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Time to Burn

by CHARLES L. MEE

Inspired by Maxim Gorky's *Lower Depths*

Night time.

America.

The sound of water dripping into buckets here and there.

We are moving very slowly in darkness
through a vast, dead, peeling, rusting, leaking,
disintegrating factory building.

In the darkness we can barely make out huge, useless, abandoned
19th century machines—big incomprehensible things
no longer capable of giving employment to anyone.

Light bulbs—not now lit—inside conical green glass shades,
hang down from wires that go up three stories to the ceiling
where there are just a half-dozen small windows.

In the center of this vast room are two rows of cutting tables—
steel frame tables with wood work surfaces worn smooth—
on which workers once produced things.

Now we see, as we move very slowly through the darkness,
that a dozen or so people are sleeping on these tables.

As we move along the aisles separating the two rows of tables,
we see things on the floor next to the tables—
a neatly placed pair of terribly worn boots,
a stack of beautiful, leather-bound books,
a pile of junk from the streets.

As we continue to move, we see,
in white type dropped out of the darkness, the title:

Time to Burn

We hear a door opening
and look up to see,
on a landing
at the top of a double flight of stairs at one end of the factory,
a man, quietly, carefully close a door behind himself,
wait a moment,
and then come down the stairs.

The dawn light is beginning to come through the windows
high up in the wall.

The man, Billy,
makes his way noiselessly through the room,
past the sleeping people
to a cluster of four wooden wine crates, makeshift shelves,
near an empty sleeping space.

He takes out of his pockets, and puts into these shelves,
some small tools,
a cluster of keys,
and a handful of jewelry.

We hear nothing, but,
with Billy, we turn to look
and see an elderly black woman, Jessie,
is awake and looking with intent curiosity at Billy.

JESSIE

What have you got?

BILLY

Nothing.

JESSIE

I see you've got something.

What is it?

I've got jewelry, you know, if that's what you want.

[she starts to rummage through the bags of stuff around her]

A watch

you know,

or a tortoiseshell comb

barometer

You see it?

a barometer

a precious old thing

[We see one of the others,

a young woman just next to her named Kadirah,

has awakened

and turns only her head to look at Jessie,

sleepily,

and without saying anything, as she goes on.]

BILLY [agreeably]

Where did you get that?

JESSIE

[with indifference]

I found it.

[then, interested again]

An Alamanac
sea shells
A tweezer case
eyebrow brush

Here they are:
a pair of silk garters
You like these?

JAROSLAW
Ssshhhh!!! Quiet.

BILLY [whispering]
No, thank you.

[silence]

JESSIE I have a snuff box.

BILLY
Unh-hunh.

JESSIE
Do you like snuff?

BILLY
Snuff?
I don't use snuff.

JESSIE
Don't use snuff.

BILLY
No.
Where did you get this stuff?

JAROSLAW
Will you be quiet!

[silence]

JESSIE

I thought gentlemen used snuff.

BILLY [still agreeable, friendly toward Jessie]

Well, it may have been true of gentlemen in the twenties,
or something

I don't know,
but I've never used it.

JESSIE

Well, I have a bell pull...

[she holds it up]

BILLY

Oh, well, that's handy.

JESSIE

I have a bell to go with it.

Somewhere here.

[She rummages around, somewhat lost in it all;
she comes upon her bottle, takes a moment to have a drink.]

JESSIE

Curling irons

[looking up]

for the hair you know.

BILLY

Yes.

JESSIE

[shakes her head, a little bit put out with how many keys she has
Jessie is lost in a world of objects, of commodities, yes—
each one precious to her—

but more than that, lost in objects of the past, of a former life,
of history
she holds one up]

BILLY

Very handsome.

JESSIE

cork screws, of course
bits of brass
That's from another time.

[Our gaze travels to Jaroslaw just as he starts to speak.]

JAROSLAW

Do you know there are people here who are still trying to sleep!

JESSIE

Then you have your usual utensils

pans

a stuffed bird

[this stops her; she gazes at it for a while before plumping it back down
unceremoniously]

opera glasses—very hard to find—you wouldn't think it—people don't throw them
away—I don't know what they do with them

[to Billy]

but, well, this is the stuff of life on earth

BILLY

Is it?

JESSIE

One time I had a desk
that had belonged to my mother and father
and before that to my mother's mother
and after they were gone

I could put my hand out flat in the center of the desk
where my father's hand had been
and feel that close to him.
And now the desk is gone, too.

JAROSLAW
Inconsiderate bastards....

[silence]

JESSIE
Well, would you like a snuff box anyway?

BILLY
I don't think so, thank you.

Look—
now—
these are beautiful things,
but I don't have any place to keep them.

JESSIE
Oh.

[offended]

Oh, of course.

[with sudden distaste]

These things are not in fashion.

BILLY
No, that's not...

JESSIE
They're just trash, you know.

BILLY

No, no, I didn't mean....

JESSIE [not mollified]

Think nothing of it.

JAROSLAW

What is it about you people?

You think you're the only people in the world?

You don't give a damn if other people are trying to get some rest?

[We look around the factory.

Others are just waking up now,

or trying not to wake up,

pulling on their clothes.

One sits for a long while on the edge of the table, his head down,
collecting himself;

another holds his head in his hands,

Jessie moves on to wrapping her swollen ankles tightly with ace bandages,

A man is scratching himself,

another man is putting ear drops into his ear.

With all the disabilities and ailments,
this looks like a wounded army camped here.

Anna, still in bed, coughs
deeply and for a long while.]

BILLY [to JAROSLAW]

She needs a doctor.

JAROSLAW

She needs a blanket.

BILLY

You should take her to a doctor.

JAROSLAW

Mind your own business.

She's my wife.

[The door bangs open.

On the landing is RAUL

struggling to get something through the door.

His cursing is heavily accented—

a foreigner who learned all the swear words first.

He is Mexican—and has several disabilities:

an odd manner that suggests a neurological deficit of some sort;

and he might also be a dwarf,

or have one leg much shorter than the other.

RAUL

God damn this fucking son of a bitch, you fucking cocksucker.

BILLY

You need help?

RAUL

What do you think

this fucking cocksucker

goddammit.

Billy starts for the stairs

when Raul pulls the thing suddenly through the door,

it hits the landing rail

and pieces of it fly over the rail down into the factory

RAUL

Hey, you fuck....

JAROSLAW

Look out!

KADIRA [frightened]

Hey! Fuck! Fuck!

[The people below scatter.

JAROSLAW

People are still sleeping here goddammit!

RAUL

Goddam you cocksucker!

[RAUL kicks the thing,
tears pieces off it and throws them over the rail
and kicks the remainder of it down the stairs

There, you son of a bitch
you goddam fucker
you fuck with me
I'll tear your fucking lungs out

[Silence

BILLY

What is this?

RAUL

It's a barbecue.

I found it on the street.

I thought we could cook dinner.

JESSIE

Cook dinner?

RAUL

Have a party.

[Everyone comes forward now with interest to examine the pieces.

KADIRA [yelling at RAUL]

Then why the fuck did you ruin it?

RAUL [yelling]

I didn't fucking ruin it.

The fucking thing wouldn't fit through the fucking door.

KADIRA [yelling]

It fits through the door if you'd use your fucking head.

RAUL [yelling]

You're so fucking smart.

You use your fucking head then and put it back together.

[Silence.

BILLY

We can put it back together.

[He begins to pick up the pieces,
others come to help him.

At the top of a second set of stairs,
at the end of the factory opposite
to the stairs we have seen used till now,
VINNIE PAZZI the landlord suddenly appears.
He wears yellow rubber gloves (at all times),
polyester satin alligator-patterned trousers,
and a black, see-through polyamide tank top,
and sunglasses.

VINNIE PAZZI [angrily]

What's this goddam noise?

[Silence

ALEJANDRO

Raul dropped something.

VINNIE PAZZI

Did he?

Or did you think you'd wreck the place?

[he starts down the stairs, talking all the way

You think it can't get worse?

You think I can't get other tenants who would appreciate a warm place to sleep?

You people.

A few bucks a month and you think you're being gouged.

I could have a waiting list if I wanted to.

And what's this all over the floor?

Didn't you people sweep this morning?

You think the rats and cockroaches won't come around

no matter what sort of filth you live in?

Spreading their diseases right up the stairs into my home?

What is this?

RAUL

A barbecue.

VINNIE PAZZI

A what?

RAUL

A barbecue.

JESSIE

For a party.

VINNIE PAZZI

You mean you think you'll have a fire down here?

BILLY

It's all contained—

just charcoal, you know,

for cooking dinner

VINNIE PAZZI

What is the matter with you people
you won't be happy till you burn my house down
Do you think the fire department would allow you to
cook down here?
Here's your problem in a nutshell.
You can't think.
No wonder.
Your minds don't let you conceive more than one step ahead.
Now pick this junk up and get it out of here.

BILLY

Wait a minute.

[silence]

The barbecue stays.

[silence]

VINNIE PAZZI

And who do you think you are?

BILLY

I am the guy who gave you a Bolex watch with an alligator band five days ago and
you owe me my share of what you sold it for. That's who I am. Who do you think
you are?

[silence;

Vinnie Pazzi looks around at all the witnesses]

VINNIE PAZZI

This is no conversation to have in front of all these people.

BILLY

I didn't start it.

VINNIE PAZZI

Come upstairs.

BILLY

I'm busy here as you can see.

VINNIE PAZZI

I see.

[Silence.

All right then.

We'll settle our business later.

BILLY

Meanwhile, the barbecue stays.

VINNIE PAZZI

Oh,

it does.

BILLY

Yes.

VINNIE PAZZI

Unh-hunh.

BILLY

So long as you do whatever you want
we will do whatever we want.

VINNIE PAZZI

I see.

BILLY

And you need to learn to speak to us
with some respect.

VINNIE PAZZI

I see.

[Silence.

Vinnie Pazzi looks around.]

And you, Mister Kacewicz,
I speak to you with all respect,
what is this around your bunk?

JAROSLAW

What?

VINNIE PAZZI

All this shit.

JAROSLAW

All this is my work.
I manufacture computer components.

VINNIE PAZZI

Here?
On my premises?

JAROSLAW

Well, yes.
It's like a—home factory.
I put my faith in capitalism, you know.
This is the new age.
The information age.
People can work from their own homes.

VINNIE PAZZI

Oh, good.
If you're taking up such space for a commercial enterprise,
I guess I'll have to raise your rent.
Say another ten dollars a month.

JAROSLAW

Ten dollars a month?

VINNIE PAZZI

Or twenty.

JAROSLAW

Twenty dollars a month?

VINNIE PAZZI

It's not enough?

JAROSLAW

Why don't you just shoot me?

VINNIE PAZZI

Shoot you,
you dumb fuck,
what good would that do me?

BILLY

[speaking confidentially]

You know, he doesn't make any money at it.

VINNIE PAZZI

Well, that's none of my business, is it?
How well you do, what profit comes your way.
That's up to you, isn't it?
Work all you want.
I wish you well.
As they say:
a rising tide lifts all boats, eh?
But I'll have to have my commercial rent, won't I?
And I don't buy luxuries either, any more than you do.
I'll use it to buy a statue of St. Jude.
You'll share the credit for it.

JAROSLAW

Credit?

VINNIE PAZZI

Credit in the next world, my friend.
Every deed,
every word
every sacrifice
is entered into a man's account there.

You shouldn't abandon your religion, you know.
That's what's wrong these days.

In the next world,
we'll all be equal.

That's heaven, you know.

[he continues speaking very quietly]

But, meanwhile, here on earth,
there is the matter of sweeping up.
This is, in a certain sense, beyond my control.
I have the health department to answer to, haven't I?

[He turns to go back upstairs,
turns back.

Do you understand?
They shut places down
for violations.
Throw everyone out and shut them down.
Do I make myself perfectly clear?

[They watch in silence
as he goes up the stairs and out.]

JAROSLAW

Where am I going to get twenty dollars a month?
You prick.

BILLY
Don't worry,
we'll all chip in.

JAROSLAW
How do you mean chip in?

BILLY
Chip in.
No reason you should pay the whole barbecue tax yourself.

RAUL
Really, there are no better people in the world than thieves.

JAROSLAW
Sure. Money comes easy to them—they don't have to work.

JESSIE
Money comes easy to plenty of people,
but it doesn't come so easy to let it go.

ALEJANDRO
As for work, now,
if you make it pleasant for me,
I'll be delighted to work.

JAROSLAW
Make it pleasant for you.
Right.
That's all you people want is to have something handed to you.

ALEJANDRO [drily]
No doubt it's cultural.

RAUL [continuing the mockery]
Cultural, yes.
Or genetic.

JAROSLAW

Yes, let's be honest.

You're used to living on the dole,

you Third World people

well, it's a different world now, you know.

You'll have to pull your own weight now, you know.

RAUL

I think my people have pulled their weight.

JAROSLAW

You do? I don't see it, anywhere I go.

People looking for a handout.

I've worked for everything I ever got in life

and what will become of me?

I own nothing.

RAUL

Well, the point is you had a job all these years!

I haven't even got a job!

JAROSLAW

Who asked you to come here?

Go home.

Go home.

KADIRA

You go home!

Where do you think you are?

ALEJANDRO

Joy

makes you open and light.

Joy

counteracts the pull of gravity.

Joy

banishes the consciousness of self.

Joy is more than contentment,
more than happiness.
Joy has something of the sacred in it,
something we should all have every day.

[silence]

[A door opens
at the top of the double stairway that Billy descended earlier.
Tertius steps out onto the landing and stands motionlessly there.

A vision of Boston Brahmin elegance and grace,
fine clothes and manners,
enters this world of filth and rags like a dream.
The inhabitants of the factory all turn one by one
and look up at Tertius in silence, and even awe.
He descends the stairs slowly,
unable to shed a bearing of natural dignity—
and slight physical awkwardness, as though he were not quite accustomed to
having to walk about the earth on foot—
and with a certain care of his self, as though he might be breakable,
as though his pockets were filled with uncooked eggs—
and they remain silent all the while he descends the stairs.

TERTIUS
Good morning.

BILLY
Good morning.

TERTIUS
I was told one of you might direct me to my accommodations.

ALEJANDRO
Your accommodations?

BILLY [amicably]
A place to sleep?

TERTIUS

Yes. Indeed.

BILLY [gesturing]

Over here there's room....

TERTIUS

Thank you.

[he moves through the crowd:

Billy, an amiable midwesterner

Raul, from Mexico

Kadira, a young Eastern European woman

Jessie, an elderly African American woman

Jaroslaw and his wife, both Poles

Alejandro, a Brazilian transvestite]

Tertius Hodgson.

Pleased to make your acquaintance.

BILLY

Billy.

[Tertius greets each one with "How do you do?"]

ALEJANDRO

Alejandro....

JAROSLAW

Jaroslaw Kacewicz

My wife, Anna....

KADIRA

Kadira....

BILLY

[as Tertius stops before an empty space on a table]

We're not as—

handsomely equipped as you might be used to....

TERTIUS

Thank you.

This looks quite comfortable to me.

JESSIE

You're a gentleman.

Well, I should say, probably, an aristocrat.

[Tertius shrugs amiably.]

[JESSIE to the others]

You know, as they say,

aristocracy is like the smallpox.

A man may get well, but the pock marks remain.

[silence; she recognizes her faux pas]

Actually, what I meant to say...

TERTIUS [waving it off with complete good humor and equanimity]

No, no, no. I think you're probably quite right.

Pock marks indeed.

BILLY

What brings you here?

TERTIUS

Well, a love of cards, I should say,
primarily.

A love of anything that moves really—

on which a man may place a bet and lose large sums of money—
the stock market, pork bellies, horses

BILLY

The sport of kings.

You know—because if you believe in horse racing
then you believe that ancestry counts.

RAUL

Proving once again: the main thing is luck.

BILLY

Luck?

Breeding I'd have said.

TERTIUS

Well.

Nurture maybe.

ALEJANDRO

I don't think anyone believes in that any more.

JESSIE

Hard work.

Character.

[Shocked silence,
then laughter from all sides.

The laughter goes on and on and on.

They laugh until they cry.]

ANNA, coming out of the laughter, coughs horribly
and for a long, long time
while they all look at her, waiting for her to stop;
awkward silence]

BILLY

We were going to have breakfast.

Will you join us?

TERTIUS

Thank you.

[Billy pours a cup of coffee for Tertius.
Others gather around the coffee pot, pour cups of coffee,
and break off pieces of stale bread from a couple of loaves.]

JESSIE

Of course, this is not a typical day for us.

Normally we wake up quite late in the morning
stretch out a hand to reach for some chocolate,
which we eat, customarily, lying in bed;
and then we get up for breakfast at eight
when we have porridge,
plum cake,
eggs benedict,
a little halibut or
some other fish,
hot biscuits and butter,
with raspberry jam and
cafe au lait.

[we look around the room slowly,
going from face to face as she gives this loving recital]

And then,
really,
our day begins.

TERTIUS

I should feel quite at home.

JESSIE

And just recently we have acquired a barbecue.

RAUL

We thought we might have a party.

ALEJANDRO

A garden party.

TERTIUS

A garden party.

BILLY

So.

Alejandro, would you help me sweep up?

ALEJANDRO

It's not my turn to sweep today.

It's Jaroslaw's turn.

JAROSLAW

I've no time to clean up,

I have work to do.

ALEJANDRO

That's not my business.

It's your turn to sweep.

I'm not going to do other people's work.

JAROSLAW

This is your problem,

you won't lift a finger,

let the whole world sink into rot.

I *am* working.

ALEJANDRO

Who is he talking to?

JAROSLAW

I'm talking to you, you slut.

ALEJANDRO

Who are you calling a slut, you asshole?

TERTIUS

Never mind.

I'll help.

It will be a novelty for me, you know.

RAUL

Although, let's face it,
you are a slut.

[to the others]

I mean, I don't approve of his behavior either.

KADIRA

Oh, no, you'd fuck him up the ass,
you just wouldn't approve of his behavior.

RAUL

Fuck him?

You think I fuck men?

ALEJANDRO

You know, there are certain things a man knows.

For instance:

have you heard of Inviting the Nectar?

RAUL

Inviting the Nectar?

ALEJANDRO

When a man lets another man's penis
slide completely into his mouth

JAROSLAW

This is disgusting.

ALEJANDRO

and presses the shaft firmly between his lips,
holding a moment before pulling away

this is called

Inviting the Nectar.

JAROSLAW

This is what's wrong if you ask me.

ALEJANDRO

Or a man can take your penis deep into his mouth,
pulling on it and sucking
as though he were stripping clean a mango-stone:
this is what we call
Sucking a Mango.

JAROSLAW

Sick.

ALEJANDRO

You shouldn't be listening to this.

JAROSLAW

You talk here in front of everyone.

ALEJANDRO

Where should I go to talk? Don't I live here?

KADIRA

Come with me shopping.
We'll get things for the picnic.

RAUL

Why do you think I fuck men?

TERTIUS

While you're out, you might pick up some champagne.

KADIRA

So you don't fuck men.

ALEJANDRO [to Raul]

Sometimes, you know,
before you make love
you can massage your penis
with honey mixed with powdered black pepper,
and you'll find you can go on and on.
Women like this.

[Raul looks at him uncomprehendingly]

Just a suggestion.

TERTIUS

I say,
while you're out,
you might pick up some champagne.

RAUL

Sure.
What do you like?

TERTIUS

Whatever is closest to the door.

RAUL

Right.
Sure.

[Raul leaves with Kadiria.

Billy and Tertius sweep.

Nikos emerges from the shadows

and approaches Tertius, talking to him, in Greek.

The English translation is not delivered; it's given here
just for the actors' convenience.]

NIKOS

Leepon, eenu chris mos apop sila-stall menos y anna cani ola ta pragh
mata ee bua hoha.

[So it is the oracle from high, sent to make all things amenable.]

TERTIUS

Ah.
Aeschylus.

NIKOS

Kalo-so-ree-sa-te. To on-o-ma mou ee-ne Nikos.

[Welcome, my name is Nikos.]

TERTIUS

Ah.

[turning to NIKOS]

He-ro-me poe-lee.

See-gno-mee

alla te elee-nee-ka-mou

then ee-ne ke to-so k-la e(x)ho na ta mee-lee-so ar-ke-to ke-ro.

[I'm glad to meet you.

Forgive me, but my Greek is a little rusty.

I haven't spoken it in a while.]

[they shake hands]

BILLY

You speak Greek?

TERTIUS

Yes, I suppose I do.

NIKOS

See-gno-mee e an ee-me lee-go af-thor-mee-tos,

alla ee-me ka-lo-tech-nees, ee-tho-pee-os ya teen ak-ree-veea,

ke e-(x)hi pe-ra-see lee-gos ke-ros.

[Excuse me if I seem a bit forward,

but I'm an artist, an actor really,

and it has been quite some time.]

BILLY

What does he say?

TERTIUS

He is an actor.

Between engagements.

BILLY

Yes.

Well,

of course he's between engagements.

I mean: he speaks Greek.

NIKOS

lexo pros humas tond Athenaias megan

thesman delcayos mandi-son duf sef-soni

[I will speak justly before you, Athena's great tribunal—
since I am a prophet, I cannot lie.]

TERTIUS [applauding]

Bravo.

Bravo.

[to BILLY]

The Eumenides.

One of my favorite plays in fact.

[to NIKOS]

to men dikaion touth hoson sthenei mathein

[Learn how strong this plea of justice is;

and I tell you to obey the will of my father]

NIKOS [once again, with great truth and power as an actor]

boulei piphausko d umm epispesthai patros:

horkos gar outi Zenos ischuei pleon

[for an oath is not more powerful]

TERTIUS

Zeus, hos legeis su, tonde chresmon opase

[Zeus, as you say, gave you this oracular command]

BILLY

You know it, too.

TERTIUS

Well, a few lines.

He knows the whole thing.

He's performed it a dozen times, he says.

BILLY

[looking at NIKOS with a new respect]

Really.

A dozen times.

[Billy and NIKOS exchange silent acknowledgement.

NIKOS turns away,

goes to his bunk.

Tertius and Billy sweep.]

BILLY

I often thought I should have been an actor.

TERTIUS

Unh-hunh.

BILLY

But then, it's no way to make a living.

TERTIUS

No.

BILLY

You must have some money left, though.

TERTIUS

How do you mean?

BILLY

It's hard to believe you don't have *any* money left.

TERTIUS

[good naturedly]

It's hard for *me* to believe.

BILLY

But probably you still have some connections.

I mean, if you had an idea for a business.

You know, I have some ideas for businesses.

TERTIUS

Really? What sort of businesses?

BILLY

Well, it would depend on what sort of resources someone had to bring to it, you know.

TERTIUS

Really, I'm afraid I burned all my bridges.

BILLY

Really.

No one, you know, we might have lunch with.

TERTIUS

[smiling]

No, I'm afraid not.

BILLY

Well.

No hard feelings that I....

TERTIUS

No. No.

Certainly not.

Certainly not.

[This is a long, long quiet time.

We watch JAROSLAW work at his computer parts

He is trying to force a small piece into another.

He grows angrier and angrier,

and finally explodes in anger.

JAROSLAW

Da mu eba maikata! Pochti uspyah...

[Fuck. Fuck. I almost got it]

Izvinyavai. Molya te, Anna, prosti mi.

[I'm sorry. Please forgive me.]

ANNA

Zanam, zanam.

[I know, I know.]

JAROSLAW

Opitvam se da izkaram pari, da te premestya v bolnitsa.

[I'm trying to make some money to put you in a hospital.]

ANNA

Ne iskam da umra v bolnitsa.

[I don't want to die in a hospital.]

JAROSLAW

Koi govori za umirane be chovek....

[Who's talking about dying....]

ANNA

Ostavi me na mira.

[Leave me.]

JAROSLAW

Zashto mislish nai-loshoto?

[Why do you think the worst?]

ANNA

Taka e po-dobre!

[It's better that way!]

[He shakes his head from side to side
finally letting it fall to his chest
probably in tears.]

We look at ANNA.
She goes on coughing.
Finally subsides, exhausted,
closes her eyes.]

JESSIE
Of all human qualities, the greatest is sympathy.

ALESSANDRA
Or compassion.

JESSIE
Or compassion.
Sometimes I think:
There are things on my horizon that go beyond me.
There are feelings that rise and rush over me
as if they were written on the walls of my soul-chamber
in some unknown language.
And I am helpless before them.

[Again: a long, long quiet time.
Our gaze moves along
to Billy who is taking a radio from a cardboard box.
He plugs it in, turns it on.

Gershwin.
Everyone listens.
A beautiful love song
from another world.

Billy looks away from the radio, listening.
Our gaze moves along
to Nikos, who is preparing heroin to inject.
We watch him do it.
He lies back and listens to Gershwin.

Our gaze moves along
to Jessie, rummaging in her shopping cart full of junk.
She is drinking out of a bottle.
One of her feet is thickly bandaged,
so that she cannot wear a shoe on it.

Our gaze moves along
to Kadira, who is absently shooting craps by herself
and listening to Gershwin.
She begins to sing along quietly, mumblingly, with the radio.

After a moment or two, Alejandro joins in more overtly.
After another moment, Jessie joins in.
Then Billy.

Finally they are all singing this beautiful sentimental song
with great feeling,
each of them caught up in a private world of memory and longing.

After the song, there is a long silence, and then:

[The door to the landlord's house opens.
NGUYEN, a Thai woman, enters with the old man SHLOMO,
giving him some support as they start down the stairs.
NGUYEN speaks with a pronounced Thai accent.

NGUYEN
Will someone give me a hand?

BILLY
I will.

[He goes quickly up the stairs to help with SHLOMO.

NGUYEN
This is a new guy.

BILLY
Hello.
My name is Billy.

SHLOMO
How do you do?
I'm Shlomo.
Really I can manage alone.

BILLY
Of course.
But these are difficult stairs.

SHLOMO
Well, you're an honest man.

BILLY
I'm sorry?

SHLOMO
I say, you are an honest man.

[Billy and Nguyen exchange a look.]

BILLY
Ah. Yes.
About the stairs.

SHLOMO
And if you are dishonest about everything else,
what do I care?
You jump up to help an old man.
You're a good human being.

BILLY
[Another look to Nguyen.]
Thank you.
It's kind of you to say so.

[They are down the stairs now.]

SHLOMO

Where shall I settle down?

BILLY

Just over here.

[SHLOMO has a tea kettle on a rope over his shoulder and a backpack
Billy takes SHLOMO's backpack from him.]

Here, let me help.

[Billy puts the backpack on the old man's bunk.]

I see you've brought your own tea kettle.
Would you like a cup of tea?

SHLOMO

Yes, I would, thank you.

BILLY [taking the kettle from the pack]
I'll do it.

JAROSLAW

What a fascinating old man you've brought to us, Nguyen.
I wonder where he's from.

NGUYEN [gently, not harshly]

You should save all your fascination for your wife, Jaroslaw.
She needs you.

JAROSLAW

Everyone lectures me.

NGUYEN

You ought to treat her more kindly.
It won't be long now—

JAROSLAW
Don't I know?

NGUYEN [still gently]
It's not enough to know.
You need to understand.
It's a frightening thing to die.

JAROSLAW [to the others]
Here I have a child telling me about death.
And meanwhile what about life?

NGUYEN
What am I doing here?
I should get a job as a waitress.

JAROSLAW
You couldn't get a job in a Chinese noodle shop.

NGUYEN [to Billy]
He still thinks I'm Chinese.

JAROSLAW
You should get out in the world.
What do you know about anything?
You have such a sheltered life.
You come here with your sister,
she marries this rich man

BILLY
Rich!

JAROSLAW
A man of property!
More than I have!
I pay him the rent,
he just sits around
lets these Orientals do his work for him.

[to NGUYEN again]
You're a kept woman really,
what's the difference.

BILLY
I thought you owned the place.

NGUYEN
My sister and I.

BILLY
Your sister and you.
So really the landlord,
he's a kept man.

JAROSLAW
How do you end up owning this place?
Who did you fuck to do that?

BILLY
Jesus.

[Raul and Kadira return with arms full of groceries
to this moment of silence.]

NGUYEN
No problem.
I'll be out of here pretty soon.

BILLY
Oh?

NGUYEN
I've had enough.
I'll be gone before much longer.

BILLY
When are you leaving?

NGUYEN

I don't know.

[silence]

But the big idea:
getting out of here—
I'm clear on that.

BILLY

Oh, I'm clear on that, too.

NGUYEN

You're going?

BILLY

Sure.

NGUYEN

When?

BILLY

I thought I'd go with you.

[She looks taken aback.]

BILLY

It takes courage just to pick up and go.

SHLOMO

Does it?

BILLY

You don't think it does?

SHLOMO

I wouldn't know.

I've done it so many times, ich fargessen.

I don't remember.

KADIRA

You get to know the lay of the land someplace
You think:
better not go somewhere you know nothing.

RAUL

Unless there's no hope at all
then you have to take your chances

RAUL

Right.

ALEJANDRO

Be a risk taker.

RAUL

Right.

ALEJANDRO

Lead the way.

RAUL

Right.

ALEJANDRO

I sometimes think: this is what I'm doing:
showing the world which way it's going.
This is how it will be for everyone in another ten years.

NGUYEN

It's not so easy for me.
They have my papers.
They say if I leave
they'll have me arrested.

SHLOMO

Your brother-in-law has your papers?

NGUYEN

Yes.

SHLOMO

Why?

NGUYEN

That's how he keeps me here.

[She turns and goes.

They all watch her.]

SHLOMO [sings]

Maybe something like:]

When somebody loves you
it's no good unless he loves you
all the way.

Happy to be near you
when you need someone to cheer you
all the way.

Taller than the tallest tree is
that's how it's got to feel

BILLY

What's that?

SHLOMO

I'm singing.

Deeper than the deep blue sea is
that's how deep it goes
if it's real

BILLY

Well, you can stop now.

SHLOMO

You don't like singing?

BILLY

I like it when it's good.

SHLOMO

I don't sing well?

BILLY

No.

SHLOMO

Imagine that! And I thought I did.

It's always like that.

A man thinks to himself: I'm doing a good job.

Then, bang—everyone is displeased.

BILLY

You sing fine.

I just need fresh air.

[He turns and goes up the stairs to the outdoors.]

SHLOMO

People's feelings are so mysterious, are they not?

Now here is a woman

[gesturing to ALEJANDRO]

reading a book

and crying.

Not real life!

A book!

RAUL [handing SHLOMO a cup of tea]

She's not a woman.

SHLOMO

This young woman?

RAUL

No, she's a transvestite.

SHLOMO

Oh.

Well, then,

a transvestite reading a book—

and crying!

These human beings are strange creatures.

[Trang, another Thaiandese woman, appears at the top of the stairs.

She wears a very expensive, brightly flowered silk robe.

Her hair is done up in a wild top knot with a silk scarf.

When she enters, Shlomo goes about keeping a low profile by taking out a project of his own and working on it—hand-binding a book.]

TRANG [coming down the stairs]

Raul, you bastard,

who do you think you are

saying whatever you please about me?

RAUL

What?

I said nothing about you.

TRANG

People tell me what you say.

You know, you can be evicted.

If I told my husband what you say

he'd have you out of here in an instant.

[to Alejandro]

Why do you let him talk like this?

ALEJANDRO

Who am I, his keeper?

TRANG

I don't care who you are,
you're living here on charity, remember that.
How much do you owe me?

ALEJANDRO

Who's counting?

RAUL

What did I say?

TRANG

You know what you said.
These rumors about me and Billy.

RAUL

These are not rumors.

TRANG

And if you keep talking like that, you'll be out of here.

Who are you? Who are you?

SHLOMO

Just an old man passing through. Don't touch.

TRANG

Who brought you in here?

ALEJANDRO

Your sister.

TRANG

Oh, she did.
No one told me.
How long do you plan to stay?

SHLOMO

That depends.

TRANG
On what?

SHLOMO
On how welcome I am.

RAUL
He's gone out.

TRANG
Who?

RAUL
Billy.

TRANG
Did I ask?

RAUL
I see you looking everywhere.

TRANG
I'm looking to see that everything is in order,
and why hasn't the floor been swept?
How many times have I told you the floor must be swept?

ALEJANDRO
We just swept it.

TRANG
How could I tell?

ALEJANDRO
Well, if you'd been here before it was swept
you could tell.
I can tell.

TRANG
Was my sister just here?

ALEJANDRO

She just brought in the old man.

RAUL

Billy went out.

He went out alone.

TRANG

Did I ask?

[She turns, goes back up the stairs.

They watch her go.

Anna has a paroxysm of coughing.

Shlomo puts aside his bookbinding.]

SHLOMO

Here.

Have some tea with me.

ANNA

What good will that do?

SHLOMO

It won't do any good,

but I think you'll like it. It can't hurt.

What's your name?

ANNA

Anna.

SHLOMO

Anna. A beautiful name. My name is Shlomo.

ANNA

As I look at you, you remind me of my father,
just as kind, and soft.

SHLOMO [laughs]

I've been through the wringer,
that's why I'm soft.

ANNA

I don't remember a time in my life
when I didn't feel hungry.
I counted every piece of bread.
All my life I've worried I might eat more than my share.
All my life I've been wearing rags.

SHLOMO

Poor woman.
You're worn out, that's all.

ANNA

I keep thinking,
O God,
am I to be punished in the next world too?

SHLOMO [stroking her forehead]

No.
You'll have
a good rest up there.
You just need to bear up
a little longer,
then you'll have your rest.

How is your pulse?
Let me feel.

[holding her wrist, gently]

A woman's pulse, you know, can be
sharp as a hook
or fine as a hair.
What do you think is normal?
How is your heart beating?
A pulse can be

like a string of pearls
like water dripping through the roof
like leaves scattering
like visiting strangers
like spring water welling up
like a smooth pill
like glory.

Your pulse is strong
and as smooth as a river.

ANNA

We really ought
to be better people, you know.
We're all the descendants of washerwomen.
This should have nurtured in us
some desire
to bring light
to the lives of our fellow beings
who have known nothing but
hardship
or hard work
all their lives.
Some of us were sent us on ahead,
we were supposed to have the intelligence
to find a road to a better life.
And we've lost our way.

SHLOMO

There.
You've done all you could do.

ANNA

I'll go to hell for it.

SHLOMO

No.

ANNA

Yes, I will.

SHLOMO

We each do what we have within us to do
This is all we can do

[while Shlomo talks, he returns to binding his book,
his practiced hands moving efficiently at the task;
we are transfixed on his hands;
the room is absolutely quiet;
we watch him for a long while in silence]

You might say
what I've done with my life
has been pointless
it might be true

[silence as he works]

Possibly I should have done something else
[looks up, with a big smile]
something that's not just
another of the pleasures for the few
[silence]

But I gave what I had
I couldn't give what I didn't have
so that
now
at the end
I might have to conclude
well:
it's been entirely meaningless
entirely meaningless
and I'm too old now to start again

[silence]

Sometimes I cry myself to sleep.
And I'm a man.

[silence as we watch him work]

ALEJANDRO

Let's play cards, shall we?
Tertius, will you play?

TERTIUS

Of course.

RAUL

I don't think you'll like our small stakes.

TERTIUS

It's not the stakes that matter.

[we see ALEJANDRO at a rigged up table, shuffling a deck of cards
Tertius joins him, and Raul, and Kadira.
We see Billy come back in from outdoors.]

BILLY

Deal me in.

ALEJANDRO

The game is seven card stud.
Ante ten cents.

[everyone puts in some coins]

KADIRA

I thought this was a friendly game.

ALEJANDRO

It *is* a friendly game.

KADIRA
Ante ten cents?

BILLY
I'll loan it to you.

KADIRA
That's all right.

BILLY
You can pay me back.

KADIRA
No. Thank you.

BILLY
Here. Take it.

[the cards are dealt]

ALEJANDRO
This is the new capitalism
the thieves loaning money
to the poor innocents of Eastern Europe.

RAUL
[while he looks at his cards]
I don't understand it.
I invest my whole life in a job,
and I get just enough to get me to the next day
to do another day's work.
Why does someone think I don't have as much invested
as the owner?

BILLY
No. You don't understand it.

TERTIUS

[idly, as he arranges his cards]

Money is magic.

If you have money

you can move your factories to Mexico,

and then, when you take your profits

you can leave the polluted air behind you in Mexico,

and return to the clean air of Paris or London.

In this way, you can take a man's water,

a man's fresh air.

a man's suntan,

take years from his life

and add them to your own.

This is the true beauty of money.

ALEJANDRO

The stories people tell about business.

no one is ever interested.

But stories about love,

these are stories anyone can understand.

One night I remember

my lover came to me

to the arbor,

[Raul sneezes into his hand and says "bullshit,"
which stops Alejandro only momentarily.]

as we had arranged

I was already there waiting for him

trembling with grief and fear

He, too, was trembling

his face as white as chalk

a revolver in his hand

and he said to me in a deathly voice:

oh my dearest, my precious love,

my parents refuse to give their consent

RAUL
His parents!

ALEJANDRO
And if we marry
they would disown me

RAUL
What do his parents have to do with it?

SHLOMO
Sha. Quiet.

ALEJANDRO
And so I have no choice, he said, but to take my life
I pleaded with him:
Oh, Marcel, I said...

RAUL
Marcel!
Last time it was Robert.

ALEJANDRO
What is the matter with you?
I'm telling you a love story.
Is it that you can't bear to hear it?

RAUL
I'm only saying:
last time it was Robert.
So he's changed his name.
Or he had two names.

ALEJANDRO
I'm pouring my heart out to you,
I'm telling you about my life,
and what do you do?
you've become literary critics!
What do you know about love?

RAUL

We're just trying to understand what you say....

Maybe you've had many young men commit suicide for you.

SHLOMO

Okay, enough,

let her tell her story.

RAUL

Him.

SHLOMO

Him.

ALEJANDRO

Forget it.

SHLOMO

Go ahead.

ALEJANDRO

I can't tell the truth to these jerks

they don't want to hear

they're too afraid of emotions I think

these men, you know how they are,

they'd rather talk business and politics.

What has business to do with you, you idiots?

Forget it!

RAUL

Go ahead.

Just try to keep your story straight.

ALEJANDRO

Oh!

RAUL

It's a good story

just very complicated.

SHLOMO

Let her tell it any way she wants!

It doesn't matter.

It's her story. His story.

This is how she feels.

JESSIE

Even if she read it from a book.

SHLOMO

Go on.

ALEJANDRO [near tears now]

No, really.

Never mind.

It doesn't matter.

I couldn't tell anything now.

I'm too upset.

SHLOMO

Please.

[silence]

ALEJANDRO

The magic word.

So I said to him:

oh, please, no.

My bright star.

[ALEJANDRO is crying now, tears rolling down her cheeks]

You musn't destroy your young life.

Forget me.

Forget me.

I'm not fit for anything.

But you have a life in front of you.

Leave me behind.

You go on, and live.
And know
I will always love you
as long as my heart beats in my breast.

[silence]

BILLY
I recognize this;
it's from the book Fatal Love.

ALEJANDRO
It's from my life
you faggot.

BILLY
OK,
it's from your life.
It just sounded to me like Fatal Love.
But I've only read the jacket copy.

KADIRA
I think I've seen it on television.

ALEJANDRO
You don't have a television!

SHLOMO [putting an arm around ALEJANDRO]
Come along, dear.
Don't mind them.
I believe you.

ALEJANDRO
He was a Chilean boy,
a student.

SHLOMO

I believe it.

Come.

[they go off to sit by ALEJANDRO's bunk]

TERTIUS

When I was a young man

I was in love with a woman.

I saw her in the summer

at a picnic.

She was a married woman.

She had on a light summer dress

and as she walked toward me

the sun was behind her

her dress was translucent

she was wearing nothing underneath it

Her eyes were sky blue

Sky blue

I don't understand it

people's passions are so unaccountable

I fell in love with her

so fragile she seemed.

I said to her: we should have a summer love affair.

She didn't say no,

she said: you're outrageous.

I said: no, it's you who are outrageous.

We met the next day—

her husband stayed in the city all week to work,

and we made love every day the whole summer

every day.

And still

I think of her

all the time.

Every day of my life.

KADIRA

I was once in love with a man
I loved him so much
I would just put my arms around him
and then he would hold me
he would hold me as gently as he could
and I would quiver
and come again and again.
and I would curl up inside his arms.
Whenever we made love, this is how we would always begin.
And every time after we made love
I would sob for a long time
with his arms around me.
Because,
I thought:
we might have lived our whole lives
and died
without ever knowing each other.

[Silence.]

[The door to the landlord's apartment opens,
and Trang steps out onto the landing.]

TRANG

Billy.

BILLY

Yes.

TRANG

Would you speak to me for a minute?

BILLY

Yes. Sure.

[to his companions]

I'm out.

[He puts his cards down and goes to the stairs and up them.]

RAUL

I win.

[Billy is now with Trang on the landing.

They speak very quietly together.]

TRANG

I thought you would want to see me.

BILLY

Want to see you?

TRANG

To say good morning.

BILLY

Oh.

TRANG

I speak to you from my heart
and fifteen minutes later
you can't remember when it was you last saw me.

BILLY

That's not true.

TRANG

It's true you don't care for me.

BILLY

Don't care for you....

TRANG

You know, you could just tell me.
You've fallen in love with someone else.

BILLY

Someone else?

TRANG

Look,
you think I know nothing.
I can tell when you have no connection to me.
It's okay.

BILLY

It's true I might have some conflicting feelings.
Maybe I shouldn't have,
I mean if I somehow let you believe that I...

TRANG

I counted on you to take me out of here with you.

BILLY

You did?
Did I know that?

TRANG

You don't want to leave?

BILLY

Well, yes, but....

TRANG

Anyhow, now I suppose that's not possible.

[silence]

Now you love my sister.

BILLY [laughs]

How do you know this?
I've hardly said two words to your sister.

[silence]

TRANG

I could even help you, you know.

BILLY
How is that?

TRANG
I could give you money.

BILLY
What are you talking about?

TRANG
To go somewhere with her.

My husband is an old man,
I mean,
for his age
he hasn't taken care of himself.
If he were to fall
if something were to happen to him,
he is so delicate
I think it would kill him.

[silence]

And then we'd be free of him,
and I could help you.

BILLY
I don't understand.

TRANG
Of course you do.
We've got a complication with him
as long as he's alive.

BILLY
You mean that I should kill your husband?

[silence]

This is not the kind of person I am.

TRANG

How do you know?

Maybe you don't know what sort of person you are.

[She turns and leaves.

He remains on the landing

turns slowly and walks down the stairs.

Nikos reels, falls against one of the bunks

and starts collapsing to the floor.

Several of the others lunge to catch him from falling.]

TERTIUS

Oh, steady on, I've got you.

ALEJANDRO

Here, I have him, too.

TERTIUS

Whoa, you've done a job of it this time.

SHLOMO

What's the matter with him?

TERTIUS

Heroin.

SHLOMO

Oh, no.

[talking now to Nikos, who is stretched out on his bunk]

This is not a life for you.

You're a young man.

My God, this is no age to give up.

I've known men

who've had some trouble with drink or drugs

they've gotten help
you can get help yourself.
All you need is a few weeks in a hospital you know

TERTIUS
Shlomo.

SHLOMO
Yes?

TERTIUS
He doesn't understand a word you're saying.
He's Greek.

[silence; SHLOMO looks at Nikos, who gazes back at him]

SHLOMO
I think he does.

TERTIUS
No. Not a word.

[Nikos slowly lies back in bed.
And, in the background, an argument erupts between Kadira and Jaroslaw.
Everyone turns
in silence to take this in. It is a completely incomprehensible argument to those of
us who listen to it.]

JAROSLAW
You say Turkic
but what do you know how it feels to be a Turk?

KADIRA
Let's say a person knows how it feels
to be conquered and forced to behave in a certain way.

JAROSLAW

So you feel bad
but this is not to feel Turkic!
You know, the Turks also formed empires.

KADIRA

I am talking about the Turkish military.

JAROSLAW

So am I.

KADIRA [EXPLODING suddenly in uncontrolled and uncontrollable rage; yelling—
frightening] attacking its own citizens.

JAROSLAW

In Armenia the army is not used against its citizens.

KADIRA [still yelling]

I didn't say it was.

JAROSLAW [the words rolling out rapid fire]

No. Exactly.

In Armenia a plane fires a rocket
that lands next to a woman holding the hand of her little daughter,
and the woman just disappears,
and the daughter's hand also disappears,
and she is crying "Mama, mama, mama"
with blood pouring from her arm,
running and running.

KADIRA [still in a rage]

Yes.

Yes.

Or they rounded up two hundred women
took them to an empty slaughterhouse
made them strip naked
and get down on all fours
like cattle
they drove them forward

to a ramp
where they were

where the soldiers
lashed out at them
with knives
and axes
forcing them to

keep crawling
until they could crawl no more
their torsos
their arms and legs hacked off
their headless torsos
left to fall
into the pit below

JAROSLAW
What is your point?

KADIRA
I am telling to you the truth!

JAROSLAW
For your information, the military is fighting the PKK, a terrorist organization that even the Kurds despise.

KADIRA
Never mind.
I'm not talking to you.

JAROSLAW
I'm talking to you.

KADIRA
No. You are talking to yourself.

JAROSLAW
Nishto ne znaesh!

KADIRA
Ibise!

JAROSLAW
Ti se lebi!

[At the end, no one has understood this any better than we have;
everyone is staring at Jaroslaw and Kadira in uncomprehending silence.]

BILLY
What was that?

ALEJANDRO
Don't ask me.

BILLY
No, really, what was that all about?

RAUL
How the fuck should I know?

NGUYEN
There's water.

[we see Nguyen standing on the landing, calling down]

Vinnie went out. I'm going to turn on the water!

[Everyone starts hurriedly taking off their clothes,
down to their underclothes
and hurrying to one corner of the factory
where there is a thin partition
behind which is an overhead pipe
and a drain in the floor.]

Okay. Two minutes.

[The residents of the factory strip—
one or two of them keep on their clothes—
and step under the stream of water from the pipe.

And they each take a shower
in what must be reminiscent of a prison scene.

Our gaze lingers on each one, stripped naked;
there is no prurient interest here,
just an interest in human individuality,
and in sagging, out-of-shape human flesh.
There should be something of sadness about this.

Those standing in line are patient for a few moments
as they wait for each person who steps into the shower,
and then they begin to say things like "Hurry up...move along...that's all...don't use
up all the water....etc. in a constant chatter.

Billy, meanwhile, walks up the stairs to follow Nguyen back into the
landlord's house.

Just as he reaches the top of the stairs, he looks back down, and we see the water
has just run out before the last two people in line could have a shower—and they
are complaining.]

JAROSLAW

Come on. Come on.
How can you be so slow?
Do you think everyone doesn't want a turn?

NGUYEN [to Billy]
What are you doing?

BILLY
I'm going to get something for you.

NGUYEN

What?

BILLY

Your papers, from Vinnie's safe.

NGUYEN

You're going to steal them?

BILLY

Yes.

NGUYEN

Why?

[silence]

So that I belong to you?

BILLY

I hadn't thought of that.

NGUYEN

No?

BILLY

No.

Well, maybe for a moment.

But I've dropped it.

[He gives the papers to her.]

NGUYEN

You're just going to give them to me?

BILLY

Yeah.

NGUYEN
For nothing?

BILLY
Yeah.
For nothing.

[She takes his face in her hands and kisses him.

He hesitates, then kisses her back.

She kisses him back.

They kiss each other passionately.]

BILLY
Only one thing:
when Vinnie discovers your papers are gone from the safe
he's going to guess you have them.

NGUYEN
Sure, I know.

BILLY
So there is a time limit,
how much longer you can stay.

NGUYEN
I wish I could be with you all the time.

BILLY
So do I.

[Silence.]

NGUYEN
Will you leave with me?

BILLY

Yes.

NGUYEN

Tonight?

BILLY

Yes.

Come on.

[He goes with her into the house to crack Vinnie's safe. Meanwhile the showering continues, and then the party preparations continue, and then Billy returns to the group.]

TERTIUS

Here, Billy, you can give me a hand.

BILLY

Are these the glasses for champagne?

TERTIUS

Yes.

[Each with a dish towel, they meticulously clean an assortment of glasses, mugs, cans, jelly jars, etc. to use as glasses. We watch them clean every speck off each container, while, in the background, the others set out food.

Meanwhile we see the bottles of champagne chilling in the pots and buckets used to catch dripping water.

BILLY

I'll be getting out of here soon, you know.

TERTIUS

I didn't know.

BILLY

Every night as I go to sleep
I nearly choke.

TERTIUS

I think there are things that everyone feels
at least once every fifteen minutes for no reason at all:
a flood of grief, or dread, or hatred, a tinge of regret,
an unreasoning rage.

These are all things that come over me,
and I find I am powerless to resist them.
So I try just to accept
whatever sensations life sends my way.

[they finish with the glasses, and Tertius opens a bottle of champagne]

Ladies and gentlemen, let me give you some champagne,

JAROSLAW

Is this champagne stolen?

TERTIUS

Stolen first from the bosom of the earth
and then from the capitalist bastards who stole it.

JAROSLAW

I have a problem drinking stolen champagne.

TERTIUS

Ah, well,
de gustibus non disputandum est.
Jessie?

JESSIE

I don't have a problem.
I put my faith in capitalism.
[she offers a glass to Tertius for him to pour her a drink]

TERTIUS

Good.

Every experience of life
is an experience of being alive.

[pouring a glass for her]

RAUL

Goddam you, you fucking cocksucker

[we see him banging his shoe repeatedly, violently on the floor]

goddam you to fucking hell goddammit

BILLY

What is it, Raul?

RAUL [close to tears]

This goddam fucking shoe won't go on my fucking foot.

BILLY

It's okay.

KADIRA

I'll help you.

[she takes the shoe from him and starts to put it on his foot]

TERTIUS

Have some champagne.

[he gives a glass to Raul]

This is not, I think,
an entirely despicable vintage.

[as he pours glasses and hands them to each of the guest, he speaks]

and, to be sure,
whatever its provenance and pedigree
whatever unique qualities it possesses
champagne is an event—
one of the finest achievements of our civilization,
an exquisite product of human intelligence
of forethought and patience,
of the accumulated knowledge of cultivation and care,
the subtle, intricate cooperation
between nature and human beings
of the qualities of the earth itself,
of the soil, the air, the sun—
so that we drink not only with champagne but also,
at the same time: *to* it,
and to the complexity and beauty of life itself
and, finally, to all those things we love best.

ALEJANDRO

Well, then,
I drink to T-shirts from Liquid Sky
a how-to course for walking in stilettos
Dom Casual's pink, terry panties with a silk crotch
And lemon body mist.

SHLOMO

To a wool cardigan sweater
not a new cardigan, but an old cardigan
of dark green wool
to a first edition of Diderot's encyclopedia
signed if possible
a small house in Normandy with a little kitchen garden
a set of copper pots and pans
an old woman
one, if possible,
to whom I have been married for thirty years
three children
no longer living at home
to some geese
and a dog.

JAROSLAW

To an afternoon nap

ANNA

to sheets and pillowcases
white cotton or muslin

TERTIUS

To moss

ALEJANDRO

Yes. Indeed.
Or a fresh pomegranate

TERTIUS

A pear tree.

ANNA

The earth itself.

SHLOMO

Dirt.

SEVERAL

To dirt.
Dirt.

ANNA

The sunlight you see in water
as you pour it from a pitcher into a bowl.

[silence]

I would like to live in a large, beautiful house. My family would stay with me, and in one of the wings I would have a friend, a woman friend. And whenever we wished, we would meet to discuss recent poems and other things of interest. When my

friend received a letter, we would read it together and write our answer. If someone came to pay my friend a visit, I would receive him in one of our beautifully decorated rooms, and if he were prevented from leaving by a rain-storm or something of the sort, I would invite him to stay.

ALEJANDRO

But why do you think it is that boys like fresh lemon body mist?
And why do they always want you to make love in a public place?
Or want you to wear a rubber dress that makes a squeaky sound when you put it on?

JESSIE

This is how men are.

ALEJANDRO

There are men who simply won't look twice
unless you're wearing rubber stockings
or rubber pants
rubber gloves
or some body jewelry
a leather bracelet, or a collar
or something that has a battery attached to it
a little bit of piercing somewhere

JAROSLAW

Of course, you all want these things given to you
These are things other people work for

RAUL

Or take from someone else.

JAROSLAW

Oh, yes, these poor bastards
always having everything taken from them
It's a lie!
You don't have anything to take!

RAUL

We don't?

JAROSLAW

No!

RAUL

We don't?

JAROSLAW

Nothing anyone wants.

RAUL

Not oil?

JAROSLAW

This is not yours!

This is in the ground!

You don't get it out!

The Americans get it out!

They come in with their know-how and they get it out!

You don't lift a goddam finger,

and yet you get paid for it.

You get paid for it.

RAUL

It belongs to us, you fucking nutcase.

And we get it out.

This is our labor you pay for.

JAROSLAW

Your labor!

You lazy bastards

you lie about all day

and then complain about your wages!

It's not fair, you say,

it's not fair, it's not fair.

I tell you: I put my faith in capitalism!

RAUL

You'll be surprised

when someone puts a fucking suitcase bomb in your subway.

KADIRA
His subway?
This Polack?

JAROSLAW
Now you think I should be afraid of a war with you—
you people don't know how to get a plane off the ground

KADIRA
You think I am an Iraqi?
You think I am an Iraqi?
You don't even know who I am!
You people sit there
have the Russians and the Germans run back and forth
back and forth
back and forth
up and down your backsides
and you tell me I don't know how to fight?

So OK.
OK.
Never mind.
In fact, one day soon this evil system will defeat itself.

JAROSLAW
This is garbage.

KADIRA
What is?

JAROSLAW
What you say,
everything you say.

KADIRA
This is my religion.

JAROSLAW
Your religion is garbage.

KADIRA [sudden uncontrolled rage; yelling]
You know, I could cut your fucking throat.

JAROSLAW [contemptuously]
With what?

KADIRA [taking a butcher knife from the table]
With this, you asshole!

[Jessie and Billy step forward instantly,
with the instincts of people who have often been in the midst
of sudden violence, holding both Jaroslaw and Kadira back.]

TERTIUS [stepping between them]
Ah, ah, ah, ah, I'll be needing that to cut the cake.

KADIRA [still yelling]
You should be nice to me.
I haven't done you any wrong.

JAROSLAW
If you knew how to do *anything*
it would be wrong.

KADIRA
What do you mean, you sonofabitch?

[Kadira breaks free and shoves Jaroslaw violently;
Jaroslaw falls backward,
crashing through Jessie's cart full of stuff,
scattering it,
landing heavily on the floor

SHLOMO [quietly, sadly]
Oh, no.

BILLY
Here. That's enough.

[Billy and several others help Jaroslaw to his feet while Jessie and others restrain Kadira.]

BILLY [helping Jaroslaw]
Are you all right?

JAROSLAW [to Raul]
I'll rip your goddam arms off!

SHLOMO
Here. Settle down now.

JAROSLAW
Let go of me.

KADIRA
I'll rip *your* fucking arms off.

[The fight subsides.]

ALEJANDRO
Do you wear rubber?

KADIRA
Rubber?

ALEJANDRO
You know, rubber, like rubber skirts, or, in the summer, rubber shorts or rubber stockings, or even—you know, rubber underwear.

KADIRA
No.

ALEJANDRO
I thought you might.
[Silence]

Most people, you know, try to repair their rubber with superglue, which is fatal, because it destroys the material.

KADIRA

No, I didn't know.

ALEJANDRO

I use Copydex for temporary repairs,
but then I always take it into a professional.

KADIRA

What are you telling me?

ALEJANDRO

I just thought you might like to know.
You never can tell when it might be useful.

You know, to get leather or rubber on, you have to make sure you're dry from head
to toe, and then talc yourself....

SHLOMO

Life is more complicated now than it used to be.

TERTIUS

Of course there used to be rules.

JAROSLAW

There are now.

ALEJANDRO

Oh, sure. But now everyone knows they're just made up.
Like the rules for
the Honey Bee or the Cart Wheel
or the Lovely Lady in Control
or the Coitus of the Gods.

JESSIE

The Coitus of the Gods?

JAROSLAW

Now we have to listen to more filth.

JESSIE

I'd like to hear.

ALEJANDRO

You hold each other's hands,
sprawled like two starfish making love,
her thighs stretched out along yours,
and you hold each other for a long, long time: that's all.

[Silence as everyone thinks about this.]

TERTIUS

Ah, but I'd almost forgotten:
there is entertainment this evening.
I have arranged for one of the great classical actors of our time
to render for us
some passages from the immortal comic genius of antiquity
the playwright Aristophanes.
Here,
from Aristophanes' great work: The Birds

[Nikos nods, takes a moment to prepare,
and then launches into his performance—
complete with bird impersonations,
flapping and leaping up and down like a bird,
and so forth.
Once again, only the Greek is delivered;
the English translation here is just for the convenience of the actor.]

NIKOS

hos d' ouchi theori toninun erchon ton anthropon to palaion,
all' ornithes, kabasileuon, poll'esti tekmeria touton.
Aiguptou d' au kai Phoinikes pases kokkux basileus en:
chopoth' ho kokkuk eipoi "kokku' tot" an hoi Phoinikes
hapantes tous purous an kai tas krithas en tois pediois etherizon.
erchon d' houto sphodra ten archen,
host ei tis kai basileuoi en tais polesin ton Hellenon Agamemnon e Menelaos,
epi ton skeptron ekathet ornis metechon ho ti dorokokoie.
ho de deinotaton g estin hapanton,

ho Zeus gar ho nun basileuon aieton ornin hesteken echon epi tes kephales
basileus on,
he d' au thugater glauch',
ho d' Apollon hosper therapon hieraka.

[It was not the gods, but the birds,
who were formerly the masters and kings over men;
of this I have a thousand proofs.
The cuckoo was the king of Egypt and of the whole of Phoenicia.
When he called out "cuckoo,"
all the Phoenicians hurried to the fields to reap their wheat and their barley.
So powerful were the birds that the kings of Grecian cities,
Agammemnon, Menelaus,
for instance, carried a bird on the tip of their scepters,
who had his share of all presents.
But the strongest proof of all is that Zeus, who now reigns,
is represented as standing with an eagle on his head as a symbol of his royalty;
his daughter has an owl,
and Phoebus, as his servant, has a hawk.]

[Tertius applauds
shouts bravo—
speaks a few words of Greek
to encourage Nikos to take repeated bows.
Everyone else remains completely unmoved and silent.
Billy, out of embarrassment and compassion for Nikos
applauds a few times.
Then there is awkward silence.]

SHLOMO [to save embarrassment]
If this is the proper moment, then,
I'd like to sing a song
that we used to sing in my home when I was a child

TERTIUS
Please.

SHLOMO
Luz mir alle inanem inanem

(name of person) makable punim zein
Luz mir alle inanem inanem
(name of person) makable punim zein
Luz mir alle namem
Luz mir alle namem
Trinken ah glazelah v-i-n-e.

Luz mir alle namem
Luz mir alle namem
Trinken ah glazelah v-i-n-e.

[The song repeats, adding others' names in as it goes along.]

Alejandro joins in dancing with him;
this moment is prolonged;
Shlomo and Alejandro enjoy dancing with each other;
then Kadira, then others join in.

On the end of Shlomo's song,
Jaroslaw begins his own song and dance
that the others also join in as they get the hang of it.]

JAROSLAW

Ya kazhi mi, oblache le, byalo
of gde idesh, gde si mi letyalo
Ne vidya li bashtini mi dvori
I ne chu li maika da govori.
Shto li pravi moito chedo milo,
s chuzhdi hora, chuzhdi hlyab delilo,
Ti kazhi I, olbache le, byalo,
zhiv I zdrav, che tuk si me vidyalo.
I nosi of mene mnogo zdrave,
mnogo mina, munichko ostana.
Nablizhava v selo da se vurna
da se vurna, maika da pregurna

[Tell me, little white cloud,
Where are you coming from, where have you flown.
Did you see my father's home
and did you hear my mother talk

How is my precious child doing,
sharing foreign bread with foreign people
You tell her, little white cloud,
that you saw me here, strong and healthy
And send my love to her,
a lot of time has passed, and not much is left
It's fine for me to go back,
to go back and give my mother a hug.]

VINNIE PAZZI

[from the top of the landing as he starts to rush down the stairs]
What are you doing, you bastards,
burning down the house?

[silence]

Smoke is pouring up the stairs
and you're dancing!

What's the matter with you?

You didn't hear what I said?

Put this out!
Put this out!

[he grabs a bucket of water, sending a champagne bottle smashing on the floor,
and dumps it onto the barbecue grill; he kicks the grill over onto the floor, gets
another bucket and dumps the water onto the scattered food and hot charcoal]

Cooking over an open fire:
this is for barbarians!

BILLY
[taking a firm hold on Vinnie Pazzi, speaking quietly]
Stop.

VINNIE PAZZI
Don't touch me, you prick.

BILLY

You'll be lucky if I don't break your neck.

VINNIE PAZZI

Are you threatening me?

Do you hear this?

He threatens me in my own house.

I could throw you out of here any moment I want.

BILLY

You throw me out, I'll have you put in jail.

VINNIE PAZZI

For what?

BILLY

For receiving stolen goods!

For selling stolen goods!

VINNIE PAZZI

You can't prove a thing.

BILLY

I have people who will testify against you.

VINNIE PAZZI

Oh, do you?

Who is that?

Who?

TERTIUS

[with Raul helping him pull Billy and Vinnie Pazzi apart.]

That's enough now.

Come.

BILLY

People from your own house.

VINNIE PAZZI
From my house!

TERTIUS
That's all.

JAROSLAW [shouting]
Have you no respect for the dead?

BILLY
What?

[silence as all turn to Jaroslaw
who is in complete anguish and despair,
tears pouring down his face,
holding Anna in his arms]

JAROSLAW
Can't you see that my wife has died?
[holding her]
Oh, Anna.
Anna.
Anna.

[Shlomo puts his arm around Jaroslaw.

SHLOMO
There, there,
she's at peace now.

VINNIE PAZZI
She's died here in my house?
Goddammit,
now what do you think
what kind of bullshit am I going to have now
with the county health department?

Goddammit,
no one told me she was that sick,
and you let her stay here when she could die on my premises?
You bastards!

[he starts for the stairway]

I'll phone the coroner's office.
You get her out of here into the alley,
I'm not having any trouble over this.

[shouting ahead as he goes up the stairs]

Trang! Nguyen!
Call the coroner's office.
Someone's died
goddammit.

SHLOMO
Come.
Bring a sheet for her.
Here, Jaroslaw, just let go for a moment now,
sit just here close to her
but let me cover her

[Jaroslaw, still crying,
slowly surrenders her body to Shlomo.
Others come with a sheet
and help to wrap Anna in it.
Still others come to Jaroslaw and hug him.

NGUYEN [from atop the landing]
I've called an undertaker and the police.

BILLY
The police?

NGUYEN
Yes.

SHLOMO

Why the police?

NGUYEN

I shouldn't have called the police?

BILLY

It's nothing to do with the police.

That's all right, it doesn't matter.

TERTIUS

Here, give me a hand.

[All the men are picking up Anna to carry her upstairs.

She is shrouded in a sheet.

They all carry her, with Jaroslaw following behind,
and then the others behind him.

Talk of "okay," "here, I have her" etc as they go upstairs

On the landing there is now a huge crowd
and a lot of maneuvering to get through the door
into the landlord's house.

Just inside the door, Vinnie Pazzi meets them.

VINNIE PAZZI [enraged]

What are you doing
bringing her in here?

RAUL

You said to take her outside.

VINNIE PAZZI

To the alley, you schmuck,
not through my house,
what are you doing bringing a dead body into my house?

BILLY

Just have some compassion for...

VINNIE PAZZI

Just get this corpse out of my house, goddammit,
you let them in here?

NGUYEN

I...

VINNIE PAZZI

You opened the door to this mob?

NGUYEN

I...

[Vinnie Pazzi slaps her.

VINNIE PAZZI

You stupid bitch!

BILLY

What happened?

TERTIUS

That was uncalled for, I think.

VINNIE PAZZI

What do you know?

[He snatches up a tea pot and throws it at Nguyen
who shrieks in pain.

BILLY

That's all.

[There is now an *explosion* of frightening violence.

Billy shoves his way through the crowd toward Vinnie Pazzi.

The others are all struggling to get to him, too.

The class war begins.

Someone shoves Vinnie Pazzi,

Vinnie Pazzi spins around off balance
into the crowd of pallbearers,
and now Billy grabs him by the shoulders
and propels him back out through the door
onto the landing
where he gives him a tremendous shove
—and, as Billy then turns to run to Nguyen,
we hear Vinnie Pazzi scream out, and then,
as Billy pulls Nguyen into his arms,
we hear another scream from one of the women
then more shouting
and finally Tertius, who happens to be near Billy speaks

TERTIUS

He has fallen over the railing.

BILLY

What?

TERTIUS

Your landlord has fallen over the railing
into the factory.

[Stunned silence.

The crowd is ashen-faced
at the instant realization of what they have done.

BILLY gets up
moves through the crowd of his companions
to look over the railing.
Already some of the others are running down the stairs.
Billy runs after them.
They part to let him to Vinnie Pazzi's side.
Billy looks at him,
reaches out to touch him,
pulls back an eyelid,
puts his head to Vinnie Pazzi's chest to listen for a heartbeat.
Billy is stunned.

BILLY [under his breath]
I've killed him.

RAUL
The police are here.

[BILLY looks up to see the police coming down the stairs.]

POLICEMAN
Well, what have we here?
Is he hurt?

BILLY
He's dead.

POLICEMAN
Dead?

[the policeman kneels down to examine Vinnie Pazzi,
confirms he is dead

Was he a friend of yours?

BILLY
No.

POLICEMAN
How did it happen?

TRANG
He pushed him.

POLICEMAN
Who?

TRANG
That man,
he pushed my husband over the railing and killed him.

POLICEMAN

Did you?

[Silence.

Kadira steps forward.]

KADIRA

I'm the one who pushed him.

He pushed me.

So I pushed him back.

RAUL

Oh, well, I pushed him.

ALEJANDRO

Well, really, I think I'm the one who pushed him.

RAUL

I think we were all pushing each other.

TERTIUS

Excuse me, officer.

Tertius Hodgson.

POLICEMAN

Yes?

TERTIUS

If I can be of any assistance.

I saw the entire incident.

POLICEMAN

And?

TERTIUS

It was an accident.

A woman died here today,

and these gentlemen were carrying the body of this poor man's wife

up through the house

to take her for burial
there was so little room on the staircase
and such a crowd of people
I think everyone was jostling
don't you know
and under such stress in any case.
This unfortunate fellow lost his balance
I think he had been a bit confused for some years in any case,
if you know what I mean.
And, in any event, he fell over the railing.
It's a tragedy.
I don't think anyone's to be blamed.

POLICEMAN

That's your story.

[silence as he looks around from one person to another]

That's your story.

TERTIUS

If there are further inquiries
you can ask for me here.

POLICEMAN

Thank you.

[to Trang]

If I could speak to you for a moment upstairs.

TRANG

Yes.

POLICEMAN [to Billy]

And you,
don't leave.

There may be further questions for you.

[The policeman starts out upstairs;
Tertius gently takes Trang's arm

TERTIUS

I hope you don't mind my speaking up to the officer,
you know,
in this country,
the courts can be so difficult
sorting out any questions of inheritance
if there is some question of foul play.
I thought you would want to be spared all that.
If you're to be our landlady now,
you'll have enough on your mind without that sort of trouble.

[She turns to follow the policeman upstairs.]

TERTIUS [to Nguyen]

Will you have some champagne?
Life is such a mixed bag
hardly ever all good or all bad.

[he gives her a glass of champagne and has one himself;
it is dark now in the factory;
the light bulbs in the green conical shades are lit]

Where is Shlomo?

RAUL

He's disappeared.

ALEJANDRO

He got his things and left
the moment Nguyen said she had called the police.

TERTIUS

Really?

KADIRA

What did he have to hide?

RAUL

I'd go myself if there were someplace to go.

TERTIUS

If you have no connections to hold you here, why not?

JESSIE

If it weren't for my feet, I'd hit the road myself.

RAUL

I'd go, but I just got here.

I meant to go somewhere.

I mean: I thought I did go somewhere,

but as it turned out

I just came here.

KADIRA

I'd like to go.

BILLY

If it hadn't been for the cop telling me to stay,

we'd have been leaving.

TERTIUS

We?

BILLY

Nguyen and I.

RAUL

Leaving here?

TERTIUS

Do you mean now?

BILLY

Yes.

[surprise; silence]

NGUYEN

Well, you can come upstairs with me
and stay there until we leave.

BILLY

Upstairs?

NGUYEN

It's as much mine
as my sister's.

[All turn to look at Billy,
their new landlord.]

KADIRA

Well, this is how it is:
every man for himself, eh?
we live in a world where the thieves rise to the top.

[silence]

ALEJANDRO

Or you could say: where love is still possible.

KADIRA

Yes, well, I put my faith in capitalism for sure.

[She turns and walks away.
Silence.]

[Tertius steps forward,
embraces Billy.]

TERTIUS

I wish you well.
You made me feel at home here when I first arrived.
I wish you both the very best.

[silence again;
finally Raul steps forward

JESSIE

I say good luck to both of you.

[everyone gathers to shake hands,
hug Nguyen, say goodbye—
only Kadiria standing aloof.]

RAUL

I for one,
I'd be in your place if I could be.

ALEJANDRO

Well,
you must have us to dinner when you've settled in your new home.

[After a moment, Billy and Nguyen turn away
and go to Billy's shelves,
take stuff from the shelves and toss them in a duffle bag.
Awkward silence.]

TERTIUS

It is so hard for me to understand the customs here.
Two people have died,
and no one mourns.
Is this how it is?

[In response to this remark,
Jessie sings a soulful, melancholy solo
that turns in the end into a positive song.

JESSIE [singing]

The valley may be dark,
the shadows deep,
my heavenly father guards
his lonely sheep.

And surely he
remembers me
my heavenly father watches over me.

I trust in God
I know he cares for me
upon the land
or on the stormy sea.

The billows roll
He keeps my soul
my heavenly father
watches over me.

The end.

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