

THE PHOBIA CLINIC

for three actors

by

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(In total dark, A LOUD CRASHING NOISE. Then silence as A LIGHT COMES UP on JACK, alone.)

JACK

FOR GOD'S SAKE, NO! DON'T DO IT! PLEASE, JACK, STOP!

That's what it's like. This voice I hear of late,
Some inner guardian angel traffic cop

Warning me off - well, something. Some dire fate.
What is this noise, this screaming red alert?
The voice leaves off, thank God, it does abate,

Leaving me spooked and rattled, but unhurt...
It's like I've been infected. Some disease.
Sometimes I'll get - lying totally inert -

These nasty creeping feelings of un-ease,
These coiling worms of doubt inside my gut.
Or - I'll be on my walk (an April breeze,

A rare blue sky) and this, I don't know what,
This urge to flee will seize me. Run inside,
The voice will shout and - right on cue - I cut

My outing short! As if to save my hide
I scurry home! This evening, in the train,
Some guy just looked at me. Gone. End of ride.

But my life's good! Why all this angst? My brain
Is all afire. I'm getting some renown.
I've poems descending on me like spring rain,

They're talking Pulitzer... I blame this town.
The New York sidewalk circus of grotesques,
The frowning mob who'll run you down

And leave you dead so they can reach their desks.
Eight million souls with no peripheral vision!
This city's hell, my friends, it's Dante-esque!

Plus all the dirt, the noise, the rude derision.
At least I have a plan. A way to get
Away. Now that I've come to my decision...

(BEBE ENTERS, unnoticed by JACK.)

Of course, there's Bea. Who doesn't know. Not yet.

BEBE

Excuse me, Hamlet. Sorry.

JACK

No...

BEBE

Bad time?

JACK

No, I was just - you know. The daily fret.

BEBE

Chasing a sonnet down? Some slippery rhyme?

JACK

The work's all good.

BEBE

Well, great. So listen, Jack,
You know what's coming.

JACK

Bombay gin with lime?

BEBE

July. Which means -

(JACK groans.)

- stop that - which means a stack
Of presents, candles, yes, the birthday thing.

JACK

You didn't say this was a sneak attack.

BEBE

We have to plan now. So. How big a ring
Of friends would you prefer? Your heart's desire.
When "Happy Birthday" happens, who should sing?

Just me, or do I rent St. Patrick's choir?
Big blow-out or us two - that is the question.
We call the gang together, dance, perspire,

Get drunk and make a fuss. That's my suggestion.
Or else: we have a picnic in the Park.
Champagne. Canoodling. Gifts. It's less congestion.

JACK

Bebe...

BEBE

Oh, Jack! Today, in Central Park -
Two swifts. A pair so perfect they looked plastic.

JACK

Bee...?

BEBE

It's your poem! It's "The Wind-Up Lark"!

JACK
I'm thinking I might move.

BEBE
Oh. Good. Fantastic!
Anything's better than this cave you've got.

JACK
No, I mean really move.

BEBE
So - something drastic?

JACK
Yeah. San Francisco.

BEBE
San Francisco... What?
You're kidding.

JACK
No, why not? It's quiet, it's clean.
It's gorgeous.

BEBE
Close by.

JACK
Granted. That it's not...

BEBE
But you mean - move alone? What do you mean?

JACK
You can come, too.

BEBE
Oh, sure. Three thousand miles?
Jack. San Francis-?

JACK
I want a change of scene.
It's a great poetry town. They clogged the aisles
Last time I read.

BEBE
Yeah, great. But what'll you do
Out there?

JACK
It might inspire me. Spin my dials.
My blue Bic pen could go for something new.

BEBE

Hey, I'll inspire you. Don't I? Just a smidge?

JACK

Yeah, sure, it's just - I crave some sky. A view!
Crave...I don't know...

BEBE

Steep hills, blue bay, red bridge?

JACK

Funny.

BEBE

I thought we'd clicked. But - your decision.

JACK

It's just...

BEBE

No! You're fidgeting? So fidge.

I have to say - not quite what I'd envisioned.
Will you be here to cut your birthday cake?
Oh, right. You've booked a flight to the Elysian
Fields.

JACK

Bee...

BEBE

So you and I were, what?, a fake?
You'd give up us, to run away and disco?

JACK

I'm sorry.

BEBE

Yeah, but. But. Jack, for heaven's sake!
Fine.

JACK

Stay a -

BEBE

No, I think I'd better go.
Be happy, Jack. Write well. I mean it.

JACK

Bee - !

(BEBE EXITS. SFX: DISTANT DOOR SLAMMING.)

(LIGHTS CHANGE to show a change of location.)

JACK (CONT'D)

So here I am in misty San Francisco,

A pastel Eden built on TNT.

There are those quakes. Plus fog, crime, Wiccan rites,
Fog, homeless camps, and fog each day at three.

Who cares? It's heaven! Adults flying kites!
Those kites the only thing here that's high-strung.
Mellow from Nob Hill to Pacific Heights -

It's like assisted living for the young.
But something...something's happened. Happened here.
(Taps his head.)

To me.

As if my very being's come unsprung -

I don't know why - but I've begun to be
Afraid. Afraid of everything. In dread,
Twenty-four/seven. That old urge to flee?

It's constant now. I flee my desk, my bed,
Closed spaces, open spaces, shadows, light,
Strangers. I run for safety? Not a shred.

I'll head into some shop, the shop's too tight,
I race on further. All day in suspense
I pace the city in some nameless plight,

My prickling nerves a charged electric fence,
My heart convulsed by the Pavlovian shocks
That once were mere pedestrian events.

Come home, I triple-bolt my bright new locks
Then stave off dark's assault with fifths of gin,
Pacing, compulsively consulting clocks

Until some cruel god lets the daylight in.
Some nights I copy out Psalm 23
To quell the jits, drown out the inner din,

But nothing stops the dread or sets me free.
Bare-knuckled terror knocks till dawn. Still worse
Are dreams, which I resist but fail to flee -

As nervous fliers, clutching book or purse,
Descend the endless jetway to their plane
And strap themselves into their idling hearse.

(SFX: CELLPHONE BEEP.)

BEBE (ON VOICEMAIL)

Hey, Jack.

JACK

The world itself seems gone insane.

BEBE (ON VOICEMAIL)

You there?

JACK

Physical laws grow howling gaps.

BEBE (ON VOICEMAIL)

It's me.

JACK

Mad visions spiral in my brain:

Shops as infernos. Buildings in collapse.
Plazas are mazes, elevators tests,
Corridors lie stretched in wait like baited traps.

Was it for this I moved, I came out west,
To flail beneath some cosmic microscope?
To fuck up? Fail?

BEBE (ON VOICEMAIL)

Well, I won't be a pest.

Bye, Jack.

(SFX: PHONE BEEP.)

JACK

And now my last, best, only hope
Is death. The thing is, I don't want to die.
I feel as if I should. Why sit and mope?

So now the only question's how, not why.
Razor, pills, rope. The options are so vast!
I don't like noise or mess. Still, feeling sly,

Thinking I'll get the whole thing over fast -
I buy a Smith and Wesson 38.
But then - behold! My perfect out, at last:

That go-to weapon called The Golden Gate.
Why not? It's quiet, it's clean. The job's pre-fab.
Just one small leap - you've done it. Check and mate.

One evening, then - blind drunk - I hail a cab
To Fort Point, climb the stairway to The Bridge,
And edge out, shivering, on that long cold slab...

(LOCATION CHANGE to THE BRIDGE.)

I stop midway. A mote of dust, a midge
Glued to some spider's towering rust-red net,
I face east toward a land of endless privilege

Beyond the city's glistening minarets.
A generous sunset gilds them, spire on spire,
A shelf of crystal trophy statuettes.

But I see nothing out there to admire.
I see more terror, see night's lowering lid,
The coming dawn's apocalyptic fire.

Down through the Bridge's panopticon grid
I study the grim waters, which - to me -
Speed toward oblivion, longing to be hid

In ocean, swallowed up and turned to Sea.
Why live, why live. Why stay. The final question flares.
Death raps my best like opportunity.

Leap, leap, the chorus roars, what's wrong, you scared?
And trying to smother that infernal vamp
I grab the rail to jump, I'm all prepared -

(ACTOR 2 ENTERS as HOMELESS MAN, jingling MONEY.)

ACTOR 2/HOMELESS MAN
Change! Change! Hey, man, spare change? Howbout it, champ?

JACK
Sorry.

ACTOR 2/HOMELESS MAN
C'mon, dude, spare change?

JACK
I can't today.

ACTOR 2/HOMELESS MAN
Hey, Jude, you got it wrong, man!

JACK
Fucking tramp...

ACTOR 2/HOMELESS MAN
No, listen, lis -

JACK
I can't. I'm broke, okay?

ACTOR 2/HOMELESS MAN

But that's HILARIOUS, dude! It's all arranged!
I wasn't askin', I was offerin'! Hey!

You want some help, man? Have some! Take some change!
Nickel, dime, dollar? G'wan and take it, bro!

JACK

Funny... I do need help, how's that for strange?
I need some help, is that so fucking strange?

(ACTOR 2/HOMELESS MAN EXITS.)

I need some help, is that so fucking strange?
I NEED SOME HELP, IS THAT SO FUCKING STRANGE?!

HELP ME! I'M GOING TO JUMP!!!

(SUDDEN CHANGE OF PLACE. BRIGHT LIGHT.)

Next thing I know

I'm in an empty, mirrored room - a cell
From some mad funhouse, or a tale by Poe.

In every wall, as down an endless well,
My reeling image dwindles and unpeels...
Escorted by some antiseptic smell...

(VANESSA ENTERS, played by BEBE. Lab coat, skirt, pearls
and heels. English and brisk. Silver hair. Carries a
CLIPBOARD.)

VANESSA

Good morning! Welcome. So, then. How d'you feel?

JACK

Where am I, what's going on, what is this place?

VANESSA

My name's Vanessa.

(Takes out a wallet, checks the I.D.)

You're...Jack?

JACK

Is this real?

VANESSA

'Fraid so, yes. Cheers. I'm taking on your case.

(SHE holds out his wallet. HE doesn't take it.)

JACK

My "case"?

VANESSA

That's right.

JACK

So this is - an asylum...?

VANESSA

What, this? No! Thanks to chance and some god's grace,
You're in The Phobia Clinic. Phylum by phylum,
We index human fears.

JACK

Well, let me out.

VANESSA

We do research. Run studies and compile them.
This room's The Reflectorium...

JACK

LET ME OUT LET ME OUT LET ME OUT!

Bitch! Cunt!

VANESSA

...where we "reflect." Mirrors, you see?

JACK

Yeah, funny.

VANESSA

Look, I know you're in a pout.
Quite futile, by the way.

JACK

What.

VANESSA

Trying to flee.
You'd never make it. I'm not saying you'd die,
I'm saying you'd likely scramble back. I.D.?

(Holds out his WALLET. JACK grabs it.)

So, then. Who's Jack? Or, just to clarify:
What's Jack's worst nightmare, biggest fear, bête noire?

JACK

That's not your fucking business. Nor am I.
What is this joint?

VANESSA

I told you where you are.

JACK

What for?

VANESSA
For treatment.

JACK

What kind? What's the trick?

VANESSA
(*producing a PIECE OF PAPER*)
No trick. Just sign this for the registrar...

JACK
What kind of "treatment"?

VANESSA
Scrawl beside the tick
And you'll find out.

JACK
Wow. Now I'm reassured.
So I sign that, you - what - slice off my dick
Then send me back out there, quote-unquote, cured?
Shovel me on the street again, but "well"?
No, fix this sorry-ass world. Or haven't you heard
It's in a picnic basket bound for hell?
The planet's gonna fry. Or drown, or freeze.
You follow news, you've heard that funeral knell.
Get "cured" to view my country's daily creeze?
And my life, my life, well, that's fucking Kierkegaard.
So, you're so smart, give me a reason! Please!
Why should I live? Huh? Why? Why? WHY?

VANESSA
I know it's hard
But think of what you'd miss.

JACK
That's it? Oh, man.
I need a reason, not a smiley card!
So screw your zoo. I'm gone.

VANESSA
I'll call the van.
Fine! I release you! Now where will you go?
Back to The Bridge? To carry out your plan?
To jump? I'd ask for background, status quo,
Your phobic history, "how did it begin"...
What could you say I won't already know?

Self-medication via fifths of gin.
Three locks on every door with custom key.
Those nights, to keep from leaping from your skin,

You copied, line by line, Psalm 23.
You want those back? The thumping heart? The jits?
Let me guess. Solid liberal arts degree...

Maybe you just moved into town...? That fits.
Maybe a special birthday made you spike,
A great relationship went on the fritz,

A crucial girl- or boyfriend took a hike.
When death began to seem your sole resort
You bought a gun. Nice thought but you don't like

To make a mess, plus there's that loud report.
And don't ask how I know this off the cuff,
I know because I daily meet your sort.

VANESSA (CONT'D)

Scared shitless, every one. Now - minus bluff -
Say it, Jack. Say it till you hear it click.
Go on.

JACK

I'm so afraid. I'm so afraid.

VANESSA

There. That's the stuff.

Of course you're scared! You're very ill, you're sick!
How d'you feel now, this moment?

JACK

Pretty dumb.

I blew my chance.

VANESSA

You stupid bloody prick,
You tried to kill yourself.

JACK

God...

VANESSA

Easy, chum.

Just breathe a moment. Breathe. Good. Nice and still.
(A moment. SHE massages his neck.)
Feel better?

JACK

More like battered. Sort of numb.

VANESSA

Well, you've just scaled a very scary hill.
But you're with us now, safe and sound. And cared for.
You can't beat this alone, you know. By will.

JACK

What is "this"?

VANESSA

Nothing anyone's prepared for.

JACK

My life was good! Sure, minor stress and strife...
I still can't fathom what I got so scared for.
Or why now.

VANESSA

What were you up there, in life?

JACK

"In life"?

VANESSA

Sorry.

JACK

It's not as if I'm dead.

VANESSA

Of course not.

JACK

But why fear? Why now?

VANESSA

That's why. What's terror but our daily bread?
This is The Age Of Fear.

(PROJECTED SIGN APPEARS: "THE AGE OF FEAR.")

No, really, think.

We've weapons under every other bed.

Fear. Fear is why this country's on the blink.

(FAST, PROJECTED IMAGES MATCH HER WORDS:)

Bollards and border fences, safety caps,
Daily surveillance, cities on the brink...

Why else Purell dispensed from public taps?

Why relaxation classes, paranoid cults,

Phone alerts, trigger warnings, malware traps?

Why "comfort food"? "Safe spaces"? Grown adults
Buying cars that look like tanks? You're still in doubt?
Forget the symptoms. Check out fear's results.

*(SFX: DISTANT CLAMOR as LIGHTS CHANGE. JACK looks into
the audience, at us.)*

JACK

Three looking-glasses clear and open out
As if they were a window on a scene - a
Panorama Bosch's brain might sprout.

I see a vast and blistering bright arena
Where flailing figures wash from wall to wall,
All howling, waving something like subpoenas

At bureaucratic grilles around the hall.
A scrumming, massive, manic spinning-jenny,
The End Of Days depicted as a brawl.

VANESSA

Our waiting room.

JACK

That mob?

VANESSA

And just like any,
They're scared. And, since they're fearful, uncontrolled.

JACK

I did not know fear had undone so many.

VANESSA

It's grown since landing in the Mayflower's hold.

(SFX: CLAMOR FADES OUT, LIGHTS RETURN.)

JACK

Look, maybe this was, I don't know, depression...

VANESSA

Depression's fear. Worst kind, if truth be told.

JACK

...or anger?

VANESSA

Also fear.

JACK

Self-aggression...

Fear.

VANESSA

JACK
Is anything not fear?

VANESSA
Not really, no.
Most any human feeling. Hence this session.

JACK
What is fear?

VANESSA
Our best friend.

(PROJECTION: "FEAR IS OUR FRIEND.")

JACK
Our "friend"? How so?

VANESSA
It gives us strength to fight when dangers press.
It's our Darwinian, inner G.I. Joe.

The problem is, fears multiply, possess
Their hapless host.

JACK
But shouldn't they decline
Once danger's past?

VANESSA
Yes. Why don't fears grow less?
Well, what runs fear?
(JACK raises his hand like a student.)
Jack?

JACK
Fear?

VANESSA
I knew you'd shine.
That's fear's big secret: fear, like us, fears death.
(PROJECTION: "FEAR FEARS DEATH.")
Fear needs you scared to propagate its line -

(PROJECTION: "FEAR MUST PROPAGATE.")

VANESSA (CONT'D)
And needs to keep you scared. Like crystal meth
It hops you up, it gives you needling shoves,
Feeds you adrenaline, speeds up your breath,

It stimulates you, then tears off the gloves
And screws you, once it's got you in the sack.
You see, fear's symptoms are the same as love's.

(PROJECTION: "FEAR = LOVE.")

So. Up for treatment? Shall we take a whack?

JACK

Your "treatment" being...?

VANESSA

Let's say we feed your fear.

JACK

With - Beta blockers, acid, Ambien, smack?

VANESSA

Nope. It's abandon dope -

VANESSA & JACK

...all ye who enter here.

VANESSA

And what is yours? Your utmost, deepest dread?

JACK

I don't know. Death?

VANESSA

Excuse me while I sneer

But where might jumping off a bridge have led?

JACK

Death.

VANESSA

Yes. And very nasty, all that kelp.

What is it, Jack? Worst nightmare, A to zed.

You fool, I'm a phobician. I can help.

JACK

Let's say you found it. Loosely, in your version,
How would you treat my personal phobic yelp?

VANESSA

You'd expiate your fear through full immersion.

(PROJECTION: "THE TREATMENT: FULL IMMERSION.")

JACK

Why am I thinking Dante?

VANESSA

As you should.

JACK

"Inferno"-?

VANESSA

Well, a similar excursion.

The downward journey past the darkling wood.

JACK

Sounds fun.

VANESSA

It's not a cakewalk, I'm afraid.

JACK

Phobician, cure thyself.

VANESSA

Some humor. Good.

JACK

What do you want?

VANESSA

To help you. To lend aid.

JACK

Why?

VANESSA

It's our purpose, treating folks who choke.

JACK

You must want something.

VANESSA

Fine. Call it a trade.

We help you out, you let us pry and poke.

Just sign that sheet and you can move on in.

JACK

And what's the fee?

VANESSA

Your soul. That was a joke.

JACK

Was it?

VANESSA

Look, Jack, we're not some dingy bin.
All right, yes, fine, we drain your bank account
And toss you in a pit. We're thieves, you win!

Who cares if there's a cost? Or the amount?
And I'd be here to manage your condition.
You need some phobic wisdom? I'm your fount!

Just sign.

*(SHE proffers a PEN. JACK reaches for it just as ACTOR 2
ENTERS as DR. NEIL. British as well.)*

ACTOR 2/DR. NEIL

Is this our latest acquisition?
A pleasure, sir, a treat. I'm Dr. Neil.
Has he signed on?

VANESSA

We had just broached admission.

ACTOR 2/DR. NEIL

Oh, trust me, you'll commit. Now here's the deal.
I know you want some magic-bullet cure,
A quick vaccine, some speedy way to heal...

Well, give it UP! Just read my brief brochure,
(PRODUCES a PAMPHLET and thrusts it in Jack's hand.)
"THERE'S NO ESCAPE FROM FEAR!" You do see why?
No? Follow me, the logic's very pure.

You have your aviophobes, who're scared to fly.
Ablutophobes, who're terrorized by soap.
You've Chicken Littles who are freaked by sky!

Ophthalmophobes don't like being stared at, nope!
While on the other hand your optophobes
Fear that they're staring; you've those who cannot cope

With garments, fearing all suits, clothes or robes,
And dishabiliophobes, who won't undress;
Cerebrophobes, who think cerebral lobes

May bleed from thinking. Testophobes dread tests.
And then there's ithyphallophobia,
The fear of penises. I do not jest.

In short, our fears are copious, with phobias
For every entity! Endless anxieties
Weaving a seamless phobic Mobius.

Forget your feeble Yankee apple-pieties.
If thing for thing and form for form, our fears
Reflect the universe in its varieties,

If fear's world holds what ours does, then it's clear
The two are one, identical, ingrained.
Why? Because fear, just like the atmosphere

(PROJECTION: "FEAR IS NECESSARY.")

We breathe, is necessary. Pre-ordained!
The quid pro quo! The "X" in all ex-istence!

JACK

There's no way out?

ACTOR 2/DR. NEIL

Alas, you find me pained
But - no. What you'll find futile is resistance.

JACK

So...?

VANESSA

Thank you, Dr. Neil.

ACTOR 2/DR. NEIL

Was that enlightening?

VANESSA

Very.

ACTOR 2/DR. NEIL

I hope you'll pardon my insistence,
But do sign on. Ta, ta!

(ACTOR 2/DR. NEIL EXITS.)

JACK

Well, that was frightening.
So if not cure, you offer...?

VANESSA

Expert care.

JACK

That makes it sound as if my nuts need tightening.
Ask him, it's hopeless.

VANESSA

True, full cures are rare.
Clearly the task before us is immense.

JACK
To make me sign.

VANESSA
To make you more aware.

JACK
Of - ?

VANESSA
Fear. Which works like Dante, in a sense.
Those rhymes that form a taut, self-tensing chain...?

JACK
Yeah, look, Dante aside - and no offense -
But this one sheet is it?

VANESSA
As I explained.

JACK
How long's the course, how long am I confined?

VANESSA
You're not confined.

JACK
What, then?

VANESSA
We ascertain
What's best for you and then you get assigned.

JACK
To what?

VANESSA
Your proper spot. Whatever ward
Attends to other phobes of your own kind.

JACK
You slot me in somewhere and I get stored.

VANESSA
(underneath, as he pushes on)
(Not stored...)

JACK
Who runs this Bedlam, who're the Board, the owners?

VANESSA
We're not some dingy madhouse, Jack. Good Lord!

JACK

I'm asking you.

VANESSA

We've corporations, donors,
Interested folks who help us make our nut.

JACK

Like military folks? Those guys have boners
For fear. The C.I.A., they make the cut?

VANESSA

Jack, this is fear -

JACK

Who says how long's my stay?
Do I decide how long my cell door's shut?

VANESSA

Wait a sec... "Jack"! Of course! Why didn't you say?
You're Jack! The poet! *Nine Songs, Alas Alack,*
"The Wind-Up Lark"?

JACK

Just cut the shit, okay?

'Cuz I say you're a goddamn fucking quack
And this is House of Games! The triple con!
Here's me, a perfect mark, all set to crack,

Cue "Dr. Neil," in-house pedantic don.

VANESSA

I'm just -

JACK

You're just this prison's hostess-pimp.
What have you done, you cunt, since minute one

Except manipulate me like some simp
And spout your delphic bullshit?

VANESSA

Please don't shout.

JACK

You're filling up your quota? Here's my crimp:

Go find another asshole you can scout.
Some other sucker you can commandeer.

VANESSA

Jack, listen...

JACK

Motherfucker! I WANT OUT!

VANESSA

You know, your father was a patient here.

(A distinct pause.)

JACK

My father...?

VANESSA

Was our guest.

JACK

No way. My Dad?

VANESSA

He had a spot of bother. Quite severe.

JACK

He was blue-collar carbon steel! Iron-clad!
He once did six rounds with a boxing pro!
And manned a scaffold every day, I'd add.

The man was fearless.

VANESSA

And yet - apropos -
He landed here somehow. D'you want to see him?

JACK

My Dad's been dead for seven years.

VANESSA

I know.

He's down the hall. You game?

JACK

So you'll, what, free him?

From death?

VANESSA

All right, well fine then. Take a pass.
(As JACK hesitates:)
Were you two close?

JACK

I hoped someday I'd be him.

VANESSA

So visit. Take a test drive. Sample class...?

(JACK considers that a moment.)

JACK

All right.

VANESSA

Who knows. You might decide to stay.

JACK

She swivels out through a quicksilver glass.

Close at her heels I meet, in tight relay,
Myself in multiple. The mirror-door
Shuffles my face, then casts the deck away.

(LOCATION CHANGE.)

We're in a wide and barren, doorless corridor,
At its dead start - or else at its dead end...
Ahead of us the sterile white walls and floor

Arc subtly left. The sinister blind bend
Conceals what lies around the circling curve.
The floor, what's more, is tilted...

VANESSA

We descend

Around a narrowing vortex, you'll observe -
Digging with each floor deeper in fear's quarry.
Shall we?

JACK

Why the blocked view? That artful swerve?

VANESSA

To frighten you.

JACK

Is that...?

VANESSA

Obligatory.

We call this spiral passageway "The Plath,"
After a poet... Well, you know Sylvia's story.

Like her, this spins through trepidation, wrath,
Stress, terror, panic, every phobic breed.

JACK

The lowest one being the worst?

VANESSA

You do the math.

JACK

Are there nine rings?

VANESSA

As many as you need.

The tilted floor's specifically designed
So gravity itself will help to speed

Your way, however much you're "dis-inclined."

(JACK gives a silent "ha-ha" of appreciation.)

The blocked view is the horror-film aesthetic:
Classically, some poor innocent will find

Him or herself increasingly frenetic
Wandering the corridors of some creepy house.
Why? They can't see ahead while pure magnetic

Fear draws them on. Suddenly - the lights douse!
(LIGHTS OUT.)

Or flicker...

(LIGHTS COME BACK AND FLICKER.)

And then BOO! Ghost in a sheet,
Psychotic killer, maybe...just a mouse.

(A MOUSE seems to scamper past them.)

What's unexpected makes a tastier treat.
Your Dad's in here.

JACK

The downward-peeling hill
Has brought us to a church-like door. We meet,

(LOCATION CHANGE. CHURCH-LIKE LIGHTING.)

The moment that we cross the oaken sill,
A silence grave as Renaissance polyphony.
From a high dome, ornate glass lanterns spill

Reds, golds and azures dyed by Tiffany...

VANESSA

This is it.

JACK

Got a nickname for this crypt?

VANESSA

It's called "The Crypt." And this...

(Hands him something from her lab coat pocket.)
...is an "Epiphany."

JACK
A metal die.

VANESSA
With - ?

JACK
(examining the die more closely)
Dad's name. Some weird script.
Yeah, this is him. The heft of it, the style,
The quiet reserve. And hey, you said he "flipped."

(Tosses the DIE in the air and catches it.)

VANESSA
Our guests record those for their patient file.
A sort of holographic letter.

JACK
Cool.
This is my Dad?

VANESSA
It will be in a while.
Just breathe on that.

JACK
Then I'll see ghosts? A ghoul?

VANESSA
More or less. Things will alter, I should add.

JACK
What things?

VANESSA
Safe home, Jack.

JACK
You don't stay?

VANESSA
(ind. what's in his hand)
The tool's
Right there.

JACK
Just breathe, huh. This will work?

VANESSA
Iron-clad.
Corraggio, Jack.

JACK
Yeah. Grazie.
(VANESSA EXITS.)

Hurry back!

(JACK breathes on the die. SFX: AN AMPLIFIED,
ECHOING BREATH. Then, STRANGE DISTANT RUMBLINGS and
ROARINGS. LIGHTS ROIL. SPACE GROANS. NOISES GROW.
LIGHTS get STRANGER. Then ACTOR 2/FATHER ENTERS in a
hospital gown/prison garb.)

ACTOR 2/FATHER
Up there in life, my name was Walter.

JACK

Dad...! Dad!

ACTOR 2/FATHER
It's quite a joint, huh. So. How are you, Jack?
It is you out there somewhere, listenin', right?

JACK

How did you...?

ACTOR 2/FATHER
Maybe you got outta whack -
You had a scare, you - as they say - took fright,
Checked in for treatment.

JACK

But, Dad, how'd you know...?

ACTOR 2/FATHER
Anyway, glad to know you seen the light.
I hope they're helping out, you're not too low,
Too beat.

JACK

How did you know I'd be afraid?

ACTOR 2/FATHER
I'm prob'ly dead and buried long ago...
Maybe I oughta read this speech I made.
Or I could talk.

JACK

Talk. Please.

ACTOR 2/FATHER
Maybe come clean,
Instead of, like I did for years, evade.

"Aw, fear? What's that?" You know my old routine,
Being biggest, ballsiest bastard on the block.
That bluster? That was, to be blunt, a sheen.

My buddies knew? I'd be a laughingstock.
But it was always there. The fear. Growin' up
I was scared! Putty tryin' to look like rock.

I had to gear myself just showin' up
For school. Was only for the sports I stayed.
The team, though, they didn't see me throwin' up

Behind the stands, diarrhea from bein' afraid.
Then - prove I'm not a pussy - I enlist.
First up for muster, first out on parade,

Just like in bar fights first out with the fists.
Medals from battle, champ in the brigade.
The whole John Wayne act - all 'cuz I was pissed,

And I was pissed because I was afraid.
I meet your Mom. Man, Jeanie scared me stiff.
I come home, get a job, sure, nicely paid -

But work up on the iron? Hang off that cliff?
Then, you arrive and geez was I afraid.
If this happens, if this, everything's "if."

What if you choke on shit your Mom crocheted?
A hundred times a night I'd check your bed.
You'd take your bike to ride to the arcade?

ACTOR 2/FATHER

I'd follow in the car. You could be dead,
Some drunk don't pull up in the intersection.
Cap pistols, B.B. guns? All D for dread.

And every time you sniffed? Acute infection.
You know I once filed down your hockey blades?

JACK

You're kidding, right?

ACTOR 2/FATHER

All this, without detection.

Enjoy yourself! Remember my tirade?
Get out, play ball, go make some pals! Have fun!
But while I'm sayin' those things? I was afraid.

So - off to college, big success you won.
Me, I just kept on playin' my macho game.
I was so proud of you. But listen, son:

Do not be me.

JACK

No...

ACTOR 2/FATHER

Do not be the same

As me.

JACK

I wanted to be you...

ACTOR 2/FATHER

Chrissake!

Dja catch this shit from me? Am I to blame?

(A pause. Lots of overlap in the following:)

JACK

You used to tell a story...

ACTOR 2/FATHER

Remember my old story...?

JACK

About a lake.

ACTOR 2/FATHER

The cold dark lake?

JACK

Some guy was there...

ACTOR 2/FATHER

Some guy's there showin' off? Impress his girl?

"Toss in your ring! I'll fetch it!"

JACK

So she takes

ACTOR 2/FATHER

So she takes

It off and tosses it.

JACK

"That's my good pearl."

ACTOR 2/FATHER

"That's my good pearl,"

She says.

JACK

The guy dives in.

ACTOR 2/FATHER
The guy dives in and disappears.
He's under...

JACK
Three whole minutes.

ACTOR 2/FATHER
Three whole minutes. Well, the girl...?

JACK
...is shitting bricks.

ACTOR 2/FATHER
...is shitting bricks.

JACK
But finally...

ACTOR 2/FATHER
Finally, up he rears.

JACK
Blood.

ACTOR 2/FATHER
Blood streaming from his eyes, ears, nose, the works.
Busted some vessels, he can't even hear.

JACK
What didn't they know?

ACTOR 2/FATHER
What those two didn't know, the stupid jerks -

JACK
The lake was bottomless.

ACTOR 2/FATHER
That lake was bottomless. It just went down.

JACK
So was it you?

ACTOR 2/FATHER
You see the risks? What lurks
In there?

JACK
Dad, was it you?

ACTOR 2/FATHER
Don't be that clown.

JACK

It was...

ACTOR 2/FATHER

Look, Jack, you're gonna long outlive me.
It's not too late yet, you don't have to drown.

I just... I only hope that you'll forgive me.

JACK

Forgive you? You were great, Dad, you were swell!

ACTOR 2/FATHER

That's all I want to say, just, please, forgive me.

JACK

There's nothing to...

(SFX: A CHIME.)

ACTOR 2/FATHER

That's it, kid. There's the bell.

JACK

No - listen, stay, Dad. Stay.

ACTOR 2/FATHER

I just - I hope
That you're okay and all.

JACK

Stay.

ACTOR 2/FATHER

Son - be well.

JACK

Don't go!

(ACTOR 2/FATHER EXITS. SFX: THAT AMPLIFIED EXHALATION IS
HEARD AGAIN. LIGHTS ROIL and CHANGE BACK.)

(VANESSA ENTERS. An inconspicuous change to THE PLATH
happens during the following exchanges.)

VANESSA

Good visit?

JACK

Yeah. Great. Like a dope
I thought I knew him all those years. Guess not.

VANESSA

Onwards, then.

JACK

Hey...can I?...I need to cope
A second here.

VANESSA

Look, Jack. That was his lot.
It needn't be yours, too.

JACK

Can I please mourn
My father? Or what, I should let him rot?

Forget him? He was tortured like that, torn
For his whole life?

VANESSA

So live yours differently.
You think he'd like to hear that you were born

To live his life again? Jack, please. You're free.
I know how painful this is, how it irks
To find he wasn't what you thought. I'm sorry.

JACK

Okay, well. Anyway. Thanks for the perks.

VANESSA

What do you mean...?

JACK

I'm leaving.

VANESSA

Leaving? No.

JACK

You said a sample test drive, not The Works.

VANESSA

Yes, but the wards are just around the -

JACK

Whoa, whoa, whoa.
This is The Plath.

VANESSA

Of course.

JACK

No no no no no. Where's the door?

VANESSA

Well, this is sudden.

JACK

I feel good! You know?

And what's the difference, now I know the score?
Fear's everywhere, you say, it's all one pit?
Wherever I am, I'm fighting the same war.

VANESSA

It's just, I thought we'd clicked, and found a fit.
We've done the foreplay, gotten into bed,
You get me interested and off you flit?

JACK

I'm only going off of what you said.

VANESSA

We did think you might use a nip and tuck.

JACK

I'm fine now. Look at me. No shakes. Clear head.
But thanks for -

VANESSA

Jack, it's fine! God bless, good luck!
We'll write it off, two world views in collision.
I'd never mock a man for being a schmuck.

JACK

So which way's out?

VANESSA

It's truly your decision.

JACK

I can't just hibernate here in your fridge.

VANESSA

I have to say - not quite what I'd envisioned.
But I have helped you, haven't I? Just a smidge?

JACK

When there's no cure?

VANESSA

You know, we do cure some.

JACK

I want a view!

VANESSA
Steep hills, blue bay, red bridge?

JACK
Funny. Look, which way's out?

VANESSA
Too bad. You come,
We gel... Ah, well. Mine not to reason why.

JACK
Just point me to the door.

VANESSA
I'm sort of numb -

JACK
God damn it, where's the exit?

(A DOOR appears.)

VANESSA
There. So fly.
Do you see guards, barbed wire, machine guns blazing?
There's no one holding you. So go! Goodbye!

(ACTOR 2 ENTERS as a SATISFIED PATIENT, in sporty
clothes, with a SUITCASE and a GOLF BAG.)

ACTOR 2/SATISFIED PATIENT
O man o man o man, was that a rush, was that amazing?
Thanks, Doc!

VANESSA
Now don't tell me you're off already?

ACTOR 2/SATISFIED PATIENT
You fixed me one-two-three! Can't have me lazing
Around this joint!

VANESSA
So you feel strong, feel steady?

ACTOR 2/SATISFIED PATIENT
Euphoric!

VANESSA
Good.

ACTOR 2/SATISFIED PATIENT
Who's this, a new addition?
Buckle your seat belts, pal. This place is heady!

Phantasmagoric! And her? She's a magician!
I walked in here I'm pissing in my pants.
Now check it out: my fear is in remission!

VANESSA

Give us a kiss.

(VANESSA and ACTOR 2 kiss.)

ACTOR 2/SATISFIED PATIENT
Howbout it, one last dance?

(VANESSA and ACTOR 2 kick up their heels briefly.)
S'long, Doc! FORE!

(ACTOR 2/SATISFIED PATIENT EXITS.)

JACK

Happy customer.

VANESSA

We try.

Oh, right. You're leaving. Well, we had our chance.

JACK

I do apologize.

(SHE takes out her phone and idly checks messages:)

VANESSA

You're sorry? Why?

JACK

For pulling out. Making the sudden switch.

VANESSA

It's no surprise, I cannot tell a lie.

JACK

And calling you a quack and - you know - bitch.

VANESSA

Please. I've been called things till my nails
have curled.

JACK

That's...

JACK & VANESSA

(together)
"Hair."

JACK

...I think.

VANESSA

I like you. That's what's rich.

JACK

"Think what you'd miss," you said. I miss the world.
Sunshine. A bagel shmear. My lucky hat.

I miss my local bagpipe player, who skirled

"Amazing Grace" all night.

VANESSA

If you miss that...

JACK

There's also, well, there's Bebe.

VANESSA

"Bebe..."

JACK

Bee.

VANESSA

Aren't you the cagey bastard. Standing pat

On aces! You've a girlfriend. Yes, I see.
Small wonder I encountered such resistance.
Well, wonderful. A girl? You're fancy-free!

JACK

Not quite. Bee is the ex in my ex-istence.

VANESSA

She left you? When you fell into a slough?

JACK

No. I was why we never went the distance.

VANESSA

So what's she like?

JACK

Bee? Spun from sunshine.

VANESSA

Wow.

JACK

She's an approver. Greets all things with cheer.
A human koan for the here-and-now.

VANESSA

Yet you two somehow never found fifth gear?

JACK

Fifth would be low for Bee. She being The Best.
But men are...

VANESSA
Fools.

JACK

...fools. And I moved out here.

VANESSA
(holds out a hand to shake)
So long, Jack. Lovely chat. You give good guest.

JACK

Christ, I can hardly think. My brain is fried.

VANESSA
Would you mind if we tried a little test?

Stand there. Just stand there. Then you can decide.
Pretend I'm Bee. Out on a friendly visit.

(As BEBE, throwing her arms around his neck:)
Jack! God! I was scared stiff! Thought you'd died

Or something! Hey, are you all right? What is it?
You've been okay and everything? Life's good?
I love this city, wow, is it exquisite?

Have you been writing - or exploring? We should!
The Golden Gate! Jack, could we go together?
And Alcatraz, Fisherman's Wharf, Mt. Hood

(That's somewhere else), but don't you love the weather?
Well, sure, the fog and everything, the chill.
Have you lost weight here? God, you're like a feather.

JACK

Stop.

VANESSA
Jack, you don't look well. Have you been ill?

JACK

STOP.

VANESSA
(herself again)
Would you tell her? Fear, The Bridge, us two?

JACK

She would be...

VANESSA
Devastated?

JACK
Something.

VANESSA
Still -

You'd have to, right? You're honest, she's true blue,
You couldn't hide it. You going round the bend.

JACK
I'd be ashamed.

VANESSA
Jack, not to be a shrew,
But "if not now" - etcetera. You must mend.
It's dangerous to leave before you're clear!

JACK
But I feel great.

VANESSA
Because you're here, my friend.
Protected. You recall what happened.

JACK
Fear.

VANESSA
Which will return. You'll go another round
Then you'll return.

JACK
You mean -

VANESSA
To us, to here,
Unless you're in the Bay, already drowned.
But, hey. You've heard my spiel. And I've got patients...

JACK
I'll do it.

VANESSA
What...

JACK
Your phobic ultra-sound.
I'll run The Plath, observe all regulations...

VANESSA
You want the treatment.

JACK
Yes.

VANESSA
Was that a - ?

JACK
Yes.

VANESSA
Yes?

JACK
YES!
(*HE signs. SHE celebrates with a little "Yaaay."*)
These...wards, though...

VANESSA
Well, they're none of them vacations.
So. Onwards? Shall we find you yours?

JACK
I guess.

VANESSA
Brilliant. And here's Ward One!

(*SIGN: "WARD ONE."*)

JACK
What?

VANESSA
Just down there.

JACK
Already?!

VANESSA
Too late, Jack. You've acquiesced.

(*VANESSA holds up the signed paper as proof.*)

JACK
Is number One my ward? My, you know, lair?

VANESSA
Your "lair"?

JACK
Where I'm assigned?

VANESSA
Jack, your mistake
Is you won't see, in your absurd despair,
Fear's beauty.

(PROJECTION: "FEAR IS BEAUTIFUL.")

What's that maxim... Is it Blake?
The grain of sand showing time without frontier?
Fear does that. Strips away the mere, the fake.

(RIPPLING BLUE-GREEN LIGHT, as if they're before a
vast fish tank between us and them.)

Take this aquarium. Please. Indulge me. Peer
Beyond that glass and tell me what you see.

JACK
(reluctant)
Water.

VANESSA
Yes. And?

JACK
Pacific atmosphere.
Pink sand. Some angelfish. A waving lea
Of jade-green grass where guppies graze like deer.

VANESSA
In other words, what life's supposed to be:
A yuppie paradise, peaceful as the Buddha.
Bit dull, though, right?

JACK
Well...

VANESSA
Now what do you see?

(THE LIGHT in the "tank" BEGINS TO CHANGE.)

JACK
There's something... Wait. Is that...?

VANESSA
A barracuda.
A gang of them, in fact.

(THE WATERY LIGHT CHURNS, TURNING BLOOD-RED.)

JACK
(*watching a slaughter, fascinated*)
Oh, God, no! Yecch. YECCH!

VANESSA
Yes, terror even in our toy Bermuda.

JACK
(*calling to the fish*)
Watch out!
(VANESSA points a REMOTE. AQUARIUM LIGHT FREEZES.)
Wait. How did you...?

VANESSA
(*showing him the REMOTE*)
It's at my beck.
3-D TV. We call that "Phobia School."
"Fish"? "School"?

JACK
Yeah, got it, got it.

VANESSA
And - ?

JACK
WOW! Not the tech,
The drama. Boy, you had me!

VANESSA
April Fool.

JACK
The blitz attack? The massacre? Was chilling!

VANESSA
And could you not watch?

JACK
No!

VANESSA
See, that's the rule.

JACK
I had to.

VANESSA
Even though you were unwilling!
That's fear's - and beauty's - energizing vim.
A slasher flick is always pretty thrilling.

JACK
No fun for angelfish.

VANESSA
They're fake! They'll swim
Again another day! But what of you?
Don't you feel braced? On fire, in every limb?

JACK
In spite of all the gore, I really do.

VANESSA
Great. Now Ward One -

JACK
Wait wait wait wait.

VANESSA
No sweat.
Fear's beauty.

JACK
Right.

VANESSA
Keep that in mental view.

*(SUDDEN LOCATION CHANGE. LIGHTS CHANGE TO FOREST PATTERN.
SFX: JUNGLE SOUNDS, BIRD CALLS, ETC.)*

JACK
Ward One's like some Jurassic jungle set.
Your classic spooky wood. A bubbling trench.
Thick foliage. Every blade of shade a threat.

Here, something slithers off. Some flowers unclench.
Somewhere nearby...

(SFX: LION ROAR.)

...a large cat comes awake.

VANESSA
(inhales deeply)
God, that aroma.

JACK
Oh, you mean that stench?
It's fake, right?

VANESSA
What.

JACK
The bush. The smell. That snake.

VANESSA
I'd say they're all as real as they appear.

JACK
Which means?

VANESSA
Looks real to me.

JACK
Give me a break...

VANESSA
Just ask our patients. They wear hazmat gear.

(ACTOR 2 ENTERS covered head-to-foot in NETTING, wearing a PITH HELMET and carrying a SPEAR-GUN. Jumpy, nervous, the PATIENT dances about trying not to touch or step on things, going "EUGH. OGH. FEH! EEEUUUWWW!")

Example A. We call this ward "Excursion,"
Since Nature is the focus of the fear.

The patients here are leery, dread submersion
In a corporeal world they think "unclean" -
Ward One being fear's most basic form: Aversion.

(PROJECTION: "FEAR'S FIRST STAGE: AVERSION.")

JACK
(noticing something disgusting near him)
What's that?

VANESSA
They want a world that's pure. Pristine.
No dirt, no germs, no slime, nothing with claws.
Although - check out our friend's protective screen.

VANESSA (CONT'D)
Go on.

(JACK examines the Patient's netting. The PATIENT is too wrapped up in keeping watch to notice.)

JACK
What is that...?

VANESSA
Well, it isn't gauze.

JACK
(Realizing:)
A spider web...?

(ACTOR 2/NETTED PATIENT: "AAAAHHHHH!")

VANESSA

Black widows. Quite a glut.

(ACTOR 2/NETTED PATIENT EXITS going "AAAAHHHHH!")

Too scared to notice all those snapping jaws.

(ACTOR 2/NETTED PATIENT is heard offstage: "AAAAHHHHH!")

JACK

Your point?

VANESSA

You've killer microbes in your gut.

JACK

Your point?

VANESSA

Life's nasty! Spiders always loom!

It's nature's law!

JACK

Yeah, but... But. But.

VANESSA

But what?

JACK

Danger.

VANESSA

An ancient general once faced doom.

His troops were lost, no chance they could survive.

He said to them, to lift them from their gloom:

"So what's the plan, boys? Bury ourselves alive?"

JACK

Xenophon.

VANESSA

He said that when up Shit's Creek!

JACK

Xenophon.

VANESSA

Who got home live and thrive.

JACK

No doubt you know that line in ancient Greek?

VANESSA
(quoting the Greek)
Apothanou...

JACK
Enough!

VANESSA
Recall that scrap
Of Xenophon next time you're feeling weak.
(CHANGE BACK to The Plath.)
What. What's this look?

JACK
Who ARE you?

VANESSA

No...

JACK
What app
Can you be found on? So I can subscribe.
Who ARE you?

VANESSA
No one.

JACK
C'mon, it's not a trap!

Between us. Where in hell did you imbibe
All this?! Not just the phobia crap. The flair.
'Cuz you're not just astute, girl. You don't jibe.

Where are you from? What state, what city, where?
Fine. Are you single? Married? Divorced? Trans? Gay?

VANESSA
I'm not your business, Jack. Okay?

JACK

That's fair.

(British accent:)
It's just you've such a maaaahvelous display.

VANESSA
Stop this right now!

JACK
Okay, I'm done. - A "nutter."
Is that the British term?

VANESSA

What did you say?

JACK

You're mad! With fear your daily bread and butter?
The opiate of choice that bangs your gong?
A nice fat phobia, doesn't your heart just flutter?

VANESSA

Yes, that's what happens, obviously.

JACK

What's wrong?

VANESSA

Oh, I love fear. Adore the heebie-jeebies.
You know I've other patients. I've a throng.

Men unlike you who aren't accorded freebies.
Who don't resist strong women or their ways,
And who don't pout about their precious Bebe's,

Men who don't moan and throw around cliché's
Like "Why should I live?"...

JACK

(Clich-?)

VANESSA

...to beat the band.

JACK

Look, you've been Ariadne in this maze.

VANESSA

Then act like it! You ought to grab my hand
And thank me. "Phobia crap?" Oh, yes, I know it.
I gleaned each detail of the death you planned

Because I've read your soul. I am your poet
And I can make you rhyme again - in here.

(*Taps her head.*)

If you don't like our treatment, please, forgo it.

JACK

Look I didn't mean -

VANESSA

I ask you what you fear,
You can't discern it staring you in the eyes.
I offer years of expertise. You jeer.

You want to know how good I am? How wise?
You bought a Smith & Wesson .38.
Was that the weapon? Did I guess your size?

I can release you. Want the Golden Gate?
We'll drop you off. Please. You don't need our "zoo."

JACK

No, let's go on.

VANESSA

Though dangers might await?

JACK

Yeah, fine.

VANESSA

In spite of an obstructed view?

JACK

Even so.

VANESSA

Even though you'll have to be assigned?

JACK

I feel as if I've been assigned - to you.

VANESSA

Yes, it's called transference. Rid it from your mind.
(VANESSA suddenly cups his face in her hands in
silence, looking in his eyes a long moment.)
Jack...

JACK

What.

VANESSA

I'm saying this of my own free will.
This clinic...

JACK

WHAT.

VANESSA

The way that it's designed -
No listen, please. I've tried, used all my skill...

(SHE is interrupted by:)

ACTOR 2/DR. NEIL'S VOICE

VANESSA, TO MY OFFICE, PLEASE.

VANESSA, TO MY OFFICE, PLEASE.

JACK

What's that?

Do you...?

VANESSA

It's nothing. Just a little drill.
I'll deal with it.

JACK

So you don't have to scat?

VANESSA

I said I'll deal with it.

JACK

But you were saying...?

VANESSA

Oh. Nothing. Just a minor caveat...

JACK

I'm sorry for the private questions. Flaying
Your personal life.

VANESSA

(cutting off further discussion)

Will you just stop. It's fine.
Fuck off.

JACK

As if, till then, we'd just been playing,

Some chilly mercury spills down my spine
As, mutely and at odds now, we decamp
To trace The Plath's unspooling serpentine:

The soul-free, dead-white, guggenheiming ramp
That feeds us down its spinning, narrowing chute...

VANESSA

Come on.

(SIGN APPEARS: "WARD TWO." JACK points to it.)

JACK

Ward Two.

VANESSA

We'll skip that.

JACK

Why?

VANESSA

It's damp,

It's dark...

JACK

No, really. Why?

VANESSA

Hey. I'm "astute."

I work here, I should know your "proper spot."
Although I could be lying.

JACK

C'mon, don't get cute -

VANESSA

Look, Jack. I'm just your guide, not a garotte.

JACK

And you've been wonderful. Sublime. Ideal.
You give me hope I'll cut this Gordian knot.

VANESSA

Cliché!

JACK

All right, all right. It's just - I feel
Better! No, no, I swear! Just off your glow.
Don't look so dubious! 'Cuz here's the reveal:

I know the answer.

VANESSA

To?

JACK

Your test. I know
My nightmare. Deepest fear from way, way back.

VANESSA

Try me.

JACK

You sparked it with that great bon mô

Of Xenophon. What puts me on the rack
Is this: being buried alive.

VANESSA

Well, gosh.

JACK

No, wait.

I'm in some desert, head inside a sack,

A ditch right here, I'm nailed inside a crate,
They drop it in, I hear dirt on the casket,
Inside, I scream, I choke, but it's too late...

You still look doubtful.

VANESSA

I've a question.

JACK

Ask it.

VANESSA

Who does this? Buries you?

JACK

Foreigners...

VANESSA

Who, which,

What race?

JACK

Who cares what race! Hey, I'm a basket
Case here describing this!

VANESSA

Right. Just to switch
Perspective for a moment: what're the odds?
I mean, for real? The sack, the crate, the ditch.

Do you seek daily contact with jihads?
What are the chances, Jack, that that's your fate?

JACK

Small. But it's all...

VANESSA

"...in the hands of the gods"?

Bosh.

JACK

Hey, why are you being like this?

VANESSA

Well, mate,

I gave you one small test. You think you passed?
NO. Graded off of ten, I'd say you rate

A two. And here's Ward Two! You might be classed
With them! You want this ward?

JACK

(Lis...)

VANESSA

No, enter! Please!

(LOCATION CHANGE. BLEAK LIGHT.)

JACK

A dismal room with patients tightly massed.

Bone-thin, ill-clad, they could be refugees
Trudging within the worn-out grooves that steer
Them in a circle. Sensing us, they freeze.

VANESSA

Anxiety. Fear's next, and deeper, tier.

(PROJECTION: "FEAR'S SECOND LEVEL: ANXIETY.")

(ACTOR 2/NAZIR RUSHES IN. Ill-fitting suit, heavy
shoes, spidering on two black canes.)

ACTOR 2/NAZIR

(accent)

Get out of here! Get out! I kill you, boy!

(Threatening JACK with his cane.)

I smash your bones! I rape you!

VANESSA

Stop, Nazir!

ACTOR 2/NAZIR

Or, are you one of us? You're hoi polloi,
You're stateless, escapee, you're homeless?

JACK

No.

ACTOR 2/NAZIR

So you're born where? Tibet? Sudan? Hanoi?
You're victim of pogrom? Guantanamo?

VANESSA

Nazir...

ACTOR 2/NAZIR

Your house is bulldozed, fields are burned,
Your parents killed?

JACK
No.

ACTOR 2/NAZIR
Then what what WHAT DO YOU KNOW?

(HE roars savagely right in JACK's face, and EXITS.)

(LOCATION CHANGE slowly back to The Plath during:)

VANESSA
Some fears are justified. His were hard-earned.
When he was ten, some soldiers armed with guns
And clubs arrived in trucks one day. They turned

His village out, lined people in the sun.
The men they killed. The womenfolk they took.
Nazir they raped for days and then for fun

Broke all his bones. For laughs. To see his look.
I'm sure "Why live?" is always on his lips.

JACK
I'm shaking.

VANESSA
Yes, well, that's his job.

JACK
His job?

VANESSA
You're shook.
It worked.

JACK
So he does - what, hands out guilt trips?

VANESSA
Reminds us billions live their lives in terror.

JACK
Well, I was born wrong! My fear's just a blip,
My fear's mere bourgeois self-indulgent error!

VANESSA
So he was rude.

JACK
He caught me off my guard!
Should I have wept?

VANESSA
Perhaps.

JACK
Would that be fairer?

VANESSA
You picked that ward.

JACK
I think you forced the card.

VANESSA
That man's a victim, not a pamphleteer.
Will you at least admit his case is hard?

You miss a bagpipe player, your daily shmear.
Nazir lacks everything. Does that suffice?
No, he's too off-putting? Too strange, too queer?

JACK
That man was going to hit me!

VANESSA
Shock's the price
Of treatment here, my friend.

JACK
He seemed insane!
Is that a reason I might not "make nice"?

VANESSA
I'm sorry you're distressed, and for your pain.
But xenophobia's every terror's model.

(PROJECTION: "XENOPHOBIA IS THE MODEL FOR ALL
FEARS.")

JACK
I'm not a xenophobe!

VANESSA
Xenophobes complain
They're threatened by what's "strange" then gaily
swaddle
Their fear in "reasons."

JACK
Please. At least admit -

VANESSA
It's not my job to spare you or to coddle.

You feel, what, violated? Heaped with shit?
Then maybe you can glean some small percent
Of that man's fear and fathom his remit -

Which is to spread his fear, inflict what's pent
Inside him. That's what fearful people do,
And nations. They distribute fear, foment.

What's history but the sound of their mad spew?
Got it?

JACK

Got it.

(A SIGN: "WARD FIVE.")

VANESSA

Ward Five. Quite different sorts.

JACK

Oh, yeah? Not crazies?

VANESSA

Would I lie to you?

(HE hesitates; SHE motions for him to enter.)

JACK

Beyond the door, as in some tropic ports...

(LOCATION CHANGE. SOFT LIGHTS and LUAU MUSIC.)

...tranquility! Pure calm, with Club Med glitz!
Stout men in palm-tree shirts and lime-green shorts,

Large dames in pastel polyester knits,
All slurping frappes, they loll in pillowed chairs -
While a TV screen advertising Schlitz

Illuminates the inmates' vacant stares.

VANESSA

We call this ward "Alarm Clock."

JACK

Yeah, why so?

(SFX: SUDDEN BELL, SIREN, FLASHING LIGHTS. Stops.)
The FUCK was THAT?!

VANESSA

ALARM CLOCK. That impairs
Their catatonia. Jolted you, right?

JACK

No.

(*SHE snaps her fingers. BELL, SIREN, LIGHTS AGAIN.*)
STOP THAT, please.

(*SHE snaps her fingers. BELLS, SIRENS, LIGHTS STOP.*)

VANESSA

How's your fear?

JACK

Right now? Enhanced.

VANESSA

These patients balk at change. Time's ebb and flow.

(*PROJECTION: "FEAR OF CHANGE = INERTIA."*)

So they retreat into this waking trance
Until we - [*About to snap her fingers again.*]

JACK

Don't. You know, though...

VANESSA

What.

JACK

It's strange.

VANESSA

You like this ward? These passive human plants?

JACK

No. I got offered that.

VANESSA

What.

JACK

Offered change.

Up on the Bridge there was this homeless guy...

(*ACTOR 2/NAN ENTERS in a muu-muu and fuzzy slippers,
slurping the straw of a FRAPPE as if in a trance.*)

ACTOR 2/NAN

Is something different now? Did something change?

VANESSA

No, I don't think so, Nan.

ACTOR 2/NAN

That's good. Goodbye.

(NAN turns to go.)

VANESSA

Nan, this man wants to know your tale. He pled
To hear it.

ACTOR 2/NAN

No...

VANESSA

Please, Nan.

ACTOR 2/NAN

No, I'm too shy.

VANESSA

For me? Please, please?

ACTOR 2/NAN

Oh, gosh. Okay, well, Ned -
Ned, that's my husband over there asleep -
One day he - shake him if he looks too dead -

He buys this "smart" phone? Now I like to keep
A land line, just in case there's nuclear war,
Last Judgment, so on. Well, to set the beep's

Impossible, the voice-mail is a chore,
There's no instructions. Honey, I am SCARED,
I say, This thing's catastrophe galore.

Ned says it never needs to be repaired
And tosses out my LAND LINE! Junks our PHONE.
I say, Fine, hon, we'll DIE. Glad you're prepared.

Because if there's a fire, and we're alone...
Well Mr. Wizard says pish pish pooh pooh.
What happens? A THREE-ALARM FIRE. Full-blown

When I wake up to pee. What's Neddy do?
He grabs his "smart" phone and ATTEMPTS to dial.
I shriek, I plead, I pray to Jesus. Voodoo

Would not work. We're barbecue. So we pile
Onto the lawn and watch our whole lives braise.
Then we came here. We love it. It's an isle

Of peace...

(BELLS, LIGHTS, ALARMS, briefly.)

...most times. Oh, gosh. We sip and laze,
we sip and laze...

(ACTOR 2/NAN EXITS, slurping her frappe.)

JACK
Good story. And the point?

VANESSA
The point?

JACK
Change and was justified. To use your phrase. She dreaded

VANESSA
The point is, fear of change is deep embedded.

JACK
Yeah, I can vouch for that...

(INCONSPICUOUS LOCATION CHANGE back to The Plath.)

VANESSA
What.

JACK
Nothing.

VANESSA
Talk!

JACK
Look, this is not at all where you were headed.
Bee wanted to get married.

VANESSA
Did you balk?

JACK
Become Ned?

VANESSA
So, the reason you declined...

JACK
Please don't say fear.

VANESSA
...was fear?

JACK

You're like a hawk!

But yes, I guess it was. Inside my mind,
My conscious mind, I weighed the pro's and cons -
Then passed, as men will do when in that bind...

To be or not to be's enshrined in bronze,
But in the daily, stupid world, To stay
Or not to stay's more like it. Paragons

Like Hamlet, those with working vertebrae,
May ponder life and death. To us poor fools
The really pressing questions that we weigh

Are: do I stay on in this job, this school,
In this relationship? With Bee, some bell
Should have gone off to say Don't be a mule -

And did! So I deserve being here in hell.

VANESSA

Maybe she's free.

JACK

I'm sure she's found some Joe -
Somebody worthy. Not a spineless gel.

I once had guts. Can you believe it?

VANESSA

No.

I'm kidding. Yes, of course I can.

JACK

I flew!

My God, I loved to fly. To see the glow

Of sunrise from the sky?! The world seems new,
New-born at 30,000 feet. Pure joy.
Now? Not for all the silver of Peru.

VANESSA

You want to fly a bit right now?

JACK

Oh, boy,

You're mean.

VANESSA

You wouldn't fly?

JACK

No.

VANESSA

Care to bet?

If you could visit Bee? I'm not being coy.

(PROJECTION: "WARD TEN." SUDDEN LOCATION CHANGE.)

How opportune. This ward's called "Turbo-Jet."

JACK

(looking around and seeing nothing there)

Why so...?

VANESSA

These airplane seats we keep on hand.

(ACTOR 2 dressed as a FLIGHT STEWARD wheels in a pair of PLAIN, NON-AIRPLANE CHAIRS.)

Shall we?

JACK

You mean - sit down?

VANESSA

It's just a set.

JACK

That's true.

(JACK sits. SFX: SNAPPING METAL.)

Hey, what's all this?!

VANESSA

The metal bands?

JACK

(struggling against wrist bonds)

Oh, fuck...!

(STAGEY SPOTLIGHT on them. VANESSA suddenly has a HAND-MIC as if they were on a stage before us on some bizarre TV reality/challenge show.)

VANESSA

Let's have a hand for Jack tonight!

(SFX: CANNED AUDIENCE APPLAUSE. ORGAN FANFARE.)

Jack's volunteered to represent a brand
Of fear I love, my favorite kind of fright:
PANIC!

(SFX: SCARY ORGAN STING. PROJECTION: "FEAR'S NEXT
LEVEL: PANIC.")

APPREHENSION!

(SFX: ANOTHER SCARY ORGAN STING. JACK struggles.)

Note the iconic
Symptoms: Cold sweat. Short breaths. Attempts at flight.
And hey! He's on a flight! Is that ironic?

(SFX: CANNED LAUGHTER.)

Fleeing's futile, though. 'Cuz this fear's in his head.

(SIGN: "PANIC = FEAR IN YOUR HEAD." ORGAN STING.)

JACK

Point made. Let's go.

VANESSA

That's why it's so demonic.
He's "flying blind," you see?

(SFX: CANNED LAUGHTER.)

JACK

(Ha, ha.)

VANESSA

Of course there's dread -
But what's it come from? His imagination!
He thinks he's "in a bind."

(SFX: CANNED LAUGHTER.)

Or trapped! Or dead!

(SFX: BIGGER CANNED LAUGHTER.)

Folks, what's fear's only power? Intimidation!

(SIGN: "FEAR'S ONLY POWER IS INTIMIDATION.")

JACK

There is no plane.

VANESSA

Is that what you construe?

(SFX: AIRPLANE DOOR CLOSING. VANESSA SITS and
buckles up.)

JACK

Was that a hatch? Or a hallucination?

ACTOR 2/PILOT VOICE (V.O.)

(Southern)

Good mornin', travelers! Speakin' for the crew
I welcome you to Fright, did I say "Fright"?

Flight Six Six Six.

JACK
(Six Six SIX...?)

ACTOR 2/PILOT VOICE (V.O.)
Now minus more ado,
Tray tables up! Make sure that seatbelt's tight!
Oh, yeah, one engine's busted, did I mention?

JACK
It's what?

ACTOR 2/PILOT VOICE (V.O.)
No prob! The boys'll put that right.
Or try! (Heh-heh-heh...)

VANESSA
So what're you feeling?

JACK
Apprehension.

ACTOR 2/PILOT VOICE (V.O.)
Just so's you know, I'm Cap'n Bobby Lee Jinks.

JACK
("Jinks"?)

ACTOR 2/PILOT VOICE (V.O.)
Welp, looks like they patched up that tetchy engine,

So I don't care what anybody thinks,
We're gawna fly! Might be a trifle bumpy
Goin' up, I'd say consult yer local Sphinx

'Cuz these old dials up here are kinda grumpy.
There's anything that we can do, just YELL!
Stewardesses, y'all take yer seats!

VANESSA
Feeling jumpy?

JACK
I'm on a "Twilight Zone" I know too well.
(*SFX here.*)
Did we just move? Did this whole place just lurch?

VANESSA
Trismyriadpediophobia.

(*PROJECTION: "TRISMYRIADPEDIOPHOBIA."*)

JACK

What the HELL...?

VANESSA

The fear of what one might feel at a perch
Of 30,000 feet.

ACTOR 2/PILOT VOICE (V.O.)

Well, here we go!

And by the way - I hope y'all been to church!

JACK

STEWARDESS!

(SFX: JET ENGINES REVVING.)

I know that there's no engine.

(THEY are pushed back by G-force.)

NOOOOOOO!

ACTOR 2/PILOT VOICE (V.O.)

I mention turbulence over the Pacific?

Yep, there's them bumps I was talkin' about - WHOOAAAAA!

(SFX: AN AIRPLANE PLUMMETING, GETTING LOUDER AND
LOUDER. LIGHTS BLINK ON AND OFF. CHAOS, NOISE.)

JACK

WHOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!

(SUDDEN SILENCE. JACK realizes he's still screaming.
HE stops. Jumps up out of the seat. Realizes he's
fine. ACTOR 2/STEWARD removes CHAIRS and EXITS.)

VANESSA

Good flight?

JACK

Aw, you know. Check-in was horrific.

No legroom, lousy food, the standard slum.

Was that FANTASTIC!?! Man, that was TERRIFIC!!!

VANESSA

You see? Flying's not so hard.

JACK

You picked a plum.

I love my ward!

VANESSA

Well...

(SUBTLE CHANGE back to THE PLATH during:)

JACK

Girlfriend, I am stoked!
I'll ride that every day, fee fi fo fum!

VANESSA

Jack, listen to me -

JACK

See that? I'm provoked
Right, I'm fine!

VANESSA

That's not what this was about...

JACK

Know what? I'm moving in! I know I've joked -

VANESSA

Jack, lis...

JACK

For good. For ever. Hear my shout.
HEY, NEIL?! I'M MOVING IN! WITH NO REPRIEVE!

VANESSA

Will you think?

JACK

I'm staying! C'mon, man, what's this doubt?

VANESSA

Your staying's not what I hoped that might achieve.

JACK

So why the ride, the zany airplane trip?

VANESSA

I guess I hoped that it might make you leave,
Fly, take a train...

JACK

I want aboard this ship!
You said we'd find my ward, my rightful bubble,
And bang! Took work but, boy, you found a pip.

VANESSA

(Except -)

JACK

Vanessa, you're my twin, my mirror-double.
Courageous Yin unto my craven Yang.
The lamp that holds the djinn who solves all trouble.

VANESSA

Except...

JACK

Think! You and I will get to hang!
You still can bust my balls, quote Xenophon,
Can egg me on, expound on fear, harangue...

VANESSA

That's not your ward.

(Pause.)

That's not your ward, Jack. You've been put upon.
I'm not your friend. This is not Xanadu.
You had us right the first time. It's a con.

Collecting specimens. That's all we do.
We gather phobes, we store them under lock,
And they feel "safe" here, having not a clue.

I'll show you your ward, if you want a shock.
D'you want to see your cell, your dingy pen?
Where you'd be just an item in our stock?

Oh, GOD! You stupid blind pathetic men.
"Why am I so afraid?" Yes, that old plea?
A guy who won't see thirty-five again,

You leave your town, your friends, your past, you flee
The chance of an I've-no-doubt kick-ass wife,
You want "the world" but not the world's debris,

You think you've lost your gift, you flee from strife -
What could these mean, your many brilliant stunts?
What do they call this crisis? Duhhh.

JACK

Mid-life.

VANESSA

(like an alarm going off)

MID-LIFE!! MID-LIFE!!!

JACK

How did I not see that?

VANESSA

By being a dunce.
Like everybody else. You're not a phobe.
You're human, you're alert and thinking. Once

You did what people do around the globe
And have done since The Fall. You lost your way.
And, being who you are, turned into Job -

Times ten.

JACK
Touché.

VANESSA
Now, having gone astray,
You're going to have to mount a steeper hill -
To home.

JACK
But if the fear...

VANESSA
Fear doesn't slay,
Jack. It intimidates but cannot kill.

(ACTOR 2/DR. NEIL ENTERS.)

ACTOR 2/DR. NEIL
Vanessa, what in God's name is all this?!
What you are saying? No, you stand there stock-still

And listen to me, my astute young Miss.
D'you like your job or is that merely spin?
And you, sir, tip-toe at the great abyss,

Who've tasted of our thrills through thick and thin -
Go find your proper ward and take your place!
Flee us? Oh, yes, try fleeing from your own skin!

JACK
I'm leaving. Asshole.

ACTOR 2/DR. NEIL
Ahh. The dauntless ace.

JACK
That's me. Who's exiting your Petri dish,
My butt directed at your wondering face.

ACTOR 2/DR. NEIL
Fine sentiments. But, as they say: you wish.
Oh, yes, you'll flounce out loudly, make a fuss.
But Jack, I tell you: you're a landed fish.

You will come back. And it will happen thus:
Your nerve will fail again, you'll go all queasy,
You'll want to jump from off a certain truss -

Voilà. You're back. Vanessa thought it easy,
She fled her ward once. Sped back in a flash.
Of course, she seems efficient, ballsy, breezy,

But underneath? Pure fear. In constant crash.
I've shocked you. Sorry. Yes, your brilliant prof
Is scared, in spite of all that bold panache.

Why waste the time? Avoid that nasty trough,
Move in right now, you've peace in no time flat.

JACK

Fuck off.

ACTOR 2/DR. NEIL

I'm tell...

JACK

I said I'm done. Fuck. OFF.

(ACTOR 2/DR. NEIL EXITS.)

JACK

So you're...?

VANESSA

A patient. Long-time phobia brat.
How else could I dissect you, bit by bit?
The jits, the gin. The gun. Been there, done that.

I'm you. So? Go, before you do commit!
Come on, I'll show you out.

JACK

(balking)

Yeah, right. Fantastic.

But.

VANESSA

What?

JACK

You have to come along.

VANESSA

Oh, shit.

JACK

Come with me!

VANESSA

No.

JACK

Vanessa...

VANESSA

No.

JACK

Why's that so drastic?

VANESSA

Look, I don't mean to spoil your fun...

JACK

You said -

And I don't think that you were being sarcastic -

Think what I'd miss out on if I were dead.

And you were right. You're what I would have missed!

VANESSA

Look, Jack...

JACK

And love.

VANESSA

If I somehow misled...

JACK

We're Tristan and Isolde! With a twist!
I'm yours.

VANESSA

No, Jack. Please don't.

JACK

You know it's true.

VANESSA

You have to leave.

JACK

But -

VANESSA

Stop it. I insist.

JACK

"Why should I live?" Of course! The answer's you.

VANESSA

But you don't know my ward...

JACK

Come up above!

Give it a shot! We might have fun! Who knew?

VANESSA
There is my special fear.

JACK
Fine. What's it of?
Shmears? Bagpipe players?

VANESSA
No. It's very trite.

JACK
C'mon! Fear of...?

(A moment. HE realizes.)

VANESSA
Told you it was trite.

JACK
...of love.

VANESSA
I'm sorry, Jack.

JACK
So you're like me.

VANESSA
Not quite.
You fled love, yes, but love is in your weave,
Your soul, your songs. For me, it's what I fight.

JACK
We couldn't attempt it?

VANESSA
Jack, don't you perceive?
I'd go with you, we'd share this great rapport,
But then (to stay or not to stay?) I'd leave.
I'd kill to come with you. Have shmears. Explore.
But...

JACK
You know what we are?

VANESSA
We're fucked?

JACK
A find.
Bury yourself alive? In hell, what's more?

VANESSA

Yes, well, it's home. To which I'm long assigned.

JACK

Okay, just come with me. No love. No strings.

VANESSA

Call me the girl you had to leave behind.

JACK

You're wrong, you know.

VANESSA

How?

JACK

Dante's rhymes. They're wings,
Not chains. They're wings that interlock, then shear
And rise toward Paradise. That's what he sings.

VANESSA

Go. Go.

JACK

After all I went through getting here?

VANESSA

Write me a song.

(SHE kisses him lightly.)

Coraggio, Jack. Be well.

(VANESSA EXITS.)

JACK

Like a Eurydice who knows no fear

Without a backward look she enters Hell.
Re-enters, laboring up the curving Plath
Until she vanishes...

(LIGHT CHANGE here...)

...and breaks the spell.

Sweat soaks me in a claustrophobic bath
And I know I am, one, afraid and, two:
Alone. The lights are weak, the walls bare lath,

Yet I continue down the tapering flue.
I have to do it, have to brave the void -
No longer heading at or towards or to,

Just moving. Now the dark is unalloyed,
The onyx at the clinic's frigid heart,
And yet I find I'm somehow cheered - I'm buoyed

Even in that black hole, in a place apart,
Not found on any map. But I know east,
My inner east, and now I feel it start,

Feel hope! Hope, bubbling up like some mad yeast...!

(LOCATION CHANGE to THE BRIDGE. ACTOR 2/HOMELESS MAN
ENTERS, jingling coins on offer.)

ACTOR 2/HOMELESS MAN
Spare change? Spare change? Spare change, man?

JACK
(takes a coin from the man's palm)
Thanks.

ACTOR 2/HOMELESS MAN
Buy breakfast. You look pale.

(ACTOR 2 EXITS. "Spare change...?")

JACK
I'm staring at the dawn, a saffron feast

In which some scattered stars still swoop and sail,
The moon long vanished in the pathless sky.
I'm back where I began my circling tale -

Amongst the cyclists, tourists, passersby
Wandering that span like patients on the mend.
And thinking, This is where I came to die -

Then feel the nighttime and the dawntime blend,
That breeze in which the dark and day have crossed.
A ferry leaves its slip. I watch it wend,

A craft that seems aloft on nothing, tossed
On carbon black it's cleaving like a blade.
A sparkling toy. A beacon for the lost.

And I strike off along the curving grade.
Beyond the Bridge's gate, the world's bazaar
Awaits me - noisy, gaudily arrayed,

And at my door, like love's own avatar,
Her finger on my bell...is Bee. A ray
Of light as radiant as the morning star.

(BEBE ENTERS with a suitcase.)

BEBE
Hi. Thought I'd come sight-see.

JACK
Steep hills.

BEBE
Blue bay.

JACK
Funny...

BEBE
So. How've you been?

JACK
How've I been. Well...
(Finds Dr. Neil's PAMPHLET in his pocket.)
I got afraid. I got afraid, Bee.

BEBE
Jack...

JACK
I lost my way
Completely, off the map, straight into hell.

BEBE
Jack, Jack, I'm here, you hear me?

JACK
It's still there!

BEBE
Can I say something?

JACK
I'm a fool?

BEBE
All's well.
All is well, Jack.

JACK
Is it?

BEBE
Yes. Yes. I swear.
(JACK embraces her and holds her.)
Okay?

JACK
Okay.

BEBE

Now let's go home.

(THEY TAKE HANDS as if heading for a journey.)

(LIGHTS FADE ON THEM. END OF PLAY.)