

HASSAN: Aye, aye, aye, and you?

OMAR: I say aye.

I'm happy to reprieve you
(aside) in order to deceive you
with her for whom I sigh.

[HASSAN:] *(aside, simultaneously with Chorus and Omar)*

You leeches, Allah sees you,
and though I now appease you,
I'll pay you by and by:
I'll drain your pockets dry!
May indigestion squeeze you
and icy showers freeze you
until the day you die!
(to the Creditors) Goodbye!
(aside) May imps of Satan tease you
and torture you and tweeze you
until you crack and cry!
(to the creditors) Allah seize you!

[CHORUS:]

Since Omar will reprieve you,
we now will say goodbye.
We are content to leave you;
we now will say goodbye.

[OMAR:] *(to Hassan)*

I'm happy to reprieve you,
I shall reprieve you
(aside) in order to deceive you
with her for whom I sigh,
with her for whom I pine and sigh.
She is the one from whom I pine and

bald bin ich wieder da.

Omar geht mit den Gläubigern durch die Tür rechts ab. Hassan begleitet sie und kehrt dann wieder zurück.

Dialog

Vierte Szene

HASSAN: *(allein)* Dank sei dem großen Propheten, daß ich die verdammten Blutsauger los geworden bin! —In den Schuldurm? —Nein, die reine Luft geht mir über Alles und ohne Bewegung kann ich garnicht leben.

Fünfte Szene

Fatime kommt mit einem Geldbeutel und mit einem Stück Goldstoff zurück.

FATIME: Eure Dienerin, mein lieber Leichnam! Hier sind die Kosten Eures Begräbnisses und es kommt nur auf Euch an, ob sie ihrem Zwecke gemäß verwendet werden sollen.

HASSAN: Heute und morgen wird noch nichts verwendet. —Doch erst muß du erfahren, wie mir's inzwischen erging.

FATIME: Das kann ich erraten.

HASSAN: Schwerlich! Omar war hier!

FATIME: O weh!

HASSAN: Mit dem ganzen Schwarm unserer Gläubiger—und wollte durchaus bezahlt sein.

FATIME: Und du?

sigh,
the one for whom I sigh.

Omar and the Creditors exit through the right door. Abu Hassan escorts them off and then returns to the stage.

Dialogue

Scene Four

HASSAN: *(alone)* Praise the Prophet, I've eluded those bloodsuckers. What! I, Hassan! languish in prison? I need life, air, movement—

Scene Five

Fatima enters, carrying a bag of money and a length of gold brocade.

FATIMA: Felicitations, beloved corpse. How do you propose to spend your funeral fees?

HASSAN: Not wisely but too well! —But first, I must tell you what I did while you were gone.

FATIMA: I can guess.

HASSAN: Hardly. Omar was here.

FATIMA: Oh no!

HASSAN: With the entire swarm of our creditors, each one a true follower of the Profit.

FATIMA: What did you do?

HASSAN: I paid them.

FATIMA: Without money?

HASSAN: Every single one.

HASSAN: Ich bezahle!

FATIME: Ohne Geld?

HASSAN: Allerdings!

FATIME: Durch welche Zauberkünste?

HASSAN: Ich sagte ihm, du liebest ihn bitten.

FATIME: Da wirst du schön angekommen sein.

HASSAN: Herrlich! Der alte Sünder biß an, nahm die ganze Sippschaft mit nach Hause und zahlt soeben alle meine Schulden.

FATIME: Da bist du vom Regen in die Traufe gekommen.

HASSAN: Da sei ruhig! Im schlimmsten Falle bezahlen wir den Schleicher von unseren Begräbniskosten! —Jetzt erzähle mir deine Geschichte.

FATIME: Zobeide hatte mein Jammern von ferne vernommen. Ich rief mit gebrochener Stimme: Teuerste Gebieterin! Abu Hassen, der arme Abu Hassen ist nicht mehr! Er ist tot! *(Sie fängt an zu weinen.)*

HASSAN: *(weint ebenfalls)* Und was erwiderte sie?

FATIME: Hier hast du die Antwort!—*(Sie reicht ihm lachend den Beutel mit Geld.)*

HASSAN: Teuerste Fatime! Das sollen die letzten Tränen gewesen sein, die du um mich vergossen hast!

FATIMA: By what magic?

HASSAN: I whispered in Omar's ear, "Fatima entreats you."

FATIMA: That did it.

HASSAN: The old lecher rose to the bait. He led the whole herd back to his house, and paid off all my debts.

FATIMA: Out of the frying pan, into the fire!

HASSAN: Don't fret. At the very worst we can always pay him out of the proceeds from our recent undertakings. Now you tell me what happened to you.

FATIMA: Zobeïda heard my great woe long before she saw me. I cried to the heavens, "Abu Hassan is dead! My poor Hassan has perished!" *(She starts to cry.)*

HASSAN: *(crying too)* And what did she say?

FATIMA: This was her answer! *(Laughing, she presents him with the moneybag.)*

HASSAN: Magnificent Fatima, may these be the last tears you shed on my behalf.

No. 4. Duett: Abu Hassan & Fatime

HASSAN:

Tränen, Tränen sollst du nicht vergießen,

du geliebtes, treues Herz,
dir das Leben zu versüßen,
teil' ich willig jeden Schmerz,
teil' ich willig,
teil' ich willig jeden Schmerz

FATIME: Tränen sind der Tau der Liebe,
unter welchem sie gedeiht,
und die Wässer edler Triebe,
Treue! Treue und Beständigkeit.

HASSAN: Prüf' dies herz.

FATIME: Es ist bewähret.

HASSAN: Laune, Argwohn und Verdacht.

FATIME: Wenn es keine Falschheit nähret,
bleibt es sorglos unbewacht,

DIE BEIDE: wenn es keine Falschheit
nähret,
bleibt es sorglos unbewacht,
bleibt es sorglos unbewacht,
bleibt es sorglos unbewacht,
sorglos unbewacht.

Umgaukelt von Liebe und Treue,
umfasse voll fröhlichem Mut,
mein Liebchen ich täglich auf's Neue
nur ewig verjüngender Glut.

Hassan geht rechts ab.

Sechste Szene

Dialog

FATIME: (*allein*) Er muß sich beeilen, dem
Kalifen Nachricht von meinem Tode zu

No. 4. Duet: Abu Hassan & Fatima

HASSAN:

Let me shield you from the tears of
sadness,
my beloved loyal wife.
I will share in every sorrow
of your even-tenored life,
I will share in
every sorrow of your life.

FATIMA: Tears renew a wilting love
as rain revives a willow tree,
wakening a true devotion,
ardor, honor and fidelity.

HASSAN: Test this heart!

FATIMA: For what condition?

HASSAN: Jealousy and dark despair!

FATIMA: If a heart denies suspicion,
then a heart is free as air.

BOTH: If a heart denies suspicion,

then a heart is free as air,
free of envy, free of care,
free of caution, unaware.
Careless love take care!

Aflutter with unfailing rapture,
atremble with passion and truth,
embracing, we daily recapture
the ardor of full-blooded youth!

Hassan exits right.

Scene Six

Dialogue

FATIMA: (*alone*) He'd better hurry to the Calif
with the news of my death, or Zobeïda will get

bringen, ehe dieser von Zobeiden seinen Tod erfährt. —Ach, welch ein Glück, daß alles dies nur Scherz, denn trotz seines Leichtsinns liebe ich ihn von ganzer Seele, und ohne Abu Hassan wäre mir das Leben glanz- und freudenlos!

No. 5. Arie: Fatime

FATIME: Wird Philomele Trauern,
dem Käfig kaum entschlüpft,
wenn sie im Duft der Rosen
von Zweig' zu Zweigen hüpf?
Scheu blickt sie nach dem Fenster,
nach dem verhaßten Haus,
und strömt dann ihre Freude
in Dankesängen aus,
und hebt die kleinen Flügel,
und schwimmt nun auf's Neu'
im wolkenlosen Äther
und jauchzt und fühlt sich frei,
und jauchzt und fühlt sich frei.

Doch Abu Hassan, ohne dich
was wäre mir das Leben?
Du Trauter, nur beseligst mich,
nur du kannst mich erheben;
ich fühle mich beglückt und frei
in deinen sanften Ketten,
aus dieser süßen Sklaverei
soll nur der Tod mich retten, der Tod!
Teure Hassan Ohne dich!

Siebente Szene

Omar öffnet vorsichtig die Tür rechts, guckt herein und nachdem er sich überzeugt hat, daß Fatime allein ist, kommt er herein.

there first with the news of *his* death. Oh, Hassan, I love you in spite of your foolishness. I'm glad you're dead in jest, and not in earnest, for life without you would be dull indeed.

No. 5. Aria: Fatima

FATIMA: Would Philomel be unhappy,
uncaged at last and free
to sniff the fragrant roses
and flit from tree to tree?
She glances all around her
and sees the world is wide.
She sings in exultation
her thankfulness and pride.
Rejoicing in her freedom,
she is no longer shy,
but boldly she determines
to spread her wings and fly.
She spreads her wings to fly.

But Abu Hassan, foolish boy,
you are a sweet enslaver!
My darling, you are all my joy;
you give my life its savor.
How tender are the bonds,
the bonds that only death can sever!
How tender are the bonds of love;
I yield to them forever, I yield!
Dearest Hassan, I love you!

Scene Seven

Omar cautiously open the right door and peers in. Having convinced himself that Fatima is alone, he enters.

Dialog

OMAR: Verzeih' schöne Fatime, ich suche deinen Mann.

FATIME: Er ist bei dem Kalifen.

OMAR: So will ich zu einer gelegeneren Zeit wieder vorsprechen! (*Er will abgehen.*)

FATIME: Wie dir's gefällt!

OMAR: (*zurückkehrend*) Ich möchte dich nicht gerne belästigen. (*wie zuvor*)

FATIME: Zu götig!

OMAR: (*kehrt wieder um*) Denn am Ende habe ich aus deinem Munde doch nichts als Kränkungen zu erwarten.

FATIME: Du verkennst mich, Omar; wenigstens will ich niemand vorsätzlich beleidigen.

OMAR: Hab' ich mir's doch gleich gedacht, als mir Zelia deine Antwort hinterbrachte! Nein—sagte ich bei mir selbst—das kann sie nicht im Ernst gemeint haben! He, he, he! Gelt, ich hab's erraten?

FATIME: Du hast in meiner Seele gelesen.

OMAR: Ja, lesen kann ich!

FATIME: (*mit Beziehung*) Und schreiben!

OMAR: Und rechnen!

FATIME: Hast du dich noch nie verrechnet?

OMAR: Nie! Ich mache über alles die Probe!

FATIME: Mein Mann ist leider nicht so vorsichtig. Hat er Geld—

OMAR: Fort muß es!

FATIME: Hat er keines—

Dialogue

OMAR: Excuse me. I am looking for your husband.

FATIMA: He is with the Calif.

OMAR: I will return at a more convenient moment. (*He makes as if to exit.*)

FATIMA: How is business?

OMAR: (*turning back*) I would rather not disturb you. (*He again makes as if to exit.*)

FATIMA: I owe you—every courtesy.

OMAR: (*turning back again*) I expect nothing from your lips but insults.

FATIMA: You are mistaken, Omar. I wouldn't purposely insult anyone.

OMAR: Ah. So I thought when I received your reply to my letter. I said to myself, "Fatima wouldn't purposely insult me. She must be teasing." Heh, heh, heh! Is it money? Do I read the situation correctly?

FATIMA: You have read my soul.

OMAR: Oh, yes. I can read—

FATIMA: and write—

OMAR: and calculate.

FATIMA: Have you never miscalculated?

OMAR: Never! I always look before I leap.

FATIMA: Alas, my husband always leaps before he looks. If he has gold—

OMAR: He flings it away!

FATIMA: If he has none—

OMAR: He flies into debt!

OMAR: Wird geborgt!

FATIME: Er ißt!

OMAR: Trinkt!

FATIME: Verschenkt!

OMAR: Verschwendet!

FATIME: Was bleibt mir am Ende?

OMAR: Nichts!

FATIME: Schulden! —Es wird mir bang ums Herz, wenn ich an das Heer unserer Gläubiger denke!

OMAR: Das Heer ist entlassen, schöne Fatime! Nur Einer steht dir noch gegenüber, aber nicht in feindlicher Absicht!

FATIME: Erkläre dich deutlicher!

Omar zieht eine Brieftasche, mit den Wechseln und Schuldscheinen angefüllt, aus seinem Kaftan hervor.

No. 6 Duett: Omar & Fatime

OMAR: Siehst du diese große Menge,
teils von Wechseln, teils von Scheinen,
du vermisest auch nicht einen,
auch nicht einen!
Alle, alle,
alle sind nun mein,
alle, alle sind nun mein!

FATIME: Wie entreißt uns dem Gedränge?
wird sich unser Schicksal wenden?
Ach, ich fühl's in deinen Händen
stehet unser Glück allein!

OMAR: Fasse Mut!

FATIME: Ich will mich fassen!

OMAR: Liebst du mich?

FATIMA: Come feast—

OMAR: Or famine—

FATIMA: He frolics. Where will I be left in the end?

OMAR: With nothing.

FATIMA: Stripped naked. Omar, I tremble to think of the horde of our creditors.

OMAR: Beautiful Fatima, the horde is dismissed. Only one stands before you, but not as your enemy.

FATIMA: What do you mean?

Omar pulls out of his caftan a small portfolio stuffed with promissory notes and bills.

No. 6. Duet: Omar & Fatima

OMAR: I possess a stack of paper,
packed with promise of repayment,
and I mean to take sufficient
satisfaction,
binding action.
Do you understand?
Show me that you understand.

FATIMA: As encroaching debts enslave me,
has a hero come to save me?
Oh, save me! Oh, save me!
for our fate is in your hands!

OMAR: Take my heart!

FATIMA: You do me credit.

OMAR: Know my mind!

FATIME: Ich kann nicht hassen!

OMAR: Rede frei!

FATIME: Oft trügt der Schein.

OMAR: Unverblümt!

FATIME: (*Verlegenheit heuchelnd*)
Nein, ja, nein, ja, nein, nein!

[OMAR:] (*bei Seite, gleichzeitig mit Fatime*)
Ha, das Närrchen ist gefangen,
und geglückt mein schlauer Plan!
(*zu ihr*) Ach, mein Sehnen, mein
Verlangen
zeigt dies Ticktack deutlich an,
ach, mein Sehnen, mein Verlangen,
ach, mein Sehnen, mein Verlangen
zeigt dies Taicktack deutlich an,
zeigt dies Ticktack, Ticktack, Ticktack
deutlich an!

[FATIME:] (*für sich*)
Schon glaubt er, ich sei gefangen,
und geglückt sein schlauer Plan!
(*zu ihm*) Mich verrät die Glut der Wangen,
die ich nicht verbergen kann,
mich verrät die Glut der Wangen!

OMAR: Du liebst mich, du liebst mich,
du liebst mich, mein Schätzchen!

FATIME: Ich lieben? ich lieben?
ich lieben? Nein! nein!

OMAR: O räume mir hier nur ein Plätzchen,
ein winziges Plätzchen nur ein,
ein winziges Plätzchen nur ein!

FATIME: Ich weiß nicht,
mir wird so beklommen,
so ängstlich!

FATIMA: I haven't read it.

OMAR: Count on me!

FATIMA: But figures lie.

OMAR: Be my love!

FATIMA: (*feigning embarrassment*)
No. Yes. Yes. No. Oh, my!

[OMAR:] (*aside, simultaneously with Fatima*)
Yes, my plan has been successful,
and the bird is almost caught.
(*to her*) I am overcome with longing,
and my heart is overwrought.
It goes pitter, pitter, patter.
I am overcome with longing
and my heart is overwrought.
It goes pitter, pitter, patter,
overwrought!

[FATIMA:] (*aside*)
He believes he is successful,
and the bird is almost caught.
(*to him*) I cannot conceal the blushes
that reveal my inmost thought.
I cannot conceal my blushes!

OMAR: You love me! You love me!
You cannot deny it!

FATIMA: I love you? I love you?
I love you? Not I!

OMAR: Accept my devoted protection,
and open yourself to affection,
and love me without circumspection.

FATIMA: Affection
without circumspection:
objection!

OMAR: Befolg' meinen Rat,
ein Küßchen zur Stärkung genommen,
das Mittel ist wahrlich probat.

FATIME:

Und meinst du, dann würd' ich genesen?

OMAR: Von Geld und von Gütern entblößt
kannst du dir die Wechselchen lösen!

FATIME: Die Wechsel?

OMAR: Sie sind schon gelös't.

(Er raubt ihr einen Kuß und legt die Wechsel auf den Tisch.)

[FATIME:] *(für sich, gleichzeitig mit Fatime)*

Ha! der Vogel ist gefangen
und mißlungen ist sein Plan.
Alter Tor, verblühte Wangen
ziehen nimmer Herzen an,
verblühte Wangen
ziehen nimmer Herzen an,
nimmer, nimmer, nimmer,
ziehen nimmer Herzen an!

[OMAR:] *(für sich)*

Ha! das Närrchen ist gefangen
und geglückt mein schlauer Plan,
und gelungen ist mein schlauer Plan.
(to her) Ach, die Rosen deiner Wangen
ziehen aller Herzen an,
aller, aller, aller,
ziehen aller, ziehen aller Herzen an,
ziehen aller Herzen an,
ziehen aller, ziehen aller,
ziehen aller, ziehen aller,
ziehen aller, aller, aller Herzen an!

OMAR: Why are you afraid?
The bills are now due for collection;
I offer a generous trade.

FATIMA:

Allow me some time for reflection.

OMAR: The payment cannot be delayed!
So if you will waive your objection...

FATIMA: ...the debts...

OMAR: ...are easily paid.

(He steals a kiss from her and puts the IOU's on the table.)

[FATIMA:] *(aside, simultaneously with Omar)*

Yes, my plan has been successful,
and the prating bird is caught.
Aging fool, your charms are fading,
and a heart cannot be bought.
Your charms are fading,
and a heart cannot be bought.
Never, never, never,
never can a heart be bought.

[OMAR:] *(aside)*

Yes, my plan has been successful,
and the pretty bird is caught,
and the pretty little bird is caught.
(to her) I am blinded by your blushes,
and my heart is overwrought,
ever, ever, ever
and forever, I am ever overwrought.
How my Heart is overwrought!
I am ever and forever,
I am ever and forever,
I am ever and forever overwrought!

Dialog

FATIME: *(durch das Fenster blickend)* O weh' mir!

OMAR: Was gibt's?

FATIME: Wir sind verloren! Mein Mann!

OMAR: Hilf Allah! Wie rette ich mich!

FATIME: Zur Flucht ist es zu spät! Schnell in das Kabinett!

Omar schlüpft in das Kabinett links. Fatime schließt hinter ihm zu und zieht den Schlüssel ab.

Achte Szene

Abu Hassan tritt durch die Tür rechts wieder auf, er trägt ebenfalls einen Beutel mit Geld und ein Stück Goldstoff.

FATIME: Warte, Nichtswürdiger, deine Liebesglut soll gelöscht werden. *(zu Abu Hassan)* Bist du schon wieder zurück, betrübtester aller Witwer? *(leise)* Der Vogel ist gefangen.

HASSAN: *(laut)* Welcher Vogel?

FATIME: *(leise, auf das Kabinett deutend)* Der Gimpel, Omar! *(laut)* Wo ist das Stück Brocat und das Geld? *(leise)* Dort liegen deine Verschreibungen!

HASSAN: *(leise)* Herrlich! *(laut)* Hier ist beides! *(Er legt den Goldstoff auf den Divan und den Beutel mit Geld auf den Tisch.)* *(leise)* Der alte Schuft soll Blut schwitzen. *(Er geht zum Kabinett hin.)* *(laut)* Warum ist das Kabinett versperrt? Wo ist der Schlüssel?

FATIME: *(im Tone der Verlegenheit)* Der—der Schlüssel?

Dialogue

FATIMA: *(looking through the window)* Oh no!

OMAR: What is it?

FATIMA: What shall we do? It's my husband!

OMAR: Allah help me!

FATIMA: It's too late to run! *(pointing to the closet)* Hide in there!

Omar slips through the left door into the closet. Fatima locks the door behind him and keeps the key.

Scene Eight

Abu Hassan enters through the right-hand door. He, like Fatima, has procured a length of brocade and a bag of money.

FATIMA: *(aside)* Oh ho, you walking bank balance! Your love interest is withdrawn. *(aloud, to Hassan)* Back so soon, poor widower! *(softly)* The bird is caught.

HASSAN: *(aloud)* What bird?

FATIMA: *(softly, pointing to the closet)* The vulture. *(aloud)* Did you get the money and the cloth? *(pointing to the closet)* You have debts to pay.

HASSAN: *(softly)* Bravo! *(aloud)* Here they are. *(He lays the brocade and moneybag on the table.)* *(softly)* We'll make him sweat blood! *(He goes to the closet door.)* *(aloud)* Why is the closet locked? Where is the key?

FATIMA: *(sounding embarrassed)* The—key?

HASSAN: Yes, the key! Hand it over!

HASSAN: Ja, der Schlüssel! Mach' auf!

No. 7. Terzett: Fatime, Hassan, & Omar

FATIME: Ich such' und such' in allen Ecken,
wo ist denn das vertrackte Ding?

HASSAN:

Ich sah' ihn noch im Schlosse stecken,
eh' ich zu dem Kalifen ging.

OMAR: (*erscheint an der vergitterten Öffnung über
der Kabinettür*)

O weh! Nun wird er bald entdecken,
daß ich mich hier im Netze fing.

HASSAN: Und wär' ich noch so kalten
Blutes,
so schlich sich doch ein Argwohn ein!

FATIME: Glaub' mir, ich bin getrosten
Mutes,
denn mein Gewissen fühl' ich rein.

[FATIME & HASSAN:]

(*bei Seite, gleichzeitig mit Omar*)

Er weiß sich nicht vor Angst zu fassen
und fleht umsonst den Himmel an,
nie wird er sich mehr blicken lassen,
wenn er diesmal entrinnen kann.

[OMAR:]

Ich weiß mich nicht vor Angst zu fassen,
O Mahomet, dich fleh' ich an,
wirst du mich ohne hilfe lassen
so ist es heut' um mich getan!

HASSAN: Im Kabinette
ward wohl ein Buhler von dir verstecket?
Gleich her den Schlüssel,
daß ich ihn strafe, daß ich ihn morde,

No. 7. Trio: Fatima, Hassan, & Omar

FATIMA: I've looked in every nook and
cranny.
I've looked in every jar and crock.

HASSAN:

That you could lose it is uncanny:
I know the key was in the lock.

OMAR: (*appearing at the latticed opening above the
cabinet door*)

Oh no, he's certain to unman me,
I will become a laughingstock.

HASSAN: I am a trusting man by nature,

but I am pierced by pangs of doubt!

FATIMA: Before you stands a guiltless
creature;
her heart is pure, her soul devout!

[FATIMA & HASSAN:]

(*aside, simultaneously with Omar*)

He trembles in his trepidation,
and cries in vain for Heaven's grace.
He can't escape humiliation,
and will not dare to show his face.

[OMAR:]

I tremble in my trepidation.
Muhammad, I implore your grace.
I turn to you for my salvation:
oh take me from this dreadful place!

HASSAN: What are you hiding?
Is there some treachery under cover?
Unlock the closet!
If I discover you have a lover,

daß schnell das zürnende
Aug' ihn entdeckt!

FATIME: Welche Vermutung
wird in der Seele plötzlich geweckt!
Du hast den Schlüssel vom Kabinette
vorhin, ich wette, zu dir gesteckt!

HASSAN: Wenn du noch zögerst,
spreng' ich gewaltsam Riegel und Tür!

FATIME: Jegliche Falte
hab' ich durchsuchet,
aber der Schlüssel, glaub' mir, auf Ehre —
findet—

*(Sie läßt, wie von ungefähr, den Schlüssel auf den
Boden fallen.)*

HASSAN: *(hebt ihn schnell auf)* Sieh' hier!

OMAR: Weh' mir!

[FATIME:] *(gleichzeitig mit Hassan & Omar)*
Er ist verloren,
kommt er hinein,
er ist verloren,
kommt er hinein,
er hat ihm den Tod geschworen
und nichts wird ihn befrei'n!

[HASSAN:] Er ist verloren,
komm' ich hinein,
er ist verloren,
komm' ich hinein,
ich hab' ihm den Tod Geschworen
und nichts wird ihn befrei'n!

[OMAR:] Ich bin verloren,
kommt er herein,
ich bin verloren,
kommt er herein,
er hat mir den Tod geschworen,
soll ich um Hilfe schrei'n?

I will unleash my ax
and hack him limb from limb!

FATIMA: This is absurdity!
How can you cast aspersions on me?
Is this some foolery? A bit of comedy?
Aha! I've guessed it! You have the key!

HASSAN: Unlock the door or
I will pound it into pulp!

FATIMA: This simply isn't fair!
I have looked everywhere:
under the carpet, over the cupboard—
I swear—

(She lets the key fall as if by accident.)

HASSAN: *(quickly picking it up)* Oho!

OMAR: Oh no!

[FATIMA:] *(simultaneously with Hassan & Omar)*
This is the crisis:
blood will be shed!
Swift is his vengeance:
he'll strike him dead!
There is no one who can help him;
he swore to have his head!

[HASSAN:] This is the crisis:
blood will be shed!
Swift is my vengeance:
I'll strike him dead!
There is no one who can help him;
I swore to have his head!

[OMAR:] This is the crisis:
blood will be shed!
Swift is his vengeance:
he'll strike me dead!
There is no one who can help me;
he swore to have my head!

Omar verschwindet vom Gitter. Fatime ist am Schluß des Terzetts zum Fenster gegangen und spricht das Folgende schnell und ängstlich:

Dialog

FATIME: Mesrur, der Vertraute des Kalifen, eilt unserer Wohnung zu! Du kannst dir vorstellen, in welcher Absicht er kommt!

HASSAN: (*entfernt sich eilig von der Tür, die er öffnen wollte*) Geschwind, lege dich auf diesen Divan, die Füße gegen Mekka gewendet.— (*Fatime legt sich schnell auf den Divan rechts.*)— Jetzt werd' ich dich mit dem Brokate bedecken. — (*Er tut es.*)— So! Nun mag er kommen! — (*Er setzt sich mit trauriger Geberde zu Fatimens Füßen und trockenet sich mit dem Schnupftuch von Zeit zu Zeit die Augen.*)

Neunte Szene

Mesrur tritt auf und bleibt unter der Tür stehen.

MESRUR: (*nach einer Pause*) Beim großen Propheten! Der Kalif hat die Wette gewonnen!

HASSAN: (*steht auf und geht ihm entgegen*) Ich küsse dir in Demut die Hände! Ach—

MESRUR: Armer Abu Hassan.

HASSAN: So nannte mich die teure Seele noch wenige Augenblicke vor ihrem Hinscheiden! Willst du sie sehen? (*Er lifftet den Goldstoff ein wenig von Fatimens Gesicht.*)

MESRUR: Überhebe mich dieses traurigen Anblickes!

HASSAN: (*bedeckt Fatime wieder*) Wie sie geendet, werde ich auch bald enden.

Omar disappears from the opening above the cabinet door. Toward the end of the trio, Fatima has gone to the window.

Dialogue

FATIMA: (*anxiously*) Mesrur is coming! The Calif must have sent him!

HASSAN: (*withdrawing hastily from the still-unopened closet door*) Hurry! Lay yourself out on the sofa, feet toward Mecca! (*Fatima quickly lies down on the right-hand divan.*)— Now I cover you with the brocade. (*He does so.*)— There! We are ready to receive condolences.

He sits at Fatima's feet and assumes a sad expression. From time to time he touches a handkerchief to his eyes.

Scene Nine

Mesrur enters and stands in the doorway. After a pause, he speaks.

MESRUR: By the all-glorious Prophet! The Calif has won his wager.

HASSAN: (*rising and going to face him*) I kiss your hands in all humility. (*He sighs heavily.*)

MESRUR: Unfortunate Abu Hassan.

HASSAN: The poor soul spoke those very words, just before she left me. — Would you like to see her? (*He liffts the brocade slightly away from Fatima's face.*)

MESRUR: Spare me the sad sight.

HASSAN: (*again covering Fatima*) I will soon follow her.

MESRUR: Nicht mutlos, Abu Hassan! Nur ein feiges Gemüt läßt sich vom Mißgeschick überwältigen! Es gibt ja noch so viele schöne Frauen auf der Welt!

HASSAN: Aber sprachst du nicht vorhin etwas von seiner gewonnenen Wette?

MESRUR: Allerdings! Der Beherrscher der Gläubigen kündigte seiner Gemahlin Fatimens Tod an; doch diese behauptete fest, du seist gestorben. Der Kalif bot nun seiner Gemahlin eine Wette darauf an, die von beiden Seiten angenommen wurde. Fatime ist also wirklich tot!

HASSAN: Ach leider! Hier liegt sie.

MESRUR: Desto schlimmer für dich und desto besser für den Kalifen! —Ich eile, ihm diese fröhliche Botschaft zu hinterbringen.

Er eilt ab, Hassan begleitet ihn.

Zehnte Szene

FATIME: (*sich aufrichtend*) Es ist mir sauer geworden, das Lachen zu verbeißen! (*zu Hassan, der wieder eintritt*) Ist er fort?

HASSAN: Über alle Berge! Er fliegt, um dem Kalifen die frohe Nachricht mitzuteilen.

FATIME: (*empfindlich, vom Divan herabsteigend*) Froh?

HASSAN: Ich meine nur wegen der Wette!

FATIME: Aber du bist mir noch Abbitte schuldig!

HASSAN: Ich?

FATIME: Ja du; wegen deines unwürdigen Verdachtes!

MESRUR: Come, Hassan. There is no need for this excessive lugubricity. There are any number of passable women left.

HASSAN: Didn't you say something about a bet?

MESRUR: Indeed, yes. When our most gracious Calif informed his wife of Fatima's death, she insisted you were the deceased party. Our most noble ruler suggested a sizable wager on the identity of the corpse, and Zobeïda accepted. —So, Fatima is no longer with us.

HASSAN: O woe and sorrow! Here she lies.

MESRUR: Bad news for you, good news for the Calif. I hasten to inform our noble sovereign of the glad tidings.

Mesrur rushes out. Hassan escorts him to the door.

Scene Ten

FATIMA: (*sitting up*) Oh Allah! I nearly died laughing! (*to Hassan, who is re-entering*) Is he gone?

HASSAN: Gone. Flown to the Calif with the happy news.

FATIMA: (*irritably, as she gets down from the divan*) Happy?

HASSAN: Over the bet.

FATIMA: You still owe me an apology.

HASSAN: I do?

FATIMA: Yes, for your despicable suspicions.

HASSAN: (*after reflection*) No, I think we should give that subject a rest. We have more pressing problems. Zobeïda will never accept defeat on Mesrur's word alone. (*During this speech he has*

HASSAN: *(nach einigem Nachdenken)* Nein, nein, die Sache mag auf sich beruhen! — Überdies sind wir noch nicht aus der Klemme, denn Zobeide wird sich mit der Aussage Mesrurs nicht begnügen! *(Er ist währenddem einige Male nach dem Fenster gegangen und bleibt plötzlich vor demselben stehen.)* Da haben wir's! —Eilig! Mache dich fertig! *(Er legt sich auf den Divan links.)*

FATIME: Was gibt's?

HASSAN: Zemrud, die Zofe!

FATIME: Wo?

HASSAN: Frage nicht und bedecke mich mit dem Goldstoff!

FATIME: *(breitet eilig den Brokat über Hassan her und legt ihm dann den Turban auf das Gesicht, dann setzt sie sich neben ihn.)* Sie kommt noch nicht! —*(Sie horcht.)* Doch, doch! —Ich glaube, ich höre sie schon!

No. 8. Arie: Fatime

FATIME: *(mit karikiertem Schmerz)*
Hier liegt, welch' martervolles Los!
das Liebste, was ich habe.
Scharrt ihr es in der Erde Schoß,
so tragt auch mich zu Grabe.

*Man sieht Zemrud draußen am Fenster vorübergehen.
Sie bleibt stehen und blickt neugierig herein.*

Ach, freudig hätte
dem Tod für dich mich hingegeben,
doch nach des Schicksals Machtgebot!
stirbst du, und ich muß leben,
stirbst du, und ich muß leben!

gone to the window several times. Now he stops in front of it.) O my prophetic soul! Hurry! *(He lies down on the left sofa.)*

FATIMA: What is it?

HASSAN: Zemrud, Zobeida's maid!

FATIMA: Where?

HASSAN: Stop chattering and cover me!
(Fatima spreads the brocade over Hassan, lays his turban over his face, and sits beside him.)

FATIMA: Well, where is she? *(She listens.)* I think I hear her.

No. 8. Aria: Fatima

FATIMA: *(with caricatured sorrow)*
I sob with every gasping breath.
Behold the fallen hero!
Now he is forced to lie in death,
his promises worth zero.

Zemrud is seen outside, passing by the window. She stops and looks inside inquisitively.

Alas, I know my flow
of bitter tears is hard to swallow.
Today I cry in sorrow,
for I shall die to tomorrow,
for I in turn shall die tomorrow.

Dialog

Elfte Szene

Zemrud ist am Schluss der Arie eingetreten und bleibt erstaunt am Eingang stehen.

ZEMRUD: Nein, die Frechheit dieses Mesrur geht doch zu weit! Beim Barte des Propheten beteuerte er, daß nicht dein Mann, sondern du gestorben seist!

FATIME: Ach, ich wollte, ich läge statt seiner hier!

ZEMRUD: Nein, nein, liebe Fatime! Besser, es sterben zehn Männer, als eine einzige Frau! —Aber laß mich doch den ehrlichen Abu Hassan noch einmal sehen, damit ich schwören kann, daß er tot ist. —

(Beide treten zu Abu Hassan.)

FATIME: *(hebt den Turban in die Höhe.)* Du willst es? —Schau her und weine, hier liegt nicht nur Abu Hassan. Hier liegt Fatime selbst, ihr besseres Ich, die Seele ihrer Seele!

ZEMRUD: Armer Abu Hassan! Arme Fatime! —Aber sonderbar, er sieht garnicht aus wie andere ehrliche Leute, die gestorben sind!

FATIME: Meine Augen täuschen mich gerade so, wie dich die deinigen, und es ist mir beinahe unmöglich, mich im Ernst für eine Witwe zu halten. Eine Witwe! Unseligstes aller Geschöpfe. *(Sie weint.)*

ZEMRUD: Ja wohl, ja wohl! *(Sie weint mit Fatime, dann schnell in ruhigem Tone)* Doch jetzt muß ich schnell zu meiner Herrin! *(Sie klopft Fatime auf die Wangen.)* Tröste dich, liebes Kind! Du bist noch jung—hübsch—und Abu Hassan war nicht der einzige Mann auf der Welt!

Dialogue

Scene Eleven

Zemrud has entered at the close of Fatima's aria and stands in the doorway, astonished.

ZEMRUD: That Mesrur! He swore by the Prophet that you were the dead one.

FATIMA: If only it were I!

ZEMRUD: You listen to Zemrud: better ten husbands than one wife. —Let me have a look at him; so I can swear he's dead.

Both walk over to Hassan.

FATIMA: *(lifting the turban)* Look and weep. Here lies, not just Abu Hassan, but Fatima's better self, her very soul.

ZEMRUD: Poor thing. But isn't it funny? — He doesn't look dead.

FATIMA: Yes, he still looks as if he were alive. I can hardly convince myself I am a widow. A widow! *(She cries.)*

ZEMRUD: There, there. There, there. *(She cries with Fatima, then prepares to leave.)* Pull yourself together. You're still young and pretty. Abu Hassan wasn't the only man in the world.

Fatima escorts Zemrud out.

Sie geht mit Fatime ab.

Zwölfte Szene

HASSAN: (*richtet sich schüchtern auf, dann nach einer Pause:*) Hole der Henker die verdammte Hexe mit ihrem Trostel!

FATIME: (*zurückkehrend*) So unrecht hatte sie eigentlich nicht. Fast möchte ich wünschen, du wärest wirklich tot, denn ich lasse mich nicht gern auf einer Lüge ertappen.

HASSAN: Deine Wahrheitsliebe geht mir ans Leben! —Doch hoffentlich wird dein Wunsch nicht sobald erfüllt, darum sei standhaft—und was noch nötiger ist—sei klug!

No. 9a. Terzett: Fatime, Abu Hassan, & Omar

Omar erscheint wieder am Gitter über der Tür.

[FATIME & OMAR:] (*gleichzeitig mit Hassan*)

Ängstlich klopft es mir im Herzen,
wie wird sich das Schicksal wenden?
wie?
die Gefahr von uns zu wenden
kann ein Wunder nur allein,
kein und Wunder, kann ein Wunder
nur allein.

[HASSAN:]

Zwar klopft's mir ein wenig im Herzen,
doch wird es so übel nicht enden,
von sich die Gefahren zu wenden,
vermag nur die Klugheit allein,
vermag nur die Klugheit,
vermag nur die Klugheit allein.

Scene Twelve

HASSAN: (*cautiously getting up*) Curdle the harpy and her curst comfort!

FATIMA: (*returning*) I thought she had a point.

HASSAN: Your tender sentiments cut me to the quick! However, I am still alive, and hope to remain so. We must be resolute—and, more to the purpose—clever!

No. 9a. Trio: Fatima, Abu Hassan, & Omar

Omar again appears at the latticed opening above the door.

[FATIMA & OMAR:] (*simultaneously with Hassan*)

How my anxious heart is pounding!
To where are these matter tending?
Where?
Can there be a happy ending?
Only by a twist of fate,
by a stunning twist of fate,
a twist of fate.

[HASSAN:]

However my heart may be pounding,
I know where these matters are tending,
and I will secure a happy ending;
my cunning can outwit fate.
Yes, only my cunning,
my cunning can outwit fate.

HASSAN: Lustig Weibchen!

FATIME: Du kannst scherzen?

HASSAN: Allerdings!

FATIME: in dieser Lage!
Wie wird's gehen?

HASSAN: Dumme Frage,
dumme Frage,
das erfährt man hintendrein.

*Marsch aus der Ferne, das Herannahen des Kalifen
und seines Gefolges andeutend.*

FATIME: Ach, wie ist mir so beklommen!

HASSAN: So war mir, eh' ich entschlief.

FATIME: (*aufhorchend*) Hörst du nicht?

HASSAN: (*Er eilt ans Fenster.*)
O weh! Sie kommen!

FATIME: (*Sie ist ebenfalls am Fenster.*)
Zobeide!

HASSAN: Der Kalif!

DIE DREI: O weh! Sie kommen!
Angst und Schrecken lähmt die Glieder!
Wie! wie! wie entrinn' ich dieser Not?

HASSAN: (*zu Fatimen*)
Hurtig, hurtig! Leg' dich nieder!

FATIME: Schon zur Hälfte bin ich tot!

*Fatime legt sich auf den Divan, Hassan bedeckt sie
mit dem Goldstoffe.*

HASSAN: Du erwachst im Morgenrot
bald zu neuem Leben wieder.

FATIME: Hätt' ich früher das bedacht!

HASSAN & OMAR: Stille, stille!

Hassan macht es eben so.

HASSAN: I am cheerful!

FATIMA: I am fearful.

HASSAN: I am sure.

FATIMA: And I am leery.
What will happen?

HASSAN: What a query!
What a question!
You will find out in the end.

*March, sounding as if from a distance, indicating the
approach of the Calif, Zobeïda, and attendants.*

FATIMA: And the end is now impending!

HASSAN: While you live, enjoy your life.

FATIMA: (*listening*) Use your ears!

HASSAN: (*He runs to the window.*)
Oh no, the Calif!

FATIMA: (*She is also at the window.*)
And his servants!

HASSAN: And his wife!

ALL THREE: They're coming nearer!
Allah, answer my petition!
Help! Help! I am paralyzed with dread!

HASSAN: (*to Fatima*)
In position! On the bed!

FATIMA: I'm already nearly dead!

Fatima lies down on the right divan. Hassan covers her.

HASSAN: In the rosy-fingered dawn,
you will sing another song.

FATIMA: May I live to see the sight!

HASSAN & OMAR: Not a whisper!

Hassan lies down on the left divan.

HASSAN: Gute Nacht!

DIE DREI: Gute Nacht!

Dreizehnte Szene

Das Gefolge des Kalifen und Zobeidens. Es stellt sich auf beiden Seiten, so, daß die Divans sichtbar bleiben.

No. 9b. Chor von des Kalifen Gefolge

CHOR: Öffnet ehrfurchtsvoll die Pforten,
werfet tief in Staub euch hin,
denn es naht sich diesem Orte
Harun und die Sultanin,
Harun und die Sultanin.

Vierzehnte Szene

Der Kalif. Zobeide. Mesrur. Zembrud. Beim Eintritt des Kalifen stürzen Alle von dem Gefolge auf die Kniee. Mesrur zeigt dem Kalifen den Divan, auf welchem Fatime, Zembrud Zobeiden denjenigen, auf welchem Abu Hassan liegt. Beide gehen rasch darauf zu.

CHOR:

Werfet, werfet tief in Staub euch hin,
denn es naht sich diesem Orte
Harun und die Sultanin,
Harun!

Dialog

KALIF: Nun, bin ich falsch berichtet worden? *(Er winkt dem Gefolge, sich zu erheben.)*

HASSAN: Good night!

ALL THREE: Good night!

Scene Thirteen

The Calif's Attendants enter. They position themselves on both sides of the stage so that the divans remain visible.

No. 9b. Mixed Chorus of the Calif's Attendants

CHORUS: Open wide your painted portals.
Throw your bodies in the dust.
Be prepared to greet your rulers,
Harun and Zobeida,
Harun al-Rashid the Just.

Scene Fourteen

Zobeida and the Calif are carried in on palanquins and are set down near the door. All the Attendants kneel to them. Mesrur and Zembrud also enter. Mesrur rushes over to Fatima's "corpse" in order to point it out to the Calif. Zembrud rushes over to Abu Hassan's "corpse" in order to point it out to Zobeida.

CHORUS:

Throw your bodies prostrate in the dust.
Be prepared to greet your rulers,
Harun and Zobeida.
Harun!

Dialogue

CALIF: *(only noticing Fatima, to Zobeida)* Now tell me I am misinformed!

ZOBEIDE: Habe ich meine Wette verloren?

KALIF: (*tritt schauernd zurück*) Was seh' ich! —Beide tot? Aber sie meldete Euch seinen—er mir ihren Tod! Wer von Beiden ist zuerst gestorben?

ZOBEIDE: Abu Hassan. Und ich habe die Wette gewonnen!

KALIF: Und ich behaupte, Fatime starb zuerst, und Ihr habt die Wette verloren! —

MESRUR: Beherrscher der Gläubigen! (*Er deutet auf den Tisch.*) Hier liegen Papiere, die uns vielleicht näheren Aufschluß geben können. (*Er überreicht dieselben.*)

KALIF: (*sie durchblättern*) Lauter Wechsel und Schuldverschreibungen, welche Abu Hassan wahrscheinlich vor seinem Tode berichtet hat! (*Er gibt sie Zobeiden.*)

ZOBEIDE: Eine bedeutende Summe, die das Vermögen der jungen Eheleute weit übersteigen muß!

ZEMRUD: (*zu Mesrur*) Was sagst denn du, Bösewicht, ist die Frau oder der Mann zuerst gestorben?

MESRUR: Ich sage das Gegenteil von dem, was du sagst—also die Wahrheit.

KALIF: Ruhig! Wir alle können nicht entscheiden, wer Recht hat! —Bei dem großen Propheten! Tausend Goldstücke wollte ich demjenigen geben, der mir sagen könnte, wer von Beiden zuerst gestorben ist!

HASSAN: (*richtet sich auf*) Beherrscher der Gläubigen! Ich bitte um die tausend Goldstücke! Ich bin zuerst gestorben!

ALLE: (*außer dem Kalifen and Zobeide treten erschrocken zurück*) Hilf, Allah!

In response to a signal from the Calif, the attendants raise him up—and perhaps also Zobeïda—on the palanquins.

ZOBEÏDA: Have I lost my bet?

CALIF: (*noticing both bodies and shrinking back with a shudder*) What's this? Both dead? But she told you—and he told me—It comes down to this: which of them died first?

ZOBEÏDA: Abu Hassan. Pay me my winnings.

CALIF: Why not say the wife died first, and pay me?

MESRUR: Indeed, it is as the Upholder of the Prophet proclaims. With my own eyes I saw the wife dead and Hassan capering in his customary style.

ZEMRUD: (*to Mesrur*) You liar! Hassan was dead and Fatima crying her eyes out.

CALIF: Silence! We cannot settle this by argument. We need evidence. (*pointing to the bills on the table*) Perhaps these papers contain some clue. (*He takes them and skims through them.*) Nothing but bills. (*He hands the bills to Zobeïda.*)

ZOBEÏDA: What an enormous amount! How could they afford it?

CALIF: By the Prophet, I will give ten thousand gold pieces to the man who can tell me which died first!

HASSAN: (*sitting up*) I did!

All but the Calif and Zobeïda draw back in terror, exclaiming:

ALL: Help, Allah!

CALIF & ZOBEÏDA: Well?

HASSAN: (*throwing himself at the Calif's feet*) Most merciful of magnates, you will surely

KALIF & ZOBEIDE: Was ist das?

HASSAN: Deine Gnade hat mich wieder zum Leben erweckt!

KALIF: Steh' auf and löse mir das Rätsell

HASSAN: (*stürzt ihm zu Füßen*) Herr, unser Elend hat uns in dieses frühe Grab gestürzt!

ZOBEIDE: Aber deine Gattin?

HASSAN: Ein huldvolles Wort von dir wird auch sie aus dem Schattenreiche zurückrufen.

ZOBEIDE: Fatime!

FATIME: (*erhebt sich*) Meine Gebieterin— Verzeihung! —

KALIF: Also auf dies Weise wolltet Ihr uns von Eurer Not unterrichten? —Aber wie war dir's möglich, diese Wechsel einzulösen?

HASSAN: Herr, sie sind nicht eingelöst! Einer meiner Gläubiger, der Fatime mit seiner Liebe verfolgt, setzte sie als Preis ihrer Gegenliebe aus.

KALIF: Nenne mir den Schändlichen!

HASSAN: (*öffnet das Kabinett and zieht Omar hervor*) Omar, dein Wechselr!

OMAR: (*dem Kalifen zu Füßen fallend*) Dein niederster Sklave!

KALIF: Elender! Danke es meiner Gnade, wenn ich dein Verbrechen nicht mit dem Tode bestrafe! —Fort aus meinen Augen! (*Omar schleicht ab. Dann, zu Mesrur:*) Befiehl meinem Schatzmeister, an Abu Hassan die versprochenen tausend Goldstücke ausuzahlen!

HASSAN: Beherrscher der Gläubigen! Ich hatte auch nicht die geringste Lust, tot zu

understand. Dire poverty compelled me: our means justified our ends!

CALIF: (*indicating the bills*) I begin to see.

ZOBEÏDA: And your wife?

HASSAN: A gracious word from you would recall her from beyond the grave.

ZOBEÏDA: Fatima!

FATIMA: (*getting up*) My lady—forgive me!

CALIF: So in this way you—informed me of your need and acquired the means to pay your debts.

HASSAN: Lord, they are not paid. The holder of these notes passionately pursues Fatima. He set her dishonor as his price.

CALIF: Name the wretch!

HASSAN: (*opening the closet and dragging Omar out*) Omar!

OMAR: (*falling at the Calif's feet*) I am your most abject slave!

CALIF: It is only my well-known mercy that saves you from death. Out of my sight! (*Omar slinks off. Then, to Mesrur*) Go, tell my treasurer to honor my oath. Let Abu Hassan be paid ten thousand pieces of gold. We must not let him dwindle into an early grave.

HASSAN: Most noble sovereign! Truly, I died badly, but I shall live well!

bleiben, und bin nur schlecht gestorben, um
gut leben zu können.

No. 10. Schlußchor

CHOR: Heil ist dem Haus beschieden,
dem der Kalif sich naht,
und das mit Zobeiden
des Herrschers Fuß betrat.
Heil, heil, heil, heil, heil, heil!

Ende des Singspiels

No. 10. Closing Chorus

CHORUS: All hail the happy household
on which the Calif smiles,
where he and Zobeïda
have trodden on the tiles.
Hail, hail, hail, hail, hail, hail!

End of the Farce

Translating for Singing: The Theory, Art and Craft of Translating Lyrics

Ronnie Apter and Mark Herman, London, Bloomsbury Academic. 2016.

Reviewed by Rick Davis

If the punning Italian imprecation *traduttore, traditore* holds practical sway anywhere, it is in the opera houses and conservatories of the English-speaking world. Elsewhere, opera has a long tradition of performing in the language of its audience, with composers such as Wagner, Gounod, and Verdi even participating in the translation process by offering musical adjustments when needed.

But Anglophone opera audiences, apart from those attending a few major houses (English National Opera, Opera Theatre of St. Louis, the old New York City Opera) and some smaller companies or the occasional university production, must either derive their understanding of plot and character through music and gesture alone (potent though they may be, they are necessarily incomplete if the motivating words are merely abstract sounds), or divide their attention between performers, production design, and a written translation provided on a screen above the stage, on their cell phones, on a nearby seat back, or in a printed libretto. Neither sacrifice tends toward a full appreciation of this most *gesamt* of art forms.

The longstanding and widespread acceptance elsewhere of the “singable translation”—a circumstance still not universally understood in our musical culture, among artists and even less so among audiences—is one of the points of departure for Ronnie Apter and Mark Herman’s *Translating for Singing: The Theory, Art and Craft of Translating Lyrics*. They cite (and acknowledge the hyperbole of) the late Colin Graham of the aforementioned Opera Theatre of St. Louis, who stated: “Not one composer ever lived who wanted his opera to be performed in a language foreign to his audience.”

Why then have our opera houses mostly shunned the live performance of singable translations? Apter and Herman point to a 300-year tradition of Anglophone preference for foreign-language performance, referencing Samuel Johnson’s remark that opera is “an exotick and irrational entertainment, which has always been combated, and always has prevailed.” Space does not permit a fuller exploration of the role of British, and later American, feelings of cultural inferiority to Old Europe in establishing and maintaining this “exotick” fascination. More recently, the authors note, the advent of the airliner combined with the major houses’ reliance on a rotating roster of international star performers has made it both possible and necessary to shorten rehearsal times, creating obstacles for singers to learn a role in several languages.

Ideally, singer-actors, directors, conductors, and audiences would all be comfortable in the “target language” of the work before them. As a frequent director of opera and *zarzuela* with both professional and student singers, all of whom have studied—but fewer of whom have truly mastered to sufficient fluency—the standard operatic languages, I can attest to the differences in the rehearsal process (and in performance) when a singer-actor has an intuitive, nuanced, and layered connection to the text as opposed to a learned understanding based on literal translation of equivalencies and elaborate phonetic analysis. In the former case, the performer can summon the spirit of the moment afresh each time, with words, music, and physical life all appearing together as the expressive synthesis of an image, a feeling, an intention. It becomes, in the best instances, that Wagnerian ideal of the *gesamtkunstwerk*, the

total work of art. In the latter circumstance, even with the excellent coaching and preparation that our best singers receive, there tends to be a sense of approximation in the performance, of being slightly behind or a little removed from the character's creation of the dramatic moment: it may be extremely beautiful, but it is often less than fully truthful. Opera, its artists, and its audiences, deserve better.

So I am most heartened to encounter Apter and Herman's book, which offers a deeply researched and theatrically informed exploration of the perils and promise of translating for sung performance. Their own contributions to the practice are extensive, comprising some two dozen translations (to date) of opera, operetta, and choral pieces. They also bring a scholarly perspective to the subject, informed by relevant—and happily accessible—contributions from semiotics (via Jakobson) and the philosophy of art (via Langer) as well as language, musicology, and cultural history.

The authors do not attempt to hide the difficulty of the translator's task in creating satisfying singable texts as compared to translating unsung poetry or drama:

...the presence of music changes the nature of both drama and poetry. The action must be compressed and the meditative moments enlarged. The poetry must have rhythms and sounds that can be musically set and sung. Further, once the libretto is set to music, that music is deemed largely unchangeable. But the music was composed to fit the prosody of the source language. Nonetheless, the translated text, despite its inherently different prosody, must be both comprehensible to the target audience when sung and easily singable by performers. (16)

No mean feat, that. Questions of style, level or register of diction, fidelity to period, extent of musical accommodation, matching of rhyme scheme, placement of vowels for high or sustained notes, and even adjustments for particular stagecraft requirements may come into play. In their own practice, Apter and Herman come across as willing collaborators with directors and singers, as witnessed in this example from their work on Carl Maria von Weber's *singspiel Abu Hassan* (libretto by Franz Carl Hiemer):

Abu Hassan tells his wife to hide by getting into bed. He says, "*Hurtig, hurtig! Leg' dich nieder!*" ("Quickly, quickly! Lie down!"). Our performable translation is "In position! On the bed!" where "bed" rhymes with a word in a previous phrase. However, in one production there was no bed, so we provided the alternative: "In position! Hide your head!" (23).

The authors are silent on why "In position!" is better than the more literal and similarly-inflected "Quickly! Quickly!" but the point of the example is that a performable translation may be considered as a living document that, properly managed, can adapt to changing circumstances.

A chapter titled "Foreignization and Domestication" tackles the difficult question – applicable to most translations, not just those meant to be sung – of whether and how much the translation should attempt to sound like the native speech of the target language in the target time period. This is, of course, both an aesthetic and a philosophical (even at times a political) consideration, and cannot be wholly separated from the intentions of the performing forces (impresario, director, conductor, designers, singer-actors).

Does language that sounds vaguely twenty-first-century (“domesticated,” in the binary scheme proposed) offer more “transparent” access to, say, *The Magic Flute* (1791), or should a translation strive to sound as if it were created contemporaneously with the source work? The spoken theater world has answered this question almost unanimously in favor of “domestication,” as witnessed by the one-generation lifespan of most translations. When was the last time you saw a Constance Garnett Chekhov or a William Archer Ibsen, unless someone was trying to avoid paying a translator’s royalties? Even their great mid-century successors, such as Hingley for Chekhov and Fjelde or Meyer for Ibsen, have largely been superseded.

Opera, with its comparative scarcity of available versions and its inherently more “exotick” nature, may feel less pressure (or opportunity?) to revisit the translated canon every generation, although Apter and Herman explore a notable exception, Brecht and Weill’s *Threepenny Opera*, in a subsequent chapter called “Adaptation and Retranslation.” And the art form itself may offer a broader canvas for selective or wholesale “foreignization.” Apter and Herman ask us to consider the case of Wagner, where leitmotifs (repeated musical ideas that have thematic significance) connect to particular words and images throughout a work. They cite the great critic and translator Andrew Porter’s practice of

...keep[ing] important words—such as *Liebe, Leid, Ring, Rhein*—and especially the proper names exactly where Wagner placed them. Their sounds and rhythms have a motivic significance; they coincide with particular harmonies...” (39)

Even if respecting the leitmotif meant writing more “foreign” sounding English (e.g., “You who this love in my heart inspired” vs. “You who inspired me to feel this love”), Porter felt that the union of specific textual and musical moments, and their purposeful repetition and development, outweigh considerations of transparency or naturalness.

One of the signal virtues of Apter and Herman’s work is their typically dispassionate, non-judgmental presentation of an issue. *Translating for Singing* examines the subject from almost every meaningful angle, including chapters such as “Dealing with difference,” “Censorship and taboos” (which includes a fascinating—and by no means universally held—defense of *The Magic Flute* as “anti-sexist” when verbal, visual, and musical texts are all taken into account) “Verbal delineation of character,” and more. Each subject is illustrated with comparative examples (including, where available, the authors’ own work), allowing readers to draw their own conclusions as to final preferences.

A final chapter, “Music and Meaning,” offers sound advice (pun intended) on, *inter alia*, how melody creates emotion, and how specific vowels and consonants may be placed to make dramatic or comic points, to ease the singer’s task at the top and bottom of their vocal range, or in delivering fast, ornamented, coloratura passages. That Apter and Herman both have substantial vocal training and performance experience (though they are not professional opera singers) plays a significant role in the practical wisdom that permeates this book.

For those who love opera and the broader genre of lyric theater, and perhaps most particularly for those of us who are engaged in making it, selling it, teaching it, and striving to find and develop our own successors on stage and in the audience, *Translating for Singing* offers an important contribution to

the discussion. My own modest proposal for its dissemination would be to find a way to place a copy on the desk of every opera house management, on the office chair of every Conservatory dean, opera director, and voice teacher in the UK and USA, and of course in the hands of anyone who is brave enough to engage in the traitorous act of opera translation.

Rick Davis is Dean of the College of Visual and Performing Arts and Professor of Theater at George Mason University. Rick came to Mason in 1991 as Artistic Director of Theater of the First Amendment (TFA) after six years as Resident Dramaturg and then Associate Artistic Director at Baltimore's Center Stage. Between 1991 and 2012, TFA produced dozens of world premieres, many of which have gone on to further production, publication, and NPR and PBS broadcast. The company was honored with twelve Helen Hayes Awards and almost forty nominations. An active director of theater and opera, Rick has staged productions for Center Stage, Kennedy Center, Opera Idaho, Delaware Theatre Company, Unseam'd Shakespeare Company, American Ibsen Theater, the IN Series, the Virginia Consort, Capital City Opera, and others. His four books include *Calderón de la Barca: Four Great Plays of the Golden Age*; co-translations of Ibsen with Brian Johnston (*Ibsen: Four Major Plays, vol. I*); *Ibsen in an Hour* (with Brian Johnston), and *Writing About Theatre* (with Christopher Thaiss). With composer Kim D. Sherman he created an oratorio, *The Songbird and the Eagle*, premiered by the San Jose Chamber Orchestra, and an opera, *Love's Comedy*. He was educated at Lawrence University (BA) and the Yale School of Drama (MFA, DFA).