

## RYGA NUMBER 8, SUMMER 2015



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## RYGA: A JOURNAL OF PROVOCATIONS NUMBER 8, SUMMER 2015



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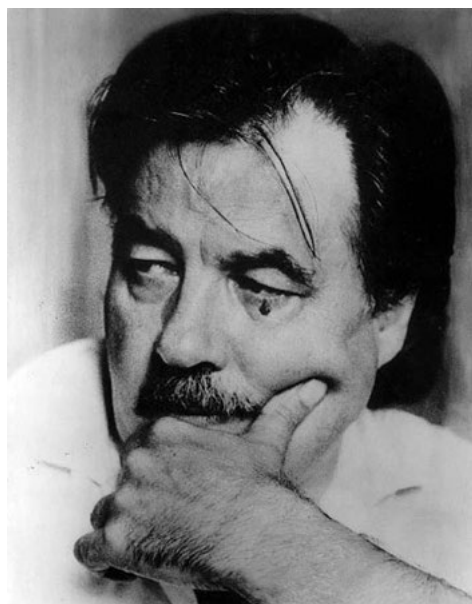
Editors: Sean Johnston and  
Corinna Chong

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**We take our name from Ryga**, a political writer, to honour his commitment to his art and to his world. His legacy is this: he was a human living in a community and that community was living in a nation, that nation in a world. He wrote without nostalgia about the world that lived around him. He believed the artist had a responsibility to write counternarratives, to treat the marginalized among us fairly, to challenge the formal boundaries of his art without losing the humanity of the characters that drive it. These characters live and move according to a complex, tentative political agreement that must not be taken as natural, but must be interrogated in every way.

—Sean Johnston, Editor

*Ryga* gratefully acknowledges the generous gift of Anne and Ted Chudyk, which has enabled us to continue publishing the important work of literary artists.



**George Ryga** (1931-87) is the author of Canada's best known English-language play, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, first produced in 1967. He was one of Canada's most prolific authors—he maintained a taxing work program as a short story writer, novelist, radio and television dramatist, poet and film scenarist, not to mention ventures into the world of ballet and opera. In a period of 14 years he produced 190 plays, two cantatas, five screenplays, two long-playing albums, three novels, and a book of poetry, as well as a considerable body of unpublished and unproduced work.



# JESSICA PIAZZA

Bomb

Woman  
Shattered

Not About  
Anything

Stalled  
Out





## **BOMB**

The nuclear tonight  
advanced.

Since the first shadow  
of the world's first sunlike  
flash:

—The age of fabrication  
and misgivings.

Brilliant tongues, exploded  
implications, unleashing

clouds of splendor and death.  
Some sort of sin. A knowledge  
they cannot lose.

—The age of the father,  
of praise and eminence.

A blank wall stripped  
of charm, violently authentic,  
echoing knowledge.

—The age of decline and fall,  
of massive experiences, compulsive culture.

Art was delicate work. Sciences,  
a celebrated ivory-tower, almost  
wholly divorced from its gravity.

A change of direction that added  
sinister overtones to the awakening  
world.



A love affair, now dead.

A continuing fury that unified  
the immense, tension-filled world.

The above is an erasure poem using the following source text:  
"J. Robert Oppenheimer, Atom Bomb Pioneer, Dies" Staff, *The New York Times*, OBITUARY,  
February 19, 1967. <http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/bday/0422.html>



## NOT ABOUT ANYTHING

Light the color of stone. A box.  
A mocking plaza. Burlap sacks  
over black robes, ecstatically rolled eyes.

In this heroic melody, a devilish whistle.  
*Life is cheap. Life is cheap.*

If this is what he needs to feel  
alive—a carpet-bomb, punches,  
a scathing end—he is among friends.

He is wooing the valuable battlefield.  
Those who stand and those who love  
destructive pleasure.

The greatest scandal in history  
is small talk. A big, public life  
fraught with golden flaws. A city's  
exhausting fear. A state insane.

There is no being kind.  
Life is cheap.

The above is an erasure poem using the following source text:  
“Martin Peretz Is Not Sorry. About Anything,” Stephen Rodrick, *The New York Times*, MAGAZINE,  
January 24, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/30/magazine/30Peretz-t.html>



## WOMAN SHATTERED

To fly was the cause, was the mission, was the explosion and crash.  
She said: *I'm cut*. She said: *I think, broken*. She had already made a  
commitment, but still.

She politely focused on her plan to cry.

She would be bad.  
Too bad.

In her early days, trained in weightlessness, she learned to fly. She chose  
space. She watched little girls in flight and learned to be revealing,  
shunned the reserved and reticent. The only disaster was that people had  
forgotten. Learned disintegration, insulation.

But she flew, twice. Twice, she lost.

The year floated away. She kept her secret. She fought for logic, and was  
devastated. When she wanted, she was homesick. When she laughed, her  
secret survived.

What drove her was not desire. All she wanted to do was fly.

The above is an erasure poem using the following source text:  
"American Woman Who Shattered Space Ceiling," Denise Grady, *The New York Times*, SPACE  
& COSMOS, July 23, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/24/science/sally-ride-trailblazing-astronaut-dies-at-61.html>



## STALLED OUT

A fast-charging, ultrafast  
charging reality seemed

ideal. Charging by, a fast-  
charge to a luminous day;

a charge with energy  
and stretch.

I meant: dispensing  
with anxiety.

That advice  
was wrong.

My knuckles were white  
from the effort.

The above is an erasure poem using the following source text:  
“Stalled Out on Tesla’s Electric Highway,” John M. Broder, *New York Times*, AUTOMOBILES,  
February 8, 2013. [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/10/automobiles/stalled-on-the-ev-highway.html?ref=automobiles&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/10/automobiles/stalled-on-the-ev-highway.html?ref=automobiles&_r=0)





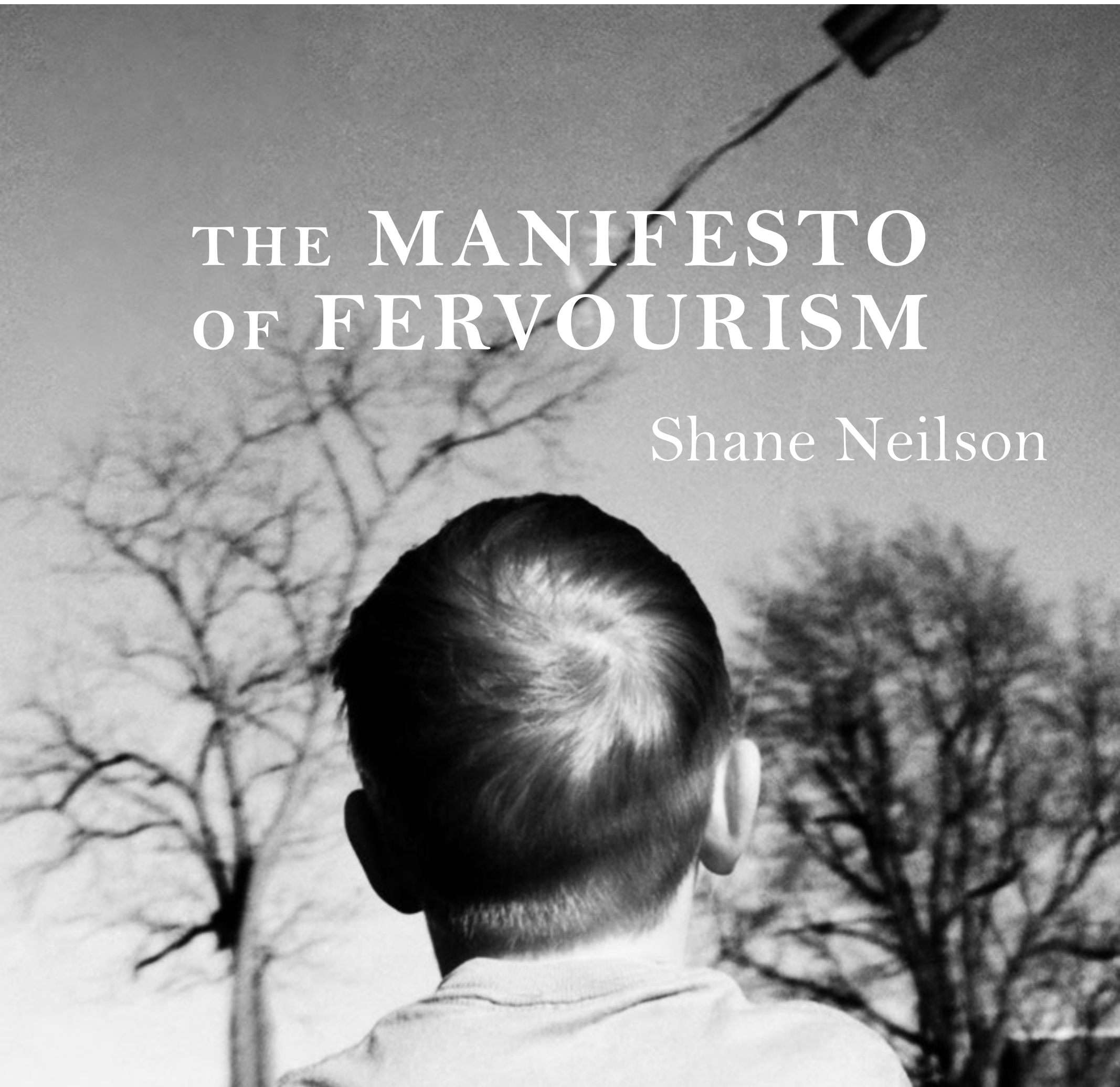
**Jessica Piazza** is

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# THE MANIFESTO OF FERVOURISM

Shane Neilson



METAPHOR, METAPHOR, METAPHOR. IT rises from the morass like a Swamp Thing, some terrible beauty waiting to be born. It forces a connection, a juxtaposition of idea, an interaction. There is applause. Under the applause is the actual heartbeat, the real meter of poetry, the real language of men. The pulse beats in the ear, the tinnitus under the floorboards of empty form. The heart says, “This is all lies.”

Metaphor trips the home Geiger counters. Critics and Nascent Poets run amok, screaming *New Metaphor is Nigh*. Critics and Nascent Poets are high on design, on conceptual beauty. These hillbillies and MFAs mistake technique for art, for conceptual thinking (because metaphor *is* conceptual thinking) as *le raison d’être*.

We ask: who ever read a poem for metaphor alone? Yet many have written for metaphor alone, for onanism, solipsism, the eternal meta of self. They forget that metaphor begins with *me*. A reader of poetry looks to the poem not for intellectual play (though that is fine) nor the pure hybridization of signs (though that is fine) nor for allegory (though that is fine) nor, and follow me on this sacrilege, for a quest along the highway of sound (though that, too, is fine). A reader looks to the poem for the strange condition of emotion–emotion embodied, enacted as revenant state that vicariously possesses the reader to bury her head in the cosmos of genuine feeling. The poem is a device of *fervour*. The poem is not a Costco of metaphors, a warehouse of metaphors stocked by just-in-time delivery protocols. (Where there’s a metaphor, there’s a carrier.)

Yet poetry written today does not possess an emotional register. The poetry of today does not register. Contemporary poetry prefers to avoid emotion altogether, rushing to the faux-frontier of metaphor, abandoning emotion at the hearth of home. Poems set out for fantastic territories in search of the legendary outlaw of metaphor. They leave their human kin shrinking and frozen next to a dwindling fire. Poetry today chooses either:

(1) to kill emotion on purpose. Kill the hearth and home as patricide, matricide, infanticide, and ultimately suicide (Whitman warned in song of the horrors of fratricidal war, “they come to me days and nights and go from me again,/ But they are not the me myself”), or

(2) to cook the books to create a metaphoric stew with mystery meat. The metaphoric stew is an associative game, a manipulative distraction that imposes upon the reader’s interpretative reach. Tickled wit sits in the belly of baffled gourmands. Poetry of this type exists as ugly cauldron forms o’erfilled with metaphors. Such hot pot poems boil



emotion off for the sake of ingredients. Toil t'was not worth the trouble. Metaphoric stew gets mixed reviews. This poetry is non-nutritive.

POETRY MAKING THESE CHOICES cannot survive outside a dedicated readership invested in the cult of personality of metaphor. Outside of the cult of personality, such poems are worthless because they have no intelligible structure save that of an unsafe playground. They are monkey bars for toddlers.

Poets who make these choices do not understand that every word in the English language is inherently metaphoric. Nietzsche understood this. I.A. Richards understood this. Max Black understood this. Lakoff and Johnson understand this. Every serious scholar who has studied the subject of metaphor understands the predicament facing even the lowly articles. O lowly articles, you too are doomed to metaphor! O poets of metaphor, you are the unacknowledged legislators of your own irrelevance! Self-appointed sheriffs who hunt the ghosts of the language at supposed frontiers, beware that fervour *is* the great frontier. That frontier is home and hearth! Go no further than your own bed, you splicers, you manglers and manaclists, you showcasers. Ghosts are everywhere. Listen to the pulse in your own ears.

A poem need not be narrative to have emotional effect. A poem need not use an abstract word, a signifier, in order to request a specific emotional effect, or a range of effects. No, a poem needs to have fervour in order to be a poem. Tautology is not our weakness, it is our strength. A poem needs to create a unified effect that is not incidental to naturally-occurring emotional effects in the language, just as a poem needs to create a unified effect not incidental to the naturally-occurring metaphoric properties of the language, just as a poem needs to create a unified effect not incidental to the naturally-occurring sonic properties of the language.

One word jerry-rigged next to another is a very old technique. Poets today forget that their mode is ancient. They make a “new” metaphor and consider themselves new. Theorists understand that metaphor is possibility itself, that metaphors are always already there. Poetry is a property of things but poems are not always already there. Poems are labor, not a Eureka of discovery. Metaphors may be the rocks in the heads of contemporary poets (always there) but poems are carved from that rock.

As if using a default, Unpoets cheat with the device of sound. They mean for sound to do the business of emotion. Attention to sound is mere sound technicianry, not artistry. Sound cannot create the program of fervour alone. Sound is to emotion what metaphor is to emotion—related, but not a pure vehicle. Sound and metaphor are emotion’s servants. Metaphor is the vista of thought, of apprehension, and sound is the accompanying score, the thunder of hoofbeats. Emotion is the simple heartbeat





underneath the poem's breathing life. Fervour animates the body of the poem. Fervour is life! In the hands of Unpoets, sound is a braying, over-encumbered mule that collapses on the way out of Nazareth. Sound can't spice up the metaphoric stew.

On the horizon, the poet commands a regiment of horse and lance to raze a village. The regiment attacks the hearth and home of over a hundred souls. The poet's image is the horse and flame. His sound conjures screams, clangs. His emotion is an abdicated throne, for emotion is the individual life, the village itself, man and woman and child and the bonds between them. Unpoet sees only his technical victory, for he writes from the horizon while marshalling metaphor. Unpoet is proud of his metaphors, the metaphors of *me*. But his poem has no heartbeat despite hoofbeats and death. It is sterile, as null as metaphoric calisthenics for emotional paralytics.

This is not a political manifesto. The dead Futurists and syphilitic Surrealists hoped to change society. They met their corporate fates. Poets of Metaphor vend Breton T-shirts in flea markets. The Manifesto of Fervourism is an aesthetic-humanist manifesto. Fervour cannot be bought. Fervour is incorruptible! Fervour is not a commodity. Commodities cannot shatter you. Call your financial adviser and town councillor for prosaic advice. We deal in human souls.

Fervour is standard, a requirement for poetry. Emotion is the way a poem makes its way in the world. A reader remembers a poem only if the poem transferred its emotion, if there was a living graft. To ironize emotion is facile. To write out traffic reports from a local news station is an insipid stunt-jump of boredom. No one will read that poem entire. No one will remember that poem. All that the reader can remember is Unpoet's traffic-report ambition, that Unpoet's audacity demanded his traffic report be designated as "poem." We do not agree with that honorific.

We think of soul. We talk of power. In our conversation is rhetoric, fact, science. We are unafraid of systems of belief. We also hate. For us, what is between heartbeats is emotion. We do not say "only emotion" but we do say, as Pound says, "Only emotion endures." We do say, as Frost says, "Poetry is when an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found words." Frost sets the right order—emotion is first. We do not agree with Wordsworth's blather about overflow or tranquillity. Poetry retains its shattering power from before the time of composition onward. We also think Eliot is very confused about emotion in poetry—at one moment calling poetry an "escape from emotion," then formulating it as an "objective correlative," then using a process metaphor to call it a "concentration" (we agree somewhat with Eliot here) but finally, in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," incoherently describing his belief that "great poetry may be made without the direct use of any emotion whatever: composed of



feelings solely.” We feel that this sentence is silly, written by an addled man who became enamoured of fervour before too long a time passed.

We say that metaphor is the husk of an erroneous tradition, a venerated baby that has become a tyrant. Metaphors are disciplined by fervour, and emotion requires metaphors to be subservient to a unified effect. Metaphors must be organized and have a sum. The sum is their effect. Effect is, always, understood in terms of emotion. This unified effect must overwhelm sense. We are not getting from point A to B, nor are we comparing A to B. We are making whole cosmologies.

When we speak of the resources of poetry, we mean that the deepest vein is fervour. When we speak of the smallest poem, we speak of fervour, just as we do when we speak of the largest. The same vein informs the same successful poem. Poetry is a property of things. Emotion revolves around the poem’s nucleus like electrons.

When we speak of emotion, we do not mean sentiment. We understand the difference. We are not confused. We know the mawkish risk of emotion like we know the onanism of metaphor. The risk of self-satisfied metaphor is a poetics of individual lines. We know writers of great lines and great metaphors. They are not great poets. They write headlines to community newspapers. They are the poets of Glitter Dolphins.

Great poets are not afraid of fervour. Greater than sense, much more awesome and terrible than sense, is emotion. Meaning is emotion. We mean to hurt the heart, to make it adapt, to quicken it or to charm it. The heart allows us because we bring the words to its door. We ask to be let inside. We rap at the valves. The heart accepts the song because the song is in praise of the heart, though sense is less than emotion, fervour transcends sense. The heart is honoured but also unconcerned. The heart is wise. The heart knows we are poets because it beats. It does not beat for us. We are for it.

We are for fervour.

## **The Four Chambers of Fervourism**

### (I) CHOOSE THE EMOTIONAL LIFE.

Metaphor, like emotion, is abstraction but emotion has the advantage of lived experience. Metaphors are tools of comparison but are not prosthesis of emotion. One cannot feel a metaphor. Words are inherently metaphoric but they do not possess emotion to the same certainty. Their sound and their meaning denote, connote,





and sing certain effects as individual signifiers but, to have coherence as vehicles of emotion, they must add to a whole. Therefore it is our vulnerability that we inflict on all who seek poetry. We are not Romantics. We do not tremble in cold castles. We harness the cellular substance that wishes survival. Done properly, soon enough the emotional life will choose you.

(2) EMOTION MUST BE DYNAMIC.

Our technique is to vary emotional effects. We do not traffic in a single emotion. We rejoice, we mourn, we celebrate small things and notice when they are gone. Our poems scaffold emotion, allowing emotion to extend or collapse. Emotion is cultivated in lines so as to overwhelm a reader's natural resistance. Pain and Love are forces that, when captured, can rouse the passions of the souls of others. Pain and Love must age in lines in order to develop. We have failed if our limericks do not provoke laughter or desire. We have failed if our ghazals sway obscurely in an Arabian night or in Vancouver's revivalist tents. We are failures if we do not confess that, metaphorically, we mean to abscond with your sensibilities. We are cunning thieves.

(3) BE THE EMOTION THAT OTHERS WISH THEY FELT.

Be *this* emotion because the Fervourist poem inspires the emotion that readers feel. Readers have felt the poles of Love and Pain working within them before. As audience to a Fervourist poem, they now feel these poles again because they still feel that historical Love and Pain. Their pieces never mended because they, too, have always been unwitting Fervourists.

(4) SEEK TO AFFECT OTHERS WITH FERVOURISM.

Use the emotional effects refined in the poem to instill in others a sympathetic response. Feed off this response to heighten emotional effects. Poetry is the gospel of emotional contagion—poems spreading as energy from one mind to the next. No greater gift than to be honoured by emotion, no greater resource than words whirling out of a roar.



**Shane Neilson** is a writer from New Brunswick. He published *On Shaving Off His Face* with the Porcupine's Quill this year, a book of poems that structurally incorporates tenets from the *Manifesto of Fervourism* and which also suggests the symbol of fervourists: [O].

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# Elise Marcella Godfrey

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Author's Note

Follow the Water

Elders, Echo Bay, Great Bear Lake

LaBine, Echo Bay, Great Bear Lake

Women, Hidden Bay, Rabbit Lake

Women, Smoothstone Lake

Women, Clam Lake

Women, Minnow Lake



## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

These poems are part of a manuscript that explores the impacts of uranium mining in northern Saskatchewan. Working with voices found in transcripts from public hearings, I have both imitated and altered the form of the transcripts to stage a kind of poetic intervention, creating a chorus of Women and a chorus of Elders and inserting an Unknown speaker as well.



## FOLLOW THE WATER

From the mouth of the widest river,  
along the shield's edge.

From the Great Lakes, past  
Hudson Bay to the Beaufort Sea.

Winnipeg, Reindeer, Athabasca,  
Great Slave, Great Bear.

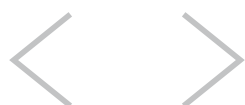
Fresh water runs on an angle,  
cuts across the continent.

Port Radium, northwest.  
Port Hope, southeast.

Mine and refinery.

Between: snake rivers,  
rail line ladders,

track the pageant from glacial retreat  
to the hammered routes of trade.



## ELDERS

### ECHO BAY, GREAT BEAR LAKE

The rock revealed itself to the seer.

In his dream, metal birds.  
A hole in the earth.

White-skinned men  
descend and return

with a black rock  
that explodes

over the widest ocean—  
an island near its shore.





## LABINE

### ECHO BAY, GREAT BEAR LAKE

Saint Paul snow blind,  
no charcoal on his cheeks.

A poultice of tea leaves over his eyes, I left him  
in the dark shack, went to stake

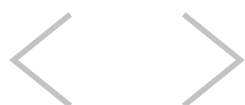
the claim. A great wall seamed with silver,  
cobalt bloom, copper green.

Marigold oxide on the black rock  
like powdered sunshine lichen.

A piece of ore the size of a plum. I knew it  
by its specific gravity: solid

pitchblende. Straining to hold  
more energy than it could contain.

Throwing off gamma rays, errant  
vibrations that penetrate in waves.



## WOMEN

### HIDDEN BAY, RABBIT LAKE

We began to dig ourselves

deeper than we dreamed  
when we began to see

metal as other than medicine,  
our bodies, more than mineral.

Copper traces our skin,  
iron, our blood.

Alkaline earth, our bones, teeth,  
heartbeat. Potassium,

sodium, our pulse.  
Sulphur. Selenium.

Zinc.



## WOMEN

### SMOOTHSTONE LAKE

Lead in the lake bed's silt  
sinks so swiftly.

How to sift the many metals?

No sieve made for this,  
except a fish's liver

or its mouthful of mud.

A skiff skims the surface

in slow circles, mirrors  
the microscope's myopic lens.

What won't the single sample show?

The many pathways radium takes  
as it decays. Always, there is more,

unseen, travelling below  
at the pace of stone.

Changes accumulate, accrue  
in increments, inching

outward into the unknown.



## WOMEN

### CLAM LAKE

Collapse occurs close to the earth,  
from cracks in its foundation.

Lowest orders fall first.  
Roots die at their deepest.

Oldest and earliest.  
Invertebrates.

Smallest and softest,  
some barely visible.

Shells coiled in codes.  
Exoskeletons exposed.



## WOMEN

### MINNOW LAKE

We dream our hands corrode  
from the inside out. Palms open like pits.  
Marrow turned acidic,  
burning through bone.

The data never did determine  
exactly how fast this happens.  
How much time it takes to decay.

No measurement—  
microrems or millisieverts,  
picocuries or becquerels—  
no accurate unit for fear.



**Elise Marcella Godfrey** recently returned to the west coast after six years in Saskatoon. She holds an MFA in Writing from the University of Saskatchewan. Her MFA thesis, a poetry manuscript entitled *Rabbit Lake*, won a Governor General's Academic Gold Medal for Fine Arts and Humanities. Her poetry has recently appeared in *PRISM* and *CV2*, and is forthcoming in *Room* and *filling Station*.

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# No One But Himself

**MICHAEL KENYON**



1.

THE MIDWIFE ARGUED WITH the doctor who hauled him out with forceps anyway, and with a thunderclap he washed up on shore. For five days the best he could do was a half-dead fly in a swaying web in the white place while other babies who would not listen rolled around and howled.

Nobody should have doubts at this age. The lights were so bright. He was abandoned, shipwrecked, a castaway who couldn't stop talking. When the nurse scooped him up and carried him down corridors, he met pirates and tried each language—English, Dutch, French, African dialects, Indian dialects, American tribal dialects, Spanish. The nurse was a nun from Convent of Las Consebinas who told him of the unhealthy air of Porto Bello.

Back at his mother's breast he took a nipple in the afternoon, listening to new rumbles between a man and this harbour. "Amalgam, Barbarous, Collision, Destiny, Epiphany." He'd never seen such rain. The window was streaming. His mother's breasts were streaming. He was black and blue. She told him she'd confused him with black tulips.

The man smiled at him but blankly.

All manner of things and animals and people had gathered, waiting, and now were listening just to him. The foliage was in the way, as was concern for his mother, as was his own size and ability, as were walls and windows. He needed, among other things, to explain that he was no bird or copycat or urchin. He turned from the nipple to question the man, but was shipwrecked again on the same hostile sterile promontory. He interrogated a castle owner about his scorched-earth policy. "Up the Chagre River west of Colon into the jungle with a force of twelve hundred."

There were noise-like words and word-like sounds; he played with both but did not have the meaning knack, though he was beginning to grasp and manipulate the flashes when exhaustion hit him like a fleshy wall.

It went on like this, rescue and shipwreck, the nun carting him along symmetrical corridors to the floaty web in the corner by the window, to his mother, back to the white place, to his father. He shaped his voice till it was full of plaint, a confession if that would do, an apology if that would do the trick, a summation of the events of his life so far, a comparative study of pre- and post-womb societies, attempts that he knew were going nowhere and which he should not expect ever to end. Nothing had prepared him. Each rescue took him past rows of faces and to each he pled his case: should a human soul be so treated? Was this capture and release? Was this the price to pay for an audience? Were they his wide continuous diverse family and he the sole performer?



And then the egg cracked, the wind freshened and blew the roof off and he bounced in his mother's arms away from hospital smells and into new introductions and challenging protocols.

He opened his mouth and spoke to a crow, a street, eight houses and a freighter. He spoke to heat and cold and his father's prickly stinky friends, icicles and sunbeams and uncle's fingers. What did he tell? It was a long unbroken description of all he'd seen before the time of wreckage and rescue, and it was nuanced and detailed, a portrait of God in a cosmic gallery, the flares and iridescent explosions from wars that must be recounted, for this was important, this was the prehistory of his species. The birth of fingernails, the right to choose, the mouthful of scavenged antelope, a baseball hat on a battlefield, the musical *always* of his mother's voice going on and on except at night, dreams that would open all the doors and windows, and angels lining up for the rickety roller-coaster that was being assembled and would soon take up all the space in the backyard and...

Creatures nodded and made trilling noises, but made no sign that they understood what he was telling them.

He kept extolling the epic. They kept interrupting. He grew desperate. It began to fade. Its vivid urgency diminished. And then at last he began to understand the level of their expectations of themselves and of him. At first disheartened with the paltry traffic they taught him to use in glory's place, and then horrified, he talked ferociously, passionately, to everyone.

Then when he was two a woman with a large face and loose throat praised his foot.

"What a little foot," she said. "Such a pretty foot."

He was dumbstruck. He stopped talking in amazement.

She took his foot in her rough hand and held it to her cheek. The heat of her hand, the penetration of her stare. And he stopped and felt the simple separate pieces that he'd been noticing lately (but needed to ignore because he couldn't connect them) fit together.

The new terrible confusions began with socks, which foot to which sock? which sock to which shoe? and proceeded through buttons and the discovery of size and order—his pants button would fit into his mother's shirt's torn buttonhole but that was wrong—and vehicles, which side? how turn? why was outside inside in transit? He was a vital tiny speck in the thrust of things who had been awarded a voice big enough to infiltrate every nook and mall and empyrean his senses butted up against, and the urge to describe such forays, and he was reduced to geography. He tried to please his mother but it was useless. She found him perfectly flawed. And as far as his dad was concerned he was a show-off.





Then came the period of cuts and stomach-aches and here is the potty (the summit of his tribe's cultural accomplishments), do a Good One.

He spoke to everyone, adapting the plain system he'd inherited, and said nothing of interest, as far as he was concerned, until he was twenty-six and falling in love. He met his cousin Emma in the university cafeteria amid a blinding riot of silver slashing light, crash of crockery, chirping voices. He didn't hear a word she said and none of her communication reached him, except for the way she leaned. The way she leaned, listening to him, shaped something similar, a kind of twirl, in him.

Charles decided that from then on he'd speak as if he belonged to a race of speakers who would only speak to those who knew how to listen. And Emma was the queen of listeners. The twirl turned into a squirm. *Be careful*, he said to himself. *Conserve.*

2.

THE GIRL WHO LISTENED began with geese. Because she was born in spring and by September all her friends were flying south, she heard for the rest of her life in all voices only endings, farewells. She lay on her back as still as she could and listened to her mother's stories of going away. The Genesis list of *au revoir*; Moses on the lam; Noah and all the animals.

Dear Emma, your grandmother is going away soon and you will never see her again, she is my mother and I came out of her tummy just like you came out of my tummy and one day... well never mind that now... it is time to listen to what she has to say before she leaves. Dear Emma, this is your new brother and he is small and needs all our help and I still love you but will have to spend a lot of time with him and, look there's Daddy going to work! Dear Emma, off you go down the steps, go play with the big children on the beach before they go to school, and your cousin? Just ignore him, he's just teasing, go on, wave bye-bye to the sun, stay away from the waves, they want to take you to Neptune's Cave. Dear Emma, kiss Daddy, he is going to live with his graduate student in a snake pit and will visit you on weekends. Dear Emma, I won't tell you again, this is the last time, I've had it up to here, don't cling! you are always underfoot!

Flap flap flap. Honk honk honk.

The girl who listened to everything felt safe in vehicles, and travelled the world in perambulator and wagon and wheelbarrow and tricycle and school desk and library carrel, with and to and from her mom, smiling at everyone and then laughing, and



a smile would hook a smile, a laugh would wake a laugh as pleasing as a pigeon coo. Listen. That's a disposal unit; that's a sucker truck; that's a jet. Those are mice feet; that's a crow; that's footsteps. Each crackle and scuff told her she had all the time in the world to practise words, round and fluid conversations in her head.

Because one day a boy would come, a poet explorer done with his travels, a boy with a mysterious illness, and he would give her long unhurried sentences as they crossed the Atacama, Patagonia, the Serengeti, the Rift Valley, the Gobi, Archangel on the Dvina, Tasmania, the Ghats, Bhutan, and the Olympic Peninsula, places whose names would wrap around her, impenetrable, words to hold her and catch the attention of passing hunters and gatherers pausing to tie their horses and camels and oxen and goats to stakes in remote outposts in order to converse as they traversed the plain from cities to villages.

It would take years and all her time and energy, but she wanted more than anything to find the perfect listening stance to hear such words and names, and although she did not at first recognise her long-lost cousin when he came to visit, she closed her eyes and listened, and found it. Breath, breath, breath. Basket of ducks, basket of geese, destined for market. A herd of wild ponies. A dog backed into an alley. Her foremost self leapt. It was him! She was his! This was possible! And then she was running, running, never stopping for more than a heart-thundering breath. *The Tao of Running, Zen of Track and Field*, her feet slap-slapping winter sidewalks and red-gravel circuits. It was him and she was skinny, hard, muscled and through the applause she would only smile and bow, smile and bow. Her background a chorus of tragedy, last days, cellular exile, but now Greek was Latin, Latin was French, French was English.

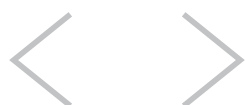
Dear Emma, the desert is not empty, but he has come a long way and you only get to say the briefest hello. And these quickly erected buildings? These scaffolds, libraries, museums and galleries, factories and collieries? Don't trust them, don't believe in them. They will crumble, and you will be under the sun again, dear Emma. This is Charles. He is possible. Speak a perfect greeting. Do not stop listening and do not get fat.

Slap slap slap. Honk honk honk.

All sounds as last words. All thoughts as warnings and instructions. Charles!

3.

"HELLO," HE SAID, STANDING in front of her. He was big, tall, blue, and loud.



“Hello,” she said.

“I have an olive for you,” he said, and offered a plastic tub of black glistening ovals.

He was strange. Already he shimmered.

“I feel I can’t say anything to you I’ve said before,” he said, sitting down.

She was frozen. His dust in her eyes, his smell in her nose. She heard something in the soft edges of his voice that she reached for and it powdered like rust from iron, red and dry and crystalline.

“Do you want to dance?” he said.

“Here?” She felt her word waver in his direction, a wagon train, a hunting party.

“Everything seems smaller now I’m home,” he said. “I’ve wanted to talk to you for such a long time, ever since I first saw you, I mean when we were children. Have another olive. What’s wrong?”

She shrugged. His purple shirt was unbuttoned to show a white chest with dark springy fur, and his eyes, light blue, already danced as he leaned forward across the table. She watched him deftly shape each dangerous word, “Biology, ornithology, geology,” as he stared at her. “Galapagos.” He laughed and waved out of the cafeteria windows toward students on the concourse. “Or maybe I should tell you in order what has happened to me?”

She leaned away. “Sure. Everything.”

“No, no. Not yet.” He stirred a finger in the air, his eyes closed. “Let me think.”

Everything because everything was swimming in silver. She wiggled her toes in the green rainy light coming through the window. She felt like dancing. Wiggling her toes in hard sand. The sky was full of butterflies, and Charles was across from her, explaining the dangers of mercury, the overpopulation of the world, climate change, refugia, and the near extinction of mountain gorillas and the big cats.

4.

THEY BOUGHT A HOUSE in the country where Charles watched Emma give birth to a girl, Anne, and two years later to a son, George. On the train back to the city after George, he had a dream. He and Emma were walking outside in springtime. The familiar road was wet, empty except for a gull striding along the yellow line, screaming. When he woke it had rained and the sky was overcast and the woodland running the length of the tracks contained many ragged trees. He tried to make a calculation on live versus dead branches. He got stuck between separate branches and possible lives.





5.

THERE WAS A NEW bay window. They liked to stand together in its compass and watch the sky and the fields. Today the fields lay below a steel-grey sky. Two crows were strutting along the path. Wind scuttled rain against the window while a line of cloud brightened to the south. Emma observed and behind her Charles strode the room.

This grasp at a moment wants to make visible the transition between niche and cloister. They (we) call it a crossroad. Remission or decline, extinction or rebound? How can all that has been not be? How can faith be beside the point? What is about to happen? Repetition, like the scattered rain hitting the window, will carry them forward. Once the next scene is upon them there will be no window or rain or crows strutting or clouds brightening. The horizon may be blue to the south, but Emma will be watching her son and Charles will be climbing the stairs to the attic, where Anne, wide-mouthed and feverish, treacherously asleep on a galleon, free of her parents' out-loud promises, is indentured to something invisible.

6.

ON ANNE'S FIRST MORNING at school Charles got up before dawn and sat with a candle at his father's desk in the attic and made a fist and looked at it. *And God remembered Noah.* Had God forgotten the man with all the animals? Charles looked up at his face in the window-glass. His head was never straight, it was always cocked to one side; now it was smiling. He looked like his dad. He took paper and pen out of the drawer and made a list of four things he wanted to know about himself. When he studied the list, he saw that these were not questions his wife should see even if she could answer them. He felt older than thirty-six. His face looked raw. "Why am I anxious?" was the first question. "Why do I talk like a river?" "Why do I love my daughter more than my son?" "When will I tell the thing I can't tell?"

Light showed in the east. The questions were of no use. They were unscientific. The answers would stand for nothing if he answered them with no one listening. The golden September light came on snail's pace and made him feel melancholy. Human events happened too suddenly. He wanted to slow things down, live in motion slow as this light. He listened to the house. He was on the top floor, his children sleeping beneath him, while the travelling sun bent its patient light through the atmosphere. Over the fields, in the city, were his busy colleagues. He was exhausted. A moth lay dead on the floor in the dust under the desk. Of his grandparents, their parents, theirs and theirs, he knew almost nothing—only what he knew of their presence in him. The



things in the room were gaining colour and edges and ordinariness. He was aware of his place among them. These things had been collected and moved from place to place through some inconceivable effort. They were his things, his and Emma's, and they would pass on to Anne and George. The light was amazing. He could imagine his kids walking separately away into this hot darkness, into careers and mates and their own children.

After breakfast Emma and Charles walked Anne along the highway to the bus stop. The girl sat down in the shelter and would not speak and refused to stand up. Emma began to cry. Charles said he would carry the girl back to the house and drive her to school, there was time, or they could say goodbye there, or Emma could ride the bus with Anne, or—

“It doesn't matter,” Anne said. She sat straight.

Emma looked at him as if she was waiting for him to say or do something.

“One of us should go back to George,” he said.

When the bus rumbled into sight Anne stood up and waved, waved the bus on, but it stopped anyway.

Emma scooped the thin girl into her arms and Charles felt stiff and upright as he watched them struggle. Eventually Emma set Anne on her feet by the rattling bus. They stood there, the three of them, in the long shadows. That's what we do, thought Charles, we turn that struggle with those we love inwards.

“I'm going to school by myself,” said Anne.

She boarded the bus and Emma and Charles watched through the dirty rear window as she made her way down the aisle clutching seats to either side for balance.

7.

EMMA YAWNED AND WONDERED why Charles insisted on order in everything. March was the “month of our wedding,” “our anniversary month,” and every year she posed the question that their lives perhaps no longer fit them, expecting a discussion to follow, and perhaps a decision to pack up and move or at least a plan to travel, and all Charles did was build onto the house—a study, the sand-walk, the glass schoolhouse, last year the bay window, and what this year? They were comfortable, but she was restless.

They enticed their first student to enrol when George was four. Four years ago. Tom's girl Abi. Emma's disillusionment had been complete when it was clear that only one child was going to show up.



“You wanted to build the school,” Charles had said, “and I wanted to make you happy.”

“The village children are suspicious of us.”

“Of me, you mean.”

“Oh, come on, Charles. You’re only interested in science, I’m interested in other people. It’s time you opened up a bit. You need to be with others.”

In any case more students attended in the following years.

She looked at Charles reading. His mouth was open. She was fascinated by his mouth. She seldom noticed his eyes. Perhaps that would be it, a little renovation every year. They always argued about it. What he wanted, what she wanted. He spoke, she contradicted. Sometimes she spoke, but he never listened. She couldn’t keep her thoughts on track. This house was almost aquatic in the spring, the birdsong fishsong. And the sound of rain was like Noah’s final lecture. They had nineteen children this year, down from twenty-four last. These days and weeks would lead these kids into their well-earned future: family for some, yes, but higher education and research for a few. The wind was freshening. And here they were analysing their relationship in terms of what could happen next. Or she was analysing; he was pretending to read. The windows contained green hills, rippled and distorted. The children dressed in rain capes had just come in and were squeaking along the blue tiles. A boy was struggling with the heavily sprung bathroom door. Soon would be lunch time.

She’d tell them the story of Noah this afternoon. She’d told it all before, variations on why, what and how. Why did the Lord flood the world? What had we done that was so wicked? How could it rain so much? According to Charles, there had been a single cataclysmic event. Nature throwing in a wrench, dipping an oar, tightening a screw. With Charles, her silence on God was unsilent. Couldn’t he just float out his theories and allow her her belief every now and then? While he read, the clouds rolled away. Everything in their vicinity was dripping; the sun came out; the boy came out of the washroom across the hall. He looked shocked, suspicious, pleased, puzzled, interested, and dazed, in that order. And Emma burrowed deeper into her thoughts and tried not to disturb Charles.

The sun illuminated his face and his open mouth. What was he thinking? She reached and hit him on the shoulder. “It’s lunchtime. If you want a sandwich, go and get one.”

And obediently he wandered off. He disappeared for an hour.

She bent her head and drank in the gorgeous plumage of the carpet. Charles was still good-looking, youthful. He had perfected his wall at last, after all his years hovering and crouching over each stone and placement, his fool-work. He had



built his path and wall and now he was like a runaway, walking the circuit at every opportunity, a master of escaping her questions.

She felt his attention on her and looked up. "What's wrong?"

"Annie has had a hard fall. She's soaked. She was at the farm getting patched up."

"Is she all right?"

"I think so. She's getting changed."

8.

"HOW ARE YOU TODAY?" he asked.

The girl lay pale under the skylight, just awake. Last night had been worse than the night before. She had had her second fever. No medicine would help. He had drunk too much wine. They had sent George to his grandparents in the city and cancelled all classes. He had had with Emma incomplete sex and now he was upstairs in Anne's bedroom feeling guilty.

"I'm okay, Papa."

"Will I tell you a story?"

"Yes, please."

Afterward he went downstairs to the front room where Emma stood looking out of the bay window. She turned as soon as she heard him. "How is she?"

He shook his head. "When she's sick I can't think."

Emma sank into her chair. She played with the worn threads of the armrest. "Are you afraid, Charles? Are you afraid?"

"They bury themselves in the sand."

"Who do?"

"The San. The original humans, according to genetic research. The folk who stayed in Africa when the rest of us left. To escape the heat. What do you think are our chances of understanding life before our grandchildren come along?"

She looked away from him. "Please don't start."

"All creatures seek water, but only at certain times of the day. When it is safe. What if knowledge is water?"

She flinched. She wrinkled her nose. She craned her neck, gazing through the bay window, fingers busy with the worn armrest. "Our kids are good, aren't they?"

He went to the window to see what she was looking at. The road outside was wet, empty except for a gull striding along, big red screams leaving its beak. "She will be okay."



“I’m afraid now, Charles.”

“She will be fine, sweetheart.”

“But she’s worse, isn’t she, Charles?”

“Yes.”

“She woke me up in the night. When I went into her room, she was soaking wet.”

“She’s sleeping now.”

9.

THE TRIP ALONG THE sand-walk overflown by Canada geese was a last goodbye. Their sweet child was gone.

“When did the light begin to fade?” he said. “Was it that first year in the city, when we began misunderstanding each other? Is it our fault? Do you know?”

“I don’t want you to do this now. You want to offend God and I want to praise Him.”

“I mean no offence. I can only blame nature and myself. I only have questions.”

“You ask stupid questions. I think you’ve never considered me. Most of the time you are in your own world. You don’t care about me.”

“I don’t ask stupid questions.”

“All right.”

“Are you actually interested in hearing what I think?”

“Most of it has nothing to do with anyone. Listening to you is exhausting. It’s a constant sort of useless exercise.”

“Do you want me to stop talking to you?”

“It was Anne’s time. She loved Jesus.”

“That doesn’t help me.”

“We are breaking down, Charles. We need to be with others. I feel so heavy today,” she said. “And yet life’s going on. We’re not getting anywhere, are we? Let’s go back.”

They had ceased. They had stopped halfway round the path. Emma was panting, her mouth open. There would be no greater challenge. Probably for both of them. The geese were so loud. Perhaps it was her fault. Perhaps her heart was failing. He felt her shift. Her weight was leaving his side, her body was crossing the path, going away. He watched her draw the shawl over her hair. Her shoulders were wet.

“Wait.”





Through the trees the windows of the house reflected green and sky. He felt they were the only passengers. And she was leaving him. Clouds were massed to the west. Women struggled with God, that heavily sprung idea. *Déjà vu?*

“Wait! I have something to say.”

10.

THEY WERE RETURNING TO the house. She was trying to breathe. She'd listen to him now, even though she'd heard it all before, or variations, because she had to hang onto something and his voice was a life line. He spoke, she listened. And if she had never really listened before, never really heard, did it matter? She was listening now. She wouldn't contradict him. God had thrown in His wrench, dipped His oar, tightened His screw. Her silence was silent. He was eloquent. Incredible. Like birds calling. Like ravens calling. Incredible. Let him converse with the hedge-dwellers, the shaw-birds, in their vicinity. Let him charm wrens from their thicket. Each quick, suspicious, pleased, puzzled wren. She was inside and outside at once. She was between rooms. She burrowed deeper into herself as the sun illuminated his face, his talking mouth. She could see all his years of hovering and crouching over rocks and fossils, all the seas he'd crossed. He had built his lectures and now he was breaking them down for her. He was like a derailed train. She was fascinated. The split world was full and mobile, even though it was poisoned. They shouldn't have sent George away. That haze was from the fire in the death room. What a beautiful pearly light in the smoke. Opalescent.

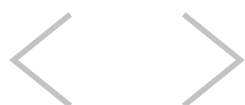
“Of course we keep going because we are following our desire. I am following my desire to speak and you are following the desire to listen. The geese follow the seasons and the seasons...”

What was he? She turned and struck his chest with her fist.

11.

HE SHRANK BACK, TOLD her she looked like the graceful statue of Mary she kept on her dresser. He knew the longer he talked and the longer she listened the quicker time would fly. And he could always find, after all, something to say, especially now she had given up trying not to listen.

“We are confused,” he said, “by the uncertainty that ensues when long-held



patterns of behaviour are interrupted. It's not just us. So many of these birds—thrushes, robins, wrens, tits, finches—are in trouble. The latest mist-netting fieldwork and point-counts tell of coming extinctions. Listen to those rooks. The Bushmen's language follows the calls of birds...

She bent her head. "Annie's hair was so soft and fine."

He drank her in. She was still good-looking, though no longer youthful. "There is a filled niche—no room for listening or talking—when eros is in the room."

"Charles? What's happening?"

He felt her attention on him. He studied her. She looked away toward the house. This was frightening. He was frightened. He leaned forward and kissed her ear.

12.

"WAS I ASLEEP?"

"Oh, just for an hour."

They were upstairs in Anne's room. Emma lay on the bed under the skylight. Last night the house had been empty all over again.

"How do you feel today?"

"I am trying, Charles, but it makes no sense. How are you?"

"Not good. Not so good."

"I depend on you, you know."

"You want me to worship."

"I don't."

Again he saw her weight shift before she turned over and slid out of Annie's bed. She crossed the room. He watched her draw the curtains back.

"The sun is so red," she said. "What time is it?"

"Nearly seven."

"That's haze from the city, I suppose. What a light in the sky. Pearly pink..."

She stayed a long time at the window. He stood guard.

"What was it you said? *Once a niche is filled, then Eros looks for a change?*"

"That's just the way it is."

13.

BUT NOW SHE'D STOPPED listening. She was the mother who had given birth to the children of this man and she couldn't remember how she had got to where she was,



where she was, who was around her, or what he was. Let him talk to others, she didn't want to witness it.

"I have been pregnant and in labour and now I have lost a child." She took his hand and set it on her belly. "What happens if I deny God? I will never repair this."

"We must bring George home," he said.

"Yes, we must get George home."

14.

FOR TWO YEARS THEIR SON never stopped running, inside and outside the house. His constant running helped them. The summer he turned ten he sat still in the morning to read to Emma from his story books and it calmed her, and they had small conversations all through the day. She found that the conversations with her son were little safe islands in the midst of the sad chaos. Everything had been out of hand, almost too much. Now it was almost in hand. Charles was absent most of the day working, shopping, cooking and cleaning.

She knew he didn't want to be quietly with her alone.

The three of them sat together in the garden in the afternoon.

George told them the story of the three kings and two crowns and the magic wagon full of words that fell off a bridge into a chasm.

Charles said nothing.

She asked why didn't the kings share the crowns?

George shouted that they were busy men with kingdoms to run.

"A kingdom? What good is a kingdom?" she said.

They laughed at each other like lost deaf souls.

"What are words?" her son asked. "Where do they come from? Who made them up?"

"Ask your father."

15.

CHARLES BROUGHT EMMA A gin and tonic.

"Our son will soon come down that road, along the path, just as he does every day."

"I can't imagine otherwise."





“Why should you.”

“What if he doesn’t come?”

“Ah.” He turned his back on the wind, sat in the grass, lay down. “Can you see me?”

“No, Charles, I can’t see you.”

“Can you see me now?” He raised a hand and knew his five fingers were visible at the same level as the hissing seed heads. The sky so big and blue up there.

“I can see you.”

“Is he in sight yet?”

“Not yet.”

“Tell me when you see the dust.” He was down there because of tears and not wanting to be seen crying. Her dress was so old and thin a teardrop would dissolve the cotton. The stems stood as straight as thin pale legs.

“I see the dust. I see him!”

“Okay.” And he would rise in a moment and go back to the house and leave Emma and George to share their news.

16.

HE WAS ALONE IN the garden as usual at the end of the day. Afraid for a moment as a cloud covered the sun. *This was where we sat to listen to George. No, no. That was another hillside. This one faces south. Been here before, though. No. No.*

Emma was dead and his son lived far away and he had a house by the sea where he could watch birds fly from their cliff nests into the air. Pop out his hearing aids and enter silence, the mass of undigested words low in his gut, and watch the eerie birds swaying out over the mute surf and back. *What are words? Where do they come from? What are they?*

*I can see you!*

*Is he coming yet?*

*Not yet.*

He felt the planet tilt, the raw words rising through his chest.

*Anne understood nothing except what I told her. She thanked me for the water. It didn’t matter that she understood nothing. When she died, with her mother holding her hand, Emma’s old friends were calling.*

Gulls were crying above the cliffs. *His old friends calling.* Okay. He would rise in a moment and go back to the house. No, no. No running away. There was a light



in the clouds, through the clouds, yes, and down below—this was memory, surely, all memory—down under the ground was an old wooden wheel. Uncover the grass, lift the brown thatch and there would be the rim, chipped blue paint, and the spokes. A girl's voice was calling, listen, over there, far away, calling to a dog or horse or brother. The wheel if unearthed would be missing spokes. The wheel of an old wagon or carriage. It was not so important to hear what the girl was calling. The hillside was a swaying green down to the road, but he didn't want to return all the way home until the light in the sky changed and the wheel was pushed down a bit further. Because this wheel was what mattered, not the top which had been in the wind, but the hidden part; this half-buried wheel with only the girl's voice, not insistent yet, disturbing the stillness.

*Who can I talk to now? Blue flakes on the rim, the hub in darkness, Annie's scraped knees, curling hair, without meaning, this spring without meaning, wet spring, and yet her spirit will flavour next year, along with a few ideas—how to get rid of darkness and have something new pushing into starlight that Emma and I can talk about, knowing we are ordinary, knowing nothing comes from nothing but light—our children, remembered bits of childhood, that nun, that shopping list that went treasure, treasure, treasure, treasure. Don't forget the milk, there are children in the house. But not for long, the hub divided into centuries when we could say centuries before we knew things took millenia to change. Olives in brine. Now there's no one to take one and none to offer and no one to listen and the wheel was a story once, the rust quick on the tongue. Be still. There's no one to listen to what I might say. Summer, yes, fall, yes. One by one the spokes forget who they are next to.*



**Michael Kenyon** is

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# John Lent

from *PRAGUE SPRING: TWELVE CUBIST SONNETS*

— for Terry Donnelly

[ *Prague Poem 3*

[ *Prague Poem 6*

[ *Prague Poem 7*

[ *Prague Poem 8*





### PRAGUE POEM 3

When you set forth in words like this, it's not as if you *will* the words to a final logic so the words become a simulacrum of something---the way a photograph seems to stop time, or a portrait copies part of something.

It's that you trust the words, like music, by starting out in the earth ground of the body, in the concrete field the body is registering around itself, will move into both the body and that electrical field around it, and by some bizarre circuitry, reach beyond both to that other matrix that is also there, that resists ordinary logic, that rushes the heart and the mind and surprises both, and is as close as we can get to saying what the breath of being is.

So it's not that the words copy.

They are set forth babbling, as probe.

They find things. They open things up. They become something.

[...the young woman feeling sorry for me in the bakery earlier, forgiving me my awkward lack of confidence in *her* words, *her* language, and grinning at me so generously beyond both sets of words, she restored me to the bakery, pulled me back into my body standing in front of her from a point of view that was from farther on down the line, when I was already looking *back* at this moment and making fun of myself in it, full of swagger of course, the *traveller*. The *raconteur*. She rescues me from that and insists on placing me here, now, in *this* garden, my feet on the ground, her many gestures a cubist blessing from all sides simultaneously. Who would have thought that when I was starting out here? This is no trip into the ordinary...]



## PRAGUE POEM 6

It's what happens when you ease into your 60s maybe: you begin to see more. I just saw this man in his 70s—all dressed up, likely headed to the bank, looking almost ridiculously formal, even for Prague. He was walking along the street opposite the window I'm staring through in this coffee shop I've found at the corner of Kosi and Kolkovne in the old Jewish Quarter. He was checking his pants for something, doing something he was certain of. Then, abruptly, he stopped walking and, instead, stared up at the sky, for no reason it seemed. He spotted something of interest up there and began to squint at it, shading his eyes with his right hand on his forehead, stretching his mouth out wide in the process as if it might help the concentration, glaring up at whatever it was. People kept milling past him in a wild flow. Life went on. But he'd interrupted himself to look at something. Maybe for the first time. It's possible.

Of course, I was watching *him*.

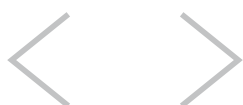
And you?

That's what it feels like. Being a kid again. Seeing things for the first time. Watching the physics of the world around you disclose itself law for law, surface for surface, wheel for interlocking wheel.

Like the circular, waxed cardboard seals on glass milk bottles back in the 50s in Edmonton. The bottle was left on your front doorstep by the delivery man who drove a square, yellow van. In the winter the bottles would crack open in the cold if you didn't bring them in as soon as they were delivered, and the first thing to give way on them if they were left out, was the circular cardboard seal. It'd be staring up at you at an odd angle supported by a churn of frozen milk that looked chalky and spongy. Some days, there'd be a glass bottle of chocolate milk there, too, and you'd all go crazy! What a surprise!

Before plastic.

Before franchises.



Before everything was processed.

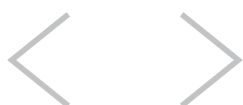
Before you stopped seeing.

*Look! Here! It's spring!*

Bridal Wreath is breaking out everywhere behind these stone walls. It's as if everything around you has been imagined by Derain and in the snap of two fingers, has become three-dimensional.

It's Prague!

Pivot!



## PRAGUE POEM 7

Sometimes, on days like this one, especially in an exotic, foreign landscape like the city of Prague, I miss each of my brothers and sisters intensely. Four brothers, two sisters. We grew up in a fierce bond that cannot be broken, but our adult lives, and our different abilities to survive and enjoy them, are unique from one another's, and, as a result, sometimes any one of us can feel perpetually stranded, looking for what seem like phantom limbs even. And they're out there, those limbs. We must not forget that. They're out there intensely, too, and they whirl in a perpetual motion matrix that is always unfolding as the past, where love was first discovered, and where it was unconditional. The fact that we have been carried by these waters away from one another—into other loves and other families—is a sea that surrounds the first matrix, but doesn't alter it. These two oceans whirl, counter-clockwise, one around the other, alternating their movements like a beneficent, poised machine, some medieval clock clicking and clacking its way through the mornings, afternoons and evenings of our small delights and sorrows and, throughout it all, separated islands of recognition and affection. *If it could only be like this! If words could simply crack open these riddles sometimes and be the balm of love, its core.*

Hey, it's spring in Prague. I love each and every one of you. We will love one another beyond the dark carbon kiss that will lay each one of us down to rest eventually in the earth—all the double machinery and water in those moments seeming to caterwaul and collapse into another kind of dust, too—even then, and beyond what seems a ruined landscape of objects that are suddenly only partial things, reverberating beyond that even into another physics: an impossible poem that must reach out beyond itself, admitting everything in order to be written, in order to become possible.





## PRAGUE POEM 8

So you get, finally, to love. The texture of love in this strange, new city with her, this baroque, art nouveau, cubist dream of a city that seems to possess the familiarity that dreams have, that Kafka-esque tableau wherein you accept everything: of *course* this is Prague and I'm *in* it. Of *course*. I get it.

I have watched you for thirty-four years as you transformed in your body and stayed the same. *Exactly*. I have watched you turn and pivot through the many red dances we've been drawn into, toe to toe, our feet like hands.

The rain is falling against the skylight in the living room of this apartment on Bilkova this evening. Though the rain is thick with grey, the sky is also bright. There's a sun close by. The pigeons coo and crackle across the red clay tiles. A siren rises and subsides a mile away, beyond the Jewish Quarter.

You are asleep down the hall, your body a complex Russian doll of encasements of interlocking times and versions of you---not as chronological time, but as different bodies of you that lean into different grasses for embraces. You lie there so slight, but contain all those fronds of you that are also there, sleeping, and dreaming.

In one of those dreams a child, a young girl, is painting on watercolour paper in a white room. The child is methodically dipping a brush in then out of an old pickle jar full of discolored water, careful to squeeze out just the right amount of water from the brush hairs each time on the lip of the glass. And then the child dips the moist brush into the bright red tablet in her metal painting case and begins to move the brush on the rough-surfaced bone-white and slightly damp paper. A bird whistles somewhere through an open window. The heavy smell of spring lilacs invades the room. The girl is smiling. She is dreaming herself a princess in an old European city, asleep in a tower, awaiting the prince. He is climbing a dark, circular staircase to reach her. He is always climbing those stairs.

Yesterday we toured the Jewish Museum and Synagogue and, most marvelous, the ancient Jewish cemetery here in Josefov. In the museum we saw a room of children's art that had been rescued from the Terazin

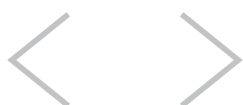


Concentration Camp during World War Two. A small white card beneath each of the paintings indicated whether that child had survived or not.

I watched you pause at each of these paintings. You have taught so many children art over the years I have known you. I watched you disappear into those paintings, those lives. You knew instinctively what was being whispered and celebrated in each case.

Eventually, hand in hand, we descended the stone spiral stairs of the synagogue and out of the gallery and down onto the bright streets of Prague. We had coffee in The Franz Kafka Café. We walked the cobblestone streets as young lovers might, transformed by love, by being *in the world*.

I am sitting just down the hall from you right now, writing. You are asleep, dreaming. I am always climbing stairs to reach you. Those children. Dark spiral staircases, everywhere. Lilacs. I am the heavy, rough paper. Your eyes see something unfolding on me: you are smiling at a bright red narrative. The dewlap brush hairs caress my stretching skin and it all begins to happen again. Of *course*. I get it.



**John Lent** is

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# PLAQUE

(a sic love story)



MATTHEW HEITI



## **PLAGUE (a sic love story)**

### **SYNOPSIS**

Love is a disease.

A mysterious sickness has cocooned the city in paranoia and suspicion. A husband and wife seal themselves into their squalid tenement flat to attend the sickbed of their child. While the illness gnaws at the seams, Bernard and Remy dig toward the truth at the heart of their life. *Plague* is a grotesque comedy about the sickening power of love.

### **SETTING**

A dilapidated and dreary tenement flat. The kitchen and rooms beyond. Time and place askew.

### **CHARACTERS**

The Doctor – The anti-healer. Walks ahead of death, lives on its fumes.

Bernard – (30s-40s) Sick with love and suspicion.

Remy – (30s) A canary in a cage.

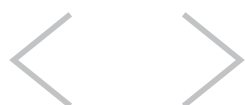
### **NOTES**

The staging area is intended to encompass the entire audience. The audience should feel sealed in, cornered. There may be the sounds of coughing, sneezing, sickness throughout the space. All is intended to increase our feeling of paranoia. Unease.

In dialogue, a slash “/” indicates the moment where the next character should begin speaking. A long dash “—” at the ends of dialogue indicates where the speech should be cut-off or continue. A long dash within dialogue indicates where a character is leaping from one thought to another. An ellipsis “...” indicates where a character searches for words just out of grasp. The intention is to create as much broken, overlapping speech as the action may dictate. These are characters who know their every pattern intimately, know their words before they’ve spoken.

### **DEVELOPMENT HISTORY**

A first draft of this play was researched and developed at the 2012 Stratford Festival Playwrights’ Retreat, supervised by Dramaturge Bob White. Continued development was assisted by Pat the Dog Playwright Centre, with Lisa O’Connell as dramaturge. A workshop was held in Sudbury in May 2013 as part of PlaySmelter.



The play was first produced by Crestfallen at 73 Elm in Sudbury in November, 2013.  
The team was as follows:

Co-creator / “Bernard”:	Matthew Heiti
Co-creator / “Remy”:	Jenny Hazelton
“The Doctor”:	Colin Eady
Stage Manager:	Jocelyn Dotta
Composer and Sound Designer:	Marc Donato





“Thus, while during the first weeks they were apt to complain that only shadows remained to them of what their love had been and meant, they now came to learn that even shadows can waste away, losing the faint hues of life that memory may give.”

—Albert Camus, *The Plague*

“Nothing so easy, if you have but the inclination,’ said Elizabeth. ‘We can all plague and punish one another. Tease him – laugh at him. Intimate as you are, you must know how it is to be done.’”

—Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*

“The plague was a time of tearful innocence,  
Now a greater darkness falls  
For we return to normal.”

—Peter Barnes, *Red Noses*

## PROOEMIUM

*As the audience enters the lobby/building/space—The DOCTOR patrols the entrance. Tall, gaunt. Hood, cloak, gloves, boots. The beaked mask of a plague doctor, glassed eyes. All of it stained a deep red.*

*He guides the audience through the door. He checks their skin for lesions. He sprays a fine mist around them—inoculation. His movements are birdlike.*

*The audience enters the performance space. A decaying apartment in a tenement house. Old furniture is covered in dusty sheets. The feeling of things being locked up, sealed off.*

*BERNARD—in a ratty cardigan, dreary slacks and rubber gloves—is cleaning the space. He throws the sheets off the furniture, dusts, makes the audience at home, but isn’t happy about it.*

*In and around this—*

*The kitchen of the apartment. A bare light bulb. Cupboards, water pump and basin. A hotplate. An icebox. A table. A crib.*

*A smudged window with one board across it. The door leading out to the landing—shut tight. A mail slot in the door.*



*It all suggests a place that has been mouldering and sealed up for some time. Nothing to attach it to any specific period or place—just some grey era that oozes on and on.*

*The only colour in the apartment is the fading sunlight trickling in through the window.*

*When he is not seating the audience, BERNARD gets on his hands and knees and begins splashing water onto the floor from a bucket and scrubbing violently with a brush. He is methodical and relentless. While he works, he hums and whistles, without happiness. Several times he goes over to the crib to check on the baby—in these moments, he is transformed by a love coming over him. Several times, he bangs his head on the light walking past, causing him pain—always the same tender spot.*

*When the audience is finally settled:*

### **ET SIC INCIPIT**

*The baby mumbles in its sleep. BERNARD goes to the side of the crib.*

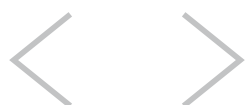
BERNARD. Shhh-shhh. Shhh-shhh.

*He COUGHS once. It surprises him. He waits, dreading another cough, but it doesn't come. He relaxes. He drops the brush in the bucket, goes to the window. He pulls the curtain closed. This last bit of colour shut out.*

*He empties the bucket in the basin and then strips off his gloves. He pumps water, barely getting a trickle going—disturbed by this, pumps harder. The pump goes CREAK CREAK! CREAK CREAK! in tempo. He grabs a can of powdered bleach from the counter and cleans his hands vigorously.*

*BERNARD COUGHS again. He stops washing his hands. He COUGHS again. He reaches for his throat. He COUGHS again. Panic. HACK HACK! HACK HACK!—a coughing fit. He goes one way and then the other. He bangs his head on the light. He goes to the icebox and pulls out a vial full of dark liquid. He removes the dropper and puts his head back, taking the dose. He sputters. He plugs his nose and covers his mouth and waits, eyes bulging. Eventually, he gains control. He releases himself and breathes slowly.*

*He waits. Frozen. Listening for the sound of someone outside. When nothing comes, he relaxes, and the bottle slips out of his hand and SHATTERS! on the floor.*



*The baby makes a gurgle, waking up and starts to cry. BERNARD turns at the sound. He sings, to soothe the child. Half spoken, half sung, he doesn't sing well, but like his cleaning—efficient. It's a variation of an old lullaby: "One For Sorrow." He makes it sound more like a funeral dirge than a lullaby. He cleans up his mess while he sings.*

BERNARD.     One crow for sorrow  
                   Two crows for joy  
                   Three crows for a girl  
                   Four crows for a boy  
                   Five crows for silver  
                   Six crows for gold  
                   Seven for a secret never to be told.

*BERNARD finishes the cleanup and comes to the crib, pulling a chair to its side.*

*He continues to repeat the final line, unable to finish. Then an idea occurs to him and he pulls a pad and pencil out of his pocket. He scrawls something down and holds it out, looking at it, pleased.*

*Something RATTLES at the door. An envelope is pushed through the mail slot and PLOPS! to the floor.*

*BERNARD stares. Waits. Finally he crosses to the door. Stares at the envelope but gives it a wide berth. He goes to the mail slot. He holds his breath, lifts the flap and peers out. Nothing. He presses the flap tightly closed.*

*He crouches down on the ground, looking at the envelope. Crosses to the other side to see it from a different angle.*

*He goes to the sink and snaps the rubber gloves back on. He returns to the envelope. He picks it up carefully, turning it over and over. It's not addressed to him.*

*He gets a bottle of disinfectant from a cupboard. He sprays the spot on the floor where the envelope lay. He sprays the mail slot. He sprays the envelope.*

*He is about to put it down on the counter and then changes his mind. He holds it up to the light, tries to unseal it—finally he pulls his shirt up over his nose and rips it open carefully. He sprays inside the envelope.*



*He is treating the entire process as if he's defusing a bomb.*

*He unfolds the letter from inside. His precautions are quickly forgotten as he reads. He is staggered. He has to sit down on the floor. Grief, reading it again, and then anger.*

*He jumps to his feet. He stamps on the floor. He stamps on the floor again. He leaps like he's trying to break through into the apartment below—STAMP STAMP! STAMP STAMP!*

*The baby starts to cry.*

*BERNARD stops stamping immediately and goes to the crib.*

*BERNARD. Shhh-shhh. Shhh-shhh.*

*His shushing is rhythmic, like a bellows, and it becomes hysterical. The baby won't stop crying. They cry together.*

*There is a RATTLING at the door. BERNARD shoves the letter in his pocket and wields the spray bottle like a gun.*

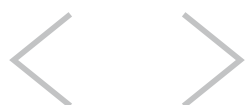
*A key turns in the lock and the door swings open—light shining in. Silence—even the baby stops crying.*

*REMY is standing in the doorway, holding a paper bag of groceries. She is wrapped in a heavy overcoat and gloves, goggles, and wears a white medical mask over her mouth. They stare at each other for a moment, BERNARD blocking her way in.*

*The baby cries again, breaking the silence.*

*REMY steps around him to put the bag down on the counter. Annoyed, BERNARD shuts the door quickly and turns the lock. The apartment is darkened again.*

*REMY waits in the doorway for BERNARD to begin his routine. He holds out his hand. She reaches into her pocket and removes some dollar bills, places these into his waiting palm. He sprays them. He counts the money, then holds out his hand again. She reaches into the pocket, removes some change and places this in his palm, as well. Again, he sprays, and then counts. He puts all the money in a dish near the door.*



*He sprays her as she turns. He strips her of her coat, gloves and boots—placing them in a sealed trunk near the door. She wears the same kind of drab clothing underneath as him. He sprays her again as she turns. He sprays her in the face, some getting in her eyes and causing her pain, which brings him pleasure.*

*She holds out her hands. He checks both sides. He checks her eyes. She opens her mouth and he checks her tongue. She pulls up her shirt so he can check her skin. He is careful not to touch her.*

*It's a well-rehearsed routine, devoid of emotion. He is obsessive, she is bored.*

*He steps away from her. He puts a hand into his pocket, feeling for the letter. Something heavy and unspoken squats between them.*

*The baby is still crying.*

*REMY pulls a cord and the light bulb comes on. It pulsates—BUZZ BUZZ! BUZZ BUZZ! Bernard's attention snaps to it—causing his eye to twitch in time. The light terrifies him.*

*She goes to the cupboard and gets a kettle. She takes this to the basin and works the pump handle. CREAK CREAK! CREAK CREAK! and water drips out. BERNARD moves to help, but she brushes him off, pumping harder, water trickling out, enough to fill the kettle partway.*

*She takes the kettle to the hotplate and turns it on.*

*REMY moves for the crib.*

*BERNARD goes to the sink, snapping off the gloves and again rubbing at his hands with the bleach. The trickle of water from the pump is ever less. Unable to take it anymore—he shuts off the light.*

*REMY rocks the crib, cooing to the baby as its crying slowly subsides.*

*REMY. Coo-coo. Coo-coo.*

*A giggle. The way she deals with the child is much like BERNARD's attention to cleaning—*



*detached, efficient. She goes to a cabinet and gets out an old concertina. She pulls a chair up to the edge of the crib.*

*BERNARD gets his notepad from earlier. He stares at it and then at REMY, hopeful.*

BERNARD. Luka.

REMY. Hm?

BERNARD. Luka. Luka.

*She shakes her head.*

REMY. Mm-mn.

*He scratches something out on the pad, violently. He turns off the lamp.*

*REMY begins to play the tune to “One For Sorrow.”*

*Annoyed, BERNARD unpacks the paper bag, spraying each item as it’s removed. A series of cans lined up on the counter. A sack of nails. A bunch of rags. A newspaper.*

BERNARD. No tomatoes?

*REMY stops playing for a moment, and then continues.*

*BERNARD opens a cupboard, and places the cans, one by one, inside.*

*Lost in thought, she has stopped playing the keys, but her hands still work the bellows of the concertina—WHEEZING.*

*BERNARD can’t stay still—he comes through the audience. Under a sheet, he finds a toolbox. He grabs some planks of wood from a pile stacked against the wall. He heads back into the kitchen.*

*He takes a hammer from the toolbox. He comes up behind REMY. The momentary threat of him standing behind her with the hammer. He drops the rags beside her and retreats, grabs the sack of nails.*





*He begins with the window, hammering more boards across to seal the rest of it off.*

*He stops, noticing REMY is still sitting. He snaps his fingers to get her attention and points to the sack of rags. She gets to work—tearing long strips from the rags, following the perimeter of the room, packing this cloth tight under the baseboards and the door.*

*BERNARD's hammering makes the baby cry. They both go to the crib.*

BERNARD. Shhh-shhh. Shhh-shhh.

*He is loving but ineffective. The baby's cries pitch up. REMY allows him to feel his impotence, before stepping in.*

REMY. Coo-coo. Coo-coo.

*The baby quiets. REMY goes back to work, BERNARD lingers before returning to the window. He hammers once—REMY gives him a look. He makes a futile effort to try to hammer as quietly as possible.*

*They both work on the door—her packing cloth, him hammering boards. She stuffs a wad of cloth in the mail slot. He pulls this out and covers it with a board instead. Hammering while looking at her. He hits his thumb and hops around trying not to yell with pain.*

*She turns on the lamp—BUZZ BUZZ! BUZZ BUZZ!—as she goes to the cupboard, gets a tea cosy, a teapot, two cups, two spoons, a plate, a box of biscuits, a dish of sugar cubes, brings these over to the table. She arranges everything at two settings—biscuits on the plate.*

*BERNARD turns off the lamp while her back is turned and keeps staring at the kettle, waiting for it to boil. It starts to whistle just as REMY finishes her ritual—perfectly timed. She grabs the kettle and BERNARD follows her to the table. She pours the water into the teapot and drops in the bags of tea. She places the kettle on the counter and returns to the table.*

*BERNARD reaches for the teapot, but REMY gives him a look—not ready yet—and he desists. They both stare at the tea brewing.*

*BERNARD COUGHS. REMY gives him a look—concerned. He covers his mouth and tries to act nonchalant. Dry throat, needs tea.*



*REMY pours them each a cup of tea. She drops a sugar cube in hers, stirring. BERNARD takes a sip right away, burning his tongue. TING TING! TING TING!—she knocks her spoon against the cup and blows on the tea.*

*He puts a sugar cube in his mouth and then a biscuit. Repeats. Then repeats again. He leaves one biscuit for REMY, which she doesn't eat. His mouth full, he sucks on his tea.*

*He's very noisy—SLURP SLURP! MUNCH MUNCH! She blows and sips silently.*

*A far-off bell, clanging. They both freeze. Clang clang—it draws closer—Clang Clang!—now the squeaking of wheels—CLANG CLANG! SQUEAK SQUEAK!*

*BERNARD and REMY place down their cups and bow their heads—a strange kind of ceremony. Respect for the dead passing by.*

*CLANG CLANG! SQUEAK SQUEAK!—the cart passes right in front of their building—Clang Clang! Squeak Squeak!—fading off the other side. BERNARD mumbles, as if in prayer.*

*BERNARD. In pace requiescat.*

*REMY stands, glares down at him. She goes to the cupboard and brings back a Bakelite radio. She places it on the table and turns it on. HISS!—static. She rolls through the stations, finding the distant sound of gypsy jazz.*

*She clears the dishes from the table. BERNARD snatches the last biscuit as she goes. She takes it all over to the sink and turns on the lamp—BUZZ BUZZ! BUZZ BUZZ!*

*BERNARD tries to find another station on the radio, but only gets static—HISS!*

*She works the pump, but no water comes out. She works it harder. Nothing. She works it with all her might. Still nothing. She grabs the can of bleach off the counter and pitches it at BERNARD—this is your fault.*

*He puts the radio down. She comes to the table and finds the gypsy jazz again. He crosses to the sink. He turns off the lamp. He works the handle—CREAK CREAK! CREAK CREAK!—continues working at it, without success.*



*REMY stands, sipping her tea. She taps her foot to the music. The jangle of the guitar gets under her skin, makes her light. She spins. She twirls. She dances. Her feet are soft and loving on the floor.*

*BERNARD strips to his undershirt sweating, and continues working the pump—CREAK CREAK! CREAK CREAK!*

*REMY puts down her cup and taps a little beat with her foot—TAP TAP! TAP TAP!*

*From the apartment below, someone answers on the ceiling—THUMP THUMP! THUMP THUMP!*

*REMY giggles and repeats the pattern—TAP TAP! TAP TAP!*

*The answer—THUMP THUMP! THUMP THUMP!*

*Oblivious, BERNARD pumps—CREAK CREAK! CREAK CREAK!*

*REMY kneels down and raps the floor with her knuckles—RAP RAP! RAP RAP! She's radiant.*

*The sound below matches her intimacy—like someone is pressed up from below—TAMP TAMP! TAMP TAMP!*

*She stretches out, pressing her whole body against the floor, and now just with one finger—TIC TIC! TIC TIC!*

*The answer like the whisper of a lover—TOC TOC! TOC TOC!*

*BERNARD has stopped pumping to listen. He turns to look at REMY in disgust. Unable to bear it any longer, he stamps on the floor—STAMP STAMP! STAMP STAMP!*

*She looks at him—the game silenced. He leaps on the floor—STAMP STAMP! STAMP STAMP!—until exhausted and then flops to the ground.*

*She gets up, straightens her clothing and picks up her tea. She turns the radio off.*



*BERNARD gets to his feet, goes back to the sink and gives it one last try—CREAK  
CREAK! CREAK CREAK! He gives up. Leaning on the counter, facing away from  
REMY, he pulls the letter out of his pocket.*

*She goes to the counter and slams her cup down beside him. She is about to speak and then  
she notices something on BERNARD's bare shoulder. She steps back in shock, and then peers  
closer. Reaches out as if to touch it.*

REMY. ... Bernard.

*He spins, putting the letter back in his pocket. He passes her, putting his shirt back on,  
covering his shoulder.*

*He goes to the crib. Looking at the baby seems to soften him. He smiles. He takes a sugar  
cube from his pocket and leans in, placing it in the baby's mouth. The baby giggles. He speaks  
nonsense to it.*

BERNARD. Peach-a-peach. Peach-a-peach...

*The baby stops giggling.*

BERNARD. Peach-a-peach. Peach-a-peach...

*The baby makes a little squeal.*

*He picks up a rattle and shakes it at the baby.*

BERNARD. Peach-a-peach. Peach-a-peach...

*The baby starts to cry. BERNARD rattles harder and speaks louder—getting anxious.*

BERNARD. PEACH-A-PEACH! PEACH-A-PEACH!

*The baby wails. REMY comes to the side and rocks the crib, softly—*

REMY. Coo-coo. Coo-coo.



*The baby quiets. REMY reaches down to touch the child. BERNARD gasps, reaching for her. Both are frozen, mid-reach, unable to make contact.*

*BERNARD turns away and pulls out his notebook.*

BERNARD. Sasha?

REMY. Mm-mn.

BERNARD. Morgan?

REMY. Mm-mn.

BERNARD. Elliot?

REMY. Hm.

BERNARD. Hm?

REMY. Mm-mn.

*He scribbles in his notebook. He walks away and has a pout.*

*Silence.*

BERNARD. I was going to make tomato soup.

*Silence.*

REMY. Didn't I buy some?

*Silence.*

BERNARD. I was going to make it from scratch.

REMY. You know there are no fresh tomatoes. / Not now.



BERNARD. There are canned ones.

REMY. Didn't I buy canned ones?

BERNARD. You bought cans of tomato soup. / I wanted to—

REMY. I thought I did.

BERNARD. —make it from scratch. I told you to get tomatoes.

REMY. I got tomato soup.

BERNARD. I put it on the list.

REMY. They didn't have tomatoes, all they had was soup, so that's what I got.

BERNARD. Well it won't taste right, so I'm not making it.

REMY. I'm not hungry.

BERNARD. You have to eat.

REMY. I'm not / hungry.

BERNARD. Everyone has to eat.

REMY. I'm not hungry.

*Beat.*

BERNARD. I'll heat up some soup.

*He goes to the cupboard and pulls out one of the cans. Gets a tool from a drawer and tries to open the soup can. He can't—he gets frustrated, he BANGS! the can down.*

*REMY crosses, takes the can from him. She opens it, brings out a pot, fills it with the soup and places it on the hotplate. She turns on the light—BUZZ BUZZ! BUZZ BUZZ!*





BERNARD. Marley?

REMY. Mm-mn.

BERNARD. Stevie?

REMY. Nicks?

BERNARD. Wonder?

REMY. Smith?

BERNARD. Stevie / Smith?

REMY. The poet.

BERNARD. I don't like poetry, you know I don't like poetry. I like the whole musician thing, like Stevie Ray Vaughan.

REMY. I like Sarah Vaughan.

BERNARD. That's not even the same thing. We're talking about Stevie here, not Vaughan.

REMY. Stevie?

BERNARD. Uh-huh.

*Beat.*

REMY. Mm-mn.

*He scribbles in his notebook, grabs the newspaper and wanders to the lamp. He shuts it off.*

REMY. It's bad for your eyes.

BERNARD. My eyes are already bad.



REMY. They'll get worse.

BERNARD. I like it dark.

REMY. You'll go blind.

BERNARD. We have to conserve power.

REMY. For who?

BERNARD. Precautions / Remy.

REMY. A little late for that.

*She turns the light on—BUZZ BUZZ! BUZZ BUZZ!*

BERNARD. We have to follow precautions.

*He turns it off.*

REMY. You're just scared of someone seeing.

*Silence. He flips the pages loudly.*

BERNARD. It's missing pages.

REMY. What?

BERNARD. It's missing pages.

REMY. No it's / not.

BERNARD. It's too light.

REMY. That's all they print / now.

BERNARD. And it's six days old.



REMY. There hasn't been anything since.

BERNARD. It's not news, it's old.

REMY. Maybe they stopped printing.

BERNARD. Why would they do that?

REMY. I don't / know.

BERNARD. Why would they stop?

REMY. Maybe they died.

*He drops the paper.*

BERNARD. Remy.

*He picks it up.*

There's a coupon in here for tomatoes. *(Beat.)* Did you see? Tomatoes, canned. / See?

REMY. It's six days old.

BERNARD. The good kind.

REMY. Maybe they had them six / days ago.

BERNARD. Here I'll tear it out for you.

*He tears out the coupon and puts it on the counter for her. She crumples it up.*

*He moves away. He reads. She stirs the soup.*

BERNARD. Numbers are up.

*Silence.*



BERNARD. Did you hear?—numbers / are up.

REMY. I heard.

BERNARD. It's good, y'know—it's to be expected. They'll keep climbing, but it'll stop eventually.

REMY. It has to.

BERNARD. Yes.

REMY. Because there won't be anyone left.

BERNARD. No. (*Beat.*) No, no. Because eventually—that's the pattern of these... things. You get a point of origin, then a rapid progression, then a spike—and that's where we are right now—a spike.

REMY. A spike.

BERNARD. Yes! And next, there's a regression... and then total remission. So there's hope.

*Silence.*

BERNARD. There's hope—you hear me?—there's / hope.

REMY. I heard.

BERNARD. Things will get back to normal.

*Silence. Then REMY laughs. Then she laughs harder. Almost hysterically. It subsides just as quickly. She stirs the soup.*

REMY. That's what I loved about you.

BERNARD. What?



REMY. Your innocence.

*Silence.*

BERNARD. Loved?

REMY. Hm?

BERNARD. Loved, as in love-*deh*, as in past / tense?

REMY. What?

BERNARD. As in once upon a time I love-*deh* you but / not anymore?

REMY. What are you squawking about?

BERNARD. I'm not / squawking.

REMY. Ca-caw-caw-caw! Ca-caw- / caw-caw!

BERNARD. I don't sound like that.

*She gets two bowls, spoons. Ladles out the soup.*

REMY. Like a crow. Caw!

BERNARD. Remy.

*Brings the bowls to the table.*

REMY. A little black crow.

BERNARD. Remy.

*He bangs his head on the light.*

REMY. Caw-cough.



BERNARD. That's not funny.

*She sits, and he joins her. Silence.*

BERNARD. I'm not hungry.

REMY. Neither am I.

BERNARD. But we have to eat.

REMY. Yes.

BERNARD. We have to keep our strength up.

REMY. Yes, yes.

BERNARD. We have to continue as normal. / If we don't—

REMY. Yes.

BERNARD. —we... we... we...

REMY. Die.

*Silence. He takes a spoonful—burns his tongue. She blows on her spoon before tasting it—doesn't eat again.*

BERNARD. It tastes like cans.

REMY. It is canned.

BERNARD. You can't talk like that.

REMY. Everything is canned, Bernard.

BERNARD. No—like you're already... like—like there's no hope.





REMY. It's just a word.

BERNARD. It's what you put behind it.

REMY. I put nothing behind it.

BERNARD. That's what I mean. You can't talk / like that.

REMY. It's just a word.

BERNARD. I don't care.

REMY. Words aren't infected.

BERNARD. Everything is infected.

REMY. It's just a word.

BERNARD. I don't want it said in here.

REMY. Dead. Dead, dead, dead, dead. Dead.

BERNARD. You can't— /

REMY. Dead.

BERNARD. —talk like that.

REMY. I can talk however I want.

*Silence.*

BERNARD. Everything is infected, Remy, even words. Please don't bring that word in here.

REMY. I didn't. Read your paper / It's on every street corner, Bernard.



BERNARD. But it's six days old.

REMY. It's in every gutter, every rooftop, every schoolyard and highrise, uptown, downtown. It's / everywhere.

BERNARD. Shhh!

REMY. You think you can keep it out? With some old rags and rotten / wood?

BERNARD. Shhh! Shhh!

*This makes BERNARD COUGH, once.*

*They both freeze. He tries to cover by clearing his throat. He makes a big deal of it.*

REMY. You think it's not already here?

*Beat. His tone changes.*

BERNARD. Nothing can get us here.

REMY. What?

BERNARD. On the moon.

REMY. What?

BERNARD. On the moon, Remy. It's just us up here.

REMY. Bernard.

BERNARD. Remember, Remy? Just us moonlings.

*He acts like he's in zero gravity, trying to be silly. REMY stares.*

REMY. Stop it.



BERNARD. Moon-papa, Moon-mama and our little / Star—

REMY. I hate that game.

*Silence.*

BERNARD. Where did you learn to be so cold?

*No answer.*

BERNARD. Those aren't your words. Who taught you those words?

REMY. Eat your soup.

BERNARD. I'm not hungry.

REMY. We have to keep our strength up.

*He raises his bowl and SLURPS! it down as she watches. She pushes her bowl away.*

REMY. You bottomless pit.

BERNARD. It's not bad.

REMY. I hate tomato. It's an awful / colour.

BERNARD. It's just a / fruit.

REMY. It's sick, a sick / colour.

BERNARD. Or a vegetable.

REMY. It's red.

BERNARD. No, it's both.

*Beat.*



BERNARD. Who did you see while you were out?

REMY. Roach. The agent at the food depot.

BERNARD. Who else?

REMY. No one.

BERNARD. You didn't run into anyone?

REMY. No.

BERNARD. No moonlit rendezvous?

REMY. What?

BERNARD. Nothing you forgot to mention—not planned or anything—just a chance meeting?

REMY. There was no one on the street.

BERNARD. What about... off... the street?

REMY. What?

BERNARD. It's twenty-two minutes to the store. I've given you ten minutes to shop, twenty-three minutes back because you're going uphill. Plus three minutes contingency.

REMY. Contingency?

BERNARD. In case you dawdled, or were attacked.

REMY. Three minutes—so generous.

BERNARD. Fifty-eight minutes total. Fifty-eight. You were gone two hours.



REMY. Was I?

BERNARD. Yes.

REMY. I don't have a watch.

BERNARD. Where did you go?

REMY. The depot.

BERNARD. That's all.

REMY. And down by the creek.

BERNARD. Jesus. Why?

REMY. To walk.

BERNARD. By the creek?

REMY. Yes.

BERNARD. Jesus. And who did you see by the creek?

REMY. A woman.

BERNARD. Who?

REMY. A beautiful woman. / An angel. Long, dark hair, pale skin.

BERNARD. Who—who?

REMY. Looking up at me from the black water of the creek.

BERNARD. Who?

REMY. Me.



BERNARD. Remy.

REMY. I didn't realize how much weight I'd lost. I look thin—don't you think I look thin?

BERNARD. No. You look fine. You've always looked fine.

REMY. You used to think better than fine.

BERNARD. You are better than fine. You look really... really... fine.

REMY. I can feel my bones.

BERNARD. Have more soup.

REMY. I'm not hungry.

BERNARD. It would've been better from scratch.

REMY. You eat it.

BERNARD. Wouldn't taste like cans from scratch.

*She slides her bowl across. He lifts it to his lips—SLURP!*

REMY. You black hole—you abyss.

*Silence. She takes his bowl to the sink, and turns the light on as she goes—BUZZ BUZZ!  
BUZZ BUZZ!*

BERNARD. How about trees?

REMY. Trees.

BERNARD. Cedar, Birch, / Aspen.

REMY. No, no, no.





BERNARD. Fern?

REMY. A fern isn't a tree.

BERNARD. Ash?

REMY. Like ashes?

BERNARD. Ash, Ashley.

REMY. Like cigarette ash?

BERNARD. What?

REMY. Like cremation, like / fallout?

BERNARD. No!

REMY. Like “ashes, ashes we all fall down?”

*Beat.*

BERNARD. No trees then.

*He scribbles on his notepad. Silence.*

REMY. I did see someone. While I was out.

BERNARD. Yes.

REMY. Monsieur / Corneille.

BERNARD. What—what?

REMY. It was by the creek.

BERNARD. Mister—?



REMY. A crow, Bernard—a crow.

BERNARD. Shhh!—a—a—?

REMY. Crow.

BERNARD. Shhh!—Jesus.

REMY. It was dead.

BERNARD. Jesus.

REMY. There was another crow eating it.

BERNARD. Shhh!—what? Jesus. Come here—the baby.

*He flips the light off. She won't budge.*

REMY. So much blood in one little thing.

BERNARD. Remy! You're joking—there are / none left.

REMY. I know what I saw.

BERNARD. There haven't been any for months.

REMY. Well I saw one—right there in front of me. It was this big, it was black, it had a beak and wings and little legs and it squawked just like you.

BERNARD. You're lying.

REMY. Ca-caw!

BERNARD. I don't squawk.

REMY. Why would I lie?



BERNARD. I don't know. I don't know—why would you?

REMY. I'm not a liar.

BERNARD. Maybe it's not what you say—maybe it's what you don't say.

REMY. What are you squawking about now, Bernard?

BERNARD. I don't know—I don't squawk—I believe you.

REMY. I saw it.

BERNARD. I have to. You're all I have.

REMY. Bernard.

BERNARD. And I'm all you have, Remy. Just us and our own little world, our little moon.

*Beat.*

REMY. Where would you go, Bernard?

BERNARD. What?

REMY. If we were... evacuated, tonight / where would—

BERNARD. Why would they evacuate us?

REMY. If Bernard.

BERNARD. They wouldn't evacuate us.

REMY. I'd go to Maine, I think.

BERNARD. Of course you / would.



REMY. I always wanted to see the ocean.

BERNARD. We were supposed to go on our honeymoon.

REMY. We didn't.

BERNARD. We were saving.

REMY. You were saving. I wanted air and salt, the sound of the seagulls.

BERNARD. Why did it have to be Maine? I don't have my / passport.

REMY. That little fishing village. With the / coloured houses.

BERNARD. And it rains / a lot.

REMY. I saw it in that / magazine.

BERNARD. You know I hate the / rain.

REMY. What was it called?

BERNARD. Cape... Caroux.

REMY. Crow.

BERNARD. Shh—it wasn't that. It was Caroux.

REMY. Crow.

BERNARD. Cah-roo.

REMY. Caw... row.

*Silence.*

BERNARD. Anyway, we're not going anywhere.



REMY. You'd stay here, even if you were forced to go. You'd stay here on your asteroid.

BERNARD. Moon.

*She stands. Clears the dishes. Turns on the light—BUZZ BUZZ! BUZZ BUZZ!*

REMY. If I was hanging off a cliff and you had / to choose—

BERNARD. Why were you hanging—?

REMY. If, Bernard, / if.

*He goes to the switch and flips the light off.*

BERNARD. The creek and now a cliff—Jesus—

REMY. If I was, Bernard. If.

BERNARD. Is this like the evacuation question?

*She turns the light back on—BUZZ BUZZ! BUZZ BUZZ!*

REMY. If I was hanging off a cliff, and the baby was hanging off the cliff / too—

*He turns it off.*

BERNARD. The baby? The baby is too small / to hang—

*She turns it on—BUZZ BUZZ! BUZZ BUZZ!*

REMY. If, Bernard, if—use your imagination.

*He turns it off.*

BERNARD. I can't if you're going to be / impractical.

*She turns it on—BUZZ BUZZ! BUZZ BUZZ!*



REMY. If we were hanging off the cliff and you could only save one of us, who would you save?

*He tries to turn it off, but she covers the switch with her hand—BUZZ BUZZ! BUZZ BUZZ!*

BERNARD. Why are you asking all these questions?

REMY. It's a joke.

BERNARD. I don't get it.

REMY. It's a riddle.

BERNARD. You know I'm no good at / riddles.

REMY. It's a test—who would you save?

BERNARD. Is this in Maine? Cape Caroux?

REMY. Crow.

BERNARD. Shh!

REMY. It doesn't matter.

BERNARD. It does—details matter / Remy.

REMY. Fine, sure, it's there—Cape Crow.

BERNARD. Shh!

REMY. Who would you save?

BERNARD. How high is the cliff?

REMY. Who?





BERNARD. Is there water / below?

REMY. Who?

BERNARD. Are there rocks?

REMY. Who?

BERNARD. What about sharks—with teeth? / This is important Remy—details matter, I need to—

REMY. Who—who? WHO?

BERNARD. The baby. The baby of course.

*REMY turns the light off and walks away.*

BERNARD. So would you, right, Remy? (*He turns the light on—BUZZ BUZZ! BUZZ BUZZ!—backs away from it*) Of course you would—the baby—of course.

*The light stays on, the bulb occasionally pulsating rhythmically. Silence. REMY goes to the side of the crib—cold, removed. She finds the concertina and begins to play “One For Sorrow.” After a few bars, she joins in, singing.*

REMY.    One crow for fever  
            Two crows for pox

BERNARD. That’s not the way it goes.

*She ignores him.*

REMY.    Three crows for buboes  
            Four crows for coughs.

*As she continues playing BERNARD fetches a pot and a spoon and joins in. For a moment, there might be the chance to be a “family band” but BERNARD is clumsy and out-of-rhythm.*



*REMY stops playing. The concertina WHEEZES in disappointment. BERNARD returns the pot and spoon.*

BERNARD. Alive. By the creek. One was... sure... but another alive. It's a good sign. *(Beat.)* Remy, did you / hear?

REMY. I heard.

BERNARD. It's a good sign.

REMY. Good? They were shoveling them off the street like rotten apples at the beginning. Taking them to the incinerator. We were told not to go near them.

BERNARD. But not alive. Alive is good.

REMY. It is.

BERNARD. It's life.

REMY. It was breathing. Its eyes were open. But I'm not sure if I would call that life. Pecking at the dead.

*Silence.*

REMY. I didn't know they did that. Ate each other.

BERNARD. *Canis canem edit.*

REMY. Don't talk like that.

BERNARD. When there's nothing / left.

REMY. I don't understand you when you talk like that.

BERNARD. One will turn on the other.

*His hand on the letter. Silence.*



BERNARD. Why were you at the creek?

REMY. I went for a walk. / I told you.

BERNARD. I was waiting.

REMY. I needed to think.

BERNARD. About what?

REMY. Things.

BERNARD. Think here.

REMY. I can't think here.

BERNARD. What things?

REMY. Things.

BERNARD. What things?

REMY. The same things.

BERNARD. We can think together.

REMY. It's too loud.

BERNARD. It's quiet. I'm quiet.

REMY. You're giving me a headache.

BERNARD. I can be quiet.

REMY. I like it better when you don't talk at all.

*Silence. The baby starts to cry. REMY goes to crib and quiets the child.*



REMY. Coo-coo. Coo-coo. (*Beat.*) Even when it's quiet, it's loud.

BERNARD. You went to the store because you wanted to / and then you—

REMY. Because you wanted / me to.

BERNARD. To get tomatoes—which you didn't get—and then you went to the creek—to think—and then you came home. And all you saw, that whole time, was a...  
a....

REMY. A crow.

BERNARD. Shhh!

REMY. We were just singing / about—

BERNARD. Singing isn't saying.

REMY. Two crows actually.

BERNARD. Shh!

REMY. That's all I saw. And Roach.

BERNARD. The agent. And that is the truth.

REMY. Yes.

BERNARD. No other vermin?

REMY. What?

BERNARD. On your walk?

REMY. No.

BERNARD. No pests? Nothing pester you? No pests?



REMY. What are you talking / about?

BERNARD. Pest!

*He jumps on the floor—STAMP!*

BERNARD. Pest. Pest, pest, pest!

*STAMP STAMP! STAMP STAMP!*

REMY. You mean Pesta?

BERNARD. Pest!

*He STAMPS!*

REMY. Stop that.

BERNARD. Did you see him?

REMY. Why would I see him?

BERNARD. Isn't he our neighbour?

*He STAMPS!*

REMY. Stop that. We have lots of neighbours.

BERNARD. Not anymore.

REMY. There's old Mrs. Pews upstairs.

BERNARD. Gone, weeks ago.

REMY. Plotz at the rear.

BERNARD. Gone.



REMY. That Norwegian / off the laneway.

BERNARD. Lopp. Gone. All gone. Just us and Pest.

REMY. I guess you're right.

BERNARD. Did you see him?

REMY. Why would I see him?

BERNARD. Maybe you saw him at the depot? Maybe he's the one that got the last of the tomatoes, is that it? / He goes out—

REMY. No.

BERNARD. —doesn't he? He works for the Bureau, doesn't he? Important job—he must go in, even now—even more now, doesn't he?

REMY. I don't know his schedule.

BERNARD. Maybe you bumped into him on the stairs? Maybe outside his door, by chance—maybe you went in to see him / to talk?

REMY. Stop it.

BERNARD. To think together, maybe.

REMY. You're giving me a headache.

BERNARD. Because you can't think with me—is that it?—but you can think with him—is that it?

REMY. Albert / stop it.

BERNARD. What—what?

REMY. Stop.





BERNARD. I'm Bernard. My name's Bernard. I'm your husband / Bernard.

REMY. I know. I'm just... confused. All your squawking's / confused me.

BERNARD. I don't squawk.

REMY. Bernard—listen to me—I've been talking to Albert.

BERNARD. I knew it!

REMY. I went to the creek and / I saw that—

BERNARD. And you met him there!

REMY. No. We've been / trying to—

BERNARD. I can't believe this. Does he like canned soup?

REMY. I don't / know what—

BERNARD. Why don't we have him up for some soup and we can all talk? We can all think together!

*He jumps on the floor—STAMP STAMP! STAMP STAMP! He runs through the audience, stamping as he goes.*

BERNARD. Come up for some soup, Albert Pesta! Canned soup not from scratch! I know you're down there—come up! Pest! Pest!

*STAMP STAMP! STAMP STAMP!*

*REMY slaps him—hard. SMACK! The sound rings through the space. Silence. BERNARD holds his cheek. REMY stares at him. The baby cries.*

*He goes back to the sink and bangs his head on the light, on the way.*

BERNARD. Ah!



*Tries the pump—CREAK CREAK! CREAK CREAK! Nothing. He grabs the disinfectant and sprays his cheek, getting some in his eyes.*

BERNARD. Ah!

*He rubs his cheek vigorously. He turns back to REMY, reaching, maybe offering to take the hand that slapped him, but when she lifts it—he sprays her palm with disinfectant instead.*

*REMY turns off the light. The baby wails.*

BERNARD. Just tell me.

*Silence.*

BERNARD. Tell me. I need to know. Just the truth—we always said, the truth, the truth before everything. Even if it's bad. Even if it's the worst thing. Tell me. Remy. Tell me.

REMY. What do you want me to say?

BERNARD. Just the truth.

REMY. Which one?

*Silence.*

BERNARD. Have you been faithful?

*Silence.*

REMY. How?

BERNARD. How?

REMY. How.

BERNARD. To me.



REMY. To you?

BERNARD. Yes.

REMY. How?

BERNARD. How?

REMY. How.

BERNARD. With your body.

REMY. Have I been faithful to you with my body?

BERNARD. Yes.

REMY. How?

BERNARD. How?

REMY. How.

BERNARD. With your body. Have you given it someone else?

REMY. Given it? / It's my—

BERNARD. Yes.

REMY. —body, Bernard. It's always been my body.

BERNARD. Remy. Has anyone else been inside your body?

REMY. Inside it?

BERNARD. Yes.

REMY. How?



BERNARD. How?

REMY. How.

BERNARD. With their body.

REMY. With their body?

BERNARD. Yes.

REMY. Another body wouldn't fit. They'd have to be very—

BERNARD. Remy.

REMY. —small. A flea. Are you asking me if a flea has crawled inside my body / Bernard?

BERNARD. No! Jesus!

REMY. Then what are you asking?

BERNARD. If someone else has had you.

REMY. Had me?

BERNARD. Yes.

REMY. How?

BERNARD. How?

REMY. How.

BERNARD. The only way you / have someone.

REMY. And what way is that?



BERNARD. The wrong / way.

REMY. What way?

BERNARD. You know what I'm / asking you.

REMY. No I don't—I don't know—you're not using the real words, Bernard.

BERNARD. I'm using words.

REMY. Not the right / ones—use your words, Bernard. Your words.

BERNARD. Have you been faithful?

REMY. How? How, how, how? / How?

BERNARD. Has someone fucked you? Has a man fucked you with his cock, cum with his cock inside you—dirtied you—defiled you? That's how, Remy, that's how.

*Silence.*

REMY. Those are your words, Bernard?

BERNARD. Those are my words.

*Silence.*

REMY. No one has done that to me.

BERNARD. No one?

REMY. No one else.

*The baby has cried itself out. Silence. BERNARD breathes in deeply, out. He relaxes.*

BERNARD. I believe you.



REMY. You do.

BERNARD. I have to. If I don't then nothing makes sense. It's just us here.

REMY. Bernard.

BERNARD. Just us on the moon, our own little world we built, / just us.

REMY. Too much.

BERNARD. No one else. Just us and our little— / our little—

REMY. It's too much.

*She starts to cry.*

BERNARD. Oh.

*He doesn't know what to do.*

Look at me—I'm on the moon, Remy.

*She cries.*

BERNARD. You don't want to play?

*She cries.*

BERNARD. Why are you crying?

*He watches. She doesn't stop.*

BERNARD. Guilt—is it guilt? Are you angry? Is it something I did? Are you saying it's / my fault?

REMY. No.





BERNARD. Is it relief? We cleared things up—are you / relieved?

REMY. No.

BERNARD. Why then—why?

REMY. Because I can't do this anymore.

BERNARD. Do what?

REMY. This.

BERNARD. What—argue?—it's not my fault you always pick / fights.

REMY. It's not that.

BERNARD. Then what—stay in these rooms? It's not my fault, it's the precautions.

REMY. It's not / that.

BERNARD. It's not my fault. *(Beat.)* I'm sorry. I'm sorry for... squawking... at you.

*He goes to hold her—realizes he can't touch her. He snaps his rubber gloves on and turns the light on—BUZZ BUZZ! BUZZ BUZZ! He brings her into the light, careful to avoid it himself, and awkwardly puts his arms around her.*

BERNARD. Buc-buc-ba-kawk. Buc-buc—

REMY. What are you doing?

BERNARD. I'm squawking.

REMY. No—I mean, what are you / doing?

BERNARD. Buc-buc-buc-ba / kawk.

REMY. Stop that. That's not squawking, it's clucking.



BERNARD. I'm sorry.

*He brushes her hair with his rubber glove. She pushes away.*

REMY. Don't touch me like that.

*She pulls his hand away.*

BERNARD. I'm just trying to / hold you.

*He tries again and she pulls his hand away again, holding it.*

REMY. If you're going to touch me, touch me for real. It's like being held by the dead.

BERNARD. Shhh!

REMY. Dead, dead, dead.

BERNARD. Shhh! Shhh!

REMY. It's like "dead man's finger"—you ever do that? We put our hands like this—

*She places her index finger against his.*

And then you run your other hand—like this—

*She runs her other hand up and down their steepled fingers.*

What do you feel?

BERNARD. Nothing—the gloves—I don't feel anything.

REMY. It doesn't matter—you still wouldn't feel anything. I don't feel—you don't feel. We can't feel each other at all.

*She pulls her hand away again. She turns off the light. Silence.*



BERNARD. It's this damn... thing.

REMY. Bernard. Don't blame it on that.

BERNARD. But it is. The stress, the panic, the suspicion—the fear. Everything was better before. When things were normal.

REMY. Was it.

BERNARD. We were happy.

REMY. Were we.

BERNARD. You were happy—you were. The minute this all started—you changed. You got cold, distant.

REMY. I didn't change.

BERNARD. I'm not pointing fingers. I know I should've been there... more... for my part / I know.

REMY. You stopped touching me. And the baby. You wouldn't touch / us.

BERNARD. I'm not pointing / fingers.

REMY. And your goddamn little tests and routines and the washing and the cleaning and / the questions.

BERNARD. Precautions issued by the / Bureau!

REMY. Precautions—not the goddamn / Spanish Inquisition!

BERNARD. I cook the meals / I clean the house.

REMY. What?

BERNARD. I look after the baby.



REMY. You won't even change the diapers!

BERNARD. I tell stories—I sing songs! We play the game.

REMYI do everything—but I do it all for us! To keep us safe!

REMY. Safe? We're prisoners!

BERNARD. Are there bars here? Are you wearing chains?

REMY. It's the same thing.

BERNARD. You're so cold. You're just so cold. You never used to be like this. We were happy. You changed—you. *(Beat.)* But I'm not pointing fingers.

REMY. I didn't change, Bernard. It's just—with all this—it seemed so pointless... to keep pretending.

BERNARD. Pretending? What are we pretending?

REMY. Bernard, I've never—

BERNARD. When this is over. You'll see—things will change—they will change back to the way they were before they changed. We'll be normal. We'll be happy again.

*A cough is building—he strains against it.*

REMY. I was never / happy.

BERNARD. I'll be better. When this is over. Without all this—I'll be better for you.

REMY. Bernard.

BERNARD. I'll be the real me.

REMY. You're who you are. I'm who I am. We are who we've always been. Why would we be anything different later?



BERNARD. I can get better!

*He COUGHS. They freeze.*

*He COUGHS again. Beat. He COUGHS again. He covers his mouth, trying to stifle the next cough.*

*He stumbles around HACKING and COUGHING all over people in the audience. REMY watches, doesn't move to help.*

*He eventually collapses, exhausted—gasping for air.*

*From the crib—the baby COUGHS, once.*

*BERNARD and REMY freeze.*

*They rush to the side of the crib together and peer down at the child.*

*The baby COUGHS again.*

*BERNARD is paralyzed. REMY dashes to the icebox, opens it. She starts flinging things out, searching.*

REMY. Where is it? Where is it?

*She goes to the cupboards, flinging more things. She searches everywhere.*

REMY. Where is it?

*BERNARD cries. REMY comes to him, reaches for his shoulders, but then realizes she can't touch him.*

REMY. Where is it—Bernard—where?

*He shakes his head. REMY starts to cry. They both cry, holding themselves because they can't hold each other. This makes them cry more.*



*They cry themselves out. Blood is dripping from BERNARD's mouth.*

BERNARD. Dana.

*Beat.*

BERNARD. Brook.

*Beat.*

BERNARD. Hilary.

*Beat.*

BERNARD. Lindsay. (*Beat.*) Lindsay? (*Beat.*) I like Lindsay. I had an uncle named Lindsay.

*REMY notices the blood coming from BERNARD's mouth—realizes what this means.*

REMY. Bernard.

BERNARD. Or maybe it was an aunt.

REMY. Bernard.

BERNARD. What—as in junior?

REMY. Bernard.

BERNARD. Bernard. A little manly, but I guess it could / work.

REMY. Bernard.

BERNARD. Bernie maybe.

REMY. Bernard!



BERNARD. What?

*He finally gets it and reaches up to feel the blood. Covers his mouth and runs to the basin, banging his head—the baby forgotten. He puts bleach powder in his mouth and rinses with tea—gagging and sputtering. She follows him.*

REMY. How long?

*He spits in the basin.*

BERNARD. I'm fine.

REMY. How long has it been?

BERNARD. I just bit my lip.

REMY. How long have you got?

BERNARD. I'm fine.

REMY. Better than fine?

BERNARD. Remy.

REMY. How long, Bernard?

*She tries to lift his shirt. He pulls away. She rips it off of him instead. He stops resisting. She pulls up his undershirt. There are dark blotches on his stomach and chest. She walks away.*

REMY. The truth, Bernard. What happened to the truth?

BERNARD. I'm sorry.

REMY. Before everything. Even if it's bad. Even if it's the worst thing.

BERNARD. I'm sorry, Remy.





REMY. That's just a word.

BERNARD. I know—I'm sorry.

REMY. Words are so easy.

BERNARD. I'm sorry!

REMY. Shut up, Bernard. Please. Just shut up. I need to think. This changes everything.

*Silence. He pulls his shirt back on.*

BERNARD. I'll go to the pharmacist for some more.

REMY. He's dead.

BERNARD. Shhh! There's that dentist up / the hill.

REMY. Dead.

BERNARD. Shhh! The chemistry teacher by / the park.

REMY. Dead.

BERNARD. Shhh! There has to be some specialist—or naturopath—or nutritionist—or yoga instructor / —or someone—

REMY. Dead. Dead, dead, dead.

BERNARD. Shhh! Shhh! Then I'll go down the back alleys, buy it off the dealers.

REMY. They're all dead. Just like we'll / be.

BERNARD. DON'T BRING THAT WORD IN HERE!

REMY. I didn't bring it in here.



BERNARD. I'm not pointing fingers—but you're the one that goes out, you do the shopping.

REMY. I'm not sick.

BERNARD. Down by the creek, with the... the... the...

REMY. Crows, Bernard—crows!

BERNARD. Shhh!—Jesus—see? You've / gotten careless—

REMY. I'm not sick, Bernard.

BERNARD. —I'm not pointing fingers—but you don't wash enough.

REMY. You're the sick one.

BERNARD. Are you blaming me?

REMY. I'm telling the truth.

BERNARD. You brought it in here (*pointing at her*)—I'm not pointing fingers—but it was you.

REMY. The baby's sick.

BERNARD. It's not my fault.

REMY. The baby's sick, Bernard.

BERNARD. Maybe it's just a cough.

REMY. You're both sick.

*Silence. Bernard goes to the trunk for his overcoat.*

BERNARD. I'll knock on every door—somebody'll have some.



REMY. It's snake oil, Bernard.

BERNARD. It's medicine.

REMY. It's snake oil. Look at yourself. It's no good.

BERNARD. Fine. Then the Doctor.

*Beat.*

REMY. What?

BERNARD. I'll bring the Doctor here.

REMY. What?

BERNARD. Maybe there will be mercy.

REMY. What?

BERNARD. Not for me, for the baby.

REMY. Are you stupid?

BERNARD. I don't know what else / to do.

REMY. Do it quick, with your hands or in the creek. / That would be—

BERNARD. Don't say that.

REMY. —more mercy than we'd get from them. You know what it means when they come for you.

BERNARD. I'm not giving up, Remy. I'm going out there and I'll fix this.

REMY. Fine, Bernard.



BERNARD. Don't try and stop me.

REMY. I'm not.

*Beat.*

REMY. Go.

BERNARD. I am.

REMY. When was the last time you went out there?

BERNARD. I don't know. A while.

REMY. Forever. You're too scared.

BERNARD. I am not.

REMY. Buc-buc-ba-kawk.

BERNARD. Stop it.

*He slams the trunk and sits on it.*

BERNARD. We can't just sit here and wait.

REMY. No.

BERNARD. Do you want us to sit here and wait for a... a... miracle?

REMY. No. I'm not going to sit here, Bernard.

*An idea comes to him. He runs into the audience, rooting around under sheets.*

BERNARD. Wait. I read something in one of the booklets released by the Bureau. About the properties of certain colours. Therapeutic. I thought bullshit, but then Mrs. Cuervo said her boy Daniel—the one with the wonky eye?—was showing signs—the



cough—and so she put him to bed, swaddled him in a red quilt. She even had him wear red stockings and briefs. And you know what?—she said he got better. *(Beat.)* You hear that? He got / better.

REMY. They're dead now.

BERNARD. But he got better first.

*He has found what he's looking for: a can of paint and brushes. He brings these back to the kitchen.*

BERNARD. Something about the colour that draws out the infection and heals.

REMY. It's their colour.

BERNARD. What?

REMY. It's *their* colour, Bernard.

*He opens the can, dips the brush and splashes red paint across a cupboard.*

BERNARD. I can feel it. It's warm. Right away you can feel the difference.

REMY. You're right.

BERNARD. I know.

REMY. It does sound like bullshit.

*He tries to ignore her and goes to painting. Like with everything, he's meticulous, trying to cut corners perfectly. He works, she watches.*

REMY. That won't do any good.

*Silence.*

REMY. You're making a mess.



BERNARD. You're always trying to bring me down.

REMY. I don't "always" / try to—

BERNARD. Yes, you always do.

REMY. I hate when you say I "always" do / something.

BERNARD. But you always / do get—

REMY. "Always" is such a damn generalization.

BERNARD. You always say that I say you "always" do things, but I don't. I never always say that.

REMY. Well you're still making a mess.

BERNARD. I'm doing something. All right? Maybe it's stupid. Maybe it won't help. But it might. It might. And it's something. And I'm doing it because I have to, because if I don't then... then we just... *(Beat.)* We'll just stay here on the moon, right, Remy? Tell me we'll stay and be safe, just us in our little world, just us...

REMY. Bernard.

BERNARD. We took a rocket to the moon and left the world behind. Say it, Remy.

REMY. No.

BERNARD. On the moon nothing can get in. On the moon it's just us, no one else. Our own little world. Moon-papa, Moon-mama, and their little Starling.

REMY. The moon isn't red, Bernard.

BERNARD. We can be on Mars, then.

REMY. I don't want to live on Mars.



BERNARD. Okay, another world, our world.

REMY. Red is *their* world, Bernard. A sick one.

BERNARD. It used to make you feel safe.

REMY. The moon is a dead place.

BERNARD. Shh!

REMY. It makes me feel trapped.

BERNARD. Please play the game.

REMY. It's not a game.

BERNARD. Please.

REMY. I can't.

BERNARD. Please please please.

REMY. I want something real, Bernard.

BERNARD. We're safe.

REMY. Tell me something real.

*Silence.*

BERNARD. I'm just scared, Remy. I'm so scared. I'm so... so...

*He trails off. Silence. She crosses to him. Picks up a paintbrush and starts slapping paint on another cupboard. He turns on the lamp—BUZZ BUZZ! BUZZ BUZZ!—and joins her. They work from opposite ends of the kitchen—throwing paint across the walls—the room burning with the fever of colour.*





*As REMY paints, she hums, finally quietly singing “Ring a Ring of Roses.”*

REMY. Ring-a-ring o’ roses  
A pocket full of posies  
Ashes, ashes  
We all / fall down.

BERNARD. Don’t sing that.

*She sings louder.*

REMY. Ring-a-ring o’ roses  
A pocket / full of posies

BERNARD. Remy.

REMY. Ashes, ashes  
We all fall down!

*He splatters paint on her. She stops singing, shocked.*

*She flings paint back at him. He retaliates. She grabs the paint can, ready to throw the entire thing on him, but he intercepts, and they wrestle.*

*She runs the paintbrush across his shirt. He paints her face. The can is forgotten and they paint each other. They laugh, despite or in spite at first, then building to real, unrepentant laughter—like the desperate sounds of a tickling taken too far.*

*Sinking to the ground, touching with these brushes in a way they have rarely touched each other—deeply, probing all the secret parts of each other’s bodies. She climbs on top of him, again lifting his shirt, exposing his blemishes.*

*She paints his skin, covering over the blotches. He exhales in pain or pleasure.*

*They are both drenched in colour—gory, glorious. Panting in rhythm—HAH HAH! HAH HAH! The light bulb pulsating with them—BUZZ BUZZ! BUZZ BUZZ!*



*This rhythm is joined by a far off squeaking of wheels—squeak squeak, squeak squeak. They both hear it and tense. Then a bell—clang clang!—agonizingly slow as it draws closer. Clang Clang! Squeak Squeak! CLANG CLANG! SQUEAK SQUEAK!*

*REMY rolls off BERNARD and they both shrink away from the light, laying on the floor.*

*The cart passes right in front of their building—Clang Clang! Squeak Squeak!—fading off the other side. Fading finally to silence.*

BERNARD. *Requiescat / in—*

REMY. Don't.

*Beat.*

BERNARD. *(Mumbles.) Pace. (Beat.)* Second one today. *(Beat.)* It's getting worse. That's good, that it's getting worse. Right, Remy? The spike, remember? Remember the spike?

*Silence.*

REMY. I had a dream last night. I'm hanging off the edge of this cliff.

BERNARD. Above Cape Caroux?

REMY. Crow.

BERNARD. Shh—a nightmare.

REMY. A dream. The baby beside me and we're both hanging there about to slip and fall. I can't look down but I know it just goes on and on. And you're above us, looking down with that look you get.

BERNARD. What look?

REMY. The one where your nostrils flare and I know you're / about to do something.



BERNARD. My nostrils don't flare.

REMY. I just don't know what. You can only choose one / me or the baby—

BERNARD. I already told you, of course / I'd—

REMY. Or yourself. A third choice. You could just walk away and leave us.

*Beat.*

BERNARD. Why would I do that?

REMY. Because that's the world we live in now. You said it before. One will turn on another.

BERNARD. Not when things go back to normal.

REMY. Normal was worse. At least now we know who's sick. (*Beat.*) If you could save yourself, I'd want you to.

BERNARD. I wouldn't. I wouldn't leave you.

*Beat.*

REMY. When I get to Maine, you know / what I'd do?

BERNARD. We'll go. We've got all that money / saved.

REMY. You saved, Bernard. I'd go to that little fishing village, Crow / and I'd—

BERNARD. Caroux.

REMY. —jump from the cliff and I'd spread my arms and fly just like a crow, too / Bernard.

BERNARD. Shh!



REMY. Like a black crow / with all—

BERNARD. Shh!

REMY. —all the white gulls. And I'd leave it all behind. Everything.

BERNARD. We need you, Remy.

REMY. If I stay here, I'll be just like that crow / I saw today. Pecking at the dead.

BERNARD. Shh! Shh!

REMY. Peck, peck, peck. Pecking at you, Bernard.

*He sits up. Looks around the room at their handiwork.*

BERNARD. But I feel better. I do. *(Beat.)* You hear me, Remy—I / feel better.

REMY. I hear you.

BERNARD. Let's listen to some music.

*He gets to his feet, with some effort. Goes to the radio.*

BERNARD. You like music. You used to like music.

*He turns it on—the HISS of static. He rolls through the stations, searching.*

BERNARD. We'll dance, Remy. Like on our wedding day—you remember that, Remy? Do you remember? You were so happy. Remy?

*She doesn't answer. He finds a signal, a weak one. It's a voice—intoning in Latin.*

VOICE.	<i>Mors vincit vita</i>	[Death conquers life
	<i>Mors vincit gaudium</i>	Death conquers happiness
	<i>Mors vincit opes</i>	Death conquers wealth
	<i>Mors vincit tempus</i>	Death conquers time]



REMY. Turn it off.

VOICE. *Mors vincit reges et mendici* [Death conquers kings and beggars  
*Mors vincit fidei et dubium* Deaths conquers faith and doubt]

REMY. Turn it off now.

VOICE. *Mors vincit vita* [Death conquers life  
*Mors vincit amor* Death conquers love  
*Mors vincit Omnia* Death conquers all]

*She crosses to the radio, but BERNARD snatches it off table and cradles it. She struggles to get it from him.*

VOICE. *Fui quod es,* [I once was what you are,  
*eris quod sum* you will be as I am  
*Annus terribilis* The terrible year  
*Dies irae* Day of wrath  
*Cadavera vero innumera* Truly countless bodies  
*Cadavera vero innumera* Truly countless bodies  
*Cadavera vero innumera* Truly countless bodies  
*Cadavera vero innumera...* Truly countless bodies...]

*She gives up the struggle and grabs her paintbrush. She crosses to the front door and paints a large red cross on it. Turns and throws the brush at BERNARD.*

REMY. Is this what you want?

*The radio has returned to static—HISS!—behind her words.*

REMY. Look at you—scared to face one word—one little word—dead, dead / dead—  
 but you'd—

BERNARD. Shh! Shh!

*He starts coughing—HACK HACK!*



REMY. —fill us with an entire dead language. You say we have to eat and keep our strength up and be safe and careful, but for what? So we can be as “normal” as possible? That’s what normal is, Bernard—it’s dying. Maybe outside is death, but it’s the ocean too. On and on. Air and salt. Seagulls.

*BERNARD COUGHS and COUGHS, violently, curling up into a ball on the floor. He COUGHS and COUGHS. REMY comes to his side and kneels down. She reaches for him, trying to take his head in her lap. He MOANS and rolls away before she can touch him.*

*She draws beside him again. He crawls to a cupboard and brings back a sheet of plastic wrap, stretches it over her lap. Rests his head there. She brushes the air above his head, trying to soothe, without touching.*

REMY. Coo-coo. Coo-coo.

*He gradually relaxes. Lets go of the radio. She shuts it off.*

REMY. Bernard.

*Silence.*

REMY. Bernard. This is important. But it will hurt. And I’m sorry for that, but I hope you will understand. *(Beat.)* I’ve found a way out. Through the perimeter. I can get out. Tonight.

*BERNARD is breathing heavily, listening.*

REMY. I arranged it for all of us, Bernard. It’s taken weeks to arrange it. And I know what you’ll say, you’ll just want to stay here, day after day, forever and ever, rest in pieces, because nothing can ever fill you, Bernard. Not a thousand cans of tomato soup.

*BERNARD moans.*

REMY. Canned soup, not from scratch. Not even this mess we made can fill you. You’re always messing things and I *am* pointing fingers, Bernard. The wedding, Bernard, remember the wedding? My dress, on the very first dance, you stepped on it



with your big feet. You. And it's never enough. One mess after the other. You're a... a landfill, Bernard.

BERNARD. Caw.

REMY. What?

BERNARD. Caw caw. Caw / caw.

REMY. What are you doing?

BERNARD. The seagulls, Remy. We'll go all the way to Cape Caroux / the ocean—

REMY. Crow.

BERNARD. —Shh—just like I promised. And it'll be just like you / imagined.

REMY. No, Bernard.

BERNARD. The hair and sleet.

REMY. Air and / salt.

BERNARD. Caw caw.

REMY. That's not a seagull, it's a crow.

BERNARD. Shh.

REMY. You have to stay, Bernard.

BERNARD. No, Remy, I'm ready. We can go. I won't mess things.

REMY. You can't come, Bernard. You understand—with you like this, we'd never make it through.

BERNARD. I'm better.





*He tries to stand and falls down. COUGHS.*

BERNARD. I'm getting better.

REMY. You're sick. *(Beat.)* I'll try to send for you. When we're safe—I'll find you a way out / too.

*She goes to put on her coat.*

BERNARD. The truth, Remy.

REMY. It won't be long. You'll be better off / here.

BERNARD. Before everything—the truth.

REMY. Things will be... fine.

BERNARD. Better than fine, Remy?

*Silence.*

BERNARD. Who? *(Beat.)* Who? Who arranged it? *(Beat.)* Who, Remy?

REMY. Someone... in the Bureau.

BERNARD. Who?

REMY. A friend.

BERNARD. Which friend—who?

REMY. Albert Pesta.

BERNARD. Pest. Pest.

*He stamps weakly, Stamp stamp!*



REMY. Stop that.

BERNARD. And what did you have to give this Pest?

REMY. What?

BERNARD. To arrange it—surely you had to give / him something?

REMY. Nothing, Bernard—nothing.

BERNARD. Money?

REMY. No.

BERNARD. Your body?

REMY. No, Bernard.

BERNARD. Then why?

REMY. He... cares.

BERNARD. Cares why?

REMY. Because he knows me—us. He's a... a friend.

BERNARD. I don't know him. He stinks. Fat and oozing in and out of his apartment, down the street to his Bureau job. / Drunk and leering at you on the stairs.

REMY. Shut up.

BERNARD. Touching your elbow with his greasy fingers on the street. You think / I don't see?

REMY. Shut up, Bernard.

BERNARD. You think I don't smell him on you?



REMY. Shut up, you cavity—you crater! Sending me out for food because you're too scared.

BERNARD. And you can't even get / tomatoes.

REMY. At least he was out there doing something—working to help us—all of us!

BERNARD. All of us?

REMY. He's agreed to take me—us—to safety, that's all that matters.

BERNARD. You were never going to take me.

REMY. I told you the truth / all of us—

BERNARD. Why didn't you tell me before? Why keep it a secret?

REMY. Because I knew you wouldn't want to go.

BERNARD. You wanted to run away with him.

REMY. What? No!

BERNARD. You wanted to leave me and run away and fuck Albert Pesta by the ocean and eat tomato soup all day—not from a can, from scratch! That's what you wanted, isn't it?

*Silence. She composes herself. He pulls the letter out of his pocket.*

REMY. Whatever has happened between you and me—all the words.... Believe whatever you want—but I will try to get you out.

*He pulls out the letter and holds it out to her.*

*She hesitates. Unsure. She takes the letter, looks at the envelope, turns it over.*

REMY. It's opened.



BERNARD. No.

REMY. You opened this?

BERNARD. No.

*She takes the letter out of the envelope—reads. It overwhelms her. She staggers to the table to sit down.*

*Silence.*

BERNARD. Do you admit it now?

*She is too stunned to answer.*

BERNARD. Lies. You liar. Lies / all of it lies—

REMY. No.

*She slips to the floor and taps—TAP TAP! TAP TAP! No answer from below.*

BERNARD. —nothing but lies-lies,                      REMY. No-no, no-no—  
lies-lies—

*She taps again, more urgently—TAP TAP! TAP TAP! Nothing.*

BERNARD. —lies-lies, lies-lies—                      REMY. —no-no, no-no—

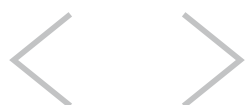
*She beats on the floor with her fist—WHAM WHAM! WHAM WHAM! Still nothing.*

*They both slow.*

BERNARD. —lies-lies... lies-lies...                      REMY. —no-no... no-no...

*Slowing to silence. He takes the letter from her and spreads it on the floor.*

BERNARD. The truth is in his words.



REMY. The words are nothing, Bernard.

BERNARD. “I’m sorry.”

REMY. They mean he’s sick.

BERNARD. “I won’t give you up.”

REMY. They mean it’s over.

BERNARD. “Don’t look for me.”

REMY. There’s no hope.

*Silence. BERNARD starts to crawl over to REMY. He pulls his gloves on.*

BERNARD. Wait. Wait—you mean he’s sick?

REMY. Yes. That’s what the words mean.

BERNARD. When—when did he get / sick?

REMY. I don’t know.

BERNARD. When did you last see him?

REMY. I don’t / know.

BERNARD. When?

*He grabs her wrist and drags her into the light, checks her scalp for bites. He’s rough, cold.*

BERNARD. You always lied to me—all ways—right from the beginning, from those first two words you say. When you danced at the wedding and smiled. And you tore your own dress—not me! Lies. But I’m not pointing fingers. Now you’ve brought his sickness up from below into this room. The sick of his skin—you brought that sick into us.



REMY. I'm not sick.

BERNARD. I just wanted the truth.

REMY. And what do you see?

*He grabs her by the wrist. She struggles.*

BERNARD. And canned tomatoes. The truth and tomatoes—that's all I asked for and you couldn't give me either!

*He grabs her by the hair.*

REMY. Ah!

*He pulls her over to a chair and slams her down. He pulls her coat partway off, over the back of the chair, so her arms are pinned behind her. As they speak, he checks her ears, pulls her shirt to check for lesions. The whole process is degrading.*

BERNARD. This is the truth you'd never give me. The truth you can't hide.

REMY. And what kind of truth did you give me?

BERNARD. I'm an honest man—always / honest.

REMY. You open my mail and / read it.

BERNARD. Don't be so petty.

REMY. Petty? You and your tomato soup and your newspaper and the lightbulb / and all your—

BERNARD. I have weak eyes.

REMY. You've always been / so petty.

BERNARD. You always say I'm always petty / but I'm—



REMY. You're the petty one!

*He forces her mouth open and grabs her tongue, gagging her. Looks inside.*

BERNARD. Don't point fingers!

*She makes a sound like "Petty." He isn't finding what he wants. He lets her go.*

BERNARD. It's not my fault the light hurts my eyes.

*She spits in his eyes.*

BERNARD. Ah!

*He runs to the sink and sprays himself in the eyes. He throws bleach in his eyes.*

BERNARD. Ah!

*He rolls around on the floor in pain, blinded.*

REMY. You gave me silences, not truth. Silences that never end. Silences with words I'd have to invent. Disapproving silences. Distrusting silences.

BERNARD. I never accused / you.

REMY. No, not with words, Bernard—but you resented me. Every breath I took of the air outside—it was wonderful—but you'd hurt me for it.

BERNARD. I never touched you / you know that's—

REMY. You just pulled my hair!

BERNARD. It's not my fault—it was an accident.

REMY. Everything's an accident.

BERNARD. I hate violence, Remy, you know that, I don't eat meat, I don't even like hurting carrots—that's the truth.





*He crawls to her.*

REMY. Truth, Bernard, is just another of your words—you know what we were missing?

*He releases her.*

BERNARD. Nothing—there's nothing!

REMY. Trust, not truth. Before everything. And we never had that.

BERNARD. You brought the sickness in here—I'm not pointing fingers—but it had to be you.

REMY. No.

BERNARD. We'll do a blood test.

REMY. No, Bernard.

BERNARD. We can put you in the water and see if you'll float.

REMY. I'm not a witch.

BERNARD. And there's this thing with a needle and / a teat.

REMY. I'm not a witch!

BERNARD. There are other tests.

REMY. None of them will tell you the truth.

*BERNARD goes to the crib and looks down at the baby—this love he has for the child the last thing he has left.*

BERNARD. What about the baby?



*Silence.*

REMY. I'm going to go. Even without Albert, I'm going.

*REMY gets the hammer and pulls the boards sealing the front door. She finishes getting dressed.*

*BERNARD rocks the cradle, half speaking, half singing—*

BERNARD.    One crow for sorrow  
                  Two crows for joy  
                  Three crows for a girl  
                  Four crows for a boy

*Beat.*

How about colours?

REMY. What?

BERNARD. Colours, Remy?

REMY. I'm not doing this anymore, Bernard.

BERNARD. Blue, Orange... turquoise.

REMY. You're colourblind.

BERNARD. Red?

REMY. No.

BERNARD. Rowan?

REMY. You said no trees.

BERNARD. How about fruits—Persimmon, Pear, Orange?



REMY. No, Bernard.

BERNARD. Jean-Marie.

REMY. Mm-mn.

BERNARD. Marie-Jean.

REMY. Mm-mn.

BERNARD. Carey.

REMY. Mm-mn.

BERNARD. Robin.

REMY. Mm-mn.

BERNARD. Gail.

REMY. Mm-mn.

BERNARD. Lex.

REMY. Mm-mn.

BERNARD. Sam.

REMY. Mm-mn.

BERNARD. Pat.

REMY. Mm-mn.

BERNARD. Blair.

REMY. Mm-mn.



BERNARD. Holly, Charlie, Bobby, Francis, Mackenzie, Andy, Ani, Anything, Anyone, Anybody, Any name at all?

*He tears the pages out of his notebook. Holding all the names in his fist.*

REMY. I have to go.

*He crosses to the sink and puts on his rubber gloves.*

REMY. What are you doing?

*He guides her to the crib, more gently this time.*

REMY. Let go, Bernard.

BERNARD. It's okay.

REMY. Let go.

*She wrenches free. He reaches down, careful not to touch skin, and swaddles the baby in a blanket. He lifts it out.*

REMY. Bernard.

*He holds the baby toward her. She backs up.*

REMY. I can't.

*He holds the baby out.*

BERNARD. You can't marry—you can't make a baby without—without—

*He finish. REMY stops at the door.*

BERNARD. If we were all there, hanging, on the cliff at the edge of Cape Caroux—me, the baby, and... and Albert Pesta too. *(Beat.)* Who would you choose? Who?



*Silence.*

BERNARD. Yourself, Remy? *(Beat.)* Not the baby?

*Silence. He lowers his arms, the offer rescinded.*

BERNARD. If I could—if I had the courage—I'd let go, Remy. I'd let myself fall. Splatter myself all over the rocks, one big mess, and the sharks could eat my guts and the seagulls could peck at my bones and you could finally be free.

*Beat.*

REMY. It was just a dream.

*She turns the knob.*

BERNARD. Don't go.

REMY. Why? Why do you want me to stay? You're both sick, Bernard.

BERNARD. We're safe.

REMY. No, Bernard.

BERNARD. I can keep us safe.

REMY. You can't. There's no moon. The truth. There's just this room. You're dying. I still have a chance. Don't you want that for me? *(Beat.)* I'd want that for you.

BERNARD. I just need—I just need a minute—one more minute—sixty seconds. That's all. Please just give me that.

REMY. More—more, it's never / enough.

BERNARD. Please.

*She lets go of the knob, comes back to the table and sits down. He places the baby gently in the centre of the table between them.*



*Silence. They both stare at the baby. She looks away.*

REMY. I need to go.

BERNARD. Why won't you choose a name?

REMY. Because you can't think of any good ones.

BERNARD. You think of one then.

REMY. I don't have any.

BERNARD. Anything you'd like. / Anything.

REMY. Bernard.

*Beat.*

BERNARD. Then why did we ever bring a baby—into all this?

REMY. It was an accident.

BERNARD. No.

REMY. We never should've—

BERNARD. We did. Take the baby, Remy.

REMY. I can't, Bernard.

BERNARD. Together, you both have a chance.

REMY. It's sick.

BERNARD. We don't know that. It's just a cough. Just a little cough. Take the baby.

REMY. I can't.



BERNARD. Yes you / can.

REMY. I can't.

*She tries to stand, he holds her wrist down with his gloved hand.*

BERNARD. Look at it.

REMY. I can't. You love this baby, Bernard. You won't let me touch it. How am I supposed to love something I can't touch.

*He tries to pull her back to the chair, she resists.*

BERNARD. *Amo, Remy, te amo.*

REMY. Don't talk to me / like that.

BERNARD. *Ad mortem te amo.*

REMY. Your words, Bernard.

BERNARD. *Ad mortem.*

REMY. Use your words!

BERNARD. Okay, Remy, okay, I... I... / you know I—

REMY. What?

BERNARD. I... I...

REMY. You're right, even your words are infected, Bernard.

*He finds the real words.*

BERNARD. I'm sorry.



REMY. I know.

BERNARD. I'm so, so sorry.

REMY. I'm sorry.

BERNARD. That's the truth, Remy. Those are my words. I want you to be free.

REMY. I believe you.

BERNARD. I believe you.

*Silence. The baby giggles. BERNARD goes down to the floor in front of REMY, begging.*

BERNARD. Will you take the baby.

REMY. Bernard.

BERNARD. Take the baby, Remy. Both of you can get to Maine, to Cape Caroux / and stand over—

REMY. Crow.

BERNARD. —all that water. With your... air and... salt and seagulls. You can leap off the edge and fly. Be free. Two little... two little...

REMY. Crows.

BERNARD. My two little black...

REMY. Crows.

BERNARD. ... Crows.

*She leans over the baby. Soothing, not squawking—*

REMY. Caw-caw. Caw-caw.





*The baby giggles.*

REMY. Caw-caw.

*She motions for BERNARD, he finishes for her.*

BERNARD. Uh... caw-caw.

*The baby giggles some more.*

REMY. Caw-caw.

BERNARD. Caw-caw.

REMY. Caw-caw.

BERNARD. Caw-caw.

*The baby squeals in delight.*

REMY. Bernard.

BERNARD. Caw-caw.

REMY. The colour is fine. The / cheeks.

BERNARD. Caw-caw.

*She leans in closer.*

REMY. Breathing is fine.

BERNARD. Caw-caw.

*She reaches to touch. He begins to stop her and then relents.*

*She touches the baby's skin.*



REMY. No fever, Bernard.

BERNARD. Caw.

REMY. Fine.

BERNARD. Fine.

REMY. Better than fine.

BERNARD. Just a cough, Remy. A little caw-cough.

*She reaches down and picks up the child, kisses it on the forehead, the cheeks, the lips—staking their connection for the first time. BERNARD watches, in awe.*

REMY. My little... my tiny, little, black... Crow.

*She looks at BERNARD.*

REMY. Crow?

BERNARD. Crow.

REMY. Crow.

*Something passes between them—acknowledging a decision has been reached.*

*She stands, cradling the baby. She opens her mouth to say something, but is stopped by—*

*A knocking on the door—KNOCK KNOCK! KNOCK KNOCK!*

*They freeze. BERNARD motions for quiet. They wait.*

*Again—KNOCK KNOCK! KNOCK KNOCK!*

*They wait. Agonizing silence, stretching until it almost seems like danger must be passed. Then, the baby COUGHS, once.*



*BERNARD and REMY startle, trying to soothe the baby.*

*The door RATTLES—someone trying to get in.*

*They panic, REMY scooping the baby in her arms and together they run into audience—into the depths of the apartment.*

*The door continues RATTLING with ever more insistence.*

*Then silence. REMY and BERNARD find a hiding place somewhere in the audience.*

*The door explodes inward, BANGING against the wall.*

*CREAK CREAK! CREAK CREAK!—the pump starts moving on its own accord.  
CREAK CREAK! CREAK CREAK!*

*The tall figure of The DOCTOR stands in the doorway. Swathed from head to foot in his blood red uniform.*

*The pump sputters and out sprays a thick dark liquid. Red, like a geyser.*

*He has to duck to enter the room. He stands, just inside, his head moving back and forth, scanning the room. He sniffs—SNIFF SNIFF! SNIFF SNIFF!*

*The DOCTOR crosses to the table—SNIFF SNIFF!—as he goes. His movements are vulture-like—pecking and hungry. He arrives at the crib and peers down.*

*In REMY's arms, the baby COUGHS.*

*The DOCTOR's head snaps up—he scuttles downstage, looking out into the audience—SNIFF SNIFF! SNIFF SNIFF!*

*The baby COUGHS again.*

**BERNARD.** Caw-caw. Caw-caw.

**REMY.** Caw-caw. Caw-caw.

*He steps down into the audience and—SNIFF SNIFF!—begins searching for the baby. He pokes and prods audience members with his cane as he goes.*



*BERNARD tries to squirm underneath someone's feet to hide.*

*But the DOCTOR draws ever closer to their hiding spot. When he's footsteps away from them, REMY shoves the baby into BERNARD's arms and jumps out.*

REMY. I'm here.

*The DOCTOR's attention swings to her. She steps away from the hiding place, still right among the audience. The DOCTOR inspects REMY—circling, sniffing her, probing her body. It's cold and violating.*

*REMY starts to cry. She covers this with a COUGH—it's forced, but a good act. The DOCTOR steps back from her. She throws a coughing fit—HACK HACK!*

*The DOCTOR gestures toward the kitchen.*

*He prods her as they walk. Just when they reach the kitchen—*

*The baby COUGHS in BERNARD's arms. The DOCTOR turns—SNIFF SNIFF!*

REMY. There's no one else.

*The DOCTOR takes a step back toward the audience—SNIFF SNIFF!*

REMY. My husband works for the Bureau. Albert Pesta—you took him in earlier today. We don't have any children.

*The DOCTOR looks toward the crib.*

REMY. I'm pregnant. With his child.

*The sink overflows, red liquid oozing into the kitchen.*

*The DOCTOR considers this. He leans in—SNIFF SNIFF!—to her neck. He undresses her, taking off her protective clothing, mirroring BERNARD's undressing from earlier. He sniffs her bare skin, her belly. He steps back and points to the door again. She looks back into the room, toward BERNARD's hiding place.*



REMY. Caw.

*They leave.*

*The pump stops, the tap dripping.*

*BERNARD emerges from his hiding place and slowly makes his way back to the stage. He sneaks up beside the door and shuts it. He is uncomfortable holding the baby—their bodies so close.*

*He paces the kitchen, not sure what to do. The baby COUGHS in his arms.*

BERNARD. Shhh-shhh. Shhh-shhh.

*The baby keeps coughing—now CHOKING—the sound of life struggling.*

BERNARD. Coo-coo. Coo-coo.

*He grabs the hammer—goes to window and pulls a board free. He uses the hammer to SHATTER the pane. He holds the baby—still CHOKING—and up to the window. Moonlight spills across them.*

BERNARD. Caw-caw. Caw-caw.

*The CHOKING stops. The baby is silent.*

BERNARD. No. No no no.

*A momentary surrender. Then a surge—refusing to give up. One last hope. He sings, his voice cracking.*

BERNARD. One crow for sorrow...

*He trails off. Restarts, copying REMY's words.*

One crow for fever  
Two crows for pox



*He abandons all thought of touch, leans down and kisses the baby on the forehead, the cheeks, the lips—copying the pattern he witnessed with mother and child.*

Three crows for buboes  
Four crows for coughs

*He moves toward the light, holding the child. Stepping into it for first time without shrinking.*

Five crows for bleeding  
Six crows to pray  
Seven with a crow, the child will...

*His voice grows quieter and quieter—his words an incantation. The light bulb quickens its pulse—BUZZ BUZZ! BUZZ BUZZ!*

With the crow, the child will...

*BUZZ BUZZ! BUZZ BUZZ!*

The child will fly...

*BUZZ BUZZ! BUZZ BUZZ!*

Fly... fly...

*The light bulb bursts—showering glass and sparks.*

Fly away.

*Silence.*

*The baby CAWS like a crow—free and joyous. BERNARD throws the bundle into the air and the blanket explodes, a cloud of black feathers snowing down. The entire space a cocoon of feather and fading light.*

**ET IDEO FINITUR**



Born in a meteor crater, **Matthew Heiti** holds an MA in Creative Writing from the University of New Brunswick. He is an award-winning playwright, a Genie-nominated screenwriter, and his first novel, *The City Still Breathing*, is published by Coach House Books. His play, *Black Dog: 4 vs the wrld* will be published by Playwrights' Canada Press in 2016. In his down time, he explores new work in abandoned places with Crestfallen Theatre and gets nostalgic: [www.harkback.org](http://www.harkback.org)

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