

THE PHOBIA CLINIC

a performance text
for three actors

by

David Ives

phobia060118.doc

All Rights Reserved
Contact:
Sarah Douglas
Abrams Artists
646-461-9376

(NICK is revealed. 40ish. Bare stage.)

NICK

Midway through summer, I began to be
Afraid. That was the start of things. At least –
I always thought mid-summer was the key.

That's when I crashed, when I first faced the Beast.
But let's go further back: that crazy spring
When I left Beatrice. When I fled the east...

(BEA ENTERS.)

BEA

You seem distracted.

NICK

Sorry.

BEA

May I "cling"?

NICK

Hell, yes.

BEA

(embraces him, dancing happily a moment)

So what'll it be? Your heart's desire.

It's a big birthday, someone's gotta sing.

Me, or the Mormon Tabernacle Choir?

Big party, or just us? That is the question.

We get the whole gang over to admire you,

Hang streamers, make a fuss. That's my suggestion.

Or: we two have a picnic in the Park.

Champagne. Canoodling. Gifts. It's less congestion.

NICK

Bea, listen.

BEA

Oh my God, in Central Park –

Two swifts today, so perfect they looked plastic.

Just like your poem! About the wind-up lark...?

NICK

I'm thinking I might move.

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

NICK
No, I mean really move.

BEA
So - something drastic?

NICK
Yeah. San Francisco.

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

NICK
No, why not? It's quiet, it's clean.
Civilized.

BEA
Close by.

NICK
Granted, that it's not...

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

NICK
You can come.

BEA
Sure. Three thousand miles away.
Nick. San Francis--?

NICK
I want a change of scene.
A view on, I don't know...

BEA
A large blue bay?

NICK
That's funny.

BEA

Thanks. Well, hey, it's your decision.
It's just, I thought we'd clicked... Who'm I to say?

NICK

Look...

BEA

It's okay! Not quite what I'd envisioned.
You'll be here for your big bad birthday? No.
We'll talk, though, when you're off in the Elysian

Fields? I feel so... Wow. Think I'd better go.
Be happy, Nick. Write well. I mean it.

NICK

Bea...

(BEA EXITS.)

So I exiled myself to San Francisco,

That pastel Eden built on TNT.
The gingerbread is dingy. There's fog, crime,
Fog, throngs of homeless, fog each day at three.

But there's the Bridge, and sea... And for a time
It did seem paradise. For a week or two -
Until I couldn't cough up my daily rhyme...

(SFX: PHONE RING.)

BEA (VO, ON PHONE)

How are you, Nick?

NICK

Hi. Good good good. What's new?

BEA (VO, ON PHONE)

Are you all right?

NICK

Me, why?

BEA (VO, ON PHONE)

Your voice is weird.

NICK

It's take-out. Some stray, I don't know...

BEA (VO, ON PHONE)

...cashew?

NICK

Funny.

BEA (VO, ON PHONE)

Thanks.

NICK

Hearing Bea's voice I felt so cheered
I very nearly said I'm coming back,
But no, I blathered on, I persevered

Until...until...until...

BEA (VO, ON PHONE)

Be well, Nick. 'Bye.

(PHONE CLICK, BUZZ TONE, OFF.)

NICK

One tiny crack,
Right here. Small temblor, category three.
I felt it shake, then fade. My first attack.

And then, mid-summer, I began to be
Afraid... At first the signs were trivial. Squirms
Of something like disgust. Anxiety

As twilight fell. But then these coiling worms
Of panic underground, a queer unease
While walking down the street. Floors felt unfirm,

Sidewalks unsound, high windows caused this quease.
By autumn I was edgy, morbid, tense,
As fear infected me like some disease,

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

Come sunset I'd secure my triple locks
Then fortify myself with fifths of gin,
Pacing, compulsively consulting clocks

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

But nothing stopped the dread or set me free.
 Bare-knuckled terror knocked till dawn. Still worse
 Were dreams, which I'd resist but fail to flee -

The way scared fliers, clutching book or purse,
 Descend the endless jetway to their plane
 Then strap themselves into their idling hearse.

(SFX: PHONE MACHINE BEEP.)

BEA (VO, ON ANSWERING MACHINE)

Hi, Nick.

NICK

The world itself seemed gone insane.

BEA (VO, ON ANSWERING MACHINE)

You there?

NICK

Physical laws grew howling gaps.

BEA (VO, ON ANSWERING MACHINE)

Nick, please.

NICK

Mad visions spiraling in my brain:

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

BEA (VO, ON ANSWERING MACHINE)

Pick up.

NICK

Was it for this I'd headed west,
 To flail beneath some cosmic microscope?
 I'd fucked up, I had failed.

BEA (VO, ON ANSWERING MACHINE)

You are the best.

Call me.

(PHONE CLICK, BUZZ, THEN OFF.)

NICK

Then Death began to look like hope.
Amazing how it happens. There's no if,
The only question's how to do it. Rope,

Gas, pills... To get it over in a jiff
I even went out and bought a .38.
But then - behold. The suicide's favorite cliff,

That go-to weapon called The Golden Gate.
Why not? It's quiet, it's clean. No muss, no fuss.
Just one small leap - it's over. Check and mate.

So late one night, quite drunk, I hopped a bus
Out to Fort Point. Nobody seemed to mind me
Venturing out onto the quivering truss.

(LOCATION CHANGE to THE BRIDGE.)

A mass of darkness pressing right behind me,
I merged among the strangers on the Bridge.

(Checks his WALLET, puts it away.)

Checked my I.D., should anybody find me...

Now, shivering there - a speck of dust, a midge
Glued to some spider's web strung spire to spire -
I faced east toward this land of endless privilege.

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

From my panopticon, that scarlet grid,
I studied the grim waters, which to me
Sped toward oblivion, racing to be hid

In ocean, swallowed up and turned to sea.
Why live, why stay. The final question flared.
Death rapped my chest like opportunity.

Leap, leap, the voices roared, What's wrong,
you scared?

I had to smother that infernal vamp.
I grab the rail to jump, I'm all prepared -

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

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

NICK
 Sorry.

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

NICK
 I can't today.

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

NICK
 Fucking tramp...

ACTOR 2/HOMELESS MAN
 No, listen, lis -

NICK
 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!
 Whatever you want, a dollar? Take it, dude!

NICK
 Funny... I do need help, how's that for strange?
I need some help, is that so fucking strange?
 (ACTOR 2 EXITS. NICK speaks to US:)
I NEED SOME HELP, IS THAT SO FUCKING STRANGE?!
I NEED SOME HELP, IS THAT SO FUCKING STRANGE?!

I ran into the road. No driver slewed,
 Nobody stopped. Help me help me, I shout,
 And scrambling to the edge as if pursued,

I climb the rail - and then the lights go out.
 (DEAFENING NOISE. SUDDEN and TOTAL DARKNESS.)
 Silence. A void. The far side of the tomb.
 Then all that dark evaporates like doubt, and...

(LIGHTS RISE.)

I'm in infinity: a mirrored room
 Within whose glasses my reflections peel
 Toward zero in an endless backward zoom...

*(MIRANDA ENTERS. Lab coat, skirt, heels and pearls.
 English and brisk. Silver hair. Played by BEA.)*

MIRANDA

Good morning. Welcome. So then: how do you feel?

NICK

Where am I? Who are you? What is this place?

MIRANDA

My name's Miranda.

(Takes out his wallet, reads driver's license.)

You are...Nick?

NICK

Is this real?

MIRANDA

'Fraid so, yes. Cheers.

(Gives him back his wallet.)

I'm taking on your case.

NICK

My case...

MIRANDA

That's right.

NICK

So this is - an asylum...?

MIRANDA

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

NICK

Well, let me out.

MIRANDA

We do research. Run studies and compile them.
This room we call "Damascus."

NICK

LET ME OUT!

MIRANDA

That's where St. Paul, of course, faced his bête noire,
Where he and God kicked off their title bout.

NICK

Where am I, bitch?

MIRANDA

I told you where you are.

NICK

For...?

MIRANDA

Treatment.

NICK

Which means what?

MIRANDA

We have our tricks.

Say yes and I'll alert the registrar.

NICK

Treatment, huh. What's that mean, what kind of "trick"?

MIRANDA

Sign on, you'll know.

NICK

Oh. Now I'm reassured.

So I say yes, 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 going to fry, or maybe freeze,

Or die from dearth, we've heard the funeral knell.

And I should live for that? The obsequies
Of earth? My life is fucking Kierkegaard.
So, you're so smart, give me a reason! Please!

Why should I live? Huh? Why?

MIRANDA

I know it's hard -
Think about all you'd miss.

NICK

That's it? Oh, man.
I need a reason, not an Easter card!

So fuck your zoo. I'm gone.

MIRANDA

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?
I'd say a solid liberal arts degree,

Originally...Midwestern? Yes, that fits.
Maybe a special birthday caused your spike,
A great relationship went on the fritz,

Some crucial girl- or boyfriend took a hike...?
Then death began to seem your sole resort
So you went out and bought a gun. You liked

The thought, too bad you feared the loud report.
And don't ask how I know this off the cuff,
I know because I daily meet your sort.

You're all SCARED. Now, then. Care to drop the bluff?
I want to hear you say it. Say it, Nick.
Go on.

NICK

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

MIRANDA

There. That's the stuff.

Of course you're scared! You're very ill, you're sick.
How are you feeling now?

NICK

Well, pretty dumb.

I blew my chance.

MIRANDA

You stupid bloody prick,

You tried to kill yourself.

NICK

God. God. God.

MIRANDA

Easy, chum.

(rubbing his neck)

Breathe. Breathe. Good.

NICK

I said to my soul, Be still.

I said to my soul, Be still...

MIRANDA

How are you feeling?

NICK

Battered. Sort of numb.

MIRANDA

It's Eliot, right? "I said to my soul, Be still."

NICK

It is...

MIRANDA

You're here now, Nick. You're safe. You're cared for.
You can't beat this alone, you know. By will.

NICK

What is this?

MIRANDA
Nothing anyone's prepared for.

NICK
My life was good! Then all this...inner strife.
I still couldn't tell you what I got so scared for.

The source, the...

MIRANDA
What were you up there, in life?

NICK
"In life"?

MIRANDA
I'm sorry.

NICK
It's not as if I'm dead.

MIRANDA
Of course.

NICK
But how could I...?

MIRANDA
Succumb? Fear's rife,
That's how. What's terror but our daily bread?
This is The Age Of Fear. No, really, think.
(*SLIDE SHOW: a fast terror collage.*)
We've weapons under every other bed!

Why else but fear's this country on the blink?
Bollards and border fences, safety caps,
Daily surveillance, cities on the brink...

Why else Purell dispensed from public taps?
Why TM devotees, New Age cranks, cults,
Phone alerts, trigger warnings, GPS maps?

Why "comfort food"? Why petrified adults
Buying tank-like SUV's? You're still in doubt?
(*SLIDE SHOW ENDS.*)
Forget the symptoms. Check out fear's results...

(*LIGHTS CHANGE. SFX: DISTANT CLAMOR heard.*)

NICK

(looking out at US)

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 -
Colliding, roiling in their desperate chase,
Like ants in some mad subterranean brawl.

A scrumming, massive manic spinning jenny.
The abstract of a panicked human race.

MIRANDA

Our waiting room.

NICK

That mob?

MIRANDA

And just like any,
They're all afraid. The Age Of Fear, in bold.

NICK

I did not know fear had undone so many...

MIRANDA

It came here smuggled in the Mayflower's hold.
Now it's disbursed like gifts from Santa's sack -
Our leaders knowing the scared will take what's doled.

(LIGHTS CHANGE BACK. THE CLAMOR FADES.)

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

NICK

Your "treatment" being...?

MIRANDA

Let's say we...feed your fear.

NICK

With - Beta blockers, acid, Ambien, smack?

MIRANDA

Nope. It's abandon dope -

NICK & MIRANDA

(together)

...all ye who enter here.

MIRANDA

What's yours?

NICK

I'm sorry?

MIRANDA

What's your deep-most dread?

NICK

I don't know. Death.

MIRANDA

Excuse me while I sneer.

Yes, where might jumping off a bridge have led?

NICK

Death.

MIRANDA

Yes. And very nasty, all that kelp.

What is it, Nick? What is it that you dread?

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

You married?

NICK

No.

MIRANDA

Kids?

NICK

No.

MIRANDA

Want kids?

NICK

The quiet kind who'd get great reviews on Yelp. I might.

MIRANDA

Do you have pets?

NICK

I have a kite.

MIRANDA

A kite...

NICK

Extremely quiet.

MIRANDA

I see. Hobbies?

NICK

I dream.

I read.

MIRANDA

You travel?

NICK

Some.

MIRANDA

How?

NICK

Very light.

MIRANDA

Your diet?

NICK

Is quiet.

MIRANDA

Tea?

NICK

Coffee.

MIRANDA

Black?

NICK

Just cream.

Do you know all now? Have I been dissected?

MIRANDA

You use your charm to cover up a scream.
You're thickly armored. Very well protected –
Partly by fear.

NICK

By fear...

MIRANDA

Why would you flout it?

Don't stick your neck out, you won't get inspected.

NICK

So I like fear.

MIRANDA

What would you do without it?

NICK

This treatment, though...

MIRANDA

Immersion. That's our credo.

We make you name your terror. Make you shout it.

NICK

In other words you're Dante, incognito.
I'm in *Inferno*! Now I'm un-dismayed.

MIRANDA

So refuse treatment. You do have a veto.

NICK

What do you want?

MIRANDA

To help you. To lend aid.

NICK

But why?

MIRANDA

It's our role. Treating folks who choke.

NICK

You must want something.

MIRANDA

Fine. Call it a trade.

We help you out, you let us pry and poke.
Who knows. You may decide to move on in.

NICK

And what's your fee?

MIRANDA

Your soul. That was a joke.

The treatment's free.

NICK

Free...

MIRANDA

Look, we're not some bin,
And I'd be here to manage your condition.
Do you agree? We're on?

NICK

All right, you win -

(ACTOR 2 ENTERS as DR. NEIL. British, too.)

ACTOR 2/DR. NEIL

So this is he, our latest acquisition?
A pleasure, sir, a treat. I'm Dr. Neil.
Have you signed on?

MIRANDA

We had just broached admission.

ACTOR 2/DR. NEIL

Oh, trust me, you'll enlist. Now here's the deal.
I know you want some magic-bullet cure,
An elfen ring, some speedy way to heal...

Well, give it UP! Just read my brief brochure,
(Producing a PAMPHLET whose title is PROJECTED:)
"THERE'S NO ESCAPE FROM FEAR!" You do see why?

No? Follow me, the logic's very pure.

You have your aviophobes, who fear to fly.
 Ablutophobes, who have a dread of soap.
 And you've those Chicken Littles who fear 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

(Habiliophobes they're called) with 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, offering 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
 That these two realms are single, they're ingrained.
Why? Because fear, just like the atmosphere

We breathe, is unavoidable. Ordained.
 Intrinsic. Fear's the "X" in all ex-istence.

(PROJECTION: "FEAR = EXISTENCE.")

NICK

There's no way out, then.

ACTOR 2/DR. NEIL

Sir, you find me pained –
 But no. What you'll find futile is resistance.

NICK

Why?

MIRANDA

Thank you, Dr. Neil.

ACTOR 2/DR. NEIL
Was that enlightening?

MIRANDA

Very.

ACTOR 2/DR. NEIL
I hope you'll pardon my insistence,
But do sign on. Ta ta!

(ACTOR 2/DR. NEIL EXITS.)

NICK

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

MIRANDA

Expert care.

NICK

That makes it sound as if my nuts need tightening.
If there's no cure...?

MIRANDA

Clearly, our task's immense.

NICK

To make me cave?

MIRANDA

To make you more aware.

NICK

Yes, but-

MIRANDA

Fear is like Dante, in a sense.
His triple-locking rhymes with no escape - ?
Fear also knits its multi-stranded fence

Whose anxious limits give our lives their shape.
That's why some guests move in.

NICK

To be confined.

MIRANDA

Sheltered. With me.

NICK

Is there much red tape?

MIRANDA

No. An exam is all. Then you're assigned.

NICK

"Assigned"...

MIRANDA

Yes, to a designated ward
Along with other phobes of your own kind.

Our subjects -

NICK

"Subjects"?

MIRANDA

Patients, all get scored
And then they're treated in the proper slot.

NICK

Your "subjects"...

MIRANDA

I misspoke

NICK

They all get stored...

MIRANDA

Not stored. They're lodged within the proper spot.
Many of them, you know, decide to stay -
Having decided we're their proper lot.

NICK

So you keep saying in that innocuous way.
You know what I think...?

MIRANDA

Wait a moment. "Nick."
Nicholas. Are you the poet? Why didn't you say
We'd a celebrity?

Run out and find another "subject," scout.
Some other suckerfish you freaks can spear.

MIRANDA

Nick, listen...

NICK

Motherfucker! I WANT OUT!

MIRANDA

You know your father was a patient here.

(A distinct pause.)

NICK

My father...was...?

MIRANDA

Our guest.

NICK

No way. My Dad?

MIRANDA

He had a spot of bother. Quite severe.

NICK

He was blue-collar carbon steel! Iron-clad!
He once took on some asshole boxing pro!
Scampered round scaffolds every day, I'd add.

The guy was fearless.

MIRANDA

And yet — apropos —

He landed here somehow. Do you want to see him?

NICK

My Dad's been dead for seven years.

MIRANDA

I know.

He's down the hall. Come on.

NICK

So you'll, what, free him?

From death?

MIRANDA

No Ouija board and no Black Mass.
You two were close?

NICK

I hoped someday I'd be him.

MIRANDA

Then follow me. Try us, a sample class.

NICK

You're on.

MIRANDA

You may move in, Nick. Who can say?

NICK

She swivels out through a quicksilver glass.

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

(LOCATION CHANGE to "THE PLATH." MIRANDA takes out a compact and puts on lipstick.)

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

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

MIRANDA

We descend
Around a vortex, as you will observe.
(SCHEMATIC DRAWING OF A SPIRAL BUILDING appears.)
The wards lie at the center. That's our quarry.
(SCHEMATIC DRAWING FADES.)

NICK

Why an obstructed view? Why the tight swerve?

MIRANDA

To frighten you.

NICK
Is that...?

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

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

NICK
The lowest one being the worst?

MIRANDA
You do the math.

NICK
Are there nine rings?

MIRANDA
As many as you need.
Your Dad's right here.

NICK
The winding, blind aortal
Corridor delivers us, with blinding speed,

At a gate to our left, a sunken portal.
Its grave ecclesiastic tones instill
That infant awe, that hint of the immortal.

(LOCATION CHANGE. A CHURCHLIKE-ATMOSPHERE.)

Gravity deepens as we cross the sill
To silence rich as Renaissance polyphony.
From a high, vaulted ceiling lanterns spill

Reds, golds and azures dyed by Tiffany.
No doubt you've got some nickname for this crypt?

MIRANDA
This? Yes. "The Crypt." And this -
(Producing something in her hand:)
- is an "Epiphany."

NICK

A metal die, its edges etched with script.
Some faces with the standard shallow holes.
And then...my father's name, if slightly chipped...

MIRANDA

Each guest records one for the archive's rolls.
A holographic letter, metal-plated.

NICK

"Epiphany," huh.

MIRANDA

Some patients call them "Souls."

NICK

So...?

MIRANDA

Grasp it tight. Your warmth will activate it.
Still game?

NICK

Hell, yes.

MIRANDA

Coraggio, Nick. Safe home.

*(SHE EXITS. NICK closes his hand over the thing.
SFX: ECHOING TICK TICK TICK...)*

NICK

A ticking sound somewhere...as when you waited

Before a shrine in some old church in Rome.
You dropped a tarnished lira through a slot
And holy Hell would quicken in the dome...

(LIGHTS, SFX: NOISE AND CHAOS.)

The whole room springs its locks and like a shot
Goes plunging down in free-fall through the floor!
The air refrigerates as swirling knots

Of gray miasmic haze collect and pour,
Vague protoplasmic shapes that sway and falter.
Now one pale twist of fog, a man-sized core,

(ACTOR TWO ENTERS in hospital gown as FATHER.)

Materializes, then begins to alter.
The features gel. The gaze unseals and clears...

ACTOR 2/FATHER

Up there in life – up there, my name was Walter
And all my days I was a slave to fears.

NICK

Dad... Dad!

ACTOR 2/FATHER

I'm prob'ly in my grave by now.
I'd bet, though – someday if somebody hears

This thing, I don't know where or why or how,
I'd bet that person's you, Nick.

NICK

I'm right here...!
It is me,

ACTOR 2/FATHER

How you found this goddamn hoosegow...

I hope you're here because you want to be.
By choice, and not because you're sick from fear,
Because fear broke your back like it did me.

It's why I made this crazy souvenir.
I just - I just don't want you being afraid.
Whoo. Harder than I thought. I need a beer!

Maybe I oughta read this speech I made...
Or I could talk.

NICK

Talk. Please.

ACTOR 2/WALTER

Could just come clean,
Instead of, like I did for years, evade.

I know I looked so sure. My whole routine,
Being biggest, bravest bastard on the block!
That bluster? That was, to be blunt, a sheen,

The way I'd strut. I'd be a laughingstock
 My buddies knew the truth. Even growing up
 I was like this. Marshmallow inside rock.

I had to gear myself just showing up
 For school. A miracle I ever stayed.
 The team, they never saw me throwing up.

'Cuz everything I did? I did afraid.
 Then - prove I'm not a pussy - I enlist.
 First up at reveille, first out on parade,

Just like in bar fights first out with the fists.
 Medals from battle, champ in the brigade.
 I never fought like that 'cuz I was pissed,

I fought like that 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 a cliff?
 Then, you arrive and geez was I afraid.
 If this happens, if this, everything's "if."

I'd worry you'd 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 - ?

I'd follow in the car. You could be dead,
 Some drunk don't pull up in some 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?

NICK

You're kidding, right?

ACTOR 2/WALTER

All this without detection.

Enjoy yourself! Remember my tirade?
Get out, play ball, go make some pals! Chrissake,
Have fun!

NICK

But why, Dad, why were you afraid?
 (Lots of overlap in the following:)

You used to tell a story...

ACTOR 2/WALTER
Remember that old story...?

NICK
About a lake.

ACTOR 2/WALTER
The cold dark lake?

NICK
Some guy was there...

ACTOR 2/WALTER
Some guy's there showing off. Impress his girl, right?
"Hey, throw your ring in, honey!"

NICK
So she takes

ACTOR 2/WALTER
She takes
It off and tosses it.

NICK
"That's my good pearl."

ACTOR 2/WALTER
"That's my good pearl,"
She says.

NICK
The guy dives in.

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

NICK
Three whole minutes.

ACTOR 2/WALTER
Three whole minutes. And the girl...?

NICK
She's shitting bricks.

ACTOR 2/WALTER
Is shitting bricks.

NICK
But finally...

ACTOR 2/WALTER
Finally, up he rears.

NICK
Blood.

ACTOR 2/WALTER
Blood streaming from his eyes, ears, nose, the works.
He busted all his vessels, can't even hear.

NICK
What didn't they know?

ACTOR 2/WALTER
What those two didn't know, the goddamn jerks –

NICK
That lake was bottomless.

ACTOR 2/WALTER
That lake was bottomless. It had no bottom.

NICK
Was that guy you?

ACTOR 2/WALTER
You see? Who knows what lurks
Down there?

NICK
Dad, was that you?

ACTOR 2/WALTER
See, that's what got'em.

NICK
Dad, who dove in?

ACTOR 2/WALTER
Time's up. The needle's run.

NICK

You tried, right, didn't you? Tried to reach the bottom?

ACTOR 2/WALTER

I was so proud of you. But listen, son.
Do not be me.

NICK

But you were strong! So brave!

ACTOR 2/WALTER

I want you burning bright like you begun.

NICK

I'm not.

ACTOR 2/WALTER

I couldn't save me. You, I could save.
You know these masons, guys who carry hod?
Man, they are artists. With their trowels, to pave

A wall real smooth and tight? Take a façade
That isn't pointed right, it's gonna fall.
Well, that's why every night I pray to God

I pointed you okay, so you'll stand tall.
Remember this, you're gonna long outlive me,
You're gonna... Christ, oh, geez, I'm gonna bawl.

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

NICK

No need.

ACTOR 2/WALTER

We never had the time for this.
But like I say...

NICK

No, stay.

ACTOR 2/WALTER

Forgive. Forgive me, Nick.
Beyond the grave, your old man sends a kiss.

NICK

Don't go! I sweep him up in my two hands –
He's gone. Within my arms a vast abyss,

(ACTOR 2 kisses Nick's head and EXITS.)

Nothing but dwindling tendrils, filmy strands
That ripple round me in that sanctuary
Then seep like water into thirsty sands.

(MIRANDA ENTERS.)

MIRANDA

Good visit?

NICK

Sorry, was I long?

MIRANDA

Not very.

(SHE takes back the "Epiphany.")

NICK

He always seemed so strong...

MIRANDA

All right, break's over.

NICK

Break?

MIRANDA

Well, you can't wallow here.

NICK

(Wallow...?)

MIRANDA

Nick. Nick, be wary.

I've been through this, and lingering's a mistake.

(LOCATION CHANGE back to the PLATH.)

How do you feel?

NICK

Adrift, aghast, acute.

That hollow chest you get at someone's wake?

MIRANDA

All natural. Good.

NICK

But listen, you're astute.
I lived angst-free for decades. In the pink.
What changed? Why now?

MIRANDA

The question is a beaut.

NICK

Yes? And?

MIRANDA

Perhaps it's one you should rethink.
You'd say these fears are new? Sounds pretty lame.

NICK

Lemon juice...

MIRANDA

Sorry?

NICK

Invisible ink.

You'd write a message – that old children's game –
And hold a candle underneath the page –
The words appear when heated by the flame.

MIRANDA

Like your fears.

NICK

Yes, exactly. At what age,
Was I inscribed? And by what?

MIRANDA

Let's move on.

NICK

The walls... Wait. Are they - ?

MIRANDA

Closer, yes. The gauge
Diminishes. We'll reach the wards anon.

NICK

We're still going down?

MIRANDA

As we've done since we started.

NICK

Stop.

MIRANDA

Why so timid?

NICK

Why?

MIRANDA

We're pushing on!

NICK

But not toward treatment...?

MIRANDA

Treatment? That's long started!

You're here, Nick! Part of our sodality!

You're being monitored, your progress charted...

NICK

Don't I sign papers?

MIRANDA

A formality.

You've seen what we can do. Enjoyed some perks.

What you need now's a ward to match your malady.

NICK

I don't even know the rules, how all this works.

Am I allowed to leave? How long's the course?

MIRANDA

The length depends upon your phobal quirks.

As to leaving, have you been held by force?

Do you see guards, barbed wire, machine guns blazing?

NICK

I'm just not sure...

MIRANDA

What is this? Buyer's remorse?

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

ACTOR 2/SATISFIED PATIENT

O man o man o man, was that amazing?
Thanks, Doc!

MIRANDA

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 the joint!

MIRANDA

So you feel strong, feel steady?

ACTOR 2/SATISFIED PATIENT

Euphoric!

MIRANDA

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!

MIRANDA

Give us a kiss.

(MIRANDA and ACTOR 2 kiss.)

ACTOR 2/SATISFIED PATIENT

Howbout it, one last dance?

*(MIRANDA and ACTOR 2 kick up their heels together
briefly, as if they've done this before.)*

So long, Doc! FORE!

(ACTOR 2/SATISFIED PATIENT EXITS.)

NICK
Proud customer.

MIRANDA
Indeed.

(Off his expression:)
I know. You're leaving. Well, we had our chance.

NICK
Thank you. I mean it.

MIRANDA
Really. There's no need.
I did my damndest. You didn't buy the pitch.

NICK
I'm stable now.

MIRANDA
Think so?

NICK
Back up to speed.
I'm sorry, by the way, I called you bitch.

MIRANDA
Oh, I've been called things till my nails have curled.

NICK
That's...

NICK & MIRANDA
(together)
"Hair."

NICK
...I think.

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

NICK
*Think what you'd miss, you said. I miss the world.
Small things like...sunlight.*

MIRANDA
That.

NICK

I know you'll laugh.
I miss my local bagpipe player, who skirled

"Amazing Grace" all night. My glass carafe,
I miss its plump warm belly. My green sweater.
The smell of beer. You know – the daily chaff.

MIRANDA

If you miss bagpipes, Christ, you must be better.
But you're a poet, of course.

NICK

Or was – till fear.
Every day and by hand, letter by letter,

I'd make my blue Bic pen a chandelier
Throwing light on – what? Time's wingèd chariot?
I'd sing its bucket seats like Chanticleer.

Man's disobedience, dawn, the proletariat,
The cruelest month I'd strum upon my strings,
The tilting moon I'd lasso with my lariat!

You're wrong, you know.

MIRANDA

What...

NICK

Dante's rhymes. They're wings,
Not chains. They interlock – but then give way.
Release and rise. Move onward. Dante sings

Through hell to get to paradise.

MIRANDA

Touché.
Well, from the heart, I'm sorry you're not staying.

NICK

I just want...I don't know...

MIRANDA

A large blue bay?

NICK

That's funny.

MIRANDA

Thank you. I guess what I'm saying -
It feels as if we've clicked, that we're a fit.

NICK

I should / go -

MIRANDA

I wish you'd got what we're purveying:

Fear's beauty.

(SIGN APPEARS: "FEAR IS BEAUTIFUL.")

NICK

Right...

MIRANDA

Fear is gorgeous! Intricate!

NICK

I should / go -

MIRANDA

/ No, what's that line of, is it Blake?
The grain of sand displaying The Infinite?

Fear makes you feel you're here for something's sake.

NICK

For what? To be afraid?

MIRANDA

To be in focus.

To see. To know that deep but conscious ache

When you transcend the daily hocus pocus
And feel beneath our feet the steep crevasse.
Fear's here to stimulate, inspire, provoke us.

(THE LIGHTING CHANGES to a greenish, watery light.)

Take this aquarium. Heaven under glass -
An ideal world. Some angelfish who're basking,
Some pink toy castles, perfect emerald grass.

Nice life, right? Who wouldn't take that without asking?
Bit dull, though, isn't it? All those soothing hues...

NICK

A change inside the tank, like an unmasking.

(THE GREENISH LIGHT gets agitated.)

I watch with morbid dread as, from the ooze
Beneath those coral towers where they'd lain curled,
Sleek barracudas wriggle forth like clues

To some unseen, malevolent sub-world.
The panicked angelfish perceive the gang.
They scatter, frantic, then as one they're hurled

Against the glass, corralled by razored fangs.

(THE GREENISH LIGHT bleeds RED.)

A crimson cloud of blood imbues the pool
Then - SNAP!

(MIRANDA points a REMOTE. ANXIOUS LIGHT FREEZES.)

The whole scene freezes like meringue.

MIRANDA

3-D TV. We call that "Phobia School."

(SHE takes his wrist to check his pulse.)

Fish? School?

NICK

I got it.

MIRANDA

And - ?

NICK

Wow! Pretty thrilling.

MIRANDA

Pulse: one-three-one. My first time, that fooled me.

NICK

The fangs? The barracudas?

MIRANDA

Aren't they chilling?

Fear's beauty. That's what that fish tank conveys.

NICK

I had to watch.

MIRANDA

Yes! Even though unwilling!

It's fear's and beauty's job to draw your gaze.

NICK

No fun if you're a fish.

MIRANDA

They're fake! They're fine!

Didn't you feel braced, though? Every nerve ablaze?

What gives you, when in danger, extra spine?

What pumps adrenaline except for - ?

NICK

Fear?

MIRANDA

But! What runs fear? Guess.

NICK

Fear?

MIRANDA

I knew you'd shine.

See, here's the secret: fear, like us, fears death.

(PROJECTED: "FEAR FEARS DEATH.")

In order to perpetuate its line

(PROJECTED: "FEAR MUST PERPETUATE ITSELF.")

It bends your senses with its lethal meth:
 Nettles you, scares you, gives you little shoves,
 Erects those telltale goosebumps, speeds your breath

Till heart and lungs are pumping hand in glove.

And sexy? Hell, yes, once you're in its sway -

Because fear's symptoms are the same as love's.

(PROJECTED: "FEAR = LOVE.")

You're sure I can't seduce you?

NICK
 What, to stay?
 Thing is – there's someone...

MIRANDA
 Ah.

NICK
 Her name is Bea.

MIRANDA
 Who's more important than the need to slay
 Your demons. You've a girlfriend. Yes, I see.
 Small wonder I detected this resistance.
 Well, wonderful. You've her, you're fancy-free.

NICK
 Not quite. Bea is the ex in my ex-istence.

MIRANDA
 She left you, just as all this crap arose?

NICK
 No, I was why we never went the distance.

To stay or not to stay. For fucked-up shmo's
 Like me, that is the question. Which is best?
 This job, this flat, this girl? And so I chose.

MIRANDA
(holds out a hand to shake)
 Bye, Nick. A lovely chat. You give good guest.

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

MIRANDA
 Would you mind if we tried a little test?
 Stand there. Just stand there. Then you can decide.

*(ACTOR 2 ENTERS in an orderly's uniform, pushing in
 a DOOR ON WHEELS. He stands beside it, staring at
 NICK, a shade too intently. MIRANDA opens the door
 till it's ajar.)*

(SFX: we start to hear...STREET NOISES. CAR HORNS. INDISTINCT CONVERSATIONS. GLASSES CLINKING, PLATES. NICK starts getting unnerved.)

BEA'S VOICE (V.O.)

*Well, hey, it's your decision.
It's just, I thought we'd clicked... Who'm I to say?*

(MIRANDA opens the door more widely. The STREET NOISES get LOUDER. NICK stares at the open door.)

BEA'S VOICE (V.O.)

*Well, hey, it's your decision.
It's just, I thought we'd clicked... Who'm I to say?*

(It's too much for NICK. MIRANDA nods to ACTOR 2, who closes the door and EXITS, wheeling it off.)

MIRANDA

That's what you'd face up there, Nick. That's the
trade-off.

NICK

I tried.

MIRANDA

And bravo you.

NICK

I really tried...

MIRANDA

I'll ask again: what is it you're afraid of?

NICK

Not a clue.

MIRANDA

You'll continue treatment, though?

(NICK nods yes.)

Tell me your fear, I'll tell you what you're made of.

NICK

I know. I know I know I know I know.
Look, these wards...

MIRANDA

Well, they're none of them vacations.

We'll find the one for you.

NICK

The right depot?
Where I'll be penned until the end of nations...?

MIRANDA

You know what you need if you're going to mend?
I'll give a hint: it's all around you.
(NICK shakes his head. No idea. The answer:)
Patience. Patient? Patients?

NICK

Who are you? No. Before we round that bend,
Who ARE you?

MIRANDA

No one.

NICK

C'mon, it's not a snare.
"Miranda." Is that your name, or just pretend?
Where are you from? Where do you live up there?
(SHE won't answer.)
Fine. Are you single, married, divorced, trans, gay?

MIRANDA

I'm not your business, Nick.

NICK

Okay.

MIRANDA

Beware.

NICK

You should move in.

MIRANDA

What? What did you just say?

NICK

You'd be star patient. Queen Of Those Who Shudder.
The phobic world's own Madame Recamier!

I mean, isn't fear your daily bread and butter,
The opiate of choice that bangs your gong?

A nice fat phobia, doesn't your heart just flutter?

MIRANDA

Yes, that's what happens, obviously.

NICK

What's wrong?

MIRANDA

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

Men, unlike you, not coasting here on freebies.
Who like strong women, who don't feel unmanned,
And who don't pout about their precious Bebes,

Or Beas. I think you ought grab my hand
And thank me that I live off dread, and know it.
I know 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.
If you don't like our treatment, please, forgo it.

NICK

Look, I didn't mean -

MIRANDA

I ask you what you fear,
You can't even see 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 -
Until the ocean deeps looked more your size.

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

NICK

No, let's go on.

MIRANDA

Though dangers might await?

NICK

I want to.

MIRANDA
Even with an obstructed view?

NICK
Even so.

MIRANDA
Even though you'd have to be assigned?

NICK
I feel as if I've been assigned – to you.

MIRANDA
Yes, it's called transference. Rid it from your mind.

(SHE cups his face in her hands a long moment.)

NICK
What.

MIRANDA
Nick...

NICK
What. What. You're giving me a chill.

MIRANDA
There's something you should know.

NICK
Well, I'm resigned –

MIRANDA
No, listen, please. I've tried with all my skill –

(ACTOR 2 ENTERS as DR. NEIL.)

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

And listen to me, not one sound, 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 –
I said there's no escape from fear. No grace.
You may as well try fleeing from your own skin!

So find your proper ward and take your place!

(ACTOR 2/DR. NEIL EXITS.)

NICK

Some chilly mercury spills down my spine
As we in silence and with equal pace

Refunnel down that coiling serpentine -
Merely a tunnel now, a slanting chute...

MIRANDA

These doors begin the wards.

NICK

Which one is mine?

This door -

MIRANDA

Not that.

NICK

How do you know?

MIRANDA

I'm astute,

Remember?

NICK

Didn't you say there's some exam?

MIRANDA

So maybe I was lying.

NICK

Hey, don't get cute / on -

MIRANDA

It's all exam, Nick. What, do you think you cram
To get a ward? The verdict's in. You're graded.
You think God cares which way, or gives a damn?

You think God can be otherwise persuaded?

NICK

Somehow we've gotten to God.

MIRANDA

It's how I think.

NICK

You're one deep twisted bitch.

MIRANDA

So call me jaded.

And why should you care? You've the ease to sink
Right in. Your neck is out of the garotte.
You're safe, we've solved your problems in a wink!

NICK

Let's see one, then -

MIRANDA

Not that ward.

NICK

No, why not?

MIRANDA

It's not for you. I swear.

NICK

What's all the drama?

MIRANDA

You want to see it? Fine. Let's take a shot -

NICK

You know - amidst this mishigaas, this trauma,
You've been so great. Not only my last hope
You make me feel I'm, what...

MIRANDA

Vasco da Gama?

NICK

You, though - you're like - Ariadne with her rope!

MIRANDA

"Ariad..."

NICK

Freed Theseus from the labyrinth?

MIRANDA

Right, right.

NICK

At one point on my downward slope
I actually went and walked a labyrinth.

MIRANDA

At Grace Cathedral.

NICK

That's how lost I was.
Young David in the Vale of Terebinth.

MIRANDA

He beat Goliath, you know.

NICK

Well, that's the buzz.

MIRANDA

Did it help?

NICK

No. God rightfully abhors
An atheist like me and, as God does,
God fucked me. Multiplied my fears by scores.
Anyway, this to say: I've done one maze.

MIRANDA

Good man.

NICK

But when I've been through yours -
Will I know why I ought to live?

(LOCATION/LIGHTING/SFX CHANGE around them.)

Cliché's

Like *why I ought to live* curdle on my tongue
As we cross to the ward. Though acrid haze

I see a huddled horde of old and young,
All shades, half-naked, some in bits of sack.
Shivering and weeping, utterly unstrung.

(ACTOR 2/NAZIR ENTERS. The ill-fitting suit of a refugee, dirty white shirt, heavy shoes, spidering on two black canes.)

ACTOR 2/NAZIR

Get that man out of here!

MIRANDA

Nazir, stay back!

ACTOR 2/NAZIR

That man does not belong! I kill you, dog!

MIRANDA

Nazir. He needs / to see -

ACTOR 2/NAZIR

You stinking bric-a-brac,
You go! I smash your bones, I rape you, hog!

MIRANDA

He wants to see.

ACTOR 2/NAZIR

Oh, yes? Who are you, boy?
Your history. You're born where? Inside what bog?

NICK

I was born in Chicago, Illinois
Breathing the steel dust of Republic's mills -

ACTOR 2/NAZIR

Ah! Not in Bangladesh? Tibet? Hanoi?

Not Syria? Yemen? Not among the hills
Of Myanmar, like our Rohingya there?
Escape to Greece, was that among your thrills,

You rode a pontoon boat with leaking air?
Maybe Tutu assassins, Hutu bands?
Colombian drug lords, they gave you a scare?

You lay in wait sometime while burning brands
Were tossed into your neighbors' houses? No.
Steel dust. Steel dust was your fear. Dirty hands.

You listened while they killed your father? No.
So you don't know that funny little note

A throat makes cut from ear to ear? Don't know

The men who rape your mother, how they gloat?
Did you stand pissing hidden by a drape
While those men beat her, fucked her, sliced her throat?

And what they did when they found you to rape?
You know this?

NICK

No.

ACTOR 2/NAZIR

What what what have you known?

[Roars open-mouthed and savagely at NICK.]

(ACTOR 2/NAZIR EXITS. LOCATION CHANGE: The Plath.)

MIRANDA

Nazir alone of all his clan escaped.

The assailants then took clubs and smashed each bone
In Nazir's body. For a laugh. To give
Themselves a kick. I'm sure that he too moans

Into the dark each night *Why should I live* –
Yet lives, though "living's" like some epitaph.
How many like him pour through history's sieve?

NICK

Is he - a patient?

MIRANDA

Also part-time staff.

NICK

So he gives guilt trips? Bends new entrants' ears?

MIRANDA

(with bite)

No, he reminds us, on the world's behalf,

That some poor souls have justifiable fears.
That millions go to bed each night in terror.

NICK

Oh. Since I didn't grow up in, what, Algiers,

My fear is all some self-indulgent error?
Self-pity masked as leaping off a bridge?

MIRANDA

Some people can afford fear. Is that fairer?

NICK

Thanks, Karl Marx. I believe I'm owed a smidge
Of recognition for what I've been through.
I felt for him! I did! Your tutelage

Aside, I can respond when pain's on view.
Though how he shows "fear's beauty" I don't see –
Or why I had to see him. So screw you.

MIRANDA

Can you for once get off of me, me, me?
You're him. He's you. Same stuff. Does that compute?
The TV screen's one screaming refugee

And all the world, like you, does what? Stands mute.

NICK

He cornered me! He caught me off my guard!

MIRANDA

May I remind you that you picked this route,
You chose that ward?

NICK

I think you forced this card.

MIRANDA

Too harsh? Too acid? We can change regimes.
No. Let's find something that's not quite so hard.

NICK

Hey, look...

MIRANDA

This door. You'll sample our extremes.

NICK

I try to dampen an insistent qualm
While we cross over – as in certain dreams...

(LOCATION CHANGE. SOFT LIGHT and MUZAK.)

...to sheer tranquility! To ample calm!
 I'm in some cruise ship's entertainment pit!
 Stout men in lime-green pants and shirts with palms,

Large dames in pastel polyester knits -
 Sucking on frappes they loll in pillowy chairs
 While a TV screen, empty but still lit,

Illuminates these inmates' vacant stares.
 The Barcaloungers range through rooms on rooms.
 It's couples, mostly, as devoid of cares

As marble figures on medieval tombs.

MIRANDA

We call this ward "Alarm Clock."

NICK

Yeah, why so?

(SUDDEN BELL, SIREN, FLASHING LIGHTS. Stops.)

The FUCK was THAT?!

MIRANDA

Alarm clock. Sonic booms

To jolt this lot. That shocked you, right?

NICK

Why, no.

MIRANDA

If life, as certain poets say, is a dance
 The patients in this ward would say "Why go?"

(BELL, SIREN, FLASHING LIGHTS AGAIN, briefly.)

NICK

STOP THAT, please.

MIRANDA

How's your fear?

NICK

Right now? Enhanced.

MIRANDA

These phobes fear time, shift, alteration, change,
 So they retreat into this waking trance

Until we – [*About to reactivate the alarms.*]

NICK
(stopping her from doing that)
Don't. You know, though...

MIRANDA
 What.

NICK
 It's strange.
 Up on The Bridge, there was this homeless guy.
 And what was this guy offering?

MIRANDA
 Change?

NICK
 Yeah! Change...

MIRANDA
 Dja take some?

NICK
 I was busy trying to die.

MIRANDA
 I see we've roused a patient...
*(ACTOR 2/NAN ENTERS in a muu-muu and fuzzy slippers,
 sucking the straw of a FRAPPE as if in a trance.)*
 Morning, Nan.

ACTOR 2/NAN
 Is something different? Something change?

MIRANDA
 No, why?

ACTOR 2/NAN
 That's good.

MIRANDA
 Nan, this is...
(ACTOR 2/NAN turns to go.)
 Nan, come back. ...a man
 Who wants your story.

ACTOR 2/NAN
Gosh. Oh, gosh.

MIRANDA
He pled.

ACTOR 2/NAN
About the phone?

MIRANDA
The phone.

ACTOR 2/NAN
I like pecan...

MIRANDA
Not recipes. Your tale.

ACTOR 2/NAN
Oh, gosh. Well, Ned –
Ned, that's my husband over there asleep –
Ned one day brings this... Shake him if he looks too dead.

He buys this "smart" phone? Now I like to keep
A land line, case there's some emergency,
Last Judgment, so on. Setting Smart Phone's beep's

About as complicated as brain surgery,
There's no instruction booklet, I am SCARED.
I said this gadget's a catastrophe.

Ned said it never needs to be repaired –
Then tosses out my land line! Heaves our PHONE.
So I said, Fine, 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. And what's he do?
He grabs his "smart" phone and ATTEMPTS to dial.
I shriek, I plead, I pray to God. No voodoo's

Gonna work. We're barbecue. So we pile
Onto the lawn and watch our whole lives braise.
Then we come here. We love it. It's a isle

Of peace...

(*BELLS, LIGHTS, ALARMS, briefly.*)
 ...most times. Oh, gosh. We sip and laze,
 we sip and laze...

(*ACTOR 2/NAN EXITS, sucking. INCONSPICUOUS LOCATION
 CHANGE back to The Plath.*)

NICK
 Good story. What's the point?

MIRANDA
 The point?

NICK
 She dreaded
 Change and was justified. To coin your phrase.

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

NICK
 I'll vouch for that.

MIRANDA
 What.

NICK
 Not important.

MIRANDA
 Talk.
 What. Talk.

NICK
 This isn't at all where you were headed.
 Bea wanted to get married.

MIRANDA
 Did you balk?

NICK
 Turn into Ned and Nan? No, volunteer?
 I may's well move in here. I've walked the walk.

MIRANDA
 You wouldn't - [*Stops.*]

NICK
What.

MIRANDA
Wouldn't move in.

NICK
Why not?

MIRANDA
From fear.

Lose, what was it?, "our daily chaff"? You sobbed
About some sweater and the smell of beer.

NICK
You're daring me to stay?

MIRANDA
I'm doing my job.
But you do know, up there, it's not all feast -
Aside from Bea.

NICK
Boy, you can twist a knob.

MIRANDA
For instance: once up top, you'd head back east?

NICK
I might.

MIRANDA
Which means you'd likely hop a plane?

NICK
Brrrrr!

MIRANDA
Don't like flying?

NICK
No.

MIRANDA
Why? Clothes get too creased?

NICK

I don't like dying.

MIRANDA

This next ward sounds germane.

NICK

It's now sub-zero down my spinal cord
As we go guggenheiming round the lane

Like subatomic particles aimed toward
Collision – two quarks playing Blind Man's Buff.

MIRANDA

Left at the zinc door. And – welcome aboard.

(LOCATION CHANGE.)

What do you think?

NICK

This? Looks innocent enough...

MIRANDA

This is a ward that we call "Turbo-Jet."

NICK

Is this an easy one?

MIRANDA

It might get rough.

NICK

I think I'm up to it.

MIRANDA

You want to bet?

NICK

Why "Turbo-Jet"?

MIRANDA

Could be these airplane seats.

Shall we?

NICK

You mean – sit down?

MIRANDA

It's just a set.

NICK

Why not.

(SFX: SNAPPING METAL.)

Hey, what's all this?!

MIRANDA

The metal cleats?

NICK

(as if struggling against bonds)

Oh, fuck...!

(STAGEY SPOTLIGHT on the two of them. MIRANDA suddenly has a HAND-MIC she speaks into as if they were on a stage before us.)

MIRANDA

Let's have a hand for Nick tonight!

(SFX: CANNED AUDIENCE APPLAUSE.)

Uneasy, Nick? Well, you're in for a treat

As we investigate my favorite fright:

Apprehension.

(SFX: SCARY ORGAN STING. APPLAUSE.)

The symptoms are iconic.

Wheezing. Sweat glands at full. Attempts at flight.

And hey! We're...on a "flight"! Is that ironic?

(SFX: CANNED LAUGHTER.)

But fleeing is futile. This fear's...in your mind.

(SIGN: "APPREHENSION = FEAR IN YOUR MIND." ORGAN.)

NICK

Point made. Let's go.

MIRANDA

That's why it's so demonic.

Dreading what's not, you're, well, you're "flying blind."

(SFX: CANNED LAUGHTER.)

So, Nick, you still don't know your deep-most fear?

NICK

Air travel?

MIRANDA

No! You're simply dis-inclined.

(SHE snaps his AIRPLANE SEAT up. CANNED LAUGHS.)

Love that bit.

(NICK struggles against his bonds. To US:)

Futile, but he'll persevere.

NICK

There is no plane!

MIRANDA

So what's the problem, Boo?

(SFX: AIRPLANE DOOR CLOSING. MIRANDA SITS.)

NICK

Was that an airplane hatch?

MIRANDA

I didn't hear.

ACTOR 2/PILOT VOICE (V.O.)

Good mornin', travelers! Speakin' for the crew

I welcome you to Fright, did I say "Fright"?

Flight Six Six Six.

NICK

(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?

NICK

It's what?

ACTOR 2/PILOT VOICE (V.O.)

No prob! The boys'll put that right.

Or try! Heh-heh-heh...

MIRANDA

What are you feeling?

NICK

Apprehension.

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

NICK
"Jinks"?

ACTOR 2/PILOT VOICE (V.O.)
Welp, looks like they patched that tetchy engine,
So I don't care what anybody thinks,
We're gawna fly! Might be a trifle bumpy
On the way up, 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!

MIRANDA
Feeling jumpy?

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

MIRANDA
Trismyriadpediophobia.

NICK
What the HELL?

MIRANDA
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!

NICK
STEWARDESS!
(SFX: JET ENGINES REVVING.)
I know that there's no engine.
(THEY are pushed back by G-force.)
NOOOOOOO!
(SFX: PLANE RISING. THEY bump up and down.)

ACTOR 2/PILOT VOICE (V.O.)

I wouldn't be too concerned about them skips,
Some turbulence over the Pacific. WHOOAAAA!

NICK

We buck, and suddenly the whole plane tips!
Lights blink inside the cabin, air masks dangle,
Passengers scream and the fuselage flips

(SFX: PLUMMETING PLANE.)

Upside down, right-side up – and then it angles
Straight toward the ground! Life vests go flying! Trash,
Food trays, nuts, novels, glasses, all get mangled

As in a massive holocaust we crash.

(SFX: CRASH.)

The world goes flat-line and behind a mist
We are a heap of acrid, smoking ash.

A sudden quiet awakes me... I exist!
There is no fuselage, there's no Pacific,
No vests, no masks, no clamps around my wrist...

MIRANDA

Good flight?

NICK

Aw, you know. Check-in was horrific.
No legroom, lousy food, the usual slum.
Was that FANTASTIC!?! Man, that was TERRIFIC!!!

You picked this ward for me, you picked a plum.
Can I ride that again? Geez, am I stoked!
I'd ride that every day, fee fi fo fum!

Sell tickets here, your hallways would be choked!
NASA will hire you, Disney'll buy you out.
Know what? I'm moving in. I know I've joked –

(We have imperceptibly changed back to THE PLATH.)

MIRANDA

Nick, wait.

NICK

I'm such a fan, I am devout.

I'm moving in right / now!

MIRANDA
/ Listen to me, Nick.

NICK
Hey, why so grim and glum? What's all this doubt?
I have a plan. I'm here. I'm going to stick.

MIRANDA
Maybe that plan is flawed, or it won't work.

NICK
You said move in.

MIRANDA
Before we'd reached the thick / of -

NICK
Hey! You're the golden ring here. You're the perk.

MIRANDA
I'm flattered. Truly.

NICK
Well, then, what's the rub?

MIRANDA
You have to think this through.

NICK
Why?

MIRANDA
It's berserk.

NICK
I can make choices.

MIRANDA
Here? From fear? Half-drubbed?

NICK
I want to stay!

MIRANDA
And live inside a bubble?

NICK

Hell, you're the reason why I'd join this club.

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

Why would I want to leave when I could hang?
 No, hear me out. You still could bust my nuts,
 You still could egg me on, expound, harangue...

This is a gift! Removing from his ruts
 A poet who's blocked!

MIRANDA

Yes, well, that's brilliant. Great —

NICK

I'd write down here.

MIRANDA

Stop, stop.

NICK

Why all the "buts"?

MIRANDA

What if this is a plot? A "secret slate"?
 And everything I've spun you is a line?
 What if this is a trap and I'm the bait?

NICK

Kiddie rides? Frappes?

MIRANDA

What if they're not benign?

NICK

So you're a shill.

MIRANDA

Before a painted valance.

NICK

You're Ariadne, spooling out her twine!

MIRANDA

You do not know me, Nick. Don't know my talents.

NICK

I want to stay.

MIRANDA

Of course! Because you're hooked!

NICK

No. No. Because I'm where I feel in balance.

MIRANDA

Nick, if you stay, I swear -

NICK

I'm, what, I'm cooked?

MIRANDA

Remember how you begged to leave, you pleaded?
We've scared you into this!

NICK

That's why I'm booked.

MIRANDA

So you don't care you've been stampeded?

NICK

I'm staying.

MIRANDA

Because it's safe? It's in your ken?

NICK

Your job's to lure me in? Well, you've succeeded.

MIRANDA

That's not your ward, Nick. When, oh dear God, when
Will you stop lying to yourself and see?
A man who - sorry - won't see twelve again,

You leave your town, your friends, your past, you flee
The chance of family, a terrific wife,
Want sunlight, yes, but not the world's debris,

Shunning dark, dogs, dreams, airplanes, inner strife,
You're standing on the rail to jump the ledge,
You still don't know your central fear?

NICK

Life.

MIRANDA

Life! Life! LIFE! LIFE! LIFE!

NICK

Keep going. It's huge. [*THEY BOTH shout "Life, life!"*]

MIRANDA

Why else go leap the edge?
Why else choose death? To flee yourself, you dunce.
That stubborn core of You. That irksome wedge

Called Nick. You turned your back on Being once –
You'd move in here? Descend The Plath by luge
So you can serve with these benighted grunts?

NICK

I'm such a, I don't know...

MIRANDA

A stooge?

NICK

A stooge.

(SHE motions him into a ward. LOCATION CHANGE.)

A warren of cubicles. Each one a shell
Lacking all hope. Without a subterfuge,

Close-packed, of carbon-blackened steel, each cell
Blocked from its neighboring stall, away they maze
Like booths in some amusement hall in hell.

And every gaping cavity displays
A patient clinging to a narrow board,
Each crumpled in the grip of some malaise.

MIRANDA

You know what this place is.

NICK

This is my ward.

(ACTOR 2/DR. NEIL ENTERS.)

ACTOR 2/DR. NEIL

I see you've found your berth amongst our host.
Yes, here you'll be, to put it bluntly, stored -

It being The Phobia Clinic's happy boast
To have preserved one billion specimens
Of fear! I grant, it's hard to take one's post

Amongst such miserably sad denizens.
Yet they stay on! If not with surplus cheer.
They seem to like our stress-less regimen...

NICK

I'm leaving.

ACTOR 2/DR. NEIL

Sorry?

NICK

I am not a smear.
I'm not a tube in some laboratory.

ACTOR 2/DR. NEIL

Ahh. Fearless now?

NICK

Fearless? I'm cavalier.

So stuff your dead-end dimestore purgatory.
Screw all the cringing beasts inside your ark.
I'm going to live. How's that? You like that story?

I welcome dogs, dreams, airplanes, total dark -
I'm jumping your pathetic Petri dish.
Fuck fear, I'm swimming with the Great White Shark!

ACTOR 2/DR. NEIL

Yes. Interesting. But, as they say: you wish.
No, listen to me, my intrepid ace,
Forget my theories, all that gibberish,

Try on this query: do you know this face?
[Pointing to himself:] Do you know this face?

NICK

It's mine...

ACTOR 2/DR. NEIL
 And why? Because you dug this pit.
 You built all this. You love it. Take your place.

(ACTOR 2/DR. NEIL EXITS.)

MIRANDA
 Don't sit there. Go! Before you recommit!
 This is great news. You're done.

NICK
 Yeah. Right. Fantastic.

MIRANDA
 But what?

NICK
 You have to come along.

MIRANDA
 Oh, shit.

NICK
 Or else – meet me up there. Is that so drastic?

MIRANDA
 Look, I don't want to spoil your fun...

NICK
 You said –
 And I don't think that you were being sarcastic –
Think what you'd miss. By opting into dread?
 And you were right. You're what I would have missed!
 Bagpipes. But also you.

MIRANDA
 If I misled...

NICK
 We're Tristan and Isolde! With a twist.
 I've / fallen –

MIRANDA
 Don't say it. Please.

NICK
 You know it's true.

No, no, no. Let me finish. I insist.

"Why should I live?" Of course the answer's you.
What...

MIRANDA

One last stop. But – Nick – before we start...

(SHE kisses him lightly.)

NICK

She leads us single-file along the flue
That wraps the chambers at the clinic's heart...and...

(LOCATION CHANGE. MIRANDA takes over.)

MIRANDA

...we enter a twi-lit wood, cold and macabre,
Where naked, solitary figures part,

Slipping through black trees with a kind of sob
As we draw near. Down through a metal grill
Beneath our feet we see a writhing mob

Of copulating bodies, like a hill
Of arms, legs and heads beneath that dead wood.

NICK

What is this ward?

MIRANDA

So you don't know this drill?
Fear of love. Freedom here's the highest good.
Their dream's to live untrammelled. Unrevealed.

NICK

You seem to know these patients.

MIRANDA

So I should.

This is my ward. I live here. Each night sealed
In with my fellow phobes, let out by day
To treat the Nicks of the world, to field

The queries of the fearful, and to say:
I'm very sorry but there is no cure -
And never get involved along the way.

I'm more than inmate. I'm the in-house lure.
 Their party line and most appealing date.
 How else, with you, could I have seemed so sure?

The fifths of gin, the jits, the .38?
 The Bridge? Been there, done that. Psalm 23?

NICK

Miranda -

MIRANDA

Don't even try, Nick. It's too late.

I know your soul because I'm you, you see?
 In every ward, at every turn and patch,
 It wasn't just you, I was revealing me.

NICK

Come with me. Up there. Now.

MIRANDA

You see the catch.

NICK

I'm getting out, why can't - ?

MIRANDA

Don't you perceive?

I can't love. Or I won't. Yes, I'll attach -

But then - to stay or not to stay? - I'll leave.

NICK

You know what we are?

MIRANDA

Truly fucked?

NICK

A find.

Call me naïve...

MIRANDA

You're gorgeously naïve.

Nick - no.

NICK
I can't just leave you.

MIRANDA
I'm assigned -
So're you. To life up there. It's great. There's beer.
Call me the girl you had to leave behind.

NICK
This, after all my trouble getting here?

MIRANDA
Write me a poem. And patience. Nick, be well.

(SHE touches his face. A moment. SHE EXITS.)

NICK
Like a Eurydice who knows no fear,
Without a backward look she turns toward Hell.
Then she's a silhouette amongst the trees,
A shadow fading like a broken spell.

No light. No Plath. Before me, just a frieze,
A tapestry of nothingness. I start
Off into it, and in this congeries

Of voids I know I'm in the clinic's heart,
The bottom of my heart, this being the ward
To stop the escapees, that place apart

No phobe would ever enter. There is no cord
To guide my path, but I know inner east.
I move, not at something, not moving toward -

Just moving, and feel hope like some mad yeast
Bubble up in me - as when, over the sea,
A nervous flyer looks out and finds a feast

Of light, and lets himself and life agree.
I move on like a hawk that's slipped its jesses
Flying toward Zion, my only company - me.

Then there's a door, and darkness deliquesces...
To open air. And people. Women, men...
As a familiar landscape coalesces.

(LOCATION CHANGE. ACTOR 2/HOMELESS MAN ENTERS.)

ACTOR 2/HOMELESS MAN

Spare change? Dude, don't tell me it's you again!

NICK

Can't seem to keep away.

ACTOR 2/HOMELESS MAN

Yo, watch the rail.

NICK

I'm trying.

ACTOR 2/HOMELESS MAN

Hey, Jude. Is this your blue Bic pen?

(Producing one. NICK takes it. ACTOR 2 EXITS.)

Change, change...!

NICK

Lone all-night drivers swoop and sail
Past me beneath a pathless gift of sky.
I'm back where I began my circling tale -

Among the city's nighthawk passersby,
The beggars, cyclists, patients on the mend,
Suicides searching for a place to die...

I feel the nighttime and the dawntime blend,
A breeze in which the dark and light are crossing.
A single ferry leaves its slip to wend

Its way and seems aloft on nothing, tossing
Upon a void it's cleaving like a blade,
A sparkling toy perched on funereal frosting.

At which I go my own way, unafraid.
Beyond the Bridge's gates the world's bazaar
Awaits me - noisy, gaudily arrayed,

And at my door, when I have crossed the bar,
A woman turns and smiles as if to bless:
It's Beatrice, blazing like the morning star.

(BEA ENTERS.)

BEA
I thought I'd visit. May I cling?

NICK

Hell, yes.

(THEY EMBRACE.)

BEA
Well, Nick? So tell.

NICK

Midway through summer, I
Began to be -

(SHE kisses him hard. END OF PLAY.)