

*SAYING EMILY**SCENE 1*

SHE'S IN A GARAGE. IT IS EMPTY, SAVE AN OLD ROCKING CHAIR WITH AN OLD WHITE DRESS DRAPED OVER ITS BACK AND A BLACK BOOK ON ITS SEAT.

SHE'S JUST ANSWERING HER CELL PHONE

Stephen! You called me back. Don't act so surprised I'm surprised. I *am* surprised, however. I've missed you, I mean, I have, not in that clinging way, just *(beat)*...Yes, thank you...*(beat)* You too? *(beat)* I'm glad. I should ask about Donald but I don't want to... *(beat)* Thank you. I'm not jealous... *(beat)* Good, that's good, then you understand... *(beat)* Me? *(beat)* Oh, why did I call? Listen, Stephen, remember those things the Sherriff sent from Charles City? Yeah, I know you don't like them, I still have them. It didn't feel right to get rid of them, they're from my sister, after all. So, I rented a garage to put them in... *(beat)* In Oakland. *(beat)* East Oakland. The neighborhood? I don't know, I've just moved in. I mean, I'm not moving in...*(beat)* No, I'm not going to tell you where I am. *(beat)* We all do stupid things. Like you. *(beat)* Yes, you and your Lolita boy *(beat)* No, it's not crazy, it's banal. *(quickly jumping in)* I'm sorry, Stevie, that wasn't fair, but it is funny, it's a bald cliché. *(soothing him)* It's fine, honey, it's fine, don't feel bad. It was fine for us. We did good: the kids, the career, the house, the whole shtick. You're picking up where you left off, me too. *(beat)* I can't tell you, it's between me and my sister. *(beat)* I know she's dead, but she asked me to do something and I'm going to do it. *(beat)* Don't talk to me like that. *(beat)*...like you're all sane and shit...No, I'm not going crazy again. When was I crazy last? *(beat)* That's a few decades is it not? I didn't stop you from being queer, don't stop me from being crazy! I'm not crazy. You make me doubt myself. How is Donald? *(beat)* I *want* to change the subject. Are you two doing well? I just want to be glad for you. Just be glad for me. Okay? And don't forget me, don't quite leave me alone. I just have to do this, I just have to do it. I'm going now. *(beat)* Are you there? Okay, good. I'm gonna hang up first. I like to think of you that way. *(beat)* Yes, like you're always sitting by the phone waiting for my call. Give Donald my best, really.

SHE HANGS UP.

CROSSES TO THE ROCKER

This rocking chair came to me in a big box directly from the post office. It was sent to me from Charles City, Iowa, "America's Hometown," by the Sheriff of Floyd County. It seems my twin sister, Sylvia, was sitting on it when she died and a note she seems to have pinned on this white dress stated that she wanted the rocking chair she was sitting on, the white dress she was wearing and the black book in her hands to be sent to no one but me in Pacific Grove, California, exact address unknown and gave my married name, Melvin, and the Sherriff's department found me and here they are, the last place Sylvia Sullivan sat and the last thing she ever wrote.

SHE PICKS UP THE BLACK BOOK

She wrote this for me, just for me. My maiden name is Sullivan, Mary Sullivan. It's a play in five short scenes. It's called, "Say Emily." On the first page is a set of instructions: I am to commit one scene at a time to memory and I'm not to read beyond what she has designated for me to memorize, and I'm to perform in a private place. I chose this place. We used to do that, Sylvia and me, we used to make little plays and play them in private places. She said not to be afraid, but we are going to Say Emily again. I haven't said Emily since I was 18. I'll start tomorrow, or the next day; it's harder to memorize now, age. She put me in the nut house, you know, Sylvia. That's why I've never contacted her and she's never contacted me, not until now, not until she was dead.

"Emily Dickinson," my god, I haven't said her name aloud in all these years.

I wonder if any one can hear me?

SHE GRABS HER KEYS AND EXITS. THERE IS THE SOUND OF HER CAR ALARM GOING OFF. SHE SHOUTS "YIKES" AND SHUSHES THE CAR, THE ALARM, HOWEVER, CONTINUES AND THEN FINALLY CEASES WITH A "BLEEP" AS THE CAR DOORS LOCK. SHE RENTERS.

I'd better go. They're watching me since Stephen left. It's hard to hide in a place you've lived for years.

SOTTO VOCE

"Emily Dickinson."

SHE SAYS IT ALOUD

"Emily Dickinson," I'm swooning, honest to god. The name brings back so much. Sometimes it seems like you pick up a life and put one down just as quick as a thought; all those years with Stephen, gone just like that, with a name. "Emily Dickinson."

LIGHTS OUT.

SCENE 2

MARY IS STANDING IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ROOM. SHE IS WEARING AN OLD LOPSIDED WHITE DRESS OVER HER STREET CLOTHES. IT HANGS FROM HER CARELESSLY AS IF A CHILD HAD PULLED IT ON. SHE IS HOLDING SYLVIA'S BLACK BOOK.

I wore this dress when I said Emily. I've hid it in a trunk in the attic all these years. My figure's changed, so what.

SHE LOOKS AT SYLVIA'S BLACK BOOK.

This is really creepy, listen to this.

READING, AS SYLVIA

“I want you to make a rag doll that looks like me.”

AS MARY

And then I’m supposed say,

READING, AS MARY

“I can sew. I’m an old fashioned Iowa girl.”

Then I’m supposed take her white dress,

MARY TAKES SYLVIA’S WHITE DRESS FROM THE BACK OF THE ROCKING CHAIR,

fold it

SHE FOLDS IT,

and put it in my bag.

SHE TUCKS IT AWAY IN HER BAG.

When I’m finish I’m supposed to put her white dress on the rag doll and bring it back

MARY CROSSES TO THE STAGE HAT.¹

I made this prop, it’s a Stage Hat, it was my idea.

PUTS IT ON HER HEAD

Now I present Sylvia Sullivan’s “Say Emily.”

AS SYLVIA

“Scene one

There once was a strange girl named June. She was so beautiful the sun ran up the other side of the world to see her, although he knew that darkness always lasts the same time, but his heart beat so strongly to see her again, and she knew it, June Sullivan, the beautiful dark haired girl; she waited for him too, not that she loved him back, she loved the night as much as the day, but she loved it that the very sun of the world loved her, although she was silent, silent, for she wouldn’t say the names of things, although she could write them, the “things” of the world named by her parents and her sisters and brothers, but *she* could not say names. So they thought she was a mute and sent her to school, but it was hard for her, not because she wouldn’t speak but because she was so beautiful that men hated her for the want of her, the sinful ancient desires her face and form



¹ stage hat: a hat she wears on her head, her face is part of the scenery, there may even be little curtains that she can draw. Her hands may at times be performers.

cut into them, and girls despised her more, for compared to her there lay no hope for the future of their beauty, so they tormented her until they made her make a sound, yes, and it was a squeal like a throat-cut pig, and they were overjoyed at the ugliness of the sound within her, and her eyes poured clear blood until the teacher came and stopped them; from then on she dressed darkly and covered her body with black thick clothes, and shrouded her face with her hands, and everyday she sat alone and alone she was left, until that day at Dawson High when she heard Emily, and a door swing open, and Emily come in and June whisper her first words in an attic way up inside her house.

MARY TAKES OFF THE STAGE HAT AND PUTS IT AWAY.

And now we start saying Emily, Mary. Remember how we always began. Let's say it together. Come on, don't be afraid."

AS MARY, SHE TAKES HER BAG AND IS READY TO LEAVE

Screw it, I *am* afraid.

AS SYLVIA

"Come on. Say it. With me."

AS MARY

I'm afraid.

AS SYLVIA

"Don't be afraid. Come on, say it with me.

AS MARY, MOVING A LITTLE FROM THE DOOR BUT STILL CLASPING HER BAG AS IF TO LEAVE.

I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you – Nobody – too?
Then there's a pair of us!
Don't tell! they'd advertise – you know!

How dreary – to be – Somebody!
How public – like a Frog –
To tell one's name – the livelong June –
To an admiring Bog!"

SHE THINKS SHE SEES A SPIDER RUN ACROSS THE FLOOR.

My blessed God, what is that? Is that a spider? It's as big as a gerbil!

SHE RUNS SCREAMING OUT THE DOOR .

LIGHTS REMAIN ON.

SCENE 3

SOUND OF THE CAR. MOTOR OFF. DOOR. BEEP/LOCK. SHE ENTERS CARRING A FOLDING CHAIR AND MEDIUM-SIZED BOX. SHE PUTS THE BOX DOWN UPSTAGE.

Three days, good light bulb.

UNFOLDS THE FOLDING CHAIR AND PUTS IT ACROSS FROM THE ROCKER.

Are you ready? Wait.

SHE EXITS, "BEEP" CAR DOOR UNLOCK, THEN CAR DOOR CLOSE AND "BEEP." SHE RETURNS CARRYING A LIFE SIZED RAG DOLL THAT RESMEBLES HERSELF. SHE HAS SEWN SYLVIA'S WHITE DRESS ON IT.

It's Sylvia!

SHE SITS THE RAG DOLL CAREFULLY IN THE ROCKER AND ARRANGES ITS ARMS SO THAT IT GIVES THE UNCANNY IMPRESSION THAT IT'S ALIVE. SHE ADMIRES HER WORK.

I'm good, don't you think? I did exactly as I was told. She drew a pattern and everything. She's just my size, we're identical twins.

SHE TURNS UP STAGE AND PULLS ON HER WHITE DRESS, DONS HER STAGE HAT, THEN TURNS BACK AGAIN AND PRESENTS

"Scene Two

SHE SETS THE CHAIR TO ROCKING. SHE SINGS AND DANCES AROUND THE ROCKING RAG DOLL.

Wild Nights - Wild Nights!²
 Were I with thee
 Wild Nights should be
 Our luxury!
 Futile - the winds -
 To a Heart in port -
 Done with the Compass -
 Done with the Chart!
 Rowing in Eden -
 Ah - the Sea!
 Might I but moor - tonight -
 In thee!

She went to the little library in Charles City and found a whole book of Emily Dickinson poems and memorized every one, ordered new collections, and memorized them, carefully checking each word and for each word she exchanged a bit of herself for Emily. She dreamed of being completely Emily, her body, a glove on Emily's hand.

What if I say I shall not wait!
 What if I burst the fleshly Gate -
 And pass escaped – to thee!

² iTunes, "Wild Nights" music by John O'Keefe

What if I file this mortal – off –

See where it hurt me – That's enough –
And step in Liberty!

They cannot take me – any more!
Dungeons can call – and Guns implore
Unmeaning – now – to me –

As laughter – was – an hour ago –
Or Laces – or a Travelling Show –
Or who died – yesterday!

Her parents were hard pressed to get rid of her, she scared men to death. But finally they got one. T'was the undertow that pulled him in, for Dwight, he wasn't a pretty man, not by a long shot, 40, hard-nosed, practical, a good farmer, a never-knew-a-decent-day-in-his-life kinda fella,

but she was such a pretty one, such a pretty one, and her eyes so far away, her skin so smooth, her lips like pink flower petals, and the pretty way the corners of her mouth tucked in; but Dwight knew that a woman like that wasn't cheap except that there was something wrong with her, and the outside chance she'd spawn strange children, but, but, but she was such a pretty one, she was such a pretty one – he got caught on his feet dreaming and married her, June Sullivan, in June.

SHE TAKES OFF HER STAGE HAT AND PULLS THE WHITE DRESS OFF.

Turn off the lights.”

AS MARY

I don't want to turn off the lights.

AS SYLVIA

“Turn off the lights and say it with me.

SHE TURNS THE LIGHTS OFF. THERE IS A MOONLIGHT GLOW.

We grow accustomed to the Dark –
When light is put away –
As when the Neighbor holds the Lamp
To witness her Goodbye –

A Moment – We uncertain step
For newness of the night –
Then – fit our Vision to the Dark –
And meet the Road – erect –

And so of larger – Darkness –
Those Evenings of the Brain –

When not a Moon disclose a sign –
Or Star – come out – within –

The Bravest – grope a little –
And sometimes hit a Tree
Directly in the Forehead –
But as they learn to see –

Either the Darkness alters –
Or something in the sight
Adjusts itself to Midnight –
And Life steps almost straight.”

AS MARY

I'm outta here!

THERE IS A MOMENTARY GLOW AS SHE EXITS THROUGH THE DOOR. THERE IS A BEEP, DRIVER'S DOOR OPENING, CAR STARTING, CRACKLING OF GRAVEL, AND DRIVING OFF.

SCENE 4

THE LIGHTS BUMP UP AS SHE BURSTS INTO THE ROOM, QUITE UPSET.

I'm blowing up! I'm blowing up! Some riff, some jibe I've heard a thousand times, it breaks my back now, it breaks me in half! I fairly shrieked at my neighbor, "Lavonne," this morning. I get scabs just being around the female and I've been around her for years, and finally this morning I told her that I admired the poetry of Emily Dickinson. And she said, "Lavonne" said, "Oh, Emily Dickinson, she's so quaint. I remember her from high school." That's when I started to get loud. "She's far from quaint," I said, and my heart was suddenly pounding, I thought I was going to have a stroke. "Really," Lavonne said, "wasn't she known for writing about bees and flowers and trees?" "That's because she was unprotected!" Yes, that was a shout. I was screaming in the driveway at 8 a.m., while the neighbor machines gathered their startled broods about them and watched me from their windows. "Because stupid people couldn't imagine what she was saying and no one stepped forward to take her side!" Yes, that was another shout. "Her sister-in-law should have helped her, and that dunce at the Atlantic Monthly was as useless as the rest of you plungers!" Lavonne dropped the drape of her charade and gave me "that look" like "Mary's going weird." And so I got scared and just started screaming at the four bedroom houses with the metal detectors and their wide-eyed androids, "What's your problem? You're just stupid!"

I know they're gonna call the law on me, gonna take me to the goddamned nut house. Shit, what am I gonna do? Screw it. Look at this place. Nobody cares if I scream here.

*SHE PULLS THE WHITE DRESS ON, PLACES THE STAGE HAT ON HER HEAD AND SCREAMS.
THEN...*

"Scene Three

The farmer couldn't keep his eyes on her and couldn't keep them off. She was just too beautiful for the likes of him. But there she was, there she was under his roof. The sultry slide of her eyes while she washed dishes, the sweat she left untouched on her forehead in the jungle Iowa August heat made him jealous and hungry. That there was something strange inside of her, something looking back that scared his glance, made him oddly secure, "She's weird like me," but still he shook his head that something so beautiful could be inside his house.

June took care of the farmer's house, murmuring Emily under her breath, and in a thicket in the corn she took her Emily books and ate Emily's ghost while the farmer worked in the fields, and at night, by candle light in the farmer's kitchen, while the farmer snored upstairs, she ate Emily more.

She felt the farmer's glances but could never meet his gaze, so she watched his hands – how they worked things, made them right, cleaned them, healed them, made them grow; how they had eyes – how big and strong they were and how nimble – could twist a fence post or pick a needle from the floor. And they were always kind to her, wanted to touch her face but were too shy. Then one day she took his hands and put them on her face. They had soft wrinkles on the outside and calluses like parrot's feet on their palms.

Sometimes like a doll, a pretty pretty doll, she wrapped around him hot, breathing hotly, kissing him, his silent addiction, her lips, her nose, her haunted eyes, her wolfish heart.

Exhilaration is the Breeze³
That lifts us from the Ground
And leaves us in another place
Whose statement is not found –

Returns us not, but after time
We soberly descend
A little newer for the term
Upon Enchanted Ground –

The farm glowed green and gold and she glowed too, and on his tractor, his eyes glowed and felt the best in his life, had not known such a thing could be, and though she never made a sound, felt her affection, her gratitude, her delight that she was with the earth, in its rhythm, that sun and moon were with her, in her, just as three hearts beat within her great wet clock of life. She carried us to the thicket in the corn and sang Emily to us in her belly, fed us Emily's ghost so we could hop her thoughts as branches do the birds.

Rock me, Mary, rock me.

MARY GENTLY ROCKS THE CHAIR.

³ iTunes, "Exhilaration", music by John O'Keefe

You say it, Mary, you say it alone this time.”

MARY

This World is not Conclusion.⁴
 A Species stands beyond –
 Invisible, as Music –
 But positive, as Sound –
 It beckons, and it baffles –
 Philosophy – don't know –
 And through a Riddle, at the last –
 Sagacity, must go –
 To guess it, puzzles scholars –
 To gain it, Men have borne
 Contempt of Generations
 And Crucifixion, shown –
 Faith slips – and laughs, and rallies –
 Blushes, if any see –
 Plucks at a twig of Evidence –
 And asks a Vane, the way –
 Much Gesture, from the Pulpit –
 Strong Hallelujahs roll –
 Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
 That nibbles at the soul –

MARY SETS THE ROCKING CHAIR IN MOTION AND THE RAG DOLL CONTINUES ROCKING AS THE LIGHTS FADE.

SCENE 5

MARY IS WEARING HER LOPSIDED WHITE DRESS. SHE HAS HER STAGE HAT ON.

“Scene four

SHE SINGS

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –⁵
 Success in Circuit lies
 Too bright for our infirm Delight
 The Truth's superb surprise
 As Lightning to the Children eased
 With explanation kind
 The Truth must dazzle gradually
 Or every man be blind –

AS SYLVIA

“June took care that Dwight would never hear her say Emily; she knew he couldn't share her with anybody just now that he was at last shining. It would change soon enough when *we* hit the air, clinging to her like leeches and her loving us, preening us. What she didn't know was that

⁴ iTunes, “This World is Not Conclusion”, music by John O’Keefe

⁵ iTunes, “Tell All The Truth”, music by John O’Keefe

Dwight wouldn't have cared about Emily. He had a crush on her, like a geeky high school kid; that she was silent was fine, if she didn't look into his eyes was fine, he didn't care if she had a couple of noisy kids as long as he could look at her, gaze at her, sip her in glances. He grew to accept her as silent and it was the silence between them he began to covet; they shared silence with each other. To protect her silence he attended alone all family functions like Christmas, Thanksgiving, and Sunday Church.

So Sundays and holidays June took us to the thicket to say Emily, and in winter we said her in the kitchen, but more carefully, as we didn't want to rouse the house and Dwight feel it when he came back.

It had to happen one Sunday, the car break down on the way to church and Dwight come back to the house on foot and hear singing coming from the corn. Is so pretty might be playing on the radio.

The cricket sang,⁶
 And set the sun,
 And workmen finished, one by one,
 Their seam the day upon.

The low grass loaded with the dew,
 The twilight stood as strangers do
 With hat in hand, polite and new,
 To stay as if, or go.

A vastness, as a neighbor, came,—
 A wisdom without face or name,
 A peace, as hemispheres at home,—
 And so the night became.

In the thicket, there she is, chin tilting like a lark, hair tumbling over her shoulders, singing! He remembers all those days how he carefully made silence for her, honoring her privacy as one would a bearer of a secret, never once trying to pry into her eyes, and she honored him he thought, but she is singing, singing to the two look-a-likes he tolerates for her being with a man the likes of him, but she doesn't mean it, she is a liar, isn't she? She's singing.

We come in, silent again, not knowing and find him sitting there, white-faced at the table,

a veiled creature.

Then Dwight catches her by the hair! "Why don't you sing to me! Why don't you sing to me!" We twins know she can talk, and he tries to make us tell him that she can talk, and I just keep my mouth shut but Mary, she can't stand him screaming at mother, to talk to talk to talk; Mary begs him, she begs him, then he's crying and he's grabbing Mary's head and he's telling mother that he's gonna crack it open on the sink if she doesn't say anything, but she doesn't, she doesn't and then Mary is screaming at her,

⁶ iTunes, "Cricket Song", music by John O'Keefe

“Say Emily! Say Emily!” And June screams and it sounds like a throat-cut pig!

He drags mother up the stairs squealing and he squeals back, and then he says, “not so pretty now,” he says, “not so pretty” and he locks her in the spare room. She breaks a window and cuts her throat with a shard glass. She watches the sun while blood pours down the front of her white dress.

SHE SINGS THE FOLLOWING POEM TO LOON.

After great pain, a formal feeling comes –⁷
 The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs –
 The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
 And Yesterday, or Centuries before?

The Feet, mechanical, go round –
 Of Ground, or Air, or Ought –
 A Wooden way
 Regardless grown,
 A Quartz contentment, like a stone –

This is the Hour of Lead –
 Remembered, if outlived,
 As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –
 First–Chill–then Stupor–then the letting go–

And Dwight comes undone,

each soul has its native strategy:

you stopped eating,

me, I told Dwight to put you in the nut house,

and he did, like putting something in the freezer maybe turned bad

but you know that

don't you

know

that

might as well me go down than you,

one go down instead of two...

so I wifed him, not that he'd want to screw me, he was too much in love with June's ghost standing in the window upstairs; I was the distance between them.

⁷ iTunes, “After Great Pain”, music by John O’Keefe

I ironed his pants, cooked his coffee, fried his eggs, made his bed. Took his crap, his skulking void, his accusatory stare, the mine fields he'd set to trap me so he could slap me. But he was already dead, just took a little time to take; a few months later, watched him die raging at a tire one summer afternoon in a thunder storm; broken hearted lovers, they, mom and dad, really.

Say it, Mary, say it."

MARY

I cannot live with you,
It would be life,
And life is over there
Behind the shelf

The sexton keeps the key to,
Putting up
Our life, his porcelain,
Like a cup

Discarded of the housewife,
Quaint or broken;
A newer Sevres pleases,
Old ones crack.

I could not die with you,
For one must wait
To shut the other's gaze down,
You could not.

And I, could I stand by
And see you freeze,
Without my right of frost,
Death's privilege?

Nor could I rise with you,
Because your face
Would put out Jesus',
That new grace

Glow plain and foreign
On my homesick eye,
Except that you, than he
Shone closer by.

They'd judge us-how?
For you served Heaven, you know,
Or sought to;
I could not,

Because you saturated sight,
And I had no more eyes
For sordid excellence
As Paradise.

And were you lost, I would be,
 Though my name
 Rang loudest
 On the heavenly fame.

And were you saved,
 And I condemned to be
 Where you were not,
 That self were hell to me.

So we must keep apart,
 You there, I here,
 With just the door ajar
 That oceans are,
 And prayer,
 And that pale sustenance,
 Despair!"

SHE COVERS HER FACE WITH HER HANDS. LIGHTS FADE TO BLACK.

SCENE 6

SOUND OF GANGSTER RAP APPROACHING – THE GRAVEL CRACKLES AND THE CAR STOPS. THE GANGSTER RAP BOOMS IN THE NIGHT, THEN IS EXTINGUISHED AS THE CAR IS TURNED OFF, THEN OUT GO THE LIGHTS. THE DRIVER’S DOOR OPENS, THEN CLOSES. SHE ENTERS CARRYING A 40 OUNCER IN A PAPER BAG.

I bought a car in a Denny’s parking lot in Redwood City, cost a lot, but I’m good for it, now I won’t stick out and it came with a cd. I’ve got my Lex stashed in a parking garage in Hayward, I’ll take this back to the garage, exchange it for the Lex and so drive across the San Mateo Bridge to my necropolis in a proper hearse. Neighbor’s won’t talk then. Like they haven’t already. “Ever since Stephen ran away with that grad student, “Donald,” wasn’t that his name, Mary seems to have gone a little wacky.”

Much madness is divinest sense
 To a discerning eye;
 Much sense the starkest madness.
 'T is the majority
 In this, as all, prevails.
 Assent, and you are sane;
 Demur, -- you're straightway dangerous,
 And handled with a chain.

SHE PULLS THE 40 OUNCER FROM THE BAG.

I stopped at the neighborhood store and got a local beverage. Those people, they were actually pleasant, they looked at me funny, but I’m sure I looked at them the same way. They recommended this, “King Cobra Premium Malt Liquor.”

UNSCREWS THE CAP, SNIFFS IT, BLINKS.

Complex.

SHE TAKES A SWIG

My god, was this brewed in a bedpan?

SHE TAKES A BIGGER DRINK AND GASPS

Yikes, that's honest!

THE BOOZE HITS HER

I'm too old to be divorced, there should be a law against it, or it should be given a new status like "Druid"; "Mary is now a Druid".

SHE TAKES ANOTHER CRACK AT THE BEER. SHE DRAGS A BOX DOWN TO THE FOLDING CHAIR. SHE SITS AND PROPS HER FEET ON THE BOX.

This stuff grows on you.

Personally, I don't like poets, I've had so many to dinner. I mean the University kind, The Poet Nation, Writers Workshop dumplings. I don't like the way they laugh. Always concerned with the doing it "right." Emily didn't do it "right." But she could write some damn good lyrics, you can sing them to any kind of music.

Listen to this. I'm gonna sing a tune by Isaac Watts. He was a great hymster, Emily Dickinson's meter master, the humble iambic trimeter and quadrameter, not the pouting, pink pentameter.

SHE BEGINS SINGING THE TUNE TO "OUR GOD, OUR HELP IN AGES PAST" BY ISAAC WATTS.

The Brain -- is wider than the Sky --
For -- put them side by side --
The one the other will contain
With ease -- and You -- beside --

The Brain is deeper than the sea --
For -- hold them -- Blue to Blue --
The one the other will absorb --
As Sponges -- Buckets -- do --

The Brain is just the weight of God --
For -- Heft them -- Pound for Pound --
And they will differ -- if they do --
As Syllable from Sound --

Hey, listen to this feminist little ditty, it's Emily, honest.

Over the fence --⁸
Strawberries -- grow --
Over the fence --

⁸ iTunes, "Over The Fence", music by John O'Keefe

I could climb – if I tried, I know –
Berries are nice!

But – if I stained my Apron –
God would certainly scold!
Oh, dear, – I guess if He were a Boy –
He'd – climb – if He could!

SHE TAKES ANOTHER DRINK, PUTS THE BOTTLE DOWN AND SINGS.

It feels so good, Sylvia, I can taste it.

I taste a liquor never brewed,⁹
From tankards scooped in pearl;
Not all the vats upon the Rhine
Yield such an alcohol!

Inebriate of air am I,
And debauchee of dew,
Reeling, through endless summer days,
From inns of molten blue.

When landlords turn the drunken bee
Out of the foxglove's door,
When butterflies renounce their drams,
I shall but drink the more!

Till seraphs swing their snowy hats,
And saints to windows run,
To see the little tippler
Leaning against the sun!

SHE GRABS A BOX OF MAKE UP AND SHOWS IT TO THE RAG DOLL.

Sylvia doll, look at this! It's make up. I love to make up. I love to put
other faces on my own. It's what I do. Fuck it.

SHE SETS UP A LITTLE MAKE UP STATION AND CLEANS HER FACE.

When I was in the Nut House, a woman, she (was a psychiatrist and she had seen me fail my sanity requirements three consecutive times, a fourth and they'd stop testing me altogether) took pity on me. She sat me down and told me simply to "behave" like a "normal" person. "That's all they require to release you into the general population, which is really just a larger mental hospital where the mad create an organized effort to survive. Just do what *they* do. Read their lips as if you were deaf. Study the social face as you would a foreign language. You are very pretty and I think, intelligent. You are intelligent aren't you? Yes, I see it in your eyes. You could work them, you could become a really fine Geisha, you could rise in the society. Why not you, pretty Mary: get a male to cover for you, then work the system." I did. I did very well, I became an academic housewife.

⁹ iTunes, "I Taste a Liquor", music by John O'Keefe

SHE BEGINS PUTTING ON GEISHA MAKE UP.

Don't underestimate an Academic House wife. Parties, who to invite: academia has such strange bedfellows and they are in bed together for a long time, interred, one might say: Serious Atheist Theorists, Scientists and Art historians, networking artists, networking scientists, networking administrators; (must be very careful to get the right mix in a tight room filled with booze), clandestine business meetings between corporate moguls and six figure socialists. She has to choose the colors, the décor, the cuisine. An Academic Housewife must know her geography, her literature, her policy, (foreign, local, departmental and "domestic"); she should know her philosophy, theology, sociology, psychology. And of course, she's got to be a polyglot. "Thank you in..." Assyrian, Afrikaans, Albanian, in four dialects of Arabic, some Basque, Szechuan, Cantonese, and a little Hopi, you get the idea, you have to be a lot of things to a lot of people, be visible at principal moments and disappear with equal facility when the "grown ups" make their deals. Dank u, Rav todot, Arigato, Dhanyavad, Khawp khun ka, merci beaucoup, and thank's y'all. "She's the smart one in the family, Stephen's a lucky guy."

SHE RISES, TURNS HER BACK, PUTS THE WIG ON AND TURNS. SHE PRESENTS THE POEM USING HER FINGERS LIKE FANS. IT IS A SONG.

Title divine – is mine!
 The Wife–without –
 the Sign –
 Acute Degree
 Conferred on me –
 Empress of Calvary –
 Royal-all but
 the Crown –
 Betrothed, without
 the Swoon
 God sends us Women –
 When You hold
 Garnet to Garnet –
 Gold to – Gold
 Born – Bridalled –
 Shrouded –
 In a Day –
 Tri Victory –
 "My Husband" –
 women say
 Stroking the Melody-
 Is this-the way –

SHE CROSSES D.S., KNEELS AND TURNS HER BACK. SHE BEGINS PAINTING HER FACE IN THE MIRROR BUT IT CAN'T BE SEEN.

One need not be a chamber to be haunted,
 One need not be a house;
 The brain has corridors surpassing
 Material place.

Far safer, of a midnight meeting
 External ghost,
 Than an interior confronting
 That whiter host.

Far safer through an Abbey gallop,
 The stones achase,
 Than, moonless, one's a'self encounter
 In lonesome place.

Yourself, behind yourself concealed,
 Should startle most;
 Assassin, hid in your apartment,
 Be horror's least.

The prudent carries a revolver,
 He bolts the door,
 O'erlooking a superior spectre
 More near.

*SHE TURNS TO THE AUDIENCE: SHE HAS BLACK SOCKET EYES, FACE-SLIT MOUTH, BLOOD TEARS,
 BIG SCARLET LIPS AND BLACK TONGUE.*

My Life had stood – a Loaded gun –¹⁰
 In Corners – till a Day
 The Owner passed – identified –
 And carried Me away –

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods –
 And now We hunt the Doe –
 And every time I speak for Him –
 The Mountains straight reply –

And do I smile, such cordial light
 Upon the Valley glow –
 It is as a Vesuvius face
 Had let its pleasure through –

And when at Night – Our good Day done –
 I guard My Master's Head –
 'Tis better than the Eider-Duck's
 Deep Pillow – to have shared –

To foe of His – I'm deadly foe –
 None stir the second time –
 On whom I lay a Yellow Eye –
 Or an emphatic Thumb –

Though I than He – may longer live
 He longer must – than I –
 For I have but the power to kill,

¹⁰ iTunes, “My Life Had Stood A Loaded Gun”, music by John O’Keefe

Without – the power to die –

Die...

MUSIC - FAREWELL- GARAGE BAND LOOP - A SCHMALTZY TRAGA-MYSTICAL-SEPULCHRAL WALTZ. SHE SCOOPS THE SYLVIA RAG DOLL UP

Sylvia, my darling! Sylvia!

SHE WALTZES ELEGANTLY WITH IT. MOONLIGHT BREAKS ON THE DANCING PAIR. MARY LAUGHS AND WHISPERS IN THE RAG DOLL'S EAR. MARY MOVES THE RAG DOLL'S HEAD SO THAT IT SEEMS TO WHISPER IN MARY'S EAR. MARY GAZES ADORINGLY AT THE RAG DOLL, THEN BENDS THE RAG DOLL BACK AND KISSES IT PASSIONATELY ON THE MOUTH. SHE STAGGERS.

I'm so fucking drunk, this King Cobra has a serious bite.

SHE TRIES TO LET GO OF THE RAG DOLL BUT HER HAND WON'T LET GO. SHE TRIES TO SHAKE IT OFF BUT IT WON'T SHAKE OFF. SHE GETS PANICED.

Let's not do this.

SHE CRUMPLES INTO THE ROCKER WITH THE RAG DOLL. SHE SITS WITH IT IN THE ROCKING CHAIR. SHE SLUMPS, THE RAG DOLL SLUMPS, THEIR TWO FACES VISIBLE LIKE STRANGE SIAMESE TWINS. SHE TALKS TO THE RAG DOLL.

What the hell am I doing? Screw you, "What the hell are *you* doing?"
What the hell *am* I doing?

TO THE RAG DOLL...

Who are you?

SHE GETS ENTANGLED WITH THE RAG DOLL AND CLAMBERS TO THE FLOOR

Good god, I *am* crazy. I am.

SHE TRIES TO DIAL HER CELL PHONE

Stephen! Stephen! Help me. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, that's so stupid. Get hold of yourself.

SUDDENLY WONDERING WHICH, TO THE DOLL

Is it "hold of yourself" or "a-hold of yourself?"

SHE PASSES OUT, THE LIGHTS REMAIN ON. THE SOUND CHANGES TO THE SOUND OF DAY TIME: GRADUALLY TRAFFIC, HONKING, PEOPLE TALKING, A DAYLIGHT RHYTHM. SHE'S PASSED OUT. SHE HEARS THE SOUND. HER EYES POP OPEN. HOW LONG HAS SHE BEEN ASLEEP? SHE UNTANGLES HERSELF FROM THE RAG DOLL. SHE CROSSES TO THE DOOR, CAUTIOUSLY CRACKS IT OPEN AND BRILLIANT LIGHT FLASHES AT HER ACCOMPANIED BY A BLAST OF SOUND. SHE SLAMS THE DOOR SHUT. SHE LOOKS AT HER FACE IN THE MIRROR AND CRIES OUT. SHE CLEANS THE MAKE UP OFF. SHE PULLS HER WHITE DRESS OFF. SHE GETS HER BAG. GOES TO THE DOOR. STOPS. TURNS AND SEARCHES THE FLOOR FOR THE BLACK BOOK. FINDS IT. SHE CHECKS HERSELF ONCE MORE IN THE MIRROR. SHE CROSSES TO THE DOOR. SHE BRACES HERSELF, TURNS

THE LIGHT OFF, DARKNESS. SHE TEARS THE DOOR OPEN AND DISAPPEARS INTO A BLAST OF LIGHT AND SOUND. SHE SLAMS THE DOOR SHUT, DARKNESS. IN THE DARKNESS IS THE SOUND OF HER GHETTO CAR FIRING UP AND ALONG WITH IT THE REST OF THE RAP TRACK.

SCENE 7

SOUND OF THE GHETTO CAR AND SAME CD BLASTING. CAR STOPS. MOTOR OFF, CD OFF. DOOR. SHE ENTERS WITH HER BAG. SHE TURNS THE LIGHT ON. THE PLACE IS AS SHE LEFT IT. SHE IS DRESSED AS SHE WAS WHEN SHE RAN OUT. IT IS NIGHT NOW.

What if I told you that I just got back from Amherst, Massachusetts? There's a strip mall there (even upscale shops have their backsides) – behind that strip mall is a little fence that leads to a graveyard. The gatekeeper closes the graveyard at 5 PM. I hid there, and when it was dark, I went to Emily's grave. There are a lot of notes at the grave site, and precious little stones, the stains of rotted flowers are on Emily's tombstone. It was drizzling lightly. I opened the little black gate and I laid on top of her grave and fell asleep for awhile. I dreamed that I dug down into the dirt and put a cell phone in the ground and I carefully covered it over. I remember it clearly, it was a Virgin Pre-Paid Mobile Flare. It was just for me and Emily. Then Emily called me. She said, "Just wait, I'll be up." I woke up. It was the middle of the night. It had stopped raining but I was damp. I climbed out of the graveyard, took the Amherst shuttle to the airport and flew back to California. I carried no luggage, no change of clothes. You know what? Nobody noticed. Nobody gave a shit, just as long as I had my I.D., plastic, and a little cash. Went straight through security, didn't get stopped once.

SITS ON THE FOLDING CHAIR.

Reading is a most intimate act. You know, with some writers you just think things you might not have thought, see things you might not have seen, so you yearn for their next perception. You go to their graves but they're not there. They're here in your heart, you're head, you know, your *special place*. Thing is, they yearn for you too. Will somebody read them after they're dead? Will they find somebody to live in? Will their voices live in your voice? Will you tell your friends? Will they spread like a virus, or last like a mould? You think it's only a one way trip, but it's not true; you are the future they're writing for, you are the love they never got, or the enemy they'll get in the end, the witness who will come forth on their behalf, mama, daddy, victim, the head for thoughts they weren't supposed to think. Oh no, they're writing for you, they just need a body to hold them. June wanted to hold Emily but she cut herself short. Perhaps she had twins the way pigeons do, who lay two eggs so if something happens to one there's always the other.

I am the other.

SHE GETS UP AND TURNS ON THE DUMMY

And it's not fair! Why did you leave it to me! Fuck, I'm shouting at a piece of cloth. I'm going home and take a bath.

SHE EXITS

LIGHTS OUT.

SCENE 8

MARY IS STANDING IN THE WHITE DRESS.

SHE CROSSES TO THE RAG DOLL, OPENS IT, AUTUMN LEAVES POUR OUT ON THE FLOOR. SHE GETS INSIDE THE RAG DOLL. SHE BECOMES SYLVIA.

AS SYLVIA

“Scene 5

I have a lover. We meet at a dance in Albion, in July, Christmas lights hanging around a platform in the open air; Clarence, red-head, freckles, foster boy farm hand five miles outside of Union. I'm pretty and if you don't know who I am you might think I'm a cheerleader. He's coming at me like a snake or a creek, afraid but wanting to do it, me too. He says I smell like soap and that that is good, and my heart is beating so hard I can hardly keep my arms up, and he's shaking too, and my cheeks are so flushed I think I've burned him, so we keep dancing with our faces together all through the evening...

Come slowly – Eden!
Lips unused to Thee –
Bashful – sip thy Jessamines –
As the fainting Bee –

Reaching late his flower,
Round her chamber hums –
Counts his nectars –
Enters – and is lost in Balms.

...till Dwight yanks me outta there, cuz I told you, Mary, that I wanted to dance that night, I said it was a secret and you made it secret too, but you, Mary, you told Dwight I was at a dance in Albion, and that boy, Clarence, is shamed and I don't cry because I don't want to shame him more, and Dwight drags me from the dancers back to shiny-eyed June and you, you, Mary, and that cursed Emily Dickinson, that vampire in the white dress. But you couldn't stop me.

November Hayride, not with a horse, mind you, but a John Deere tractor. Breath-steam, gibbous moon, lots of clothes, jackets and scarves, gloves and mittens and hay in bales prickly as our wool collars. Faces, ruddy, round and shiny, and our necks so white and hot, and our lips so plump, not a wrinkle, eyes so drunk, undressing our hands to curl and clutch our fingers. Oh, yes, and a kiss that goes as far as the moon and the harvested corn, dry and cool as violin cases, hot and satin inside.

The name – of it – is "Autumn" –
The hue – of it – is Blood –
An Artery – upon the Hill –
A Vein – along the Road –

Great Globules – in the Alleys –
 And Oh, the Shower of Stain –
 When Winds – upset the Basin –
 And spill the Scarlet Rain –

It sprinkles Bonnets – far below –
 It gathers ruddy Pools –
 Then – eddies like a Rose – away –
 Upon Vermilion Wheels –

He's going into the Army. That is until he sees me and I see him and then there's just us and no room for Emily no more, no more, in the dark trees by the water, cicada's eerie, eerie song, August breathing tassels in the ocean in the sky thicker than light, I sneak to him each night. "Mary, if you tell I'll tell Dwight June can talk." That was a sin. But it got me a skinny freckled boy for a summer and a fall.

Then running away and getting caught because June weeps like November drizzle until Dwight gets in his truck and pulls me out of that one room flat in Saint Louis, left my freckled boy, AWOL, crying at the top of the stairs, Dwight's big hand dragging me back to that crazy woman with the ghosts in her eyes, back to the silence, back to that farm with a lie made of glass.

SHE ROCKS AND ROCKS AND CRIES

And I never see him again, and I never hold him, I never hold any one ever, never hold any one, Mary, Mary, hold me! Hold me!

HER TEARS SUBSIDE, SHE GOES QUIET

So I stay there and live in that house, alone, selling parcels of land to support myself and preserve the house and the thicket.

And there are these voices all a'clatter, gobbling round in the house, arguing and mending, the voices of wood and metal and glass and of echoes and dampness and Emily's ghost. And I lock down the rest of the house and move into the kitchen.

I never say Emily, she says herself, an insane girl running upstairs through the halls in her white dress and pounding on the door.

The house screams for years and then it dies and goes silent.

Perhaps the house is silent for years and then goes dead.

I can't decide if the ghost or the house is silent right away, or if the house is loud because I am ranting, that I have gone crazy in that house and become divine.

I felt a Cleaving in my Mind –
 As if my Brain had split –
 I tried to match it – Seam by Seam –

But could not make them fit.
 The thought behind, I strove to join
 Unto the thought before –
 But Sequence unravelled out of Sound
 Like Balls – upon a Floor.

Then the voices went quiet, Mary, they just went quiet, and I was able to go outside.

I was picking blackberries in a thunder storm that first time I went blind, thought it might have been the ions, and then it passed and hit again, right here in this rocking chair, and lasted such a long time I could hear the blue jays closing in on my eyes, and I promised myself if my sight returned, that I'd go to town and see a doctor, though I'd never seen one in my life. Said I was going to die just like Susan Hayward, go blind, go limp, die. Asked me if I wanted to go in the hospital. Said I'd do fine back at the farm. So here I sit again, waiting yet another day, four straight, four bouts of blindness, wouldn't think it would be so hard to die, big step, though, you know.

SHE OPENS THE BLACK BOOK. SHE ROCKS

And I thought, how lovely to pass in ecstasy in this rocking chair on the front porch. Everybody can see me from the road but nobody will come up here because I'm known to be batty, that is, until they see the blue jays pecking at my eyes, then the sheriff will come. And that's when I started writing this little play. I've just pinned the note on my white dress telling them to send this rocker to you and my dress and the very words you're saying right now. You're almost done, don't be afraid.

On a Columnar Self –How ample to rely
 In Tumult – or Extremity –
 How good the Certainty

That Lever cannot pry –
 And Wedge cannot divide
 Conviction – That Granitic Base –
 Though None be on our Side

Suffice us – for a Crowd –
 Ourselves – and Rectitude –
 And that Assembly – not far off
 From furthest Spirit – God –

I look at the air, I see it between the trees and rocks and plants, it is alive and full of ghosts. Haven't you seen them, peeking between branches, faces of leaves, dust drift, shadow shift, gawking at us from the other side, slipping just out of sight? It's all what you believe. Emily is in me, now she is in you, in the words you've memorized. She's in your brain. Mary, look, see the cornfields, see the thicket, see the trees, see the hill climbing to the house, see me in the rocking chair. Look, see me waving?

SHE WAVES

I'm wackin out, my brain's goin'. Mary, are you wackin out with me? Are we doing it at the same time? We are, if you're doing what I told you to do. You're doing it, aren't you, you're wakin' out. Come on, rock in the chair.

SHE BEGINS ROCKING

Come on, rock in the chair.

SHE ROCKS

I'm sorry, Mary. I'm sorry for putting you in the nut house, but you were really crazy, honey, you wouldn't have lasted a week with Dwight. Besides, you cheated me out of my boyfriend.

SHE LAUGHS

Come on, say, "I'm sorry, Sylvia." Come on and say it."

AS MARY

I'm sorry, Sylvia.

SHE ROCKS MORE SLOWLY

AS SYLVIA

"That's good. I forgive you. Say, "I forgive you, Sylvia."

AS MARY

I forgive you, Sylvia.

AS SYLVIA

That's it, it's comin' on now. That's it, no shit. Maybe there's no Sylvia, maybe she reinvents herself with every glance.

Mary?"

AS MARY

Yes?

AS SYLVIA

Here comes Emily.

MARY SLOWLY ROCKS TO A STOP. SHE OPENS THE BLACK BOOK TO THE LAST PAGE, SHE PULLS A PENCIL FROM THE BOOK AND TRACES IT OVER THE WORDS WRITTEN ON THE LAST PAGE.

He fumbles at your Soul
As Players at the Keys
Before they drop full Music on --

He stuns you by degrees --
 Prepares your brittle Nature
 For the Ethereal Blow
 By fainter Hammers -- further heard --
 Then nearer -- Then so slow
 Your Breath has time to straighten --
 Your Brain -- to bubble Cool --
 Deals -- One -- imperial -- Thunderbolt --
 That scalps your naked Soul --

When Winds hold Forests in their Paws --
 The Universe -- is still --”

HER HAND SLIDES OFF THE PAPER AND THE PENCIL LEAVES A TRAIL OF GRAPHITE AND DROPS TO THE FLOOR.

SHE IS STILL. THEN, GRADUALLY SHE COMES ALIVE, BEGINNING WITH THE MOVEMENT OF A FINGER.

She lay as if at play
 Her life had leaped away –
 Intending to return –
 But not so soon –

Her merry Arms, half dropt –
 As if for lull of sport –
 An instant had forgot –

The Trick to start –

Her dancing Eyes – ajar –
 As if their Owner were
 Still sparkling through
 For fun – at you –

Her Morning at the door –
 Devising, I am sure –
 To force her sleep –
 So light – so deep –

HER EYES POP OPEN AND SHE “SMILES” LIKE A CHEERY DOLL. SHE SLIPS TO HER FEET WITH FELINE LIGHTNESS AND DANCES IN LITTLE PRANCES ON HER TOES WHILE SHE SINGS. PIZZICATO.

I was the slightest in the House –¹¹
 I took the smallest Room –
 At night, my little Lamp, and Book –
 And one Geranium –

So stationed I could catch the Mint
 That never ceased to fall –
 And just my Basket –
 Let me think–I'm sure

¹¹ iTunes, “I Was The Slightest In The House”, music by John O’Keefe

That this was all –

I never spoke—unless addressed –
 And then, 'twas brief and low –
 I could not bear to live—aloud –
 The Racket shamed me so –

And if it had not been so far –
 And any one I knew
 Were going—I had often thought
 How noteless—I could die –

SHE BEGINS TO EMERGE FROM THE RAG DOLL. AT THE END SHE SPREADS THE RAG DOLL OPEN AND LETS IT DROP TO HER FEET. SHE HOLDS A SINGLE SILK FLOWER.

My Cocoon tightens -- Colors tease --
 I'm feeling for the Air --
 A dim capacity for Wings
 Demeans the Dress I wear --
 A power of Butterfly must be --
 The Aptitude to fly
 Meadows of Majesty implies
 And easy Sweeps of Sky --
 So I must baffle at the Hint
 And cipher at the Sign
 And make much blunder, if at least
 I take the clue divine --

SHE PICKS UP THE BLACK BOOK AND PUTS IT ON THE DISGARDED RAG DOLL. SHE PUTS THE FLOWER IN A LITTLE VASE. LIGHTS A VOTIVE CANDLE IN A HOLDER. SHE PUTS THE FLOWER ON THE FLOOR BY THE BLACK BOOK AND THE VOITVE CANDLE BY THE FLOWER.

'Twas just this time, last year, I died.
 I know I heard the Corn,
 When I was carried by the Farms —
 It had the Tassels on —

I thought how yellow it would look —
 When Richard went to mill —
 And then, I wanted to get out,
 But something held my will.

I thought just how Red — Apples wedged
 The Stubble's joints between —
 And the Carts stooping round the fields
 To take the Pumpkins in —

I wondered which would miss me, least,
 And when Thanksgiving, came,
 If Father'd multiply the plates —
 To make an even Sum —

And would it blur the Christmas glee

My Stocking hang too high
For any Santa Claus to reach
The Altitude of me —

But this sort, grieved myself,
And so, I thought the other way,
How just this time, some perfect year —
Themself, should come to me —

SHE TURNS OUT THE LIGHT LEAVING THE VOTIVE CANDLE FOR ILLUMINATION. THERE IS A SILENCE, THEN A CAR DOOR OPENING, THE IGNITION AND THE CD AND ENGINE REVING AS THE GHETTO CAR BACKS OUT AND THEN DISAPPEARS INTO THE NIGHT.