

**Blessed Unrest**

**By**

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(Produced at HB Theater, NYC)

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Reg. - WGA-e

### Cast of Characters

Tom - Thirties. A writer.

Sprig - Thirties. His wife, a biologist.

Miguel - Twenties. Restaurant deliveryman.

Susan - Sixties. From Minnesota.

Bill - Sixties. Her husband, also from the Gopher State.

Brian - Forties.

Carl - Thirties.

### Setting

A house in the suburbs around Seattle, Washington, and a highway rest stop north of Seattle.

### Time

The present.

ACT I

SCENE 1

SETTING: TOM's attic office, midday. The room is cheery and sparse, an old wooden desk and chair in the center of the room and bookshelves lining the far wall. A small table for a goldfish bowl.

AT RISE: TOM in pajamas, on his knees digging through desk drawers. He locates a pencil and yellow pad, sits and with relish applies pencil to paper. The pencil tip breaks off. He searches for a pencil sharpener, sharpens pencil over desktop until sharpener bottom falls out and shavings go all over the desk. He picks up trash bin and brushes shavings into it, sits and begins to write again, reading aloud as he does so.

TOM

I exist just in front of myself, just out of reach. My lips are dry, I rub them against each other and feel the hardened skin. My skin is made up of overlapping cells, with pores and hair follicles and minute bacteria, and my skin dies and flakes off and becomes dust that gathers in the corners of rooms. All these tiny worlds, realities, existing at the same time, pressed against each other, unaware of each other...

There is a knock at the door.

For fuck's sake!

SPRIG

His wife SPRIG enters balancing a huge tray of beakers and test tubes

Sweetheart? There's a man at the door from the Animal Welfare department. He wants to know if we've seen any sign of a mountain lion.

TOM

Sadly no. I'd much rather see one of those pass by the house than a human being.

SPRIG

Apparently it's eaten a human being. Mauled one, anyway. A jogger, on Prospect Street. They wait in trees and then jump down on a fast moving object and tear it to pieces.

TOM

Excellent! I admire its decisive action. As if it's some sort of cardinal sin for an animal to kill a human. Jesus, we used to be part of the food chain. Now we rot away in air tight coffins so even the worms don't benefit from our existence.

SPRIG

I'll tell the man we've haven't seen hide or hair.

TOM

Kindly don't disturb me again until lunchtime. I'm getting some amazing stuff right now. The words are just flying into my brain.

Considers, then resumes writing  
Daily I walk home knowing beforehand what every step will be like, each time shoe hits asphalt, scraping off little slivers of rubber, the anticipation conjured by each familiar landmark, until I finally reach my door, anticipating the angular bite of my keys before my hand closes on them, knowing the sharp click of the lock before I hear it, knowing how it will spark a little shiver of recognition...

The door bursts open again.

SPRIG

The basement's flooded. The hose came off the washing machine.

TOM

Sprig, I cannot accommodate these pedestrian issues at this time. Get a bucket. Very important work is happening in here and I cannot continue to be disturbed.

SPRIG

You've been in here all weekend Tom. I've hardly seen you.

SPRIG slams the door closed

ACT I

SCENE 2

SETTING: The kitchen, afternoon. The sink is piled high with dirty dishes and the counter is covered in scientific paraphernalia: microscope, scales, beakers, bunsen burners.

AT RISE: SPRIG is skinning a badger carcass that hangs from a string tied to an overhead light fixture. TOM is at the table.

SPRIG

Amazing how the skin slides so easily from the organ sack. It's like a banana. And look how neatly the organs fit together, a living puzzle. I just love it. This one is in such good condition. I think the hide is just big enough to finish my cape.

TOM

Can't he bring you bigger road kill? You could make clothing much faster with a deer hide instead of cobbling together all those little ones.

SPRIG

I know. But deer carcasses are hard to come by. Such a shame.

TOM

Is there anything to eat besides that badger? I don't think I've eaten since yesterday's breakfast.

SPRIG

Shoot. I was going to pick something up on the way home last night but I forgot... So exciting! I took a boat out on Lake Washington with the Corps of Engineers. They want me to research the sudden overgrowth of water chestnut from the excess phosphorus runoff...

(off TOM's look)

I could go out and find us something to eat... Maybe you could get the groceries sometimes Tom. It's hard when I work so late. You're home all day.

TOM

I'm not home all day Sprig. I take long and strenuous walks to clear my head. A disciplined regimen is essential for a writer. We'll have to get delivery from that Mexican place again. Make sure to get the door, I'll be in my office. Where's my notebook?

doesn't see it protruding from his pajama pocket. Grabs paper towel roll instead and writes on it

Somehow those brief moments with a delivery man are terribly awkward; just as when one asks for directions from a stranger, the knowledge that the relationship is only going to last a matter of seconds makes it seem callous and somehow insincere.

TOM takes a box of birdseed from the counter and throws a handful from the kitchen window, watching the gathering birds

TOM

Funny how little creatures have such jerky movements. Birds, squirrels, mice. As if their lives are too small to warrant a motor any more complex than a wind-up toy.

Closes the window abruptly

Oh well.

SPRIG

stirring contents of a beaker and holds it up to the light

Just look at this algae. The frilly edges are actually thousands of minute fractals. Tiny geometries, such order on the micro level. There's such a grandeur to life, even in these beads of water. I'm amazed by it. Awed by it.

Drops the beaker

Oh shoot.

She grabs the paper towel roll and mops up the spill, ruining TOM's prose.

TOM

I'll call the Mexican. While you talk to your plants.

SPRIG

Algae's not a plant, it's Kingdom Protista. What time is it? I have to turn on the hydroponic system. Did you see the artificial wetland I built in the basement, for the algae? It's growing at five times its normal rate.

She exits

TOM

Why don't you grow something we can eat!

ACT 1

SCENE 3

SETTING:

The kitchen.

AT RISE: SPRIG is at her microscope, singing to herself when the kitchen door suddenly bursts open and in falls MIGUEL, the delivery man from the Mexican restaurant. He is bleeding badly from his back and his shirt is shredded but he's managed to hold onto the delivery bag.

MIGUEL

Ay Dios mio! Un animal que es en un arbol! Una gata grande!

He collapses on the floor

SPRIG

Who's this? You looks very badly damaged.

goes over to examine Miguel  
Claw marks, five inch diameter, smaller inner digits. A large feline. Hello? Can you hear me?

picks up a watering can from the counter and pours water on MIGUEL'S face

MIGUEL

comes to, whimpering

I am dying.

SPRIG

No you're not. Were you hurrying on your way here?

MIGUEL

Yes, on my bicycle, I cannot be late wit de order. I av ay strong work ethic.

sees the blood on his shirt, looks faint

Blood!

SPRIG

I have some pau d'arco root somewhere here... I'll make a poultice.

MIGUEL

You are angel. Angel in disguise.

reaches up and removes SPRIG'S glasses

You see?

SPRIG

No, I can't see anything. Please give me back my glasses.

MIGUEL

As you like. I was entering your drifeway and dis animal he jump down on me from dee roof. I hit him right on dee nose and he run away. I am bull fighter since I was fourteen. My name is Miguel.

puts out hand for SPRIG to shake

SPRIG

Miguel, that's very impressive. A mountain lion is a prodigious opponent under the best of circumstances.

TOM enters the kitchen

TOM

Do you know what I just calculated? If I live to be 70, which is the average life expectancy for a male living in the good ol' US of A who isn't a toll booth operator or a baseball player, if I live to be 70 and I brush my teeth twice daily, not even the recommended three times, I will brush them 29,200 more times before I die. I'm fed up with the amount of upkeep necessary just to make it to another day. It's all so predictable, so many years to go of squeezing the right amount of toothpaste, putting the cap back on, standing staring into the mirror brushing and spitting. The monotony makes my skin crawl. Have you ever considered that?

SPRIG

The delivery man was attacked on the way over.

TOM

You can't set foot outside anymore without being set upon by another human.

SPRIG

Get off your high horse. It was the mountain lion.

TOM

Spectacular! The natural order of things is restored. I must bear witness to the carnage. It will spur on my creative faculties.

Walking over and peering down at Miguel  
Isn't this amazing. How did the lion make out?

SPRIG

It's probably fine, might still be on the roof. We should call Animal Welfare.

TOM

Hold on now sweetheart, we can't do that. They'll kill it. Or worse still put it in the zoo.

MIGUEL

Miguel is not leaving out dat door wit dat animal running ayroun'. I haf no insurance wit dis job. And I am scairt. Well only a leetle nervioso.

TOM

We'll catch it. I shall devise a trap.

MIGUEL

An' then what? You are looking for a new pet? Porque dis animal was very angry. He would not be good in dee house.

TOM

We can return it to its native habitat. Lake Wenatchee State Park is probably big enough. I will not allow this noble creature to be killed. How to build a trap...

He goes over to the bookshelf, starts riffling through the books.

SPRIG

Miguel would you like to lie down in the hammock and gather your energies after this ordeal?

MIGUEL

Sprig, is not necessary. You have healed Miguel and fluttered his heart. You are like a ray of sunshine in my eyes, not blinding me but, how you say... refifing me.

Crawls to counter and pulls himself up by the drawer handles

SPRIG

Maybe you'd like to look at the protozoan flagellates I've been studying. It will be so helpful to have two sets of eyes, they tend to move out of the light. I have some mature specimens I'm trying to mate.

MIGUEL

I know not these items but mating is one of my especialities.

TOM

Listen to this Miguel.

Reading from a well worn copy of  
'Nausea'

'I exist because I think... and I can't stop myself from thinking. At this very moment- it's frightful- if I exist, it is because I am horrified at existing. I am the one who pulls myself from the nothingness to which I aspire.

Even if I crouch silently in a corner, I shall not forget myself.' You see, all great literature is about loneliness and death, and yet the inevitability of the latter is the source of life's creative urgency and potential for joy. I write for that, you see. All art is a revolt against man's fate.

MIGUEL

A revolt, okay.

Fist weakly in the air

Revolucion!

TOM

But what difference does it make. Do you hear that sound? That's eternity laughing at the futility of life and the effort of life. A mirthless laughter more terrible than any sadness. Watching us, self obsessed, gnawing away at our lives, chewing them down until we reach the thick stump of death. Saw dust. That's what it amounts to. It makes me sick and I long for it all to end.

SPRIG

Look here Miguel. In the microscope. There they are. Pursuing whatever it is that protozoan flagellates pursue.

MIGUEL

peering into her microscope

Will jue look at dat. Jus e'swimming ayroun wit der tails flapping. Jue show me a new world. I would like to show one to jue.

They all look up at a noise from the roof. The mountain lion comes crashing through the ceiling in a cloud of roof tiles and plaster. MIGUEL leaps up and grabs a baseball bat leaning against the wall

MIGUEL

Bullfighter!

He hits the heap of debris several times. It lies still.

Now we tie him up.

ACT I

## SCENE 4

SETTING: A rest stop on Highway 120. Bathrooms, a bench, a few trees and shrubs, and behind a wooded area. The sound of cars passing.

AT RISE: TOM climbs from behind the wheel of their station wagon and stretches. SPRIG exits from passenger side and peers through the back window of the car.

SPRIG  
Looks like it's still knocked out.

TOM  
Thank god for that. I imagine it will be in a bad temper when it comes to. I'm going to make use of the facilities. Back in a minute.

He exits to the bathroom. SPRIG exclaims excitedly and goes to some low lying plants along the walkway. Evidently some plant unique to that microclimate. A woman, SUSAN, 60 or so, overweight, strong Minnesota accent, wearing an 'I Love Grandma' t-shirt, exits the women's room.

SUSAN  
Bill? Bill!

BILL  
Her husband, also overweight, balding, Minnesota accent, emerges from behind a car  
Over here Susan! Just checking the tire pressure.

SUSAN hurries towards him, stops to search through her purse

SUSAN  
Now where on earth are my throat lozenges. The air here just isn't the same as back home...

Almost falls over SPRIG, still bent down on the path.

What in heaven's name...Oh dear, did you lose a contact?

SPRIG  
What? Oh no I...

SUSAN

(talking over her)

Let me help you look.

Crouches down next to SPRIG

Are you from out of state?

without waiting for answer, talking  
quickly with much enthusiasm

We're from Minnesota but Lou Ann- that's our daughter- just had a baby so we're on our way to Spokane for a little visit. Isn't that nice? This is our third time leaving Minnesota. Oh yah. The first time was for a Disney cruise from Florida to Cancun. We spent four days in Cancun. Oh we had such a good time. Bill? What was that hotel we stayed at, near the beach?

BILL is unfolding a huge map onto the hood of his car.

BILL

It was the Holiday Inn. Great customer service, you betcha. They gave us a shoe horn so we could get the gosh darn rubber flippers on for the snorkeling. We should have waited until we were at the beach to put them on honey, I remember it was quite a walk. I keep forgetting they gave us some kind of coupons for an upgrade.

SUSAN

Oh that's right! I wonder if they have a Holiday Inn here in Washington, we could maybe use the coupons before they expire. The room was so comfortable. Bill caught a cold though the last day, kept me up all night blowing his nose.

BILL

Gosh, yeah I remember.

SUSAN

(To Sprig)

Where do you like to stay at honey, when...

she stops and looks at SPRIG accusingly  
Why did you tell me you lost a contact? You're wearing glasses.

She heaves herself up

My knees!

TOM arrives at the car

TOM

(to Sprig)

There's a notice on the welcome sign thanking us for being 'guests' at this rest stop! And they didn't call it a rest stop, they called it a 'comfort station'. What nonsense. Must language be rendered entirely meaningless? Meanwhile all the toilets are clogged.

(noticing Bill and Susan)

Er, hello. Is there a reason we're all gathered around?

SUSAN

Is this your husband dear? Oh how cute! Hi I'm Susan and this is Bill, we're from Minnesota.

TOM

The 'Gopher State'. Or the 'Playground of the Nation', but I think that's pushing it.

Well sweetheart shall we continue on?

BILL

Are either of you good folks familiar with Highway 160? Is that the fastest way to Spokane or is there a more direct route.

TOM

If you're coming from Minnesota you passed Spokane on your way here.

SUSAN

Oh my land...

BILL

Shoot! It must be that detour we made this morning, that was a real doozy there. Do you know we took a wrong turn out of the parking lot leaving Denny's and got completely turned around. Really threw us for a loop. Would you mind taking a gander at the map here?

SUSAN

(to Tom)

You must know your way around. Didn't you say you were a travelling salesman?

TOM

Certainly not, I would never...

SUSAN

(interrupting)

Now what is it you're selling, let me guess, is it a craft item? I love craft items don't I honey. Oh yah. I took an artificial flower making class last year at our community center and I make them as gifts. Oh they're really popular aren't they Bill.

BILL

They are by golly. And I can whip up a pretty nifty birdhouse in about an hour. We have one outside every window.

TOM

(interested)

Really. I just toss the birdseed on the ground but the squirrels get to it first. How would I go about constructing a house?

BILL

Oh, you just take some wood see, spruce is good, they seem to enjoy the sap. And you, well let me draw you a little picture here.

He leans over the hood with TOM,  
drawing on a scrap of paper

TOM

How interesting. I don't know when I'll find the time to build one, I have a very full daily routine.

SUSAN

The Lord will provide, the good Lord will provide.

BILL

straightening up from his birdhouse  
drawing, which TOM pockets

Amen.

he crosses himself

TOM

And the coping mechanism emerges. What comedy.

SUSAN

You're not a believer?

TOM

Certainly not. Not in that drivel.

BILL

That's a shame son, a real shame. We've taken Jesus Christ as our own personal savior.

SUSAN

You betcha, definitely. His presence is a light in our lives.

BRIAN, 30, emerges from behind the restroom building, intent on the tai chi forms he is working through. He is wearing loose hemp pants, sandals, and a flowing Indian style shirt. He chants to himself. Everyone stares. He trips over something in the grass and drops the yoga mat hanging from his shoulder

BRIAN

God *damn* it!

SUSAN

What in the world...

TOM

Jesus another coping mechanism.

SUSAN

Now you're taking the Lord's name in vain.

TOM

Madam kindly do not impose your myopic views on me.

BRIAN walks past to his car, having retrieved his yoga mat. He does a little bow to the group

BRIAN

Namaste.

He tries his car door it's locked. He searches his pockets frantically

God *damn* it!

He kicks a tire. Turns to the others, composing himself

Afternoon folks. Does anyone have a coat hanger? I left my keys in the car.



SPRIG

I've collected a very rare species of Pteridophyt. The lab will be so pleased.

TOM

Good sweetheart. My wife is expanding the boundaries of human knowledge even as the moronic seek to limit them. Now Sprig I think our charge may be growing restless.

BRIAN

(gesturing to SPRIG's plant)

Plants have feelings you know. I don't think that beautiful green being wants to be given a label like it's just an object.

SUSAN

Green bean? That's not a bean. One thing I do know is my legumes, I...

suddenly there is a large amount of rustling from the wooded area behind the rest stop. CARL, a very scruffy man in his thirties clambers over the fence. Beard growing in, dirty flannel shirt, dried mud on his pants, one shoe. He looks at the group and moans, crumpling into a sitting position on the grass. He pulls a Smith & Wesson 1911 revolver from his waistband and holds it to his temple. SUSAN screams and pulls BILL behind a car. BRIAN also screams, and tries vainly to get into his locked car. TOM and SPRIG instinctively hold hands but don't move from where they stand.

CARL

rocking back and forth in his anguish  
I can't take it! I can't take it! It wont stop, it goes on  
and on and on.

He sits motionless for a minute  
Even sitting *still* I can't forget myself. The thoughts creep  
back in, *meaningless*. What have I done to deserve this  
horrific existence? The void beckons me to end my suffering,  
for surely "there is no more dreadful punishment...

TOM

...than futile and hopeless  
labor".

CARL

...than futile and hopeless  
labor".

TOM

Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus". A comrade!

CARL

"Anguish, the perpetual climate of the lucid man"...

TOM

"The world can no longer offer anything to the man filled with anguish". But "as for that thorn he feels in his heart, he is careful not to quiet its pain".

SPRIG

I thought Tom was the only one who spoke like that.

CARL

"For anyone who is alone, without God and without a master, the weight of days is dreadful".

TOM

(excitedly)

And how truly dreadful it is!

CARL

This burden of consciousness...

TOM

"To be overly conscious is a sickness"...

CARL

Dostoevsky!

TOM

...for which only death offers a cure. I know.

SUSAN

(from behind their car)

What are they talking about Bill? I don't understand what they're talking about.

BILL

It's giving me the heebie jeebies.

TOM

(re BILL and SUSAN )

Peons. Ignore them. They have no powers of rumination.

BRIAN emerges from his hiding place crouched behind his car. He has removed a sage bundle from his bag and proceeds to light it

BRIAN

Let's clear away some of this negativity.

He circles the group, blowing sage smoke in their direction. He hesitates, then approaches CARL and circles him with smoke until CARL coughs violently

So much better. I saw some real anger and pain in your energy fields from where I was hiding. Not hiding just observing without any judgement.

(to TOM and CARL)

You two are a real downer, you know that? This calls for some heavy medicine. And I know just the thing, a mandala shaped in the symbol for healing.

He ceremoniously removes several objects from his bag

Sand from the Drepung monastery.

TOM

We can do without whatever it is thank you very much. Don't burden us with your spiritual shrapnel.

(gesturing to BILL and SUSAN)

Obviously very hard to get rid of these fairy tales once they've wormed their way in.

BILL steps forward from behind the car where he and SUSAN have been crouching

BILL

I don't know about all that, but I do know what helps me when I'm feeling blue. The Lazy Boy and a football game on the boob tube. The wife whips me up a ham sandwich and potato salad and I'm set.

TOM

Foooootbawwwll. Getchur cold wuuun! No. For me it's the semicolon, my favorite mark of punctuation. The cadence it adds to a sentence is the briefest pull on the reins followed by a renewed gallop. Beautiful.

BRIAN has begun chanting softly as he creates a chalk outline of a big circle on the asphalt

BRIAN

I could use some help with this. It's important to get the initial outline absolutely perfect.

CARL

Hello! I'm suffering over here and you can't stop talking amongst yourselves. My heart breaks but once again the world turns away from me, silent.

TOM

Go on and put the gun to your head. No no I suppose we have to find a way through this.

BILL

Now I'm not a preacher so I can't claim to speak the faith, but turning towards God will surely lift from your eyes the veil of hopelessness.

CARL

The sheer absurdity of life doesn't inspire me to hope. In a universe devoid of justice or meaning the logical conclusion is to end my senseless existence.

TOM

This man obviously condemns the concept of hope, as being an opiate, a shield from the responsibility of accepting life's true nature. As long as you have hope you cannot live freely.

SUSAN joins them from behind the car

SUSAN

Now this is a real shame. Oh this is so upsetting. Give yourself to the Lord, let him carry you.

BILL

He has a plan for each and every one of us. Trust in him.

TOM

(to BILL and SUSAN)

Is it so terrifying for you to consider that perhaps there is no plan at all? No ultimate purpose?

(to CARL)

I share your angst. I get up every morning with the full knowledge that nothing matters whatsoever.

SPRIG

I wish you would get up in the morning. You don't get up until twelve.

TOM

Thank you darling. Perhaps not but when I do it's with an immediate awareness of the sheer amount of matter in the world, fleshy and decaying and atrophying.

CARL

And the unending internal narrative trying to make sense of it.

TOM

Sickening.

SUSAN

You know what's sickening to me? Your lack of faith.

TOM

As Nietzsche pointed out, "a casual stroll through the lunatic asylum shows that faith does not prove anything".

SUSAN

You should be thanking God in heaven for the wonderful gift of his creation. That's what you should be doing every morning.

TOM

It's not as if living without a belief in God is so pleasant. For you meaning doesn't have to be scavenged into existence, patchworked together from a multitude of tiny tasks. Your mental flabbiness makes things easier for you.

BILL

Now don't you go calling my wife flabby, you hear me? Is this what people in the Blue states are like? No wonder...

BRIAN

(interrupting)

Okay I'm going to need everyone to gather around the circle.

Pushes Bill over to the circle he's created

You're going to represent north, a grounding force.

BILL

I'm not sure this is necessary son.

BRIAN

Oh it's necessary. We'll need to collect some plants willing to give their life in the name of healing. A type that burns easily.

(to SPRIG)

I'll leave that to you to find since you're such an expert at labeling things.

(to SUSAN)

I'll ask you to stand here.

He motions to the other side of the circle

SUSAN

Oh no thank you. I haven't played hopscotch in years.

BRIAN

(looking tearful)

I'm giving a gift from my heart and you're rejecting it! Get over there dammit!

SUSAN

(nervously)

Well... okay but just for a second now you hear. We really do need to get going.

She stands at the circle

BRIAN

(to TOM)

You too, please join them at the circle.

TOM

I have no intention of indulging your sad attempt to parrot a legitimate art form. You have a need for self expression far beyond the scope of your natural talents.

BRIAN

(obviously repeating something a counselor has told him)

We all have an individual gift to offer the world that no one else has. There is only one of me in *all* the world and my self expression is unique and immensely important. I shouldn't judge it, because if I don't express my creative impulse it will be lost forever. But *'whatever'*.

He makes the annoying 'W' sign with his hands.

(to SPRIG)

Where's the plant spirit offering? Oh never mind, I'll do everything.

Carelessly grabs a few low-lying plants from under the nearby shrubbery

See the plants know what's going on. They offer up their wisdom to those who treat them with respect.

SPRIG

Coming over to the circle in concern  
That's Toxicodendron.

BRIAN

I don't want to hear your labels! Now quiet I need to summon  
up the earth force.

Closes his eyes and begins to chant

SPRIG

Commonly known as poison ivy.

TOM

Comes to the circle and takes SPRIG's  
arm

Leave him to play in his sandbox. I don't think he's quite  
right in the head.

BRIAN

(opening one eye)

I heard that! You can take your judgements elsewhere this is  
a no judgement zone!

CARL

I can't believe this! I'm sitting here alone staring down  
utter despair and you're all standing around gossiping! What  
does it take to reach you people? I need *help*, damn you!

BILL

Knock and the door shall be opened unto ye. We can see you're  
in a bind son. Susan and I would be happy to drop you off at  
a place of worship. I think some knee bending at the altar  
might put you on the right track. Or try having a sense of  
humor.

TOM

Real humor arises from the inescapable fact that we are all  
born into a losing struggle. Since you're blissfully unaware  
of that it's hard to see you having much of a grasp on humor.

BRIAN

I think you should try a rehab center. Turns out that's what  
I needed when...

CARL stands suddenly and points the gun  
at the group gathered in the circle.  
SUSAN screams and starts to sob loudly,  
drops to her knees to pray. BILL  
swears. SPRIG moves to protect her  
precious specimens. TOM mumbles 'oh for  
god's sake' etc. BRIAN still has his  
eyes closed.

CARL

Damn you people! You're oblivious! *God* its discouraging. *Completely* oblivious to the darkness seething and writhing at the bottom of everything, *winding* its tentacles...

SUSAN

(through her tears)

Bill I want to go home! We shouldn't have left Minnesota, this man's problem isn't our cross to bear.

BRIAN

(still with his eyes closed)

Open your hearts people, what effects one affects us all.

Opens his eyes, sees Carl with the gun, screams and pulls Bill in front of him.

This is not happening, this is *not* happening.

TOM

(to CARL)

Kill yourself why don't you. Get on with it you'll do the planet a favor. Get rid of all of us, then the other species can have a stab at it.

SPRIG

Did you know, if all the ants on earth died all life on the planet would disappear in a matter of weeks? And if all the humans died all life would flourish in a matter of weeks. Sad isn't it. We assume we're the end product of evolution, the reason it all took place- amoebas to apes all to end with us!

BILL

Learn your bible folks, we were doing just fine until Eve was too weak to resist temptation. If only she'd resisted that apple... thanks to Eve's weakness Adam was lured into the sin of fornication.

SPRIG

What a fairytale. The Adam and Eve story came from an oral tradition passed on by tribes in the Fertile Crescent to explain the Agricultural Revolution. Why don't you learn your history.

TOM

Anyway Bill if it wasn't for your silly apple it all would have ended there, in the Garden of Eden, wouldn't it. You wouldn't be standing in this parking lot.

(to the pacing CARL)

It is indeed legitimate to wonder whether life has a meaning;

therefore it is legitimate to meet the problem of suicide face to face. I applaud your courage.

SUSAN

Courage!?! He's pointing a gun at us and you say he has courage.

BRIAN

Emerges from behind BILL and self-importantly addresses CARL

You're a boat on the ocean of life, bobbing up and down with every event and emotion. Stop being a victim! Become an observer of your own life, I did.

TOM

(to BRIAN)

One whose mind observes itself is an intellectual. And that you most certainly are not.

BRIAN

Oh shut up mister know-it-all. You're not the only one who thinks around here. This is all part of our dharma. We've been brought together for a reason, that's what my guru would say.

CARL

I don't want to hide behind a ready-made belief system like you do, I want to engage life as it really is! Coward.

SUSAN

People, people, the Lord walks always beside us. Why wont you accept his love?

TOM

Why do so many of you lack the courage to question life and meet it on its own terms? You couldn't make it through a day without your fairy tales to make sense of it for you. Those of you lucky enough to have a life that makes sense have it easy. You don't know the sticky creeping fear that enters at dusk, the sense of a huge nothingness licking ravenously at the corners of things, dissolving them...

CARL

(interrupting)

Until there's nothing finite at all, your atoms have drifted apart leaving you with no shape, you don't know where you end and everything else starts.

TOM

Yes, it's such a slippery substance, this life, it only appears to have finite qualities. What can we say with any certainty about it?

CARL

Only, as Heidegger noted, that "the only reality is anxiety." Perpetual discomfort.

BILL

I'm not hearing anything but nonsense from you two. Come on troopers, smile a little why don't you!

TOM

A person hears only what they understand. And why the obsession with being happy? Americans see unhappiness as a sign of maladjustment- something must be wrong with you if you're not in a state of perpetual happiness. I don't know how people manage to walk around being so upbeat, it looks exhausting. There's this feeling that it's our 'right' to be happy. Why? Easier for keeping your head firmly planted in the sand I suppose... acute consciousness is a burden after all, a disease.

BRIAN

Disease, *dis-ease*. Be at ease, the universe takes care of all things. Relax!

SPRIG

Would you be saying that if you'd just watched your family be killed by your neighbor, or were starving to death?

BRIAN

(uncomfortably)

That's not something I need to focus on. We're all on different planes, working out past karma.

CARL

There must be a lot of people with bad karma then, because most of the world is suffering.

BRIAN

That's not our problem. We're supposed to focus inwards and work on ourselves before we can help anyone else.

SUSAN

I don't know about that. Seems to me we can do both. What do they say, we have two hands- one to help ourselves and one to help other people.

BILL

She volunteers at the church rummage sale.

SUSAN

Least I can do.

BRIAN

I'm sure we all help out in our own way. All with different gifts to offer.

Comes timidly out of the circle and takes a few steps toward CARL

Now give me the gun. Come on, hand it over.

CARL focuses the gun on BRIAN, who scuttles back to the group

TOM

(laughing, to BRIAN)

Look at you, just longing to be a hero.

CARL

Aren't we all? That would make it more bearable.

TOM

We all *are* heroes, in our own *minds*. We all see ourselves as being on the Hero's Journey- as inhabiting the central role in the universe for whom others are merely supporting characters and to whom all external events must personally relate. The weather is bad on an important day, or we miss the bus - the world must be against us. We see a shooting star-it must be a good omen. We reorganize every event in our minds so as to put the interminable 'me' at the center of the story. It's our enduring hubris.

SPRIG

Storytelling evolved from a need to read animal tracks in order to hunt successfully. To read which way the animal went, and where it is likely to be now. Early hunters who were able to read tracks as a past, present, and future, as stories, were more successful, and therefore more represented in the gene pool. Thusly we are genetically, innately, storytellers.

TOM

Well I'm more interested in the stories we tell ourselves as a *culture*, not our individual stories. The stories we tell as a culture dictate how we live, our traditions. And now that we live in a society that's lost its myths, we no longer have strong traditions to tell us what we ought to do.

SPRIG

And no animal instincts to guide us in what we have to do.

CARL

So true, and the confusion is intensified by a lack of community, a society without cohesion that renders us all alone.

BRIAN

No one's alone, we're all fingers of the same hand. Why don't you come back to earth and join us my uppity friend.

TOM

Can't you see he's standing there *longing* to be a part of things? Like Dostoevsky's 'man from underground', longing to be a part of it, but instead stuck regarding life through a crack in the floorboards...

CARL

...yes, that's it! "Im a a sick man... I am a wicked man", experiencing countless "risings of bile", trying to make sense of it, to grasp a thread of *reason* that strings events together in an orderly way! And yet any glimmer of meaning that has the *temerity* to show itself...

TOM

...makes it all seem more pointless.

BILL

Son what you need to remember first and foremost is that suicide is a mortal sin, one that will send you straight to hell. Oh yah. Repentance is necessary through an act of contrition so that you don't suffer the fire of an angry Lord. God is forgiving only to those who repent.

TOM

Oh well I guess we'll just have to do without his forgiveness.

BILL

Don't even think it! You wont get anywhere without the Lord to carry you. Why if I stop to think what life would be like without Him by my side...

TOM

I don't suppose you've ever stepped on his almighty toes have you.

BILL

No, no I haven't. I certainly haven't. I've walked the path of the righteous man.

BRIAN

Non-judgemental, exhibiting acceptance, forgiveness, and tolerance?

BILL

Why sure. That's what God asks of his followers. Doesn't he Susan.

SUSAN

Yes he does.

BILL

I wouldn't be here telling you if I hadn't cleansed my own heart.

TOM

Ah well, not much hope for the rest of us poor slobs.

BILL

I'm telling you, turn your heart to the Light. God sees all, you can't hide anything. Live free of sin and Heaven will shine upon you. I...

SUSAN

That's enough Bill. I don't want to hear anymore of that from you.

BILL

But I...

SUSAN

No you don't. You just don't Bill so let it be.

BRIAN

Hey now the man's trying to share his story. Let's accept his gift.

SUSAN

Okay then, Bill, why don't you tell us your story. Why don't you put it all out there for these folks.

BILL

I'd be glad to share anything I've learned along the way. At some point we should get back on the road though don't you think Susan.

SUSAN

No I don't. I don't want to go any further.

BILL

Now don't be silly lovebird, Lou Ann's waiting. We've got a grandchild for gosh sakes!

SUSAN

(starting to cry again)

No she's not waiting Bill, she's not waiting at all. She doesn't know we're coming.

BILL

What do you mean, of course she does. You spoke to her last night.

SUSAN

(starting to get hysterical)

And she said not to come. She doesn't want someone in her home who didn't want her in his!

BILL

(pause)

I don't believe it. That was six years ago. Come on now, you womenfolk are just being emotional.

SUSAN

We haven't seen our daughter in six years because of you, you nincompoop.

BILL

Now don't go starting this up again Susan, I don't think these good folks want to hear you go on about...

SUSAN

How dare you! How dare you!

BILL

I took her to church every week since she could talk! And Sunday school! She made me look like a fool.

SUSAN

You made yourself look like a fool.

BILL

And then she... and then she went and gave away her most precious possession to some *thug*, some philistine! I can't believe it, my daughter, an unmarried teenager, indulged in worldly sins, sins of the flesh.

SUSAN

And you had to throw her out for it?. At seventeen. Christ I can't believe it.

BILL

Now *you're* taking His name in vain. What is the world coming to?

SUSAN

I'm sick about this, just sick. I don't know what's going to happen when we get there. I'm sure her husband hates us. Not even invited to the wedding...

BILL

I'll bet he's inclined to agree with me. I'm sure he would have liked a pure woman to marry.

SPRIG

But it's okay if *he* wasn't 'pure', because "boys will be boys", wink wink, they need to sow their wild oats, while women aren't encouraged to have any sexual discovery outside of a monogamous, preferably married relationship. And you perpetuate the very Christian virgin/whore duality, boys need some willing girls to practice on, let's denigrate them as the whores, they're only good for one thing, but when the boy is finally ready to settle down it's a virgin he wants to end up with.

SUSAN

Yes! That's so true, thank you! Yes Bill, I as a woman have needs too. Do you know what I do in the laundry room sometimes, with a magazine I purchased? Since you're not interested in me? Did you know some people put things in orifices that you don't even...

BILL

Do you mean sodomy?

SUSAN

Yes I do, I want someone to knock on my back door gosh darn it, and instead I'm stuck in the laundry room doing something against the vibrating washing machine. While you run around with that soprano in the choir...

BILL

I haven't seen Judy since Christmas Mass, stop harping on that. Our daughter broke with God Susan. She's a sinner and that's all there is to it.

SUSAN

No! No I wont let you talk about Lou Ann that way. It's not your place to say what she can do with her body. How could you let her sleep on the streets like that... and you, breaking the marriage covenant.

Runs to CARL, who has forgotten to point his gun at the group, and grabs it. She points it unsteadily at BILL, who ducks

BILL

Susan you're crazy!

SUSAN

No I'm not I'm angry! I haven't seen my own daughter in six years because you couldn't love her for the way she is. She was taken from me by your closed heart.

And I have to suffer the painful herpes lesions that you gave me! Here I am, suffering quietly for your sins, your hateful judgement of our daughter, wondering why a rightful God doesn't strike you down...

(turning to CARL)

And if I can keep my faith, if I can start every morning sitting on an ice pack to ease my painful sores and *still* thank God for each day, then so the fuck can you.

Violent thrashing sounds are heard from the back of Sprig and Tom's station wagon. Susan turns the gun towards the sound and fires through the back window. The glass shatters and blood spatters inside the car. SUSAN screams.

BRIAN

You've killed someone! Your karma is ruined!

SPRIG rushes to the car

SPRIG

Oh no oh no oh no oh no.

TOM joins her and they drag out the limp and bloody mountain lion, still in its cage, the wire bent from the bullet. TOM tenderly takes the animal from the cage and covers it in his jacket.

CARL

What in the world! Is that your cat?

TOM

It's a magnificent creature that was on its way to freedom. Your pathetic mediocrity has taken its life.

SUSAN

Oh my goodness, I was so nervous... I heard a noise and just pulled the trigger.

BRIAN

Put it in the middle of the circle. The least we can do is honor it. I don't need this on my conscience.

TOM places the lion gently in the middle of the outlined circle.

BRIAN

Everyone needs to take a color. I've already drawn the outline here for *kripalu*, the Buddhist symbol of healing and forgiveness.

SUSAN is still sobbing. TOM goes to her and awkwardly puts his arm around her.

TOM

Er, let's try to come to some sort of peaceful understanding here shall we. Um...

Brings her over to the circle

Let's see what this art project is about. What does this require of us.

BRIAN

It's a mandala, a sand painting. A Buddhist art form to celebrate the ephemeral nature of life.

TOM

A courageous act of refuting the ultimate nature of existence! Fantastic. We must go about it in the proper way.

BRIAN

We'll start with this plant matter, burned as an offering to the gods.

SPRIG

(hurriedly)

Let's try the Rhododendron aromatica over there, it burns much better.

BRIAN

Let's not split hairs here. All right, if you say so.

(muttering to himself)

Be open to suggestion.

SPRIG goes to collect the less toxic plant

Gather round, gather round, this is a group effort. I know some of you aren't used to playing well with others.

Pointing, as SPRIG brings back some small-leaved plants

I need you there, and you opposite, you're north, you over here, there's six of us so we'll double up, you two will be east, and I'll be directing the proceedings.

He picks up the plant and stuffs some of the leaves into a pipe he pulls from his pocket. He lights it and takes a puff, chokes, turns around and spits on the ground.

Sorry about that folks. I'm asthmatic. We'll just skip that part. Everyone hold hands.

They do so, grudgingly

BRIAN

(grandiosely)

I call on brother sun and sister moon, the earth spirits and um... water sprites, and our past reincarnations,

(a snort from TOM)

and... and the animal kingdom to receive our mandala of healing, for this sick man and the dead cat that was murdered by this crazy lady here.

CARL and SUSAN look angry

Now if everyone could say a little something. You first.

Points to SPRIG

SPRIG

Well let me see...

BRIAN

(interrupting)

I'll go first.

TOM

We've just listened to you yammer on for...

BRIAN

Let me finish! I just want to say that I appreciate the chance to be able to help you people, hopefully get your energy fields vibrating just a little bit faster. I'm happy to teach what I know. Okay your turn.

SPRIG

I'm so sad about the furthering of extinction that's taken place here. This poor animal's life wont go to waste, I think its hide is big enough to finish my cape.

BILL

My turn.

Gets awkwardly down on his knees, still holding onto the hands on either side of him

To my wife Susan, I'm so very very sorry for the pain I've caused, by not accepting my daughter's decisions. For calling her a harlot and disowning her I beg my wife's and the Lord's forgiveness, and also my daughter's, if she agrees to see me. Susan, I'm sorry about the herpes. And I'll take a look at that magazine and see if we can't give what they're suggesting a try. I just hope the Lord turns a blind eye.

SUSAN

Oh Bill, thank you. We'll call Lou Ann, I should have told you we were going to be surprising her, maybe we can find a Holiday Inn down the road from her and just drop by for an afternoon visit tomorrow. And I'm sorry about pointing the gun at you, and for killing this poor creature.

CARL

It's my fault, I brought the firearm. I'm sorry for holding you all hostage. I appreciate your attempts to help me. And most of all I'm thankful for meeting someone who shares my inner turmoil. Tom, you're a brother to me. Thank you for existing.

TOM

(clearing his throat)

Er, thank you Carl. This is all very... thank you everyone for, er... for listening to my... this has all been very interesting. And Brian, for reviving this cultural relic. That's all.

BRIAN

Thank you everyone for sharing. This takes me back to meetings. Now if everyone can please pick a color, let's be *creative!* But don't go outside the lines.

With varying degrees of enthusiasm everyone takes a color and starts filling in the chalk outlines BRIAN has already laid down.

SUSAN

Oh good I got blue! My isn't this a creative outlet! I wonder if I could teach this at the community center.

CARL

Rituals... they do seem to tie things together, I'll say that much. Things look comfortingly simple.

SPRIG

What were you doing in the woods Carl?

CARL

I've been living back there, actually. Yeah, I have a little camp. Just a hammock, little stove, a backpack full of lentils. I didn't see the point of paying rent anymore so I was evicted, all my stuff thrown out on the street. Went back to the basics. And then being alone, and seeing the plants flower and die and the leaves turn, drove me mad.

TOM

What the Japanese call 'mono no aware'- sadness at the ephemeral nature of beauty.

BRIAN

The origin of the cherry blossom festival! With this mandala we are celebrating the beauty of the transient nature of life.

TOM

You do know something after all.

BILL

I don't know about all that but it sure is shaping up pretty.

SUSAN

What are we going to do with the body?

SPRIG

I'll take the carcass home. I need the hide for a project.

SUSAN

Are you a devil worshipper? What do you need animal corpses for?

TOM

She's Pagan. Which to you Christians means devil worshipper.

SPRIG

I'm High Priestess of the Seattle Wiccan Coven, branch 1102.

SUSAN

A witch! A devil worshipper! I thought you were a scientist!

SPRIG

I can't be both a scientist and a worshipper of the divine? Why does it have to be one or the other, neither refutes the existence of the other. Science led me to see the divine in nature, allowed me to glimpse a divine logic, intelligence. The world holds up to examination and so it affirms my sense of wonder and faith. It makes life a bearable joke.

SUSAN

Science questions the ways of the Lord. That's not for us to know.

SPRIG

Nonsense. It's a pleasure to find the divine in nature. When I study *Hexabranchus sanguineus*, an 18-inch long hermaphroditic sea slug, called the "Spanish Dancer" for its habit of gathering in flocks and dancing all along the tropical Indo-Pacific coastal seas I see a divine sense of play. With the stinging cells of recently devoured jellyfish stored in the lining of its orange dorsal spikes, it will poison any fish that tries to eat it. That's divine, that logic.

TOM

The more life is picked apart, the more pointless it seems. All these complex goings on for no reason. You have more information but it leads back to the same question, *why?*

SPRIG

Why can't examining the perfect workings of the world add to my faith. Why does science scare you so much, are you afraid to shed light on the world? Why does studying the workings of the human brain or studying the codependency of species scare you? You glimpse a divine mind. You explore the wonder in life, you understand how awake the fabric of life is, what an intelligent, reactive substance it is. *That* is the spiritual component of my life, they're one and the same.

BILL

(rubbing his temples)

That's enough. I can't take in anymore.

BRIAN

Looks like we're done here! Stand back, let's take a look at our creation.

They move back and regard the circle

SUSAN

Now isn't that beautiful.

BRIAN

A real tribute to this poor animal. Now we approach from the four directions and scoop the sand to the center.

SUSAN

Oh my I have to get on my knees again. Bill give me a hand would you.

BILL helps SUSAN kneel. They push the sand into a pile in the center of the mandala. SPRIG picks up the mountain lion gently. BRIAN gathers up the sand in a cloth.

BRIAN

I'll scatter this in the nearest river, to spread the healing out in to the world. Once I get my car unlocked. Can anyone give me a ride to the nearest gas station?

BILL

Be glad to.

CARL

I'm coming with you Tom.

TOM

If you don't mind sitting in the back with the carcass. Well goodbye then. Best of luck with it all.

BILL

You know, I've enjoyed this.

SUSAN

What are your names, I don't think we ever got them.

SPRIG

I'm Sprig Olberding. And my husband, Tom.

SUSAN

*Sprig*, my goodness, okay. You two take care now.

CARL, SPRIG and TOM climb into the station wagon with the dead mountain lion, BRIAN gets in the back of BILL and SUSAN's car. Engines turn on, lights dim.

ACT 2

SCENE 1

SETTING: The kitchen of SPRIG and TOM's house. Every surface is spotless; the beakers washed and carefully stacked, the sink free of dishes, the table neatly set for two.

AT RISE: MIGUEL is stirring something on the stove, humming happily to himself. The door opens and SPRIG and TOM enter, TOM carrying the cage containing the dead mountain lion.

SPRIG

... said he'd be back in a month to...

She bumps into the back of TOM, who has stopped in his tracks at the sight of the transformed kitchen

TOM

What's happened to the kitchen. And why is he still here.

SPRIG

I said he could stay sweetheart, he needs to rest up after what he went through. How are you feeling?

MIGUEL

I am feeling almost like dee ol' Miguel. I 'ave only a few pains when I move too fastly.

TOM

Shouldn't you seek medical treatment?

MIGUEL

I haf no insurance.

(looks lovingly at SPRIG)

But is okay, she is fine doctor for me. I clean dee whole house! Was a big mess.

TOM

I hope you didn't touch anything in my office.

SPRIG

That was very sweet Miguel, thank you.

TOM

Where's Carl? He must still be sleeping in the backseat.

Puts down the cage and exits outside to  
wake CARL

SPRIG

I should probably take a look at your wounds.

MIGUEL

I would like dat so much.

Sees what's in the cage

Is dee lion! You kill him, you give Miguel back his good name! Gracias.

SPRIG

Don't you need to be back at work?

MIGUEL

A leetle problem. I call dee boss and he say dee immigracion they come lookin' for me. Miguel needs to hide or he'll be locked away.

SPRIG

Do they lock people up who are here illegally? I thought they just put you on a plane home.

MIGUEL

No, if only it was dat easy. They don' jus' sen' jue home, they lock jue in detencion center for many months, while dey go back and fort' wit' all dees papers for deportacion. It happen to my sister. She is in detencion in Texas wit' her 9 year-old son for two years now.

Many people locked up by the INS, dee Immigracion and Naturalizacion Serveese. And now dees worse people, dee Homeland Security.

Gets down on his knees  
Please I beg you don't send me out from here, I cook and clean. I don' want to be captured like dee big cat.

SPRIG  
We don't want what happened to the cat to happen to you Miguel. If you don't mind sleeping on the couch...

MIGUEL  
No is good, I already vacuum it of dust and food, I found a squished sanwich in dere, looked very ol'.

SPRIG  
Must have been there for a long time. Sorry you had to go through that. Let me take a look at your puncture wounds.

SPRIG goes to MIGUEL and lifts his shirt, examining his bandages. He looks at her longingly. The kitchen door opens and TOM and CARL enter.

TOM  
How's the victim?

SPRIG  
The bleeding's stopped. I guess my poultice did the trick. Hopefully it wont need stitches.

TOM  
You're in good hands Miguel, my wife is an accomplished witch.

MIGUEL  
(looks worried)  
Una bruja? Okay.

(sees CARL)  
You have guest. Please all sit, I have casserole.

MIGUEL goes to the oven and removes a casserole dish with his bare hands. He shrieks in pain and drops it on the floor.  
Is okay, I have other one.

This time he dons the oven mitts first and successfully carries the other casserole to a waiting pot holder in the middle of the table.

Now, this is a *wonderful* item I make from dee animal I find hanging from dee ceiling.

He brings another place setting for CARL and fastidiously arranges it, then ladles the badger casserole onto the plates, bows and stands near the table at attention like a soldier.

SPRIG

I hope you saved the skin, it was very difficult to remove!

TOM

Please Miguel sit down, you're making me nervous.

MIGUEL

Thank you senor but I'm no hungry after dis' 'ting I go through.

He sits with hands folded.

TOM

Not bad! Nice to have something *homemade* for once.

He and SPRIG glare at eachother.

CARL

Is this your maid?

TOM

No he survived quite a...

MIGUEL

(interrupting)

Yes I am their maid for six years now, since I first become citizen. I have papers to prove.

(looks pleadingly at SPRIG)

SPRIG

Miguel here is a great cook, look what he did with the roadkill. We couldn't be without him.

MIGUEL looks adoringly at SPRIG

TOM

Whatever you say. Carl and I are going to retire to my office for some important discussion. Please don't disturb.

SPRIG

(angrily)

Don't worry, I know the rules by now. I won't bother you unless the roof caves in.

TOM

That happened this morning. So not even then. Miguel, if we don't get e.coli from the casserole I shall have to congratulate you on your cooking skills. Come on Carl.

They exit, CARL giving an apologetic smile to SPRIG and MIGUEL

MIGUEL

Your husband, he is a big wig?

SPRIG

He thinks he is.

MIGUEL

Don't look sad senorita. They left too soon to enjoy Miguel's famous flan. More for jue!

SPRIG

Oh how nice. I'd like to wait and see how the badger settles first.

Rubs her stomach

MIGUEL

As jue wish.

He gets to work clearing the table in an obsessively neat fashion. SPRIG puts the mountain lion carcass in the freezer.

ACT 2

SCENE 2

SETTING: Tom's attic office

AT RISE: TOM is sitting at his desk. CARL is pacing back and forth, avoiding the small pile of ceiling plaster and roof shingles on the floor, reading aloud from Kafka's "The Metamorphosis".

CARL

"As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a monstrous vermin."

TOM

(interrupting)

Notice that this translation says 'vermin' and not 'insect'. 'Vermin' denotes a sense of separation between him and his environment. He is unclean and therefore he shall be excluded.

CARL

(reading again)

"Ach Gott, he thought, what an exhausting job I've picked on! Traveling about day in, day out. Many more anxieties on the road than in the office, the plague of worrying about train connections, the bad and irregular meals, casual acquaintances never to be seen again, never to become intimate friends. The hell with it all!" I like that part, "the hell with it all!". So freeing. That's how I felt when I stopped going to work and paying rent, so free, no more opening the mail, taking out the trash, keeping food in the fridge and cleaning like a respectable person. I didn't see a point in continuing the charade.

TOM

And why should you? Why should we constantly beat at the air with our folly, creating a stir when nothing is needed. The universe doesn't ask that of us, we ask it of *ourselves*. Are we right to do that?

CARL

Is it better if we just say okay the game's up, I'm not going to engage with life anymore? Or is that worse, because it brings so painfully to light the fact that consciousness doesn't cease when we want it to.

TOM

What are we to do? What is a *reasonable* person to do? Are we just to sit here and endure the absurdity of Nothingness? No, I say we must rouse ourselves to a grand and noble struggle with the forces of mediocrity. Let us expose the true nature of the human condition. I'm writing a treatise, "The True Nature of Existence", wherein I seek to record the subtle machinations of the mind, and the movements of my fellow man, much as we have little in common. As Kafka himself said, "Anyone who cannot come to terms with his life needs one hand to ward off his despair... but with his other hand he can note down what he sees among the ruins."

(scrabbles around on the desk and pulls forth some pages excitedly)

Listen. I wrote this on my foray to the library last week. "Why must they all fidget and make constant noise? Don't they see how like a pile of randomly firing neurons and flesh they are? There it is again, the intermittent noise of someone unwrapping some lozenge to ease their phlegm filled throat or fraying nerves. That crinkling of plastic that houses some noxious nugget. Block it out. I can't! I hate them! Why did they bother coming here, so they could disturb those of us at work? I feel about to choke from anticipation of their next noise." Then I had to go home and lie down.

CARL

That sounds terrible! What I find calming in those moments is something simple, a pattern, like the seeds on the face of a sunflower or something like that. Petals that get bigger and bigger as they move away from the middle. And then something Rilke said comes to me, "beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror... it serenely disdains to annihilate us". And then I feel as though I'm about to be swallowed up. A very strange sensation.

TOM

Interesting. Let's write that down.

(scribbles and mutters aloud)

Spacial repetition, elemental patterns, divine mathematics, the void is perceived...

CARL

Removes his revolver from his waistband and idly aims at things around the room, making gunshot noises

That's what it is isn't it. The void. Everything seems to point toward it.

TOM

The only way out is through. We must catalog the void's every attribute, and seek to move beyond it.

He hands CARL a notebook and pencil

TOM

You'll have to sharpen that yourself.

Gets up to pace

Now then, the way I've been going about this, is trying to capture the *mind*, pin it down, thoroughly record its machinations, and then the second step will be to follow that thread to its source, circuitous as the path may be, to its *groundspring* if you will, from whence all this madness and stimuli derives.

Bravely casting a line into the dark sea of perception. Mind you, I haven't much hope of finding anything there, lest you think I see any light at the end of this tunnel. But the treatise is a methodical way of going about trying to get to the *crux* of the thing. Nietzsche said "a thinker sees his own actions as experiments and questions- as attempts to find out something. Success and failure are for him answers above all". We shall see what success we have, in this, this blow struck against the unexamined life, this death knell for mediocrity. Therefore if our exploration yields only that we are chasing our own tail, we will know at least one way or another, whether there is a reason for us to be here at all.

CARL

I'm moved by your quest. If we don't uncover anything of meaning we can shoot ourselves. Deal?

TOM

My you've got a death wish. That's a good place to start this research. "A first sign of the beginning of understanding is the wish to die", as Kafka said. Okay it's a deal. The world certainly wont mourn our passing. Oh God, the fish.

Goes to the bowl by the windows

Don't know why I keep this damn thing. Supposed to lower blood pressure, watching it swim around. I can't leave it to die though can I. Here, little fishy. Here's some of your flaky food. Why don't we start with a rumination on this fish. Its little world, neatly contained in a glass orb. I like that word. Orb. Orb.

Brings the fishbowl over and puts it on the desk between him and Carl. They both stare into it intently. Carl sticks his face right up to the glass and makes fish lips at the fish

CARL

He's a cutie pie. But if he could see his life objectively he'd commit suicide. He'd jump right out of that bowl. But he doesn't know he's in a bowl, just like we don't know reality beyond the edge of our own skin.

Moves his face abruptly away from the bowl

He tried to attack me! Put his fin up and went right for me!

TOM

It's a she. A japanese fighting fish. I had three but she ate the others. Her name is Domo Arigato.

CARL

"Thank you"?

TOM

Its literal meaning actually derives from the Japanese words "ari", which means "to be" and gatai, meaning "to be difficult", which then translates into "too difficult to be" or "too difficult to exist".

CARL

Oh.

TOM

It originated from the Japanese Buddhist priests. To Japanese Buddhists it means "it would be too difficult without you", or, "without your kindness, I couldn't be".

CARL

I'll write that down.

TOM

That's something we already know. We're supposed to be writing new things.

CARL

I didn't know it. I'm putting it down.

TOM

Suit yourself. Okay let's move on, experiment number two. I've tried this before, it will help having two observers. Something that's occurred to me, well let me describe the sensation. Sometimes on entering a room or turning on a light I get the distinct impression that before my arrival the objects in the room were 'relaxing', their atoms not bothering to retain a clear shape, because what's the point without an observer, and now they're scrambling to create the same form they had last time they were looked at, to create a semblance of what they looked like before. And sometimes they succeed and sometimes there are slight inconsistencies. The desk may appear *slightly* larger or smaller, the objects placed slightly differently in relation to one another. It's the same when I regard myself in a mirror- of course I look *generally* the same each time but my nose may look wider, my ears may stick out more. I expect finite objects to anchor us in reality but they seem as temperamental as any thought or emotion. Very disconcerting I must say.

CARL

So you propose we try to surprise our surroundings by sneaking up on them.

TOM

Precisely my dear Watson! I'll man the light switch, you take notes.

Goes to the light switch by the door

Ready? No blinking.

He switches off the light and counts to three. At three he flips it back on and looks critically around the room.

Anything?

CARL, pen poised, is also looking around, slowly swivelling in the office chair

CARL

Nothing so far. Oh wait. Do the books on the shelf look slightly out of line to you?

TOM

Peers at them

Not sure. Yes maybe, maybe they're leaning a little more to the left, on the top shelf. They also look a little hazier, dustier. Write that down.

Immediately switches the light off again

CARL

Wait...

There is a knock on the door and MIGUEL enters. The light from the hallway pierces the dark. The door hits TOM in the back.

TOM

Damn you!

MIGUEL

I so sorry.

TOM

(Turns on the light, rubbing his spine)

The indignity of it.

MIGUEL

So sorry. I'm wondering if you would like, Sprig an me we are trying some of my horchata, I make it from wet almonds and...

Catches sight of the pile of rubble on the floor

Ay Dios mio, dis is where dee cat come from. I be back momentarelee wit a broom.

Disappears, closing the door. TOM opens it and calls down the hallway

TOM

Not necessary! Please keep away!

Slams the door shut

Okay back to our experiment. I've lost my concentration now dammit, where were we.

He flips off the lights

ACT 2

SCENE 3

SETTING: Kitchen

AT RISE: SPRIG has returned the kitchen counter to its messy state with her science equipment, and is taking samples from multiple beakers of greenish water with a dropper and mixing them together. MIGUEL enters.

MIGUEL

Big mess up dere. Where I put dee broom...

SPRIG

Don't worry about that, it's not your responsibility.

MIGUEL

Pero I *hate* dirt. Just knowing dat der is a big mess nearby, it makes my skin shiver.

Takes in what SPRIG is doing to the counter.

An now look at dee mess dat jue are making down here. Jue are *keelling* me. I take deep breath, I clean upstairs firs.

SPRIG

Tom wont appreciate your efforts. I'd leave it alone if I were you. He'll yell at you.

MIGUEL

He seems a leetle, how you say, frustrated?

SPRIG

He wasn't always this way. He was wonderful until a few years ago. Then he went to Lhasa on one of his trips, to translate Buddhist texts from Tibetan to Mandarin, and he was seized by the Chinese authorities.

MIGUEL

Why?

SPRIG

They found out about his translation work and considered him a political subversive for preserving the Tibetan culture. He was put in solitary confinement for almost a year. He was only set free because the Chinese needed him for interpreting work. When he got back it was months before he'd even leave the house.

MIGUEL

Ay Dios Mio, is horrible! Put in a cage... is what I am fearing from dee Inmigracion peoples.

SPRIG

Are they going after you specifically?

MIGUEL

I'm not sure, maybe someone report me, or maybe is jus' my bad luck.

SPRIG

They can't find you here.

MIGUEL

Maybe maybe not, I leave my delivery bicycle outside where I am attacked and is not dere anymore. And dey could ask for dee last address I was sent to. Ay Dios Mio, please pray for me.

SPRIG

I don't believe in a monotheistic god Miguel so I can't help you there but I hope you'll stay as long as you need to. We don't need another person needlessly locked away.

MIGUEL

Thank you princesa. If I have my way, I am sleeping here on dee couch for a long time. Or maybe no' jus' on dee couch... Why you are paying so much attention to dees plants?

SPRIG

It's something wonderful, it's algae. From the artificial wetland I built in the basement.

MIGUEL

Dose big pools of water?

SPRIG

You saw them! Aren't they magnificent? I've created the perfect environment for algaculture, the harvesting of algae. I'm growing a quickly multiplying, very resilient, genetically modified algae strain, a superplant.

MIGUEL

A super... Is for your job?

SPRIG

These algae strains are from my job, from the research I was doing. I was heading a project that was shut down, a program at the National Renewable Energy Laboratory funded by the Department of Energy. Last month they suddenly pulled the funding and we were fired and sworn to secrecy about the results of our research.

MIGUEL

Why you were fired?

SPRIG

Because algae is a magnificent source of fuel, far superior to fossil fuels. The oil companies caught wind of our program and pressured the Department of Energy and we were shut down. Three years of experimenting, gathering data, growing hundreds of species of algae, engineering our own strains, all shut down and dismantled because there's too much money to be made extracting the rest of the oil out of the earth. When I left I took the results of my research with me. I couldn't bear to see it all go to waste.

MIGUEL

I so sorry. Why you are still working on it?

SPRIG

This is a chance to halt global warming, which will end life as we know it. Life has maintained a tenacious hold on this planet for some 3.8 billion years, and will exist here for another 5.5 billion years or so, until the world's oceans boil from the heat emitted from an exhausted red sun. That's 5.5 billion years of evolution humans are curtailing.

MIGUEL

Oh my. I'm not sure I understand all dat you are saying but I see is very important to jue. It sounds like a big thing you are facing. Is like when I am in the ring wit a huge bull. It requires all my faculty.

SPRIG

We humans think that we're the end product, the apex, of evolution. We are simply the *current* most conscious life form. If evolution is allowed to continue we will simply be one rung on the ladder, as the early hominids are to us. My objective is to preserve those conditions which are most conducive to evolution.

MIGUEL

I see, so jue just wan' to use dis algae to help humans not stop evolution wit der pollution.

SPRIG

That's right Miguel! It's thanks to algae that the planet is even habitable for humans, because it started the oxygen creating process millions of years ago. Now algae is offering us a way out of our addiction to oil and coal. And we refuse it because of greed. I've had enough.

MIGUEL

Oh my. You sound very angry. How about some flan.

He brings the bowl of flan to SPRIG.  
Try it. Is my own recipe.

SPRIG dips her finger in to try it.

SPRIG

Mmm that's delicious Miguel.

He takes her hand and dips it into the flan again, then brings it to his mouth and slowly licks the flan from her fingers. SPRIG looks faint and steadies herself against the counter. CARL enters.

CARL

Excuse me, do you know where I might find a lightbulb?

SPRIG jumps away from MIGUEL, knocking a few test tubes on the floor.

SPRIG

You can take one from another room. Or I have some grow lights in the basement...

CARL

Unscrewing a bulb from a lamp on a side table  
This'll do great. Thanks, gotta get back to Tom.

Exits quickly with the lightbulb.

MIGUEL

More flan, princessa?

He dips his fingers in the flan and beckons her to him.

ACT 2

## SCENE 4

SETTING: TOM's attic office.

AT RISE: Darkness, just voices.

CARL

Don't turn the switch until I get it all the way screwed in.

TOM

Why, I thought you wanted to die.

CARL

Very funny. Not from electrocution. There we go. Okay, ready.

TOM turns on the light

TOM

Good. You know I was thinking while I was up here in the dark, about how comically arranged we humans are. Like a chess player, we like only the *process* of achieving a goal but not the goal itself. Very strange, that we don't do well unless we feel we're working towards something. Achieving we like but *having* achieved we do not quite like, and that of course is terribly funny. We are comically arranged, there is apparently a joke in this.

CARL

At our expense.

TOM

Naturally.

CARL

I was thinking something similar on a recent walk, and my legs became shaky, they felt like two strings of spaghetti. I had to will them on, one in front of the other, awkwardly, stiltedly, yes stiltedly like tall gangly stilts. I became terrified that I'd fall in the middle of the street, in the midst of my pompous thoughts, and people would laugh. Bastards.

TOM

Of course they would. What do you expect. What are we to do about the brutish nature of the common man, the disrepair of the intellect. When I'm forced to venture out I gloomily marvel at them, the humans, amazed at the pettiness of their thinking, the stupidity of their past times, conversations. Their crudeness outrages me. They have so little understanding of the most essential things, so little interest in the most impressive, startling objects, anything of subtle or fragile beauty.

They see only the most obvious, glaring reality, trampling on the things that reveal themselves only in silence and disappear when regarded too closely. I should write that down. Ah well, it's very disappointing. Shall we move on to conducting our next experiment?

CARL

Should we go outside for this one? Maybe it's inaccurate if all the data is collected in only one place.

TOM

Remember what Kafka said? "It is not necessary that you leave the house. Remain at your table and listen. Do not even listen, only wait. Do not even wait, be wholly still and alone. The world will present itself to you for its unmasking, it can do no other. In ecstasy it will writhe at your feet."

CARL

More like in *anguish* it will writhe at your feet. Nothing pleasant ever 'writhes'.

TOM

Writhing does sound like it takes a lot of energy. Hmm. Honestly Carl I'm exhausted just from the act of *being*. It really takes a toll.

CARL

I agree. I'm in a constant state of weariness. How about we examine the nature of our dreams, as a sort of counterpoint to what we've been doing.

TOM

That sounds reasonable. No harm in that.

He retrieves the folded up tapestry from where he left it going through the closet, and unfurls it on the floor

Here, you can sleep on this.

CARL

Standing over the richly colored, woven tapestry

Whoa. Beautiful pattern. Looks like it took a long time to make. It looks like the thingamajig we made with sand today. The mandala.

TOM

That is indeed what it is. A mandala handwoven on a thangka, a Tibetan tapestry, by monks in the Ganden monastery, near Lhasa. Before the Cultural Revolution of course, when it was dynamited by the Army and Red Guards.

CARL

Our tai chi friend would be surprised that you have this.

TOM

Probably. I wanted to correct a few things in his mandala but it wasn't worth getting into. Maybe I should have. Anyway, you take that, I'll nap in the chair.

CARL

Thanks friend.

TOM

You're welcome.

They settle in for a little break from being.

ACT 2

SCENE 5

SETTING: Kitchen. The next morning.

AT RISE: MIGUEL is hard at work at the stove, humming. SPRIG tiptoes in shyly, wearing a long, old fashioned nightgown.

SPRIG

awkwardly

Good morning Miguel.

MIGUEL

Buenas dias, my princesa. I hope you had good dreams. I make you pancakes. I used dee horchata for batter porque der is no flour.

SPRIG

Flour, no there's probably none of that. Thank you, it's so nice to be cooked for.

MIGUEL

Is my pleasure. Please, sit down. I don't want you liftin' a finger when jue don' need to.

SPRIG sits at the table. MIGUEL tucks a bib into her nightdress and puts a plate of pancakes in front of her.

SPRIG

Oh my, that looks good. Have you seen Tom or Carl? I think Tom must have slept in his office last night. He does that quite a bit.

MIGUEL

Dat is no place for a man to sleep my Sprig, when his wife is keeping dee bed warm. No breakfas' for him.

SPRIG

He didn't always... anyway my algae research has been keeping me up late into the night these last few weeks.

MIGUEL

Are you sure you're not Mexican. Such a hard worker you are, mama sita.

Fussily straightens some pictures on  
the wall

I knew dere was something wrong in here.

SPRIG

I've been thinking... your bicycle isn't around anymore... but do you still have the delivery bag you used?

MIGUEL

My Stay-Hot bag? Sure, why, you wan' to go on a picnic?

He pulls it out of a cabinet

I can prepare a very nice picnic for jus' two. Pero we have to have it in dee house por que I cannot go outside. Maybe sitting by dee pond in dee basement, on a blanket?

SPRIG

I need something Miguel.

MIGUEL

For you, anyting. What is your heart's desire.

SPRIG

There's something I need from the lab, the one I was working in. A piece of equipment integral to my research. I need you to go and get it for me. I was thinking you could go in disguise, as if you're there to make a delivery.

MIGUEL

Oh my. A delivery? I have no burritos. An I am scairt, wit dee immigracion...

SPRIG

Please Miguel, It's so important to me. I can't continue without it.

MIGUEL

Ay Dios Mio. How can I say no when dose big beeyootiful eyes are looking at me like dat. What do you need from dere.

SPRIG

I've developed a nano-tech, high-throughput sequencing system that allows me to reduce the algae down to single celled plants, which can survive extended periods of drying by slowing down biological processes and becoming resting spores. Now I need the freeze drying machine in order to complete the process.

MIGUEL

(swoons)

Mama sita, jue are so smart. Ok princesa. I get you your machine. You jus tell me where to go.

SPRIG

Wonderful!

Kisses MIGUEL

I'm going to draw you a map of just where in the building you need to go, and what you need to bring me. The security guard has a good temperament if you catch him after a nap. His name is Carlos, he'll be the one you sign in with.

MIGUEL

Carlos? Is he latino? Wonderful! I make burritos for him. He will be eating from my hand like a kitty.

SPRIG

Speaking of kitties, I need to get started skinning the mountain lion.

MIGUEL

I can make mountain lion burritos for Marco! A little cumin, will taste amazing.

He drags the carcass from the freezer and onto the counter.

SPRIG

I'll skin, you chop. Some of the tendons may be hard to get a knife through. Go slowly.

ACT 2

SCENE 6

SETTING:

TOM's attic office.

AT RISE: CARL is sitting on the floor using the tapestry as a shawl. TOM sits at his desk. They are deep in conversation.

TOM

Yes, I thought the same thing. Maybe it's because we see ourselves as being on the Hero's Journey. I'm wondering if there are any answers to be found in examining archetypes, in terms of pinpointing our true selves.

Picks a book up off his desk and reads

Here's something from Campbell I've been thinking about. "The hero discovers and assimilates his opposite (his own unsuspected self) either by swallowing it or being swallowed. One by one the resistances are broken. He must put aside his pride, his virtue, beauty and life, and bow or submit to the absolutely intolerable. Then he finds that he and his opposite are not differing species, but one flesh."

CARL

So the only way out *is* through, as you said. I figured as much. Damn.

TOM

Interesting, the idea of mythic character types in storytelling. We see the same ones in all cultures. We humans are, first and foremost, storytellers. Metaphors in stories act as a sort of sixth sense. We can understand things through metaphor we couldn't grasp any other way.

Picks up his notebook and writes

When we tell a story, we take that one moment out of time and give it a chance to speak for itself, to yield up its intricacies, to spin like a prism, showing us multiple angles, depth, and providing a mirror back at ourselves.

CARL

I didn't know you had such a respect for storytelling.

TOM

I did at one point. I used to travel around documenting the stories of different cultures. It seems a little silly now. I was almost going to get rid of them all the other day, put them behind me, but I couldn't turn the computer on. Maybe it's a good thing, they could be useful in our research.

CARL

Or maybe we'd just see whatever we projected onto them. I've found that wherever you look, there something is. It's difficult to separate subject and object, they seem to affect one another.

TOM

Yes! It's true in quantum physics and in our experience of reality. You see what you look for.

A piercing noise is heard from  
downstairs

TOM

The fire alarm. Sprig is probably burning something. Let's go down and see what it is. An army marches on its stomach you know. This research is very taxing.

CARL stands and stretches

CARL

But exhilarating. I hope there's more of Miguel's badger.

ACT 2

SCENE 7

SETTING: Kitchen.

AT RISE: SPRIG has the mountain lion skin stretched and drying on a rack, the face still intact. She has some vacuum sealing equipment on the counter, and is attaching a clear square container to the end of one of its protuberances. TOM and CARL enter.

CARL

Wow. What's going on in here?

SPRIG

If you came out of the attic more often you'd know.

TOM

That's Sprig's big project. Is there anything to eat?

SPRIG

Miguel left some stew cooking on the stove. I think I let it burn but it's probably still delicious. He's amazing.

TOM ladles out some stew into bowls and hands one to CARL

CARL

Good stuff! Is it badger?

SPRIG

No it's the mountain lion. Look what I've been able to do with the hide, I tanned it with its own brains. It's going to be so supple. Hardly any of the animal went to waste. I even made string out of the ankle tendons.

TOM

Very useful.

SPRIG

And bone buttons. I'm making a nice warm cape.

TOM

For what? Oh, Alaska, of course. You should hear the plan she's concocted Carl, while I've been in the office writing.

He picks up a book on the counter

TOM

What's this? Karl Popper. I don't know him.

SPRIG

I'm double checking my research, using his theory of critical rationalism. The law of falsifiability.

TOM

That sounds interesting. What does it say?

SPRIG

Well basically, he contends that scientific theories are abstract in nature, and can be tested only indirectly, by reference to their implications. Logically, no number of positive outcomes at the level of experimental testing can confirm a scientific theory, but a single counterexample is logically decisive: it shows the theory, from which the implication is derived, to be false.

TOM scribbles on a napkin.

TOM

Say that last part again?

SPRIG

No number of positive outcomes at the level of experimental testing can confirm a scientific theory, but a single counterexample is logically decisive: it shows the theory, from which the implication is derived, to be false.

TOM

Interesting. I'll have to think about that.

He puts the napkin in his pocket

CARL

What are you doing with this machine? It looks like a vacuum packer. I got one when I thought I'd learn how to cook, for the leftovers, but I never got around to the cooking.

SPRIG

It's for my algae. Can I tell you about algae Carl? It's why we're able to be survive here on earth.

CARL

Then I'm not sure I'm a fan.

SPRIG

Listen. I love to tell its story, you'll fall in love with it too. Blue green algae created earth as we know it. It started to extract hydrogen from water during photosynthesis, releasing oxygen as a by-product. Over time, enough oxygen accumulated in the Earth's atmosphere to allow the evolution of oxygen-using organisms. As conditions became more favorable, there was a rapid expansion in biological diversity and the evolution of ever more complex organisms. Two or three billion years later, we have reached a point in our own evolution where we can peer down a microscope at perhaps a thousand of these tiny life forms drifting about in a drop of water. We are looking at our ancestors.

CARL

Wow. Is that why you're knee deep in the stuff? To talk to your ancestors?

SPRIG

It's much more than that, algae is now offering us a chance to stop our widespread damage to the earth, and our potential to stop the evolution the algae started.

TOM

Here we go, brace yourself Carl. No let *me* tell you. Algae fuel, also called algal fuel, oilgae, or algaeoleum is a biofuel made from algae. Since the whole organism converts sunlight into oil, algae can produce more oil in an area the size of a two-car garage than an entire football field of soybeans. Algae can double its volume overnight. Unlike other biofuel feedstocks, such as soy or corn, it can be harvested day after day. If algae fuel replaced all the petroleum fuel in the United States, it would require 15,000 square miles, which is a few thousand square miles larger than Maryland. This is less than 1/7th the area of corn harvested in the United States each year. How am I doing Sprig?

SPRIG

You've been listening to me!

TOM

Wait, there's more. Algal fuels do not impact fresh water resources, and can use ocean and wastewater. It's biodegradable, and so relatively harmless to the environment if spilled. With the record oil price increases since 2003, competing demands between foods and other biofuel sources and the world food crisis, there is much interest in algaculture for making biogasoline, biodiesel, bioethanol, biomethanol, and other biofuels. However.

SPRIG

However, as is usual these days, the monolith that is Big Oil, coupled with a government controlled by big business, in tandem with a sleepy populace, managed to get this very viable alternative fuel source taken off the table.

CARL

I heard of something like that happening with an electric car they made in California. The State of California caved in to the oil companies and lowered the fuel standards and with a waiting list of people wanting one, the brand new cars were recalled and junked.

SPRIG

The EV-1, you know about that! That is wonderful. Several of my colleagues worked on the technology for that car. It was very upsetting. Beyond the greed and shortsightedness, what we're dealing with here is first and foremost a crisis of vision. Why is there this renouncing of idealism? This attitude that it's childish, naïve, the lack of imagination that says this is how the world ought to look, that asking it to change is sad and misled. Why? Why? You used to talk this way Tom. You used to show a lot of pain at a world that falls so short of what it could be.

TOM

Did I? I don't remember. Really, I was like that once, believing a different world was possible, passionate that the world mattered and should be bled for?

He sits suddenly

This world that has no magic, that pulls down true things, pure things, muddies them in meaninglessness, everything just and downtrodden scoffed and jeered at. Did I put my hopes in it? I can't remember.

(to himself)

There once was a boy with a heart on fire and finding the world not worthy of his passion he retired, behind the walls of indifference. I'm going to my office.

He leaves abruptly.

CARL

I think I'll follow him. We need to get all of this written down.

CARL exits. SPRIG resumes her preparations for the algae. Soon there is a noise outside the kitchen door and in comes an out of breath MIGUEL, his Stay Hot bag over one shoulder, dragging a large piece of equipment behind him by the power cord.

MIGUEL

Senorita! I made it!

SPRIG hurries over to help him get it in the door

SPRIG

Oh my goodness, you brought the big one. How did you... regardless. There was a smaller version but this one will work much faster.

MIGUEL

I am deliveryman extra ordinaire.

SPRIG

Let's get it on the counter.

They each take an end and balance it precariously across a corner of the counter, next to the vacuum packer.

MIGUEL

So what is next. I am eager to fulfil jour wishes. How do we make your precious fuel.

SPRIG

Well, that's not *exactly* what I'm doing here. It revolves more around getting the human element out of the environmental picture. How can I explain this... the so-called carbon cycle can best be understood as breathing by the planet Earth. Each year, green plants inhale about 100 billion tons of CO<sub>2</sub> from the atmosphere during photosynthesis. Animals and other organisms which break down plant matter, fungi, molds, worms, etc, exhale about 100 billion tons annually back into the atmosphere. It maintains a balance. But the vast stores of hydrocarbons that we now extract and burn for fuel, which would most certainly have remained entombed forever were it not for human activity, are upsetting that balance. We humans have upset Earth's breathing. Each year, we add an extra six billion tons of CO<sub>2</sub> to the air. We've given the planet a case of asthma. Now she's developing a fever, along with her asthma.

(off MIGUEL's expression)

It's okay if you're not following entirely. So. In light of all that, I've reversed the algae's respiratory function, so that instead of taking in carbon dioxide and releasing oxygen, it does the opposite. It takes in oxygen during photosynthesis and releases carbon dioxide, quickly upsetting the 21% oxygen level in the atmosphere that humans need to survive. The algae spores I've engineered can survive extended periods of drying by slowing down all biological processes. That's where the freeze dryer comes in. When it's all completely dried I'll release it, and the fine powder will float in the air, multiplying, until rainwater restarts its metabolism and carries the particles back down to the ground. Then the earth will start breathing in reverse Miguel.

MIGUEL

We're going to die! I don' wan' to die!

SPRIG

That's why we're going to Alaska. The arctic tundra pulls carbon from the atmosphere very effectively, we'll be fine up there.

MIGUEL

Ay Dios Mio. Alaska. I don' like dee cold.

ACT 2

SCENE 8

SETTING: TOM's attic office

AT RISE: TOM and CARL are crouched over a big pile of books on the floor, picking them up randomly and reading

CARL

What are we looking for again?

TOM pulls the piece of napkin from his pocket and reads SPRIG's words

TOM

Logically, no number of positive outcomes at the level of experimental testing can confirm a scientific theory, but a single counterexample is logically decisive: it shows the theory, from which the implication is derived, to be false.

Puts it back in his pocket

So no number of outcomes that point to the meaninglessness of our existence can confirm it is so, but a single counterexample, that life has meaning, shows the theory that life is meaningless, to be false. We're looking for a counterexample. And if we can come up with one, maybe there's hope after all.

CARL

Okay let's see here,

Picks up Viktor Frankl's *The Meaning of Life*

how about this. "If architects want to strengthen an arch they increase the load which is laid upon it, for therefore the pieces are joined more firmly together. What man needs is not a tensionless state but the striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal toward the meaning of one's life."

TOM

Let me see that.

Flips to another page and reads

"Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is but rather he must recognize that it is he who is asked. Each man is questioned by life and he can only answer by answering for his own life."

CARL picks up *The Myth of Sisyphus*

CARL

Here's something else. "The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."

TOM picks up Camus' *Happy Death*

TOM

"But in the end one needs more courage to live than to kill himself." I've overlooked these passages on previous reads. But now..

CARL picks up another one

CARL

Tom Stoppard's *The Coast of Utopia*. "It takes wit and courage to make our way while our way is making us, with no consolation to count on but art and the summer lightning of personal happiness... but if nothing is certain, everything is possible, and that's what gives us our human dignity..."

TOM

That's beautiful.

CARL

If everything is meaningless then nihilism can't mean anything, it proves itself wrong. How can you build an argument about how everything is meaningless if all you have to prove it is the theory of nothingness itself.

TOM

You said it.

CARL

It's cowardly not to believe in something isn't it?

TOM

There's greater possibility in the other argument isn't there, it's much more rich with possibility. The object of our research, the *glass*, if you will, never changes. But you shift your focus to the space within it. The *space* is its potential. Not the glass itself, but what it holds. *That* is what is pertinent...

CARL

...and wherein lies a vastness of possibility! Aren't you glad to be alive? There is a profound sweetness in it isn't there. I was afraid to be happy because then I would have something to lose, so I protected myself from. Being happy means letting something in. Being open. As long as it's out of reach you can pine for it but you're afraid to really grasp it. Afraid it will hurt, wont be as good as you hoped, it might be another disappointment. Being sad lets you blame the world and push it away.

TOM

Hold it at arms length. Cynicism protects your pain and gives a sense of security. But the only security is the commitment to the adventure.

CARL

Yes! The "wisdom of insecurity", Alan Watts calls it.

TOM

We refuse to bow down before the state of our existence. We say no, this matters. I refuse to allow it to be pointless, I demand more for it, I demand that it matter. We don't want to live for nothing. The hopelessness of our situation, our struggle, does not detract from its dignity, its meaning. My goodness... we must publish our research immediately, our ontological treaty. Those who give the most hope are those who come back from the abyss and say yes, there is a reason to live.

CARL

This coming from someone who has never seen the void is meaningless.

TOM

"I seem to have been only like a small boy playing on the sea-shore, diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than the ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me." Sir Isaac Newton.

ACT 2

SCENE 9

SETTING: Kitchen.

AT RISE: Sprig, wearing her mountain lion cape, is stacking the airtight containers of algae spores. TOM and CARL burst in.

TOM

Sprig!

SPRIG

We got a postcard from Bill and Susan. They made it to Olympia.

He goes to her and sweeps her up into an embrace

I was wrong!

Dances her around the room

I was wrong, I was wrong!

He stops at the sight of MIGUEL continuing to neatly stack the containers

TOM

No no no. We'll have none of that. Carl and I have a treaty to publish.

SPRIG

So what. I have plants to save.

CARL

What's she doing?

TOM

Preparing to finish off the human species. Don't do it Sprig. Spriglet. Please.

SPRIG

What other life form besides us destroys its own host. A virus.

TOM

A virus we may be. But we are a virus with potential! We can create any meaning we choose! The story has yet to be written.

He spies MIGUEL fastidiously  
straightening the rug he wrinkled  
dancing SPRIG across it

TOM

No matter how much straighten it, the fibers of that rug are wearing down as we speak, constantly in a state of entropy. You can't stop that. You know what though? If straightening and cleaning organizes the universe for you, and makes it manageable, go right ahead. Nothing wrong with that, my friend. Nothing at all.

There is a noise at the kitchen door. Two Immigration and Naturalization agents in riot gear kick down the door and enter the kitchen. SPRIG, TOM, and MIGUEL duck behind the counter. CARL, standing in the middle of the room, swings around and raises his Smith and Wesson. One agent raises his Glock 9 and shoots. CARL falls to the ground dead.

AGENT 1

Anyone else want to tangle with the INS?

No movement

Didn't think so.

Sees the three cowering behind the  
counter

Stand up. With your hands up.

The three rise slowly with their hands  
above their heads. MIGUEL whimpers.

AGENT 2

That must be him, the one in the middle.

AGENT 1

The mexican one?

AGENT 2

Obviously. Are you Miguel (pronounces it Migwel) Hernandez?

SPRIG

No, he's Fabio. Fabio Velasquez, our maid.

AGENT 2

Don't lie lady, it wont help your case. Harboring enemies of the state. What's that you're wearing anyway. Hippie freak.

MIGUEL

Okay okay, jes, is me. Miguel.

AGENT 1

You illegals, profiting from our freedom, it makes me sick. Are you part of a terrorist cell? I knew it was only a matter of time before they sprouted up in South America.

MIGUEL

(bewildered)

Terrorist?

TOM

Don't be ridiculous.

AGENT 1

Don't talk back to me!

He swaggers toward TOM, but stops when he sees the containers on the counter full of the white powdered spores

What do we have here? Running a cocaine lab are we, with cheap foreign labor?

He punctures a container with his knife and sticks in his finger, examines the powder closely

Good quality.

AGENT 2 comes over and punctures another container, pours some of the contents in the palm of his hand, covers a nostril and inhales the whole handful. He sneezes violently

AGENT 2

Strong stuff.

counts the containers

Nine containers, about three pounds each I'd say.

He pulls out his walkie talkie

Agent 209, over.

A crackling from the walkie talkie, then

VOICE

Agent 573, I hear you 209.

AGENT 2

573, there's no illegal here. No need to send backup.

VOICE

Copy that, over.

AGENT 2 puts his walkie talkie back on his belt

AGENT 1

We'll be removing these, and we can forget the whole thing. Do you have a trash bag or something?

AGENT 2

We can just carry them to the car like they are.

He picks up four containers and walks out the door. AGENT 1 picks up the remaining five and follows. He trips going out the door and a container drops, bursting open. White powder wafts in the breeze.

Shit. Oh well.

He exits. SPRIG, TOM, and MIGUEL look at one another.

SPRIG

What's the weather forecast?

There is a large clap of thunder

LIGHTS OUT

CURTAIN