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Blind Mouth Singing

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TDR: The Drama Review, Volume 54, Number 3, Fall 2010 (T 207),
pp. 12-17 (Article)

Published by The MIT Press



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Figure 1. Reiderico (Jon Norman Schneider) sneaks out at night, hoping to speak to Lucero (Alexis Camins) who lives at the bottom of the well. Blind Mouth Singing by Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas. Directed by Rubén Polendo. National Asian American Theatre Company, 2007. (Photo by Zack Brown)

Pieces

Blind Mouth Singing

Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas
introduction by Coco Fusco

Art on the Hyphen Goes to the Homeland

Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas takes Cuban-American Theatre to Havana¹

In July of 2010, Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas's *Blind Mouth Singing* will be produced in Havana. Last staged in New York by the National Asian American Theatre Company in 2007, this strange and rarified play will be performed at *El Sotano* (the basement) theatre in El Vedado, the city's cultural hub. The tiny but highly respected venue is the home of the Compañía Teatral Rita Montaner. Founded in 1956, the company is well known for championing works by young Cuban playwrights and for its strategic approach to social critique. These attributes classify the group as daring in Cuban terms.

Theatre, generally speaking, is a politically cautious art form in Cuba. Its dependence on state subsidy makes open dissent extremely risky, and the dominance of narrative form and naturalistic acting styles facilitate narrow sociological readings by those who look for controversy in order to savor or suppress it. Thus, directors tend to favor palimpsest strategies to allude to local problems, using foreign plays set in distant times and places as thinly veiled allegories about their own context. During the Special Period of the early 1990s, for example, when *jineterismo*² blossomed in response to the severe economic downturn and the explosion of tourism, the Rita Montaner group performed the Venezuelan José Gabriel Nuñez's play *Noche del satín regio* (The Night of Royal Satin) about the ills of prostitution. In response

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1. *TDR* follows the *Chicago Manual of Style* and does not hyphenate any ethnic identities. However, cultural critics elaborate theories about ethnic subcultures that center on the hyphen. I borrow throughout this essay from Gustavo Pérez Firmat, the leading cultural theorist on bicultural Cuban identity, and his treatment of the hyphen involves an understanding of a state of being in between cultures and languages, and imagining this as a generative space. I would not want to have to pit Pérez Firmat's theories against the *Chicago Manual of Style* so I have retained the hyphen in Cuban-American throughout.
 2. Cuban terminology for sex tourism—*jinetero* literally means a jockey, or the one who rides the horse. In the '90s, Cuban women and men, gay and straight, from all walks of life, began to engage in a range of erotic activities with foreigners in exchange for money, marriage, and emigration. Because so much about these encounters goes beyond the scope of sex acts, the term prostitution is something of a misnomer.

Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas's awards include fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York Foundation for the Arts. His plays include *Maleta Mulata* (1998; *Campo Santo*, San Francisco), *Look! A Latino* (2004; *Ma-Yi*, New York; 2009, *Great Short Plays, Playscripts*), and *Sleepwalkers* (1999; *Area Stage*, Miami; 2002; *Alliance Theatre*, Atlanta), which won the Carbonell Award. *Blind Mouth Singing* completed runs at Chicago's *Teatro Vista*, and the New York-based *National Asian American Theatre Company*, productions the *Chicago Tribune* praised as having "visionary wit" and the *New York Times* called "beautiful and strange." He is on the faculty at *Lehigh University*, is a *Usual Suspect* at *New York Theatre Workshop*, and is a member of *New Dramatists*.

Coco Fusco is an interdisciplinary artist and writer and Associate Professor at *Parsons*, the *New School for Design*.

to the quarantining of HIV-positive Cubans, the group staged Australian Mary Morris's play *Dos semanas con la reina* (Two Weeks with the Queen), which explores a family's response to the life-threatening illness of one of its members.

Blind Mouth Singing is about a teenage boy—with a friend living at the bottom of a well outside his house—who is trying to release himself from his stifling mother's clutches. Although blind mouth translates into Spanish as *boca ciega*, which is also the name of a tiny beach community east of Havana, Cortiñas's tale unfolds in a dreamscape that is studiously detached from any particular locale: it is remote and rural, not exactly modern, and subject to hurricanes, but the language is devoid of idiomatic markers that would anchor the drama in a specific time and place. While the presentation of authoritarian family relations often serves as a veiled critique of centralized state power in Cuban film and drama, it is quite remarkable that the group was willing to risk bringing *Blind Mouth Singing* to the Cuban stage because the play's author is Cuban-American, raised by Cuban-born parents in Miami.³ How to interpret the significance of this factor is a complicated question. No other dramatic work by a Cuban-American has ever been produced by a Cuban company on the island.⁴ While Cuban-Americans have been invited to fine art and literary events on the island sporadically, the stage has been off-limits to them up to now. And this production of *Blind Mouth Singing* is far from being an underground or unsanctioned affair—the Compañía Teatral Rita Montaner is a prominent state-subsidized company and its director Gerardo Fullea Leon, in addition to being

one of Cuba's most established playwrights, is the president of the Dramaturgical Section of the Cuban Artists and Writers Union. Thus, the production would seem to mark a critical moment of cultural rapprochement between Cuba and the Cuban diaspora.

The status of Cuban-Americans and the culture we produce has been a volatile political issue since Cuban-Americans began visiting the island in the 1980s. While we may not pose the same political threat as rabid anti-Castro exiles once did, our presence represents the limits of state hegemony over things Cuban. The notion that viable forms of *cubanía* could be created by people who were not socialized on the island within the confines of its cultural and educational institutions remains an affront to both revolutionary ideology and popular sentiment. Even though key pre-revolutionary cultural figures, from the nationalist hero and writer José Martí, to the painter Wifredo Lam, to musicians Beny Moré, Bola de Nieve, Rita Montaner, and many others, produced significant bodies of work away from the island and have been embraced by the Revolution, the post-revolutionary definition of *cubanía* revolves around the issue of territoriality. In the decades since 1959, appraisals of exile cultural production have tended to employ organic metaphors: culture that grows on the island is well-rooted in history and properly nourished by its environment, while the *cubanía* of transplants withers in foreign soil, sooner than later. Geographic displacement leads to degradation of essence, evolutionary stagnation, and stunted growth—hence, the exile fixation on the way things were. Even though the eminent Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz used the culinary metaphor of the *ajiaco* stew to describe

3. For the sake of clarity, I will make a distinction throughout this piece between Cuban nationals who reside in Cuba, exiles and émigrés who were born in Cuba but left at different stages of their lives to take up residence in another country, and Cuban-Americans who were born in the United States of Cuban parentage. The US government accords particular travel privileges to Cubans and Cuban-Americans with close relatives living in Cuba, which allow them to circumvent restrictions imposed by the US embargo against Cuba. The Cuban government does not recognize the US citizenship of Cuban exiles. It also differentiates for security purposes between Cubans in the diaspora who emigrated legally or illegally, by periods of migration, and by whether those who have left publicized their defection or spoke out against the government. Americans with relatives in Cuba are not subject to laws that apply to Cuban nationals when they enter the country, but they are identified as a special group whose activities may be subject to special monitoring by the state.

4. The New York company El Repertorio Español's production of *Broken Eggs* by Cuban exile Eduardo Machado toured Cuba in 1987. And in 2007, émigré Alberto Sarraín returned to Cuba to direct a production at Havana's Teatro Mella.

his culture's heterogeneous character, stressing that it is composed of distinct elements that don't completely melt together, Cuban revolutionary ideology together with the state's strict control over the right of Cuban nationals to leave and of exiles to return imposes clear limits on Cuban-ness. The state and revolutionary ideology equate being within the ideological framework of the Revolution with being physically located within national boundaries, thus exacerbating what could be understood in popular terms as an island mentality and infusing it with political tension.⁵

Not surprisingly then, official cultural institutions in Cuba proceed with extreme caution when it comes to Cuban-Americans; the notion of hyphenated cultural identity is still frequently viewed as suspect.⁶ Public discussions in Cuba about Cuban-American art, film, and literature are often limited to disputes over the validity of the term Latino or whether cultural expressions in English or Spanglish merit consideration as Cuban at all. When the representation of Cubans outside Cuba is raised, the acceptable paradigms largely have been limited to exiles as political threats and incorrigible capitalists. Cuban-Americans don't register on that radar as much more than lost children or maladjusted Americans. Only a handful of Cuban artists in Cuba have touched on the delicate issue of Cubans outside Cuba since the establishment of family reunification visits in the late 1970s: the 1986 film *Lejania* by Jesus Diaz depicts returning exiles as stylish but selfish materialists; subsequent documentaries about emigrants made in Cuba after the 1980 Mariel boatlift and the 1994 *bakero* (rafter) crisis represent them as remorseful and emotionally devastated. These attempts should be read against an intimidating historical backdrop, since post-revolutionary Cubans have lived through periods in which exiled and blacklisted cultural figures were systematically expunged from official media and history.

In the 1990s, the Cuban state began to wrestle with newer waves of emigration that included numerous prominent cultural figures who had been raised within the Revolution, making it far more difficult to maintain a clear divide between authentic children of the Revolution at home and the inauthentic *gusanos* (literally worms, a derogatory term for defectors) outside. Sociological interest in the increasingly vast, dispersed, and diverse creative output of the Cuban diaspora began to emerge during this time, and a few Cuban artists were awarded grants and residencies abroad to travel, study, and create works about the diaspora. The growth of the Cuban tourist industry, the legalization of US dollar possession for Cuban nationals, the blossoming of cultural exchange programs bringing Cuban artists to the US, and the increasingly liberal attitudes among newer Cuban immigrants and younger Cuban-Americans have created the conditions for increased contact among exiles, nationals, and Cuban-Americans both inside and outside the home country.

Within this changing political and cultural landscape, Cuban cultural institutions have made intermittent and selective overtures to exiles and Cuban-American artists who do not participate in any direct political challenges to the system. A Writers of the Americas conference and workshop held in Havana in 2001, for example, brought émigré Cuban playwright Maria Irene Fornes in contact with Cuban writers. Anthropologist and Cuban émigré Ruth Behar's anthology *Bridges to Cuba* (1996), which came out of numerous encounters between Cubans inside and outside, included works by second-generation writers from the island and the diaspora for the first time. Emigré visual artists Ernesto Pujol and Maria Elena Gonzalez exhibited in the 1997 Bienal de la Habana, while the 2009 biennial featured works by artists Flavio Garcíandia and

5. For a lucid appraisal of Ortiz's theorization of Cuban cultural identity and his use of the *ajjaco* metaphor, see Gustavo Pérez Firmat's "From *Ajaco* to Tropical Soup: Fernando Ortiz and the Definition of Cuban Culture," LACC Occasional Papers Series. Dialogues (1980–1994), Florida International University, 1987, <http://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/laccopsd/16>.

6. Pérez Firmat's pioneering study *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way* (1994), proposes that the cultural production of the generation that grew up between the US and Cuba in the post-war period should be understood as innovatively hybrid rather than regressive or assimilationist.

Jose Bedia, high profile protagonists of the '80s generation who had left the island in the 1990s.

In 2005, an anthology entitled *Teatro cubano actual: Dramaturgia escrita en Estados Unidos*, (Contemporary Cuban Theatre: Dramaturgy Written in the United States) was published in Cuba by Ediciones Alacos. The book was co-edited by émigré director Alberto Sarraín and émigré writer Lillian Manzor who is a professor at the University of Miami. Not coincidentally, Sarraín had previously won a PEN/Newman's Own Award for challenging a Miami-Dade County ban on art funding for cultural organizations that produced works by artists living in Cuba. He would subsequently return to Cuba in 2007 to stage Cuban playwright Anton Arrufat's translation of Aeschylus's *The Seven Against Thebes*, which had been suppressed since it received a Casa de las Americas award in 1968 because of the presumed parallels in the Spanish version between fratricidal conflicts in Ancient Greece and the struggles among Cubans. The Sarraín Manzor anthology brings together plays by Cuban-born Fornés, Dolores Prida, and Nilo Cruz, and plays by the American-born Caridad Svich and Jorge Cortiñas. *Teatro cubano actual* breaks ground by suggesting that theatre written in the US by people who weren't even born on the island could be considered Cuban, and in her introduction, Manzor explicitly draws strategic comparisons between the essential hybridity of Cuban culture in Cuba and the hyphenated cultural condition of Cubans in the United States. She also draws parallels between Cuban cultural expression produced in exile before and after the Revolution.

In an interview I conducted with Jorge Cortiñas, he recalled that when a *Miami Herald* reporter questioned him about the anthology, he suggested that the selection of works avoided controversy by sidestepping overtly Cuban subject matter. His own play *Sleepwalkers* (1999), about the extreme hardships of the Cuban Special Period of the early 1990s, had been passed over in favor of *Abrázame Fuerte* (Tight Embrace; 2005), which explores

the psychological relationship between a kidnapped woman and her two captors. After his comments appeared in print, he received word that Cuban officials were displeased. Fortunately, that alleged displeasure has not prevented the plans for the Cuban production of his play from moving forward. This in itself could be seen as a sign of liberalizing tendencies prevailing in the Cuban theatre scene.

For Cortiñas to have made a direct political comment about Cuban affairs is unusual, since he publicly acknowledges that he retired his politically engaged self in the mid-1990s, when he began writing plays. This came after several years of intensive involvement in AIDS activism in the Bay Area, where Cortiñas studied public health at UC Berkeley. His activism and experience in the health field led to his first visit to Havana in 1992, when he went to conduct research on treatment of HIV-positive Cubans as part of his graduate study.⁷ Once there, he worked for the Ministry of Public Health and organized the first gay male HIV-prevention support groups. Cortiñas recalls that the men were pleasantly surprised to find themselves gathering publicly for something that was not a party or a trip to a bar. The Ministry allowed the men's groups to continue for some time after he left. Cortiñas notes that gay men and women at this time began to meet independently, despite the fact that independent civic organizing in Cuba is forbidden. However, that group was forced to disband and many of its members have since emigrated. In recent years, Cuban President Raul Castro's daughter Mariela Castro Espín has officially implemented educational campaigns in support of LGBT rights in Cuba.

It is highly unusual for a Miami-raised Cuban-American to seek out ways of engaging with Cuban culture on the island. Social pressure in Miami to condemn everything about Cuban society as an expression of the Castro regime remains quite potent, even after five decades. Nonetheless, Cortiñas claims that his return was, politically speaking, relatively unremarkable to his family:

7. After leaving Miami in 1985 to attend Georgetown, where he studied History, Cortiñas enrolled in the graduate program in Public Health at UC Berkeley. After returning from Cuba, he received an MFA in Creative Writing from Brown University in 2000.

I had already tortured my parents so much by coming out, by being repeatedly arrested in acts of civil disobedience, by ending up on the front page of *The Miami Herald* talking shit about Ronald Reagan...At that point, their response to my traveling to Cuba was, ‘Oh of course you are going to Cuba. Of course you are going to torture us with that.’ (Cortiñas 2009)

That directness is also uncharacteristic of his approach to cubanía as a dramatist. The hyphenated quality of his creative endeavor is better understood as formal rather than sociological. Cortiñas viscerally rejects the demand placed on many ethnic playwrights in the US to reiterate the narrative of immigration *ad infinitum*—and stay within that subject matter. In our interview, he also lamented what he sees as an unfortunate tendency in Cuban theatre toward highly physical acting styles that “leave no room for minimalism, for playing with flatness.” Cortiñas is open about his attraction to a certain element of the Cuban modernist literary tradition, what he calls the “mythical” symbolic space that Cuban writers Alejo Carpentier and Reinaldo Arenas create with their dense and stylized prose. “Arenas achieves an X-ray of a cultural psyche,” says the playwright, claiming that he sought to create an English equivalent in *Blind Mouth Singing*. “We get lost in the excess of psychic space.” To Cortiñas, the classification of these writers as magic realists is inappropriate and misleading—he describes their approach to language as intentionally odd, evocative of archetypal structures that underlie Cuban culture. “It offends me that this aspect of my Cubanness was something that the downtown theatre scene in New York had no place for,” he confessed. “They couldn’t read it, or if they did, they’d treat it as a lesser Isabel Allende.”

Cortiñas has maintained an attitude of constructive engagement with contemporary Cuban culture on the island and in the diaspora while refusing to limit the scope of his artistic interests to chronicling the Cuban exo-

dus or romantically dwelling on the country’s past. *Blind Mouth Singing* does not reflect current or past social conditions in Cuba so much as it evokes an emotional state that is shaped by isolation and displacement—which could be experienced by anyone anywhere. Cortiñas’s interest in Cuban culture is at once deeply personal and profoundly analytic. Traveling to Cuba and meeting the relatives who stayed, he explained in an unusually sentimental moment in our conversation, enabled him to understand what he might have become. “It suddenly hit me when I got there that everybody and everything was Cuban—and how weird that was,” he recalled. “I realized that I’m hopelessly North American—I need my Kurt Cobain records.” But taking his work to Cuba does not for Cortiñas mean that he has to translate it into something identifiably ethnic or regional. He has chosen a Mexican translator for the Havana production of *Blind Mouth Singing*, he explained to me with a wink, in order to avoid having to work with a Spanish text that is peppered with “¿Que bola, asere?”—Cuban slang for “What’s up?” or “How’s it going, buddy?” He is currently working with the director and actors to retune musical elements so as to avoid the local. “There is a bolero in the English-language version that was played on a ukulele,” he explains, “because no one in the US would recognize that sound as Cuban. In the Cuban version we can’t use that song. We’re looking for something like Tom Waits. It’s got to sound strange and old.”

—Coco Fusco

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Blind Mouth Singing

Production History

Blind Mouth Singing was originally commissioned by South Coast Repertory, Costa Mesa, CA. The play received development at the Joseph Papp Public Theater, New York; at the Underwood Theater, New York; and at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, Waterford,

CT. An earlier version of the play was produced in 2006 by Teatro Vista, Chicago, and directed by Loy Arcenas.

The script was developed further and produced by the National Asian American Theatre Company, New York. The show opened on 14 September 2007 and was directed by Rubén Polendo; Mia Katigbak was the Artistic Producing Director.

*for federico, for reinaldo,
for all the pretty, pretty shepherd boys*

*¿cómo no seguir viviendo con dos
lenguas casas nostalgias tentaciones melancolías?
Porque no puedo amputarme una lengua
ni tumbar una casa
ni enterrar una melancolía.
Quisiera, al contrario,
singularizar lo indivisiblemente dividido,
hacer de dos grandes ojos una sola mirada.*

—Gustavo Pérez Firmat, “Provocaciones” (1983)

La tierra también come bueno.

—Cuban proverb

Dramatis Personae

Bolivia is a middle-aged woman. She is modest and candid and blushes at (and enjoys) a good joke the same way she blushes from (and enjoys) the occasional, always carefully measured, glass of rum. She is the sister of...

Mother of the Late Afternoon, who is middle aged and a very skillful handler of kitchen knives. She has a tongue like a potato peeler. She is the mother of...

Gordi, the eldest son. He is chubby and still unmarried and his pants don't fit. There is something vaguely out of tune about Gordi. Maybe he is too short, maybe he is clumsy, but he carries with him the faint echoes of previous ridicule. He is the brother of...

Reiderico, the youngest son. He is the small king of a small garden. He fears sudden movements. He is friends with...

Lucero, who dresses identically to Reiderico, but in a different color. He lives at the bottom

of the well, has strong hands and eyes like dark water.

Time—We can use the timeline outlined by Chamoiseau to place these events after the end of the age of straw, possibly in the middle of the age of brick, and almost certainly after the dawn of the age of crate wood. Other scholars, albeit a minority, argue for evidence that suggests the age of tar, or the age of concrete, or the age of asbestos.

Place—There's the sea, which only looks infinite but crashes into that barrier reef halfway to the horizon, making loud surf where no one can hear it. That barrier reef lies entirely under the waves but its location is obvious because it forms a visible line of surf like a white frothy scar a hundred yards long. The scar bubbles and refuses to heal. (The reef grew where the Yanqui warships sank, which is the precise spot where the Spanish warships sank. No one invited either of them, but both of them came, and both of them sank.) Eventually the sea ebbs

over that barrier reef and becomes a stone littered valley called Blind Mouth. A few yards of this land are fertile before it hardens again into insurrection ridge, which you climb to get to thousand almond river, which you can follow to get to a small trading town on the main road to City (also called Port), which is a two-week's journey from there by ox cart.

In between the land called Blind Mouth and the unplowable rock of insurrection ridge, on that narrow strip of arable land, is an old well. No one can remember who dug the well, but there it sits. It is a deep well, full of sweet water and endless echoes. It is with this well that our tale is concerned.

Act 1

Scene 1

(Just before dawn. The breeze slow and heavy.)

REIDERICO, in the garden.

REIDERICO speaks softly into the well. He leans close into it, the way a friend leans close when sharing a confidence.)

REIDERICO: Are you there? Lucero?
(REIDERICO smiles.) You are. Aren't you? You are there. Used to be, when I looked down this well, I could only see my own reflection. But then I began to see the outline of your face. And your black eyes, looking up at me from the bottom of the well. What's it like my friend? What's it like to live at the bottom of the well?
(REIDERICO listens. We hear the faint sound of scratching, the sound of somebody whispering.) It's true Lucero. It's true. Some nights your voice is like the wind, I can barely hear it. But every time I look down into this well, you're a little more real. *(The sound of whispers echoes, and passes on through the branches of the laurel trees. REIDERICO chuckles softly. The breeze is slow and steady.)* You have beautiful black eyes Lucero. And you're getting closer. Closer to me. *(The whispers increase. The whispers seem to laugh. REIDERICO anticipates great happiness.)*

Scene 2

(The sun has risen. Inside the house, MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON is sharpening kitchen knives. This is a kitchen full of knives. On the table, there is a small cage full of squabs. The young birds coo nervously.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: First thing in the morning, I allow myself—like a fool—to look out my own window, only to see my youngest son is out there again: talking to that well.

BOLIVIA: I brought you something to take your mind off all that. A surprise.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: Watch: he'll be out there all day. Muttering to himself.

BOLIVIA: Don't worry about that. Look at the present I brought you.

(A pause in the sharpening. BOLIVIA holds out her gift.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: A worn-out gramophone record?

BOLIVIA: It's that song.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: *(Back to the sharpening.)* When do I have time to listen to music?

BOLIVIA: It's that song your husband used to court you with.

(Sound of blade hitting sharpening stone.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: And since I lost the husband, you thought you'd bring me the song. *(A pause in the sharpening.)* Try not to be so thoughtful.

(MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON resumes her sharpening. BOLIVIA places the gramophone record on the table, and tries a different tactic.)

BOLIVIA: If you let REIDERICO meet friends his own age, he might spend less time in the garden.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: Him? Out loose in the world? Then he would really torture me with worry.

BOLIVIA: I could take the boy with me to Market, at least. Since I'm going anyway.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: Did my son leave something behind at Market, that he needs to go back there and look for it?



Figure 2. Bolivia (Sue Jean Kim) tries to get a word in while Mother of the Late Afternoon (Mia Katigbak) sharpens her long, long knives. *Blind Mouth Singing* by Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas. Directed by Rubén Polendo. NAATCO, 2007. (Photo by Zack Brown)

BOLIVIA: He's never left sight of your kitchen window, what could—He hasn't lost anything.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: Well then, why argue with success.

(Sound of blade hitting the sharpening stone.)

BOLIVIA: Shall we listen to the gramophone?

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: No.

BOLIVIA: But it's been so long since you've heard it.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: No.

BOLIVIA: Are you sure?

(Beat.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: *(Because she is not sure...)* No.

(Beat.)

BOLIVIA: You have to admit, Rey is funny. He must think his true love lives at the bottom of

that well, the way he spends his time talking to it.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: He won't amount to much.

BOLIVIA: He's king of that garden.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: King of his own hole in the ground.

BOLIVIA: Aren't those knives sharp enough for you yet?

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: This isn't the time of year for a son to be daydreaming like that. With the weather changing every hour. I get no rest. No peace.

BOLIVIA: What's the hurry? When the time comes to bury us in our very own holes, deep enough so that the grave robbers don't dig us up, then we'll have peace and quiet all right. Quiet for sure.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: You talk just like him.

BOLIVIA: I like to watch him sometimes: Philosophizing with that well.

(MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON has heard enough. She sticks her head out the kitchen window.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: Gordi, come and get your younger brother away from the well!

GORDI: *(From offstage)* Why do I have to look after him?

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: I've told him again and again: stay away from that well. Go on. Get him away from there.

GORDI: *(From offstage)* One day I'm going to get tired of this.

(MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON continues to sharpen her knives. From outside,

the sound of GORDI and REIDERICO jostling.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: If you take that worn-out gramophone record with you, you'll save me the trouble of throwing it out.

(The worn-out gramophone record sits on the table. BOLIVIA watches her sister. Sound of blade hitting stone.)

Scene 3

(Outside, in the garden. The sun is relentless. The plants are relentless. The insects selfish and uncaring. GORDI has REIDERICO pinned to the ground.)

GORDI: Don't be like that, I need your assistance. I'm trying to quit smoking Rey, and you're going to have to help me.

REIDERICO: You don't smoke. You've never smoked.

(GORDI punches REIDERICO on the shoulder. REIDERICO yells.)

GORDI: That's why I need your help. Will you give me a chance to explain? Sit down with me. Come on. Now look, if you go into the kitchen, and distract your mother for me, I can steal a cigar from the pantry. Then I'd be smoking. After that, I can see about trying to quit. Be logical Rey.

REIDERICO: Why don't you leave me alone.

GORDI: What are you talking about? You like me Rey. *(GORDI punches REIDERICO. REIDERICO yells.)* You like spending time with me.

REIDERICO: Just do it yourself, it's your idea.

GORDI: I can't. I'm under a lot of stress. I break out in sweats; I get palpitations in my chest. A man needs tobacco to help him relax. Help me Rey.

REIDERICO: I don't like your plots.

GORDI: But we have to do things together. *(GORDI punches REIDERICO.)* Like brothers.



Figure 3. Gordi (Orville Mendoza) beats his little brother (Jon Norman Schneider) in a misguided show of affection. *Blind Mouth Singing* by Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas. Directed by Rubén Polendo. NAATCO, 2007. (Photo by Zack Brown)

(GORDI punches REIDERICO on the shoulder. REIDERICO yells.) Look at me. I'm older than you aren't I? Hey. So forget your obsession with that well, and stick with me.

(BOLIVIA enters the garden.)

BOLIVIA: Gordi—What are you doing to your brother?

(GORDI scrambles to his feet. He pulls REIDERICO up after him.)

GORDI: He wasn't working. It's hurricane season and he should be doing his part around here.

REIDERICO: That's not what you said—

(GORDI silences his brother with a gesture.)

GORDI: You should listen to me.

(GORDI runs off. BOLIVIA dusts REIDERICO off. The red dust hovers in the humid air.)

BOLIVIA: Are you all right?

REIDERICO: He must think I'm a horse, and that if he kicks me it doesn't hurt.

BOLIVIA: How's your arm?

REIDERICO: It hurts.

BOLIVIA: Come here. I need your help.

REIDERICO: With what?

(BOLIVIA looks behind herself before speaking.)

BOLIVIA: Between you and me.

REIDERICO: All right.

BOLIVIA: Since you're good with words. *(Looks behind her. Takes out a scrap of paper and a charcoal pencil. Makes the Caribbean gesture to indicate a secret.)* I want you to paint these words, on a plank of wood. For a friend of mine. Here.

(REIDERICO takes the paper and reads a bit. Looks up at BOLIVIA quizzically.)

REIDERICO: You mean...these words exactly?

BOLIVIA: More or less. You tell me if, my friend, is using the right...phrases.

(REIDERICO reads a bit more. Looks up at his aunt.)

REIDERICO: This isn't how you spell "syphilis."

(BOLIVIA makes the Caribbean gesture to indicate a secret.)

BOLIVIA: Fix it.

(REIDERICO does.)

REIDERICO: So: "Ointment of Mercury. Treats - syphilis - and Other Lesions of Indiscretion. At your service: the Spinster of Calcutta."

BOLIVIA: Is that too many words for a sign?

REIDERICO: You bring me a long plank of wood, I'll paint you a long sign.

BOLIVIA: You're a good nephew.

REIDERICO: What kind of person is this friend of yours, this spinster woman?

BOLIVIA: *(Looks behind her.)* That spinster is me. *(She makes the Caribbean gesture to indicate a secret. Looks behind her.)* I wear a mask when I do it, like a Turk. It's good money.

REIDERICO: What if mother finds out.

BOLIVIA: What she doesn't know, she can't torture herself with.

REIDERICO: But you're always saying maybe I shouldn't have secret habits, like talking into the well. You're always saying people my age should try and fit in. But now you have a secret livelihood. If mother finds out she'll—

(GORDI enters. REIDERICO stops speaking. BOLIVIA and REIDERICO look at GORDI. A standoff.)

BOLIVIA: Yes Gordi?

GORDI: I need Rey to help me with something.

BOLIVIA: Later.

GORDI: When then?

BOLIVIA: Not now.

(GORDI does not walk away. BOLIVIA and REIDERICO do not resume their conversation.)

GORDI: What are you two talking about?

BOLIVIA: Gordi, if you don't have anything to do, please don't come to do it here. *(GORDI exits. BOLIVIA waits until she is sure he is gone, then she turns to REIDERICO and resumes her conversation.)* Listen: there's a Vendor of Pamphlets who lends me the back of his stall. So I have a place to consult the patients. It's all right.

REIDERICO: I've never seen anyone with an affliction. Are they immodest?

BOLIVIA: No. The opposite. My patients come up to the stall so quietly, with such an innocent look on their faces, you know right away they must have syphilis.

REIDERICO: And the men, do they show it to you?

BOLIVIA: The men? They introduce me to their members. You know men give their member names? Oh they do.

They hold their members out to me, limp and pale. And they weep over the pustules that erupt. Just like a mother weeps over a sick child. I've never seen men act with such tenderness.

REIDERICO: Are these men offended when you describe their members as limp like that?

BOLIVIA: Well. I don't tell them everything I'm thinking.

But after I treat them, they have such gratitude. They thank me, on behalf of their members. The men began to call me the Blessed Virgin of Calcutta. I don't even know where Calcutta is, but the Vendor of Pamphlets, he convinced me the name would be good for business.

REIDERICO: Blessed Virgin isn't what you wrote here on this paper.

BOLIVIA: It doesn't do to be vain. Besides, one thing I've learned is, you put the word "Virgin" up on a shelf for long enough, it becomes the word "Spinster." And I'll tell you something, after handling the private parts of so many men, I may want to stay a spinster.

REIDERICO: I'm glad you're my aunt.

BOLIVIA: I don't see why men should swagger. A man's privates are the saddest part of his body. The most wrinkled. I feel compassion for them, I do. *(Beat.)* You won't tell anyone else?

REIDERICO: All you have to do to keep a secret is keep to yourself. And haven't I had lots of practice at that?

(BOLIVIA kisses REIDERICO.)

BOLIVIA: When I come back from Market, I'll bring you that plank of wood. And I'll get enough provisions, in case we get a hurricane this year. It's that season you know.

REIDERICO: Bring some red paint.

BOLIVIA: *(Looks up.)* What do you think? Will there be a hurricane this year?

REIDERICO: Could be. We are due.

BOLIVIA: Sometimes I think even a storm couldn't find this house. So settled here. Like

everything about this place has already been decided.

(BOLIVIA gives REIDERICO another kiss. She exits with the canvas sack full of sweet potatoes.

REIDERICO watches her go. He looks at the sky.

GORDI enters with a battered paper box.)

REIDERICO: What?

GORDI: I found this empty candle box under your bed. It's full of novels and horoscopes.

REIDERICO: So?

GORDI: Come here.

(REIDERICO runs off. GORDI chases him.)

Scene 4

(Then the night sweeps in around the house like a black tide around a small boat.

Inside the house someone sputters and snores. He lies on his back with his eyes closed and his mouth open. The house fills up with the heavy vapor of sleep. But outside the night is restless. Outside there is rustling and sly movement and wide-eyed watching.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON comes out into the garden, holding the worn-out gramophone record. She's careful not to be seen, or heard, but through a window we see REIDERICO. He watches.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON walks over to the well and runs her hands over the record. She runs the tip of a finger along the grooves.

REIDERICO watches her, he sees a vulnerability in her that he has not seen before. MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON weighs the record, she weighs her memory of the song.

And then she lets the record slip from her fingers and fall into the well.

There: she's made her decision.

REIDERICO disappears.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON starts back toward the house. Something from the direction of the well attracts her attention. She looks that way. From deep in the well the wind carries an echo. Could it be someone singing?

There is a splash.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
(Not loud.) Who's there?

(The rustling retreats. Then silence.)

BOLIVIA approaches, weighed down with provisions from Market.)

BOLIVIA: No need to wait up like this.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
You shouldn't be out so late. See what happens if some villain grabs you.

BOLIVIA: It's not easy finding my way home on that road at night. Black as bibles out there.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Why do you stay at Market so long?

BOLIVIA: Best time to buy is at the end of the day.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Those clouds have me worried. See the way the moon lights them up? They have jagged edges.

BOLIVIA: Look like clouds to me.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
What are they saying at Market?

BOLIVIA: The merchants—what are they going to say? The vendors who sell building supplies, they're certain a hurricane is coming. Meanwhile, the ones who sell that liquor they make from fermented molasses, they say to relax and enjoy ourselves. So you see, it does no good to ask.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
I say expect the worst. That way you're never disappointed.

(BOLIVIA brings out her supplies.)

BOLIVIA: I don't discriminate. I buy from both of them. Iron nails for boarding up the windows, in case there is a storm. And liquor, eh? to celebrate our luck if nothing comes.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
You shouldn't spend so much.

BOLIVIA: I bargain.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
The branches of that tree are calm, but look how fast the clouds are moving. Come inside. Walking about on a night like this isn't healthy.

(MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON holds open the door to the house for BOLIVIA.)

BOLIVIA: And the boys?

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
They've been asleep for hours. I run a decent house.

(BOLIVIA enters the house.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON stares out in the direction of the well for a moment. Then she closes the door behind her.)

Scene 5

(After a while, REIDERICO is seen quietly standing in the doorway of the house. He listens. He lights a kerosene lamp and sneaks into the garden. He walks up to the well, and peers inside. Silence. There is no sign of anything. He holds the lamp down the well.)

REIDERICO: Lucero. Lucero. *(No answer. The crickets don't stop repeating themselves.)* I heard you. From inside the house, I heard you singing. What's come over you? I could ask you why you were singing. But if I asked you a simple question like that, you wouldn't be able to come up with a reason. Just singing, you'd say. You've never been easy to understand you know. Are you listening? *(REIDERICO picks up a small stone and drops it into the well—the stone falls a long time before it hits water, the splash distant and cold.)* The moon doesn't seem to pay this house any mind. The moon only cares about some other place, some place way over there. What's all the way over there anyway? *(No answer.)* I hate it when you get like this. *(No answer.)* I don't know why we should have done all the things we've done together if you won't answer me now, when it really counts. *(No answer.)* Lucero? I know I heard you. I know you're there. You must have taught yourself how to sing. From the bottom of the well, you taught yourself to sing. How did you learn? *(Beat.)* But you won't answer me will you? You won't even explain a simple thing like that.

(REIDERICO gives up, and he gets up to go back indoors. Then LUCERO begins to sing from the bottom of the well. He sings through a crooked smile. At first we can only hear his voice, by the end of the song we can see him, LUCERO's head just visible above the wall of the well.)

LUCERO: *(From offstage, singing)*

You once taught me this song⁸
Before you went far away
Bet you've forgotten my name
But I still remember your tune
Now I don't see much light
Down deep inside of this hole
What in the world can we do
Everyone has to lose
At least you taught me a song
What in the world can we do
Everyone has to lose
At least I still know this tune

(LUCERO ends the song.)

REIDERICO: I forget how handsome you are.

LUCERO: Did you like the song? I sang it for you.

REIDERICO: It's pretty. But what's the use?
Even if they heard you singing, I don't think they'd believe you exist.

(In mock offense, LUCERO dives back into the well.)

REIDERICO: Come back Lucero. I like it, I do.

(LUCERO comes back up.)

LUCERO: Should I sing it again? What do you say I sing it again?

REIDERICO: Go on then. I'll listen.

LUCERO: Know what? Changed my mind.

(LUCERO dives back in the well.)

REIDERICO: I know you're coming back up. I know you want to see me. *(LUCERO comes back up.)* Told you.

LUCERO: REIDERICO.

REIDERICO: Yes?

LUCERO: Come here. I heard your mother talking and this time she's right. There is a hurricane coming.

REIDERICO: My Aunt says maybe the storm is like my father and if we're lucky it'll stay away.

LUCERO: It won't be safe for you in that house. You should leave.

REIDERICO: Things are all right, really. Could be better, I suppose. But they'll be all right.

LUCERO: Why do you act like you're the one stuck in this well?

REIDERICO: Because I wouldn't leave you behind Lucero. I wouldn't do that to you.

LUCERO: If I were you: I'd go. Storm is coming. And when the weather starts changing, nobody can stop it.

(A rustling in the garden. REIDERICO looks behind him. When REIDERICO looks back, LUCERO is gone.)

Scene 6

(Outside. The bleary morning. BOLIVIA piling up boards. As she works GORDI enters the yard. GORDI looks at BOLIVIA. BOLIVIA looks at him.)

BOLIVIA: Good morning. *(GORDI doesn't answer. He walks up to the well, leans over, and with a rumble in his throat, begins to draw up all the phlegm he can. Then he very deliberately lets that long line of mucous hang out of his mouth and slowly drop into the well. He smiles, eminently pleased with himself.)* We drink out of there you know.

GORDI: There's a penitent with a long beard who says it's all the same—that what we drink in the evening is what we piss out in the morning and it does no good to try and separate the two.

(GORDI is even more pleased with himself. He chuckles? BOLIVIA returns to her work.)

It occurs to GORDI that there is a more direct way to test the penitent's theory. GORDI climbs up on

8. To the melody of "He perdido contigo," listed as having been composed by Luis Cárdenas Triana, though another source lists it as having been composed by both Luis Cárdenas and María Teresa Vera. The earliest recording I was able to find dates from the mid-1950s. Multiple searches show no existing copyright, presumed to be in the public domain. Adapted and translated into English as "Everyone Has to Lose" by Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas.

the wall of the well and starts to unbuckle his pants.
BOLIVIA happens to look up.)

BOLIVIA: Gordi!

(GORDI caught, sulks off the wall of the well.)

BOLIVIA: I could use some help with these planks of wood.

GORDI: I'm busy aren't I?

(Beat. GORDI has another idea, and runs off. BOLIVIA returns to the planks of wood.)

REIDERICO enters. He starts to help his aunt with the boards. They work.)

REIDERICO: You're up early.

BOLIVIA: I'm eager to get to Market.

REIDERICO: We have time. You never go this soon.

BOLIVIA: That's because I used to put off leaving.

REIDERICO: I thought we could at least paint the sign you wanted.

(BOLIVIA hands REIDERICO a half-sized board, and a small can of paint.)

BOLIVIA: Here's a plank of wood. And the paint you asked me for. But I'm going to leave this job in your hands. Do you mind?

REIDERICO: Will you have to be there long?

BOLIVIA: I'm not going to complain. I enjoy the work, let me tell you. I put on that veil, I'm a different person. *(Sighs.)* Oh. Part of me is afraid none of this is real.

I should go.

REIDERICO: Wait. You can't stay then, just for a bit?

BOLIVIA: Don't you want to wish me luck today?

(Beat. BOLIVIA turns to leave.)

REIDERICO: I know the Vendor of Pamphlets is your friend now, also, but don't forget. I'm waiting for you here.

BOLIVIA: If your brother picks on you, you stand up to him.

(Beat. REIDERICO watches her go. Then she is gone. Another beat.)

REIDERICO: ...good luck...

(GORDI comes in quietly, tackles REIDERICO onto the ground.)

GORDI: Finally. Got you.

REIDERICO: Let go of me.

(GORDI is pushing REIDERICO towards the kitchen. As they approach it, the boys try not to be heard.)

GORDI: *(Pushing REY.)* Come on, come on.

REIDERICO: You're the one who wants to steal the cigar. You go.

GORDI: Go. Or I'll tell your mother something so terrible, something so sad, that she'll stop loving you. I'll tell her you've been watching her when she bathes and making fun of what you see.

REIDERICO: It isn't me who does that.

GORDI: I'll tell her that when she isn't looking, you wipe away her kisses with the back of your hand.

REIDERICO: That was you.

GORDI: I'll tell her you've been touching the chickens with your privates.

REIDERICO: I do not.

GORDI: Just go. Distract her for me.

REIDERICO: What will I say?

GORDI: Make up a story. Or aren't you good at that anymore.

(With a final push, they enter the kitchen...)

Scene 7

(Enter the kitchen. A cloud of feathers and protest from the birds. Heads on the floor. Blood on the raised knife. A loud red chop.)

REIDERICO and his brother paralyzed at the door.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
What?

GORDI: It's Rey. He has something to tell you.



Figure 4. Gordi (Orville Mendoza) watches as Mother of the Late Afternoon (Mia Katigbak) instructs Reiderico (Jon Norman Schneider) on how to decapitate squabs in the 2007 NAATCO production of *Blind Mouth Singing*. Written by Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas. Directed by Rubén Polendo. (Photo by Zack Brown)

(GORDI shoves REIDERICO across the room ———>. REIDERICO ends at his mother's side, between the cage and the knife.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Tell me my king. *(She whips out a rag.)* Go on my pierced heart. *(She wipes blood off the knife.)* My reason for living. *(She throws the rag down on the table.)*

REIDERICO: It's, I've been thinking about what I should do with my life.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
The last thing we need is new problems
REIDERICO.

REIDERICO: I'm grown, everyone says, Rey, What are you going to do with your life?

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
If you want to help your family—*(A loud red chop. She gives the decapitated bird to REIDERICO.)* Then hang up this bird so it can bleed.

Hang it from its feet. Bleeding isn't something that should take all day.

(The bird has been hung and REIDERICO has backed into the door <———.)

GORDI: Now tell her something she wants to hear.

(GORDI pushes his brother back across the room, REIDERICO comes to a stop inches away from a loud red chop ———>.)

REIDERICO: Mama, suppose I became a sharpener of knives? I'd take a sharpening stone, maybe open a stall. I'd sharpen your knives for free. Could you teach me how to sharpen kitchen knives?

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Now you want to work with knives? Come here then. Hold this bird. Tickle the feathers. That's right. Whisper to the bird that everything is going to be all right. You have to relax the bird if you want to lengthen the neck.

(A loud red chop.)

REIDERICO: You almost caught my fingers!

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
See! Knives are too sharp for you.

(REIDERICO flees across the room <———.)

GORDI: Tell her what you meant to say.

(GORDI pushes his brother back across the room ———>.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Here's another bird for you to hang. We'll have to work quickly. If the flies smell the blood we'll never get them out of the house. I would have closed the shutters but I was worried about you. You distract me REIDERICO, that doesn't help things.

(REIDERICO has hung the bird and tried to sneak across the room <———.)

GORDI: You didn't even say anything this time. Speak up.

(GORDI pushes his brother back ———>.)

REIDERICO: Maybe I could be a water diviner? I'd travel the country and tell people where to dig their wells and, I'd save the clearest water for you.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: Instead of telling me stories REIDERICO, why don't you help me sweep up the heads. *(A loud red chop.)* Careful you don't trip, the floor's wet.

(REIDERICO has sneaked back across the room <————.)

GORDI: That wasn't what he meant to say.

(GORDI pushes his brother back across the room ———>.)

It's time to pluck the slaughtered birds. MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON begins to pluck feathers out in fistfuls.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: Don't interrupt me REIDERICO. There are so many feathers to tear off these birds. Sometimes I tear out these feathers so I don't tear out my own hair. Oh! Look at all these feathers!

REIDERICO: Maybe I could make my living climbing people's rooftops, I could repair the red tiles. There'd be views up there—whatever I saw I'd tell you all about it.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: You'd fall! Just like all of these feathers, you'd fall! These feathers are blind and they don't care where they land.

(REIDERICO has backed across the room <—————. GORDI catches him. They struggle.)

GORDI: Distract her or we'll be here all day.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: And now we have to gut these birds. Add it to the list, because we still have to gut these birds.



Figure 5. Gordi (Orville Mendoza) hurls his brother Reiderico (John Norman Schneider) towards the sharp knives of his mother in the 2007 NAATCO production of *Blind Mouth Singing*. Written by Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas. Directed by Rubén Polendo. (Photo by Zack Brown)

REIDERICO: I don't know, I don't know, let me go outside and not know.

(GORDI pushes his brother back across the room —————>. MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON has begun to gut the birds.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: Later when we have dinner, you'll be able to eat this lesson.

(A dry chop. REIDERICO backs away a bit <—.)

REIDERICO: Please mama.

(A dry chop. REIDERICO backs away a bit more <—.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: Not everyone gets to eat their lesson. You're lucky for that.

REIDERICO: It's the afternoon already.

(A dry chop. REIDERICO backs away a bit more <—.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: Close the shutters REIDERICO.

GORDI: Make her understand you.

(GORDI pushes REIDERICO back across the room —————>.

A ha! REIDERICO knows what to say.)

REIDERICO: I KNOW! *(All eyes on REIDERICO.)* Why don't you embroider my name onto your pillow, so that I'll always be with you.

(Beat.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: Embroider your name onto my pillow, is that what you said?

GORDI: That's what he said, I heard him.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: You'll leave me.

GORDI: No he won't.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: But I have so much to do.

REIDERICO: Let's go get your sewing needle.

(REIDERICO runs off, MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON follows him.)

Alone in the kitchen, GORDI opens the cabinet. He sees the bottle of fermented molasses. Takes a swig. Returns the bottle. GORDI opens the cigar box. Takes a cigar and lights it. GORDI begins to smoke the cigar, posing the way he thinks a man should.

From the next room we hear MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON calling...)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: *(From offstage)* REIDERICO! Why are you running from me now? Come back here.

(GORDI runs off with his stolen cigar.)

Scene 8

(Outside in the garden the sun refuses to judge anything.)

Outside, the trees have spent years stretching their scars.

REIDERICO and GORDI are hiding. GORDI is smoking the stolen cigar. His words rough, his mouth smooth.)

REIDERICO: We'll get caught.

GORDI: You're going to have to toughen up Rey. Be more like me.

REIDERICO: Is she looking?

GORDI: Here, smoke some of this cigar.

REIDERICO: No thanks.

GORDI: Go on, I offered.

REIDERICO: Should keep your head down, she'll see you.

GORDI: You want me to tell you what I've been doing in bed, when no one's looking?

REIDERICO: What do you mean?

GORDI: I've been shaving. At night, I sneak one of the kitchen knives into bed with me, and I drag it across my cheeks. Most people think you have to wait for whiskers and then shave. But I have faith that it's the shaving that'll make the whiskers grow.

REIDERICO: You're going to cut yourself.

GORDI: I'm the oldest, I think I have a right to shave.



Figure 6. Gordi (Orville Mendoza) and Reiderico (Jon Norman Schneider) hide in the garden. *Blind Mouth Singing* by Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas. Directed by Rubén Polendo. NAATCO, 2007. (Photo by Zack Brown)

(MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON comes out into the garden. The boys freeze. They show fear.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
REIDERICO. *(She listens.)* REIDERICO, are you out there?

(She listens, then goes back inside.)

GORDI: You know why you aren't normal?

REIDERICO: Why?

GORDI: Because father left here too early and he never got a chance to beat you.

REIDERICO: I came out all right.

GORDI: Beatings would have toughened you up. When I was a boy and I would get into mischief, father would beat me. But I wouldn't cry, and that only made him beat me harder. I was his favorite.

REIDERICO: The way I act doesn't harm anyone.

GORDI: It's obvious you've never been properly beaten. If you were smart, you would let me beat you.

REIDERICO: I'll find someone else to beat me, thank you.

GORDI: Do me a favor, touch me here. Feel that?

REIDERICO: What? Here?

GORDI: Does that feel tough enough to you? Seriously, tell me the truth. Do you think I was beaten enough?

REIDERICO: Well, your arm feels tough.

GORDI: Still, sometimes I can't help but wonder. That's why I started shaving.

(GORDI begins to cough. MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON comes out in the garden again.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
I can hear you. *(She listens.)* I have the sewing needle ready. *(She listens.)* REIDERICO, you're a liar. *(She goes back inside.)*

GORDI: This is a good place to hide.

REIDERICO: I like when it's quiet, and there's no one looking for me.

GORDI: So?

REIDERICO: There are leaves out here that are as big as a soldier's chest.

GORDI: Why do you say these things?

(GORDI pretends he is going to hit REIDERICO on the back of his head. REIDERICO flinches, but GORDI doesn't hit him. MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON comes back out into the garden.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
REIDERICO!

GORDI: *(Handing the cigar to REIDERICO.)* Hold the cigar. Don't move. *(GORDI stands up to speak to his mother. He keeps his hand on REIDERICO's head to hold his brother down in place and out of sight.)* He isn't here.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Where did he get to? Why weren't you
watching him?

GORDI: He stole a cigar and then he ran off.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
You're saying he tricked me?

GORDI: He wanted to play with the cigar. You
know how he is.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
A weight on my heart, that's what he is.

*(MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON goes
back inside. GORDI takes back the cigar, sits down,
resumes his smoking.)*

REIDERICO: I helped you. Why did you tell
her that?

GORDI: Right now she's inside wishing you
had never been born. Right now she wishes you
were just an idea, something distant. Like that
bird, there, above us. Circling. Something far
away.

REIDERICO: That's a vulture. It spends the
day spying.

GORDI: For whom is the vulture spying?

REIDERICO: Nobody knows.

(GORDI smokes.)

Scene 9

*(That night, MOTHER OF THE LATE
AFTERNOON holds a mirror made of tin in front
of her face. With her other hand, she is pulling hairs
out with tweezers. She plucks hair out of her ears,
off her upper lip, from her nose. Each pluck burns.
It is painful to watch.)*

REIDERICO enters, penitent.

*MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON gives
REIDERICO one look, and then she returns her
attention to the mirror. She plucks. REIDERICO
flinches.*

She plucks. REIDERICO flinches.

She plucks again. Flinch.)

REIDERICO: You're mad at me.

*(Beat. MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON
chooses not to answer. Then she plucks.
REIDERICO flinches.)*

REIDERICO: I wanted to tell you that it
wasn't—

(She plucks. REIDERICO flinches.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Why don't you make yourself useful and hold
this mirror for your mother. *(REIDERICO
approaches his mother. Takes the mirror.)*

Stand closer. *(He does.)* Hold it at an angle.
(REIDERICO adjusts the angle of the mirror.)

*MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON
adjusts his adjustment. Then she plucks. He
flinches.)* I can't see myself properly if you
continue to tremble. *(She plucks. He flinches.)*
*MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON
adjusts the mirror again.)*

REIDERICO: I wanted to explain that—

(She plucks. He flinches.)

REIDERICO: But you won't mind if I tell you
the reason for what—

(She plucks. He flinches. She adjusts the mirror.)

REIDERICO: Sorry. I just, I can't watch when
you do that.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
You prefer a mother with a moustache?

REIDERICO: I don't care.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
For the sake of the family, could you pretend
to care? Nobody wants a mother with a
moustache.

(She plucks. REIDERICO flinches.)

REIDERICO: But you're hurting yourself.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Your father hurts me, you don't complain. You
deceived me so you could steal cigars from the
pantry. That hurts me, but you don't complain
about that either. So let me hurt myself in
peace.

(She plucks. REIDERICO flinches.)

REIDERICO: If you let me explain that—

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
No.

REIDERICO: No?

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
No. *(She plucks. REIDERICO flinches.)*
No. *(She plucks. REIDERICO flinches.)*
REIDERICO—the answer is no. You can't
leave the house, because your father already did
that. You can't climb through the paintings in
the living room, because they're paintings, not
windows. You can't speak to the well anymore
because the water in the well is meant to be
drunk, not spoken to. So no, no, no. *(She plucks.*
REIDERICO flinches. She inspects her face.)
There. How do I look?

REIDERICO: You've made your face all
orange. Like a yam.

(MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON
snatches the mirror back.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Such a cruel thing to say. You see how you hurt
me? *(Beat.)* It must be difficult for a son in your
shoes—no, it must. Otherwise why would you
say those things? *(Beat.)* Maybe one day Rey,
I'll do you a favor—and throw myself down
that well. Then you would finally be free of the
mother who hinders you so much.

REIDERICO: Don't.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
You'd come out of the house, just before
daybreak. You'd step over the wet grass and go
talk into that hole in the ground that you're
in love with. Then you'd see me. Bloating and
drowned in the well. And you know what would
happen? You'd spend the rest of your life seeing
my face float up to greet you every time you so
much as looked into a bowl of soup.

But I'd be dead at least, and you would finally
be free.

REIDERICO: Please don't ever do that.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Then why do you play tricks on me?

REIDERICO: It wasn't me who stole the—

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
REIDERICO—it hurts me when you try to
make excuses. When you lie.

(A considered beat. REIDERICO gives up.)

REIDERICO: I'm sorry then. I stole the cigar.
It was me. I'm sorry.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
And after you buttered me up with that sweet
talk, what did you want to ask me for?

REIDERICO: Nothing.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
You didn't want anything from me? This isn't
another ploy?

REIDERICO: *(Lying.)* No. That's what I came
for, to apologize.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Did you at least like the way I sewed your name
onto my pillowcase?

REIDERICO: Very much.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Then again, earlier you said you would never
leave me, but you said it just to trick me. It
hurts a mother very much when a son lies to
her.

REIDERICO: So I'll never leave you then.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Promise it with a kiss.

(REIDERICO kisses her again.)

REIDERICO: I'll keep my promise.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
And will you apologize to your brother for
causing him to worry?

REIDERICO: ... — ...Yes.

(MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON
hands her son the mirror.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Now be good, and try to hold this mirror
steady for me.

(She positions the mirror in front of his face. She
adjusts it. Then she plucks. He flinches, almost
dropping the mirror.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON
is disappointed that her son is unable to hold
something as simple as a mirror, but what's the use
of saying so?

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON exits
quickly, leaving REIDERICO holding the mirror
with no one to stare into it.)

Scene 10

(The same night. GORDI in the dark kitchen, slowly and deliberately smoking another stolen cigar. He watches his plumes of smoke, wonders how it is they grow in size, how it is the smoke wafts over the knives without fear.)

BOLIVIA enters from a long day at Market.)

BOLIVIA: If your mother sees you smoking your father's cigars... *(BOLIVIA makes the Caribbean gesture for impending trouble she won't be responsible for.)*

GORDI: *(You shouldn't blame me because...)* I'm trying to quit.

BOLIVIA: That tobacco belongs to your father. She wants to keep his things locked away.

GORDI: What is it that you're always talking to Rey about in the garden?

BOLIVIA: That's between Rey and I, isn't it?

GORDI: You two were speaking, but when I came by you stopped. Then you left for Market and you were gone all day again. And it makes me wonder, How is it that you are able to bring back so many provisions when we have so little to trade?

BOLIVIA: Gordi, what is that cut on your cheek? Did you cut yourself?

GORDI: Don't touch me.

BOLIVIA: Sorry. I, I—sorry.

GORDI: I sure do wonder what it is you do all day at Market.

(GORDI continues to smoke. BOLIVIA exits. Smoke.)

Scene 11

(Dark. The sound of crickets slog blindly through the thick night. From deep in the well we hear someone whistling; it is the tune to the song from the bottom of the well.)

REIDERICO steps out onto the decaying porch, with a lit kerosene lamp. He takes one more step and the whistling stops.

REIDERICO walks cautiously to the well. Looks about. He puts down the lamp. He lowers the bucket

into the well. He brings the bucket back up. He drinks water from the bucket. He looks behind him.

The crickets.

REIDERICO quickly replaces the bucket and picks up his lamp. Halfway to the house the whistling begins again. REIDERICO turns around. The whistling stops.

REIDERICO takes two more steps towards the house. The whistling starts again. REIDERICO turns around. Silence.

REIDERICO continues to walk towards the house. When he has almost reached it, LUCERO raises his head over the wall of the well in silence, without whistling. REIDERICO stops: without even looking he can feel LUCERO there.)

REIDERICO: Always playing games.

LUCERO: What are you doing, out here in the dark again?

REIDERICO: I was looking for you.

LUCERO: I don't understand you Rey. If I didn't live in a well, I wouldn't waste my time staring down into one.

REIDERICO: In case you're wondering, I tried. I tried repeating the things you told me to say, to stand up to them. None of it came out right. The things you say, they sound so clever. But when I try to repeat them, it doesn't work. No one understands a word I'm saying.

LUCERO: Rey, if you can't do it, let me.

REIDERICO: How?

LUCERO: I can harden myself, and lay in wait, patiently as a bullet in the barrel of a rifle. And when the time came, I'd speak to your brother, and he'd listen. I'd fix things. I'd do that for you.

REIDERICO: I'd prefer if you were with me all the time. I would.

LUCERO: What would you say to me leaving this well then?

REIDERICO: The ideas you get in your head.

LUCERO: And why not?

REIDERICO: You're stuck in there, Lucero. There's nothing we can do about that.

LUCERO: I've been getting stronger Reiderico. Everyday I climb a little higher up this well.

REIDERICO: If it was up to me, I would help you, I would.

LUCERO: Just grab hold of this rope. Pull me up. *(REIDERICO hesitates.)* Go on. Don't be afraid. *(REIDERICO hesitates.)* Rey, I thought I was your best friend.

(REIDERICO grabs hold of the rope. During the following, REIDERICO tries to lift LUCERO out of the well. This is difficult, and REIDERICO is clumsy at it.)

REIDERICO: You're heavy.

LUCERO: Pull. You want to spend time with me don't you?

REIDERICO: I can't bear the weight.

LUCERO: Pull. If I make it out of this well, I'd climb that Banyan Tree with you.

REIDERICO: Would you really do that with me?

LUCERO: We could spend the night in its branches, making plans.

REIDERICO: We could chew fennel if you wanted.

LUCERO: Then pull.

REIDERICO: And during the day, would you hide in the front room, and stare out the window with me?

LUCERO: Look REIDERICO. I've almost made it out.

REIDERICO: I said, would you hide in the front room and stare out the slanted window with me?

LUCERO: No. I wouldn't do that.

(REIDERICO stops pulling. LUCERO balances precariously. Half inside the well, half outside it.)

REIDERICO: What do you mean no?

LUCERO: We could open the window. We could jump out and run down the footpath.

REIDERICO: Sounds dangerous, to run out like that.

(REIDERICO begins to lower LUCERO back down into the well.)

LUCERO: No. Don't let go of me. These stones are slippery.

REIDERICO: They wouldn't let us. You don't know what they're like in that house.

LUCERO: Help me REIDERICO. I'm losing my footing.

REIDERICO: It's not like you think out here. People would always be watching you.

LUCERO: Please don't let me fall.

REIDERICO: Might be better to stay in the well, where it's safe. *(REIDERICO pushes LUCERO back into the well. LUCERO's yell disappears, faraway and underground. REIDERICO peers in after him.)*

Lucero are you alright? We shouldn't have tried. You fell Lucero. We tried and then you fell.

(From an enormous distance, we begin to hear LUCERO sing the song from the bottom of the well.)

LUCERO: *(Singing)*

You once taught me this song
Before you went far away
Bet you've forgotten my name
But I still remember your tune.

REIDERICO: If anyone ever hurt you Lucero, who would I have to talk to then? I bet it isn't as bad in the well as you say. I bet the water down there is cool and feels good against the skin. And you sing so pretty, Lucero. I wish I could sing like that.

LUCERO: *(Singing.)*

What in the world can we do
Everyone has to lose
At least I still know this tune.

Scene 12

(Day. The wind has picked up. The house rattles in protest. Everything buzzes with tense preparation for the approaching storm. Outside, BOLIVIA and MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON board up the windows. BOLIVIA mostly works. MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON mostly watches.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Nail that board in tightly at least.

BOLIVIA: Doing that.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
This will keep the winds out?

BOLIVIA: Should.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Two women alone facing a storm. Never thought it would come to this.

BOLIVIA: I say we're lucky. If your ex-husband was here, he'd only be giving us orders.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Maybe that's good in a crisis.

BOLIVIA: Did he order you to marry him?
For him that would count as seduction.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
He was slyer than that. He used gifts as bait.

BOLIVIA: What? Those Three Wise Men,
made out of caramel candy? He kept them by
the window and they warped in the heat.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Some people thought they were pretty. Also,
that album of black silhouettes, fixed against
yellow paper.

BOLIVIA: Didn't he give you his own wisdom
tooth? With some engraving on it?

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
It was the day and the month we met, engraved
on one of his teeth, pulled from his mouth and
strung up on a necklace.

BOLIVIA: Creative.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
I liked his sense of purpose.

BOLIVIA: What happened to those gifts? I
don't see them around anymore.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
You're lucky. No man has ever loved you, but at
least you've never been abandoned.

BOLIVIA: You have such a way of putting
things.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
I still remember the day he left.

BOLIVIA: You're always looking for the
bottom side of things.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
I asked my husband where he was going and he
said, Away. Then he locked his mouth tight as a
policeman locks up his prisoners.

*(BOLIVIA has lifted another heavy board and is
defly moving it into place.)*

BOLIVIA: Careful. Out of the way. Don't
worry about this storm. I'm here to look after
you, aren't I?

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
I don't know, are you?

BOLIVIA: Course I am.

*(REIDERICO enters the garden with another
board. He struggles with the weight.)*

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
I don't think Rey can lift those planks.

BOLIVIA: Leave the boy to do what he can.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
He should hurry. Listen to that wind howl.

BOLIVIA: Like it's being dragged in a
direction it doesn't want to go.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
You should secure the windows from the inside
too. Come on.

*(The women exit into the house. REIDERICO
struggles to board up the last exposed window.
GORDI approaches.)*

REIDERICO: Where have you been? We're
almost finished now. *(GORDI looks in the
direction of the house, his expression one of cold
disgust. He doesn't answer. We have not seen him
like this before.)* Where were you?

GORDI: You know what I hate about this family Rey?

REIDERICO: What?

GORDI: How weak everyone is.

REIDERICO: We don't have much time, you know.

GORDI: I saw what your Aunt does at Market. I saw her pretend to be the Spinster from Calcutta.

REIDERICO: That's a secret.

GORDI: I'll tell. Aunt Bolivia shouldn't do that. She shouldn't act like a man. I'll make her stop.

(BOLIVIA enters the garden.)

BOLIVIA: That's it. Everything is inside the house. Hurry in and stay away from the windows. *(BOLIVIA picks up the last of the tools.)* Rey. What's wrong?

(GORDI keeps his eyes on REIDERICO.)

REIDERICO: Nothing.

BOLIVIA: Give me that. *(BOLIVIA quickly finishes securing the last board.)* Gordi. Hold down the other end. *(GORDI refuses to move.)* Then don't stand there growing roots. It'll be dangerous out here soon enough.

(BOLIVIA goes into the house.)

GORDI: It's not right the way she acts. She thinks she's the locomotive, and I'm the freight car that follows behind.

REIDERICO: It's not that way. You don't understand.

GORDI: I'm not stupid Rey. You think I am, but I'm not. I know what I'm supposed to do. I'll show her.

(GORDI goes into the house. It begins to rain. Cold tablespoons of rain. Violent rain that has come all the way from across the ocean.)

REIDERICO runs to the well.)

REIDERICO: Lucero! Lucero! *(The wind picks up.)* Please answer me. Lucero: I need your help.

LUCERO: It's too late Rey. The storm is already here.

REIDERICO: It's worse than that. It's Gordi who's going to wreck everything.

LUCERO: I warned you.

REIDERICO: You said you could help me. You said you could fix things.

LUCERO: That was before you pushed me back into the well Rey. That wasn't very nice. Now you're stuck with the storm.



Figure 7. Lucero (Alexis Camins) tricks Reiderico (Jon Norman Schneider) into giving up his shirt. *Blind Mouth Singing* by Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas. Directed by Rubén Polendo. NAATCO, 2007. (Photo by Zack Brown)

(LUCERO disappears back into the well. GORDI comes out onto the decaying porch.)

GORDI: REIDERICO! Come in the house. I want you to hear my announcement.

REIDERICO: Don't say anything! We should be sticking together tonight.

GORDI: Isn't that what I want?

(GORDI goes back into the house. REIDERICO is drenched by now.)

REIDERICO: Lucero! Please. You said you could handle him.

LUCERO: Help me out of the well then. Help me get out and I'll tell you what to do.

REIDERICO: Take my hand.

LUCERO: You won't push me in again?

(The wind increases. It is hard to be heard.)

REIDERICO: Trust me.

(LUCERO takes REIDERICO's hand.)

LUCERO: Pull!

(They strain. Around them whirls wind and wet. The world is a ship tossed at sea. Finally, REIDERICO pulls LUCERO out of the well.

LUCERO checks his legs. His arms. He feels the rain. He looks about. He is a newborn with a man's body.

LUCERO fixes his gaze on REIDERICO.)

REIDERICO: What? *(LUCERO, with hungry eyes, takes one step closer to REIDERICO. REIDERICO takes a step back.)* What?

(LUCERO takes another step closer to REIDERICO. REIDERICO takes another step back. Pause.)

LUCERO: Give me your pants!

REIDERICO: Why?

LUCERO: And your shirt!

REIDERICO: I'll be naked.

LUCERO: You can have mine. Hurry.

(They take off their shirts. A wet and tangled ballet of confused identities ensues.



Figure 8. Reiderico (Jon Norman Schneider) and Lucero (Alexis Camins) trade clothes as the storm rages around them. Blind Mouth Singing by Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas. Directed by Rubén Polendo. NAATCO, 2007. (Photo by Zack Brown)

LUCERO grabs REIDERICO's shirt, but REIDERICO does not let go. REIDERICO grabs LUCERO's shirt, but LUCERO does not let go. They pull each other's shirts back and forth as they circle each other. They trade positions and then they trade shirts.

LUCERO puts on REIDERICO's shirt. REIDERICO puts on LUCERO's shirt.

They take off their pants.

LUCERO grabs REIDERICO's pants, but REIDERICO does not let go. REIDERICO grabs LUCERO's pants, but LUCERO does not let go. They pull each other's pants back and forth as they circle each other. They trade positions. They trade pants.

LUCERO puts on REIDERICO's pants. REIDERICO puts on LUCERO's pants.

LUCERO is now wearing all of REIDERICO's clothes. REIDERICO is now wearing all of LUCERO's clothes. They assess each other, like jealous lovers after a long separation. The rain continues to surge down.)

LUCERO: How do these pants look?

REIDERICO: Like they were sewn for you.

LUCERO: Quick, hide.

(LUCERO pulls REIDERICO down, they hide from view. MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON comes out onto the decaying porch. She has to yell over the sound of the storm.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
REIDERICO!

LUCERO: I need one more thing from you Rey.

REIDERICO: What else do I have?

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
ARE YOU OUT HERE? I WANT YOU BY MY SIDE TONIGHT.

LUCERO: Because I lent you my clothes. So it's only fair.

REIDERICO: So I'll lend you my name.

LUCERO: My name is REIDERICO then.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
REIDERICO! ANSWER ME!

(LUCERO stands up.)

LUCERO: MOTHER, WHAT IS IT?

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
YOU NEED TO GET INSIDE BEFORE THE STORM GETS WORSE!

LUCERO: COMING!

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
THIS IS NOT TIME TO PLAY WITH THAT WELL!

LUCERO: YOU'RE ABSOLUTELY RIGHT!
(MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON goes inside. REIDERICO looks at LUCERO expectantly.) It isn't safe out here my friend. You'll have to hide in the well.

REIDERICO: Is the well very deep?

LUCERO: Grab hold of the rope. Don't let go. Hold it tighter. Like a vine choking a tree.

REIDERICO: You'll come and get me after the storm?

LUCERO: As long as you hold onto the rope, I'll be able to pull you back up.

REIDERICO: Do you have a plan?

LUCERO: No.

REIDERICO: What's that?

LUCERO: I don't have a plan.

REIDERICO: Be careful.

LUCERO: Hide. Don't come back up until I say so.

REIDERICO: I'll be waiting for you.

(REIDERICO descends into the well.)

LUCERO begins to walk towards the house. The storm grows more fierce. A large branch of a tree is snapped off.

BOLIVIA comes outside.)

BOLIVIA: REIDERICO!

LUCERO: I'M HERE! LOOK AT ME! I'M HERE!

BOLIVIA: COME INSIDE!

LUCERO: THE WIND BLOWS THROUGH ME. I'M NOT AFRAID. THE WIND BLOWS RIGHT THROUGH ME!

(Boom, a punch of wind knocks LUCERO to the muddy ground. LUCERO struggles and manages to grab the edge of the decaying porch. The wind lifts his feet off the ground. LUCERO holds on for dear life.)

BOLIVIA: HOLD ON REIDERICO! TRY TO HOLD ON!

END OF ACT 1

Act 2

Scene 1

(After the storm and a long night of the house leaning and the wood tensing and the women exhausted. From inside the house they speak.)

BOLIVIA: That storm was something strong.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
It didn't carry much rain, but the wind was strong.

BOLIVIA: All night the house was moaning.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Floorboards were creaking.

BOLIVIA: Like there was a man in the house, pacing.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Strongest storm we've had in nine years.

BOLIVIA: Do you remember that one? And afterwards that Sun-burnt Sailor wandered up saying his ship had been lost.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: That man was crazy.

BOLIVIA: You never know. He was wearing a sailor's cap.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: Nobody sails a ship this far inland.

BOLIVIA: You shouldn't have run that sailor out. He needed our help.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: He let me run him out.

BOLIVIA: Maybe that storm last night will blow the Sun-burnt Sailor back to me.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: This storm wasn't as bad as what I painted for myself in my own mind, luckily.

BOLIVIA: You assume the worst. You're famous for that.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: I'm sore from all the preparations.

BOLIVIA: My back is sore.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: Even my hair is sore.

BOLIVIA: Look at our hands.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: *(Looking at her own hands.)* Splinters.

BOLIVIA: *(Looking at her own hands.)* And calluses.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: The storm has aged you. Even if he came back, that Sun-burnt Sailor wouldn't want you now.

(MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON exits. Sound of blade hitting stone.)

Scene 2

(Morning. The garden after the hurricane. Trees snapped and bare of leaves. Tangled, exposed roots. The sky swept clean and bare. The rocks and well left standing. The empty air, full of light, raw. And bare.)

GORDI, recently awakened, exits the house and enters the garden. Sees it all.

LUCERO follows at a wry distance.)

GORDI: O. O. O. Look at this out here. A wasteland. O, what a wind that was. O. O. Wait a minute. Come here you.

LUCERO: I've seen it. I wasn't the one curled up in a corner, muttering at the floorboards. Looked to me like you wanted to pray, but couldn't bring yourself to look up long enough to do it.

GORDI: I was rehearsing: my announcement.

LUCERO: You about ready with that announcement?

GORDI: Leave that to me. Now come out here and look at this. Look what the storm did over there. No. Not like that. Do this. Look. Look like this.

(GORDI poses, squinting into the great distance.)

LUCERO: What are you doing?

GORDI: Squinting.

LUCERO: Why?

GORDI: This is how men look at the world. I watched them for a while at Market. They pretended there was smoke in the air and that the smoke made it hard to see.

(LUCERO squints.)

LUCERO: Like this?

GORDI: Now try and squint. As if the sun was in your eyes.

LUCERO: It's not.

GORDI: Just squint. It makes you look like you own the land. Like you're inspecting the damage from the storm. You own all the land you can see and you are looking over it for something to stab. Something to kill.

LUCERO: Kill what?

GORDI: It doesn't matter so much what you kill. A deer. A foreigner.

LUCERO: How long is one supposed to squint?

GORDI: The point is not to stop trying. You mustn't stop squinting. And suck in your stomach.

LUCERO: I don't like to squint. I have beautiful eyes and if I squint, people can't see them.

GORDI: You can also squint at something that is close by, if it disgusts you, like this.

(GORDI squints at LUCERO.)

LUCERO: See. For you squinting works. Your eyes look better when they're covered.

GORDI: Something peculiar about you this morning Rey.

(GORDI squints at LUCERO, harder. LUCERO chuckles and squints back.)

BOLIVIA enters the garden. Her eyes are wet with tears, which she discretely wipes away. LUCERO goes over to BOLIVIA, as GORDI practices his pose.)

LUCERO: Hello there.

BOLIVIA: Hello my little prince.

LUCERO: You've been crying.

BOLIVIA: Something in my eye, that's all.

LUCERO: I have something that will cheer you up. Come here. *(LUCERO takes BOLIVIA by the hand and walks her over to GORDI.)* Look. Look at him.

BOLIVIA: Gordi, what are you doing there? Why do you have your face all tangled in a knot like that?

GORDI: I'm inspecting the grounds.

LUCERO: To me, it looks like he's trying to push out something he ate.

(LUCERO and BOLIVIA laugh.)

GORDI: Why are you laughing?

(BOLIVIA and LUCERO keep laughing.)

BOLIVIA: O REIDERICO, I needed that joke.

GORDI: You won't laugh next time there's a storm and it blows on you two even harder.

LUCERO: Gordi says that's how men go around looking at the world. With their eyes half-closed. But the only way he's going to look more handsome, is if he convinces the rest of the world to keep their eyes half-closed.

(BOLIVIA laughs. Then LUCERO laughs.)

BOLIVIA: Should we make him use a veil?

LUCERO: Like the Spinster of Calcutta?

(LUCERO and BOLIVIA laugh at this also.)

GORDI: What is that suppose to mean? Hey. What? *(GORDI picks up a felled branch. He wields the branch menacingly.)* All right little brother, I'm about to beat a lesson into you, right through your thin skin.

LUCERO: I'm not afraid of your log. *(GORDI strikes at LUCERO with the branch, LUCERO easily dodges the blow.)* Why it's not even that big a log really. Or don't you know most men have bigger logs than that.

(GORDI cannot get that branch out of his hand fast enough. He wipes the band. BOLIVIA and LUCERO laugh. GORDI walks away from LUCERO.)

GORDI: Make him stop saying that.

BOLIVIA: Gordi, he was just having fun.

GORDI: *(To BOLIVIA. Not loud, with steady determination.)* I'm warning you. Make him stop saying those things.

BOLIVIA: It's just a joke. You're a strong man, surely you can take a joke. Come back. Gordi wait.

(GORDI has stomped off into the house.)

LUCERO: Don't you want to wave your log at me some more? Come back.

BOLIVIA: Rey? You're standing up to your brother.

LUCERO: I'm not afraid of him.

BOLIVIA: Have you been getting ideas by talking to that well?

LUCERO: Forget about the well. That well's just a big hole in the ground.

(GORDI enters the yard, with one of the kitchen knives in his hand. He holds the door open, as if announcing an entrance.)

GORDI: I warned you.

(MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON walks out through the open door, holding the wooden sign for syphilis treatment.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
(Speaking to BOLIVIA.) You've soiled yourself.
And you've soiled this house.

BOLIVIA: That sign is none of your business.

LUCERO: No more secrets! No more secrets!

(GORDI comes after LUCERO.)

GORDI: I'll show you.

(LUCERO dashes off, with GORDI in hot pursuit.)

BOLIVIA: Boys! Come back here.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
How long has this been going on?

BOLIVIA: Gordi is going to hurt his brother
with that knife.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Don't touch any of us with those hands, after
what you've been doing.

BOLIVIA: These fingers are mine to touch
what I will.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
The whole of this time I have been keeping
both eyes on my sons, and it was you I
should have been watching. Digging out the
foundation of this house from under our feet.

BOLIVIA: I'm a real vendor now and I bring
home real money. Real food that you ate. All
you have to do is look the other way.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Who can I show this face to? You've made fools
of us.

BOLIVIA: By feeding your boys?

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
I've been telling people this family was one
thing and you've been busy telling them we
were another.

BOLIVIA: Forget you saw the sign and don't
torture yourself.

*(BOLIVIA tries to grab her wooden sign back;
MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON dodges
her attempt.)*

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
There's a reason why the men around here
won't touch you. They can smell it on you.
Smell of a tavern after hours. Smell of sawdust
and piss.

BOLIVIA: I take precautions. I wear gloves.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
You have no shame.

BOLIVIA: I wear a veil when I do it.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
So you cover your face?

BOLIVIA: No one knows it's me. No one
knows I'm the Spinster from Calcutta.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Not yet they don't.

*(MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON
begins to walk off.)*

BOLIVIA: Where are you going now?

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
To Market.

BOLIVIA: You can't shame me. I don't care
who finds out. *(MOTHER OF THE LATE
AFTERNOON exits.)* I want my sign back!
(BOLIVIA goes off after her sister.)

Scene 3

*(Many hours later. The still damp, late afternoon.
Everything is wet. Everything smells of damp bark.
The garden is empty.)*

*A very soft, almost sad, whistling from the bottom
of the well.*

*BOLIVIA comes up the pathway. The whistling
turns to wind, and then even that dies.*

*BOLIVIA sits by the edge of the well, an image
of exhaustion. She holds in her hand the wooden
sign announcing syphilis treatment. She traces her
fingers along the letters, then lets the sign fall from
her hands into the well. Next she takes her veil, and
lets that also fall into the well.*

LUCERO is standing on the porch. How long has he been there? He approaches his aunt.)

LUCERO: You were gone a long time.

BOLIVIA: There you are. Where's your brother?

LUCERO: I got tired of playing with him. (He nudges his aunt.) What's wrong with you?

BOLIVIA: You know, halfway up the road to Market, you pass a dog that's been abandoned, a dog no one will claim. That mangy dog will stand over its scrap of bone, and growl. But it won't touch the bone either. It will die defending that dry piece of bone, and never taste it.

LUCERO: So the dog wants to be angry.

BOLIVIA: So angry it makes itself stiff as a corpse, years before it's due to die.

LUCERO: What happened at Market?

BOLIVIA: Your mother told them who the Spinster from Calcutta was. She told them I was the woman behind the veil.

LUCERO: So don't be ashamed. No more secrets then.

BOLIVIA: No money either. Not a man there could bring himself to look me in the face. And the women, they said I tricked them. Said I wasn't from Calcutta, that I was just a lonely spinster out to steal their men. Then a child threw a stone at me and said I should go back to Calcutta. Everyone laughed. Before a crowd could form around me the Vendor of Pamphlets hurried me into his stall.

We waited all day in the humid shadows of that small tent, and not one person came in. Not even to buy those pamphlets about the saints and their favorite ways to suffer. We didn't dare come out until we were certain everyone had left.

LUCERO: I don't understand. You were trying to help those people...

BOLIVIA: Those very ones.

LUCERO: And those people prefer to keep secrets?

BOLIVIA: Like the dead guard their coffins. (Beat.) I can't work there again.

(An awkward pause. When you grow up in a well, you don't always know what to say.)

LUCERO: Will the Vendor of Pamphlets still sell there?

BOLIVIA: No. He leaves tomorrow.

LUCERO: Is he bitter?

BOLIVIA: (Resigned) He said he lost customers but that he found me. Said I was a rich harvest for such a poor man.

LUCERO: He's in love with you.

(BOLIVIA makes the Caribbean sign indicating a secret.)

BOLIVIA: He was being polite.

LUCERO: Very polite.

BOLIVIA: Said he wanted to take me with him.

LUCERO: Where is he going?

BOLIVIA: To City.

LUCERO: City? This is it. This is it. Go. Go. And take me with you. This isn't where we have to stay. I knew it.

BOLIVIA: It's not as easy as you think.

LUCERO: I don't mind work.

BOLIVIA: It's two weeks by Ox. Slower on foot.

LUCERO: Let's go. We must.

BOLIVIA: He has syphilis. The Vendor of Pamphlets has syphilis. So maybe he is in love with me. But he has the affliction. He confessed it to me.

LUCERO: Complicated.

BOLIVIA: It's not easy to travel with a man who has syphilis. Especially a handsome man.

LUCERO: Do you love him?

BOLIVIA: Maybe. But what does it matter?

LUCERO: You can't cure him?

BOLIVIA: I treat the lesions. It brings some relief. It helps. But the thing that causes this affliction, it burrows deep inside a person. No medicine can reach it.

LUCERO: You're like your sister, you'll never leave.

BOLIVIA: Who would I be away from this place. Away from the black-eyed vines, the log that's rotten, the deer. Maybe my body could walk away, but my bones would stay here, pulling me back. I'd be split in two. I'd be lost.

LUCERO: You'd be someone else.

BOLIVIA: Who?

LUCERO: I don't know.

BOLIVIA: Sounds sad to me.

LUCERO: If you let him go, if the Vendor of Pamphlets leaves for City without you, it'll be the same here. Your whole life will taste of stale bread. And you'll sit on the doorstep in the afternoons, watching the path and pressing your hands down against your empty stomach. Like you always do.

BOLIVIA: I didn't think anyone was watching when I did that.

LUCERO: I was watching.

BOLIVIA: You go. I have my sister to keep me company.

LUCERO: She's cruel.

BOLIVIA: It hasn't been easy for her.

LUCERO: She won't let you have a livelihood—you said so.

BOLIVIA: I can't sneak off in the night and abandon her.

LUCERO: I'll talk to her. I may have a way to get through to her.

BOLIVIA: She'll stop you from leaving.

LUCERO: Tell me you'll agree to go, to City, with the Vendor of Pamphlets, and to take me along? Tell me you agree.

BOLIVIA: Used to be, you never wanted to leave this garden. Now look at you.

LUCERO: Go inside and stay out of your sister's way. Leave the rest to me.

(BOLIVIA exits the garden and enters the house.)

Scene 4

(LUCERO looks down into the well. Throws down a pebble. Whistles.)

LUCERO: Hello. Hello. Did you keep hold of the rope? *(LUCERO takes a pull on the rope. It resists.)* Yes you did. Good. And what? You're ignoring me?

REIDERICO: *(From below)* You've been up there a long time.

LUCERO: Things have become complicated up here.

REIDERICO: I warned you.

LUCERO: Come up for a minute.

REIDERICO: You come down here.

LUCERO: Don't get like that. Ah, you see, you see how you get? *(LUCERO begins to pull up the rope, the pulley creaks.)* Up you go. All the way. Come on.

(REIDERICO is steadily pulled up on the rope, uncommitted.)

REIDERICO: So?

LUCERO: How are things?

REIDERICO: Are you coming back into the well Lucero?

LUCERO: Don't call me that. You lent me your name, don't you remember?

REIDERICO: I want my name back.

LUCERO: I'm still using it.

REIDERICO: Well then, when are you coming back into the well—REIDERICO?

LUCERO: I was thinking...

REIDERICO: Yes.

LUCERO: How do you like it down there?

REIDERICO: I like it.

LUCERO: And do you miss the kitchen knives and the shouting? Do you miss the wrinkled red beans?

REIDERICO: No. I don't. You'll let me stay here with you, won't you? I'll take this rope and tie myself to you and we'll never come back up. It'll just be me. And you. And the echo.

LUCERO: Why can't I stay out of the well then, if you like it down there so much?

REIDERICO: Who else is going to sing down here? There's an echo, sure, but now there's no one to sing to it. And you have the prettiest voice.

LUCERO: I'm a bit tired of that echo.

REIDERICO: There are other things to look at. You never told me about all the possessions people have thrown down here. I've found all kinds of objects people have tried to get rid of.

LUCERO: Go down there a minute. Will you do that? Tell me what you find. There's something I'm looking for.

REIDERICO: Hold on. *(REIDERICO takes hold of the rope and goes down. Then comes back up.)* You'll wait here for me won't you?

LUCERO: Yes, I'll wait. *(REIDERICO goes down into the well.)* Lower. Go on.

REIDERICO: *(From below)* All right then.

LUCERO: What do you see?

REIDERICO: There's a poster for the old political party of the peasants.

LUCERO: Good. But what else?

REIDERICO: There are two bouquets of roses—one with thorns, one without.

LUCERO: Those are good. Keep going.

REIDERICO: *(Up again.)* There are Three Wise Men made out of caramel candy. A bit warped. Also there's an album of black silhouettes, fixed against yellow paper. Very pretty.

LUCERO: Don't stop. That's right. A little lower this time.

(REIDERICO has gone back down.)

REIDERICO: Wait. Look at this. There's a wisdom tooth with a date engraved on it, some sort of keepsake.

LUCERO: Aha. Next to that what is there?

REIDERICO: Um. O. A gramophone record.

LUCERO: *(Pulling REIDERICO back up.)* There we are. Bring me that.

REIDERICO: *(Up again, the rope in one hand, the record in the other.)* Looks like it wants to stay here. Looks too tired to be anywhere else.

LUCERO: A little scratched is all.

REIDERICO: What's this about?

LUCERO: You don't mind doing things for me, do you?

REIDERICO: You're my only friend.

LUCERO: Then stay here for me. In the well. While I go...talk to someone.

REIDERICO: That wasn't the bargain.

LUCERO: I'll be back again.

REIDERICO: To stay this time? *(LUCERO doesn't answer.)* Hey. Mr. REIDERICO, with the borrowed name and the borrowed trousers. You belong at the bottom of the well. Don't you forget that. But don't worry—this time, I'll stay here with you, to keep you company.

LUCERO: *(Wait a minute, I see what's happening here...)* You don't ever intend to leave me alone, do you?

REIDERICO: I told you: I wouldn't do that to you. *(LUCERO begins to lower REIDERICO back down into the well.)* There's a whole lot to look at down here. *(As REIDERICO descends, his voice trails off underground.)* A trumpet with blood stains on it. A rusted weather vane. A splint used to heal a fracture.

(When REIDERICO's voice has trailed off, LUCERO unties the rope from the winch. He holds it an instant, then lets the rope unravel and fall into the well. One final flash of the whirling end of the rope, and then the sound of falling.)

Scene 5

(It is now night. LUCERO enters the bedroom of MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON. He is carrying the gramophone record.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Such a sad face. Hasn't your Aunt Bolivia come back yet?

LUCERO: You were my age once. Do you remember that?

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Being your age is nothing special. Everyone's done it.

LUCERO: Surely you think about it.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
I've moved on.

LUCERO: At the end of the day, when you're tired, and you fall on your bed like an empty sack, you must think of it then, your youth.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
We have a lot of work to do tomorrow. Debris to clear from the garden.

LUCERO: I brought you a present. Something of yours, from when you were my age.

(LUCERO holds up the gramophone record.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Where did you get this?

LUCERO: Do you like it?

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
What is it with people in this house and old gramophone records.

LUCERO: It's a gift, for you.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: I
threw one just like this into the well. Your aunt, she accused me of poisoning our water supply with my failed love.

LUCERO: Let's listen to the song. Would you like that?

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Don't torture an old woman with things she has no use for anymore.

LUCERO: If you heard just a bit of it.

(LUCERO polishes the record. He puts the record on the gramophone. Over a bed of skips and scratches, we hear strumming guitars. Resigned horns. A blue danzón.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON
listens, then begins to sing. It is the song from the bottom of the well.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
(Singing)

So you say you love me
Let's assume that it's true
Then if one day you leave
I will follow after you

This love that you give me
It might not last very long
What in the world can we do
Everyone has to fall
For me it happened with you

(Speaking) Your father used to sing me this song.

LUCERO: It's pretty.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
When your father would take me for walks, everyone looked at us with envy. We were the most beautiful, the two everyone wanted, and we chose each other.

You know, when someone is young, and they want love, but they're still too young to know what love is, that's the time in a person's life when they are the most beautiful.

LUCERO: Dance with me.

(LUCERO begins to dance with MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON, a dance of sweet regret.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
(Singing)

So many handsome proud men
With open hearts they adored me
I gave them up for your sweet kiss
And now your kisses taste bitter

(Speaking) Because later, you fall in love, just like everyone else does. And afterwards, everyone thinks a little less of you.

(Singing) What in the world can we do
Everyone has to lose
For me it happened with you

(Speaking) You know something my little one?

LUCERO: Tell me.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Everyday that passes, you look more and more
like your father. Like it wasn't my belly you
were cut from, but his.

Who taught you to dance so well. Huh? Who?

LUCERO: No one.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Then how did you learn?

LUCERO: I don't know.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Just like your father. Always with the mysteries.

*(The record ends. Sound of a needle skipping. They
dance in silence for a while, then...)*

LUCERO: *(Singing in a very strong smooth voice,
but not loud, gentle, steady. He sounds just like his
father.)*

So many lovely places
I would have liked to have seen
I gave them up for your sweet kiss
Now your kisses taste bitter
Because you acted so cruel
That you toyed with my heart
What in the world can we do
Everyone has to lose
For me it happened with you

*(They dance, as LUCERO continues singing.
MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON slowly
grows icy. LUCERO stops singing. An enormous
silence between them. MOTHER OF THE LATE
AFTERNOON pushes LUCERO away.)*

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Sometimes I can't even look at you. That's
how angry you make me. *(She has walked to the
gramophone and removed the record.)*

LUCERO: If you give me back the record, I'll
keep it safe for you.

*(MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON snaps
the record in half.)*

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
You have your father's eyes. You look at me and
you don't blink.

*(MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON beads
for the garden.)*

LUCERO: Where are you going?

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
To throw this song to the bottom of the well.

LUCERO: I'm leaving—for City. My Aunt
and I, we're leaving here, so she can have a
livelihood. You and Gordi can come if you
want—it's up to you.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Don't be silly. Nobody from here ever goes any
place.

*(MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON exits.
LUCERO sings, very softly.)*

LUCERO: *(Singing)*

So many lovely places
I would have liked to have seen
I gave them up for your sweet kiss
Now your kisses taste bitter

*(Through the window, we see REIDERICO, with
eyes full of envy, watching LUCERO sing.)*

Scene 6

*(MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON
comes out to the garden at night. She throws the
two halves of the gramophone record into the well.
The night is slow, the clouds are swift.)*

*GORDI enters. He is carrying a now bloodied
kitchen knife and dragging the carcass of a bloody
dog.*

*MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON keeps
her eyes on the knife.)*

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Gordi.

GORDI: Halfway up the road to Market there
was a dog that wouldn't stop growling at me. A
manga thing like that ought to chew its bone
while it has the chance. I cut that dog, and the
wound opened up like a great big mouth. I
dared that gaping wound to say something, but
all it did was bleed.

(He drops the dog at her feet.)



Figure 9. Gordi (Orville Mendoza) has killed a mangy dog that he now drags across the stage, leaving a trail of blood. *Blind Mouth Singing* by Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas. Directed by Rubén Polendo. NAATCO, 2007. (Photo by Zack Brown)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
What have you done?

GORDI: It wouldn't stop growling at me.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
You've always tried your best, but Gordi.

GORDI: I'm not your favorite.

(GORDI enters the house dragging the bleeding dead dog. A trail of blood follows him in.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON
watches him go, then with sudden concern follows him in.)

Scene 7

(In the house, LUCERO packs an indecisive BOLIVIA's suitcase. She looks on, full of doubt.)

BOLIVIA: Did she really say that?

LUCERO: I'm telling you, she isn't coming with us. *(LUCERO packs. Quickly. With determination.)*

BOLIVIA: City is far. City is sure to be strange. I know it shouldn't frighten me, but it does.

(As LUCERO hurriedly throws things in the suitcase, BOLIVIA gently, discretely removes them.)

LUCERO: Come with me to see it.

BOLIVIA: What's there for us?

LUCERO: Everything. In City, there's a man who is skinny as a wire because all he does is drink rum. He can't afford to eat, because he spends all his money on rum. People pass him

on the street and they provoke arguments with him because if he shouts at you, his breath gets you drunk.

BOLIVIA: There is no such man.

LUCERO: Maybe there is. And I want to see the women who stand in doorways, dressed only in slips. They gesture for you to follow them up narrow staircases that end in rooms so dark, you have to navigate with your hands.

BOLIVIA: To me it sounds confusing. In City, how does one know what street to walk down or which door to walk into?

LUCERO: What if you walk through a door and it's the wrong one. O how funny that would be.

BOLIVIA: I-I-I-I'd apologize?

LUCERO: Or suppose you walked into a warehouse, where men sit at tables all day and roll cigars. The oldest have been doing it so long, that their skin has the same color and the same texture as the tobacco leaves. And outside the windows of the warehouse, you can hear the students who fill the streets everyday at lunch hour to shout the news the papers aren't brave enough to print.

BOLIVIA: We won't know anyone. It will be lonely.

LUCERO: How could it possibly be lonely? In City there are so many people. So many people that every person dedicates themselves to doing

just one thing. There's an old woman who only digs graves. There's another man and all he does is complain. And there's a big fat baker and all he does is bake wedding cakes. I want to meet the doctor who does the opposite of what he tells his patients to do. And I want to study philosophy. I want to know things. Why are the poor the best dancers? Why, if the rich are always complaining of ill health, are they the ones who live the longest? Do you think I could be a philosopher?

BOLIVIA: If you ask questions like that, you just might. *(BOLIVIA has stopped unpacking. She watches LUCERO as he finishes.)*

LUCERO: Don't you see. We must move to City so we can be philosophers.

BOLIVIA: If I go, what would I do when I get there? Would we still plant sweet potatoes?

LUCERO: You could be anything.

BOLIVIA: Anything?

LUCERO: You know what I want to dedicate myself to? I want to be the man who stays up so late that he staggers home in the morning, with his hair tussled, but elegantly dressed. I want to pass the children's choir lining up for morning mass and I want to give the most handsome of those children the last of the liquor in my bottle. And I'll ask that child to please sing a song for me. And I hope the choirmaster sees me and tries to chase me away with his baton and his long robe. That's what I want.

BOLIVIA: Maybe in City, on a street one day, for example, we'd be walking along and we'd pass the Sun-burnt Sailor.

LUCERO: I bet that sailor sees you, and he smiles. He can't help it. That's his instinct.

BOLIVIA: I wonder if he still has that deep voice. Like the murmur from a crowded room.

LUCERO: Quick. What would you say to him? Be prepared.

BOLIVIA: What if he doesn't remember me?

LUCERO: Even if we don't run into the Sun-burnt Sailor, we'll meet someone who looks like him. I'm certain of it.

BOLIVIA: Are there that many people there? *(Beat.)* What?

LUCERO: I want to kiss a soldier.

BOLIVIA: You can't kiss a soldier. That's against nature.

LUCERO: City is full of things that are against nature. The trolley cars and the motorized ships. Why the motorized ships move against the current of the river. And alarm clocks. Surely alarm clocks are against nature.

BOLIVIA: I suppose, if you put it that way.

LUCERO: Have you ever kissed a soldier?

BOLIVIA: The questions you ask.

LUCERO: No secrets between us.

BOLIVIA: The only man I ever kissed was the Sun-burnt Sailor.

LUCERO: Why so few?

BOLIVIA: Because—I wanted to be selective. I wanted to find the best kisser, and then keep kissing that one man, just that one, for a long time.

LUCERO: How well did the sailor kiss?

BOLIVIA: That's the flaw in my plan. It's hard to tell if you found the best kisser, when you've only kissed one man.

LUCERO: Come. We'll find the best kisser. In City.

BOLIVIA: How? How can you tell who the best kisser is?

LUCERO: By kissing them. And as for myself, I hope it takes me a long time to find the best kisser.

BOLIVIA: Scoundrel!

LUCERO: But no matter what, we won't ever stop looking. We won't ever stop trying to find the best kisser. Agreed?

(BOLIVIA considers, then throws her last item into the suitcase.)

BOLIVIA: I'll accompany you. For a while. I'll see what it's like and decide for myself if I want to stay.

(LUCERO kisses her on the forehead.)

LUCERO: It's better to go to City with a friend.

BOLIVIA: I'm scared.

LUCERO: Take the suitcase. It's light.

BOLIVIA: I should write your mother a note.

LUCERO: Write to her from City.

BOLIVIA: You'll be my chaperone?

LUCERO: We'll tell the Vendor of Pamphlets that you need time to think about his proposal.

BOLIVIA: You will tell me your honest opinion of him?

LUCERO: Wait for me at the crossroads.

BOLIVIA: No. Come with me now.

LUCERO: There is something I promised I would do in the garden. I want to say goodbye to the well. I won't take long.

BOLIVIA: Your mother will catch you. She sleeps with one eye open.

LUCERO: I'm not afraid of her. *(They open the door.)* Look. See the fireflies.

BOLIVIA: There are so many tonight.

LUCERO: If fireflies have bellies that light up—

BOLIVIA: It's so that they can find each other in the dark.

LUCERO: Tell me then, why don't I ever see two lights flashing together? Don't they ever find each other?

BOLIVIA: They do. It's just that once they find each other, they stop lighting up. Then there's no need. They pull the darkness over themselves for privacy. They settle down.

LUCERO: Silly insects.

BOLIVIA: Because you, you'd rather stay lit up?

LUCERO: *(LUCERO hands her a kerosene lamp, he turns up the wick.)* I prefer to burn.

(BOLIVIA kisses LUCERO goodbye, and exits. LUCERO closes the door.)

LUCERO crosses.

REIDERICO comes from behind holding the long rope. He tackles LUCERO to the floor.)

Scene 8

(REIDERICO laying on top of LUCERO.)

REIDERICO: I was starting to lose my faith in you.

LUCERO: What are you doing out of your hole in the ground?

REIDERICO: I waited long enough. It's time for you to come back to the bottom of the well.

LUCERO: I didn't realize—that you weighed so much.

(REIDERICO has tied a noose around LUCERO's neck. They both get up off the floor. As REIDERICO speaks he tightens the noose around his own neck.)

REIDERICO: When I think of my childhood, all I remember is being alone. Then one night you showed up. *(Beat.)* Now I've gotten so use to you.

LUCERO: We've grown apart.

REIDERICO: We need each other. We're attached. We're two veins flowing from the same heart. *(LUCERO and REIDERICO circle each other. They are opposite points on the circumference of the same wheel, the rope is the spoke.)* You can keep my name, but you've got to come back with me.

LUCERO: I've been thinking...

REIDERICO: —so have I—

LUCERO: —about how one person—

REIDERICO: —you or me—

LUCERO: —can sometimes want two different things—

REIDERICO: —two instincts—

LUCERO: —at exactly the same time—

REIDERICO: —in the same head.

LUCERO: That's difficult.

REIDERICO: I feel shuffled. The way you try and rearrange me—

LUCERO: —it hurts.

(LUCERO pulls the noose from around his throat, and places it around REIDERICO's throat.)

They hear GORDI approaching, drunk and too loud.)

REIDERICO: Who's that?

LUCERO: Your brother. He wants to talk to you.

(LUCERO ties his end of the rope to a post so that REIDERICO is stuck, and then LUCERO hides. REIDERICO tries to run off, but he can't.)

GORDI enters.)

Scene 9

(REIDERICO tied to the post. The rope around his neck. GORDI is still carrying the sharp kitchen knife and now, also, the open bottle of fermented molasses.)

GORDI looks over the room, a foreman inspecting the grounds after some time away. He approaches REIDERICO, puts his arm tightly around REIDERICO's neck, brings him close to his face, and with his other hand forces him to drink from the bottle.)

GORDI: I need to speak to you, man to man. Can you manage that? Stay close. Will you have a drink with me? *(GORDI takes a swig himself.)*

REIDERICO: I don't like to drink liquor, it makes me dizzy.

(GORDI tips the bottle up into REIDERICO's mouth again.)

GORDI: What's this about you leaving?

REIDERICO: No, I don't want to.

(GORDI forces REIDERICO to drink.)

GORDI: You do things Rey. Just the way you walk, it offends us. Just the way you talk, it insults us. Why do you act like that?

REIDERICO: I tried to stay out of the way. Ducked my head when you walked past. Spoke softly when I was in the kitchen.



Figure 10. Gordi (Orville Mendoza) forces Reiderico (Jon Norman Schneider) to drink the liquor they made from fermented molasses. *Blind Mouth Singing* by Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas. Directed by Rubén Polendo. NAATCO, 2007. (Photo by Zack Brown)

GORDI: Don't speak softly Rey.

REIDERICO: Are you drunk?

(GORDI is trying to force REIDERICO to have another drink. REIDERICO resists, spits it out.)

GORDI: A man drinks because he wants to put himself in someone else's care. It bothers me that you don't like to drink with me Rey.

REIDERICO: It burns.

(GORDI releases REIDERICO and crosses. REIDERICO immediately begins to try and release the knot that ties his rope to the post.)

GORDI: You don't want to open up with me do you?

LUCERO: *(Laughing, unseen by GORDI.)* I bet your breath could make me drunk. Blow on me Gordi! Blow on me!

GORDI: You mock me?

REIDERICO: No, I don't.

GORDI: This knife, it's odd. It just points in the direction it wants to go.

REIDERICO: Gordi?

GORDI: Don't mock me.

LUCERO: *(Still laughing, still unseen by GORDI.)* Blow on me! Blow on me!

(REIDERICO has finally freed himself from the post. A very angry GORDI rushes him, knife first, and stabs him in the gut. GORDI holds his brother close as he collapses on the floor. LUCERO has stopped laughing. GORDI drops the knife.)

GORDI: When you see all the dead people who live under the ground Rey, do me a favor: Tell them I've learned how to be a man.

(REIDERICO lies out on the floor; his breath escaping him. GORDI staggers off.)

Scene 10

(LUCERO softly enters and goes to REIDERICO and helps him up.)

REIDERICO: Don't look at me now. I'm ashamed.

LUCERO: No, I'm here. Remember? I promised.

REIDERICO: You used to run away from me so quickly. You would disappear under the algae and the ripples. What a hard time I had holding on to you. It was like grabbing at the wind. Why is everything turning to wind?

LUCERO: Because you're dying, my friend.

REIDERICO: Am I afraid?

LUCERO: No, you're not. You're heavy and sinking. Say goodbye.

REIDERICO: Will you ever come to see me?

LUCERO: One day I will.

REIDERICO: Are you lying? To comfort me?

LUCERO: I will come back. And when I do, I'll sink like a stone, and the world will turn to wind. And I'll be with you then.

REIDERICO: What do I do now?

LUCERO: Go back to the well. It's like walking into the shade. It's easy.

REIDERICO: I'm so tired.

LUCERO: Exhale all of your breath. Sink to the deepest part, then wait for me there.

REIDERICO: And how long will we be apart?

LUCERO: Just for a lifetime. Barely any time at all.

(REIDERICO, the small king of the small garden, disappears into the well with a long, irreversible sigh. A sigh that's impossible to see, a sigh that's impossible to catch.)

LUCERO is alone. He puts his hand to his gut, he is hurt, he is bleeding.)

Scene 11

(LUCERO sits. Removes his shirt. He wipes the blood off his wound. It is a surface cut. It will heal. MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON enters.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: Did he cut you deep?

LUCERO: No. Not deep.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: If you're really leaving, you should take a clean shirt.

LUCERO: That would be nice. *(MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON turns to bring a shirt.)* Bring me the one with the pleated pocket.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: *(Not argumentative, not angry)* That shirt fits you too loosely.

LUCERO: That's the one I like.

(MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON brings him the shirt with the pleated pocket. LUCERO rises. He puts on the clean shirt and is ready to leave.)

LUCERO: Thank you.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON: You want to go to City and do good. Let me tell you, life only makes us bad. *(Beat.)* Be careful.

LUCERO: I'll write you letters and tell you what it's like.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Shall I wash another shirt for you?

LUCERO: There isn't time.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
Might be better to take two shirts.

LUCERO: Come here. Put your hand on my heart.

(MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON puts her hand on her son's chest.)

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON:
It's beating like a drum.

LUCERO: It's racing towards City.

(LUCERO exits, for City.)

The sky is beginning to pale. It is morning.

MOTHER OF THE LATE AFTERNOON
watches her son go.

The road outside her house seems to narrow and lengthen. She can feel it in her chest.)

Scene 12

(And then there is the landscape. After all of us are gone, the landscape remains. The sea will still be there, pushing incessantly against the island. And the island will still be there, thrust like a dagger into the sea.)

REIDERICO enters, a noose around his neck.)

REIDERICO: And it's true. Lucero ran away from the place he was from. He ran away from the bottom of the well, and he ran away from me. Fast as he could. How far would you say you ran Lucero?

(LUCERO is there, a middle-aged man, with bags under his eyes.)

LUCERO: I ran until I got to City. I spent years figuring out which alleyways to run through. City is tricky.

REIDERICO: You've been running in circles.

LUCERO: Those were good years.

REIDERICO: Is that why you ran so fast? Were you trying to forget me?

LUCERO: I drank liquor. So I wouldn't have to hear you whispering in my head.

REIDERICO: And the next morning you felt sick and you reeked of stale tobacco, and you woke up alone, and there I was.

LUCERO: How did you get out from the bottom of the well? I left you and you were bleeding.

REIDERICO: I was worried about you Lucero. All alone in the Capital.

LUCERO: I did well for myself. I blew kisses at sailors and when they chased me I ran as fast as I could and laughed all the way.

REIDERICO: Except for the night the sailors caught you and beat you and when you lay there, your cut lip bleeding on the cobblestones, I came, and walked you home.

LUCERO: You're stubborn REIDERICO.

REIDERICO: Do you remember how deep the well is Lucero?

LUCERO: Every day.

REIDERICO: The well remembers you too.

LUCERO: When will you stop following me REIDERICO?

REIDERICO: When you come back with me.

(REIDERICO holds out his hand. LUCERO looks at it. REIDERICO begins to sing softly, with a hopelessness so comfortable that he wears it like a favorite old coat. He is barely singing, he is almost speaking.)

So many lovely places
I would have loved to have seen
I gave them up for your sweet kiss
Now your kisses taste bitter

LUCERO: *(Closer to singing, still softly)*

Because you acted so cruel
That you toyed with my heart
What in the world can we do—

(LUCERO breaks off mid stanza, he is weeping. REIDERICO continues the song.)

REIDERICO: *(Singing)*

What in the world can we do
Everyone has to lose
For me it happened with you

LUCERO: I won't go back with you.

REIDERICO: You can't get rid of me.

LUCERO: I've always been faster than you.

REIDERICO: You're getting old. You're getting tired.

(LUCERO begins to run in place, fighting his tears. REIDERICO chases after him.)

LUCERO: I'll keep running through the labyrinth of City. I know my way around these alleys like nobody else.

REIDERICO: There is a mob of angry sailors chasing you Lucero. They want to throw you onto the pavement.

LUCERO: I know the shortcuts. I am running.

REIDERICO: The sailors want to kick you.

LUCERO: They can't catch me.

REIDERICO: You hear shoes echoing off the cobblestones behind you.

LUCERO: I won't rest. I won't stand still.

REIDERICO: What have you done to make the sailors so angry at you Lucero?

LUCERO: I didn't do anything this time. I was just walking by.

REIDERICO: It must be the way you talk. It offends them.

LUCERO: I hear you whisper in my ear, but I don't stop.

REIDERICO: You can't run forever.

LUCERO: I keep going.

REIDERICO: I reach out for you.

LUCERO: I am almost out of breath.

REIDERICO: The tips of my fingers brush up against your hair.

LUCERO: Chasing me.

REIDERICO: Right behind you.

LUCERO: Always.

REIDERICO: Almost.

LUCERO: Running.

(The panting. The footsteps. The echoes.)

END OF PLAY