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## Verses from Jordan A Play About Chasing

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Verses from Jordan  
A Play About Chasing

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
In  
English  
Creative Writing, Playwriting

by  
Bradley Troll  
B.S. McNeese State University, 2001  
M.A. McNeese State University, 2006

May, 2009

## **- Characters -**

\*Four actors play all the roles:

The actor playing JORDAN.

The actor playing JAKE as well as JORDAN'S DOUBLE and various characters behind the scrim.

The actor playing the GIFT GIVER, DAD, WHITTY (THE MAN), and various men behind the scrim.

The actor playing DR. EMILY, MOM, SITALA, and various women behind the scrim.

## **- Speaking Character Breakdown -**

Jordan	Late 20's, a bug chaser
Jake	Mid to late 20's, a love interest
Whitty (The Man)	A dirty, old pervert in the park, also the poet Walt Whitman
Dr. Emily	A perky physician, also the poet Emily Dickinson
The Gift Giver	A bug giver. He may be Santa, or Prometheus, or God
Mom	Jordan's mother
Dad	Jordan's father
Sitala	An insane street bum or perhaps the Goddess of Disease

## **- Scene Breakdown-**

### **-Act One-**

I..... Jordan's fantasy  
II..... The next day, a park bathroom  
III..... A week later, a doctor's office  
IV ..... The next couple of weeks, Jordan's mind/memory  
..... with interruptions from an answering machine  
V..... The next day, the Gift Giver's apartment  
VI ..... Later that day, a park bathroom

### **-Act Two -**

VII..... A week later, Jordan's parents' dining room  
VIII..... A few days later, a park bathroom  
IX ..... The next day, a funeral home  
X..... Later that day, the park  
XI ..... Later that day, the Gift Giver's apartment  
XII..... A few days later, the park

## **- Setting -**

Present day. Scenes take place in a park bathroom, a doctor's office, Jordan's apartment, the apartment of the Gift Giver, a dining room, a funeral home, and a wooded area of a park. The story is told with surrealistic elements and the set should reflect this. It should be surreal and abstract. Additionally there is a scrim upstage. Behind the scrim, we see various things at different times. But at all times, we should see trees behind the scrim.

## - ACT ONE -

### - I -

*(A dark stage. JORDAN sits in a dim spotlight. Upstage, behind a scrim, two males stand looking at each other. One of these men represents JORDAN, the other represents JORDAN's fantasy. The two men perform the action of scene in silhouette. This scene is fantasy- an idealized version of JORDAN's exhilarating journey into depravity. Above these men, we can see trees. JORDAN explores his body as his words explore his fantasy. This is masturbation, and it should build and be delivered as such. With sexual intensity, he speaks:)*

#### JORDAN

Who is he? A gift to me. A sacrifice. No, that's me. He could be anyone. Anyone I want. He could be a doctor, a priest, a criminal. He could be a father, a pedophile, a teacher, a saint. Which is sexier. Which scenario creates the best sexual fiction. He's an important businessman, power, money- he's slumming. No. He's a pervert. He's using me to get off. Going to do things to me I've only read about, only pretended not to think about alone in my room at night. Sex was once sexy, I remember. Not anymore. It's not enough. Sex is a drug; it requires higher and higher doses each time to get you off. So once sex isn't sexy anymore, anonymous sex is. Then, what? Sex with the married man, sex with the pervert, sex with your teacher, your boss, your brother... Sex without a condom, yes... Sex... sex with everyone in everyway. Until finally it's enough. Finally it's sexy again. Don't over-think it... just make it sexy.

*(The shadowy figure representing JORDAN crosses to the other man and slowly straddles him, facing the audience. He lowers his torso slowly as the man enters him. JORDAN reacts with pain and pleasure. JORDAN's line delivery throughout builds with the sex. JORDAN is so involved in fantasy, he almost does not notice a man's voice.)*

A MAN'S VOICE

*A sudden blow: the great wings beating still  
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed  
By his dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,  
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.*

JORDAN

What? Who said that? He... you said that... No, you couldn't. That's not you, it's... Who is he? No. He's nothing. He's a tool. Perverted enough to get me off? Yes, a pervert. It's called the chase. I'm a chaser. Fantasy is my goal, it's what I'm after. Yes. Who is he? He's just some sick, depraved man who is raping me, taking me, taking my ass, my hole. He's using me. I'm his toy, his object, his toilet. If he fucks me hard enough I'll cry, I'll bleed. Yes. Make me bleed. Please. Please, sir, fuck me 'til I bleed. I need... I deserve to bleed. Only when I bleed will I be pure, be true. A hero in battle bleeds. Please... MAKE ME BLEED.

*(The man violently pushes JORDAN's  
double down on all fours as he penetrates  
him from behind.)*

JORDAN

Yes! Yes, please. Fuck. Make it sexy. Sexy. A euphemism. Sexy means something that makes me cum. Make me cum. Sexy implies beautiful. Sexy means love? No, I don't need beautiful, I just need to cum. *(wincing in pain)* It hurts. It has to. It must. Not just now, it needs to hurt after I cum. It needs to hurt forever. Fuck me, sir. Make it hurt. Choke me!

*(The man chokes JORDAN's double.  
JORDAN puts his own hand to his throat.)*

A MAN'S VOICE

*How can those terrified vague fingers push  
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?*

JORDAN

Shut up! You're not him! I don't want to hear... Yes. He's raping me. He's going to fuck me until I pass out, the he's going to fuck me some more. I'll wake up in a pool of blood and piss and cum and I'll know that this man has used me, made me his.

A MAN'S VOICE

*How can anybody, laid in that white rush,  
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?*

JORDAN

HARDER! MAKE IT STOP! MAKE IT ALL JUST... YES! Choke me. Harder... harder. HARDER! Maybe I won't wake up. Maybe he'll kill me. Yes fuck me til I'm dead fuck me. Choke me. KILL ME! FUCKING KILL ME!

*(The men change positions again. JORDAN's double is being raped. The pace of the intercourse is quickening.)*

JORDAN (cont...)

More. It has to be dirtier. Depravity. I'm worthless. Yes. I have to feel worthless. I have bruises around my neck from his rapist's hands. I may be bleeding. I am sure that I am. Dirtier. Yes. Who is he? Maybe he's got it. It. The disease. Say it, damnit! He's got AIDS. Yes. He's got it. It's called the chase. I'm the chaser. Fuck me. Yes. Fill me. Yes. Infect me. Yes. It's a coming-of-age, a right-of-passage. I need it. It's a gift. I need to have it. It's an inevitability. A hero's journey. Bloodshed, the good die young.

A MAN'S VOICE

*A shudder in the loins, engenders there  
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower  
And Agamemnon dead.*

JORDAN

NO! Not you! He's not you, he's... (*JORDAN screams in pain/pleasure*) Fuck me! Give it to me. When I have it, finally, I won't have to fear it anymore. Please, sir. Bleed me, choke me, infect me. Just fill me. Yes. Make me cum.

*(The rape becomes very violent. JORDAN's double both struggles and submits. The pace quickens as JORDAN nears climax.)*

JORDAN (cont...)

It's harder now. Faster. It hurts. I've been crying. I didn't notice. I noticed. I like it. I'm powerless. We're animals. He's a dog, a dirty, infected dog. Fucking me like a dog. I'm his bitch. BITE ME! Yes. I'm raped, beaten, filled. Bruised and bleeding. Blood. Bad blood, wrong blood... Infected. Please. I'm nothing. Please. Yes. Yes. No! No means yes. I want it. The bitch wants it. They all want it. It's no fun if I don't fight back. Fill me. Fill me. He can smell it, the blood. Dogs always can. I'm his prey. Yes. He'll finish me with his fluids. Finish me! Fuck me. Yes. Fuck me, I'm nothing. I'm worthless, please. Please, make me worthless. YES. Fuck. Yes. Make me nothing. Make me cum. Yes. I'm cumming. I'm becoming... I'm... FUCK!

*(Climax. The scrim lights go down. The men are gone. JORDAN sits alone, speaks breathlessly.)*

JORDAN and A MAN'S VOICE

*Being so caught up,  
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,  
Did she put on his knowledge with his power  
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?*

JORDAN

Did she put on his knowledge... I want your knowledge. I want... Why do I hear you still? Why... I'm becoming... I am. It's called the chase... I'm. I am...

*(JORDAN rises quickly and exits.)*

*(Blackout)*



- II -

*(Lights up on a dirty public men's restroom. Faint lights behind the scrim reflect the woods outside. Down of the scrim: There are three stalls upstage right. There are three urinals upstage, left of the stalls. The entrance to the restroom is on the wall stage left. Down center there are three low sinks; the actors will give the impression of looking into the imaginary mirrors above the sinks. JORDAN enters nervously. This is not fantasy; this is real. JORDAN crosses to the stalls and looks under the doors. JORDAN crosses to the sink and looks in the mirror. JORDAN stares at himself for a significant amount of time; he seems to be trying to recognize himself. After a time, JORDAN shakes his head, disgusted, and begins to exit. As JORDAN approaches the door, a MAN in his 40's enters. Hearing the entrance, JORDAN rushes back to the sink and begins to wash his hands vigorously. The MAN enters slowly. He is older with a beard and wears a baseball cap, sunglasses, cut-off shorts, and a sleeveless plaid button-up. JORDAN makes short quick glances into the mirror to get a look at the MAN. The MAN stares blatantly at JORDAN. Whenever JORDAN makes eye contact with the MAN, he quickly looks back to the sink. The MAN smiles. The MAN swaggers slowly through the bathroom; he checks the stalls and notices that none are occupied. The MAN crosses to the sink next to JORDAN and begins to wash his hands as well. JORDAN glances briefly at the MAN's reflection in his own mirror. Again, the MAN smiles. JORDAN smiles briefly, awkwardly as he continues to wash his hands. The MAN turns off his water, flicks his hands dry, then looks to the paper towel dispenser located on the other side of JORDAN. The man walks deliberately behind the JORDAN, then reaches over him to retrieve a paper towel, pressing his body very hard against JORDAN, pinning him between the MAN and the sink. The MAN looks at JORDAN's face in the mirror and smiles. JORDAN smiles as well though obviously uncomfortable. The MAN takes JORDAN's wrist, checks the time on the wristwatch, looks at JORDAN's face again in the window, and winks. The MAN laughs, throws the paper towel away, and crosses upstage to the urinal. He leans against the wall with one hand as he relieves himself. JORDAN watches in the mirror. Using the mirror, JORDAN looks at the door, at the MAN, and at the door again. The MAN flushes the urinal and zips his pants. The MAN turns and looks at JORDAN's reflection in the mirror. This time, JORDAN doesn't turn away from his gaze. The MAN leans against the wall between two urinals and begins to rub his crotch, smiling. JORDAN turns and leans against the sink, back to the audience. The MAN looks down at his crotch, then back up at*

*JORDAN. The MAN nods his head, motioning JORDAN to come closer. JORDAN slowly begins to cross upstage, glancing at the closed stall. The MAN never loses his wicked smile. JORDAN leans against the wall of the stall furthest stage right looking at the MAN. The MAN crosses to JORDAN, pushes him hard against the wall causing a loud “thud,” and begins to rub JORDAN’s crotch. JORDAN looks back and puts his finger to his mouth, reminding the MAN to be quiet; the MAN just laughs. JORDAN looks back toward the occupied stall. The MAN lightly slaps JORDAN; the MAN points two fingers at JORDAN’s eyes then turns the fingers toward his own eyes. The MAN sticks his hand down JORDAN’s pants. JORDAN begins to moan softly with pleasure. JORDAN closes his eyes, enjoying the situation, as the MAN stares at him intensely. Suddenly, the MAN grabs JORDAN by the shirt and pulls him across the room to the sink. The MAN pushes JORDAN downstage, back against the sink, and drops to his knees.)*

*(SOUND: talking outside as runners pass.)*

*(The MAN quickly stands and crosses to the urinal. JORDAN zips his pants, turns quickly and begins to wash his hands. JORDAN watches the door for any sign of movement. There is none. JORDAN turns his attention in the mirror to the MAN, who has turned his head to look. The MAN shakes his head. The MAN crosses upstage behind JORDAN who is still facing out. The MAN looks at JORDAN in the mirror, smiles, and mimics JORDAN’s “shush” finger. Without warning, the MAN roughly yanks JORDAN’s pants down then unzips his own pants. JORDAN begins to object, pointing to the door. The MAN covers JORDAN’s mouth and smiles as he begins to thrust into JORDAN.)*

*(SOUND: a thunder clap outside. It begins to rain.)*

*(JORDAN begins to turn to push the MAN off, but the MAN forces him back around and grabs him by throat from behind. They stare at each other for a moment. After a still moment, the MAN begins thrusting again. The two do not break eye contact. The MAN sneers as he begins thrusting faster. JORDAN looks down into the sink. The MAN lifts JORDAN’s head up by his chin, forcing him to look at the MAN as he stares lasciviously back. After a moment, the MAN closes his eyes and becomes lost in the pleasure. JORDAN looks at himself in the mirror. As he stares at himself, his eyes begin to water and his lips begin to purse. Finally, he deliberately looks away. The MAN’s thrusting becomes heavier and faster until he reaches climax. The MAN stumbles back quickly, tucking everything away into his pants. JORDAN quickly*

*pulls up his pants. They are both breathing heavily. As they catch their breath, they look at each through the mirror. JORDAN looks away first in shame and wipes his eyes. The MAN begins to laugh. The MAN crosses to JORDAN, still laughing. JORDAN will not look at him. The laughing MAN stares at JORDAN, kisses his own hand, and lightly slaps JORDAN's face with it. The MAN laughs loudly as he exits the bathroom. JORDAN frantically washes his hands, using an excessive amount of soap. JORDAN then begins to wash his face as well. As he's rinsing his face, he catches his own reflection in the mirror. Every time he catches his own eyes, he looks away until finally he locks eyes with his own. He stares for a long while. Suddenly, JORDAN rushes into a stall and closes the door.)*

*(SOUND: JORDAN vomiting)*

*(JORDAN emerges from the stall as JAKE enters. The two exchange glances. JAKE cannot help but notice JORDAN's disheveled state.)*

You ok man?  
JAKE

Huh? Uh... yeah.  
JORDAN

Ok. Just checking.  
JAKE

*(pause)*

Hey, don't I know you?  
JAKE

No.  
JORDAN

Oh. Ok.  
JAKE

I mean, I don't think so.  
JORDAN

JAKE

Are you sure.

JORDAN

Pretty sure.

JAKE

Ok.

*(JAKE crosses to the urinal to relieve himself as JORDAN washes his face again in the sink.)*

JAKE (*cont...*)

Could you...

JORDAN

What?

JAKE

You know... I'm just a little... I mean, you know...

JORDAN

No. What?

JAKE

I'm pee shy, ok?

JORDAN

Ok...

JAKE

So if you could just...

JORDAN

Just...

JAKE

I don't know. Make some noise or something. (*beat*) Sing!

JORDAN

Sing?

JAKE

Yeah, sing. Kinda loud too, if you don't mind.

JORDAN

What should I sing?

JAKE

I don't know- anything. *(Thinks)* R.E.M. You like R.E.M.?

JORDAN

Uh... sure...

JAKE

Ok, I'll get you started.

*(He sings)*

That's me in the corner,

That's me in the spot- light- losing my religion.

Come on...

JORDAN and JAKE

Trying to keep up with you

And I don't know if I can do it

*(JORDAN continues to sing as JAKE starts to pee)*

JORDAN

Oh no I've said too much

I haven't said enough.

JAKE

Louder!

JORDAN

*(louder)*

I thought that I heard you laughing,

I thought that I heard you sing.

I think I thought I saw you...

JAKE

Ok, it's flowing now. You can stop.

JORDAN

Uh... ok.

JAKE

Nice voice.

JORDAN

Thanks.

JAKE

*(still at the urinal)*

Terrible weather out there.

JORDAN

Is it?

JAKE

You didn't notice? What? Been in here all day?

JORDAN

No. Yeah, I mean... is it raining?

JAKE

Yes. Again. Just started.

*(pause)*

JAKE *(cont...)*

*April is the cruelest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.*

*(JAKE zips his pants and crosses to the sink  
to wash his hands.)*

JORDAN

What did you say?

JAKE

Huh? Oh, I don't know, some verse I picked up somewhere. "April showers bring may flowers" or something like that.

JORDAN

No... that was Eliot.

JAKE

Oh... was it?

JORDAN

Why did you say that?

JAKE

I don't...

JORDAN

*(with more anger)*

Why would you say that? Did someone...

JAKE

Hey, calm down... I'm sorry. I just... I thought I knew you.

JORDAN

You don't...

JAKE

Jordan, right? Jordan something...

*(A pause, JORDAN has given himself away)*

JORDAN

Yes. Jordan.

JAKE

Jordan what?

JORDAN

Just Jordan.

JAKE

What like Cher? Or Jesus? Unless you count Christ as a last name, I never know. Or "of Nazareth" I'm not very biblical...

JORDAN

No. Not like Jesus.

JAKE

Ok, so more like Cher.

JORDAN

Fine.

JAKE

I'm Jacob... Jake.

JORDAN

Nice to meet you... How did you know...

JAKE

You came to my class one day, gave a lecture. Modernist poets.

JORDAN

I did?

JAKE

Yeah, that's what you do, right? You're...

JORDAN

Yes. That's... that's what I do.

JAKE

I thought so. You were dating...

JORDAN

I'm not dating anyone.

JAKE

Not now, I know, I mean... you used to date....

JORDAN

I said I'm not dating anyone.

JAKE

Ok. Sorry. Didn't mean to hit a sore spot.

*(pause)*

Look, I've obviously caught you at a bad time or pissed you off or something, so...

JORDAN

You didn't... I'm sorry, I just don't usually... What are you doing here?

JAKE

I'm here for some rough trade, what do you think?

JORDAN

You are?

JAKE

No, I had to pee. *(laughs)* Like I come to public restrooms for... I mean, unless you did... I don't judge, you know, I say, "to each his own" and all. I mean, I have heard that this place sometimes is... well... and you, I mean, I know that you're gay... not that I'm judging... I'm gay too, I swear, so... so, if you're here to... well, you know... then that's cool, I mean, I don't judge, you know, I say, "to each his own" and all. Cause, you know, if the mood struck might, I might even... I mean...

JORDAN



I'm not. Here. For that.

JAKE

Ok, good, because I really didn't want to insult you if you were because, you know, like I said, I don't...

JORDAN

Judge, right. To each his own.

JAKE

Right.

JORDAN

How do you know I'm gay.

JAKE

Because you used to be with... Or at least I thought you were with...

JORDAN

I'm not *with* anyone.

JAKE

I know. I got it. (*pause*) You know he's not doing well.

JORDAN

I wouldn't know.

JAKE

Ok. (*beat*) Look, I'm gonna go... I'm sorry if I said anything... I'm a little socially retarded sometimes.

JORDAN

It's fine. Really.

JAKE

(*beat*)  
You know, I read *The Waste Land* after your lecture. Quite a few times. It's tough, you know, to understand.

JORDAN

It's a lot to take in.

JAKE

I also read that article about Yeats you wrote. The one that got all the hype. "Revolutionary" raves *Poetry Today* or whatever. Your claim to fame.

JORDAN  
Yeah...

JAKE  
Have you had anything published since?

JORDAN  
No.

JAKE  
So, do you just study poetry, or do you write as well?

JORDAN  
No. No, I don't write.

JAKE  
I thought you did.

JORDAN  
No.

JAKE  
Ever tried?

JORDAN  
You're an English major?

JAKE  
Was. And no.

JORDAN  
I'm sorry?

JAKE  
I'm alum. All matriculated and stuff. And Business was my major. That class was just an elective. And you... you were a grad student.

JORDAN  
Yeah, all matriculated and stuff too.

JAKE  
Hey, you sure you're ok? You look kinda flushed.

JORDAN

Stomach thing. I was walking... in the park and suddenly I had this... well... stomach thing I guess.

JAKE

Yikes. Well, it's going around.

JORDAN

Is it?

JAKE

I don't know, that's just what people always say. I mean, I'm sure it's going around somewhere. It must be.

JORDAN

True. You were in the park?

JAKE

Jogging. Well, walking. About to start jogging. Thinking about jogging anyway. More like entertaining the idea of jogging, you know. As I was walking I was envisioning jogging. I was walking and I was like, "any minute now... Jog!" And it was going to be a spectacular jog with the wind blowing through my hair and the birds singing and the calories burning and all. I was almost there but it started to rain, and the rain made me have to pee.

JORDAN

I take it you don't jog a lot.

JAKE

Never in my life. But, I've attempted it several times now. I just don't see the point in running if I'm not being chased or something. Do you run?

JORDAN

No. I walk. At times I stride, but that's about it.

JAKE

It's so weird running into you here like this. *(beat)* You know, after you spoke... I asked about you.

JORDAN

You... asked about me.

JAKE

Yeah, you're quite intriguing, Just Jordan. I asked around. That's how I met... *(beat)* Well, anyway, it seems you're fairly mysterious.

JORDAN

Just private.

JAKE

Yeah. I get that. Double life. Mild-mannered poetry teacher by day, crime fighter by night, right?

JORDAN

You got it.

JAKE

It's not that I was stalking you or anything. I wasn't all like outside your bedroom window at night filming you doing needle point and eating Fruit Loops or anything.

JORDAN

How did you know I enjoy needle point and Fruit Loops at night?

JAKE

Oh, God, do you?...

JORDAN

I'm just kidding.

JAKE

Miracle of miracles: he makes a joke. You. You're a tricky one. Smart, cute, and funny. Who knew?

JORDAN

Who knew.

*(pause)*

JAKE

Hey, look, I know that this is like the sketchiest thing ever. Like Guinness Book of Records-level sketchy, but... would you like to go have a drink sometime, or dinner, or Fruit Loops or something? Just casual. Well, I mean, less casual than this dirty park bathroom but more casual than like the king's ball or something. You know, somewhere between the two?

JORDAN

The king's bathroom?

JAKE

Perhaps. So, what do you think? King's bathroom? Saturday? 8ish?

JORDAN

I... I don't think so.

JAKE

Yeah. Ok, well that's cool. Never hurts to ask, right? I mean, it does hurt the ego, bruise it... slightly. I mean... Wow, I've never had quite this much desire to jog before... quickly... away... far. So, yeah... I'm just gonna go do that. Jog, that is, away. It was nice seeing you... good luck with your thing, your stomach... bye.

JORDAN

Look, I just don't know if I'm really in a place to...

JAKE

Hey, it's cool. I get it.

*His vanity requires no response,  
And makes a welcome of indifference.*

*(JAKE begins to exit.)*

JORDAN

Hey, wait. I'm sorry, I'm... out of it. My thing...

JAKE

Your stomach.

JORDAN

Yeah. It's just...

JAKE

Yeah?...

JORDAN

*(bluntly)*

You were cruising. For sex. Weren't you.

JAKE

Look, I told you I was here to...

JORDAN

Jog. You said.

JAKE

Just to jog. *(beat)* I really should go.

JORDAN

Ok. *(beat)* Can I call you?

JAKE

Call me. Yes. Sure. Calling is good.

JORDAN

Good.

JAKE

Ok, so, yes. Good. I'll talk to you later. Unless I don't, which is cool. Ok. Well... bye then.

JORDAN

Jake... forgetting something?

JAKE

I washed my hands.

JORDAN

Your phone number.

JAKE

Oh, it's on the wall. Third stall.

JORDAN

Classy.

JAKE

Just kidding. Here.

*(JAKE hands JORDAN a card from his pocket.)*

JAKE (*cont...*)

*And this card  
Which is blank, is something he carries on his back,  
Which I am forbidden to see. I do not find  
The Hanged Man.*

JORDAN

*Fear death by water.*

JAKE

I brought an umbrella.

JORDAN

*(A slight laugh)*

Eliot humor... not bad for a business major. Sharp wit is not often found in bathroom trade.

JAKE

I'm just here to jog.

JORDAN

Well good luck with that.

JAKE

Thanks... bye.

JORDAN

Bye.

*(JORDAN stares at the card for a moment, then stares at himself in the mirror and again washes his face.)*

*(Blackout)*

- III -

*(JORDAN sits in a doctor's office, anxious. DR. EMILY enters. She looks and is dressed like the popular image of Emily Dickinson, a long, black, conservative dress with her hair in a tight bun, and glasses. She is pale and looks fairly dire as she enters. JORDAN is soon surprised to find that after her somber entrance, she becomes quite perky and speaks with an annoying, chipper voice throughout.)*

DR. EMILY

Well, hello there Jordan. My name is Dr. Emily.

JORDAN

Dr... Emily?

DR. EMILY

Ya huh. And how in the heck are ya today?

JORDAN

Well... I believe the appropriate witty retort is, "you tell me."

DR. EMILY

All righty-roonie. Let's take a look at your test results, shall we?

JORDAN

You look familiar.

DR. EMILY

Well, of course I do, silly billy. *(all in one breath: )* See, you're projecting your view of Emily Dickinson on me because you expect to hear bad news today and you thought it would be better to hear it from someone you don't know and you sure don't know me and someone you can't stand, and that's me, which I think is unfair because most of the world has hailed me as a gosh darn literary pioneer and such but nevertheless here I am! *(breath)* All righty, let's have a look.

JORDAN

I'm... I'm projecting, what? I don't understand.

DR. EMILY

Jordan, I know you've been hearing things lately. Verses, for example, from poems.



JORDAN

How did you know?

DR. EMILY

Because I'm Dr. Emily. I know these things. Things been kinda wonky lately, haven't they Jordan.

JORDAN

Are you... is this for real?

DR. EMILY

Good question. You know, you're on a journey Jordan. It's called the chase. And you're the chaser.

JORDAN

Wait a minute... if you're my projected image of Emily Dickinson... you wouldn't be this... chipper.

DR. EMILY

Don't ask me, it's your mind. Now then, let's take a little sneak peak...

JORDAN

My mind? This is all in my mind?

DR. EMILY

There's a fine line between reality and fantasy, pal, and I think the edges might be blurring. Kinda makes you feel like a cook, huh? Ok, so looking at your test results...

JORDAN

No, no no... wait a sec. If someone is going to tell me that I'm dying, why wouldn't I want to hear from someone I actually like? No offense.

DR. EMILY

None taken. Hmmmm, well, that is a toughie. I suppose you need someone to resent. And you sure don't want to live the rest of your life resenting one of your heroes... so here I am!

JORDAN

But why you?

DR. EMILY

If I had to guess... gee whiz... Well, for starters, I'm a woman.

JORDAN

What is that supposed to mean?

DR. EMILY

*(laughing)*

Let's me honest here for just five seconds if that's perfectly all right with you... you're not exactly a huge fan of women.

JORDAN

Why? Because I'm gay?

DR. EMILY

No, silly butt, because you're sexist.

JORDAN

I am not sexist.

DR. EMILY

Who is your favorite female poet?

*(silence)*

DR. EMILY *(cont...)*

I thought so.

JORDAN

Wait... just let me think.

DR. EMILY

All righty.

*(DR. EMILY takes off her glasses and waits patiently for a long pause.)*

DR. EMILY *(cont...)*

Ok, moving on...

JORDAN

Ok, fine... maybe I'm a little sexist... but why you? Bad news should come from somebody like Plath.

DR. EMILY

She's busy at the oven.

*(DR. EMILY bursts into roaring laughter. JORDAN sits silent.)*

DR. EMILY

*(breathless and still laughing)*

At the... the oven. Did you see what I did there? The oven... it's... because she... well, nevermind. Besides, you and I have a lot in common.

JORDAN

I find that hard to believe.

DR. EMILY

Well, sure. Listen, mister, we're a lot alike. We both shut ourselves off from the world. We both accepted our fate way too early in life. Self-fulfilling prophecies. We're both obsessed with death.

JORDAN

I'm not obsessed with death. And who says I've shut myself off?

DR. EMILY

In fact, the only difference between us is that I continued to create.

JORDAN

Oh sure, 1800 poems, maybe three of them decent.

DR. EMILY

Well what have you done, whiney pants? What have you contributed?

JORDAN

I contribute. I teach.

DR. EMILY

Sure, you teach, you teach. But, what do you create?

JORDAN

I've done important research.

DR. EMILY

Oh, research. Restating facts that other people have already stated, but in new and exciting ways. Very creative.

JORDAN

This isn't about me.

DR. EMILY

Of course it is! Listen, Jordan, I'm here to be honest with you.

JORDAN

Because I'm dying?

DR. EMILY

*The dying need but little, dear –*

JORDAN

Then why?

DR. EMILY

Because you're living. Why in the world are you so convinced that you're dying? You've already made your mind up that you've caught the bug. But why?

JORDAN

Just a feeling.

DR. EMILY

Or a desire. But maybe you haven't admitted it to yourself yet.

JORDAN

Admitted what?

DR. EMILY

That your little obsession with rough sex has progressed, moved on. Maybe you haven't yet admitted to yourself that you're a chaser.

JORDAN

What do you know about chasing?

DR. EMILY

You're one of those people who want it. A bug chaser. Intentionally out to get infected with HIV.

JORDAN

Could you just... read the results of my test please.

DR. EMILY

All righty roo. Let's take a lookie in the old bookie... *(beat)* Really, not even chuckle about the oven thing? It's funny because of both her death and the play on the stereotype of a woman's place...

JORDAN

I get it.

DR. EMILY

And nothing?

JORDAN

Please, just my results.

DR. EMILY

Fine. Party pooper. Ok, let's see here... (*reading*) Oh. Oh, my...

JORDAN

What is it?

DR. EMILY

Oh gee willickers.

JORDAN

What?

DR. EMILY

Well, I'm sorry to have to tell you this. But it seems you've tested positive...

JORDAN

I knew it.

DR. EMILY

...for slant rhyme.

JORDAN

(*beat*)

Excuse me.

DR. EMILY

Yes, slant rhyme. There's no cure for it, I'm afraid. Believe me, I know.

JORDAN

I don't understand.

DR. EMILY

Well, it seems that you will live the rest of your life unable to make exact rhymes.

JORDAN

You tested me for slant rhyme? This doesn't make any sense.

DR. EMILY

Sure it does. For example:

*Hope is the thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul,  
And sings the tune without the words  
And never stops at all.*

You see what I did there? Notice how “soul” and “all” don’t really rhyme.

JORDAN

You’re insane! Don’t slant rhyme to me about hope. Something you didn’t even believe in. Tell me my results. My *real* results.

DR. EMILY

I’m afraid the test is conclusive. Go ahead try to make a rhyme. Go on. Here, I’ll get you started. Cut me a little slack, though, I’m pretty rusty.

Love is a thing that carries us,  
A sea where our heart wades,  
You however, do not search it,  
For you accept a death of...

Go ahead, finish it.

JORDAN

Fine. I accept a death of... a death of... heart disease. Shit. I meant... cancer. Fuck. I’m trying to say it... I accept a death of... A DEATH OF... LYME DISEASE! DAMNIT. Why can’t I say it?

DR. EMILY

Slant rhyme is incurable. Though yours must be pretty progressive because those weren’t even slanted. They were way off.

JORDAN

I can’t take this. Please. I don’t need happy perky Emily Dickinson. I need somber, hermit Emily Dickinson. She would tell me the truth. The real, horrible *actual* truth.

DR. EMILY

I am, honey pie, don’t you see. You *do* have a disease. Your actions *did* have consequence. If you want, I can be blunt. I can call it HPV, hepatitis, herpes, or whatever it is... It’s incurable, and it’s terrible... but it’s not what you were after. Sorry. It’s not the big enchilada.

JORDAN

It’s not?

DR. EMILY

Afraid not. So now you have to live on with this thing, but you don’t get the big hero’s ending that you *think* you would’ve had. That *is* what you think, isn’t it?

JORDAN

You have no idea what I think.

(*pause*)

Are you sure?

DR. EMILY

Oh I surely am afraid so. You don't get the disease with the support groups and the fashionable red ribbons. You don't get the disease with the catchy rock musicals. You don't get the disease you can write about and win a Pulitzer. *(beat)* You don't get the community. Sorry Charlie. You get this. And there are no support groups. And nobody cares. And people will judge. And you will feel dirty and forgotten. That's what you get.

JORDAN

This isn't real.

DR. EMILY

That's not for me to say. Golly, you know I'm not big on the clarity. But I can tell you this: you have a poet's soul. And a poet romanticizes things. Are you *sure* you would've been happier if you *had* caught it?

JORDAN

I never said I wanted to catch it!

*(long pause)*

Would you... could I hear one of your poems?

DR. EMILY

You hate my poems.

JORDAN

I don't know what I hate anymore.

DR. EMILY

Well, okily dokie, if you think it'll put a pep in your step, let me think...

*I heard a fly buzz when I died;  
The stillness round my form  
Was like the stillness in the air  
Between the heavens of storm.*

*The eyes beside had wrung them dry,  
And breaths were gathering sure  
For that last onset, when the king  
Be witnessed in his power.*

Did you see what I did there, with "sure" and "power"? Slant-tastic!

JORDAN

*I willed my keepsakes, signed away  
What portion of me I  
Could make assignable,--and then  
There interposed a fly,*

DR. EMILY

*With blue, uncertain, stumbling buzz,  
Between the light and me;  
And then the windows failed, and then  
I could not see to see.*

*(pause)*

JORDAN

I have a confession. I always kinda liked that one.

DR. EMILY

I know.

*(pause)*

JORDAN

You're right. I do. I want it. I just want to get it out of the way. It's just a matter of time, right? I mean, if I catch it, I won't have to be afraid of it. And medicine these days... well it's almost nothing, you know? People live long lives... If I go out and catch it, then I won't have to *fear* catching it. And I can move on. It's not the death sentence it used to be, it doesn't mean what it used to... So yes, to answer your question... Yes, I want it. I want to get it over with.

DR. EMILY

Nice speech. Now how about the truth.

*(pause)*

JORDAN

I think I'm going crazy.

DR. EMILY

Honey... who are *you* telling?

*(DR. EMILY hugs JORDAN as lights fade.)*



- IV -

*(JORDAN sits in a small spotlight, presumably in his apartment. Lights up behind the scrim, where two male figures move around a silhouetted living room. One represents JORDAN, the other an unknown LOVER. They move about the living room with domestic familiarity, sipping drinks, snuggling on the couch, etc.)*

JORDAN

*(a slight smile)*

No, not tonight. Not Eliot, please! *(pause)* Yeats? Hmmm. *(pause)* Dickinson? *(JORDAN laughs)* I'm just kidding. *(pause)* My choice? My choice. Well, well, well... you know what I'm going to say... *(pause)* Don't groan! You know he's my favorite.

*(an answering machine beep)*

JAKE

Jordan... hi, it's Jake... Ok, so I know I gave you *my* number, but you never called, and I know this seems, like, stalker-riffic, but I looked in my old campus directory and got your number, so... So, I thought I would just take some initiative and call you. You're so sketched out right now, aren't you. Shit. Ok, so I'm just touching base. I really hope you call. I'm about to head up to the hospital. I'm half expecting to see you there, I don't know. Maybe not. Maybe that was a stupid thing to say. You know, I'm just gonna wrap this up... so. Yeah. Call me. If you want. Ok. Ok, well... later. Oh, this Jake, not sure if I said that. I think I did, but... ok. Ok, bye.

*(an answering machine beep)*

JORDAN

So, Whitman it is. *(pause)* Come on, babe, please?

*(Behind the scrim, the LOVER stands holding a notebook.)*

JORDAN *(cont...)*

Where did you find that? No! Come on, please dont...

*(JORDAN's double stands, attempting to get the book. The DOUBLE avoids him and a chase around the couch ensues.)*

JORDAN (*cont...*)

Give it back! Please, that's personal. It's nothing... I was just playing around. (*pause*)  
No, *you're* the poet, not me. I was just trying some things.

*(JORDAN's double reaches for the notebook, but the LOVER quickly puts it behind his back and pulls JORDAN's double in for a kiss.)*

*(an answering machine beep)*

MOM

Jordan, dear, it's mom. We haven't heard from you in a while. Your father and I were wondering if you'd like to come up this weekend for dinner, maybe?

DAD (*in background*)

Did you tell him about the...

MOM

No now dear. We're making meatloaf Jordan, you're favorite. We'd really like to see you.

DAD (*in background*)

Tell him about the...

MOM

Jordan, dear, I hate to nag, but we haven't heard from you in quite some time. It's not like you. (*beat*) I remember when you were a kid, you used to disappear for hours, usually up in a tree, and I would call and call for you and you'd never answer. You heard me, but you just wouldn't answer. I always thought it was some kind of test. So, maybe this is too. There's nothing worse in this world than speaking and not being heard. Please, dear. Call us. We love you. (*beat. To DAD*) Now what do I do?

DAD

Press "end."

MOM

Press what?

DAD

"End!"

MOM

I don't see it...

DAD

Look, it's right by the...

MOM

I don't see it.

DAD

Right next to the...

*(an answering machine beep)*

*(JORDAN's double and the LOVER are still kissing. After a moment, they break.)*

JORDAN

Ok, so Whitman. You read tonight, you're a better reader. *(pause)* Bed? Already? I'm not tired.

*(The LOVER kisses JORDAN. The LOVER's obviously not tired either.)*

JORDAN *(cont...)*

Not tonight babe, I thought we were going to read. *(pause)* That's not true. I *do* want to, I just... we were going to read. *(pause)* Maybe tomorrow, I just... I'm just not in the mood tonight. Can't we just hang out.

*(The LOVER, dejected, sits on the couch away from JORDAN.)*

*(an answering machine beep)*

JAKE

Jordan, hi. It's Jake. Again. I called and left a message last week. Didn't hear back from you. Yeah, so, I mean that's cool, and I'm not trying to bug you, but... I'm calling because. I've been going up to the hospital, and... *(pause)* Look, I know this is none of my business, but he's been asking about you, and... well, I told him I would call you. I... I didn't mean to get in the middle of anything, I just thought it would be the right thing to do. *(pause)* I would still like to see you. But, if nothing else... you should go up there. *(pause)* So, not to be *that* guy, but please. Call me.

*(an answering machine beep)*

JORDAN

How was your appointment today?

*(The LOVER, exasperated, stands and turns away, his forehead on his hand.)*

JORDAN *(cont...)*

Sorry. I'm just worried. *(pause)* I don't *always* bring it up. Can't I be worried about you? I don't want... *(pause)* You may not want to talk about it, but I do. I *need* to.

*(The LOVER begins to exit.)*

JORDAN *(cont...)*

Babe, please. It's just that I...

*(The LOVER stops, looks at JORDAN's double.)*

JORDAN *(cont...)*

Nevermind.

*(The LOVER exits. Lights down behind the scrim.)*

JORDAN *(cont...)*

I don't want to lose you. And I'm scared. It's my fault, it's mine... But it's there. I can sense it. And it's always there. And it's rotting.

*(an answering machine beep)*

GIFT GIVER

Jordan, I've decided that it's time to call. Your e-mails have intrigued me, and I'd like to meet you with you. Tomorrow, if possible. I'll send you directions to my apartment. I feel confident you've weighed this decision carefully, so congratulations. Every man must be master of his own destiny. I will see you tomorrow. I look forward to it.

*(an answering machine beep)*

A MAN'S VOICE

*O living always, always dying*

JORDAN

*(a slight smile)*

Whitman.

A MAN'S VOICE and JORDAN

*O living always, always dying*

*O the burials of me past and present,*

*O me while I stride ahead, material, visible, imperious as ever;*

*O me, what I was for years, now dead, (I lament not, I am content);  
O to disengage myself from those corpses of me, which I turn and look at where I  
cast them,  
To pass on, (O living! always living!) and leave the corpses behind.*

JORDAN

How can you be leaving? How can you be gone when all I hear is you?

*(Lights fade to black)*

- V -

*(A small studio apartment. The decorating is eclectic, to say the least. There are several flowing drapes of all colors. There are bean bag chairs and a small bed. Candles and incense can be seen throughout. There is a small "altar" which has on it, among other things, a cross, a religious candle, a Buddha, some crystals, some vials containing powders and liquids, and other religious paraphernalia of every conceivable belief. AT RISE, JORDAN can be seen sitting uncomfortably on a bean bag chair. The GIFT GIVER enters with two cups of tea on a tray. He wears a colorful, flowing robe. He is in his 40's and wears glasses.)*

GIFT GIVER

I hope you like ginger tea.

JORDAN

I've never had it.

GIFT GIVER

Ah, well then. Something new. So, Jordan, tell me about yourself.

JORDAN

What do you want to know?

GIFT GIVER

Why don't we start with the basics?

JORDAN

Ok... well, I'm a teacher.

GIFT GIVER

Oh how wonderful. What do you teach?

JORDAN

Poetry. What do you do?

GIFT GIVER

You already know that, I'm a gift giver.

JORDAN

No, I mean...

GIFT GIVER

I know what you meant. But let's not define each other through our occupations. How long have you been chasing?

JORDAN

I... I'm not sure.

GIFT GIVER

Of course. Probably a lot longer than you realize. Though I believe that those who chase unsuccessfully for a long period of time may not be chasing what they want to catch. (*beat*) How do you like the tea?

JORDAN

It's fine.

GIFT GIVER

Good for the immune system.

JORDAN

That seems counter-productive.

GIFT GIVER

Does it? If you want to skip straight to death, there are easier ways, you know.

JORDAN

Of course, I just meant...

GIFT GIVER

You're here to receive a gift, not to die.

JORDAN

Of course. (*pause*) So, that's how you view it then? A gift.

GIFT GIVER

What matters is how the receiver views it.

JORDAN

I like your... altar.

GIFT GIVER

Thank you.

JORDAN

Your religious tastes seem... varied.

GIFT GIVER

There are many things in this world that may give you peace. For some it's spirituality, for some it's chocolate.

JORDAN

For some it's death.

GIFT GIVER

For some it's disease?

JORDAN

For you, it's incense and candles.

GIFT GIVER

You think I'm ridiculous.

JORDAN

No, I didn't mean that.

GIFT GIVER

It's fine, really. How others view me is of no concern. Some think I'm the devil, spreading disease, perpetuating death.

JORDAN

So... you do this often?

GIFT GIVER

This?

JORDAN

You know.

GIFT GIVER

If you're going to go through with it, you should at least be able to say it.

JORDAN

Do you... infect people. Often.

GIFT GIVER

What I do... what you're asking me to do, I only do with certain people. This is an interview process, not some rough trade, do you understand?

JORDAN

I think so. It's just... well, you said...



GIFT GIVER

I said you can come over and discuss it. I need to know who you are. You need to know who I am.

JORDAN

You make it sound like we're having a child or something.

GIFT GIVER

It's not unlike pregnancy. I will be giving you something permanent, something that links us forever. I'll be giving you something that will feed on your body and will eventually kill you –like a child. (*pause*) That last part was my little joke.

JORDAN

Cute.

GIFT GIVER

More tea?

JORDAN

No. Thank you.

GIFT GIVER

Are you nervous?

JORDAN

No.

GIFT GIVER

Liar. It's a big decision. I've met many people who said they were ready to receive the gift, but they were liars. Lying to themselves.

JORDAN

How could you tell?

GIFT GIVER

Did you ever climb trees when you were young?

JORDAN

Sure.

GIFT GIVER

Have you ever seen a large tree that you wanted to climb so badly it consumed you? You just wanted so much to know what the view was like from up there. So you climb. The first step is getting up to where the branches start. Once you're there, you finagle your way from one branch to the next. You get scratched up and bruised but you keep going, high as you can, until you're up where the limbs start to give way, they become weaker,

and you realized that you just can't go any further. But you're high, and the view is beautiful. You can see your whole neighborhood, your house, the rooftops. But then what? You think you'll be like the birds, but you can't fly. You can only sit there, awkwardly, and then you realize that you're scared. Too scared to climb back down. And you feel completely trapped, like you're buried alive. Have you ever felt like that?

JORDAN

Yeah.

GIFT GIVER

It doesn't feel good.

JORDAN

But doesn't it feel better than always being on the ground, looking up? To be up in that tree, Whitman's oak?

GIFT GIVER

It's all relative. All about perspective. The ground isn't so bad. Do you ever wonder if the birds wish they could walk?

JORDAN

But birds can walk.

GIFT GIVER

Touché. Jordan, I don't give this gift lightly. I've had this for many years now, and I've stayed healthy. My life has changed. I've learned how to take responsibility, how to take care of myself. I've discovered spirituality... all types. And I can say that I'm finally at peace.

JORDAN

So, would you say it's been a blessing?

GIFT GIVER

It's all about perspective. If you climbed a tree and fell, broke your leg... you would learn something. Maybe you would learn that you shouldn't climb trees, maybe you would learn to be better at it. It's a good lesson, but was it worth the pain?

JORDAN

But you're only talking about the negative effects, what about the positive. You got to see the view. Doesn't that make the climb worthwhile?

GIFT GIVER

I can't answer that for you.

JORDAN

What's *your* answer?

GIFT GIVER

I have this disease. And believe me, I understand the chaser's philosophy. You're scared. You think this will take the fear away. You think that it's going to happen sooner or later, so it might as well happen now.

JORDAN

It's an inevitability.

GIFT GIVER

Perhaps. What I offer is the chance to accept it in a positive, peaceful atmosphere. I feel it's my calling.

JORDAN

So having it has given you purpose.

GIFT GIVER

All throughout time, people have looked to higher powers to receive what they need. Gaia, Demeter, Loki, Chala, Santa Claus... God. These are all thought of as the great gift givers. Prometheus gave the gift of fire because that's what humans needed. The question is: is this what you need. What you really need?

JORDAN

So, do you think you're God?

GIFT GIVER

God. Death. Santa. Does it matter? If this is something you need, I can give it.

JORDAN

So why the interview? If I say I need it, why not just give it?

GIFT GIVER

Acceptissima semper munera sunt, auctor quae pretiosa facit. "Those gifts are always the most acceptable which our love for the donor makes precious." So tell me, Jordan, why do you want this?

JORDAN

Well, I mean, you're right. It's bound to happen, right?

GIFT GIVER

Of course not.

JORDAN

It started... at first, it was just, I don't know, the idea...

GIFT GIVER

Turned you on?

JORDAN

Is that strange?

GIFT GIVER

It's about sex. It's about human contact. Receiving something from another person. And, again, it's about perspective. Danger, thrill. Some say it's about self-destruction, which is about self-hatred. And self-love.

JORDAN

So what if it is?

GIFT GIVER

If it were only about punishment, you wouldn't be here. You'd be out doing it. Or it would be already done.

JORDAN

Well, then it became appealing, the idea.

GIFT GIVER

Sexually appealing?

JORDAN

Yes, I guess. It's just. It seems to me that there's a sort of... Well, look at you.

GIFT GIVER

A poet's need to romanticize.

JORDAN

I'm not a poet!

GIFT GIVER

Why do you want this, Jordan?!

JORDAN

I only... I just thought tha...

GIFT GIVER

You thought that if you contracted HIV, you could ascend. You thought AIDS would make you great.

*(pause)*

JORDAN

It worked for you.

GIFT GIVER

Who's your favorite poet?

JORDAN

Walt Whitman.

GIFT GIVER

Why?

JORDAN

Because he made everything sound beautiful. He made life sound worthwhile.

GIFT GIVER

There are many ways to make your life worthwhile.

JORDAN

For some, maybe. But don't you think that there are people who don't have the capacity for great achievement. Not everyone can be great. Some people need... something.

GIFT GIVER

Perspective. What's your definition of great? Death? Painful and raw. That this will make you great?

JORDAN

I don't know... We remember those people as brave. And tragic. But we remember them.

GIFT GIVER

And you won't be remembered if you don't die tragically?

JORDAN

I just feel like this is where my life is going anyway, so I might as well get it over with. See, I keep hearing... things. My mind, it's melting and all the different sections are blending together. And I feel like its all leading me to this. To this place, this conclusion.

GIFT GIVER

*Sickness brought me this  
Thought, in that scale of his:  
Why should I be dismayed  
Though flame had burned the whole  
World, as it were a coal,  
Now I have seen it weighed*

*Against a soul?*

JORDAN

Yeats... That was Yeats.

GIFT GIVER

Yes.

JORDAN

It's this verse, I keep hearing verses, poems... voices from the past. It's like nothing is real anymore.

GIFT GIVER

Are you a fan of poetry?

JORDAN

It's what I teach.

GIFT GIVER

But are you a fan?

JORDAN

I love it.

GIFT GIVER

Could it be that your mind and your heart are trying to project something beautiful onto something ugly?

JORDAN

The world?

GIFT GIVER

Yourself. You're at war. You're trying to reconcile the ugliness in your soul with some sense of beauty.

JORDAN

You say I'm self-destructive. Fine. But, I know that, see? I'm aware that I'm out to destroy myself. I know that I hate myself. I used to have friends, love, purpose. But I've taken myself out of all that, driven people away. I wanted to.

GIFT GIVER

The great paradox. You don't want to be lonely but you push people away. You test them. You want people to love you but you hate yourself.

JORDAN

I've got issues, huh?

GIFT GIVER

No more than any other poet...

JORDAN

I'm not a poet...

GIFT GIVER

I know. I know. (*beat*) You're not so unique, you know. But these verses, the ones you keep hearing. Do you know why you hear them? It's about creation and destruction, another paradox. You believe in poetry, in art. Inherently, an act of creation. You hope to achieve creation through destruction, or maybe destruction through creation. But what about the alternative? Creation from creation.

JORDAN

You're God, you tell me.

GIFT GIVER

Creation breeds creation. Creation breeds destruction. Destruction breeds destruction. Destruction breeds creation. All things in this world are possible. It's about choosing the path you want to take.

JORDAN

You see, that's what pisses me off. You throw around terms like "creation" and "destruction" as if those are the only two options. Some people don't have the capacity for either. What if your choice is neither creation nor destruction, but observation. Just to exist.

GIFT GIVER

And you think there is no capacity for creation in observation? Then you truly are not a poet. (*pause*) There are many out there like you, Jordan. These "bug chasers." More than most people realize. Evolution. This disease, it's by no means exclusive to the gay community, but we have this... personal attachment to it. In a way, we've taken ownership of it. And we've gone through phases. Fear, denial, anger... acceptance. And we've been relatively lucky. Because this is a new day. Treatments, successes... life. Not a cure, but *life* nonetheless! And now that the fear has somewhat subsided, we evolve, and suddenly- along come people us like us. The bug chasers. The gift givers. We walk around- people don't know who we are, but we exist. And we all have our reasons. And they're all deeply personal. Some chasers view it as a rite of passage in the gay community. Some chase because they want to continue to be promiscuous without any thought of consequences. Others chase because the fear simply consumes them and this is the only way they can defeat it. But for whatever reason the chasers chase, it's *always* deeply personal. You give me these stock answers about avoiding fear and sexual thrills, but your reason is also deeply personal, even if you don't want to admit it. But it's destructive.

JORDAN

If this is really about self-destruction, how do I change that?

GIFT GIVER

If God is the great gift-giver, then his greatest act of love was creation, and his greatest act of creation was love.

JORDAN

*(confused)*

Can I ask you a question without offending you?

GIFT GIVER

Of course.

JORDAN

Are you real? I'm not sure what's real anymore.

GIFT GIVER

Good question. Now you're starting to understand what to ask. Reality is about perspective.

JORDAN

How did I know you would say that?

GIFT GIVER

I offer my gift to you, Jordan. If you choose to accept it, be here in two weeks.

JORDAN

A waiting period? Like I'm buying a gun?

GIFT GIVER

But I have a request. Don't go out like before. Don't chase down the trade in public bathrooms and sex houses. If you are going to get it, you're going to get it here. Purely. Spend your two weeks reading. Go see your family. Deal?

JORDAN

Deal.

GIFT GIVER

Two weeks. And like Prometheus, I will give you the fire you yearn for to heat your soul. But remember, *Accede ad ignem hunc, jam calesces plus satis.*

JORDAN

"Approach this fire, and you will soon be too warm." *(pause)* You say everything is about perspective. Did this wisdom, this perspective, come from disease?



GIFT GIVER

If I am indeed God, then I was God before I got sick. You expect this disease to change you... make you wiser or give you purpose or take purpose away. Take desire away.

JORDAN

Didn't it for you?

GIFT GIVER

What most people are surprised to find is that, once they get what they want most, they are still the same person they were before. And that, I'm afraid, is the biggest disappointment in life. Two weeks.

JORDAN

Ok. Two weeks. Wish me perspective.

GIFT GIVER

Perspective is inevitable. I wish you love.

*(blackout)*

- VI -

*(The same men's restroom as before.  
JORDAN again stares into the mirror above  
the sink. He is not at all surprised when  
JAKE enters.)*

JORDAN  
Hello Jake.

JAKE  
Jordan.

JORDAN  
Jogging?

JAKE  
Attempting. *(pause)* I tried calling you.

JORDAN  
I know.

*(JORDAN turns to JAKE)*

JORDAN *(cont...)*  
Did you come here looking for me?...

JAKE  
No, I... Well, I thought you might...

JORDAN  
...or did you come here looking for sex?

JAKE  
No... I...

JORDAN  
What are you doing, Jake. Nobody spends this much time in a dirty park bathroom unless they're looking for something.

JAKE  
Well... *you're* here.

JORDAN  
I know.

JAKE

So what are you looking for?

JORDAN

*(beat)*

Do you want to fuck?

JAKE

Excuse me.

JORDAN

You do. You want to fuck. Hard. Wet. Raw. That's why you were in here that day. Not because you wanted to jog, but because you were horny. Just like the rest of us. So let's do it. Let's fuck.

JAKE

I see. Fine. Let's fuck.

JORDAN

Really.

JAKE

I guess.

JORDAN

You guess?

JAKE

Well, I mean... Ok, so fine. I was horny. I mean, we all get horny right? So I was horny. There, I said it. And, for the record, I've never done that before. But I know that guys come here, sometimes, to... for that. And I thought, why not, right? Why not me too. And I was nervous. This guy was walking out right before I came in and he looked so sleazy and dirty and...

JORDAN

Sexy?

JAKE

Yeah... I don't know why. It was animal. But then you were here, and I was embarrassed. And I... used to have a crush on you, ok. I did, and I'm not very good at asserting myself or asking guys out, so I thought maybe it was a sign, you being here. It's just... I'm not very good at reading signs. Because someone had spraypainted on that bathroom door "Abandon hope all ye who enter here." And I thought that was a sign too. And the signs conflicted. And one time I had a dream that I was driving to class and suddenly I was run off the road by a big truck and I hit a tree. And then, as I lay there

bleeding, I saw my dead grandmother, and Jesus, and Yoda. Jesus said, “Thou shall not drive this next day” and Yoda said, “Tomorrow behind the wheel you should not be,” and my grandmother said, “In case you missed the point here numbnuts, you shouldn’t drive to class tomorrow. Get it? Driving. You. Tomorrow. Don’t do it. Capiche?”

JORDAN

So what did you do?

JAKE

I drove. I crashed. I lived. The point is, after that I’ve tried to pay attention to fate’s little messages you know? Sometimes I feel like I want something, I just chase it down and ignore all the signs telling me to just... let it go. And with you, truth is, I do want to fuck. But I don’t want to fuck, you know?

JORDAN

So you came here today hoping to find another sleazy, sexy man who would get the job done?

JAKE

No. (*beat*) I did come here looking for you.

JORDAN

Well you found me. Now what?

JAKE

God, I really must be a punishment junkie, huh? Because I just feel like shit every time I talk to you or *attempt* to talk to you and I just keep on a’ comin’ back.

JORDAN

Yeah, well, welcome to the club of self-destruction.

JAKE

Why haven’t you gone to the hospital?

JORDAN

What?

JAKE

I know it’s none of my business, but...

JORDAN

You’re right, it’s none of your business.

JAKE

Jordan, he...

JORDAN

Two weeks. Ok? I'll go in two weeks. But not now.

JAKE

And what if he's gone in two weeks?

JORDAN

How do you even know him?

JAKE

He was my teacher. And later my friend.

JORDAN

He was everybody's friend.

JAKE

*Is.* He's not dead.

JORDAN

Look, you have no idea what you're talking about. Just because you had some silly crush on your teacher does not mean you have any insight into our relationship.

JAKE

Maybe not. Just tell me why you won't go up there.

*(JORDAN doesn't answer. Pause.)*

JAKE

*Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.  
What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?  
I never know what you are thinking. Think.*

JORDAN

*I think we are in rat's alley  
Where the dead men lost their bones.*

JAKE

*(pause)*

He *said* you were a complicated person.

JORDAN

Jake, just think of this as another sign telling you to let it go. I think it would make your grandmother happy. And Jesus. And Yoda.

JAKE

Maybe. *(beat)* But I'm not going to leave without telling you. I like you.

JORDAN

Why?

JAKE

I don't know. I think it's because of how he always talks about you. I know that you're a good person, and I want to get to know you better, I think we...

JORDAN

No... no, it's not right. Look, just leave me alone. Don't call me, don't ask about me. And if you see me on the street, just turn your head and walk on by. You want to fuck me in the bathroom, fine, fuck me and move on, but that's it. Get it? Capiche?

*(silence)*

JAKE

*When I count, there are only you and I together  
But when I look ahead up the white road  
There is always another one walking beside you  
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded*  
Goodbye Jordan.

*(JAKE exits.)*

JORDAN

*What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,  
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only  
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,  
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,  
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only  
There is shadow under this red rock,  
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),  
And I will show you something different from either  
Your shadow at morning striding behind you  
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;  
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.*

*(LIGHTS DOWN to blackout)*

*(Intermission)*

**- ACT TWO -**

**- VII -**

*(JORDAN sits at the dinner table, finishing dinner, with his MOM and DAD. They speak quickly, half-listening, the way married couples can do. Behind the scrim we see trees softly lit. At rise, MOM is in the middle of a story.)*

MOM

...right into the neighbor's yard. But I told her, "kids are kids," but she still insists she'll press charges.

DAD

She won't press charges.

MOM

She may press charges.

DAD

She won't press charges.

MOM

Well, whether or not she does press charges...

DAD

She won't.

MOM

...those kids still owe her an apology.

DAD

Did your mother tell you about the deer?

JORDAN

The deer?

DAD

Get your mom to tell you about the deer.

What deer? JORDAN

Ask your mother. DAD

Mom. The deer? JORDAN

What deer, dear? MOM

The deer. DAD

I don't know what deer you're talking about. MOM

Nevermind. DAD

What deer? MOM

The mayor's deer. DAD

Oh, the deer. I didn't tell you about the deer? MOM

Obviously not. JORDAN

Well you know about your mother's newsletter. DAD

Yeah... what about it? JORDAN

Ask your mother. DAD

(*sigh*) Mom? JORDAN



MOM

Oh, it's nothing really.

DAD

Well, you know her little paper's become quite popular.

JORDAN

That's nice.

DAD

Especially now that she's enemies with the mayor.

JORDAN

Enemies?

DAD

Ask your mother.

JORDAN

Mom?

MOM

Oh it's nothing really.

JORDAN

Ok.

MOM

It's just that he has those tacky deer out in his front yard. Two of them. So, in my "lawn fashion" section, I simply stated that fake, plastic animals are just plain silly and, well... trashy.

JORDAN

You called the mayor "trashy."

MOM

Not him, just his plastic deer. I mean, what? Are we supposed to believe that they're real deer when we pass his home. Is that supposed to increase the aesthetic experience for us? "Oh look, there are wild deer standing next to the riding mower... ah nature!" Please.

DAD

And now the mayor is pissed as hell.

JORDAN

He is?

DAD

Ask your mother.

JORDAN

Mom...?

MOM

It's true dear. He's a little miffed, but he'll be fine. But now all of his family have bought plastic deer as a sign of support. The town's turning into a fake wildlife sanctuary.

JORDAN

That's nice.

DAD

Old drunk Larry from down the block accidentally shot one the other day while he was out hunting.

JORDAN

They have these fake deer out in the woods?

MOM

No, it was in front of the library... he was just drunk.

JORDAN

And they continue to let that man carry a gun?

MOM

Well, if you ask me I think it's cruel to deliberately confuse a man who has only two loves in life: shotguns and whiskey.

DAD

Did your mother tell you how many subscribers she has?

JORDAN

No. How many?

DAD

Ask your mother.

JORDAN

Mom, how many?

MOM

Oh, I don't know.

DAD

Fifty. Ask her.

JORDAN

Mom? Is it fifty?

MOM

I guess it's about fifty.

JORDAN

That's nice.

DAD

Did your mother tell you that she wrote an article about you?

JORDAN

No.

DAD

Ask her.

JORDAN

Mom?

MOM

It's true dear. Just a little blurb about that article you had published a couple years back. Of course people around here didn't think much of it since it wasn't in *Redbook*.

DAD

Or *Penthouse*.

MOM

Or *Field and Stream*. I saved you a copy. Of course you haven't been home in a while. Your sister was here last week. *She* manages at least one visit a month.

DAD

Did your mother tell you that your sister is engaged?

JORDAN

No.

DAD

Ask her.

Mom?

JORDAN

MOM

It's true dear.

JORDAN

That's nice.

MOM

Whatever happened to that nice teacher you were seeing?

JORDAN

We haven't been together for a few years now, you know that.

MOM

Not that you ever brought him home to meet us.

JORDAN

It's complicated.

DAD

You're sister's fiancé is very nice. Did your mom tell you about him?

JORDAN

No.

DAD

Ask her.

JORDAN

Actually, I need to talk to you guys.

MOM

Well of course, dear.

JORDAN

I don't know if you've noticed... but I've been a little... out of it lately.

MOM

It's your creative mind. All creative people are inherently disturbed. Believe me, when I'm working on the newsletter...

JORDAN

No, it's more than that. I needed to come home, get away, I just... things aren't really making much sense lately. I'm on this two week waiting period...

DAD

Did your mother tell you how she burned the turkey last week when she was working on her newsletter?

JORDAN

No.

DAD

Ask her.

JORDAN

*(sigh)* Mom?

MOM

I burned the turkey last week when I was working on the newsletter.

JORDAN

I think I'm a sexual addict.

MOM

I hear that drunk Larry's wife is addicted to Xanadu.

DAD

I think it's called Xanax, dear.

MOM

No, honey, it's Xanadu.

DAD

Ok, dear.

JORDAN

Do you hear what I'm saying? I'm addicted to sex. Rough trade. And... you're not going to like this. I'm going to get HIV. *(pause)* I'm intentionally trying to get AIDS.

MOM

When you were little you wanted chicken pocks so badly.

DAD

Oh yes, how strange you were, always rubbing against the spotted kids at school.

MOM

Your teachers were so concerned.

DAD

You never got the pocks though, damndest thing.

JORDAN

Am I even here? In two weeks God is going to give me AIDS!

DAD

Did your mother tell you that your aunt Sue has hemorrhoids?

JORDAN

No!

DAD

Ask her.

JORDAN

Don't you want to know why?

MOM

Well, honey, there's no rhyme or reason to hemorrhoids.

JORDAN

Fear. If I get it now, I won't have to be scared of it.

DAD

You don't have to fear hemorrhoids.

JORDAN

And honor. I'll have an honorable ending. I'll be able to make something out of my life. Through this gift. Through my death.

DAD

Did your mother tell you that Mrs. Harper isn't doing too well?

JORDAN

NO!

DAD

Ask her.

MOM

She's not doing well at all. I've started on her obituary for the newsletter. Do you think it bad taste to start an obituary before someone has died?

JORDAN

MOM! DAD! I NEED YOU TO LISTEN!

MOM

Well, of course, dear.

DAD

Shoot, sport.

*(pause)*

JORDAN

I want to read a poem to you.

MOM

Oh, how lovely.

JORDAN

*Dear parents,  
I forgive you my life,  
Begotten in a drab town,  
The intention was good;  
Passing the street now,  
I see still the remains of sunlight.*

DAD

The weather *has* been quite nice lately.

JORDAN

*It was not the bone buckled;  
You gave me enough food  
To renew myself.*

MOM

Are you still hungry? We have plenty.

JORDAN

*It was the mind's weight  
Kept me bent, as I grew tall.*

DAD

Did your mother tell you how tall your cousin is now?

JORDAN

*It was not your fault.  
What should have gone on,  
Arrow aimed from a tried bow  
At a tried target, has turned back,*

*Wounding itself  
With questions you had not asked.*

*(long pause)*

MOM

Wasn't that lovely.

DAD

Very nice. You write that, sport?

JORDAN

I don't write poetry. That was Thomas.

DAD

Did your mother tell you that Thomas Wilkes is going to law school.

JORDAN

No, she didn't.

DAD

Ask her.

MOM

It's true dear.

JORDAN

I'm losing my mind. I'm engaging in dangerous sexual acts. Do you see? I'm fucking random men in park bathrooms and sex houses and... everywhere. Unprotected. They hit me, they choke me, see? And I don't know why, but I can't stop. I can't stop until I catch it. I'm going crazy, do you understand?

MOM

Well, I hear the Xanadu is pretty good for stress.

DAD

Unless you abuse it like drunk Larry's wife.

MOM

Well, of course.

JORDAN

Mother! Xanadu is a roller skating disco musical starring Olivia Newton John. It's called Xanax.



DAD

I told you, dear.

MOM

Are you sure honey? I could've sworn...

JORDAN

You guys... listen. I'm hearing things... voices of people who aren't there, and they're talking to me. Telling me things. I don't if they're real, if you're real, if I'm real. It's like reality gave up on me so I've had to find a new one.

MOM

Honey, what is it you're going on about it?

DAD

Hey sport. Maybe you just need to do what makes you happy.

JORDAN

I thought I was.

MOM

What do you want, honey?

DAD

What are your dreams?

MOM

If you could do anything...

DAD

Be anything...

MOM

What is it that you want?

*(pause)*

JORDAN

I want... I don't know. When I was a kid, I used to write limericks, remember? You would put them on the fridge. I used to pretend I lived in a world where everything rhymed like a Shel Silverstein poem. I always wanted to go to where the sidewalk ended and see what was there. I think I fell off. I hear verses where I'm not supposed to now. That feeling I always used to get when I read my favorite lines... it's gone now. And the beauty of the poetry has blended with the ugliness of life, and I can't reconcile the two. *(pause)* Truly beautiful poems are tragically beautiful, you know? Melancholy. Sad in a way that makes you tingle inside. Beautifully tragic. Or tragically beautiful. That's

what I want. I want tragic beauty. Beautiful tragedy. I learned a long time ago that I don't have that "greatness" in me to have the beautiful without the tragedy. I want *The Wasteland*. But I want it inside me. I want to be the wasteland, not live in it. And it doesn't make any sense, I know that. But it's the most I can achieve to make my life worth something. I think. I think it's the best I can do. It's my one chance to not be ordinary. To be special. To be connected. To be remembered for something, even if it's death. To make up for things I've done. It's not much, but it's something. They never tell you that that "cool peppermint wind" that Silverstein talks about is just a warning, a last bit of pleasure before the pain. The sidewalk ends. And you either have to stop or keep going. You either have to remain, unimportant... or die.

*(long pause)*

DAD

Did your mother tell you about...

JORDAN

No.

DAD

Ask her.

JORDAN

Mom?

MOM

It's true dear...

JORDAN

That's nice.

*(blackout)*

- VIII -

*(Soft lights behind the scrim illuminate trees. The silhouette of a man appears behind the scrim.)*

A MAN'S VOICE

*Webster was much possessed by death  
And saw the skull beneath the skin;  
And breastless creatures under ground  
Leaned backward with a liplless grin.*

*Daffodil bulbs instead of balls  
Stared from the sockets of the eyes!  
He knew that thought clings round dead limbs  
Tightening its lusts and luxuries.*

*(Another man, in silhouette appears behind the scrim.)*

*Donne, I suppose, was such another  
Who found no substitute for sense;  
To seize and clutch and penetrate,  
Expert beyond experience,*

*He knew the anguish of the marrow  
The ague of the skeleton;  
No contact possible to flesh  
Allayed the fever of the bone.*

*(A woman's silhouette appears behind the scrim.)*

*Grishkin is nice: her  
Russian eye is underlined for emphasis;  
Uncorseted, her friendly bust  
Gives promise of pneumatic bliss.*

*The couched Brazilian jaguar  
Compels the scampering marmoset  
With subtle effluence of cat;  
Grishkin has a maisonette;*

*The sleek Brazilian jaguar  
Does not in its arboreal gloom*

*Distil so rank a feline smell  
As Grishkin in a drawing-room.*

*And even the Abstract Entities  
Circumambulate her charm;  
But our lot crawls between dry ribs  
To keep our metaphysics warm.*

*(The silhouettes exit. Lights up downstage.  
JORDAN is in the same bathroom as before.  
The trees are still seen behind the scrim. He  
looks into the mirror, examining himself  
with resolve. After a moment, the door  
opens and SITALA enters. She is homeless,  
dressed in shabby clothes, and carrying  
several bags.)*

TRADE! (beat) TRAAAAADE! SITALA

Excuse me. JORDAN

TRAAAAAAAAAAAAADE! SITALA

Ma'am. Please. JORDAN

You looking for trade, son? SITALA

Ma'am. I... JORDAN

I thought you weren't supposed to be here! SITALA

Who told you that? JORDAN

Squirrels. I've heard about what goes on here. The squirrels told all, the way squirrels do with their gossip and deception. SITALA

JORDAN

The squirrels?

SITALA

What squirrels? You crazy or something. Crazy speaks the sane person. Anyway, the squirrels told me that this is the place where you men come for trade. Is that true?

JORDAN

I... I suppose.

SITALA

That what you here for?

JORDAN

I should go.

SITALA

Well, let's get started. I offer you this in trade.

*(SITALA reaches into one of her bags and produces a small object.)*

JORDAN

It's chewing gum.

SITALA

It's spearmint.

JORDAN

It's used.

SITALA

What will you trade for this?

JORDAN

Nothing.

SITALA

A dollar?

JORDAN

No.

SITALA

Two dollars?

JORDAN

Ma'am, I think you've misunderstood...

SITALA

Shhhhhh!

*(SITALA hears something. She crouches down and listens, walking slowly, ending by the toilet.)*

SITALA

...Yes? ...Ok. ...You don't say! ...Oh. Ooooh, I see. *(to JORDAN)* Well, I'm terribly sorry. The squirrels were confused, as usual. I don't know why I even listen to them. *(beat. Upbeat:)* You're here for sex.

JORDAN

Who... what? Did the toilet tell you that?

SITALA

The toilet? *(she laughs and addresses the toilet)* Toilet speaks to ones who do not hear the toilet speak as he says you do, insane. Honestly, you meet the strangest sort of people in park bathrooms. *(to JORDAN)* What's your name, son?

JORDAN

Jordan. You?

SITALA

Sitala.

JORDAN

Pretty name.

SITALA

I was named after that famous character from that Kentucky Williams play, *A Trolley Named Wanting Real Bad*. Remember? When he's outside the window yelling, "SITALLLLLLLA!"

JORDAN

That's not right.

SITALA

It's not? Oh, then I'm Sitala, the Goddess of Disease.

JORDAN

Sure. That makes a lot more sense.

SITALA

So, what do you want to trade? Surely I have something you want. Bottle cap necklace?

JORDAN

No, thanks.

SITALA

A flat penny from the train tracks... Just five dollars. Great trade!

JORDAN

No. Please. I'm not looking to trade anything.

SITALA

Oh that's right. It's the sex you're here for. *(thinks)* Well... *(begins to cross to JORDAN seductively with a very awkward shimmy)* You like that?

JORDAN

No. Really.

SITALA

How about if I sing you a sexy song. "I wanna be, your sledgehammer. Why don't you call my name. Oh let me be your sledgehammer..."

JORDAN

Sitala. Look, here's five bucks, just... don't dance. Or sing.

SITALA

Thank you, son, thank you. But I have to give you something. It's trade. It's tradition.

JORDAN

It's not that kind of trade. They call it "rough trade." See, men come here to have sex with each other. Anonymous sex between men, understand?

SITALA

Ah, man to man sex. The monkey who lives in the invisible mailbox on the roof told me that when a man desires another man, he is almost ready to become an angel.

JORDAN

I don't understand.

SITALA

You see, once a man can transcend his love for the female form, then his love is not driven by sexual urges, but by a love of humanity as a whole. And that man is almost ready to join the higher power as an angel, a protector of souls. *(beat)* And warrior against the banana army.

JORDAN

That doesn't really make sense. But it's a nice thought.

SITALA

Well, you can't trust that monkey. So, what am I to give you?

JORDAN

Nothing. Really. You should probably just go. This is a *men's* room.

SITALA

Son, I am a goddess. Surely I have something you desire.

JORDAN

You're the goddess of disease, right?

SITALA

Who told you that?

JORDAN

You did.

SITALA

Hmmm. Well, it must be true then.

JORDAN

Well if you are, if you really are, then you're doing a terrible job. Do you know how many people are suffering out there from incurable diseases? How can you live with that? Incurable, in this day and age. And millions are dying for no reason. If you really are the goddess of disease, you need to get your ass out there into the world and start making things right. Why are you letting these people suffer?

SITALA

*(beat)* Well, clearly I'm insane.

JORDAN

The goddess of disease is insane. Now *that* makes sense. *(pause)* Ok, goddess, here's the trade. I'll give you five dollars. You give me AIDS.

SITALA

You want me to give you AIDS?

JORDAN

Yes. You've got the power, give it to me. I don't need to wait two weeks for God to grant this. Let's get it over with.



SITALA

AIDS he says he wants. He says he wants. He doesn't even know what that is. Tell him, lemon drops and candy corn have more appeal than lemons and corn. Corn cuts the gums. Let me give you something else. I'll grant you love.

JORDAN

No.

SITALA

Inspiration.

JORDAN

I don't want it.

SITALA

Peace.

JORDAN

You will give me peace when you give me AIDS.

SITALA

Fine. Don't move.

*(SITALA takes a step back. She stares deeply at JORDAN for a moment. She turns and whispers to nobody, then turns back.)*

SITALA

It is done.

JORDAN

Just like that?

SITALA

Just like that.

JORDAN

Who did you whisper to?

SITALA

A friend of yours. He has just passed over.

JORDAN

Right. Ok, well Sitala, thanks a heap. I really should go.

SITALA

Jordan, wait a moment. I have something else to give you.

*(SITALA reaches into her bag and removes a plastic bottle filled with purple liquid.)*

SITALA

Take this as well.

JORDAN

What is it?

SITALA

The cure.

JORDAN

The cure for AIDS?

SITALA

Why not.

JORDAN

The cure for HIV has been in the bag of a street bum this entire time?

SITALA

A goddess. A spirit, really.

JORDAN

*(smells)* It's grape soda.

SITALA

It is what you make of it. All is what you make of it all. That is what all is. When you decide you don't want the HIV I've given you, drink the entire bottle. All will be well.

JORDAN

Right. Well thanks for the AIDS, and the grape soda cure. It's been real... special, Sitala. But I really don't need any more crazy in my life right now, I'm just about full up. So...

SITALA

You don't believe me.

JORDAN

No, I don't. I'm sorry. Why should I?

SITALA

*This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
Not with a bang but a whimper.*

JORDAN

Who are you?

SITALA

I have already told you.

JORDAN

Who sent you here? How do you know me?

SITALA

I don't know you, you don't know me. We all know each other. We exist together. Sitala, Sitala! Sitala gives you what you want, what you don't need, what you must have, what you can't avoid. Sitala knows you.

*(SITALA turns to listen again to nobody.)*

SITALA *(cont...)*

What? I don't know what that means to say. I... if you insist. I say it if you insist. I have a message for you, Jordan.

JORDAN

Oh you do. From the monkey? Or the squirrels?

SITALA

No, from your friend who has just passed.

*I saw in Louisiana a live-oak growing,  
All alone stood it and the moss hung down from the branches,  
Without any companion it grew there uttering joyous of dark green,  
And its look, rude, unbending, lusty, made me think of myself,*

JORDAN

Shut up.

SITALA

*But I wonder'd how it could utter joyous leaves standing alone there  
without its friend near, for I knew I could not,  
And I broke off a twig with a certain number of leaves upon it and  
twined around it a little moss,  
And brought it away, and I have placed it in sight in my room,*

*It is not needed to remind me as of my own dear friends,  
(For I believe lately I think of little else than of them,)*

JORDAN

Who... why are you doing this to me? Why...

SITALA

*Yet it remains to me a curious token, it makes me think of manly love;  
For all that, and though the live-oak glistens there in Louisiana  
solitary in a wide in a wide flat space,  
Uttering joyous leaves all its life without a friend a lover near,  
I know very well I could not.*

*(JORDAN has reached the point of a  
breakdown. He is speechless.)*

JORDAN

Why... That was always my favorite...

SITALA

He says he loves you. And goodbye. You are lucky to have so much love coming to you in this world and beyond. So lucky to receive love and give love. Such a trade. But not rough.

JORDAN

This may be the roughest trade I've ever had.

*(blackout)*

- IX -

*(Behind the scrim, soft lights on the trees and now a coffin. Behind the scrim, JAKE, upstage of the coffin, speaks- a eulogy.)*

JAKE

*Adieu O soldier,  
You of the rude campaigning, (which we shared,)  
The rapid march, the life of the camp,  
The hot contention of opposing fronts, the long manoeuvre,  
Red battles with their slaughter, the stimulus, the strong terrific game,  
Spell of all brave and manly hearts, the trains of time through you  
and like of you all fill'd,  
With war and war's expression.*

*Adieu dear comrade,  
Your mission is fulfill'd--but I, more warlike,  
Myself and this contentious soul of mine,  
Still on our own campaigning bound,  
Through untried roads with ambushes opponents lined,  
Through many a sharp defeat and many a crisis, often baffled,  
Here marching, ever marching on, a war fight out--aye here,  
To fiercer, weightier battles give expression.*

*(Lights down behind the scrim. JORDAN enters downstage into a sparse room, dressed in a suit, and sits in a folding chair, head in hands. JAKE follows behind. JAKE stands silent for a moment.)*

JAKE

He wouldn't have been happy with the suit.

JORDAN

Or the make-up.

*(silence)*

JAKE

I was wondering if you would be here.

JORDAN

I... I almost...

JAKE

It's a nice turn out.

JORDAN

Of course. Everyone loved him.

JAKE

He was a hoot. Who wouldn't like him?

JORDAN

Me.

*(pause)*

JAKE

I don't think that's true.

JORDAN

We... didn't get along. Not really.

JAKE

Unbelievable. You're so charming.

JORDAN

I guess I deserve that.

JAKE

No, you don't. *(beat)* I mean, yeah. Yeah, you do. *(confidentially)* See, I always do this thing where I try to take a stand and then immediately back down and my therapist says that I have to be more assertive when the mood strikes no matter where I am or who can hear, so hang on buddy, cause you're about to get it. *(takes a breath)* You're an assface!

JORDAN

Very poetic.

JAKE

Screw poetry! Ha! That's right, I said it.

JORDAN

You really don't handle rejection well, do you?

JAKE

Rejection is one thing. But I don't think you're rejecting me. You're rejecting something else, something bigger, something personal.

JORDAN

You been talking to God? Or just Emily Dickinson.

JAKE

I'm... not quite sure how to answer that. Quit interrupting my angered rambling with confusing statements, it's not fair!

JORDAN

Life's not fair.

JAKE

Yeah, life's real tough for you Jordan. (*indicating coffin*) What about him? He's dead. Is that fair?

JORDAN

No, it's not fair. It's not fair! Disease has lost her mind and now nothing is fair.

JAKE

What's with you?

JORDAN

I have no idea.

JAKE

I always thought that someone who loved poetry as much as you would... I don't know. It's like, if you're a poet, then surely you must be in tune to the beauty of the world. To love.

JORDAN

I'm not a poet.

JAKE

Do you love poetry?

JORDAN

Of course.

JAKE

Why? (*no answer*) Seriously, why do you love it?

JORDAN

Because it works. It makes sense when it's supposed to and it's vague when it needs to be, but it always works, if it's done well. And it's not about the meter or the rhyming or the form, it's about the mastery. In a poet's world, every word, every syllable and sound is perfectly chosen, perfectly placed. It has meaning. The only time I ever caught a glimpse of meaning is when I looked at the world through verse.

JAKE

Or when you looked at the world through him.

JORDAN

I'm sick of finding meaning through other people. Other people's love, other people's verse.

JAKE

You know what I think? I think you're one of those people... you know, those odd melancholy people who like feeling down, who get off on sadness.

JORDAN

You have no idea what gets me off.

JAKE

Oh I'm pretty sure I do. I'm just not the guy who can give it to you. I don't deal in misery.

JORDAN

How nice for you.

JAKE

There are some people who walk around like zombies. And there are some people who are full of life, no matter what. *He* was full of life. He doesn't deserve to be in there. Someone like you does. (*pause*) I'm sorry.

JORDAN

No you're not. You think I don't know all of this? You think he didn't tell me everyday when we were together that I needed to be full of life, needed to be happy?! (*beat*) He was sick when I met him, but he was always happy. I loved him, just like everyone else. As much as I could. But there was... disease. Between us. It was just there. Always. And I envied him, ok? I did. I wanted to be happy and be loved. But that's not me.

JAKE

But that's what I don't understand. You *were* loved.

JORDAN

You just don't know.

JAKE

Yes I do! Jordan, he loved you. He told me. He told me over and over. He said it so much and so passionately that I think *I* could love you. I just caught it from him, his love for you, like a disease. I've always been after love like that. He made it seem so... beautiful.



JORDAN

Tragically beautiful.

JAKE

Only tragic because it didn't work out. But if you ever thought for a minute that he didn't love you...

JORDAN

I KNOW HE LOVED ME! *(beat)* I always knew he loved me, but I didn't... I couldn't... He was sick and he wasn't... in this day and age, the medicines, the treatments, they weren't working that well... I knew he couldn't be here forever, and... I left. I left him because of his disease.

*(pause)*

JAKE

He never told me that.

JORDAN

He wouldn't. He was too good of a person to say the terrible truth. I couldn't even touch him without feeling it. Sensing it. When we kissed, when we... touched. And now all I hear is his voice. All I hear is the poetry that *used* to work, make sense. The verses, that's where we fell in love, somewhere between the lines. Somewhere in the pattern of the meter our hearts starting beating the same. Stress, unstress. Somewhere in those lines it fit. And I can't stop hearing it. I need it to stop. I'm going to make it stop.

JAKE

Jordan...

JORDAN

But he wasn't perfect. Because he fell in love with me. And I wasn't worthy of it. I'll make it up to him. If he would have just waited. I would've made it up...

JAKE

Jordan, stop. Everyone deserves love.

JORDAN

We can't all be him. Loved by everybody. Perfect. A poet. He's dead now. A hero. He'll be remembered as a hero. And I'm here. Alive. Unloved. Who do you think is better off?

JAKE

Maybe the one who's not in a coffin.

JORDAN

No. He won the chase, and all the rewards that come with it. *(pause)* You know, I knew he had died. A goddess in a bathroom told me that a friend of mine had died and I knew she meant him. *(scoff)* It sure as hell wasn't me. I had been dreaming about death all week. Not his... my death, the death he beat me to. MY DEATH! The one that would have made people remember, made people respect... God, it was beautiful. Not like this. I was in the park. Only it wasn't the park, you know, the way dreams do. It was back in the trails, back where it's thick, hard to see. Back where men go to be men and be with men. But I wasn't with anyone, I don't know what I was doing... I was just there. And then I died. Just died. I don't know if it was natural or if I was killed or what, but I died... alone. In the woods. And I was taken, only I don't remember that part and I don't know who took me, but I was taken and planted. I was put in the ground and my feet became roots and my arms became branches and I could feel the chlorophyll running through me like blood used to. Only thicker. Like green molasses. I could feel my body turning carbon dioxide into oxygen, like breathing underwater, breathing in reverse. And it took some getting used to, but it was natural – it felt strange but it felt right, effortless. And time was different, as it must be for things that live so long... or things that are dead. Days passed in the time of a heartbeat. Only, there were no heartbeats, no stress, unstress. Just the rhythm of the flow of everything in me – everything in and from the Earth. And I grew. Tall. I feel like I was an oak. I know I was. And I grew tall and I could see everything and I knew everything. I looked on with a love for humanity that I never felt as a man. And it felt so... good, it felt... I can't describe it. I think it must be what Heaven feels like. I think it must have been Heaven. I was a tall, beautiful oak and Whitman wrote poems about me. And then I woke up. And I felt so lost and empty. My blood was too thin and it moved through me far too quickly. It wasn't right. I miss the thickness. My blood isn't right anymore. I resent my blood. And I resent him. It should be me in there. I want my blood to suffer. It's too fast. And the days are too slow. And it just isn't right.

*(Pause. JAKE is unsure of what to say.)*

*(blackout)*

- X -

*(Behind the scrim the trees are lit. Sounds of the outdoors. We are in the park. Downstage, WHITTY, an older man with a grey beard is sitting on a park bench. He wears sunglasses, a baseball cap, cut-off shorts and a sleeveless plaid button-up. This is the same MAN that was in the bathroom. He seems as though he is trying to hide his identity. JORDAN enters, wearing the dress shirt and tie, now loosened, from the scene before, but with no jacket. He sits on another bench. WHITTY looks at him. The two exchange a few awkward glances.)*

Sup?

WHITTY

Hi.

JORDAN

*(Silence. They exchange a few more awkward glances.)*

You lookin'?

WHITTY

What?

JORDAN

I said, you lookin'?

WHITTY

Lookin'?

JORDAN

Nevermind.

WHITTY

*(Silence. WHITTY looks at JORDAN again and begins to rub his crotch.)*

I've seen you before.

WHITTY *(cont...)*

I don't think so.

JORDAN

Bathroom. Few weeks ago.

WHITTY

*(JORDAN finally looks WHITTY, realizing that he is THE MAN from the bathroom.)*

Oh. Right.

JORDAN

Was fuckin' hot man.

WHITTY

Yeah.

JORDAN

I'm Whit. Friends call me Whitty.

WHITTY

Hey.

JORDAN

You got a name?

WHITTY

Look, I don't mean to be rude. I've had a rough day, and I'm not really in the mood to...

JORDAN

To what? Not in the mood to fuck?

WHITTY

No, actually, I'm not in the mood to fuck.

JORDAN

Then what the fuck are you doin' here?

WHITTY

It's a public park.

JORDAN

No. Out there it's a public park. Back here, back in the brush and the trails... Well, everyone knows it ain't a public park back here. Everybody knows what's back here.

WHITTY

And that wasn't no public bathroom a few weeks ago neither, was it? We both know what that was.

JORDAN

Fuck off.

WHITTY

Whoa, there now. Don't get all uppity with me. I was inside you.

*(JORDAN begins to exit.)*

WHITTY *(cont...)*

That's right. I came inside you, boy. Remember? Yeah, you remember. You're acting high and mighty now, but you wanted it. You were practically begging for it.

JORDAN

Yeah? So what if I was. Does that give you the right to call me out whenever you see me?

WHITTY

*(laughing)*

Calm down, boy. I was just hoping for another go-round.

JORDAN

Well, that's not going to happen. I have an appointment this afternoon. I'll get what I need then. It'll be done then, I don't need it from you.

WHITTY

Goin' to get a good fuck this afternoon, huh? Sure you don't wanna be loosened up a little first?

JORDAN

No. I don't want a good fuck, get it? That's never what I wanted from you. You were supposed to be a fantasy.

WHITTY

What, it wasn't good?

JORDAN

That's not the fantasy. It never was. *(beat)* I thought it was sex. To be sexy. Sexy is a euphemism. Something that makes me cum. I don't need beauty. And I don't need to cum. It was a means to an end. You understand? It wasn't the sex that was sexy. It was the connection. The punishment. *(beat)* You wouldn't understand. You're just some old pervert fucking guys in the woods. You need to cum. I need to become...

WHITTY

*Was it doubted that those who corrupt their own bodies conceal themselves;  
And if those who defile the living are as bad as they who defile the dead?  
And if the body does not do as much as the Soul?  
And if the body were not the Soul, what is the Soul?*

*(pause)*

JORDAN

Take your glasses off.

WHITTY

Why?

JORDAN

Please.

*(WHITTY takes off his glasses.)*

JORDAN *(cont...)*

And your hat. Please.

*(WHITTY takes off his hat. Pause.)*

JORDAN *(cont...)*

Why didn't you tell me it was you?

WHITTY

Did it matter.

JORDAN

Of course.

WHITTY

You were here to get something. Did it matter who I was.

JORDAN

I guess not.

WHITTY

You don't seem surprised to see me.

JORDAN

Nothing surprises me anymore, except for how wrong I am about everything. Dickinson wasn't the way I imagined her, why should you be?

WHITTY

How did you imagine me?

JORDAN

The same way we always imagine our heroes. Perfect.

WHITTY

Perfection implies a lack of humanity. So why can't I be an animal.

JORDAN

I never imagined you... sexual.

WHITTY

Well that ain't very fair, boy.

JORDAN

It just wasn't something I thought about.

WHITTY

I was just some poet. Some asexual pen and paper with no genitalia.

JORDAN

That's not true. I knew you were gay.

WHITTY

But not sexual.

JORDAN

Come on. You're supposed to be the good grey poet. You're like a literary teddy bear.

WHITTY

The good grey poet. That's all fine and good, but who says that's the image I wanted? Who says that's how I wanted to be remembered. Fuck that. How do you want to be remembered, Jordan? You want to be the "good grey poet?" Fuck that.

JORDAN

I'm not a poet.

WHITTY

Because you don't write anymore. Why is that?

JORDAN

I don't have the capacity for greatness.

WHITTY

We don't write to be great. If we're lucky, being great is just a result.

JORDAN

*(laughing)*

Fuck. Says you. Of all people. “What is the soul?” Well, what if your soul isn’t worth anything. It’s easy to be magnanimous when you’re Walt Whitman. It’s easy to be lofty when you’re one of the greats. “Oh, poor me. That’s not how I wanted to be remembered. I’m sexual! I’m a sexual beast in the woods!” What a shame you were accidentally remembered as a great poet and not some promiscuous fag. At least you’re remembered for something. We don’t have your luxuries, you know? We don’t live in a time when we can just up and travel and live in the joy and splendor of a young country. America’s middle-aged now. And it’s having a crisis. My generation- we’re the ones who’ll be remembered as the promiscuous fags, the fuckers in the forest. That’s our America. America needs contact. *We* need contact.

WHITTY

That what you need, boy? I can give you that.

JORDAN

Why are you here? Like this?

WHITTY

Because you want to see me here. Like this.

JORDAN

Yeah, Dr. Emily already gave me that speech. I’m projecting something.

WHITTY

You’re reconciling something, more like it. You wanted me inside you.

JORDAN

I wanted disease inside me.

WHITTY

You wanted me inside you. The way I used to be. When *he* was alive. You want beauty inside you, all perfectly placed and metered like words in a poem.

JORDAN

I want a lot of things inside me that used to be there, and some things that deserve to be there.

WHITTY

When’s the last time you wrote something?

JORDAN

I was doing some research last year...



WHITTY

I'm talking about poetry.

JORDAN

I don't know.

WHITTY

Not since you two were together. I'm right, huh?

*(JORDAN doesn't answer)*

WHITTY *(cont...)*

Ever since you left him. And then you started hating yourself. But instead of doing the right thing and going back, you started making yourself believe you wanted something else. Sex. Raw. Anonymous. But you see, Jordan, it's never anonymous. You know me, I know you.

JORDAN

I don't know you, this isn't real.

WHITTY

Yeah, it's not real, is it. What you've done. When you left. When you got scared. It wasn't real. Fantasy and reality- what's what? No more writing poems, just going out. Fucking. I'm sure it was a little thrilling, just living for yourself like that. Doing whatever you pleased. Selfish. Selfishness is a drug. It takes higher and higher doses to get off.

JORDAN

It was more complicated than that. I wasn't after pleasure.

WHITTY

Sure you were. Self-misery, self-destruction... it's still selfish. That's pleasure.

JORDAN

Fine. I'm selfish. I get that. *(beat)* So I wanted you inside me. I want disease and beauty inside me. All of it. If you can't give me disease, can you give me beauty? Can you come inside me the way you used to? You are my hero. I hate seeing you here like this.

WHITTY

Then how do you feel when you look in the mirror. Pushing people away. Taking yourself out of life. You've lost him, but there are others out there who love you.

JORDAN

I think it's too late.

WHITTY

*I have perceiv'd that to be with those I like is enough,  
To stop in company with the rest at evening is enough,  
To be surrounded by beautiful, curious, breathing, laughing flesh is enough,  
To pass among them, or touch any one, or rest my arm ever so lightly round his  
or her neck  
for a moment—what is this, then?  
I do not ask any more delight—I swim in it, as in a sea.*

*There is something in staying close to men and women, and looking on them, and  
in the  
contact and odor of them, that pleases the soul well;  
All things please the soul—but these please the soul well.*

There's your beauty. From your asexual hero. Here's the reconciliation. Because you hate yourself you'll soon hate me. And everything else you ever loved. So, come on. Hate me now. You got your beauty, now get your pain.

*(WHITTY bends JORDAN over a bench and  
grabs his throat.)*

WHITTY (cont...)

So tell me, Jordan. What is it you want, boy? What do you want!?

JORDAN

I want you inside me.

*(WHITTY pushes JORDAN's face away and  
begins the violent act again as the lights  
fade to dim. Lights up behind the scrim on  
SITALA. She speaks as WHITTY and  
JORDAN have sex.)*

SITALA

Those who follow me know. They know that my love and my curse are one and the same. I love you- disease! I hate you- disease! Love and hate and hate and love. And disease. This is the way I work, the way the world works. It's trade. It's tradition. I am your mother. Your father is your friend, your mother does what needs to be done. I do what I have to do. What others won't. Because I know. I know that sometimes we must do bad things for the greater good. But it's all because I love you. I love you so very much.

*(Lights downstage of the scrim fade to black.  
JORDAN and WHITTY exit. SITALA  
continues.)*

SITALA (*cont...*)

Am I insane. Clearly. Because there is no logic in love and hate. There is no logic in disease. Those who call themselves children of science and reason may disagree with me, they may call me insane. They can indentify organisms and viruses and cells and all those things that help satisfy our hunger to explain. But then there is beauty. There is love. There is poetry. There is faith. There is fear. And there is disease. And there is no reasoning to be found. My followers sacrifice animals. Blood. On my alters. To appease me. But my love and my curse are one and the same. Blood. Fear. Things that are inside all of us. There is no cure for fear. There is no reason in disease. There is no answer in blood. I do these things for the greater good? I think? A trade. It's a trade? I can't remember anymore. It all used to make so much sense, but I just don't remember anymore. But I do love you. I love you so very much.

*(Lights fade to black.)*

- XI -

*(The apartment of the GIFT GIVER. Soft lights behind the scrim show trees. JORDAN sits again on the bean bag chair. He is still wearing the button-up, loosened tie, and dress pants, though now the shirt is untucked and JORDAN is generally more disheveled. There is a pallet on the floor with pillows and sheets.)*

JORDAN

I... I hope I'm not early.

GIFT GIVER *(off)*

Not at all. How have you been.

JORDAN

It's been a strange couple of weeks.

GIFT GIVER *(off)*

Perspective?

JORDAN

I'm not sure.

*(The GIFT GIVER enters with tea. He is dressed the same as in act one.)*

GIFT GIVER

You've gained perspective. But, the knowledge that comes with such perspective isn't always easily discerned.

JORDAN

I wish... just for a while... that people would speak clearly.

GIFT GIVER

*(laughing)*

Well wouldn't the world be an easy place then? *(beat)* Things don't work so well in free verse, do they?

JORDAN

Can we... let's just do this.

GIFT GIVER

Be patient. First a prayer.

JORDAN

No offense, but can we just keep God out of this... present company excluded.

GIFT GIVER

Just a few words. For peace.

JORDAN

Fine.

*(The GIFT GIVER lights a few candles and sits on the floor.)*

GIFT GIVER

We ask that the gifts which we are granted are accepted with appreciation, humility, respect, and love. We ask that we receive only what we need and give others only what they truly require. We ask for consistent guidance and unconditional love. Amen.

JORDAN

That was lovely.

GIFT GIVER

Thank you Jordan. Are you ready?

JORDAN

I think so... Yes. Yes, I'm ready.

GIFT GIVER

Good.

*(The GIFT GIVER lowers the lights and gestures for JORDAN to join him on the pallet. JORDAN does so.)*

GIFT GIVER (cont...)

Please, make yourself comfortable.

JORDAN

Ok.

*(JORDAN takes off his shoes. The GIFT GIVER begins to unbutton JORDAN's shirt.)*

GIFT GIVER

It's fine to be nervous.

JORDAN

I'm not. I'm fine.

GIFT GIVER

Be honest, Jordan, it's better for you to be honest. It's healthier.

JORDAN

I may be nervous, some... but I know this is what I want. I'm resolved, so let's... let's just do this.

GIFT GIVER

Of course.

*(The GIFT GIVER begins to massage  
JORDAN's shoulders.)*

GIFT GIVER *(cont...)*

This will help with the tension.

JORDAN

Can you... will you tell me how you got it?

GIFT GIVER

Well sure. I think it's helpful that we know each other. Let's see... It was sexually transmitted. Back before we knew a lot about it.

JORDAN

Your partner?

GIFT GIVER

No, actually. I didn't know him.

JORDAN

One night stand?

GIFT GIVER

I guess you could say that. I met him in the park.

JORDAN

The park?

GIFT GIVER

Yes. Back then, the park was a place that men went to, well... meet.

JORDAN

Did you go often?

GIFT GIVER

For a while I did. I don't know, I guess you could say I was looking for something.

JORDAN

Perspective?

GIFT GIVER

Connection. I wasn't married or anything, but I wasn't, I guess your generation would call "out"... times were different. I just wanted to find other people like me.

JORDAN

Did you meet a lot of guys there?

GIFT GIVER

A few.

JORDAN

Then how do you know which one infected you?

GIFT GIVER

Jordan, there are moments in life when things become very clear. When you start to believe the unbelievable. There are moments when you realize that reality was never as black and white as you once thought it to be. I met him, and he was inside me. And he has never left.

JORDAN

Who was he?

GIFT GIVER

A fantasy. An ideal. To me he represented... no he *was* all things. Truth and beauty and fear and destruction. Perhaps that doesn't make sense to you.

JORDAN

It does. (*pause*) I have to tell you something. You said you didn't want me to have sex the past two weeks. But I may have.

GIFT GIVER

You *may* have?

JORDAN

Today. In the park. With Walt Whitman.

GIFT GIVER

Walt Whitman?

JORDAN

I wanted him inside me. And he was. He may be still, I don't know.

*(The GIFT GIVER stands, turns the lights back up, and blows out the candles as he speaks.)*

GIFT GIVER

I must ask you to leave.

JORDAN

What?

GIFT GIVER

I had one request, Jordan, and you couldn't fulfill it. Please go.

JORDAN

Did you hear what I said? Walt Whitman.

GIFT GIVER

I heard.

JORDAN

Well, I mean, it obviously wasn't real. Walt Whitman. And a few weeks ago I met Emily Dickinson in a doctor's office.

GIFT GIVER

Reality isn't black and white.

JORDAN

These things *aren't* really happening. And now you.

GIFT GIVER

What about me?

JORDAN

Well you're God, you tell me.

GIFT GIVER

Tell you?

JORDAN

Tell me what I'm supposed to do here, because honestly I don't know. You say you're God...



GIFT GIVER

I never said...

JORDAN

And you imply I should do what makes me happy, and the only thing I can think of that would make me really happy is to die. And what does that say about me? And I'm having sex in the park with Walt Whitman and I'm talking to dead people, you see? For chrissake, Emily Dickenson thinks I'm crazy, so that can't be good. I've been a complete jerk to a really nice, good guy who liked me. Really liked me. And I know I've gone crazy, I know that, but I can't figure out a way out of it because all I want is my feet in the ground and green syrup in my veins and I'm scared and excited and lost and, yes, horny. Shit! Sex and death and love and life and suffering and verse... I can't separate them anymore and I'm not even sure I'm supposed to, so tell me. God. Santa. Satan. Prometheus. What the hell am I supposed to do here?

GIFT GIVER

You had a date?

JORDAN

What?

GIFT GIVER

Somewhere in that rambling, you said you were a jerk to a nice guy. What's his story?

JORDAN

Just a good person who liked me.

GIFT GIVER

And?

JORDAN

And... and I made sure he wouldn't call me again.

GIFT GIVER

Well for goodness sake, why?

JORDAN

He's decent, you understand?

GIFT GIVER

And?

JORDAN

And I don't think it's right for someone like that to get mixed up with someone like me.

GIFT GIVER

That makes sense.

JORDAN

It does?

GIFT GIVER

Sure. You're a terrible person. You wanted to spare him.

JORDAN

Right.

GIFT GIVER

You're an awful person. Confused, lost. Dealing with human urges, desires. Coping with big concepts like death and love and ambition. Nobody else has these problems, only terrible you.

JORDAN

God uses reverse psychology. Nice.

GIFT GIVER

So what's Emily Dickinson like?

JORDAN

Perky.

GIFT GIVER

I knew she would be.

JORDAN

She thinks I'm a terrible person. Just like Jake... and you too no doubt.

GIFT GIVER

Isn't that what you want me to think?

JORDAN

They say that when you're lost, you're supposed to ask God to step in and take control of your life... just, surrender yourself to him. So here I am, I come to you for the one gift you can give me. And now you're refusing?

GIFT GIVER

You're not worthy of my gift.

JORDAN

I'm not worthy of a virus?

GIFT GIVER

You've been selfish. You were offered guidance and you refused it. So go. Go do it in the park, get it there... but you're not getting it from me.

JORDAN

Fine. I will. I'll go out and get infected. And then, when I change my mind, I'll drink the grape soda with the talking squirrels. And I'll be fine. And I can meet another giver and start the cycle again if need be, and I won't drink this time but fade away. And then the branches will start to grow. Or they won't. Maybe I'll be cut too soon. Cut down to size. Even in death I'll have no rest. Maybe there's no good path. Maybe hope is an immune system and mine is deficient. Hope lives in the blood but mine moves to quickly for hope. Hope is washed away, attacked by virus. Hope doesn't exist in trees. Or does it grow there? I can't remember.

GIFT GIVER

Aut insanit homo, aut versus facit.

JORDAN

I don't know that one.

GIFT GIVER

"The fellow is either mad or he is composing verses." *(beat)* Jordan, I have a gift for you.

JORDAN

I thought I didn't deserve it.

GIFT GIVER

Not that. I mean another gift.

*(The GIFT GIVER crosses to his altar and picks up a wrapped gift for JORDAN.)*

JORDAN

Should I open it now?

GIFT GIVER

No. Later. You'll know when.

JORDAN

Well, here, I should give you something too.

GIFT GIVER

It's not necessary.

JORDAN

No, it's trade. I'm told it's tradition.

*(JORDAN presents the GIFT GIVER with  
the bottle of grape soda.)*

JORDAN

Here, the cure for HIV. Enjoy.

GIFT GIVER

Where did you get this?

JORDAN

Oh, you'll love this. The grey area of reality. I got this from a goddess in a bathroom.  
Sitala.

GIFT GIVER

Sitala! How is she?

JORDAN

You're kidding.

GIFT GIVER

She gave you the cure?

JORDAN

Yes.

GIFT GIVER

Which means... she gave you the virus.

JORDAN

Yep. For five bucks.

GIFT GIVER

So now you've got it.

JORDAN

She was a bum in a park bathroom!

GIFT GIVER

Oh, Jordan. Son, you have to learn how to see the world.

JORDAN

*(sarcastic)*

So, what you're telling me is that I have it. Just like that.

GIFT GIVER

That is what I'm telling you. You now have what you wanted.

JORDAN

Sure. Forget all the fucking and fluids. I pay five dollars in a bathroom and now I have it, right from the goddess's mouth. But lucky me, I've got the cure right here.

GIFT GIVER

You are indeed fortunate. That is a gift she didn't even give me.

JORDAN

Why not? You're God. If everything is so screwed up, why can't God and the spirit of disease just sit down over coffee and make things right?

GIFT GIVER

It's not that easy. God searches for answers just as answers search for God. When you have a sad spirit who has lost her senses and a God who is fading away, sometimes the two just can't meet.

JORDAN

I can't take this anymore. Nothing makes sense.

GIFT GIVER

Nothing makes sense? Nothing makes sense for you! I have to tell you Jordan, I don't usually like to raise my voice, but you... you're really infuriating, you know that?

JORDAN

Excuse me?

GIFT GIVER

You think you're struggling with something that is unique to you? You want some sagely advice, here it is: get over it! I have AIDS, ok? I will die from it. But you, you go looking for it, and when you finally get what you want, you think nothing makes sense. It makes perfect sense. You go out, you do, you act and you get results. But most people don't ask for it. To be honest, you're an insult to those people who live with it everyday. Who've learned to appreciate life. You think it's both a punishment and a beautifully tragic destiny. Well screw you! It's a virus. You're still going to be an ungrateful, mopey little shit whether you're positive or not. And all because you're scared. Scared that if you really try to do something with your life, you'll fail. Scared to face the mistakes you've made in your past. Scared of the ghosts of people you've hurt. Well, you know what failure is all about?

JORDAN

Perspective?

GIFT GIVER

Perspective.

*(long pause)*

JORDAN

I really have it, don't I?

GIFT GIVER

You really do, Jordan. You really have it now.

JORDAN

I thought there would be more... I don't know, ceremony.

GIFT GIVER

No. You don't have it, then you do, it's the same for everybody.

JORDAN

I've got it. *(pause)* Well good. Finally.

GIFT GIVER

Congratulations. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to expel some of this angry energy.

*(The GIFT GIVER lights some incense and walks around the room spreading it in the air.)*

JORDAN

I can feel it, my blood. It's slower somehow. It's starting to feel... right.

GIFT GIVER

I'm glad.

JORDAN

*(smiling)*

It's true. It's really true. I have it.

GIFT GIVER

You do.

JORDAN

*(happy, almost hysterically ecstatic)*

Yeah. It's moving through like syrup. And you know what? It feels amazing. I knew it would, see? I knew it! God! I can feel the fear slipping away, just falling out of me. I've never felt so liberated. It's like I can live without consequence. Death, it doesn't mean anything anymore, you know? It doesn't scare me. Because I know it now, I've

tasted it. It's coming. And now I can live. Do you understand, I finally feel like I can go out there and live. I'm growing. I'm starting to grow like an oak, I'm coming... I'm becoming. I am.

GIFT GIVER

I am truly happy for you. So what do you do now?

JORDAN

I go out, I live. I reconnect...

GIFT GIVER

With the people in your life, with the ones you've pushed away.

JORDAN

Yes, I suppose. *(pause)* Only...

GIFT GIVER

Only you're different now. Even more different than before. They don't understand, do they?

JORDAN

Well no... not really, I mean...

GIFT GIVER

You felt so alone before. But how about now? This is what you wanted. What you needed.

JORDAN

Yeah...

GIFT GIVER

So now you don't have to feel alone anymore, right?

JORDAN

Right.

GIFT GIVER

Only...

JORDAN

Only... loneliness. I don't... I'm not sure I really knew what loneliness *was* before now.

GIFT GIVER

But at least you've punished yourself, right? Made up for the mistakes of your past. How's that guilt? Gone yet?

JORDAN

Not exactly...

GIFT GIVER

Aha. And what about your urge to write, to create. Is it quenched? (*silence*) Is it?

JORDAN

No. It isn't.

GIFT GIVER

Why not?

JORDAN

I... I want to write. More now than ever. Isn't that crazy. Just in an instant I felt more a need to write than I have since...

GIFT GIVER

Since?

JORDAN

I don't understand.

GIFT GIVER

Well then start writing. Only now you don't feel like you have as much time as you used to.

JORDAN

No...

GIFT GIVER

I mean, you may live a long life still, but that inevitable death... you may no longer fear it, but it walks with you. Do you feel it?

JORDAN

I feel it. It's planting me. My feet, they're already in the ground.

GIFT GIVER

It's harder to move now.

JORDAN

It's harder. I want... I need to keep moving.

GIFT GIVER

You cannot move faster than your own blood.



JORDAN

But it's not fair. I'm free now, free of the fear.

GIFT GIVER

Fear can only be defeated if you truly know what the fear is. So now you have fear and something new: knowledge.

JORDAN

But that's not fair.

GIFT GIVER

Fair? (*laughs*) God is dying from disease and you think life should be fair?

JORDAN

It's not supposed to be like this.

GIFT GIVER

What did you think, Jordan, what did you expect? Millions of people live with and die from this disease everyday. Most of them didn't ask for it. Fair. We're going to die from it. What in this life is fair? TELL ME?! WHAT IS FAIR?!

JORDAN

Well isn't that your fault? You're God.

GIFT GIVER

God is very busy. And God helps those who help themselves.

JORDAN

I just wanted my life to mean something again. Like it used to. I just want meaning. Is that too much to ask?

*(The GIFT GIVER doesn't answer.)*

JORDAN (*cont...*)

Why do I feel like this? I don't understand.

GIFT GIVER

For most people, it's in their blood, and many go on to live happy, fulfilling lives. But you asked for plague, it's in more than your blood, it's in your soul.

JORDAN

The cure... the grape soda I gave you. Are you telling me that it really works?

GIFT GIVER

If she can grant disease, she can take it away.

So I've given you the cure.

JORDAN

You are free to take it back.

GIFT GIVER

Take it back?! From God?!

JORDAN

Call it a gift.

GIFT GIVER

*(Pause. JORDAN looks at the bottle but does not move.)*

JORDAN  
*Because I could not stop for Death,  
He kindly stopped for me;  
The carriage held but just ourselves  
And Immortality.*

JORDAN

I thought you didn't care for Dickinson.

GIFT GIVER

Things change.

JORDAN

*(Blackout)*

- XII -

*(Lights behind the scrim show trees.  
Downstage, we're in the park again.  
JORDAN sits on a bench, staring blankly.  
Next to him, the wrapped box from the GIFT  
GIVER. After a moment, JAKE enters.)*

JORDAN

*(without looking up)*

Hello Jake.

JAKE

I don't think I've ever seen you in the daylight before. That bathroom lighting- not flattering.

JORDAN

You here looking for me, or for sex?

JAKE

You. Not sure why, except of course for my unyielding fetish for humiliation.

JORDAN

Look, about how I acted...

JAKE

No, it was me. At the funeral... I'm sorry for my behavior.

JORDAN

No you're not.

JAKE

Yeah, you're right, I'm totally not.

JORDAN

I need you to know something. It's not that I wasn't interested in you...

JAKE

I know. I mean... I thought it was me for a hot minute, but then I realized it was you. I mean, maybe you weren't interested, but I'm pretty sure you might have been. Well, intrigued at least. But, I mean... look, you're obviously going through stuff, and it took a while to figure it out, but I'm not stupid. You're a chaser.

JORDAN

You're right.

JAKE

You chase misery. I get it. I offered something more. But that's not what you wanted or needed or... whatever. But I worry about you, and I'm here. If you need someone to talk to. (*pause*) Well, I just came to tell you that. Goodbye Jordan.

JORDAN

Wait. There's some things *I* need to tell *you*.

JAKE

You really don't.

JORDAN

No, I do. And not because I want your sympathy or because I like you or because I want forgiveness, but because I need to say them. And to tell you these things, well... And it's not that I feel the need to be punished. Well, not as much. Or maybe not for the reasons I thought... But because you were right, and if I'm ever going to change...

JAKE

You like me?

JORDAN

What?

JAKE

Somewhere in the midst of that nonsensical grouping of sentences... you said you liked me.

JORDAN

I do like you. I've liked you since the bathroom. Where, by the way, I *did* fuck that sleazy guy.

JAKE

Wow. That may be the most romantic thing anyone's ever said to me. (*beat*) And that's unbelievably sad.

JORDAN

You remember what you told me about chasing things that you know you shouldn't, but you just feel compelled to.

JAKE

Yeah.

JORDAN

That's what I've been doing. I've been chasing something. This "thing." And I was a little obsessed. I think that this chase has been the first time in a long time I've found any kind of meaning in my life, so I went for it. I knew it was wrong, but it felt so good to

finally have purpose so I did. I chased. I chased this darkness, and I thought it would make up for... for what I did to him. Do you understand what I'm saying.

JAKE

You're a bug chaser.

*(silence)*

JAKE *(cont...)*

I'm sorry. I'm way off.

JORDAN

No. You're right. It's just, I've never heard put so bluntly. You knew?

JAKE

Jordan, I know when someone is trying to self-destruct.

JORDAN

It just hasn't seemed real until I heard you say it. But that's the thing about reality...

JAKE

Did you, you know... did you catch it?

JORDAN

I did. I caught it. And I had the cure. I gave it to God, but he offered to give it back.

JAKE

You Indian-gave God the cure for AIDS?

JORDAN

It's a long story.

JAKE

So do you have it or not?

JORDAN

Honestly, I don't know. But it doesn't matter. *(pause)* I wanted so badly to make things right, but I've just been making the same mistakes. *(pause)* I didn't want you to be exposed.

JAKE

To HIV?

JORDAN

Well, yeah to HIV, but mostly... to me.

JAKE

I see.

JORDAN

And even if I didn't catch it, there are other things. You understand? Other consequences. If we were to ever... write poetry... together... I wouldn't be able to write in exact rhyme. Ever. For the rest of my life, I will never be able to write completely rhyming poetry. And that's not going to change. Do you see what I'm saying?

JAKE

Depends. Are you making use of an extended metaphor?

JORDAN

It's not really a metaphor if it has to be pointed out.

JAKE

Jordan, there are lots of people who can't... rhyme. It's not such a bad thing, you know, to use protection. When writing poetry.

JORDAN

Is that really the kind of poetry you would want to write for the rest of your life?

JAKE

Just because art is "protected" doesn't mean that it can't be written with love. Sometimes the most beautiful things come from within boundaries.

JORDAN

I don't know if I can be with someone and live with that burden.

JAKE

At the funeral, you said he loved you. That disease was always there between you two. But *you* put it there. A burden is borne more easily when it's shared.

JORDAN

I know that, and I feel terrible...

JAKE

I was talking about *your* burden. *Your* disease. You didn't let him help you bear the load.

JORDAN

I screwed up so much.

JAKE

You're not perfect, I get that. I'm not either. *(pause)* Jordan, every night when I get home I cut myself on my arms and legs and stomach just so that I can *feel* something.

JORDAN

Oh God, Jake. Really?

JAKE

No, I'm totally kidding. See, I have a sick sense of humor. I'm strange and off-putting to most people. We all have our issues.

JORDAN

You're such a freak

JAKE

Look who's talking.

*(pause)*

JAKE *(cont...)*

I know you're going through a lot, but my offer still stands. I'd like to take you out sometime. Eventually. When you're ready.

JORDAN

But if I'm infected...

JAKE

I can handle it.

JORDAN

That's what *I* said.

JAKE

I'm not you.

JORDAN

Maybe. One day. But until then... friends?

JAKE

Friends are good. *(pause)* So that gift... is that for me?

JORDAN

No. It's for me actually.

JAKE

Gee, you really know how to charm a guy.

*(JORDAN looks at the present, then opens it.)*

What is it?  
JAKE

Paper. And a pen.  
JORDAN

What for?  
JAKE

For writing.  
JORDAN

That makes sense. Who's it from?  
JAKE

God. Santa. *(beat)* A friend.  
JORDAN

Friends are good.  
JAKE

They really are.  
JORDAN

*(During the last few lines, lights brighten behind the scrim. The GIFT GIVER enters with SITALA. They speak silently. JAKE notices them.)*

Do you know them?  
JAKE

I think I do. Together, perhaps, they are change. Mindless disease meets with an infected God. And upon such a union, change becomes the outcome, the inevitability. Not fear, not death, but change. Fundamental and beautiful.  
JORDAN

That's lovely. Who wrote that?  
JAKE

I did.  
JORDAN



*(SITALA gives the GIFT GIVER a bottle of purple liquid as JORDAN and JAKE watch. SITALA and the GIFT GIVER hug. Lights down behind the scrim.)*

JAKE

I think it's time we get out of the woods.

JORDAN

I think you're right. Thank you, Jake.

*(JAKE smiles and exits. JORDAN begins to exit, hesitates, and addresses no one and everyone.)*

JORDAN *(cont...)*

*Native moments--when you come upon me--ah you are here now,  
Give me now libidinous joys only,  
Give me the drench of my passions, give me life coarse and rank,  
To-day I go consort with Nature's darlings, to-night too,  
I am for those who believe in loose delights, I share the midnight  
orgies of young men,  
I dance with the dancers and drink with the drinkers,  
The echoes ring with our indecent calls, I pick out some low person  
for my dearest friend,  
He shall be lawless, rude, illiterate, he shall be one condemn'd by  
others for deeds done,  
I will play a part no longer, why should I exile myself from my companions?  
O you shunn'd persons, I at least do not shun you,  
I come forthwith in your midst, I will be your poet,  
I will be more to you than to any of the rest.*

*(Lights fade to Blackout)*

*(End of play)*

## **Vita**

Bradley Troll is a Louisiana resident and recipient of numerous awards, including Regional Winner at the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival in 2006 and 2009.