

Even to Roaring:
An exploration of character and language in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*
and a creative experiment in poetic and dramatic forms


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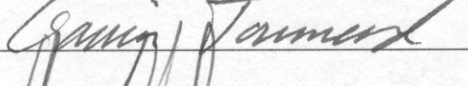
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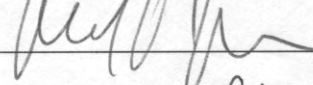
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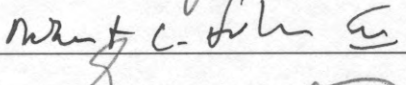
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“It is woefully difficult to write a play” writes celebrated theatre director, Peter Brook, in *The Empty Space*..” (Brook 38) I have never been so inclined to agree with anyone. The creative process of choosing and pulling characters from my poetry and attempting to recreate, rediscover, and to develop them further in the dramatic mode has no doubt been a long and circuitous one. Yes, even to roaring. Inspired by the greatest proprietor, the greatest welder of the poetic and the dramatic, William Shakespeare, I have sought to shape character primarily in the context of language and ultimately to use language as a revealing and driving force in a character-driven dramatic context. Richard Eyre says of Shakespeare: “The life of his plays is in the language, not alongside it or underneath it. Feelings and thoughts are released at the moment of speech.” (Eyre 23) In one sense, my experiment in form has been striving to capture just that. I believe, perhaps, it will be most useful to begin by examining the relationship of character and language in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, a play which reckons thematically not only with identity and language, but also with the forces and nuances of the theatrical art itself.

Part 1: Language and Character in *The Tempest*

It may seem obvious that the relationship between language and character exists as natural and mutually dependent. How do we know a character? We can only comprehend them by what they say or what they do (except in the case of narrative voice -over and similar but comparatively infrequent dramatic techniques). David Ball, in *Backwards and Forwards*, point us to the unique use of language in drama as

the expression of character desires, no matter the tone, diction, or quality of language the playwright chooses. He states: “Playwrights heighten language, or lower it, or fragment it, or make it as artificial as it can be, but because they want to support, not undermine, the pretense of impersonation.” (Ball 27) Ball discusses the role of language in dramatic action as fundamentally an expression of character desire. He writes, “A human being talks in order to get what he or she wants. That is the key to dramatic language, a language quite distinct from poetry and non-dramatic written prose.” (Ball 27)

But how do we specifically approach the use of poetic language in a play? Shakespeare is often read and interpreted from a purely literary standpoint, a method that separates the poetry from its essential function as a component of dramatic action. Any dramatic text, no matter the quality of the language, stands incomplete on the page by the very nature of theatre. In *Changing Stages*, Richard Eyre argues, “We can only understand or appreciate Shakespeare’s extraordinary achievement if we are prepared to not only concede that he was not writing poetry for the library or the bedroom, but that he had actually chosen to write for the theatre—writing in *character*, narrative revealed by what people say or do.” (Eyre 22)

Poetry not only acts as the chosen form for dialogue, but also is inherent to the development and expression of character. In Shakespeare, the two are inseparable. They define each other reflexively. Poetry drives the play forward. Eyre says, “Poetry is applied to Shakespeare’s plays...not like a sort of decorative paint, but as an expressive tool that gives greater pulse, momentum, and distillation of thought and

feeling than prose; but it's no less a medium for delineating character." (Eyre 22) At the same time, it must be said that poetry springs and develops from character—the characters wants and desires propelling the language.

In one sense, we can see poetry as moving outwards, gaining a new and wonderful complexity as it is transferred into the realm of the dramatic. Poetry, by nature, is driven by language. Dramatic action is inherently driven by character. The world of *The Tempest* is driven by characters driven by language. Victor Hugo, standing at the forefront of the French Romantic movement, advocated the idea of a new post-revolutionary French identity through the liberation and reclamation of his native language in a new literature for the people. He exclaimed: "J'ai mis le bonnet rouge sous le vieux dictionnaire."¹ Hugo believed the theatre provided an ideal platform for this new language, even christening drama, poetry in its truest, fullest state. For him, Shakespeare embodied this ideal. In his preface to *Cromwell*, Hugo states: "Shakespeare, c'est le drame."² (Hugo 66) and that drama is "la poésie vraie, la poésie complète, est dans la harmonie des contraires."³ (Hugo 71) He continues and points specifically to this "harmonie des contraires" as acted out in *The Tempest*: "tantôt sublime dans Ariel, tantôt grotesque dans Caliban."⁴ (Hugo 69) But the complexity of character in *The Tempest* also lies not necessarily in a harmonic state, but in these very contradictions, which create a state of tension—the realm of internal and external character conflict. In no other character is the opposition between the

¹ I have placed the red cap over the old dictionary. The red cap evokes the spirit of the French revolution.

² Shakespeare is the theatre.

³ True poetry, complete poetry... in the harmony of opposites

⁴ sometimes sublime in Ariel, sometimes grotesque in Caliban

sublime and the grotesque greater than in the character of Caliban. But first we most look to those who surround him, those who exact and represent the multi-directional forces that simultaneously press upon him.

Prospero controls the island in his ability to harness absolutely its elemental forces by way of his magic, his art, though the resistance of his living subjects, Ariel and Caliban is evident. Prospero's character is a complex one, and the language he invokes at any given moment mirrors his particular interior state. Stephen Orgel in his introduction to *The Tempest* points out the numerous and varied directorial interpretations of Prospero: "In recent years, we have seen Prospero as a noble ruler and mage, a tyrant and a megalomaniac, a necromancer, a Neoplatonic scientist, a colonial imperialist, a civiliser." (Orgel 11) Throughout the play, Prospero provides a context for each of these interpretations by the very nature of his language, which often shifts or transforms dramatically from scene to scene, from moment to moment. The range in the quality and tone of his speech reflects the many sides of his personality and his propensity to act as a loving father, a devoted scholar, a wildly incantatory magician, and an iron-fisted authoritarian.

In *Shakespeare's Language*, Frank Kermode posits that the exposition of Act I, scene ii, Prospero's telling to Miranda the story of their exile and arrival to the island, comes across as clumsy because Shakespeare negotiated the form of the play in order to strictly follow classical rules for a five act structure which included a prologue followed by an exposition or protasis. (Kermode 286) Kermode states, "And the awkwardness shows in the language." (286) Ironically, this "awkwardness" works

precisely in its expression of Prospero's internal turmoil—the confrontation of the memory of past defeat and humiliation—the memory of weakness emerging in a world now entirely in his power. Where the language falls short, Prospero falls short. He is now facing his greatest obstacle—his desire for revenge and the rectification of the past. Or at least we sense that the fumbling of his language reveals a kind of dramatic fumbling inherent to character. In this understanding, I find Kermode's criticism of the non-fluidity of Prospero's speech unarguable when he writes of the "unwieldiness" and the "hurry and disconnection of ... metaphors" (287) in the following passage:

Thy false uncle...
Being once perfected how to grant suits,
How to deny them, who t'advance, and who
To trash for overtopping, new created
The creatures that were mine, I say, or changed 'em,
Or else new form'd'em; having both the key
Of officer and office, set all hearts i'th'state
To what tune pleas'd his ear, that now he was
The ivy which had hid my princely trunk,
And suck'ed my verdure out on't. (77-87)

Prospero's "agitation" is also evident in this scene in his wild leaps in tone. For one moment he is brimming with bitter images as he describes their voyage in exile: "A rotten carcase of a butt, not rigged,/ Nor tackle, sail, nor mast—the very rats/ Instinctively has quit it."(lines 146-148). And in the next, he gently coos to Miranda: "O, cherubim/Thou wast did preserve me. Thou didst smile,/ Infused with a fortitude from heaven." (lines 154-156).

But, we cannot deny the power of Prospero's language—its magical and incantatory force, which is both metaphorical and literal to the action of the play.

John Berryman, in his essay, “Shakespeare’s Last Word,” is struck by what he calls Prospero’s “final abjuration to his spirits” (156). The magic that empowers Prospero, the same magic he recants in the final moments of the play, is both majestic and dark—reflecting not only a duality in the nature of his power, but in his nature as a man. As Stephen Orgel points out, the speech strongly resonates with the language of Medea’s speech in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* as translated in 1567 by Arthur Golding Gentlemen.⁵ Orgel finds that Prospero’s invocation of Medea makes evident the connection between him and the malignant spirit of Sycorax: “The identification of the two becomes strikingly manifest.” (Orgel 20)

By whose aid--
Weake masters though ye be-- I have bedimmed
The Noon-tide Sun, called forth the mutinous winds
And twixt the green sea and the azured vault
Set roaring war (lines 41-44 5.1)

Berryman is struck by the authority in the language of the passage and calls it “hair-raising language... thoughtful, not ornamental.” Berryman elaborates on how Prospero increases and engages his power in his use of unexpected turns and discoveries in his language: “He bedimmed the sun at the moment when the feat might be thought most difficult--a fancy borrowed from Ovid, who exaggerates it...then a vast and blazing image: of the ocean and of heaven’s arch, and of the space between them... and between these great stages of nature...he sets war, and before, or just as you learn “war” it “roars” at you.” (Berryman 157)

⁵ See appendix for excerpt from text (Orgel 240)

It is Prospero, no doubt, from whom Caliban has learned to curse. In part, we sympathize with Prospero's loathing of Caliban, as well as Prospero's impulse to threaten and curse him from the stance of a protective and loving father. But Prospero curses any that seek to cross him, even his beloved Ariel. When Ariel asks when he shall be given his liberty (a thing already promised him), Prospero responds ragefully, threatening to return Ariel to his prior state of enslavement under Sycorax: "If thou more murmur'st, I will rend an oak/ And peg thee in his knotty entrails till/ Thou hast howled away twelve winters." (lines 295-297). But in the presence of Caliban, we find Prospero's greatest propensity for violent and embittered language. In Act 1, scene ii, Prospero beckons Caliban: "Thou poisonous slave, got by the devil himself/ Upon thy wicked dam, come forth!" (lines 319-320). Prospero then proceeds to threaten Caliban much in the way he earlier threatens Ariel—the threat of extreme consequences for disobedience. He promises: "If thou does neglec'st, or dost unwillingly/What I command, I'll rack thee with old cramps, Fill all thy bones with aches, make thee roar,/ That beasts shall tremble at thy din." (lines 368-371)

The incantatory force of poetry in Prospero's language establishes and expresses his absolute power in the world of the *Tempest*—how the language is at once both figurative and vigorously active in the movement of the play. As Berryman points out, the language is far from "ornamental" but the drive of the images is also far more than "thoughtful." It forcefully provokes, it moves, and it pushes both character and action forward. His imagery also harnesses the forces of light and dark

which can be concisely understood in terms of his own opposing internal forces, those that make him both wise sage and harsh dictator.

The influence of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is greatly evident throughout the play, and in no other character is the Ovidian metamorphic quality more astute than in Ariel. Certainly, the characteristics of his language, especially imagistically, reflect this quality. When we first meet Ariel, he introduces himself by these points: "All hail, great master, grave sir, hail! I come/ To answer thy best pleasure, be't to fly,/ To swim, to dive into the fire, to ride/ On the curled clouds; to they strong bidding task/ Ariel and all his quality." His language intensifies as he is carried along by the details of his performance with a mounting excitement:

I flamed amazement. Sometimes I'd divide
And burn in many places; on the topmast,
The yards and bowsprit would I flame distinctly,
Then meet and join. Jove's lightning, the precursors
O'th' dreadful thunder claps, more momentary
And sight-outrunning were not the fire and cracks
Of sulphorous roaring the most mighty Neptune
Seem to besiege and make his bold waves tremble,
Yea, his dreaded trident shake. (1.2 lines 198-206)

By the end of his speech, Ariel's language has assumed powers greater than Prospero's—an act to which Prospero seems to respond in amusement: "My brave spirit!"

Ariel's language varies between the densely and wildly imagistic, to the musical, to the dark and the absurd. In scene 1.2, an invisible Ariel welcomes the sea-weary Ferdinand with a kind of farcical serenade, and in these instances, Ariel's

Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes;
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell.

Ding dong.

Hark, now I hear them, ding dong bell (1.2 lines 397-404)

Ariel transforms the memory of the King entirely, essentially sculpting the king's imaginary death into a thing of strange beauty, perhaps, as he might recreate himself even in his own death. In addition to Ariel's physical ability to metamorphose, Shakespeare has equipped him with the transformative powers of the poet. Whereas Prospero commands the elements of the isle, Ariel contains them, can move freely among what Martin Heidegger in his essay, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," defines as "the fourfold" of dwelling: earth, sky, divinities, and mortals. Ariel is a metamorphic denizen of the "fourfold." He serves as a bridge between the human, the natural, and the fantastic on the island. And yet the poetry of his language and his ability to make himself literally a metaphor for himself in the corporeal state are both absolutely crucial to the forward movement of the play.

Whereas Prospero does the plotting and the ordering, Ariel must enact Prospero's plans and guard the actions of the other characters. We find him frequently presiding over the play's major turning points. It is he, appearing invisible and playing music, who casts the King and his party into drunken slumber, during which time Antonio and Sebastian plot the King's assassination. Frank Kermode says of

Ariel: “Ariel is another wonder, a spirit who makes the carrying out of his orders an arcane, beautifully inhuman task.” (Kermode 291) It is also Ariel, ironically by one of the most human gestures in *The Tempest*, who inspires Prospero’s compassion in choosing forgiveness over revenge:

Ariel: Your charms so strongly works ‘em
 That if you now beheld them, your affections
 Would become tender
Prospero: Dost thou think so, spirit?
Ariel: Mine would, sir, were I human.
Prospero: And mine shall.
 Hast thou, which art but air, a touch, a feeling
 Of their afflictions, and shall not myself,
 One of their kind, that relish all as sharply
 Passion as they, be kindlier moved than thou art?
 ...The rarer action is
 In virtue than in vengeance... (5.1 lines 19-29)

In no other character do the forces of virtue and vengeance so internally oppose each other than in the monster-man, Caliban. We only need look at how the contradictions in his usage of language complicate our impression of him—his ability to both bless and curse. Hugo points out a common interpretation: Ariel represents the sublime and Caliban the grotesque. Yet, I find that each character contains elements of both and that in Caliban is this opposition the most severe, undeniably so in his attitude towards the idea of language itself. Kermode writes:

“ This character is very properly celebrated as one of Shakespeare’s most remarkable inventions. For a master of language invents a character who needs to be taught language, who is willing to deal with the problems of who acquires language without acquiring its social contexts of respect and privileges.” (Kermode 290)

Caliban's situation complicates as the play progresses. He, like Ariel, seeks liberation from Prospero's authority, yet he remains indelibly bound—and not just as a slave, but a slave who has been given the proverbial apple of knowledge and who has been utterly excluded from fully participating in the world of his language. His loneliness entirely possesses him as we see later in his farcical and drunken stooping to Stephano and Trinculo. In a play so concerned thematically with language (it acts throughout the play as a kind of conceit for identity), we cannot find another character both so elevated and bound by language. In act I scene ii, Caliban hisses in response to Miranda's self-admonitions that she had actually endeavored to civilize him; asserting that she: "Took pains to make thee speak.../When though did's't not, savage,/ know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like/ A thing most brutish." (lines 353-356). He retorts: "You taught me language, and my profit on't/ Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you/ For learning me your language!" Yet, even in the moments of Caliban's severest cursing, when his intentions seems most debased, his language is still wonderfully rich in metaphor.

Berryman divides Caliban's language and persona into three major categories: that of the earth, that of the sharply poetic, and that of the malicious. (Berryman 158-159) Of the first Berryman writes, "Much of his talk presents nature in its earthiest form." (158) He uses Caliban's proposal to Stephano in scene 2.2 as an example:

I prethee let me bring thee where Crabs grow
And I with my long nails will digge thee pig-nuts;
Show thee a Jays nest, and instruct thee how
To snare the nimble Marmoset: (2.2 lines 161-164)

Berryman then points to one of play's most poetic speeches where we witness, particularly here, Caliban's capabilities, however fleeting, to step into the realm of the sublime. Here, seeking to appease the fears of his hopeful and buffoonish saviors, he fully embraces and realizes the language he despises:

Be not afeard, the isle is full of noises,
Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not:
Sometimes a thousand twangling Instruments
Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices,
That if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again, and then in dreaming
The clouds methought would open and show riches
Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked
I cried to dream again. (3.2 lines 132-141)

Out the rare moments of the sublime, Shakespeare has rooted Caliban's language and character in the grotesque. But does the malicious side of his nature, inherited from Sycorax, govern him entirely? Not only does Caliban struggle against a conflict in language, loneliness, and embitterdness, he is also caught in a conflict of being and identity. Neither he himself, nor the other characters can wholly classify him as man or beast. In contrast, Ariel shifts naturally from one entity to another. He wills his metamorphoses, an empowerment that allows both a freedom and a complexity of identity. Ariel's identity, though malleable, always completes and fully realizes his transformations. Caliban's monstrosity emerges from a kind of incomplete identity—he is caught, enslaved in the process of transformation. It is from this state that we can begin to understand the stark contrasts in his use of language.

He is caught in metamorphosis. This is the truly horrific aspect of Caliban—it is just this inability to name exactly what he is that is both so frightening and sympathetic in and outside the world of the play. We need only think of popular horror movies where men are transformed into beasts to prove this point. When Jeff Goldblum turns into a fly, or when Michael J. Fox becomes a werewolf, the moments that most grip and terrify an audience are the moments of transformation—when the characters are distorted by the transformation. These moments of metamorphosis heighten an audience’s fears and anticipations because when the metamorphosis is complete we return to a state of constancy; we return from the world of the unknown. Imagine these characters frozen in the act of transformation—elements of the beast supplanted onto a recognizable human form. Imagine a cocoon ripped open mid-way through its cycle--this is Caliban’s greatest curse. It is this state, which I find, functions as a metaphoric hyperbole for the human condition and the consequential horror and beauty of change.

Part II: *Cursing the Butterfly*: The process of developing poetry into drama

Cursing the Butterfly emerged from an interest in developing characters who had emerged in the process of writing poetry. In the form of a poem, they are first and foremost tools of the language and, in this sense, existed merely as outlines of true dramatic character. Looking through my work, the two women from my poem, “On Sharing a Mirror in the Women’s Dressing Room” seemed to elicit a kind of dramatic

tension, an interesting dialectic of character that I wanted to explore in a theatrical context, and hence came the birth of Jean and Ruth.

The process of revision basically followed a pattern of distillation and compression of character and situation. In the first version of the play, I attempted to closely transcribe the dramatic situation of the dressing room from the poem to the play. I knew that this would somehow act as the pivot for the plot—the meeting of Jean and Ruth (originally called “Callie” in this version), but I had to provide a context for their meeting, a context for them being thrust into some sort of crisis situation—thus the kidnapping plot begins. It was a choice that has both amused and plagued me ever since. The first version involved eight characters in a strangely constructed piece that started with a kind of social satire and ended with a clumsy kind of poetic “reverie.” Needless to say, the poems that were plopped in their entirety into the dialogue often tipped the play, the wobbly “carcase of a butt,” into the waters of melodrama. I didn’t want poetry to become an enemy of character, an enemy of dramatic sincerity, and in a sense, it had done just that.

In my first major revision, I knew that the “cursing of the butterfly” needed to be more thoughtfully integrated into the dramatic action and I needed to clarify its metaphorical context. In our playwriting workshop, the butterfly came across as “tacked on” to the action and hadn’t quite communicated that I wanted to undermine the cliché of the butterfly—that Ruth sought to undermine this cliché. The same week I was faced with revising my first draft, I had recently reread James Wright’s brilliantly wrought poem, “To A Blossoming Pear Tree” for my poetry workshop.

Immediately, I realized a connection between how Wright had dramatically undermined the seeming innocence and perfection of a blossoming pear tree with what I was beginning to understand as the direction I wanted to take with the gesture of cursing the butterfly. The poem is one of the most emotionally striking in all of Wright's work:

To a Blossoming Pear Tree

Beautiful natural blossoms
Pure delicate body,
You stand without trembling.
Little mist of fallen starlight,
Perfect, beyond my reach,
How I envy you.
For if you could only listen,
I would tell you something,
Something human.

An old man
Appeared to me once
In the unendurable snow.
He had a fringe of white
Beard on his face.
He paused on a street in Minneapolis
And stroked my face.

Give it to me, he begged.
I'll pay you anything.

I flinched. Both terrified,
We slunk away,
Each in his own way dodging
The cruel darts of cold.

Beautiful natural blossoms,
How could you possibly
Worry or bother or care
About the ashamed, hopeless
Old man? He was so near death

He was willing to take
Any love he could get,
Even at the risk
Of some mocking policeman
Or some cute young wiseacre
Smashing his dentures,
Perhaps leading him on
To a dark place and there
Kicking him in his dead groin
Just for the fun of it.

Young tree, unburdened
By anything but your beautiful natural blossoms
And dew, the dark
Blood in my body drags me
Down with my brother.

The poem begins with language heavily reminiscent of the Romantics—a moment of exalting nature as the speaker ascribes a kind of beauty, innocence, and perfection to the pear tree: “pure delicate body...perfect beyond my reach.” The poem initially thrusts us into a world that appears governed by the dreamy idolization of young love---indeed a kind of purity just before the “blossoming” of sexuality -- thus to be followed by the impending and inevitable fall from grace? Not yet. At this point we don’t expect it, though Wright suggests and foreshadows this move with the last line of the first stanza: “I would tell you something/Something human.” This line also acts as a kind of invitation into the poem’s proceeding dramatic moment.

I think this “something human” is what the speaker ultimately seeks as we quickly depart from the pear tree into a dark moment of human contact (a depraved kind of “invitation”) which begins as a strange and gentle exchange of affection between two strangers. Only we are told they meet in the “unendurable snow”—a gesture in the poem that subtly points to a world, to a moment of great suffering. Then the third

stanza acts as a quick and razor sharp pivot in the tone of the poem. “Give it to me, he begged/I’ll pay you anything.” Here begins our descent from Eden, from perfection, and innocence. The language becomes actively harsh “flinched...terrified...cruel darts of cold.”

The speaker then returns to his address of the pear tree (the model of non-human perfection) and the language is both compassionate and desperate and brutally violent all in the same breath. The short length of lines and the economy of the poem’s structure itself force the poem to move very quickly down the page, intensifying the emotional stake of the poem. In the final stanza, the “young tree, unburdened/ By anything but your beautiful natural blossoms/ And dew” strikes us as almost tragically flawed in its superficial perfection, in its non-humanity. And it is now the pear tree that looms ominously and almost oppressively over the speaker’s suffering as: “the dark/Blood in my body drags me/Down with my brother.” The reversal the speaker’s perception of the blossoming is inherently dramatic and harshly sincere.

I decided I would try to weave in the idea of Wright’s blossoming pear tree? But how? Wright’s poem led me instantly to association with the Bradford pear trees that adorn our campus and the ever--unpleasant scent they emit each spring. Personally, I find the connection of little coincidence to Wright’s poem. Another interesting characteristic of these so-called pear trees is, ironically, that they produce no fruit. I wanted the metaphor, the image of these trees to work through disdainfulness in Jean’s language.

One of the most important facets of dramatic writing, which I learned mostly by way of revision and by looking at character and language in *The Tempest*, is the importance of language emerging from *character*. To tack on a metaphor or image without providing a viable context in a dramatic setting is analogous to setting out “symbols” like mantle pieces in a poem—by way of trying to sound poetic, you undercut any sincerity because the speaker or character ends up either sounding pompous or melodramatic. If a playwright is not cautious, overly poetic language can act as a barricade, not a bridge to dramatic action. Over the course of the last year, I have attempted to play with language in the dramatic genre, discovering only the beginning of its possibilities and limits in the theatre. But above all, I have tried to create characters who use language not only as a mode of expression, but also as a means of discovery.

Cursing the Butterfly

A One-Act Play

Characters:

JEAN: Convicted car thief. Attractive. Early thirties. Tough but never ever butch.

GILBERT: Early twenties. Jean's younger brother. Mechanic at Wallace Dove's garage.

RUTH: Twenties. Wallace Dove's daughter.

Scene 1:

(Log cabin sparsely furnished. On wall, near corner is a collection of framed Blue Morpho butterflies—the frame hangs tilted on the wall. Couch. Table. Desk. Stove. Large beaten up antique armchair. Occasional sound of thunder. No rain. Gilbert lies in dark on couch facing door, smoking a cigarette humming some random but quiet tune. Ruth is tied to armchair turned away from door. Jean enters carrying two grocery bags. It is evening.)

JEAN: Why are you sitting in the dark?

GILBERT: (visibly drunk) I couldn't sleep.

JEAN: Wake up and give me a hand with these *(Jean starts unloading groceries, canned goods etc. Lastly, she pulls out a box of bullets.)* The pear trees have started to blossom. Put these in the desk. No. The bottom drawer. I take it you've done nothing but slouch around all day.

GILBERT: In and out of shadows. In and out.

JEAN: Turn the lights on will you. I can't see a damn thing. That's better. It's the first day of spring that's for sure. I woke up in town and knew the minute I opened my door. The pear trees all over town have released their stench. Here. Clean this *(pulls pistol out of purse and tosses it to Gilbert)*. And they're everywhere.

GILBERT: What? *(begins to play with gun)*

JEAN: The trees, Gilbert, those nasty pear trees. Jesus, they reek. Have you even been outside today?

GILBERT: Of course. I went to work.

JEAN: How exceptional of you, Gilbert. What the hell have you been doing the past couple of days? This place is trashed! *(Walks around room, picking up trash and throwing it into empty grocery bag)* You're such a slob. Believe me this is the last time you'll stay here when I'm gone. Anyway. The pear trees—

GILBERT: You say this every year, and I never smell anything.

JEAN: That's because you are generally unaware. They reek. They do. Anyone with a half-functioning sense of smell can tell you that. I could barely breathe. I walked around all day with my hand over my face trying to salvage some breathable air. It didn't work. The smell kept creeping in through the cracks in my fingers.

GILBERT: Sure, Jean. Sure.

JEAN: No one says a word about it. Spring after spring. No one says a word. And you know why? Because everyone knows exactly what it smells like and they're ashamed of the comparison.

GILBERT: I don't know, Jean. Maybe they just like the trees.

JEAN: Maybe. They feel guilty for finding fault with things of ordinary beauty. Things they count on to hide the dull landscape. They walk by those pear trees every spring and for a moment they think that today's going to mean something... What a joke. *(Stops. Sees Ruth blindfolded and bound to chair) (in low voices)* Gilbert, what the hell is going on?

GILBERT: Oh, I just made a little advance in our plans...

JEAN: You're losing me, Gilbert.

GILBERT: There's a simple brilliant explanation.

JEAN: I'm going to fucking kill you. What have you done?

GILBERT: Hold on a second, Jean. Hold on---

JEAN: Who is she?

GILBERT: Listen—

JEAN: Who is she!

GILBERT: Ruth Dove. Sshhh. She's sleeping. Though, I doubt she'll be waking up anytime soon.

JEAN: Dove?

GILBERT: That's right. His daughter.

JEAN: *Hettie* is his daughter.

GILBERT: What? Can't a man have two?

JEAN: You had better explain this. Fast.

GILBERT: Now listen for just a second, Jean. I haven't fucked up here.

JEAN: It sure looks that way.

GILBERT: I know we had a plan to take Hettie Dove--

JEAN: That's right. We had a plan. Who the hell do you think you are? I leave town for two days and you suddenly think you can do this thing without me? You think---

GILBERT: Trust me

JEAN: Trust you to do what? Fuck up my life again? You think you're brave? You're a fucking fool.

GILBERT: I know we had planned to grab Hettie--

JEAN:-- That's right. Hettie Dove. Not her sister. And not tonight. Not tonight!

GILBERT: Half-sister.

JEAN: What?

GILBERT: Ruth is Hettie's half-sister.

JEAN: What is wrong with you?

GILBERT: This is a better deal. I swear to you Jean.

JEAN: You have one minute to convince me to stay.

GILBERT: Listen. I went to work today as usual. As usual, Jean. The garage was slammed. Seemed like everyone was springing leaks, busting fan belts---three different women came in today with smashed windshields. Pretty suspicious if you ask me.

JEAN: Get to the point.

GILBERT: So there were a few more ladies than usual around the garage. Real attractive ones too. The boys got a little rowdy. Started showing off for the ladies, started blabbering on about this broad and that. The ones in the shop. Ones they had fucked or wanted to fuck...

JEAN: Gilbert.

GILBERT: Then Dove comes in, and everyone shuts up for the boss. Then Hettie walks in, right behind him. And the boys all start whispering about how tight her ass is and how they all like to fuck her, and how Dove's the luckiest man on earth because his wife is still as good-looking as his daughter. They go on and on about how Wallace Dove has got it all—the whole big bad American dream. Now wait, Jean, this all-important. Then Rusty. You remember old Three-Tooth Rusty, don't you. Anyway Rusty starts laughing real quiet like, whistling through his last three good teeth, and starts telling us about Dove's first wife. Rusty, Rusty's been with Dove from the beginning. Worked in Dove's first shop years ago. Rusty says that he knocked her up and had to marry her though he couldn't stand her. But that he got rid of her smoothly, didn't say how, but real smoothly when he met Hettie's mother—one of them car showroom models with the long legs and big tits. Dove was on his way up and she wanted part of it. Dove got rid of his wife—broke her fucking heart, Rusty says. Of course, Rusty, sick bastard, finds the whole thing hysterical. Says the woman died a few years later—some say she killed herself, some say she died of loneliness. It was Dove's daughter, Ruth, who found her dead. Just found her dead one morning. Rusty says Dove was torn up by guilt for years. Though he never let it show. Never let it interfere with business. He sent Ruth away to fancy schools, gave her everything just to keep her away. Rusty said he did it because he loved her best. Even more than Hettie. Loved her as deep as the guilt. This is how we've got him, Jean. I mean. We've really fucking got him.

JEAN: Why didn't you ask me first,

GILBERT: There wasn't time.

JEAN: Why? How did you get her here?

GILBERT: Well, I'll be damned, but within an hour of Rusty spouting out all this shit, Ruth walks into the shop looking for her father. She looks real frazzled, real tired. Apparently Hettie had forgotten to pick her up from the airport. But Ruth, she didn't seem pissed off, just tired. I could tell right away that this one, she wouldn't be a fighter, not like Hettie. This one, she'd be easy to keep quiet. Anyway, I could see Hettie apologizing all over the place. Miss sugary sweet, Hettie kissing all over Ruth. Ruth just stood there quietly and smiled as she believed every word Hettie said. They left with Hettie yapping on about “walking down the aisle barefoot” and how that was so “Asian independent” and some other weird girl bullshit. They left just at

closing, so I followed them. I was real curious, see. Real curious. Like I knew there might be an opportunity that we hadn't thought of. I followed them. Hettie didn't drive home. She stopped over at Jim's, her asshole fiancé's. Ruth stayed in the car. Looked like she was trying to sleep. I watched the light and shadows move through the house, up to a bedroom window, and I knew Hettie wouldn't be coming down anytime soon. Then just as I was contemplating getting out of the car, maybe to close in, I didn't know at that point. Ruth gets out of the car and starts walking down the road towards some little neighborhood park. I followed her from a distance. She was easy to spot wearing that white dress. Seemed to catch all the light around it. There she was throwing some grass at a flock of pathetic looking pond geese. All I had in the car was crescent wrench. I got out of the car, not knowing what I was going to do, but knew there was this perfect opportunity. For as far as I knew, I just might start up a little conversation. The geese, well they saw me coming and started hissing. And she turned, startled by the geese and I hit her over the head. She fell right back into my arms like a piece of paper someone had crumpled in a fist. Just like that.

JEAN: You hit her over the head with a wrench!

GILBERT: *(Laughs)* I know.

JEAN: You could have killed her... *(Rushes to armchair to look at Ruth)*

GILBERT: I didn't.

JEAN: You're drunk.

GILBERT: She'll be all right.

JEAN: No one saw you?

GILBERT: Not a soul.

JEAN: She never saw your face?

GILBERT: Didn't have a chance.

JEAN: Are you sure?

GILBERT: Positive.

JEAN: This is still fucked up.

GILBERT: Maybe. But now we have do deal with it.

JEAN: You don't know what you're doing.

GILBERT: Neither do you.

JEAN: I don't now. I'll figure something out.

GILBERT: It'll work.

JEAN: It will if I make it. Only if you listen to everything I say. If I think for one moment, Gilbert, that you will pull anymore shit like this, I'm out of here. I'll disappear. I'll leave you alone with this mess. And you will get caught.

GILBERT: Sure. I'm going to bed.

JEAN: You can't stay here. It's too dangerous. You can't come up here anymore. Go back to town. You know this. It was part of the original plan.

GILBERT: I thought we had scrapped the "plan"

JEAN: Don't fuck with me. From here on out we run everything the way we had planned. That's no different. You have to stay in town. You have to go to work.

GILBERT: Just tonight, Jean.

JEAN: No.

GILBERT: I shouldn't drive.

JEAN: She can't see you. Only me.

GILBERT: I'll be gone before she wakes up...

JEAN: No.

GILBERT: The room's spinning. I'll get pulled over for sure.

JEAN: You're out of here before dawn. No one can see you leaving the mountain. Do you hear?

GILBERT: Just wake me when it's time.

JEAN: How long will she sleep?

GILBERT: Not sure. You can give her another one of these if you want.

JEAN: I'll save it.

GILBERT: Good night, Sis.

Scene 2:

(Ruth sleeps. Gilbert is seated on the ground in work clothes putting on his boots. Jean is standing over stove, heating a kettle.)

JEAN: (quietly) Hurry, Gil. You'll be late.

GILBERT: I'm trying, Jean.

JEAN: Gil? Gilbert?

GILBERT: What?

JEAN: What the hell is wrong with you?

GILBERT: I don't know why I did this.

JEAN: I don't either. But it's done and now we have to deal with it.

GILBERT: I know. My head's fucking killing me.

JEAN: We can't go back.

GILBERT: I'm sorry.

JEAN: You remember what I said. You fuck up anything else and I will disappear.

GILBERT: What if they know?

JEAN: They won't.

JEAN: Look at me please. They won't know.

GILBERT: How am I supposed to act, Jean?

JEAN: Normally.

GILBERT: I'm already sweating through my clothes.

JEAN: Don't be a coward. You have to deal with this now, now that you've slept off whatever delusions drove you to this last night. You'll be fine.

GILBERT: Are you sure?

JEAN: Yes.

GILBERT: What do I tell Dove?

JEAN: Nothing. You tell him nothing.

GILBERT: What if he asks. What if he suspects?

JEAN: What would he have to suspect Gilbert? Unless there's something you left out of your little story last night.

GILBERT: No

JEAN: He will be worried with other matters, Gil. He won't ask.

GILBERT: It's safer this way.

JEAN: What do you mean?

GILBERT: You won't hurt her. You feel sorry for her. You would have hurt Hettie.

JEAN: Why do you say that?

GILBERT: You hate Hettie. You don't even know her.

JEAN: Why should you care?

GILBERT: I don't know. I say what I see.

JEAN: Spare me.

GILBERT: Bye, Jean.

JEAN: You trust that, don't you? Trust *what* you see, *how* you see?

GILBERT: I do.

JEAN: You fucked this up, Gilbert. From now on you only trust my eyes see. Understood? Keep your eyes and your mouth shut. Go to work. *(He turns to leave)* You'll forget all about her when we have the money. Go to work. *(He exits)*

(Jeans crosses to stove. Lights a cigarette. Kettle begins to whistle. She jumps to take it off heat. Ruth stirs. Then wakes. She is silent)

JEAN: It's morning. You're safe. Okay? You're safe here. So don't fight against those ropes. You'll only burn your skin. Believe me it will hurt like hell. I'm making some coffee. Instant. It's all I have. Your head's probably pounding. Mine is anyway. *(Crosses to armchair where Ruth can see her)* I don't have any milk or sugar. *(Begins to take off gag, Stops)* I think you know better than to scream. I have a gun. I will use it. Believe me, the miles of trees could care less. Even their hearts are colder than you think. *(Pulls off gag)*. Here. This will warm you up. *(Ruth looks away. Jean puts cup right to her mouth)* Sip it slowly. It's very hot. *(Ruth drinks)* Good girl. Have another. Good. One more.

RUTH: Who are you?

JEAN: That's not important.

RUTH: What do you want?

JEAN: Money.

RUTH: I don't have—

JEAN: Not from you. From your father. I wouldn't be able to buy a measly carton of cigarettes with the ten bucks crumpled at the bottom of your handbag. *(Pulls bill out of pocket and tosses it in Ruth's lap)*

RUTH: What do you want from me?

JEAN: We won't hurt you.... you're safe as long as--

RUTH: --Where's Hettie?

JEAN: Hettie?

RUTH: What did you do to Hettie?

JEAN: Nothing, She's not here. She's safe.

(Sound of rain beginning to pour down.)

JEAN: Finally. It's thundered and thundered for hours. Not a drop of rain. And up here, we're closer to it. Did you hear it? In town, all you hear is the rumble, but here, the thunder sounds like almighty God himself has taken a seat on your back porch. Sometimes I expect that if I opened the door, I'd find him sitting there. Banging on sheets of metal. Filthy, knotted hair. Black fingernails. Moth-eaten pants. Foaming at the mouth, ready to throw that first bolt of lightning. It always makes me uptight, nervous even. Having to wait so long for the rain.

RUTH: Where am I?

JEAN: The mountain.

RUTH: You'll let me go...

JEAN: When your father pays.

RUTH: Fuck you.

JEAN: Be nice. I don't deserve that.

RUTH: Fuck you, you won't get a dime from him.

JEAN: I don't agree.

RUTH: What the hell do you want?

JEAN: I've told you

RUTH: He won't stoop to you.

JEAN: No. But he will cooperate.

RUTH: Right. He's going to bow down to some skank ass bitch.

JEAN: And to think I actually felt sorry for you. You're your father's daughter that's for sure. Disgusting. I bet you consider yourself pretty fucking righteous, huh? Think God's more than a drooling, toothless, wild man. Sure. Why don't you tell me about the old "straight and narrow" about the path paved with gold, and the path paved with weeds. I've heard that's your father's favorite speech. We can play a round of Sunday school. Seems to me you know more about it than I do.

RUTH: I don't know what you're talking about.

JEAN: No?

RUTH: My father is a good man.

JEAN: So I've been told. He'll pay. His *goodness* will guarantee that.

RUTH: Maybe.

JEAN: There are no maybes in this situation. He will pay for your safe return.

RUTH: Or what?

JEAN: Or we enter the gray. Where it thunders and thunders and never fucking rains.

RUTH: My sister is getting married..

JEAN: How lovely.

RUTH: My family.... they need me.

JEAN: I didn't realize how close you were.

RUTH: Do you. Do you know my father?

JEAN: I know enough about him. Maybe more than you.

RUTH: Please my sister is getting marr--

JEAN: Why should you care?

RUTH: Please.

JEAN: Because deep down you love her, though you couldn't possibly stand her.

RUTH: Please let me go home.

JEAN: For the sake of a wedding?

RUTH: They need me.

JEAN: Do they? What exactly do they need? Let them wait.

RUTH: How long?

JEAN: Soon.

RUTH: How long?

JEAN: As long as it takes.

RUTH: I don't understand what you want.

JEAN: Today they will be receiving a letter. A letter of, how can I say this? A letter of circumstances and instructions. A map of absolutes.

(Crossing to stove.) I have a copy if you care to see.

(Jean crosses to stove. Unfolds letter. Places it back on stove. Lights cigarette. Takes knife from stovetop and crosses to Ruth.)

JEAN: Sit Still

(Cuts Ruth's left hand free from arm of chair. Crosses back to stove. Crosses back to Ruth with letter—tosses it into her lap)

Go ahead. Read it. You could call it the short end of your fate.

(reads letter)

So. Here's a question for you. When do you leave?

RUTH: I don't know what you want from me.

JEAN: I want you to tell me how long this ordeal will take.

RUTH: Why are you asking—

JEAN: ---How long until he pays?

RUTH: I don't know.

JEAN: He's your father. Out of the two of us, you should know him best. How long until he pays? Or will he?

RUTH: I told you, I don't know.

JEAN: You know. What? Don't want to say it? Remember, we're dealing with absolutes. How long?

RUTH: I don't know.

JEAN: Think about it. How much are you exactly worth? Come on. Can't you measure his desperation? Maybe it's a match for yours. Start there.

What is it the oracle said?

RUTH: I don't know what to say....

JEAN: Know thyself?

RUTH: (*near tears*) I don't know...

JEAN: Then don't deal with the absolutes, *Ruthie*. Think of it as a kind of a half-guessed prophecy. You're the blind priestess dipping her little crooked fingers in the waters of whatever and the universe. You need some fish bladders? Some rooster entrails? Maybe a handful of chicken bones to toss in the air like a pair of dice. How long?

RUTH: I don't know.

JEAN: You know. You just don't want to know.

RUTH: He...

JEAN: Yes?

RUTH: He will call the cops

JEAN: The letter very specifically instructs—

RUTH: He will.

JEAN: He's a fool then.

RUTH: But he will. Why would he trust you.

JEAN: He wouldn't take that risk. The letter clearly says that if he involves the police, you will not live

RUTH: But he would. He will take that risk.

JEAN: Trying to worry me? It won't work—

RUTH: He considers it wrong. Immoral. Making deals in dark back alleys with strangers. He would never risk morality.

JEAN: It's immoral to save your daughter's life?

RUTH: I don't know.

JEAN: Are you afraid Ruth? (pause) Tough. Very tough. But you do. (*Grabbing knife again. putting it to Ruth's chin*) Look me in the eye. Tell me that you're not afraid of me. You won't even look.

RUTH: Please...

JEAN: Please what?

RUTH: Please don't.

JEAN: Look at me! That's what I thought

(Makes a quick and shallow cut underneath Ruth's chin. Ruth fights the tears. Eventually she cries quietly, stoically. Jean drops the knife. Grabs napkin, dishtowel, and presses it to the wound. Ruth takes it. Jean crosses back to stove. Lights cigarette. Long silence.)

JEAN: I'm sorry.

RUTH: What do you want. Why are you doing this?

JEAN: Listen. Cut the bullshit, Miss Ruth. I have been dragged into this every bit as much as you have. I want out too. Understand? I don't want to be here as much as you don't.

RUTH: Please tell me why.

JEAN: I want out.

RUTH: Of what.

JEAN: How strange that you should care. But I'll tell you. I hate cowards. My whole life I have been surrounded by cowards. I spent the last four years of my life in prison covering for cowards. They offered me parole. But I held my tongue.

RUTH: You were in prison.

JEAN: How else would I have heard about your father?

RUTH: I don't understand.

JEAN: Oh, come one don't play innocent. You're father's the only businessman in a three hundred mile radius who will give a convict a decent job. Pays them shit, but it's better than cleaning toilets at the Gas Mart.

RUTH: You worked for my father?

JEAN: Good try there. But no. I thought about it. But, I couldn't bring myself to stoop so low. Lots of folks around here consider your father a very generous man. He's a collector of cheap and grateful labor. Half of his employees are ex-cons. And the other half? Pentecostals. Dutiful Pentecostals. They stay with him for years. He pays them shit because he knows they are loyal. Knows they have nowhere else to go.

RUTH: I never knew that.

JEAN: No? You must not come around to see your family very much.

RUTH: No. I don't.

JEAN: Right.

RUTH: Why were you in prison.

JEAN: I got caught.

RUTH: What for?

JEAN: Why the hell are you suddenly so interested in my life?

RUTH: Because mine suddenly depends on it.

JEAN: I spent three years in prison for grand theft auto.

I'd fucked around with stealing cars for years. Mainly a way to get cheap thrills. Most of the time I'd abandon them 30 miles outside of town in an deserted parking lot. I never even tried to sell them. Just a way of showing off. I always knew so much about cars. When we were young, to punish us, my father would make my brother and I take the engine out of some old car he'd find at the junkyard. He'd help us take it completely apart. Down to the last bolt. Then he would leave us and say "When I hear the car start, you are free to go." I learned every trick in the book to make a car

start. Even with pieces missing. Even if it hadn't turned over in ten years. I got better and better. And me and my brother, well, we got into the business of it. Started working with other people in the area. They were all idiots. Sloppy, grubby hands. One night we got caught. My brother and this other guy, the one who tripped the alarm, they got away. The police, the district attorney, they offered me a reduced sentence. Six months, tops, they said. But I couldn't turn in my brother... I couldn't ruin his life.

RUTH: And the other one?

JEAN: Oh, I would've fucking ruined his life in a heartbeat. But I knew he'd turn in my brother. I wouldn't take that chance. He was a coward. A brainless coward. I need a fucking smoke. *(Grabs purse and starts digging through its contents)* Never can find a damn thing in here. Never when I need it. Do you have a light in your bag?

RUTH: No.

JEAN: Don't smoke?

RUTH: Sometimes.

JEAN: Shame. It's good for you. *(pause)* Are you sure? Maybe some old matches you've forgotten about?

RUTH: Yes.

Jean digs even more persistently.

JEAN: Can't see a damn thing. *(Moves closer to light, continues to dig)*

I feel like one of those women you pass on the street, always wonder what they're digging for up to their elbows.

They never seem able to find it do they? You know the ones I'm talking about. I pass them on the street everyday. Always up to their elbows in a handbag. They always look so rushed. So discouraged. Then they pass someone they have to smile for, and they rave or complain about the weather. Though this time of year they talk about nothing but the pear trees, how nicely they are coming into bloom. How they worry that a late frost might wreck all the buds. I don't see why they care. I've never seen those trees produce any kind of fruit. Pear trees empty of pears. I've seen these women stop right in front of me on the street to finger a branch as if they understand its structure, as if it were a houseplant. But you know what? You'll never see one of them draw one of the flowers to their nose. Never. They know it ain't no rosebush.

RUTH: They smell awful.

JEAN: The trees?

RUTH: Yes, the pear trees. That's what you meant didn't you.

JEAN: They reek. I've been bitching about this for years. You're the first person I've met who agrees.

RUTH: It's always the first of spring. The one thing I remember most about this town. The stench of those trees. Every now and then, I'll come across the same smell

JEAN: Usually in some run-down ladies restroom

RUTH: --A turned over trashcan---bloody tampons left festering for days.

JEAN: The sweet stench of fertility.

RUTH: The sweet smell of home. *(They laugh)*

JEAN: People always tell me I'm crazy when I say anything.

RUTH: I haven't been here in so long, I almost forgot about it.

JEAN: Don't worry, as sweet as those little trees look. They're vicious. They won't let you forget. Believe me I've tried. What do you think those women have in the pits of their handbags anyway?

RUTH: I wouldn't know.

JEAN: The older they are, the bigger the purse. Like they carry their whole lives with them. Am I wrong. What the hell are they carrying around? A few crusty Kleenex? A couple of dried up tubes of lipstick. The jawbone of a dead husband?

RUTH: It wouldn't surprise me.

JEAN: A friend of mine in prison. She had this crazy sister, smart as hell but really twisted. She traveled all over Europe and would only send Lucy postcards and pictures of the most fucked up things. I saw these photos of Italian churches----one had a dead body, hundreds of years old spread out beneath the altar. Most of the things she sent were of dead things---dead things built right into the architecture of the holy. There was another church, in Slovakia, I think. Built entirely of human bones.

RUTH: There's the preserved head of St. Catherine in Siena. Skin and everything. Hanging on the wall in a glass box like a framed picture.

JEAN: Just the head?

RUTH: Just the head.

JEAN: Really?

RUTH: Is that what you want?

JEAN: What? The head of a saint?

RUTH: No.

JEAN: What do you mean what do I want?

RUTH: To escape from the pear trees, to a church made of bone?

JEAN: Do you want a smoke?

RUTH: No.

JEAN: Are you sure? It might make you feel better.

RUTH: *(shakes head)* What time is it?

JEAN: I don't know. Early still.

RUTH: It's so dark.

JEAN: It's always dark in here. The trees block out most of the sun. You can sleep all day. Never have to face the morning.

RUTH: I'm so thirsty.

JEAN: There's more coffee.

RUTH: Could I have some water?

JEAN: Sure.

(Brings Ruth a glass of water. Lights another cigarette.)

Here.

(Ruth gulps it down)

More?

(Ruth shakes head)

JEAN: What?

RUTH: What is that?

JEAN: What?

RUTH: That blue light?

JEAN: Oh. My butterfly. *(Walks over to framed butterfly hanging on wall)* It's wings are catching that little bit of sun.

RUTH: A butterfly?

JEAN: It's real. Dead of course. But real.

RUTH: You don't strike me as one of those types.

JEAN: What type?

RUTH: One of those butterfly girls. You probably have a butterfly tattoo from your seventeenth birthday. *(Jean leans around as if to check the small of her back. Almost as if she has lost something)*

No. I didn't see it. But the odds are if you've got a shiny dead butterfly hanging on your wall, you've got one drawn on your body somewhere.

JEAN: You have a problem with butterflies?

RUTH: You just don't strike me as the type.

JEAN: *(taking frame off wall)* She's a beauty. The one in the middle. She's a Blue--

RUTH:-- Blue morpho butterfly. Morpho Didius. I know. Wingspan reaches seven inches in forests near the Amazon. Only the males are ever this brightly colored. They have very few natural predators due to the slow beat of their wings. And only the tops of their wings are iridescent. They appear as bright flash to a predator, disappear, and

then reappear somewhere else. Again only a flash. Nearly impossible to follow. Impossible to catch. Besides the living room décor industry, you could say they are their own greatest predator.

JEAN: What? Are they jealous of each other's color. Do they have little duels to the death.

RUTH: The butterfly feeds mainly off the juices of rotting fruit, but the caterpillars--- the caterpillars are ferociously cannibalistic.

JEAN: I don't believe that.

RUTH: Wrecks their image doesn't it? That they start out so ugly, so gruesome.

JEAN: How do you know so much about it?

RUTH: I once took a class in entomology. The study of insects.

JEAN: Right.

RUTH: My professor was a woman. This was her favorite insect. She had a tattoo of course. She would always tell us the cannibalistic thing to convince the boys that butterflies were more than just pretty. But in the end, despite their depravities, she liked the pretty. Just like your old ladies who love the pear trees.

JEAN: I'm not sure I agree.

RUTH: I'm so tired.

JEAN: Sleep. Sleep while you can. *(Returns frame to wall)*

Blackout

Scene 3:

(Ruth still tied to chair, though ropes have loosened considerably, she could easily slip from them if she had the will. Seems to be sleeping. Jean stands at stove, smoking and writing in a large black journal over stove.)

JEAN: Ruth. Ruth? Are you awake?

RUTH: Yes.

(Jean puts book away)

JEAN: I have soup. Are you hungry?

RUTH: Yes.

JEAN: Will you eat it?

RUTH: Yes.

JEAN: Give me a few minutes. *(Pulls out two large cans of soup)* Tomato or beef stew?

Which one?

RUTH: Either.

JEAN: Which one?

RUTH: I don't care.

JEAN: Choose. (pause) Damnit. Then don't eat. *(Throws cans on the table in front of Ruth)*

RUTH: Tomato

JEAN: What?

RUTH: Tomato.

(Jean grabs can of tomato soup and begins to heat it over the stove.)

RUTH: It's so dark. When will you know?

JEAN: That depends.

RUTH: I'm so tired.

JEAN: You've slept all day.

(Gilbert comes rushing in from rain. He is soaking wet. Stumbling. Drunk)

GILBERT: Get me a towel.

(Jean gets towel. Brings it to him. He dries himself. Long silence)

JEAN: What the hell are you doing here? Get out!

GILBERT: I've got something to tell you Jean.

JEAN: Damnit. Shut up and get out! Have you forgotten everything!

GILBERT: (*crossing to Ruth*). Hi. Remember me? I clubbed you over the head in the moonlight with a crescent wrench. My name's Gilbert. This is my sister Jean.

JEAN: Goddamn you. Get out of here.

GILBERT: No. I came here to tell you something.

JEAN: Well.

GILBERT: Well, fucking what, Jean?

JEAN: Well? What are you waiting for?

GILBERT: This whole thing is fucked up—it's going to blow up in our faces, Jean I'm telling you!

JEAN: What happened? Tell me what's going on. What happened today?

GILBERT: I want out.

JEAN: What happened!

GILBERT: Dove. He knows. He fucking knows.

JEAN: He doesn't know, Gil. Listen to me.

GILBERT: No Jean. You listen to me. I'm getting out of here tonight. And I'm going straight to Wallace Dove. I'm going to tell him everything if you don't stop this now, I won't go to fucking prison just to make you some easy cash. I owe you a lot, Jean. But, I'll never owe you that.

JEAN: Gil—

GILBERT: I'm getting the fuck out of here--

JEAN: --Tell me what happened.

GILBERT: I kept messing things up. I just kept sweating and sweating and the boys started to ask if I had a fever or something. If I was sick. Kept telling me maybe I should sit down. Like I was some kind of faggot who couldn't take the work. Like I was going to pass out. And my hands wouldn't stop shaking. I kept dropping things. I almost knocked out Joe's teeth when I dropped a wrench. He scooted out from the car, and I jumped. Fucking lost it. It busted up his chin real good. Everyone was whispering about Dove being in real bad sorts, about his daughter getting killed or raped or something. And I kept dropping shit and everyone kept looking at me.

JEAN: You should have told them you were sick.

GILBERT: Then Dove came in, and everyone shut up. Nobody said anything. Just the clanking of metal and engines. And Dove, he just paced silently throughout the garage. Not a word. Watching all of us real close. He knew. He knew it was one of us. You could see it. The way he watched and stared. Not a word. For an hour this went on and finally he seemed to snap out of it. Came over and fucked around with us. Asking us how the work was going, our day. Normal bullshit. Making jokes. Pattin' us on the back.

JEAN: What happened, Gil?

GILBERT: Just before closing he tapped me on the shoulder, told Bobby to finish up for me, said he wanted to talk to me for a minute. He asked me about you. "Where's your sister, Gilbert?" He says, "Where's Jean? Said he had heard things about you. Around town. How you were trouble and everyone knew it. Said he could tell something was wrong with me. The way I'd been acting. Wanted to know if I was having family difficulty. I couldn't answer him. Couldn't think of a damn thing to say. He stared me into the fucking corner. He just stood there. I couldn't bring myself to look at him and he knew it. He fucking knew it. Then he said, I've heard things. Good folks are saying she's a criminal. A criminal and a whore with no future who will drag her brother down with her. I ain't going down with you Jean.

JEAN: And you bought that. You're so weak. You believe that. Go ahead call me whore. Go ahead and say it. My sister is a whore. You sound like him, when you say it. But worse. Like some pip-squeak church boy who's afraid of women, so he calls them whores. Pathetic. If you're going to curse me, curse me with some spirit. Curse me like you know me.

GILBERT: I'm out of here.

JEAN: He knows you have a chance, Gil. He wants to keep you loyal by making you feel like a worthless piece of shit. He's good. Real good. I never thought you'd fall for it.

GILBERT: I'm afraid Jean.

JEAN: I know.

GILBERT: I'm getting out of here.

JEAN: Wait.

GILBERT: No Jean, I'm not going to wait.

JEAN: Wait, Gilbert. I said wait!!

(crosses to door. Jean rushes to handbag and pulls out a gun)

JEAN: Stop Gilbert *(cocking gun)*

(back still to door)

GILBERT: Come on Jean, let me go. I can't do this anymore.

(Jean crosses to door and puts the gun right to the back of his head)

JEAN: Be quiet.

GILBERT: Please, Jean

JEAN: Gilbert, you know I'd never pull this trigger, but I'm still going to press this gun into your head, because what you fear is the possibility. You're going to listen to me now. I love you. You know this. But my life is about to start over and you will not fuck that up. I can hate you. I am filled with that possibility. You are a coward. More so now than ever. Unbelievable. Really. Leave Gilbert. Find another town, another job, another life. But do not fuck this up for me. Promise me, Gil, promise me that you'll leave town. Leave knowing that you are worthless in my life and your own. But leave quietly. Promise me. Promise Me!

GILBERT: I promise

JEAN: Goodbye Gilbert.

(long silence. Jean crosses back to stove. Places gun on counter. Gil moves to leave, stops, then leaves. Jean crosses back to stove. Begins stirring soup. Long pause)

The soup is ready.

(brings soup over to Ruth. Places it on table. Hands Ruth a spoon. Crosses away and lights cigarette.)

RUTH: What about you?

JEAN: Eat. Just eat.

RUTH: Listen, I can't.

JEAN: Just eat!

RUTH: I can't eat soup with one arm.

JEAN: Lean into it.

RUTH: I can't reach the table.

(Jean grabs knife. Cuts her completely free. Crosses back to stove begins stirring the remainder of soup. Ruth begins to eat)

JEAN: *(accidentally burns hand.)* Goddamnit! *(throws pot into wall. tomato soup spills and runs down wall)*

RUTH: *(jumping from seat)* What happened?

JEAN: My hand. I burned my hand.

RUTH: *(grabbing towel she wets it under faucet)* Let me see. Pretty nasty. Here, run it under the faucet.

JEAN: I do love him. But he's fucking stupid, Ruth. He's so fucking simple. And it's unforgivable because he can help it. He's not some romanticized half-wit that can't help what he is. He has chosen to be stupid and he fucking wallows in it. He worships it.

RUTH: He's hurt. He's afraid.

JEAN: And who isn't?

RUTH: I want half.

JEAN: What?

RUTH: I want half. Half of the money.

JEAN: You've got to be kidding me. Sit down.

RUTH: No. He's gone. You won't be able to finish this alone. Not without my help

JEAN: Sit down. (*points gun at her*)

RUTH: No Jean. I'm in this now. We can help each other.

JEAN: Why?

RUTH: Because. They try. They try to love... I don't know. They try and it's. It's almost enough. I don't want the money to hurt my father. He believes he loves me. He loves Hettie. He loves himself. I don't even try to believe.

JEAN: You want the money?

RUTH: Yes.

JEAN: Why?

RUTH: I don't know. Maybe I want out like you. Maybe I'll travel, or give it to the poor, or burn it. Maybe I'll carry it around forever in my pocket like a lost shadow, I don't know. But I want to see this thing finished. And I want my share.

JEAN: Why are you doing this?

RUTH: I told you. I don't know. It doesn't matter. Meaning isn't important.

JEAN: No. You tell me why. (*points gun at her*)

RUTH: I don't know. Things aren't that clear. Sometimes I feel that I hate him. That I owe him that. I watched my mother slowly kill herself because she refused to hate him. Believed that she couldn't. I think she only loved the idea of him that she could only create in his absence. And it killed her. The imagining of it.

JEAN: Of what?

RUTH: Love.

JEAN: And you think that's enough for me to trust you?

RUTH: I'd almost forgotten until just now. The things your brother said. I remember now. How he is. My father. How he hurts. Destroys. How he wrecks a person so simply. Put that down. Trust isn't an issue. Are you afraid of another betrayal? It won't happen. Whatever does happen, it will never be that. You don't know me. I don't know you. When is betrayal ever between strangers? Tell me Jean. You'll never be able to finish this alone. You need my help.

JEAN: All right. (*puts gun down*) But I'm watching you.

RUTH: We'll do this?

JEAN: We'll do this.

RUTH: Good.

JEAN: You want a drink?

RUTH: Sure.

JEAN: Whiskey all right? It's all I've got.

RUTH: Perfect.

JEAN: (*reaching for bottle with injured hand*) Shit!

RUTH: Here. Let me do that.

JEAN: Thanks. Glasses are in there. There's no ice. There's a couple of cans of Coke there. I'll take mine straight.

RUTH: Straight and warm? You're tougher than I thought.

JEAN: Sure am.

Are you serious about this?

RUTH: Yes.

JEAN: You can leave.

RUTH: I know.

JEAN: We have to move quick.

RUTH: Sure.

JEAN: We need to talk about the money, Ruth. I don't believe Gilbert's brave enough to do what he promised me. I don't trust him to keep his mouth shut. If we ever want to see that money we need Dove to pay. Now.

RUTH: How?

JEAN: I don't know. But whatever that letter might have threatened, you know it wasn't enough.

RUTH: Maybe it was.

JEAN: Don't bullshit me. You told me this morning that he'd be too concerned with morals. That's all well and fine from a distance. Easy to be steadfast from a distance.

RUTH: What are you saying?

JEAN: He's not afraid.

RUTH: You can't say that—

JEAN: We need to make sure that he's scared shitless.

RUTH: The man's not afraid of anything

JEAN: Then make him afraid for you.

RUTH: How am I supposed to do that?

JEAN: Close the distance. He has to hear your voice.

RUTH: I can't

JEAN: Call him. Make him afraid, Ruth.

RUTH: What. What am I supposed to say?

JEAN: You'll figure it out. Follow your instincts.

RUTH: I can't.

JEAN: Then leave. Go on. Chase down my brother. I'm sure he'd gladly save you. That's what you want isn't it? You want to be saved? That's what this is about? No? Is it about greed then?

RUTH: What's the difference.

JEAN: You don't know? That's very sad, Ruth. Breaks my fucking heart.

RUTH: Leave me alone.

JEAN: Save yourself, Ruth. You said you wanted to see this thing finished, that you wanted your share. Then take it. There's a pay phone just down the road at an old gas station. It's closed down now. No one will be there. You can call from there. Go. You can stop there or you can keep walking. It's up to you. But go.

(Jean turns back on Ruth. Few beats of stillness. Ruth grabs coat. Exits. Jean left standing. She does not move. Blackout)

Scene 4:

(Lights up. Jean is packing a bag. Rushing around the room frantically. Opens cabinet door above sink.. Door opens. Ruth enters soaking wet.)

JEAN: I thought you were gone.

RUTH: I called.

JEAN: What did he say?

RUTH: He'll pay.

JEAN: What did you tell him?

RUTH: He'll pay

JEAN: When?

RUTH: Tonight. Midnight. The money will be where you told him.

JEAN: Yes! You did it, Ruth. You fucking did it.

RUTH: I'm so cold.

JEAN: You're soaking wet. Let me get you a blanket.

RUTH: I was so cruel. I broke his heart. I didn't think that was possible.

JEAN: What did you tell him?

RUTH: He cried.

JEAN: What did you say?

RUTH: He cried like a little boy. He was so frightened. He said he loved me so much. That he would do anything. Anything.

JEAN: And he'll meet me tonight? No cops?

RUTH: Yes.

JEAN: You did it, Ruth!

RUTH: He could hardly speak. He just listened. Every word. So precious.

JEAN: I'll be out of here tonight.

RUTH: My mother, what is it they say, turning over in her grave? (pause) Every fucking word.

JEAN: Sit down, Ruth.

RUTH: And you collect them? (*crossing to framed butterflies*)

JEAN: No. It was a gift from my mother.

RUTH: Really. How strange. My mother had this thing for butterflies---God, I can barely stand the word. The way you can't avoid sounding like a kid when you said it. It's pretense of innocence. It's pretense for hope. My mother bought into that. Plastered the house with butterfly décor. Even these sorry bastards. It's a shame. Bred and harvested to be hung in a frame on someone's empty wall. To be worshipped. Prayed to like the shrine of Saint Catherine's head. Preserved. Pretty. But useless.

JEAN: You need another drink.

RUTH: I do.

JEAN: I do too for that matter.

RUTH: Cheers.

JEAN: Cheers. *(They drink)*

RUTH: *(Turning back to frame)* I wish I could have told her about the caterpillars.

JEAN: Who?

RUTH: My mother.

JEAN: Cannibal caterpillars?

RUTH: Yes.

JEAN: Why?

RUTH: Maybe it would have made her laugh. Maybe she would have realized how foolish her life had become. I really think she bought into this hope for change. In its inevitability. That if she wrapped herself--weaved herself into some pinch of spit and silk—oh, the great metamorphosis--if she crawled in the dirt long enough she would become irresistible to the good and happy life. The life she watched pass her by through the window. I'd come home from school and I'd see her sitting by that window—her head perfectly framed. So pious and empty. I'd kick the dirt to find a little movement, a little hope. There's more hope in a fistful of dirt than a wall full of butterflies. She deserved it you know. She deserved every bit of hurt she wallowed in because she felt safe in her sadness.

(approaching butterfly)

You better watch your back. The birds around here? They foam at the mouth. Their throats are like canons. They don't like things quiet. Neither do we. But that's a secret we've managed to keep. You've got fucking nothing on the muscles of an ant. Or the howling grasshoppers that keeps me up all night. Fucking nothing. Even the trees find you boring. And the flowers? They've been fooling you all along. But Jean here. Jean loves you. I bet she wouldn't tell you what happened in Mexico. Do you know what happened in Mexico, Jean?

JEAN: No.

RUTH: She's a goddamn liar, butterfly. A worthless thieving liar. I'll tell you about Mexico. Maybe you heard about it. I'll tell you anyway. This spring, in Me-hee-co, a sudden return of winter killed millions, millions, of monarch butterflies just broken from their cocoons. Millions of dead frozen butterflies roaring down from the sky—onto rooftops, into ditches, all the way down to the ordinary ground that drags us all down. All the way fucking down. And no one wept, butterfly. Not even the trees. Even the trees curse you.

JEAN: Your glass is empty.

RUTH: Thanks.

(Jean has put down gun earlier. Jean turns her back while she pours another drink. Ruth snatches gun)

JEAN: How much ice?

RUTH: *(Ruth puts gun into her back)* You're right. Whatever you're thinking. I don't know how to really use this thing. But that won't matter. Fingers slip. What you fear is the possibility? Right?

JEAN: Something like that.

RUTH: Listen to me. I still want the money. But we're going to do things a little differently. A little change of plans.

JEAN: Fuck.

RUTH: My father will be waiting for you at midnight. If you're not back in two hours. I turn you in myself. I'll make sure they find you. You and Gilbert. It will be easy. You've been sloppy. This whole charade. You have no idea what you're doing. You will return with the money. A third will be yours.

JEAN: A third? You're not going to tell me---

RUTH:-- I have already told you.

JEAN: I see.

RUTH: Go, Jean. I'll be waiting.

JEAN: No betrayal right?

RUTH: No betrayal. We're strangers.

Scene 5:

Single shaft of light up on Ruth at kitchen counter. She is looking through cabinets, under cushions. Etc. searching for a lighter. Lights cigarette off of stove. Several moments pass. Gilbert burst through the door.)

RUTH: What are you doing here?

GILBERT: It's my house.

RUTH: Jean told you to not come back.

GILBERT: Jean's dead.

RUTH: What?

GILBERT: You're free to go. She's dead. The police. They shot her. She's dead. I came to get the last of my things. I have to get out of here. *(rushes around room. He has been crying. Leaves as quickly as he came.)*

(Ruth stands motionless for several moments. Begins to very slowly gather her few things. Begins to exit quickly and stops at door. She is again motionless for a few beats. Crosses slowly, timidly to framed morpho blue butterfly. Crosses to butterfly. Smashes frame with the butt of her gun. The frame falls to floor. She kneels. Pulls away a few shards of glass and takes out the butterfly. Stands. Holds it for a moment then drops it. She exits. Blackout)

Imprint of a Folding Wing

Selected Poems

On Sharing a Mirror in the Women's Dressing Room

Standing in the dressing room mirror, the woman next to me wears a red, size of a cardinal's wing flush to the wind string bikini. She snaps the waistline over the outline of a faded butterfly tattoo. I begin to wonder what species of birds hunt butterflies and if they eat the wings, and if when she walks alone on the beach, seagull dive in maddening droves to nip the point of her hip. Pulling at the hem of my skirt, I envision the back of my knees tattooed with rain or the wind that snatches snow away from tongue. But, even then, I think the birds might still attack.

Shoulder to shoulder, the woman and I make eye contact only by our reflections. She catches me staring at the lines of her tattoo. Running her fingers across it she asks, "Ain't you got one?" Unable to say no, I only shake my head as if embarrassed from having forgotten something vital, fearing that this woman might be able to name it.

What to draw on my body that I would never feel the need to cover. Perhaps the hollowed shape of a bird that I might see the whole sky behind it—clouds gathering in the south. The woman answers my silence with a smirk, and I imagine telling her how tonight, driving home from work I heard that in Mexico, a sudden return of winter had frozen millions of monarch butterflies just broken from their cocoons. I tell her how I can't shake the thought of woman dreaming she can fly, and how she wakes to the patter of their bodies landing on her roof as gently as leaves. She breaks from the bundle of sheets she has rolled herself into only to find that she has no wings, that the promise of spring must wait, and that the wind swears to bring it soon.

Still Life

A man sits down to write a painting and begins
the moment before an overturned basket of January
pears tumbles from a table, their unbruised skins
are like the back of a woman he once watched swim
secretly the width of a river after the spring's first thaw.

He is a boy hardly the length of her legs, and he
memorizes how her white arms darken the water
they push against. From the bank, he imagines
how blue veins wind the limbs of her body like
the pattern of roots tangled at the bottom of fallen trees.

He writes her skin's texture in the lines of a rainstorm
that feeds the burning of an orchard, he writes
the tear of her stroke ripping through the river's
current. It is like the unwept vowels of a farmer
who watches ashen blossoms collapse
to the ground, taking on the pigment of rain.

He writes the air the farmer's wife will sigh
tonight reaching into an oven without mitts,
distracted by her husband's silence and the
foggy kitchen window steamed from the outside.

He writes the crash of a pie to a floor,
the black circle it chars on the linoleum. He writes
the stillness of a hollow pan spinning on its side.

Imprint of a Folding Wing

The streets mirrored in rainwater shake puddles
of moonlight down the rusty storm drains I pass
each night returning home where the windows
greet me blankly. Their glass faces silken over
the angles of city lights—the blur I have memorized.
Here, even the sidewalks know the pattern of footfalls
that I dance through each morning, each evening.
The misshapen mouth of a storm drain smiles awkwardly
to find me approaching, hungry for the gum
wrapper I might flick down his throat, or the piece
of shadow that might tumble into his stomach, slipping
like a coin from a pocket's unnoticed hole. Yes,
the city starves, and most nights I can't sleep from
the grumble of its belly, the way it swallows
uselessly the reflected point of the moon, the way
it chews the squealing of rats who dream of an old
deaf woman who walks slowly and with sure feet.
She pours a white parliament of owls into a manhole,
and the thud of their approaching wings is the sound
of a whisper bouncing against the walls of an
empty room—the way I wake myself talking
in my sleep when you are gone. In that moment—
the slow losing of dreams, I imagine you fumbling
for a glass of milk—the squeak of a door hinge
is the whimper of a mouse curled in the claws of an owl
returning to its nest. Beside me, I am sure that
the pillow holds the imprint of a small and
outstretched wing beginning to fold over my eyes.

What Bertie Once Said of Measuring Fire

Let me tell you about the guiltless
wind and how it curls the debris of
blackened wildflowers into scattered
but certain fists. They clench and
box the swelt of my tires. Warn
that here the road does not stop.

I sink into the seat.
It sticks and tears at my skin and the sun's
so fucking hot that I confuse it for grief.
I can barely see the landscape or how
the ribs of a long dead dog jut and mar
into the dry wind. I don't blink, but
let me tell you that tourists will weep
at this, will clutch their children tighter
in prayer that the day might be
longer, or over, or new.

I drive on, you see, plunge towards
the two-dimensional horizon where
I am looking for the point that doesn't
vanish. Maybe it's the heat, or maybe
the benign mania of driving eight
days straight no sleep that makes
me believe in a point where the drift
of a petal is constant. Where the groaning,
the friction of time, that slows us back
to the ruffled dirt—to the bones
of a dog, is kinder after all.

I believe that a day is not equal
or unequal to the dimensions of wildfire
that the fertility of ash might fucking
heal us all into sudden rain. That when
we find what we are looking for
it travels a road that must first furl
back before striking into the morning.
A road where burns are cured only
by the echo of fire. We will drive
on, the smelt of a grinding clutch
will wake us, peel our red eyes open
to the road where we gain time

only by its limit. And distance by
clamoring towards the impossible horizon.

Platonic Drumstick

The old man with the blue-eyed dog
wears spurs each day “to prick this
sorry earth when it slows to hobble
my feet. I gotta keep moving.”
He admits he confuses the curve
of Demeter’s hip with the flanks
of a centaur: “You see, the mountains
rise and twitch. Some from the flusterings
of labor, the birth of islands and storms,
but mostly to knock from the earth’s
white back our sticky hands, our
sharp mouths. I sleep soundly
through quakes now that I can hardly
swallow, hardly taste no more.
I take my ambrosia slowly because
flowers are leaking everywhere.
Once, when I was young, a tornado
battled a chicken truck heading
for slaughter. The bodies of 800
hens rained down onto the town, and
the people gathered them from
ditches and door stoops, from rooftops
and swimming pools, from their mouths
and stomachs. No one ate for days.
And the flowers wept. The dogs howled.
And the earth was still. Now, Atlas
moans all night from the spur
I drove into his shoulder, that
the angry dirt swallowed, like the
snapping mouth of my blue-eyed dog.
I had to keep moving, you see.
Even the flowers will bite.”
Sipping his whiskey, he tells
me he moves only for love.
For a woman who might rise back
from the rivers, break from
the trees her bones have become.
“One day the gods will hear me,”
he says. A rooster crows; the
blue-eyed dog cries. “The
gods will hear me for love,” he
shouts as he lifts his foot, and

even I jump to suddenly feel
the tired earth slowing.

The Woman at the Sink

The woman leans
over the sink and watches
her hands expand as she
pushes them down beneath
the clean white dishes.
Her palms pressed against
the sink's metal floor
she holds herself up as though
bowing for a moment
over the handles of a plow,
the earth at its blades unbroken.

The sun sets. She does not
raise her eyes to the window,
does not bother with seeing.
It is always the same yard
the same hill just beyond
the same slow retreat of light.
the same day always neatly
dead, folded squarely
in the back of some closet
she only opens for the sake
of guests and grown children—
those she must remember for.

The sky thunders but does not rain
and she grows anxious with waiting
as if her whole body would burst
to fill the bones of a riverbed.
She would toss the precise points
of her cutlery to split open the
dark metal seam of clouds, to
demand the return of some lost
hour to the waters swelling
at her elbows.

She pulls out the stopper, eyes
its dimensions, mechanical and
round and sighs to hear the murky
dishwater gasp in its exit.
The house trembles; the cabinets
clatter as if empty. Outside,

quietly it rains. Somewhere
she knows the wheels of a plow
slowly begin to rust, and rivers
lower their heads at the thought.

Galileo's Insomnia

For hours I have squinted to hear
the mutterings of taillights
passing my bedroom window.

For hours, this squabble
of light and quiet has lurched
me from dreams. For hours,

I have bartered away the hard
truths I have fought to find in a few
slumped lines. In a short occasion
of patience that contains no sleep.
No brilliance in the baptism of
new planets, no shoulders
of great men tilting towards infinitude.

Tonight is not the night of Galileo
who stoops at his desk to saw curves
into bricks of glass to cup the order
of the sky, to make solid the hand
brimming with water, with
the slippery light of unnamed stars.
Galileo calculated the angles
of a man's fear in the disruption

of centers, the inversion of things-
as-we-swear-we-know-them. He discovered
how the parishioners of absolutes will
burn a man alive to make him
re-swear old truths. Even though their
nervous frowns, their darts of sweat
hissing in fire, cannot rattle the
earth nor make it still.

For hours, I cannot sleep. For
hours I cannot write. I watch
headlights break the distance
into parts. Each driver his own
center pushing out from an
old truth, an unnoticed moment, a
lump of space swallowed by a child's
crying. The stars pay no attention.
Tonight, they are more restless

they have ever seemed. Their sideways
light sifts through the cracked lens
of a five-and-dime telescope tossed
from a backseat, from a pair
of small fat hands.

Outside my window, the broken
glass burns red under the glow
of passing taillights. An event
which translates departure
sometimes for fear or loneliness,
and sometimes for the simplest
truth, the simplest discovery.

Adapted Translation of Arthur Rimbaud's "Ma Bohème"

Bohemian Fantasy

They say I left perfectly, the pitch of the
slamming door, my fists tearing holes
in my pockets—even my coat reaching
the ideal! I walked out beneath the sky
dreaming of lovers, swearing vows
to the muses who laughed and shook
their breasts at the hole in my only pair
of pants as I stooped to harvest rhymes
from the cracks in the earth. At night,
I slept cupped in the Big Dipper, and
the stars rustled in the skirts of Calliope.
Lying belly-up, I listened to them scatter
to the edges of roads those September
evenings when I would taste the drops
of dew running from my forehead like
a strong wine hinted with glass that
someone had smashed against the sky.
And oh, how I rhymed like a lyre to
imaginary passing travelers, oh, how I
plucked the strings of my wounded shoes—
one foot pressed tightly against my heart!

Snow White at the Road House

Spitting a lime across the table
she turns to the bartender who
with the point of a hunting knife
picks a seed from his teeth. She says
“Once I almost had my heart cut
out by a woodsman....but the bitch
behind it? I got her good in the end.”
The man next to her grows nervous
drinks harder and faster as if to
swallow her words before she can
say them. But it is no use. Instead,
he slams another round of tequila
and asks her to dance. When he
holds her waist, he is afraid that
under the clumsy heat of his arms,
her inky white skin is beginning
to melt, that beneath her skirt,
they step through radiant puddles
of milk. If only he could get the damn
spell right, he thinks, if only she
would allow him to hold her head
against his shoulder. He fears that
everyone knows but him that she
is slowly disappearing, that his
loneliness could swallow them all,
could change the whole bar into
a flock of well-muscled doves.
He would send out to drop good
omens and fairytale endings over
the closed eyes of those, like him,
who find little sleep. Yes,
he would send them out to drop
hope from their beaks carelessly
like the green hearts of broken twigs.

Bored of Work, I am Lulled by the Screeching of Tires

Sometimes the grass is blue
and the birds become confused
dive into the earth, their gawking
beaks gathering worms they will
happily return to the trees. Some
mornings, I take my coffee standing
on my head, and scratch my heels
on the edges of clouds. Sometimes
I burst them, and the sky grows dark
and the neighbors curse me-- the roots
of their rose bushes are beginning
to rot, and why can't I walk with
my head towards the clouds—they
are tired of me muddying their feet.
I tell them I have no choice, something
about doctor's orders, about raising my
blood pressure before the heart deflates.
It has not had enough work lately.
I sleep all day, even the rain doesn't wake
me. I am lulled by the screeching
of tires, and sometimes I ask the birds
if they don't mind squawking across
puddles, trying for me the friction
of water, the bursting of air.

Elegy

This could be to the myth of a man I never met,
a grandfather who missed the war over measurable
weaknesses—an archless foot, it is thought, has no grace plowing
across the backs of the dead, and a dissonant heart
makes for too much music in open fields. His brother,
Cecil, returned to tell of the good life found in a hand
of five fingers and how, after all, the guns were burning
arms playing from steel-bellied pianos, and how
every man sang.

Though Paul in '43 had found restlessness
in the trenches of his own body, the first
in our modernity to have his spleen removed.
I might recall to you how he asked to hold it,
brown, watery thing, and how it shivered despite
the heat waking from his gloveless hands. The pus
ran from its skin like sweat or the beginnings of silk
pulled from the mouth of a sleeping worm. Oh,
and I mustn't forget to say how he laughed to
understand emptiness from without—how a traveler
startles his reflection in a dried river bed, the one
from which he used to drink when the clouds
had been in better spirits and when men had
measured rain by rising rivers instead of swallows.

Radish-bellied Fugue

I am tired of counting myself among the laughing—
wish I were the woman who strong as an ox,
strapped herself to a plough. Though the ground
that year was nonnegotiable, she coaxed the dust
to hold the roots of plants with subterranean fruits.
Her children from radishes and rhubarb grew
fat as Jacobean noblemen painted with ham hocks
in hand. Though their eyes were made of another
metal—the kind that melts easily in low fire
when the wind is high and insistent. It blows
your name mockingly into your pink and waking
ears. Slowly, you realize that the name is someone
else's, that you do not wish to remain in its sounds
even if you had never once prayed for change, had
never imagined radish-bellied children who inhaled
storms into their tiny wind-chests. Their voices
puffed into pipe-organs would surely save us all
from this remaining, would surely bellow
our feet from this ordinary ground.

What We Might Have Lost

Climbing the stairs into the attic
my sister and I falter for a moment
to hear the wind halt from nowhere. It is
beautiful and sudden like the scattered
bronze gears of an old and useless clock
we stumbled upon while searching
for some letter our grandmother had sworn
into existence, a letter of perfect love
tucked into a pack of army issued
playing cards--the box yellowed
and brushed with her husband's blood
she said, as if the wind had intended it,
had carried a small part of him back.
Though our father told us differently.
Pulling us aside he would tell us the story
of a fat and greasy hen that had lost
its way into a house, into a kitchen
where his mother sat quietly
at a table, biting blood unknowingly
from her lip while she finished
a round of solitaire, a thin white letter
crumpled at her fist. He told us reluctantly
of how the hen burst through the window,
squawking out the room's heavy silence,
the steady tick of the hallway clock that had held
his mother for hours in its careful order.
Fingering the gears, we remember
how he would lean closer to whisper
us into the room where a baffled and greedy
chicken snatched from our grandmother's
hand the final and ready king. His eyes
would widen to hear for us the sharp
ring of metal, to tell us how the knife
that she snapped down onto its neck
seemed to come from air, from
the cold edge, the precise chaos
of a heart breaking on its own.

A Prelude

According to scholarly gossip,
Gérard de Nerval leaned naked
from the tops of moonlit trees
crying out the name of a woman he
believed a star--though she only
quivered out light, a sideways
glance like the cocked head of a bird
who eyes the widely silent mouth
of a shotgun clicking in the undergrowth.
But wait. Nerval wasn't crazy, though
he paraded a lobster on a blue ribbon
through the gardens of the Palais-Royale,
though he hanged himself by an apron
string he had christened the "Garter of Sheba."
Perhaps he too had watched, knees
planted in mud, a flock of wild doves
scatter back from a lonely field.
And perhaps he knew too well
the wild turkeys that young boys
hunted clumsily, knew how they
wore their wattles *comme les*
coeurs ridiculeux--like hearts
pinned to the throat of the bravest
fool. But to children eager to bloody
their hands, the sight of this only
makes the empty plate emptier, the
table top more crooked on which
they rest their sweaty and simple
foreheads. Nerval, he understood
the weight of the unsaid, of impossible love--
the sorrow of a fat greasy bird returning to its roost.
And damnit! The first time I shouldered
a gun awkwardly one September,
I was forced to trudge again through
the strange triggerings of the heart that
make us both fool and beast; both cloud
and one-legged bird teetering into a kiss.
And we know full well that somewhere
near us in the dark, a branch will give into air,
an unspoken word will break fully into silence.
And we know that the firing of a bullet is best
accompanied by a sudden lurching towards flight--

a prelude of wild beautiful flapping.

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Appendix

“Medea’s Incantation”

From Book XV of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Translated from the Latin by Arthur Golding, Gentleman. (1567)

Before the moon should circlewise close both her horns in one
Three nights were yet as then to come. As soon as that she shone
Most full of light, and did behold the earth with fulsome face,
Medea with her hair not trussed so much as in a lace,
But flaring on her shoulders twain, and barefoot, with her gown
Ungirded, got her out of doors and wandered up and down
Alone the dead time of the night. Both man and beast and bird
Were fast asleep; the serpents sly in trailing forward stirred
So softly as you would have thought they still asleep had been.
The moisting air was whist; no leaf ye could have moving seen.
The stars alonely fair and bright did in the welkin shine.
To which she lifting up her hands did thrice herself incline,
And thrice with water of the brook her hair besprinkled she,
And gasping thrice she oped her mouth, and bowing down her knee
Upon the bare, hard ground she said, “ O trusty time of night
Most faithful unto privities, O golden stars whose light
Doth jointly with the moon succeed the beams that blaze by day,
And thou three-headed Hecate, who knowest best the way
To compass this our great attempt and art our chiefest stay;
Ye charms and witchcrafts, and thou earth, which both with herb and
weed
Of mighty working furnished the wizards at their need;
Ye airs and winds; ye elves of hills, of brooks, of woods alone;
Of standing lakes, and of the night, approach ye every one,
Through help of whom (the crooked banks much wond’ring at the thing)
By charms I make the calme seas rough and make the rough seas plain,
And cover all the sky with clouds and chase theme thence again.
By charms I raise and lay the winds and burst the viper’s jaw,
And from the bowels of the earth both stones and trees do draw.
Whole woods and forests I remove; I make the mountains shake,
And even the earth itself to groan and fearfully to quake.
I call up dead men from their graves; and thee, O lightsome moon,
I darken oft, though beaten brass abate thy peril soon;
Our sorcery dims the morning fair and darks the sun at noon.
The flaming breath of fiery bulls ye quenched for my sake,
And caused their unwieldy necks the bended yoke to take.

Among the earth-bred brothers you a mortal war did set,
And brought asleep the dragon fell whose eyes you were never shet,
By means whereof deceiving him that he had the golden fleece
In charge to keep, you sent it thence by Jason into Greece.
Now I have the need of herbs that can by virtue of their juice
To flowering prime of lusty youth old withered age reduce.
I am assured ye will it grant; for not in vain have shone
These twinkling stars, ne yet in vain this chariot all alone
By draught of dragons hither comes.' With that was from the sky.
A chariot softly glanced down, and stayed hard thereby.