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Hotel Cassiopeia

by CHARLES L. MEE

A wall of stars:
the constellations
or the moon
or a vast star map of the cosmos covers the back wall
[or should it look like a Pollack painting?
splashes and droplets of white paint].

We hear Satie's Gymnopedies on the piano.

A young woman on a bicycle
or a life-size paper cutout of a young woman on a bicycle
or a paper cutout of a giant owl
arcs across the sky
while he speaks.

JOSEPH [sitting at a cafe table]
There are days that I will have
a few donuts
a caramel pudding
two cups of Dutch process cocoa all milk,
white bread,
peanut butter and peach jam
a Milky Way candy bar
some chocolate eclairs
a half-dozen icing cakes from Bay West
a peach pie (6 cents)

and a prune twist
and, on other days:
cottage cheese, toast,
bologna, jello,
fresh baked shortcake with creamy chocolate icing
Kool Aid
brownies and cherry Coke
a cinnamon donut
homemade coffee cake
the pink centers of Huntley and Palmer shortcake cookies
pancakes

[As he speaks a wall rises up slowly behind him
of windowed cubby holes
of the sort that once covered the walls of New York City's
Bickford's Cafeterias,
each cubby hole containing,
behind its closed, windowed door, one item,
such as a sandwich, a piece of pie, a glass of milk.

A waitress enters, drying her hands on a towel,
and takes out pad and pencil.]

WAITRESS

What will you have?

JOSEPH

What will I have?

I don't know.

WAITRESS

You're not hungry?

[gesturing with her pencil towards the little windows]

Well, then,

I've got your honey colored seashells....

JOSEPH
I'm sorry?

WAITRESS
I've got your crested cockatiel....

JOSEPH
My what?

WAITRESS
I've got your deep sea blue sand
your dancing confetti
a toy metal horse
very nicely corroded
lead with greenish and reddish coloring
after it's been lying about washed in the sand and sea

JOSEPH
What will I do with these?

WAITRESS
Make a life.
Have you got a life?

So: a caramel pudding
and a cherry Coke?

JOSEPH
Yes. Yes, thank you.

[The astronomer enters, stands to the side.]

WAITRESS
Will you be having the whipped cream?

JOSEPH

Yes, thank you.

I'll have the whipped cream.

[she leaves;

he looks after her as she leaves;

the astronomer takes a seat at a nearby table
several others enter and join him.]

THE ASTRONOMER

You see, you'll be wanting to go slow with girls
because

THE HERBALIST

Because you can scare a girl

THE ASTRONOMER

You can scare anyone really.

THE HERBALIST

You can scare anyone.

THE ASTRONOMER

And you don't want always
to be looking at women out the window

THE HERBALIST

The passersby on the sidewalk.

THE ASTRONOMER

Because this can give a bad impression.

HERBALIST

You can scare a person.

THE PHARMACIST

Do you ever take a girl home with you?

JOSEPH

Yes.

HERBALIST

What do you do with her?

JOSEPH

Well.

We sit in the kitchen usually.

THE ASTRONOMER

Yes?

JOSEPH

Usually, we have tea.

THE HERBALIST

Tea?

THE PHARMACIST

That's all?

JOSEPH

And I will open the window,
so the birds can fly in
and eat crumbs from the kitchen table.

THE ASTRONOMER

Eat crumbs.

JOSEPH

Yes.

THE PHARMACIST

During the summer.

JOSEPH

Yes, well,
yes.

THE ASTRONOMER
During the winter?

JOSEPH
Well. Yes.

THE ASTRONOMER
I see.

JOSEPH
Usually, people like this.

THE HERBALIST
And then they leave?

JOSEPH
Yes. Well, by then it will be late afternoon.
So it's time to leave.

ASTRONOMER
Tea and crumbs.

PHARMACIST
Still, I like an herbal tea.

ASTRONOMER
A peppermint tea.

PHARMACIST
Or a tisane.

ASTRONOMER
Something made with roots and berries.

[Joseph, ever a voyeur,
watches them as they continue the conversation.]

THE HERBALIST

I would say
probably
I would have to say
licorice root
that would be my favorite root
because it contains a
thick astringent mucilage
with a little aroma
which is a very good pectoral.

THE PHARMACIST

A pectoral?

HERBALIST

Very good for illnesses of the chest and lungs.

PHARMACIST

Ah.

HERBALIST

And that happens to be
my own personal
preoccupation.

PHARMACIST

I see.

HERBALIST

Whereas I don't know
for you....

PHARMACIST

For me it would be
the hawthorn
which used to be used always
to decorate the front door on May Day

HERBALIST

Oh, well
but of course
also it was said to invite death indoors.

PHARMACIST

No.

HERBALIST

Yes.

PHARMACIST

No.

HERBALIST

I am afraid so.
I mean, excuse me, but
I am an herbalist.

PHARMACIST

Still.

HERBALIST

No. There is no getting around it.

ASTRONOMER

I would have to say
my favorite herb
would be the common quince.

HERBALIST

Indeed?

ASTRONOMER

Oh, yes,
because for two reasons
you know
it was once thought to be
the forbidden fruit of the Garden of Eden.

HERBALIST

I knew that, yes.

ASTRONOMER

And so it was served
at wedding feasts in ancient Rome.

HERBALIST

Of course.

PHARMACIST

Of course.

ASTRONOMER

So, to me,
it is the sexiest herb.

HERBALIST

Fruit.

ASTRONOMER

I beg your pardon?

HERBALIST

Fruit. It is a fruit.
Not an herb.

ASTRONOMER

Oh yes, fruit.
I thought we could mention either herbs or fruits.

HERBALIST

Well, the conversation was about herbs.

ASTRONOMER

And I brought the conversation around
to include fruits.

HERBALIST

If you are not going to stick to the point
I'm afraid
this is not my kind of conversation.

[he leaves;

the others look around
and, one by one, feeling uncomfortable,
they decide to leave, too;

a crescent moon through the top of bare branches
a star above it
clear, fresh beauty
night blue
gently faded

Joseph remains at his table.

As the Bickford's windows slowly disappear
a girl in tights and a tutu sings.

These are original lyrics,
for which there is no music:]

BALLERINA

The good Lord makes both kinds of flowers
the good ones and the evil
the good flowers are our lifelong friends
the evil our undoing

The tawny gray, the regal royal
the creeping and the bloody red
the kidney-shaped
the wrinkle-leaved
the sugar-bearing, evergreen

the sweet-scented, pale blue
pure yellow, fruit bearing
holy moss
the Gorgon-like
lizard-headed
scorpion in the rocks

the ever flowering, semi-winged
the white haired scarlet leaf
the silky flowered, late bearing
yellow-green serpentine
the bristle-like horny-headed
helmet shaped ripening fruit

the hunchbacked new swollen
pouch-like speckled
smooth spiral
openmouthed
the star burst
winter flowering

The good Lord makes both kinds of flowers
the good ones and the evil
the good flowers are our lifelong friends
the evil our undoing.

[A paper cutout cockatiel descends from the flies
and an old newspaper ad for the Hotel Eden—
partly obliterated by big splotches of white paint—
is projected.]

Allegra comes for tea.
She is carrying a book on erotic art
and a mocha cake.]

ALLEGRA
Joseph?

JOSEPH

Yes?

[he stands]

ALLEGRA

Were you expecting me?

[he takes several steps backward
unable to help himself
in his embarrassment and shyness]

JOSEPH

Oh. Yes. Expecting you.

ALLEGRA

Had you forgotten I was coming today?

JOSEPH

No. Oh, no.

I've been looking forward to it.

[he stands motionless]

ALLEGRA

I've brought some cake.

JOSEPH

Ah. Cake.

I love cake.

ALLEGRA

Chocolate mocha cake.

JOSEPH

Chocolate mocha cake.

ALLEGRA

Shall I get some plates?

JOSEPH

Oh. Yes. I'll get them.

[He returns with plates.]

Shall I cut the cake?

ALLEGRA

Thank you.

How are you?

[He cuts the cake very carefully
as he speaks.]

JOSEPH

How I am.

Yes.

Well.

Some days

I will wake up in the morning

feeling serene it may be

having a vision of the house

trees, grass,

well, bushes in flower

in the early morning air

forever inviolate

this is so much better than the mornings of anxiety

the nervousness

feelings of reversal

sadness

so much so

sometimes

I will have to sit on the edge of my bed

for a few hours

waiting for the time of lifting

waiting for the time of evenness

the time of naturalness

arriving in the mental clearing

which also
on some mornings
I can induce
by spending some time standing at the sink
shaving
taking some time dressing
and then
if I make a trip down to the water
the colony of beautiful laughing gulls
I will be free of confusion
migrating birds—scattered drifts of them heading South
way up like specks against pink glow
salvaging these moments
I think of
celestial blue heavens, golden constellations,
the Milky Way star dust
the girl seen through the window of Bickford's cafeteria
a young girl
sharp features
pleasant expression after a very hot working day
black dress
such gracious qualities of serenity
that I felt ashamed of any inner complaining
and then
the sustained mood of calmness on returning home
this is OK
and the evening
the smell of night on a scarf or a handkerchief

What I saw today
I saw
thru the cellar window
the squirrel and the catbird
a robin at the bird table under the quince tree
with its petals falling
the rose pink of azalea bush in full bloom

ALLEGRA

I'm going to wear a newspaper hat
because the sun is so bright.

JOSEPH

Yes.

I have some pictures.

[he shows her]

ALLEGRA

What will you do with them?

JOSEPH

I will keep them because....

because then I will have them.

[We do not see his mother
but only hear her voice say:]

HIS MOTHER'S VOICE

Joseph?

JOSEPH

Yes.

HIS MOTHER'S VOICE

Did you have a guest?

JOSEPH

Yes, mother.

[Allegra leaves.]

HIS MOTHER'S VOICE

Did she wash her hands at the sink?

JOSEPH

I think she did.

HIS MOTHER'S VOICE

And dry her hands on the dish towel?

JOSEPH

Yes.

HIS MOTHER'S VOICE

Then you must boil the dish towel.

JOSEPH

Yes, mother.

[A black and white film flickers on the back wall—
the 1945 movie *To Have and Have Not*,
starring Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall,
and Joseph speaks in sync with Bogart.]

INTERVIEWER

Browning, Marie. American. Age twenty-two. How long have you been in Port au
France?

MARIE

I arrived by plane this afternoon.

INTERVIEWER

Residence?

MARIE

Hotel Marquis.

INTERVIEWER

Where did you come from?

MARIE

Trinidad, Port of Spain.

INTERVIEWER

And before that, from where Mademoiselle? From home, perhaps?

MARIE

No. From Brazil, Rio.

INTERVIEWER

Alone?

MARIE

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you get off here?

MARIE

To buy a new hat.

INTERVIEWER

What?

MARIE

To buy a new hat. Read the label, maybe you'll believe me then.

INTERVIEWER

I never doubted you, Mademoiselle. It was only your tone that was objectionable. I'll ask you again. Why did you get off here?

MARIE

Because I didn't have money enough to go any further.

INTERVIEWER

That's better. Where were you when the shooting occurred?

MARIE

I was-

HARRY

You don't have to answer that stuff.

INTERVIEWER

Shut up, you.

HARRY

Don't answer it.

INTERVIEWER

I told you to shut up.

HARRY

Go ahead, slap me.

INTERVIEWER

Come come, Capitan. This is not a brawl. We merely wish to get to the bottom of this affair.

HARRY

You'll never do it by slapping people around. That's bad luck.

INTERVIEWER

Well, we shall see. If we need to question you further, you will be available at the hotel?

HARRY

Well, I don't know how I'm gonna go any place when you have my passport and all my money.

INTERVIEWER

Well your passport will be returned to you. And as for the money, if it is yours, that will arrange itself in good time.

HARRY

Would you suggest I see the American consulate and have him help you arrange it?

INTERVIEWER

That is your privilege. By the way, what are your sympathies?

HARRY

Minding my own business.

INTERVIEWER

May I—

HARRY

And I don't need any advice about continuing to do it either.

MARIE

Say, I don't understand all of this. After all, I just got here.

HARRY

You landed right in the middle of a small war.

MARIE

What's it all about?

HARRY

The boys we just left, joined with Vichy. You know what that is?

MARIE

Vaguely.

HARRY

Well, they got the Navy behind them, I think you saw that carrier in the harbor?

MARIE

Yeah.

HARRY

And the other fellows, the ones they were shooting at, they're the free French. You know what they are.

MARIE

It's not getting any clearer.

HARRY

Well anyway, most of the people on the island, the patriots, are for De Gaulle, but so far they haven't been able to do anything about it.

EDDIE

Harry! Harry! Are we in trouble?

HARRY

No, Eddie.

EDDIE

Well, I seen them guys pick you up and I was scared.

HARRY

Well, everything is all right. You go on back and get some sleep.

EDDIE

Well, I'd have got you out, Harry. You know me.

HARRY

Yeah, I know you Eddie. You go on back to the boat.

EDDIE

Say, Harry could ya—

HARRY

No.

EDDIE

But—

HARRY

No more tonight, Eddie. Beat it.

MARIE

I could use a drink myself.

A black and white photograph—
with a musky light blue overlay—

of a painting of a Renaissance princess
is projected on the back wall.

A huge yellow cork ball.

A train whistle quietly
the sound of a locomotive.
Joseph goes to his brother Robert
who lies in bed
huddled against the wall

JOSEPH

Robert?

Robert?

May I bring you anything?

I will care for you, Robert

I will care for you

I will care for you and care for you forever

you will never be left alone

because I will always be here for you

and not just because I am your brother

but because I love you

I will be here for you forever

you don't need to worry

you never need to worry

you will be warm enough

there will be things for you to eat

and I will talk to you

so you won't be uninterested in your life

I will talk to you about the things I see

what I have done

where I have gone during the day

the pharmacy

[he talks and talks

until Robert falls to sleep

I had a ringside seat by the window
at Bickford's cafeteria today

the June Dairy truck
unloading into the basement in front of the plate glass window
a girl fixing her white kerchief and hair
a girl with a red scarf, well groomed
a Chinese girl in a striped sweater, with an exquisite profile
a girl in a white blouse on the escalator
a girl in a pink linen skirt reading a thick tome on Freudian theory

and out the window:
a blonde child looking from out of the window of a taxi
up 8th avenue—

on the sidewalk
a woman with chestnut hair worn down her back—
a light blue sweater—
high cheek bones
boney frame
wan
emaciated

I felt a graciousness and wonder all over again
at the impact of these "meetings"
their sudden significance

the face in the driveway across the street
the sudden surprise and
happy confusion
trying to place it

a surprise blue skirt
white blouse
graceful simplicity with that impact of surprise

Beth—do you remember the girl I call "Beth?"
walking up Lexington avenue about 56th
with a friend
almost sunny

A sunny Tuesday
high noon
the face in the crowd beaming across an intersection
one's own steps turned back

three different appearances of Joyce
in baby blue dress
from endearing to mocking

a group of older girls
and some baby lambs

Courtesy Drugs checkout girl
also seen in Food Shop
piled up hair again
warm light brown corduroy slacks
no socks but the same dreamy docileness
the immense innocence
and beauty of expression
warmth in her contacts in Food shop

Are you asleep, Robert?
Are you asleep?
Shall I open the window?
I will be here all night if there is anything you need.
I will bring you tea in the morning.

[and he pulls the covers up to keep Robert warm
very carefully, meticulously, tucking the covers in
just under Robert's chin]

[The faint bluish suggestion of storm clouds
emerging from tunnel.]

HERBALIST

A window is a lovely thing.

[Surprised, Joseph turns his attention at once
to these people talking—the voyeur again.]

PHARMACIST

A lovely thing.

I myself have a shop with a window
and what I like to put in the window of my shop

I like to put a glass beaker
or a vial of some sort
with an emerald green liquid in it
or a deep blue
because people will look at that

HERBALIST

Or sometimes I will put a white clay pipe in my window

ASTRONOMER

Or balloons.

PHARMACIST

Balloons.

Balloons are always good.

HERBALIST

Or...

a forest of twigs
green-leaved twigs
a crescent moon

PHARMACIST

crumbled pieces of paper with text on them
a giant crumpled ball of paper with text on it

HERBALIST

fussy old wallpaper with birds on it
or butterflies

PHARMACIST

a music box wrapped in paper with old printed text on it
and on one side, a letter with stamps and postmarks

JOSEPH

birds

PHARMACIST

a paper cockatiel

ASTRONOMER

a whiffle ball

HERBALIST

the head of a porcelain doll

JOSEPH

small wrapped packages
with ribbons on them
packages of words, bits of text
bits of handwriting

ASTRONOMER

the stars
a map of the starry sky
the milky way

JOSEPH

sand

PHARMACIST

seashells

JOSEPH

broken glass

PHARMACIST

a wine glass

HERBALIST

little pennants with stick pins

ASTRONOMER

zeppelins

a new star exploding in the heavens

PHARMACIST

an engraving of a girl caught in the act of drawing

HERBALIST

Renaissance women

a Renaissance girl

ASTRONOMER

children

girls

young women

flowering trees

HERBALIST

Hedy Lamarr

JOSEPH

wooden benches under a quince tree

children's blocks

with pen and ink sketches of owls and ferns and songbirds on them

an 18th century man in a snowcovered forest

a star in a box as though found under a bridge

PHARMACIST

This will catch the eye of your typical passerby.

He will be looking in the window

and thinking

if I had one of those

then I'd have a complete life.

[A young girl enters,
takes hold of the ballet barre
and does her ballet exercises,
while a pianist plays for her.

Or it could be that Carolee Schneeman enters naked
with her cello,
sits and plays Bach.

A girl enters,
takes off her tutu and leotard,
and gets into street clothes
while we listen to the cello.]

ASTRONOMER

There was a time
when you came indoors from the fields
you would expect to see
traces of human occupation everywhere;
fires still burning in the fireplaces
because someone meant to come right back;
a book lying face down on the window seat;
a paintbox
and beside it
a glass
full of cloudy water;
flowers in a cut glass vase;
an unfinished game of solitaire;
a piece of cross-stitching
with a needle and thread stuck in it;
building blocks
or lead soldiers
in the middle of the library floor;
lights left burning in empty rooms.
This was the inner life.

We miss it.

[The girl leaves.

And, if Carolee Schneeman was playing the cello,
then she leaves.

Joseph sits at the kitchen table,
his head in his hands,
in despair

while we hear one of Joseph Cornell's favorite singers,
Kathleen Ferrier, sing—
on an old, scratchy, badly preserved record album—

Where'er you walk,
cool gales shall fan the glade;
trees where you sit
shall crown into a shade.

Where'er you tread,
the blushing flow'rs shall rise,
and all things flourish,
where'er you turn your eyes.

(This song is G.F. Handel, Semele,
and is taken from a CD album called Songs My Father Taught Me,
put out by Gala records)

A star map is projected,
along with black and white engravings
of the bull of Taurus
and the fish of Pisces
and a huge silver ring is suspended in midair.

Two artists—Matta and Duchamp—
sit in the garden talking.]

MATTA

What sort of future do you see?
what sort of future of humanity and of the world

DUCHAMP

what new forms

MATTA

what new visions

DUCHAMP

this will be the job of the artist

MATTA

this will be the artist's only job

DUCHAMP

because the great changes in the world
the changes of consciousness
the changes of our sense of life itself
will not come from the reasoned arguments
of political scientists or philosophers
but from the visions of artists
not by arguing well
but by speaking differently

MATTA

or is this a promise that has failed, or is failing?
new visions are easy to come up with
but the world goes on ignoring the best of them
the world is littered with so many utopias

DUCHAMP

so many visions of wondrousness
so many great ideas

MATTA

and even ideas that were possible at one time or another
beautiful things

DUCHAMP

or never mind the great ideas
just life itself

the moments of life itself
transporting things
things that will last a moment
and then vanish forever
vanish forever
how does one cherish even what has happened
let alone what might have happened
how does one relish it
how does one relish life itself
it slips through the fingers so quickly

MATTA

this is where the work comes from
if one is an artist
from the shooting stars
water in a stream
a love
a young girl
a woman
a ballerina on the stage
snow flakes
the lifespan of a butterfly
all gone
a girl I saw in a window
Hedy Lamarr on a bicycle

JOSEPH

do you know Anne Hoysio
she works in a factory where I work
and I gave her a box that I had made
a box containing
a picture of a dog
a young girl
skyscrapers
a dark blue night sky
lauren bacall behind a glass frame
a ball
and I think she may have liked it
although

the truth is
she has hardly noticed me
before or since
she gave me a Christmas card
which I have saved in a special place
and I take it out from time to time to look at it
because
she was important to me
and her card is signed, you see,
it is signed
"Anne (tester) (Allied)"
tester in parentheses
and Allied in parentheses
because
you see
she thought she needed to identify herself to me
she thought our friendship was so insignificant
that I wouldn't know who she was
unless she reminded me
that she was a tester in the factory at Allied
where we worked
her Christmas card was
a sort of business Christmas card
that's how I guess she thought of it
but to me
I've saved it all these years
and I take it out from time to time
not just on Christmas
to look at it
to remember her

[We see
skyscrapers
a dark blue night sky
lauren bacall behind a glass frame
an orange ball.

Is Lauren Bacall present?
Or do we only hear her voice?]

JOSEPH

As the character in the movie,
you recall how great it was to be beautiful.
As someone who was a sex symbol yourself,
what are your views on that?

LAUREN

To begin with,
I never thought I was beautiful.
Sorry, guys.
I wish I thought I was divine.
Listen,
I would've been a much happier person
had I been able to look in the mirror and say,
"Gee, you are great!
Love your looks!"

JOSEPH

But,
you were called The Look.
You were the one who said,
"Put your lips together and blow."

LAUREN

Well, I'll go along with that.
But beautiful, no.
In movies, when somebody new comes along,
plays a part and it happens to click,
there is a tremendous exaggeration
about what you are,
what you have,
what this sudden new person is.
In my case, I was announced as the Second Coming.
I was this combination of Garbo and Dietrich
and Bette Davis and Mae West
all rolled into one—
and that was just in one movie.
Now, you know damn well
there was no way I was any of that.

Then came the second movie,
Confidential Agent.
It was a disaster, and I was a disaster,
and they said, "Oh, we made a terrible mistake."

JOSEPH

Are there parts of you in Hannah?

LAUREN

Well, I certainly recognize the woman's insecurity
and her fear of what's to become of her
on a personal level.
I recognize certain
confrontational moments that I've had
with my own children.
I know what it feels like
to want your child to do something
and have them not do it.

JOSEPH

You've written about how happy you were
with Humphrey Bogart
and how difficult it was for you after his death.

LAUREN

Well, it's been hyped so much.
But, of course,
it was a great love story.
Listen, I lucked out at a very young age;
it's been downhill ever since.
What can I say?
Then again,
I had what some people never have,
so I can't complain.

JOSEPH

Mother, why do you kick girls out of the house?
Why are you rude to them?
Do you not want me to have any friends?

And then, if you let them come
and sit with me in the garden
do you remember the time
you were washing dishes at the sink
and you emptied the dishpan out the kitchen window
and it splashed down like a waterfall
and soaked the girl who was talking to me in the garden
why did you do this?

[he is in a corkmaker's shop

an immense white-painted cork ball descends from the flies
and whirls of wire—as though watch springs—
and from beneath the stage rises
a huge cordial glass with a turquoise egg suspended in it—
or blue sand fills it half-way]

JOSEPH

I am looking for a.....
a present

CORKMAKER

For a girl?

JOSEPH

For someone.

CORKMAKER

But is it a girl?

That is to say, do you want something for a girl
or for a man?

JOSEPH

for my brother

CORKMAKER

I see. And what is it you would like?

JOSEPH

what do you have?

CORKMAKER

I have a little train you can wind up
that goes around a track
and a...

JOSEPH

do you have a clock?

CORKMAKER

a clock

JOSEPH

yes

CORKMAKER

we don't have clocks
what would your brother do with a clock?

JOSEPH

I would like a clock for myself
because
sometimes it seems to me
my life is going by so quickly
and I don't know what is happening
I think
if I could slow it down
I would notice it
I would feel OK about it
before it's gone

BALLERINA

Have you been looking for me?

JOSEPH

well. have I been looking for you?
Yes, well, I don't know.

BALLERINA

You can't be sure.

JOSEPH

No.

BALLERINA

You can't be sure.

JOSEPH

You see, I have obligations.

BALLERINA

I see.

I thought I'd like to come to tea.

JOSEPH

Oh, tea. Well.

BALLERINA

That would be alright?

JOSEPH

Oh.

BALLERINA

Shall I come for tea, then?

JOSEPH

Oh, yes, well, of course.

[she does, instantly]

BALLERINA

Where shall I sit?

JOSEPH

At the table here.

BALLERINA
OK.

JOSEPH
Shall I open the window?

BALLERINA
If you like.

JOSEPH
I have only one tea bag.

BALLERINA
We can share it.

JOSEPH
Will you have something to eat?

BALLERINA
I've brought a cake.

JOSEPH
Oh.

BALLERINA
Chocolate cake.

JOSEPH
Oh. Good.

BALLERINA
When I was a girl,
I suddenly realized that I loved to run fast at night
so I wrote my mother that I wanted to be
a ballerina.
I had never seen a ballet
but I had three favorite dancing records at boarding school:

The Grand Canyon Suite
The Fighting Song of Notre Dame
and something by Beethoven.

Later, when I was eleven,
we came to New York
and we obtained a scholarship for me
at the School of American Ballet.
I say we because it's good to have a mother behind you
if she's not too
[she laughs]
too much of a ballet mother.

The fact that I didn't know entirely the technique—
I sort of made some of it up—
I think Mr. Balanchine was interested in that
that little offbeat part of me
because the slight
peculiarities
of a dancer were interesting to him.
Otherwise you could have a plasticine doll you know
go through the positions.
But.
So.
I think he liked that.

My first piece was called The Unanswered Question
which
actually Charles Ives the composer had a very
mystical
he was very
attached
to this composition of his
some of it I believe was even supposed to be
improvised
and it was mysterious
and he chose that piece for me.
I was held aloft by four men
I never touched the floor

and there was someone on the floor
sort of trying to reach me
always
and I regarded the four men as my spaceship
The best part was when I was standing
on the two men's shoulders
and Balanchine said to me: just fall back!
So in the first rehearsal I looked around
to make sure the men were there to catch me
and then I just slowly—
oh, that was fun.

Then Balanchine revived *The Somnambulist* for me
and in that ballet
he always had me exit backwards
because you know
well
because I didn't need to see a doorway
to go through it.

I was reading a book by Eudora Welty
called *The Optimist's Daughter*
and there's one line that stuck
"it's memory that is the somnambulist"
There is no going backward in life,
except for the sleepwalker
and at the end....
At the end!
The poet that I—the sleepwalker—
am so deeply in love with
is stabbed by my jealous husband
and he's lifted—
the somnambulist carries the poet backwards
offstage
in her arms
and it's just a shocking entrance—
excuse me!—
Exit.

I've had a big problem with depression but—
That's why I like to dance.
Even now, I take ballet class every day.
To normalize my psychotic instincts.
I'm just mad for plies, tendus.
we are—
we're animals.
We have to run fast.
We have to swim,
we have to walk,
we have to dance.

And now
the world has come around to thinking that muscles
are very important.
However old you are.

I miss postcards.
You know.
Postcards are unique, and no one sends them any more.
It just isn't done.
And I often wonder: why not?
Has someone taken a moral position?

With a novel or a book you always come to the end,
but you can just keep reading or writing one postcard after another and never come
to the end.
Each one of them unique—and never an end
This is a kind of pleasure we simply don't know any more,
though it seems harmless enough when you think about it.
There's no point to it, and yet it's such a pleasure.
It's not what you would call goal-oriented,
that's the pleasure of it, I suppose,
you just take it for it's own sake.

And I like that you can never tell
which is the front and which is the back of a postcard.

JOSEPH

No.

Is this how you are?

BALLERINA

How do you mean?

JOSEPH

Is this how you are all the time
or just with me?

BALLERINA

How am I?

JOSEPH

Oh. Fine. Good. Excellent.

Odd.

A little odd.

BALLERINA

Good.

[Debussy.

A rain of soap bubbles,
a grandiose cloud of cumulus over treetop.]

JOSEPH

Robert? Robert?

Are you warm enough?

I've brought you some things.

Some watch parts

a coiled spring

you see?

a beautiful thing

some stamps,

marbles,

a gold-colored bracelet

a painted wooden bird

a cut out metal harlequin
marbles
candies
bubble pipes
a thimble
some bits of broken glass
scrimshaw
whales' teeth
left over buttons
spools of thread
feathers
sequins
a metal ring
a cork ball
a music box
these are for you

I love you, Robert.

[he sits at the kitchen table,
lost

a wall of musical notes
a box lined with musical notes, also its door
the door opens and someone is inside
a piano player playing ballet class music

a couple dances
or several people dance
a romantic dance]

ASTRONOMER

Most people feel that,
gee,
somebody must know all about that,
some university or something.
The fact is, no, they don't.

HERBALIST

Even about common species?

ASTRONOMER

Even the common birds.

HERBALIST

For a person just getting started watching birds,
what advice do you offer?

ASTRONOMER

First thing I'd tell them is

"Get some binoculars."

If you play tennis,
you get a tennis racquet.

If you go skiing,
you get skis.

If you go birdwatching,
you get binoculars.

PHARMACIST

"Enjoy watching the birds,
and don't be intimidated."

HERBALIST

Sometimes I hear a kind of
contempt
for people who enjoy birds only in the backyard,
as if they weren't real birdwatchers.

ASTRONOMER

Lillian and I have found
that some people tend to make a hierarchy
out of different ways of watching birds.
But there is no hierarchy.
There are various areas and ways
that people enjoy birds,

and we're all under the same tent.
It isn't something at the top
and something at the bottom.

PHARMACIST

It's a sphere. It's not a ladder.

ASTRONOMER

We always talk about cooperation,
not competition.
We're getting the language of hierarchy
out of our language
In referring to birdwatching.

PHARMACIST

And we use the words
birdwatching and birding
interchangeably.
We feel that people are participating
in both activities
in the enjoyment of watching birds,
and both those terms describe that,
even though some people want to split them
and make a lot of different definitions.
We're all under one big tent!

HERBALIST

Yes, right. With the birds!

PHARMACIST

That's right.

ASTRONOMER

And we have one thing in common.
We all love birds.

[A movie is projected—
the 1938 movie Algiers,
starring Charles Boyer and Hedy Lamarr.
Joseph speaks simultaneously with Boyer.]

BOYER

So, you wanted to take another look at the strange wild animal.

LAMARR

Strange. But not so wild.

BOYER

How do you like my cage?

LAMARR

I don't know—yet.

BOYER

How do you like Algiers?

LAMARR

I don't like travelling—makes me homesick.

BOYER

Does it?

LAMARR

If I can't see Paris when I hope my eyes in the morning
I want to go right back to sleep. Do you know Paris?

BOYER

Do I know Paris?
La Rue Samartain.

LAMARR

Champs Elysee.

BOYER

Gare du Nord.

LAMARR
L'Opera.
Boulevard Capucines.

BOYER
L'Abays.
La Chapelle.

LAMARR
Montmartre.

BOYER
Boulevard Rochcouchoir.

LAMARR
Rue Fontaine.

BOTH TOGETHER
La Place Blanche.

BOYER
What a small world.

LAMARR
Cigarette?

BOYER
Thanks.
Have a light?

LAMARR
We are a long way from home.

BOYER
Mm-hmm.
Excuse me.
Well?

GUY

He still thinks he's playing his last card.
Merde.

BOYER

I'll tell her you said so.

GUY

No, no, I mean the rock she's wearing.
Now, if it was me, I'd get that first
and then do the fancy stuff afterwards.

BOYER

Shut up.

GUY

You can't talk to me like that.

BOYER

You heard me. Shut up.

GUY

OK.

LAMARR

He was talking about me?

BOYER

He was worried about you.

LAMARR

About me?

BOYER

All that stuff you have on.

LAMARR

Oh, that's nice of him.

BOYER

You're not worried?

LAMARR

No. Not while I'm with you.

BOYER

Right.

This is something.

LAMARR

Isn't it? And it hardly weighs anything. Look.

BOYER

At least 20,000 francs, hmm?

LAMARR

Add a zero.

BOYER

Oh, I mean—what I would get for it.

LAMARR

Oh!

BOYER

Here. Put it on again.

LAMARR

You put it on.

[Dance music comes up.]

BOYER

Want to dance?

LAMARR

Yes.

[They dance.

Joseph watches them a long while as they fade
or
Joseph dances with someone, or he dances alone.]

[Debussy or Chopin
the big dipper
a birdcage
painted white
which descends over the front of the stage
filling the proscenium arch
the bird has gone from the cage]

HERBALIST

Do you come back often?

JOSEPH

No.

I've only come back for the funeral.

HERBALIST

I see.

JOSEPH

Otherwise

I haven't been back since my father died
when I was seven.

HERBALIST

So young!

JOSEPH

And that was when we moved
and we left a good many things behind
in the attic.

But otherwise I haven't missed things so much.
The front yard
which sloped down from the front of the house
toward the corner.
And the big tree in the front yard.
I've never had a fireplace since that time.
I would like to have a fireplace.
Otherwise I haven't missed anything
except my father.

HERBALIST
You miss him.

JOSEPH
Oh, yes.
After he died
our lives were never the same again.

MOTHER
Joseph?

JOSEPH
Yes?

MOTHER
What is this you've left on the kitchen table?

JOSEPH
Oh. Have I left something?

MOTHER
You're not a child.

JOSEPH
No.

MOTHER
And yet it seems
you leave things on the table

you leave things on the chairs
you leave things on the cabinet
you leave things on the floor

JOSEPH

I'm sorry, mother.

MOTHER

And what?

Is the faucet fixed?

Have you fixed it?

Or have you called the plumber?

I will be right if I blame you for everything.

JOSEPH

I'm sorry, mother.

MOTHER

And do I not always do everything for you?

Here.

I've read the newspaper for you

and I have clipped out the articles

you will want to see.

[she reads the headlines from the clippings]

JUDY HOLLIDAY'S GONE AND BROADWAY WEEPS
SEA SHELL MINIATURES STILL HOLD OLD CHARMS
PAN AM HELIPORT TO OPEN

JOSEPH

Judy Holliday is gone?

Has she died?

MOTHER

Yes.

JOSEPH

Oh.

Sometimes a person will wonder:
what does art matter
compared with the sad prospect of a life
unlived?

[ice cubes
a diamond necklace
velvet]

MARIANNE

I've enjoyed your letters.

JOSEPH

Oh, I'm sorry.

MARIANNE

Sorry?

JOSEPH

I didn't mean to impose.

MARIANNE

Impose. No. Certainly not.
I only wonder if I did something inconsiderate
to have made you
disappear
the way you did
I had thought we had quite a
heartfelt exchange
so that
after I sent my last note to you
I waited
two years
for a reply.
So I wondered:
what had I done wrong?

JOSEPH

Oh.

No.

You did nothing wrong.

[Joseph and Gorky are sitting at the kitchen table

having two cups of tea

made with one tea bag.

We watch as Joseph pours two cups of hot water from a pot.

Then he dips a teabag into his teacup

then dips it in Gorky's.

Joseph dips the tea bag back and forth as

he tells Gorky how hard things are for him,

his life as an artist:

JOSEPH

I work in the basement.

That's where I keep all my materials

for my work.

And I think:

What am I doing?

I've lost my way

why don't I give it up?

there are times I get so lost

I don't know what to do

I've gone so deep, so far

I don't know if I'll ever find my way out again

and then: what's the point?

is this useful?

does anyone care?

I get up in the morning

some days I just weep and weep

is everything I do just written on water?

but what else can I do?

just because another artist is incredibly famous

doesn't mean his work is destined to fall

into oblivion in another generation
and my work will endure
is this any way to spend a life?
I'm living my life in a basement.

[And Gorky replies, in effect:
you think you've had it bad?]

GORKY

I was born Vosdanik Adoian
at the turn of the last century
in Khorkom,
a now destroyed village
in the western Armenian province of Van,
part of the Ottoman Empire.
I didn't speak until I was 6.
My father left my mother, Shushan, and her children
to find work in America,
promising to send money so they could join him,
which he never did.

After the siege of Van City by the Turks,
with my family
I fled the Turkish slaughter of Armenians by trekking east.
My mother had already endured unspeakable horrors.
Years earlier, her father, a priest,
had been killed and his body nailed to the door of his church,
and she had been forced by the Turks
to watch her previous husband murdered.
Now she starved herself to give her children
what little food there was on the long march.
Broken and impoverished, she died,
while I was by her side.

Where am I now?
My studio has burned down
with most of my work still in it.
An operation for rectal cancer
has forced me to use a colostomy bag.

I am a fastidious man.
I find this unbearable.
My wife has run off with Matta.
I have broken my neck and my painting arm
in an automobile crash.
I don't sleep well
and I have headaches.
I pushed my wife down the stairs in a rage
when I was drunk.
Now she is gone.
And I have nothing left but to hang myself.

[Music.
snow on glass with a hole at the center
for an actress to look through
as she sings a pop song
maybe Cole Porter

sings a song
sings a song

JOSEPH
Sometimes, mother,
we have a peaceful exchange

MOTHER

and we like that
do we not like that?

JOSEPH

Yes. Yes, we do,
but more often
you criticize my behavior
your criticisms fill the air like
like musical darts

MOTHER

Not like darts.
Oh, Joseph, not like darts.

JOSEPH

you say nothing without an edge
glowering at me from across the room
resentful when you are not included
belligerent
like
like
like Queen Victoria

MOTHER

Queen Victoria.

JOSEPH

what you require
it seems to me
is absolute sexless loyalty

MOTHER

No.

JOSEPH

and then there will be times
we sit together in the back yard

MOTHER
in the warm weather

JOSEPH
Yes

MOTHER
idyllic

JOSEPH
Yes
and then you will somehow say
"I haven't had one word from Mrs. Duchamp
for the letter I took such pains with
and also I wonder if she ever got the little gift
in my last gold and silver Lord and Taylor gift box
People could take a minute or two
to acknowledge little kindly things their friends do"
and then the complaining and criticism
has begun again

MOTHER
Oh.

JOSEPH
so that no one would ever know
who you really are
the intensity of your inner life

MOTHER
Oh.

JOSEPH
the letters that you write me sometimes
for no reason at all
do you know that I mark on them
"read again"

MOTHER

No.

JOSEPH

to remind myself
to read them again and again and again
because then I see you love what I love

MOTHER

we are kept alive by the same things

[an entire back wall of the theatre
with bottles with things in them
or the entire fabulous window of a pharmacy
or the fantastical window of a Paris shop
or a thousand sorts of watch springs]

JOSEPH

Of course, I wouldn't want to be presumptuous.
Giving advice to you.
A person of a different generation.
What I think
may no longer be useful.

THE GIRL

Still....

JOSEPH

Still,
if I were to say anything to you
it would be:
do what you love
not what you think you should do
or what you think is all you can do
what you think is possible for you
no
do what you love
and let the rest follow along behind it
or not

or not
because
even if it doesn't follow along behind
you will have done what you've loved
and you know what that is
you know better than anyone what you love
and a life centered around your love
cannot be wrong
cannot finally be disappointing

THE GIRL

Easy for you to say.

JOSEPH

No. No, it isn't.

[The back of giant silver watch with a glass back
is projected on the back wall.
Its round frame is filled
with deep blue sky and stars
and the constellation Taurus in white etching.]

JOSEPH

Robert, are you asleep?

Are you asleep?

I've brought you some things.

You see:

a metal ring

a piece of string

a cork ball

a wooden dowel

a clock face

a little box

Robert.

Now then

don't leave me, Robert.

Who will I care for?

Who will I give things to?

Who will talk to me?

Because
we've had a lifetime together
without you
our lifetime
is gone.

[the train comes crashing through the wall
its whistle screaming
steam engine pounding
hissing steam
roaring and slamming

Cornell pulls the sheet up to cover Robert completely
and then sinks to the floor weeping]

THE ASTRONOMER

One time
long ago
not far from here
the poet Simonides
was gathered with his friends
for dinner at a palace in the hills
across this valley.
Simonides stepped outside onto the terrace
for a moment
for a breath of air,
and in that moment
an earthquake
shook the villa
and brought it to the ground.
All Simonides' friends were crushed to death,
their bodies mangled and torn apart,
not even their own families could recognize them.

But Simonides could picture in his mind's eye
just where each one of his friends had been sitting,
and as he recalled them one by one
their bodies could be

pulled out from the rubble and identified.
And from this moment
came the beginning
of mankind's desire to remember
exactly
how the world has been
at one moment or another.

And so Simonides
instructed his friends
how to build their own palaces of memory,
how to build each room
how to furnish these rooms
with the faces and figures of their friends,
events of their lives,
their treasures,
books, poems,
each room given things of singular beauty
or distinctive ugliness,
to make them vivid
unforgettable
memories disfigured,
faces splashed with paint
or stained with blood
each moment suspended
in this geometry of memory, thought
and feeling.

[A movie is projected—
Algiers again, with Boyer and Lamarr.
Joseph speaks simultaneously with Boyer.]

BOYER
You're beautiful.
That's easy to say.
I know a lot of people have told you.
But what I'm telling you is different, see?
For me you're more than that.
For two years I've been lost.

Like walking in my sleep.
Suddenly I wake up: that's you.
I don't know what I've been doing all that time
waiting for you without knowing it.
Do you know what you are to me?
Paris.
That's you.
Paris.
With you, I escape. Follow me?
The whole town—a Spring morning in Paris.
You're lovely.
You're marvelous.

[cut to: he kisses her]

LAMARR
It's late. I must go.

BOYER
Suppose you don't come tomorrow.

LAMARR
Suppose I don't.
Can't you ever get away from the Casbah?

BOYER
Why do you ask?

LAMARR
Can't you?

BOYER
No. I'm caught here.
Like a bear in a hole.
Dogs barking.
Hunters all around.
No way out.
Do you like that?
Maybe it's lucky for you.

LAMARR
I don't like it.
It's not lucky.

BOYER
You are right.
If you don't come back I might do anything.
I might go down to the hotel to get you.

LAMARR
Tomorrow, Pepe.

BOYER
Tomorrow?

LAMARR
I never break a promise.

[A black and white engraving of Andromeda
amidst the stars
is projected on the back wall.]

JOSEPH
The fact is, of course,
I am not a good prospect for you.
I am too old for you.

LEILA
I don't think so.

JOSEPH
I am twice your age.

LEILA
Well,
more than twice my age.

JOSEPH
You see.

LEILA
No, I don't.

JOSEPH
I will be decrepit and whatnot
while you are still just beginning your life.

LEILA
I'd like to begin it with you.
The only thing I regret
is that you won't live forever
because
I will miss you.

JOSEPH
A girl like you
anything is possible for your life

LEILA
I don't think so.

JOSEPH
Yes.
For you
it is.
A life of possibility.

LEILA
Then I'd like to be with you.

JOSEPH
You can always be with me
the way you are with Bleecker Street
or Bank Street
Broadway south of Houston
those shop windows
Debussy
Mallarme
Fanelli's on the corner of Prince and Mercer

the little store nearby where you can find
star fish
butterflies in little boxes
driftwood
and in the antiques store
the things from Asia
inlaid wood
a thousand little drawers
you have a good sense of mortality
in these streets
stopping in the cafes
looking at the light on the buildings
in the late afternoon
when it is already nighttime down below
lights coming on in the shops
and still afternoon in the sky above
this is how I spend my time
I can see it again and again
and never grow tired of it.

The fact is,
I've spent my life looking for true love
and never found it.

LEILA
I thought you had.

JOSEPH
Have I?

[a very long silence]

Yes.

[A wall of stars
the constellation Andromeda
or the moon

or a vast star map of the cosmos covers the back wall
[or should it look like a Pollack painting?
splashes and droplets of white paint—
and will this wall return at the end of the piece?].

We hear Satie's Gymnopedies on the piano.]

The End.

A NOTE ON THE TEXT:

Hotel Cassiopeia was inspired by the work of Joseph Cornell, and incorporates texts taken from his diaries and letters edited by Mary Ann Caws, some of his favorite movies, Deborah Solomon's biography *Utopia Parkway*, the writings of members of a Cornell workshop, especially Heidi Schreck, Jenny Sandman, Kristen Palmer, and Karen Hartman, the writings of Colette, and the treasures of the internet.

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