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Time that is intolerant  
of the brave and innocent  
and indifferent, in a week  
to a beautiful physique  
Worships language and forgives  
everyone by whom it lives.  
—W.H. Auden

What, in the end, makes advertising so superior to criticism? Not what the moving neon sign says—but the fiery pool reflecting it in the asphalt.  
—Walter Benjamin

Love set you going like a fat gold watch.  
—Sylvia Plath

## **Cast of Characters**

ANN MARIE, an advertising executive turned creative writing professor. At the beginning of the play she looks put-together and stylish. About 35.

CELIA, a creative writing student in her seventeenth year of studying for her B.A. She is ordinary and plainly dressed, but with a wild look in her eye. Early 40s.

DR. K, a no-nonsense Freudian therapist, understated in his dress and manner. Mid 40s.

THE BARISTA, a tattooed, sexy bohemian.

MARION, the chair of the Creative Writing Department at Staten Island Community College. A strong-looking woman who wears nubby tweed all year round. Late 30s.

MR. LANGLEY, a school board employee. His clothing indicates that he has given up.

MEL, a deadpan, androgynous copywriter at Saatchi and Saatchi. Any age.

## **Setting**

The setting is in and around NYC over the course of the Fall Semester of 2002. The last two scenes of the play jump forward in time by six months.

## Acknowledgments

*Those Who Can, Do* was developed and workshopped at Clubbed Thumb in New York City as part of the Summerworks 2004 Festival, June 2004. The cast and crew were as follows:

ANN MARIE ..... Maria Striar  
MEL.....Brienen Bryant  
DR. K/BARISTA ..... Pamela Gray  
MARION ..... Irene McDonnell  
CELIA .....Patricia Buckley

Artistic Directors ..... Maria Striar  
and Meg MacCary  
Director ..... Maria J. Mileaf  
Set ..... Timothy Mackabee  
Lights ..... Josh Epstein  
Sound ..... Jeremy Lee  
Costumes ..... Trillian  
Stage Manager ..... Rachel Fachner  
Dramaturgy on early drafts ..... Madeleine Olnek  
and David Nolta

*Those Who Can, Do* was subsequently produced in Providence, Rhode Island at the Brown/Trinity Playwrights Repertory Theatre, where it was directed by Laura Kepley in June, 2005.

# THOSE WHO CAN, DO

by Brighde Mullins

## Scene 1

*(The final days of 2001. Darkness. Street sounds: the subway, sirens, then static. LIGHTS UP: ANN MARIE alone onstage. She directly addresses the audience.)*

**ANN MARIE.** I was on the way to work one day at Saatchi and Saatchi and I saw a poster on the subway that said: “No One Ever Remembered a Great accountant: TEACH.” That struck me because, in light of recent events, I had been thinking: why am I doing this?

## Scene 2

*(Early Spring of 2002. A cramped cubicle at the Board of Education in Brooklyn. MR. LANGLEY, a scowling man of indeterminate age, reads ANN MARIE’s resume and takes notes for a few minutes. ANN MARIE sits and watches. Finally ANN MARIE coughs slightly.)*

**LANGLEY.** I see here that you have not one but two master’s degrees.

**ANN MARIE.** Yes. And I’m A.B.D. on my Ph.D.

**LANGLEY.** A.B.D.? What does that mean, A.B.D.?

**ANN MARIE.** It means “All But Dissertation.” I just couldn’t finish it. But I did complete all of my course work.

**LANGLEY.** So: from graduate school you went into—Advertising?

**ANN MARIE.** Yes, I did. I was at Saatchi and Saatchi for five years.

**LANGLEY.** What did you do at Saatchi and Saatchi?

**ANN MARIE.** I created desire in consumers using anything at my disposal.

*(There is no response from LANGLEY, not even eye contact. ANN MARIE waits a moment and then continues.)*

**ANN MARIE.** I worked on some very successful ad campaigns over the years, such as Freshness Pouches.

*(LONG PAUSE during which LANGLEY takes notes.)*

**LANGLEY.** Can you tell me why you want to teach high school?

**ANN MARIE.** I realized that I wanted to do something else with my life. Something with more meaning.

**LANGLEY.** And, so, then, how, exactly are you qualified to teach high school English?

**ANN MARIE.** I thought that the M.A.'s from Princeton and Yale respectively and the Ph.D from Columbia as well as the year that I spent at Cambridge researching Sylvia Plath's English Influences might have some bearing—

**LANGLEY.** With those accomplishments you could teach in a prep school or a college.

**ANN MARIE.** I don't want to teach in a Prep School! I want to go where I'm needed. The kids in the public schools are the ones who need my attention!

**LANGLEY.** *(This has been brewing all along:)* You're not qualified to teach in a New York City Public High School.

**ANN MARIE.** Are you kidding me?

**LANGLEY.** I suggest that you take six credits through Continuing Ed at Teachers College or Bank Street, take the exam and come back and see us next year.

**ANN MARIE.** But I feel I have so much to offer—

**LANGLEY.** We feel that being a classroom teacher in the New York City Public School System is the kind of position that requires special training.

**ANN MARIE.** I saw the poster in the subway— I thought that you NEEDED teachers, it said that you Needed Teachers!

**LANGLEY.** That poster has caused us a heck of a lot of trouble.

**ANN MARIE.** You mean the poster's a lie?

**LANGLEY.** It's just some crazy ad campaign.

**ANN MARIE.** But I feel that I have so much to offer!

**LANGLEY.** You could apply at a community college. They need as much help as we do in the public schools. How about (*Flips through his rolodex*) —Staten Island Community College?

**ANN MARIE.** Staten Island Community College? I don't want to teach at Staten Island Community College. (*Beat.*) I want to teach kids from the ghetto! I would never attend a community college, let alone teach at one.

**LANGLEY.** If you want to teach Inner City Kids, this is where they end up, at places like Staten Island Community College. This is the same population, the same demographic, as the Public School System. Staten Island Community College has the largest English and Creative Writing Department in New York. They're always hiring. It's completely Meaningful Work. You teach first generation college students, and those returning to school. (*Beat.*) You should call the Chair. Here's her number.

### Scene 3

*(Early Fall, 2002. ANN MARIE's classroom at Staten Island Community College.)*

**ANN MARIE.** I'm Ann Marie Burke, and this is Advanced Poetry Writing One! (*Beat.*) Welcome! Well, this is, actually, my very first semester at Staten Island Community College, and I'm really eager to get started. I should tell you that—I'm new to teaching. Although I did "T.A." at Yale. Since graduate school, I've worked in Advertising, as a copywriter, basically, at Saatchi and Saatchi. But I decided to go back to my first love, which is literature, specifically twentieth century women's poetry. This semester we'll start with Marianne Moore, who described poems as being like "Imaginary gardens with Real Toads in them." Isn't that great?

*(There is no response from the class.)*

**ANN MARIE.** Why don't I just—pass out the syllabus? Yes. That's what I'll do. (*She digs through her briefcase.*) I know it's in here! I went

to Kinko's last night. Here it is. Yes. Okay. That's good. *(She passes out the syllabus.)* So you see as you glance down at the list of authors that we'll be reading Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Gwendolyn Brooks and Sharon Olds. So you see, this isn't just a Poetry Writing Workshop. We'll do lots of reading, because, as Sartre says, "To read a book is to write a book."

*(CELIA, a disheveled woman with a piercing look in her eye enters. She carries an armful of books, and she enters speaking at the top of her lungs.)*

**CELIA.** Do you like my co-ed outfit? I'm enjoying being a co-ed.

**ANN MARIE.** Excuse me?

**CELIA.** What's the class going to be about?

**ANN MARIE.** Why don't you have a seat, and I'll get you a syllabus.

**CELIA.** What's the final project?

**ANN MARIE.** We'll get to that.

**CELIA.** You're new. I have a note from your chair saying that I can take this class.

**ANN MARIE.** Could you just hold your comments until after class, please?

**CELIA.** I'd like to: but what's the class going to be about?

#### Scene 4

*(A few days later. The office of MARION, the Chair of the Creative Writing Department, Staten Island Community College. MARION and ANN MARIE drink tea in Styrofoam cups.)*

**MARION.** It warms my heart to see the way that you're taking to teaching here.

**ANN MARIE.** I've realized that you don't really even KNOW a subject until you teach it.

**MARION.** —when did you realize that?

**ANN MARIE.** Last night...as I was preparing my Milton lecture.

**MARION.** You're a quick study. It usually takes years for that to hit someone. You know, I had to give you Fishbein's Milton class because it was revealed, last semester, that Fishbein is slipping.

**ANN MARIE.** —it's an honor to be teaching Milton, it's just a little nervous-making because—I'm not really a Milton scholar!

**MARION.** Oh, who is?

**ANN MARIE.** Fishbein is! He wrote a book on Milton! But it's fine with me; it's both a challenge and a chance to re-read PARADISE LOST. Although I must confess: I sometimes feel that I'm bluffing my way through—making these private associations with the material—

**MARION.** —that's what we all do! But we call it teaching, right?

**ANN MARIE.** Right!

**MARION.** That's the spirit. (*Slight pause.*) Yes? Was there something else on your mind?

**ANN MARIE.** There's another class that I feel a little unqualified to teach. It's the "Fundamentals of Media Analysis."

**MARION.** Someone has to teach it! I thought that with your background in advertising you'd be a natural. After all: isn't the market the birthplace of linguistic invention?

**ANN MARIE.** With insights like that maybe you should be teaching it.

**MARION.** Oh, please! (*Chuckles.*) And how are the poetry classes going?

**ANN MARIE.** I am in my element there—although I do have a very disruptive student—she's wildly exuberant.

**MARION.** Yes, poets tend to be wild eccentrics! Outcasts and misfits!

**ANN MARIE.** I hadn't looked at it like that. (*Beat.*) This is exactly the kind of conversation I could never have at Saatchi and Saatchi.

**MARION.** It's the artistic temperament. It's Romanticism in a nutshell, isn't it?

### Scene 5

*(One week later. ANN MARIE's classroom: she lectures on the poetry of Sylvia Plath. CELIA sits in the front row and eats a taco salad out of a paper bag. ANN MARIE tries to actively ignore CELIA's chewing.)*

**ANN MARIE.** What she really wanted was to save herself, through her work. Poetry was her cross and her religion. She hammered herself to it. She wanted to show the male establishment, and especially her husband, a poet in his own right, that she could write the hell out of distinctly female experiences. And she did. What she really wanted was to expiate the purely female from her system. She was clinically diagnosed as being manic-depressive. But she used language as medication. This was before Prozac and Paxil and Wellbutrin. *(Beat.)* Would someone like to read the poem out loud for us? I see that we have a hand up— Why don't you read the poem for us, Celia?

**CELIA.** My name is Patty.

**ANN MARIE.** It is?

**CELIA.** Celia stayed home today to watch the cat!

*(She reads the first stanza. She is unaware of the volume of her voice.)*

I KNOW THE BOTTOM SHE SAYS  
I KNOW IT WITH MY GREAT TAP ROOT  
IT IS WHAT YOU FEAR  
I DO NOT FEAR IT I HAVE BEEN THERE!

*(The class gets nervous.)*

**ANN MARIE.** Thank you. We're actually looking at page 152, though, at the poem that begins "On this bald hill the new year hones its edge." Would someone else like to read the poem out loud?

*(CELIA's hand goes up.)*

**ANN MARIE.** How about you, Kelly?

*(No response.)*

**ANN MARIE.** Doesn't anyone else have his or her book?

**CELIA.** I HAVE A BOOK.

### **Scene 6**

*(A few days later. MARION's office.)*

**MARION.** Where did you get the notion that teaching poetry would be meaningful, Ann Marie?

**ANN MARIE.** Why are you here? Don't you want to lead a meaningful life?

**MARION.** I'm a simple woman, Ann Marie.

**ANN MARIE.** I'm trying to teach and under these circumstances it's been very difficult!

**MARION.** What circumstances are you talking about, Ann Marie?

**ANN MARIE.** Last week Celia brought in a large taco salad to the class. And she sat eating it loudly.

**MARION.** This is a state institution, Ann Marie. She'd have to open fire on the classroom to be thrown out. Last year we had a student who had a psychotic break in class. We've had students write threatening fantasies about dismembering their classmates. They're expressing themselves. It's freedom of speech. These students know their rights to an education. There's not a lot that you can do.

**ANN MARIE.** But I can't really do a good job under these conditions.

**MARION.** *(Brightly:)* Then why don't you just do a bad job?

**ANN MARIE.** Are you seriously telling me to do a bad job? Are you serious?

**MARION.** Listen, Ann Marie, you're not the only one who's had problems with Celia. *(She looks through a thick manila file.)* She has

taken several Creative Writing classes. It looks like she's in her seventeenth year here.

**ANN MARIE.** But how could she remain in school that long? Isn't there a statute of limitations on attending college? She clearly cannot function.

**MARION.** Maybe she was taking her meds in the past.

**ANN MARIE.** Her meds.

**MARION.** Medications.

**ANN MARIE.** Yes. What kind of medications?

**MARION.** I'm not at liberty to disclose the facts of her file. But I can give you some general info: she started taking classes in the mid-80s, about the time that Reagan emptied out the psychiatric wards around the city. That's your first clue. A lot of those folks got advised to explore their creativity as a way to control their delusions, et cetera. If you ask me I would have to say that Ronald Reagan did those folks a disservice.

**ANN MARIE.** You won't find me defending Ronald Reagan. What else does it say?

**MARION.** *(Smiling:)* I'm not at liberty to say.

**ANN MARIE.** Don't I have a right to know who it is that I'm dealing with?

**MARION.** She's protected by the privacy of information act.

**ANN MARIE.** Am I protected?

**MARION.** You have to go through the proper channels.

**ANN MARIE.** Which are what?

**MARION.** Look, Ann Marie: as a first-time teacher you're trying to do everything perfectly. One thing that you'll learn is that the only thing that you can do "perfectly" is jump off a bridge!

**ANN MARIE.** I'm discovering that I can't even do that perfectly.

**MARION.** Now, now. It's not as bad as you feel it is. I'm here for you, Ann Marie. I've got your back! These super-alive creative

types can be a handful, I know. You might try talking to her—take her aside and point out the classroom rules section of your syllabus where you state that there is no eating in class.

**ANN MARIE.** What? No one told me about that! I thought that was common sense!

**MARION.** Oh—I see. This is a heads-up, then! In the future, you'll want to make that clear. In the meantime, you might try giving her a little extra attention. And remember, too, that at Staten Island Community College we have a humble but necessary mission: we are educating these students not for the heights of Parnassus, not for the cafes of Greenwich Village, not for salon society—we are educating them to be data processors and shift managers at Strawberry's, capesce? We need Celia's tuition. We need her body in that chair. We are providing a public service. You might think of teaching as a meaningful occupation because you had a Joycean epiphany on the IRT, but for most of us, it's just a job!

### Scene 7

*(Late September. ANN MARIE and CELIA in ANN MARIE's office.)*

**ANN MARIE.** I do understand about your having to leave class early, that's fine. I'm glad you came to see me because there's actually another issue that I've been meaning to talk to you about. It's the fact that you've been eating during class.

**CELIA.** Lots of students do!

**ANN MARIE.** It's true that some students might bring in a snack, a bagel, or a granola bar, but—

**CELIA.** Mine is healthier!

**ANN MARIE.** It's just very distracting to the other students when you eat a Taco Salad.

**CELIA.** You know the chihuahua on the Taco Bell commercials?

**ANN MARIE.** Yes?

**CELIA.** Well, what do you think he'd say about it?

**Scene 8**

*(Mid-September. ANN MARIE at her therapist's office. Her Therapist, DR. K, speaks in dulcet tones.)*

**DR. K.** Ann Marie, isn't that why you left advertising in the first place?

**ANN MARIE.** Are you saying that I was persona non grata at Saatchi and Saatchi?

**DR. K.** I'm saying that you encountered some difficulties among the staff there. I'm saying that there were power struggles. I'm saying that you were often unhappy about office politics.

**ANN MARIE.** Saatchi and Saatchi was a cake-walk in comparison to this. Commerce gets the blood going, there's a presiding spirit of healthy competition and real stakes. But within the English and Creative Writing Department at Staten Island Community College there's a presiding spirit of fatigue and hatred. No one is pursuing knowledge for its own sake. The students are there for the degree so they can get jobs. And the people who teach there? I am beginning to suspect that they don't really enjoy teaching.

**DR. K.** I'm hearing that you are having a hard time connecting with your colleagues.

**ANN MARIE.** I volunteered for all sorts of committees. I'm very collegial. I volunteered to re-structure the Curriculum Plan.

**DR. K.** Perhaps they find your energy level to be threatening?

**ANN MARIE.** I guess the other thing is that it's a blow to my ego. I thought that I was going to be helping people.

**DR. K.** With poetry?

**ANN MARIE.** Yes. With poetry.

**DR. K.** Is that realistic?

**ANN MARIE.** Why not? You know what Kafka said, don't you? "Art acts like an axe on the frozen sea inside of us."

**DR. K.** You approached teaching like it was a sacred thing. You felt that you had a calling. You're disillusioned, that's painful. What I'm hearing is disillusionment. (*Affectlessly:*) I wonder what Kafka would have had to say about disillusionment.

### Scene 9

(*One week later. ANN MARIE's classroom.*)

**ANN MARIE.** Anne Sexton had said to Plath once, "Oh, you have a concentration camp in your head, too."

**CELIA.** I THOUGHT THAT FIRST.

**ANN MARIE.** (*Ignoring Celia's outburst:*) Elizabeth Bishop had a very different approach to writing poetry from that of Sylvia Plath. My favorite poem by Bishop is the villanelle "One Art," which you will find on page 178. This is a deceptively simple poem. It has an air of sanity, and is almost comic, which is hard to pull off in a poem, unless you're Dorothy Parker. It's a poem about LOSS. I'll give you a few minutes to first re-read the poem silently to yourself.

**CELIA.** (*Blurts out:*) "The art of Losing isn't hard to Master!"

**ANN MARIE.** It is hard to resist reading it out loud. Why don't we read it out loud? Why don't I read it out loud— (*She recites the poem from memory:*)

"The art of losing isn't hard to master.  
So many things seem filled with the intent  
To be lost that their loss is no disaster.  
Lose something every day. Accept the fluster  
Of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.  
The art of losing isn't hard to master!" (*Beat.*)

**ANN MARIE.** Those are the first two stanzas of the poem. Now, let me ask you, why do you think Bishop repeats the line "the art of losing isn't hard to master—"?

**CELIA.** Because she doesn't TRUST the reader.

**ANN MARIE.** No. I don't think that's why. (*Long pause.*) Because it's a VILLANELLE. It's the formal strategy of the poem.

**CELIA.** I think that she should just TRUST THE READER and not a dead French form.

**ANN MARIE.** Celia, we aren't workshopping this poem. This poem is a masterpiece. Now I invite you to LISTEN to the next stanza:

“Then practice losing farther, losing faster:  
Places, and names, and where it was you meant  
To travel. The art of Losing isn't hard to master.”

**ANN MARIE.** Let's look at that stanza for a moment. What is the poet saying?

**CELIA.** She's saying that being a loser is all right, in the long run.

**ANN MARIE.** Let's hear from some other people. (*Beat.*) Kelly, what do you think the poet is saying?

**CELIA.** SHOW ME A GOOD LOSER AND I'LL SHOW YOU A LOSER!

**ANN MARIE.** I'm finding it difficult to teach with you speaking out of turn, Celia, so I'm asking you to please refrain from speaking for the rest of the class period. Do you think that you can do that?

*(CELIA mimes a gesture of sealing her lips, locking them, and throwing away the key.)*

**ANN MARIE.** Thank you. (*With new vigor:*) This deceptively simple poem is essentially an Elegy.

**CELIA.** I die to myself daily. I was the first one to come up with the phrase RING AROUND THE COLLAR. But I didn't get the credit! I never get the credit!

**ANN MARIE.** Let's just end class early.

**CELIA.** Why don't we just end the semester early?

**ANN MARIE.** Because we have a lot more material to cover—

**CELIA.** I wouldn't know. I seem to have LOST my syllabus. Get it?

---

**Scene 10**

*(Later that day. The chair's office. MARION and ANN MARIE.)*

**ANN MARIE.** Since finding out about my former career in advertising she's added that to her roster of delusional fantasies.

**MARION.** You obviously exert an influence over her. You exerted influence over a lot of people when you worked in advertising. Were you more comfortable with the dynamic of the marketplace? The difference is that now, in the classroom, you can directly witness your influence. Am I right about that?

**ANN MARIE.** Excuse me? I'm not sure what it is that you're asking me—

**MARION.** I'm just saying: a teacher has a direct and a profound influence. She's fond of you.

**ANN MARIE.** Is she? I think she's fond of scaring me.

**MARION.** She's like an animal. She can sense fear. Is that what you're saying?

**ANN MARIE.** No. She's not like an animal. I don't know what she's like. She's un-like.

**MARION.** But even animals can be trained! Are you fond of animals?

**ANN MARIE.** *(Confused:)* I have a cat.

**MARION.** Yes. I imagine that you do. Have a cat. *(With a significant look at Ann Marie:)* Well, I believe that we have tackled some of your worries here today, haven't we, Ann Marie?

**ANN MARIE.** I don't believe that we have.

**MARION.** But you do have a cat!

**ANN MARIE.** I do.

**MARION.** Well, then.

**Scene 11**

*(ANN MARIE at a café, at a tiny table, swamped by papers. She is in the middle of a conversation with a sexy, tattooed BARISTA.)*

**ANN MARIE.** I had a long conversation with Mother Teresa once, she was doing a Gap ad and I'd been hired to write the copy, and we were chatting about the nature of evil, and she said that the crux of evil is doubt. That whenever we hesitate that is the way that the devil acts through us. She actually said that—"the devil." I love Catholicism: it's so tenth century. It made me think that when we hesitate to give money to the homeless then that's the Devil having his way. It was a powerful moment for me. This is the kind of thing I usually only tell my shrink.

*(The BARISTA looks at her, blankly.)*

**ANN MARIE.** What was it you asked me again?

**BARISTA.** I asked if you ordered a triple macchiato?

**ANN MARIE.** Yes, thank you—

*(The BARISTA sets it down in the midst of the papers.)*

**BARISTA.** What kind of a writer are you?

**ANN MARIE.** Oh, you mean—these? These are poems!

**BARISTA.** You're a poet!

**ANN MARIE.** Well, sort of. I'm a little blocked lately. For the past five years actually. But all of that is about to change—for now, I teach it. Poetry. I teach poetry. For a living. I'm trying to get myself on a writing schedule though. You know what Stendhal said: "Write twenty lines a day, genius or not!"

**BARISTA.** I like that idea. I can get behind that idea. Lightning doesn't have to strike you, right? You strike first.

**ANN MARIE.** Exactly. It's something I should tell my students. Not that they have writer's block. Quite the opposite. These are their poems. Their homework-poems. They certainly have no trouble expressing themselves!

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**Scene 12**

(ANN MARIE lectures. As she speaks, CELIA enters loudly.)

**ANN MARIE.** “Is Art worth this?” Elizabeth Bishop once asked Robert Lowell. I wonder about that myself, sometimes. And we can especially wonder about that when we look at the life and the work of the poet Anne Sexton—

**CELIA.** (*In a coaxing, super-polite voice:*) I’m sorry I’m late. I was up all night—writing— I just wanted to—to—to solve the monster shaped riddle of WHAT SHOULD I DO WITH MY LIFE?

**ANN MARIE.** What?

**CELIA.** I want to write beautiful POEMS!

**ANN MARIE.** (*Gently:*) We all want to do that, Celia.

**CELIA.** Do you? You write poems?

**ANN MARIE.** Well, yes—

**CELIA.** You’re a poet!

**ANN MARIE.** No, I wouldn’t claim that title.

**CELIA.** I heard it! You said it!

**ANN MARIE.** (*Losing control:*) You didn’t hear it and I didn’t say it!

**CELIA.** But you write, right?

**ANN MARIE.** Right! Right—look— (*At first she’s flustered, then she regains her composure and she realizes that this is an opportunity to teach something.*) Look, it’s like that famous analogy that Flaubert makes about writing—describing the gap between the thought and its expression—that struggle with words— Flaubert says: “Language is a cracked kettle upon which we tap out crude rhythms for bears to dance to when we long to make music that will melt the stars.”

**CELIA.** Say that again.

**ANN MARIE.** “Language is a cracked kettle upon which we tap out crude rhythms for bears to dance to when we long to make music that will melt the stars!”

**CELIA.** (*With conviction:*) But sometimes—bears need to dance, too!

*(LIGHTS go to a spot on CELIA. A jangly, carnival-like tune is heard. The music seems to be pulling CELIA's strings. She starts to beat out a "crude rhythm for bears to dance to" with her pencil. A pin-spot stays on her as she settles into writing a poem.)*

*(LIGHTS CROSSFADE.)*

### Scene 13

*(ANN MARIE at her THERAPIST's office. ANN MARIE has gained weight since the last scene, and wears a padded blazer.)*

**DR. K.** You have to stop thinking about her all the time.

**ANN MARIE.** Sometimes I see her head on other people's bodies.

*(Long beat.)*

**DR. K.** That sounds startling.

**ANN MARIE.** It was all going so well till she showed up and went ape-shit in my Advanced Poetry Writing One class!

**DR. K.** I sense some rage.

**ANN MARIE.** It's more like—bewilderment—

**DR. K.** Let's explore that rage—What is the rage connected with—

**ANN MARIE.** Well the "rage" is connected with my sense of bewilderment—why is this woman hell-bent on ruining my class? Why is she in college in the first place? Why was she passed along, shined on from semester to semester when she can barely write a sentence?

**DR. K.** How is she ruining your class?

**ANN MARIE.** She free-associates in class, she heckles the poems that we are reading, she eats taco salads loudly.

**DR. K.** And this eating of taco salads is ruining your class?

**ANN MARIE.** It's hard to discuss poetry when she is chomping down on nacho chips and then monologuing with sour cream dripping onto her blouse.

**DR. K.** What can you do about it?

**ANN MARIE.** Right now I'm thinking of quitting teaching.

**DR. K.** Quitting! So soon? You've barely done it.

**ANN MARIE.** It's just that I had such high hopes for myself as a teacher.

**DR. K.** Let's talk about those high hopes.

**ANN MARIE.** Teaching seemed so positive, so pure, so platonic. And I was so inspired by my teachers. And I thought that it would make my life more meaningful to teach.

**DR. K.** And what, specifically, inspired you to start teaching?

**ANN MARIE.** I wanted more.

**DR. K.** More...?

**ANN MARIE.** Out of life. I wanted more. Also, I thought, and I've never told anyone this before, but the real reason, the real reason for my career change and all, well—

**DR. K.** The real reason?

**ANN MARIE.** I have always wanted to write. Poetry. But I felt that I had lost my soul.

**DR. K.** So you thought that if you went into a more noble but less lucrative profession then your soul would return and you would be able to write again?

**ANN MARIE.** Yes.

**DR. K.** And has that happened?

**ANN MARIE.** Who has the time to write? I'm paralyzed with rage. I teach four classes with thirty students in each class. I'm on three committees, each one more political and twisted than the last. Between grading papers and reading Milton, I work about sixty hours a week. A barista at Starbucks makes more than I do and has more of a shot at writing something worthwhile. (*She takes out a paper bag.*) And I've gained sixteen pounds in seven weeks. I think that's

some kind of a record. I'm just going to have a little snack while I sit here. (*ANN MARIE unwraps a taco salad.*)

### Scene 14

*(LIGHTS UP on CELIA as she finishes writing her poem, and stands and reads it aloud to herself with a self-congratulatory sense of joy.)*

**CELIA.** Your veins are blue as marbles  
Horsehair has nothing on you!  
I'll strangle you with your long blonde hair  
I'll maim you with one touch  
And God won't know and God won't care  
Because I told him HUSH.  
And I'll cut out your tongue and glue it to your lung  
Without a lung and sans a tongue  
You cannot speak of what I've done!

*(She stands for a moment, bathed in her own accomplishment and then runs off.)*

### Scene 15

*(ANN MARIE at the café. She is jittery from too much caffeine. She speaks to the BARISTA, who hangs on her every word.)*

**ANN MARIE.** They download their homework from the internet. Often they don't even bother to change the font of the stolen material before they cut and paste it onto a fresh document. So you get this weird, mish-mash thing, this scrambled thing and that's their homework.

**BARISTA.** Helen Keller was a plagiarist.

**ANN MARIE.** NO!

**BARISTA.** She was. She unconsciously memorized a fairytale and she regurgitated it later—

**ANN MARIE.** The mere act of teaching implies that one wishes the world WELL.

**BARISTA.** Who said that?

**ANN MARIE.** I did. Just now.

### **Scene 16**

*(ANN MARIE, in the classroom: she lectures.)*

**ANN MARIE.** How does one *become* a poet? Writing is an act of faith. It is a re-ordering, a re-working, a re-organizing of the world as it is and into what it might better BE. It is a re-fashioning of the patterns of your own nervous system, making your nervous system an ally with the strongest tool at your disposal—language. Do you remember in our last class when Diana said that “Memorizability” is what makes a great poem a great poem? Many critics regard memorizability as the “acid test” as to what makes a poem work, so Diana is in good company. And we had a chance to think about how rhyme functions when we looked at Wally’s poem, which was a limerick. Before the printing press was invented, poets had to memorize their poems to save them from oblivion. And this brings me to what I want to focus on today, RHYTHM and the way that sound is the heart of the poem. And I want to start with something Celia said in class last week. Celia made a very insightful point about a quote from Flaubert. Celia reminded us that: “Sometimes bears need to dance, too!”

**CELIA.** *(Screams:)* —*by the roots of my hair some god has got hold of me!*

**ANN MARIE.** Excuse me?

**CELIA.** That’s the first line of my new poem. Whaddya’ think, Professor?

**ANN MARIE.** It’s a beautiful line.

**CELIA.** Thank you.

**ANN MARIE.** Did you write it?

**CELIA.** What do you mean by that?

**ANN MARIE.** It sounds familiar, and I just wondered if you wrote it...

**CELIA.** I didn't write it my pencil wrote it!

*(CELIA moves her chair a foot closer to ANN MARIE.)*

**ANN MARIE.** *(Unnerved, but stoic:)* What was I saying? Something about rhythm, yes, memory, yes, how rhythm functions as a mnemonic device—

*(CELIA moves her chair directly in front of ANN MARIE and stares at ANN MARIE intently.)*

*(ANN MARIE stops talking.)*

### Scene 17

*(A few days later, Mid-October. ANN MARIE and MARION, at Staten Island Community College.)*

**MARION.** As I see it, you have two options in this Situation: the first option is that you could meet with Celia one on one.

**ANN MARIE.** I'm not sure what you mean by that.

**MARION.** Do a private tutorial with her.

**ANN MARIE.** Essentially—you mean—conduct a private class for her benefit?

**MARION.** I'm looking at the bigger picture here. That's my job. *(Beat.)* You wrote this memo to me, let's see, here we go: "this student is disruptive in class: she free-associates, makes strange faces and talks constantly. At the break many students have approached me about her behavior. My primary concern is for the well-being of the class." *(She puts aside the memo.)* So you see one way to salvage the class would be for you to meet privately with Celia once a week.

**ANN MARIE.** *(With the force of a revelation:)* I see. She's not being rewarded. *(Beat.)* I'm being punished.

**MARION.** Let's not exaggerate. There are no carrots and no sticks. Teaching isn't just three hours of class time once a week. Sometimes you need to *extend* yourself.

**ANN MARIE.** Where would I have to meet with her?

**MARION.** You don't *have* to do anything. But we can't allot a classroom for a one on one tutorial.

**ANN MARIE.** You want me to meet with her in my office, alone, one on one?

**MARION.** That's my recommendation, yes.

**ANN MARIE.** Do you have any idea of how isolated the sixth floor is?

**MARION.** They aren't supposed to assign women to offices on the sixth floor.

**ANN MARIE.** —why is that?

**MARION.** There were a few isolated incidents of rape. Last year. But most of the rapists were caught. I'll put in a memo to the dean to re-assign you to a new office.

**ANN MARIE.** Most of them were caught—

**MARION.** Yes, arrested and convicted.

**ANN MARIE.** I don't find that reassuring.

**MARION.** Ann Marie, there must have been a mix-up in assigning the offices. We'll get you off that floor.

**ANN MARIE.** You know, I had such high hopes when I started here.

**MARION.** As well you should! Do you know how many people you leap-frogged to get to teach poetry? Most new hires do time in the trenches teaching comp classes, slogging through "Communicating Ideas Through the Expository Essay" semester after semester. And why not you?

**ANN MARIE.** My C.V.—Princeton, Columbia, Cambridge?

**MARION.** Yes, it's a feather in our cap to have someone with so many ivy-league diplomas teaching here. But that's not it. I liked your style. Not your "fashion sense." I mean your manner. You had such enthusiasm! Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm. I could see that you would use the techniques that you had

learned in advertising in the classroom, that you'd sell your students on the life of the mind.

**ANN MARIE.** I do appreciate your faith in me.

**MARION.** I sense that you're frightened of Celia.

**ANN MARIE.** I'm not afraid of her, but I don't particularly care to be left alone with her either.

**MARION.** We'll get you a security guard outside your office. You see there are some benefits to teaching here. It's my job to absorb this stuff. Yes, the stress level is very high. Yes, it is. But that's the price you pay. Maybe I should try swimming sometime to manage my stress level. (*Looking ANN MARIE up and down.*) What do you wear when you swim?

**ANN MARIE.** (*Confused:*) I wear a speedo.

**MARION.** I don't even know how to swim.

**ANN MARIE.** They offer lessons at the pool—

**MARION.** (*Batting her eyes:*) You know what they say about new dogs and old tricks.

**ANN MARIE.** You said that there were two options in this situation. Meeting privately with Celia is the first option. I'm wondering: what's the second option?

**MARION.** Let's not go into that right now. That will be an option only if option one doesn't work, capesce? To tell you the truth I have a feeling that you probably won't have to deal with this situation much longer.

**ANN MARIE.** Why do you say that?

**MARION.** I doubt that Celia even has the organizational skills to show up to meet with you. And if she does, you can fight off the rapists together!

**ANN MARIE.** What did you just say?

**MARION.** It's a joke!

**ANN MARIE.** Jokes are funny.

**MARION.** Ann Marie, you need to lighten up. I am giving you permission to lighten up. To get some perspective. *(Beat.)* I think that we solved some of our problems today!

### **Scene 18**

*(Dr. K's Office. ANN MARIE is at an uncomfortable weight; she wears a fat suit.)*

**ANN MARIE.** The Chair of the Department finally moved me off the rapist floor. But now she keeps batting her eyes at me.

**DR. K.** Are *any* of your colleagues sympathetic?

**ANN MARIE.** I really like the guy in the Student Union.

**DR. K.** What does he do?

**ANN MARIE.** Sells coffee and Krispy Kreme donuts.

**DR. K.** And that's important to you?

**ANN MARIE.** Isn't that important to everyone?

**DR. K.** Do you spend much time on campus any more?

**ANN MARIE.** The place gives me the creeps. It's like a manure pile where a diamond has been lost. Is my own personality a dream? To go to a new place, into a new line of work, that is something. It has been like trying to wake up from a dream. But then you find you were still asleep.

**DR. K.** Would you like to talk about your dreams?

**ANN MARIE.** No.

**DR. K.** Well, what would you like to talk about?

**ANN MARIE.** Why have they chosen me to torture? WHY ME.

**DR. K.** "No one can make you miserable without your consent." Eleanor Roosevelt said that.

**ANN MARIE.** You're saying I'm somehow complicit?

**DR. K.** What you prize is the life of the mind. You revere it. Celia is a fly in the ointment, right? Have you thought about writing about what you're going through?

**ANN MARIE.** I'm not that kind of a writer.

**DR. K.** What kind of a writer are you?

**ANN MARIE.** I can't colonize the wilderness of my life long enough to string two words together. I'm afraid of a blank page and the opinions of others.

**DR. K.** Why are you allowing these strangers to demoralize you?

**ANN MARIE.** Stranger rhymes with danger. Have you ever noticed that?

**DR. K.** I can't say that I have. (*Beat.*) Perhaps you see yourself—or some aspect of yourself—in Celia.

**ANN MARIE.** Who does that make the Chair? Am I the Chair too? Look. You've helped me a lot over the years, you really have. But maybe I need what they call in mafia circles a war-time consigliere—

**DR. K.** I don't get your reference—

**ANN MARIE.** In the mafia.

**DR. K.** The mafia? What do you know about the mafia?

**ANN MARIE.** You usually don't get my literary references, so I was making a reference to popular culture. I just think I need some more concrete help—

**DR. K.** I think that this would be a very bad time to stop therapy.

**ANN MARIE.** I just want to be free, and you, you keep undermining me—

**DR. K.** How am I “undermining” you?

**ANN MARIE.** You keep dredging up the past—

**DR. K.** I'm your therapist!

**ANN MARIE.** All I know is that it's not helping.

**DR. K.** There are some painful things here that you are not dealing with, Ann Marie. Lashing out at me may make you feel better, but in the long run, *I am not the enemy.*

**ANN MARIE.** What painful things are you talking about?

*(A loud ping is heard.)*

**DR. K.** What was that?

**ANN MARIE.** What? I didn't hear anything.

**DR. K.** *(Groping on the floor, and coming up:)* It's a button! It seems to have—popped off your blazer—

*(ANN MARIE takes it from her, examines it.)*

**ANN MARIE.** Oh. I guess you're right. Maybe they shrunk it at the dry-cleaners.

**DR. K.** The whole point of dry-cleaning is that they don't shrink your clothes.

**ANN MARIE.** That's what I used to think.

*(She wraps the too-small blazer around her torso.)*

## Scene 19

*(CELIA, in a trench-coat, sits cross-legged on the floor outside of ANN MARIE's office and speaks into a small tape recorder.)*

**CELIA.** Testing. One. Two. Testing. Today is October eighteenth, I have been here since 9 a.m. I am at school. My ideas have begun showing up in major motion pictures. At first I thought it was just the zeitgeist, the spirit of the time written large on these silver screens, but now I realize: Steven Spielberg had gotten hold of my diary. And then there was that other big mogul, he had seen an early draft of a poem. That's why I now put a little copyright logo on everything. I'll see you in court. I see my ideas everywhere, reflected back at me. YOU'RE SOAKING IN IT! *(Long beat.)* Should I be flattered, to be plundered by such heavy weights? For the record: I am. I am. I am. I am of three minds about it.

*(LIGHTS SHIFT to ANN MARIE on another part of the stage.)*

**ANN MARIE.** *(To the audience:)* On my way to meet with her I had a premonition. I pictured her wearing a bug-brown trench-coat. I had a flash of compassion, and an insight: I could see her faulty neurons, her misfiring synapses, and I wanted to say something consoling to her, something with wings. But then the light shifted and she became what can only be described as a human cockroach, twitching her feelers, deriving nutrition from detritus, from garbage. Then just as suddenly I felt sorry for her. And I rode these waves of tenderness and revulsion: I am sea-sick, and I am ballast! And again I am immensely sorry for her.

*(LIGHTS SHIFT to take in CELIA.)*

**CELIA.** *(Enthusiastically:)* Good morning Professor. I've been here since nine.

**ANN MARIE.** Yes, I apologize for being late. If you could just give me a few minutes to get into my office and get settled.

**CELIA.** I've been meaning to tell you something.

**ANN MARIE.** I just need one minute to find my keys.

**CELIA.** You said: "there's not a train I wouldn't take no matter where it's going."

**ANN MARIE.** *(As she searches for her keys:)* That's a paraphrase of Marianne Moore, actually. I may have *said* it but I didn't *say* it.

**CELIA.** I've been meaning to tell you that *I've traveled to France.*

**ANN MARIE.** *(Glibly:)* Since our last class?

*(CELIA holds what looks like a gun beneath her coat; the gun is pointed at ANN MARIE.)*

**CELIA.** I don't understand what you just said. Do you think that I'm making these things up? I take *very good* notes. You said those things in class. I've been here since nine. I've been here since 9 a.m. for our very first one on one tutorial.

**ANN MARIE.** You'll have to forgive me my lateness, I'm not a morning person.

**CELIA.** But why are you so late on our first day?

**ANN MARIE.** Don't take it personally— I'm an owl, not a lark.

**CELIA.** I don't know what you mean by that.

**ANN MARIE.** It's an expression. A lark is a morning bird, right?

**CELIA.** (*Scanning the line heavily.*) "What lark through yonder window breaks!"

**ANN MARIE.** It's actually what LIGHT through yonder window breaks—

**CELIA.** If no one understands it why do you say it?

**ANN MARIE.** There are some people who understand it.

**CELIA.** Who? Who? Whoooo? Get it? Lark, owl, I was being an owl! (*Points the gun again.*) *Why aren't we in the office yet?*

**ANN MARIE.** I can't seem to find my keys.

**CELIA.** Well, keep looking! I'll provide some background music, our own personal soundtrack. (*She hums.*) What do you think of that as a choice? That's Le Marseillaise. It's the French national anthem, you know, it's hardly "nonsensical." It's not so good to remind me of that. Let's continue this conversation inside the office—

**ANN MARIE.** I'd love to, but I seem to have lost my keys—

**CELIA.** *Garlic in the mayonnaise! Cell phones and cigarettes! Small dogs with frog faces! Everything mixed together, tastes and smells. The women don't age into crones, or disappear into nonentities the way they do in America: they become goddesses. No longer a sexy siren? Don't lash yourself to the mast, when you're an immortelle, the years do not count. (Pause.)* Did that sound like a poem to you?

**ANN MARIE.** That sounds like ad-copy.

**CELIA.** (*Suspicious.*) What do you mean by that?

**ANN MARIE.** It's a compliment.

**CELIA.** Is it?

**ANN MARIE.** It's the poetry of capitalism. Some of America's great poets have written it.

**CELIA.** What great poets? Are you talking about yourself?

**ANN MARIE.** No, I'm not. Marianne Moore was hired to name a car made by Ford. Have you ever seen or heard of an Edsel?

**CELIA.** That reminds me. Right before you got here I saw a cockroach, the kind with wings to fly them to places that legs cannot reach. *(Long, uncomfortable beat.)*

**ANN MARIE.** Well, I can see why the Edsel could make you think of a cockroach. It looked rather like a cockroach, that curvilinear shell.

**CELIA.** I mention the cockroach because I would be more comfortable meeting in your office than out here, waiting for one of them to fly into my hair!

*(CELIA moves the concealed weapon so that it protrudes menacingly.)*

**ANN MARIE.** *(Whispers:)* We can't get into my office because I seem to have misplaced my keys—

**CELIA.** *(Whispers back:)* Why are you whispering? So the cockroaches won't hear you?

**ANN MARIE.** My keys are lost—

**CELIA.** Let's say a prayer to Saint Anthony, the Patron Saint of Lost Things.

**ANN MARIE.** *(Playing along:)* Please help me find my keys!

**CELIA.** *(Correcting her:)* Dear Saint Anthony please come round, something's lost and must be found. Never has that prayer failed. Now, you say it.

**ANN MARIE.** *Dear Saint Anthony please come round, something's lost and must be found.*

*(ANN MARIE sinks to her knees, opens her briefcase, scatters pens, papers, glasses, lipstick on the floor; She recites the prayer over and over under her breath.)*

**CELIA.** I used to have this nun who said that she could tell if you were really praying or if you were faking it. *(Beat.)* She said she could tell by looking at the back of your head, like I am now.

**ANN MARIE.** Was this a French nun at the lycee?

**CELIA.** Oui. We called her Sister Sister but that wasn't her real name.

*(ANN MARIE has stopped searching for her keys.)*

**CELIA.** Don't you want to find your keys?

**ANN MARIE.** I must have left them in my other coat pocket. Or inside the office!

**CELIA.** I heard something jangle!

**ANN MARIE.** Those were my apartment keys, not my office keys. We should just go to the Student Union is what we should do.

*(CELIA re-adjusts her "gun.")*

**CELIA.** This is just an *apparatus*.

**ANN MARIE.** We should just go to the Student Union is what we should do—

**CELIA.** I heard you the first time!

**ANN MARIE.** Sorry—

**CELIA.** Would you like to see my apparatus?

**ANN MARIE.** That's not necessary. You can just describe it to me as we walk to the Student Union—

**CELIA.** No. I want to show it to you NOW.

*(CELIA pulls out a small hand-held tape-recorder.)*

**ANN MARIE.** It's a *tape-recorder*?

**CELIA.** What did you think it was?

**ANN MARIE.** *(Looking straight into CELIA's eyes:)* Nothing. I thought it was nothing. You secretly taped our conversation?

**CELIA.** What makes you think that?

**ANN MARIE.** You were hiding a tape-recorder underneath your coat.

**CELIA.** I don't think it can record through fabric. And yet, I want to assure you: it's not make-believe.

**ANN MARIE.** No. I don't think it is. I don't think it's possible to make this shit up.

**CELIA.** Did you say SHIT? (*Into the recorder:*) The teacher just said SHIT.

**ANN MARIE.** I need coffee.

**CELIA.** And a pastry? You've filled out a bit and that's good. Here's a trick question, what's more fattening: a bagel or a croissant? What do you think? Huh?

**ANN MARIE.** I think you need HELP.

**CELIA.** What did you just say to me? Never mind. I have my *apparatus*.

**CELIA.** (*Pulls out some crumpled pages.*) Your boss suggested that I write a poem, using the voices that I sometimes hear— she said that I could write poems from listening to the voices that I heard in my head, like Robert Browning did.

**ANN MARIE.** Robert Browning didn't "hear voices." He wrote CHARACTERS. He was engaged in an activity. He wrote *characters* based on his *meticulous research*.

**CELIA.** I'm like Robert Browning without the meticulous research.

**ANN MARIE.** You met with the chair? When did you meet with the Chair?

**CELIA.** Stranger rhymes with danger. *You just don't like me.* "Well, she's on her high horse," she says to me, "she thinks she's fancy, she's got Ivy League credentials, she doesn't shop at Loehmann's, no-siree."

**ANN MARIE.** Who said that?

**CELIA.** Whooo—oo—the owl, get it?

**ANN MARIE.** Did my Chair say that?

**CELIA.** Why don't you like me?

**ANN MARIE.** Don't be absurd. I have over a hundred students. I have papers to grade. I have meetings with other students.

**CELIA.** I don't see any other students.

**ANN MARIE.** That's because my office hour is now over.

**CELIA.** It's not over until ten. See, the tape-recorder is to record me! It's for MY voices, it was never about you, it has nothing to do with you.

*(ANN MARIE goes.)*

**CELIA.** WHAT ABOUT MY POEM? WHAT ABOUT IT? WHAT ABOUT MY POEM?

## **Scene 20**

*(The chair's office: ANN MARIE and the CHAIR face each other.)*

**ANN MARIE.** So I'd like to know what Plan B is.

**MARION.** Did your tutorial not go well?

**ANN MARIE.** Did you read my memo?

*(MARION squints.)*

**ANN MARIE.** My new memo?

**MARION.** Is this the one about the tape recorder?

**ANN MARIE.** Yes.

**MARION.** I skimmed it.

**ANN MARIE.** She kept calling you "my boss," and implying that you were the one who suggested that she register for my class in the first place, but I know that's not true, you wouldn't recommend that a known troublemaker with a record of seventeen years of wreaking havoc in the department take MY CLASS. I'm brand-new!

**MARION.** That's correct.

**ANN MARIE.** What do you mean by that?

**MARION.** Academia goes by a very different “perks” system than Advertising. In Advertising maybe after so many years you get a larger bonus, a bigger office. Here at Staten Island Community College the main “perk” we offer is No Celia! (*Silence.*) We aren’t at Oxford. I’m not a Don. You’re not a full professor. I’m the Chair at a state institution and you’re a new hire, an entry level assistant professor. Celia may not be so far off in her appraisal of the situation.

**ANN MARIE.** She kept quoting you.

**MARION.** Excuse me?

**ANN MARIE.** In our meeting she kept implying that you told her that I didn’t like her.

**MARION.** *You don’t like her, do you?*

**ANN MARIE.** That’s hardly the point.

**MARION.** Look, you went through all the trouble to compose a memo, so I may as well read it.

*(LIGHTS SHIFT to a pin-spot on ANN MARIE.)*

**ANN MARIE.** That memo is one of the first things that I’ve written since I left Saatchi and Saatchi. It’s a carefully composed blow by blow description of an assault—was it an assault? I can tell, by the look on her face, that she doesn’t think so. She thinks creativity and insanity go hand in hand. Lady Macbeth’s cry to the cosmos: UNSEX ME! Ophelia’s plaiting of petals and flotation. They were pretty eloquent in the throes of madness. But in the grit of the real: the imagination does not order itself gently around psychosis. NO. Depression is not the same as hostility: depression is anger turned inward. Celia-Sometimes-Known-as-Patty is anger turned outward, and I’m her target, I’m her bullseye: she speaks in paranoid word salads, not poems; projection, not stanzas; confusion, mania, and threats— (*Beat.*) SHE THREATENED ME.

**MARION.** (*Having read the memo.*) Yes. (*Dryly.*) With a *tape-recorder?*

**ANN MARIE.** Yes, with a tape recorder that she had hidden underneath her coat, like this: (*She imitates CELIA’s posture with the tape recorder.*) See, she’s very clever. See, she made me think she was carrying a gun! Isn’t that clear in the memo?

**MARION.** Yes, it's clear. What's also clear is that you are giving her an awful lot of power over you. She "*made you think that she had a gun.*" Listen to yourself, Ann Marie!

**ANN MARIE.** I'm here to find out about Plan B.

**MARION.** Plan B?

**ANN MARIE.** At our last meeting you mentioned something about a Plan B.

**MARION.** Do you mean option Number Two?

**ANN MARIE.** You know what I mean.

**MARION.** For the sake of clarity—

**ANN MARIE.** What is Option Number Two?

**MARION.** A professor can bring a student in front of the Faculty Senate Disciplinary Action Committee.

**ANN MARIE.** Sounds delightful—then what?

**MARION.** You recommend that the student be suspended, in which case they are not permitted to set foot on campus for five years: or expelled, in which case they are banished forever.

**ANN MARIE.** I'd like for her to be expelled and banished forever.

**MARION.** No faculty member within the English Department has succeeded in having a student expelled. Not in the twenty years I've been working here. It's a lot of work and when, not IF, but when you lose, at the end of the day, we'll have one very disgruntled student on our hands.

**ANN MARIE.** Seventeen years she's been here. You told me that. Seventeen years of sabotaging classes! So, if I win the appeal, and she's expelled, no one will have their class ruined by her again, and maybe, just maybe she'll realize that she needs help. Not poetry classes. *She needs therapy and medication.*

**MARION.** Doing this for the good of the school are you?

**ANN MARIE.** Yes. And for her own good. So if I do decide to go through with this, then what would the next step be?

**MARION.** For your own good the next step would be to think about it. Overnight. If you still feel this strongly tomorrow I will be behind you one hundred percent! It's a moral dilemma, I know.

*(MARION starts to massage ANN MARIE's shoulders.)*

**MARION.** In the meantime, may I suggest that you take a long swim? Your shoulders are all knotted up.

*(ANN MARIE says nothing.)*

**MARION.** You're in very good hands! Didn't we solve all of our problems today?

**ANN MARIE.** *(This is too much for her:)* I don't know what you mean by that. We solved nothing. Nothing is even remotely solved.

**MARION.** Don't be angry! Sleep on it.

**ANN MARIE.** Angry? No. It's not anger I feel. I feel lost.

**MARION.** I think we've taken some real steps.

## Scene 21

*(Early November, early morning. Staten Island Community College: outside of ANN MARIE's office. CELIA stands in her trench coat with a large shopping bag.)*

**CELIA.** My teacher said that poets don't finish poems, they ABANDON them. So I'll just abandon this here. *(She pulls a piece of paper out of the bag.)* On her office door. Some women abandon their babies, stick them in dumpsters, but not poets, poets abandon their poems. *(She tacks the poem to Ann Marie's door.)* Don't cry. My milk's all dry anyway. She'll take such better care of you than I ever could!

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**Scene 22**

(Later that day. The chair's office, Staten Island Community College. ANN MARIE and MARION sit with a crumpled piece of paper on the desk between them.)

**ANN MARIE.** You know she even stole some of Browning's language in her poem.

**MARION.** At least it shows initiative.

**ANN MARIE.** That's a surprising defense of plagiarism coming from you.

**MARION.** Plagiarism is a legal term, not a literary one. But you must be familiar with plagiarism after all of those years in advertising—

**ANN MARIE.** What I find the most alarming are the thinly veiled threats of mutilation and strangulation.

**MARION.** It's her fifth amendment right, Ann Marie. It is freedom of speech in action.

**ANN MARIE.** It's hate-speech. It's doggerel. And she left it on my office door!

**MARION.** Now, now, one minute. Did Browning actually DO the stuff he wrote about? I'm thinking of Genet who said that "Every work of art is an uncommitted crime."

**ANN MARIE.** She's not Browning! She's not Genet! Her poem has no aesthetic merit, zero, nada, zilch! Her poems are bad and she ought to stop wasting the paper.

**MARION.** Her poem has *educational merit*. She is channeling her neuroses into language.

**ANN MARIE.** Exactly; and I am not a clinical social worker. And this is what has tipped me over the edge. I've thought long and hard about what you said about the hurdles that go along with expelling a student. But I don't feel like I have another choice here. (Beat.) I've filed an appeal to the Academic Senate Disciplinary Committee. I've sent copies of the appeal to the Dean, the Chair of the Senate, and the members of the committee.

**MARION.** You're pretty confident about this, aren't you?

**ANN MARIE.** I have only the evidence of my senses.

**MARION.** I'm telling you right now: I suggest that you withdraw your case.

**ANN MARIE.** How can you say that?

**MARION.** You will lose.

**ANN MARIE.** Perhaps I will not mind losing if I can at least be heard.

**MARION.** I'm sure that Celia feels the same way.

*(OFFSTAGE, CELIA screams.)*

### Scene 23

**CELIA.** *(In her own mind, thinking out loud:)* There is a certain Dirty Lie being spread about me. And I don't appreciate it. Lies and Libel. There is a certain Dirty Lie!

### Scene 24

*(Early December. CELIA in front of the Academic Senate: She has one arm wrapped in a crude, home-made sling.)*

**DISEMBODIED VOICE.** *(Very sympathetic:)* A poem entitled "A Death Warrant for Professor Burke in Twelve Stanzas" was found on Professor Burke's office door. Do you know anything about this poem? *(Pause.)*

**CELIA.** Could you repeat the question?

**DISEMBODIED VOICE.** Yes. A poem called "A Death Warrant for Professor Burke in Twelve Stanzas" was found on Professor Burke's office door. Did you write this poem?

**CELIA.** *(Flapping her arm:)* How could I with my skiing injury?

**DISEMBODIED VOICE.** Do you know anything about the poem?

**CELIA.** Are you all media substitutes?

**DISEMBODIED VOICE.** Do you understand why you're here today? It's not just about the poem. It's about your ongoing behavior in the classroom this semester.

**CELIA.** My name is Celia!

**DISEMBODIED VOICE.** I know that.

*(CELIA runs off.)*

**DISEMBODIED VOICE.** Professor Burke, is what we've seen here today indicative of her behavior in class?

**ANN MARIE.** Yes. I think you can see what I'm up against, her problems are so much larger than the scope of the poetry classroom—

**DISEMBODIED VOICE.** She seems harmless, and her poem is not exactly a threat: it's self-expression.

**ANN MARIE.** She's not "harmless." She's harming the educational opportunities of her classmates.

**DISEMBODIED VOICE.** The class is just a—is it a poetry class?

**ANN MARIE.** Yes, I know it's "Just Poetry" it's not Rocket Science.

**DISEMBODIED VOICE.** I didn't mean to imply that Poetry wasn't as rigorous a discipline as Rocket Science.

**ANN MARIE.** I believe that poems put us into zones of perception we don't have access to otherwise. I believe in the power of the WORD, the healing power of language, I believe that when we put words up against chaos, loss and death, we walk away stronger. *(Beat.)* And yet, after all, words are just marks on a page. They need to be MET with an intellect that can decipher and encounter them.

**DISEMBODIED VOICE.** Staten Island Community College itself can hardly meet the kind of standards that you're used to—

**ANN MARIE.** I'm here not for myself but for my other students, who have a right to an education, who have the abilities to tackle these concepts. *(She pulls out a piece of paper.)* I'm here for Mrs. Rosa Delgado, mother of six, returning to school after fifteen years; Anna

Garcia, the first girl in her family to attend college; Wally Burton, security guard; Teresa Capobianco; Diana Grusteiner; Kelly Contino—

**DISEMBODIED VOICE.** You don't need to read all of their names. This is the group that is congregated in the hallway right now?

**ANN MARIE.** Yes. I asked for volunteers, for witnesses, and they all wanted to come. The entire class. Sure, Celia is ruining my semester. But it's not about my semester. It's THEIR semester. It's about them. They deserve better.

**DISEMBODIED VOICE.** Everyone usually does. *(Beat.)*

**ANN MARIE.** Is that all?

**DISEMBODIED VOICE.** Do you have anything more to say?

**ANN MARIE.** I am not oblivious to the pathos that Celia embodies— I am aware that “Everyone Deserves Better!” That's not the point though, is it? *(She is met with silence.)* Am I running close to contempt of court?

**DISEMBODIED VOICE.** Keep going. You are free to speak your heart.

**ANN MARIE.** I have relied on my heart! That is all.

**DISEMBODIED VOICE.** You will hear from us.

**DISEMBODIED VOICE.** In due time.

**DISEMBODIED VOICE.** And through the proper channels.

## Scene 25

*(LIGHTS UP: ANN MARIE and DR. K.)*

**DR. K.** This experience with your student can be seen as a trial run, as a chance to redress grievances from the past.

**ANN MARIE.** You mean other times that I didn't stick up for myself and acted like a doormat out of a sickening compulsion to please others?

**DR. K.** You acted out of a sickening compulsion to please others?

**ANN MARIE.** Yes. To solve the monster shaped riddle of What Should I Do With My Life?

**DR. K.** The “monster shaped riddle”—?

**ANN MARIE.** Why must you repeat everything I say? I KNOW WHAT I ASKED YOU. I’m sorry. I know it’s your technique, to mirror, to reflect.

**DR. K.** It’s useful. It works for some people.

**ANN MARIE.** Not for Woody Allen. It didn’t work for him. Do you ever think about that Dr. K? Do you ever think about Woody Allen?

**DR. K.** I can’t say that I do, Ann Marie. I think you’ve taken some real steps. It’s time to take one more. It’s time to start defending yourself. What about enrolling in a karate or judo class?

**ANN MARIE.** I would definitely enjoy to karate-chop her. *(Beat.)* Only if absolutely necessary.

## Scene 26

*(LIGHTS SHIFT: ANN MARIE’S new office at Staten Island Community College. LIGHTS UP on CELIA, who sits alone in the office. Her arm is no longer in a sling. There’s a big shopping bag next to her.)*

*(CELIA practices a speech: she takes a flower in a coke bottle out of the shopping bag.)*

**CELIA.** Hullo Professor! I brought this for you. It’s a gift, so you can’t refuse it. At least it’s bad luck to refuse it. You don’t want to bring bad luck down on your head. It’s an “office-warming” present. I shouldn’t have but I did! *(She puts the flower and bottle back and changes her tone.)* Hi Professor. I brought you a gift. I thought of bringing you fat-free gummies, but I thought that might hurt your feelings. The fat-free part. *(Changes her tone; puts the flower back in the bag.)* Hello Professor! You look so nice today. Are you pregnant? No. That’s mean. Don’t be truthful! Be kind. Be kind. Don’t mention

her recent weight gain. No one wants to hear that. (*Beat.*) Hullo Professor!

(ANN MARIE enters warily. She wears a velour sweat-suit that does nothing to hide all of her bulges, but is still trying to look professional, and carries a briefcase: she is stunned to see CELIA sitting in her office.)

**CELIA.** (*To ANN MARIE:*) I like your outfit. I don't think that you can even tell that those are gym-clothes. I prefer a stretchy waistband too. I saw a hoodie just like that in Glamour Magazine. There's a cross-over happening: gym clothes popping up on runways and in the office.

**ANN MARIE.** How did you get into my office?

**CELIA.** We had so much trouble getting in the last time that I thought that I'd take matters into my own hands.

**ANN MARIE.** Did someone let you in?

**CELIA.** I have a right to be here, it's our time.

**ANN MARIE.** Actually you *don't* have a right to be here.

**CELIA.** What does that mean?

**ANN MARIE.** It means that you'll have to leave now.

**CELIA.** But—this is *Our Time*.

**ANN MARIE.** No, it isn't.

**CELIA.** Yes, it is!

**ANN MARIE.** You have to go now.

**CELIA.** Why are you breaking our appointment?

**ANN MARIE.** Remember the Academic Senate? You were expelled, Celia.

**CELIA.** (*After a long pause.*) Are you sure?

**ANN MARIE.** Yes. I am.

**CELIA.** Why was I expelled?

**ANN MARIE.** Well, you seemed to be having a lot of problems with the class, remember? Talking out of turn, and eating, and there was that incident with the tape-recorder.

**CELIA.** But I love that class! You're a great teacher!

**ANN MARIE.** I'm sorry.

**CELIA.** Maybe—what if we don't tell them, I can just attend your class, like a fly on the wall, quiet as a mushroom, I'll sit in a corner, keep to myself, you won't even know I'm alive. I'll be a statue, a mute, a stone. I promise!

**ANN MARIE.** I'm so sorry, but it's too late.

**CELIA.** Why? Don't you think that people can change?

**ANN MARIE.** Look, you have to go.

**CELIA.** Please!

**ANN MARIE.** Would you like me to call Someone?

**CELIA.** What have you done? *(There is an unbearably long pause.)*

**ANN MARIE.** I'm calling Security.

**CELIA.** Let's bury the hatchet. *(Takes an empty coke bottle out of her bag, and sets it on the desk.)* Look, I brought this for you. *(Puts a single red rose in the bottle.)* And this, I grew this in my own garden. For you.

**ANN MARIE.** Thank you. But. You see. You were expelled. *(Picks up phone; taps out a number.)* Hello? This is Ann Marie Burke. I need immediate assistance. I'm in Humanities 245. Yes, all right. Yes.

*(ANN MARIE covers the mouthpiece, but keeps the phone at her ear: To CELIA.)*

**ANN MARIE.** You're free to go until they get here and then it won't be so easy for you. As someone who's been expelled you aren't permitted to be on campus for any reason.

**CELIA.** I have one thing to ask of you.

**ANN MARIE.** Is any of what I'm saying sinking in?

**CELIA.** Can you do me one small favor?

**ANN MARIE.** That depends on what it is.

**CELIA.** Tell me *how could you do this to me.* (Long pause.) Seventeen years of studying, I'm two classes away from graduating. It's not my fault, I keep trying. Didn't you ever have that, that struggle, that struggle, and that struggle?

**ANN MARIE.** You did this to yourself. I'm sorry.

**CELIA.** You're wrong about me. I didn't do this to myself. This was done to me.

*(She goes OFF.)*

*(ANN MARIE sits silently for a long beat.)*

*(Her phone rings. She looks at it.)*

*(She doesn't answer it.)*

*(There's a knock at her door.)*

*(She doesn't answer it.)*

*(She puts her face in her hands.)*

### Scene 27

*(Mid-December. Staten Island Community College Faculty Club. Table set with linen. ANN MARIE and MARION sit. ANN MARIE is chewing.)*

**MARION.** The art of teaching is a persuasive art. That is truly part of our job: to persuade students to give up easier pleasures in favor of more difficult ones. It must be a lot more rewarding than Madison Avenue, where you're just another faceless name, just another executive. Here in academia you are so necessary to the department.

**ANN MARIE.** Can you pass the bread-basket, please?

**MARION.** Those were some very flattering course evaluations that you received.

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**ANN MARIE.** (*For the bread-basket:*) —thank you—

**MARION.** I'm so glad that we have this chance to have lunch together and discuss the semester, to talk about Teaching, shoot the breeze, celebrate the Expulsion of Celia. Let's talk about next semester—

**ANN MARIE.** I won't be here next semester. I'm not returning.

**MARION.** You're leaving us?

**ANN MARIE.** Yes. I am.

**MARION.** You're not even going to return for the Spring Semester? You are leaving me in the lurch—

**ANN MARIE.** You always told me that you had lots of people waiting in the wings to teach poetry.

**MARION.** That's not the point.

**ANN MARIE.** Do I address my resignation letter to you or to the Dean or do I C.C. both of you and just send it straight to the President?

**MARION.** Why don't you hold off on the letter. It's not too late to ask for a leave of absence. Wait and see how you feel after a few months: when you change your mind, the job will be waiting for you.

**ANN MARIE.** I don't want the job.

**MARION.** Do you know how hard it is to land a tenure track job in New York City? The money-getters are abolishing tenure! In five years time there will be no more tenure! (*Beat.*) Celia was a once in a career phenomenon. (*MARION leans over like a Mafia Don.*) I can personally guarantee you that *a student like Celia will never recur for you at Staten Island Community College.*

**ANN MARIE.** How can you personally guarantee that? (*She stops chewing.*) You told her to take my class in the first place, didn't you? She wasn't making that up.

**MARION.** It's true that I thought that you could handle her better than our other teachers; their nerves are shot, they are worn-out,

they are between heart-attacks. *(Beat.)* But you? You seemed to have the chops to handle someone like Celia.

**ANN MARIE.** What gave you that impression? I had never taught before! I didn't have any idea of what I was getting into—

**MARION.** You showed up wearing a suit, you had so much gusto, you looked like you could handle anyone.

**ANN MARIE.** *(Folds her napkin.)* Excuse me, I do need to get going. I'm sorry about lunch.

**MARION.** Was I so wrong about you?

**ANN MARIE.** Yes, yes, you were. So. Very. Wrong. About me.

*(ANN MARIE rises and takes her chair with her: it is stuck to her hips.)*

**MARION.** Forgive an old dog her old tricks! Let's not part on bad terms-

*(She approaches ANN MARIE, who dodges her.)*

**ANN MARIE.** I wish I could cheerfully dismiss this whole episode of my life, but I can't.

**MARION.** You wanted to change some things. But, what you didn't realize is that change is not always positive. For you teaching has just been some Majestic Whim.

**ANN MARIE.** I do not agree to your Version of my Existence.

**MARION.** And now you'll just waltz back into your power-suit three-martini lunch Life-Style!

**ANN MARIE.** You'll be glad to know that none of my power-suits fit me anymore.

## Scene 28

*(Cafe. ANN MARIE sits with an espresso and a bottle of water. She is writing. The BARISTA enters, watches her, The BARISTA puts down a new espresso and buses the old one.)*

**BARISTA.** On the house.

**ANN MARIE.** What? Why?

**BARISTA.** A reward.

**ANN MARIE.** For what?

**BARISTA.** You've been here for three hours.

**ANN MARIE.** Oh my God. I'm so sorry! Is there a time-limit on tables?

**BARISTA.** For some people.

**ANN MARIE.** Oh?

**BARISTA.** Sure. The way you keep your hand moving—you sit there bouncing radar signals all around the room—you're a lure to other customers.

**ANN MARIE.** I'm just "doing the work" as they say—

**BARISTA.** Who says?

**ANN MARIE.** Some poet.

**BARISTA.** Not you?

**ANN MARIE.** No. I mean it's not digging a ditch. But it is work.

**BARISTA.** You make it look easy.

**ANN MARIE.** That's why I get the big bucks.

**BARISTA.** Yeah? I thought there was no money in poetry—

**ANN MARIE.** It's the other way around.

*(She is met with blankness.)*

**ANN MARIE.** *There's no poetry in money.*

**BARISTA.** No? Yeah. Well. Sure. Right. I have to get back to work—

**ANN MARIE.** Me too—

**BARISTA.** But if you want another shot of espresso, you'll let me know, right?

**ANN MARIE.** You'll be the first to know.

**BARISTA.** Yeah? Nice.

*(ANN MARIE continues writing. The BARISTA watches her for a moment and then goes.)*

### Scene 29

*(Six Months later. ANN MARIE, once again in a suit, looking trimmer, and MEL, an androgynous colleague, smoke cigarettes on the sidewalk outside of Saatchi and Saatchi.)*

**MEL.** I heard about your “research-slash-teaching stint” in a ghetto high school. Really gutsy and super-smart. Your street credibility with the suits at Saatchi and Saatchi is going to be through the roof: you can say, “I have seen gangsta style with my own eyes.” And that can go directly into client consultations. There’s still plenty to be made in the White Kids With Dreadlocks Teen Sector. *Where the ghetto goes the suburbs follow.*

**ANN MARIE.** Where did you hear that? Is that what people are saying?

**MEL.** I know, I know, no matter what people are saying, you had *noble motives*. I don’t doubt that. I am just putting a spin on it. I wanted to ask you something—have you been following the story about the high school English teacher who was shot by his own student? What do you think?

**ANN MARIE.** About what?

**MEL.** About kids shooting their teachers—

**ANN MARIE.** I’m surprised it doesn’t happen more often.

**MEL.** There’s an episode based on it on LAW AND ORDER tonight. Are you watching?

**ANN MARIE.** I hate LAW AND ORDER.

**MEL.** How can you hate LAW AND ORDER? *(She imitates the LAW AND ORDER theme sound.)* “Dun-dun—”

**ANN MARIE.** LAW AND ORDER always gets the facts wrong. They isolate some facts and de-contextualize them.

**MEL.** They have to do that in order to nail it to a through-line. Life has no through-line. TV has a through-line.

**ANN MARIE.** Anyway, how can they have a show based on the shooting when it hasn't gone to trial yet? What if the jurors see it?

**MEL.** It's very fall of the Roman Empire. The kid is tried in the court of public opinion, which is made up of these Hollywood television writers. I'll tell you what the verdict is tomorrow because I have to watch it. It's research—*Deep Image Product Placement*. (*Teasing her:*) Of course, it's not as flash as being a ghetto schoolteacher.

**ANN MARIE.** I hate to burst your bubble, Mel, but I wasn't a ghetto schoolteacher. And it's called the inner-city, not the ghetto. *I taught English at Staten Island Community College.*

**MEL.** I don't think I've ever even set foot on Staten Island.

**ANN MARIE.** That's the kind of response that I usually get.

**MEL.** What's it like?

**ANN MARIE.** Landfills and delis. It's like nothing. It's unlike. The best thing about it is taking the ferry, twice a day, there and back. Manhattan's a diorama, blood-red sunrises, hangnail moons, the Hudson River.

**MEL.** So what was it like being a professor?

**ANN MARIE.** I was stalked by a student, harassed by colleagues, underpaid, overworked, and for what?

**MEL.** You tell me. If you weren't doing it as research, why were you doing it?

**ANN MARIE.** I wanted to do something meaningful—also, and this is something I've only discussed with my shrink, but: I thought that I could start writing poetry again.

**MEL.** But why couldn't you just write poetry and work here?

**ANN MARIE.** They seem antithetical to me.

**MEL.** Poetry and Advertising?

**ANN MARIE.** Opposite ends of the continuum of human expression.

**MEL.** Not at all.

**ANN MARIE.** Oh, come on!

**MEL.** Think about it: in two thousand years do you think people will be reading what today's poets are writing?

**ANN MARIE.** Rap is the new poetry, Springsteen is the new Shakespeare?

**MEL.** No. I think that if there is any civilization left in two thousand years, we will be seen as the poets of the pre-eminent discourse of our time. Think about it: THINK DIFFERENT. The United Colors of Benetton. Target's Maoist iconography. We are the Fiery Pool, we are the Kindred Artifact, we are the Vale of Soul-Making! Preserved in anthologies and taught in classrooms? No, not yet...But, in time... We are LIVE THOUGHT. Think about our campaign for apartheid, the fall of the Berlin Wall, Guinness in Africa! The ontology of art has been altered. "Meaning is Use." Can't go backwards, might as well go forwards, right? Some optimism is in order. We are pioneers. This is the new poetry. These are the new authentic speech acts. The real poetry is happening right here, Ann Marie, and you were always writing it.

**ANN MARIE.** If you do believe that, and I'm not sure that you do—

**MEL.** (*Overriding her:*) Hey, I have an MFA from IOWA. Of course I believe it.

**ANN MARIE.** Is that true, do you really believe it?

**MEL.** Yes, it's "true," yes, I really believe it!

**ANN MARIE.** Did you just put air-quotation-marks around the word true?

**MEL.** Yes, I did.

**ANN MARIE.** Thereby negating the word TRUE, or underlining the ironic meaning of the concept of TRUTH itself as a construct?

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