

The Hunger of Wolves

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*Of a certainty
the man who can see
all creatures in himself,
himself in all creatures,
knows no sorrow.*

Eesha Upanishad

*“The wolf thought to himself:
what a tender young creature, what a nice plump mouthful.”*

Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm

CHARACTERS:

AMBER SPENSER, a redheaded young playwright

DOCTOR RODERICK RONDEL, a retired forensic artist

MARGARET MADRIGAL, a theatre arts professor

VISCOUNT RUDOLPH VILLANELLE, her husband, a British born drama critic

TIME:

The present and recent past

PLACE:

New York City: the interrogation room of a police station; a sparsely furnished Manhattan apartment with a desk, several chairs, and shelves filled with human skulls; and a cabin in the Catskill Mountains.

SCENE 1

(New York City: in the interrogation room of a police station, AMBER SPENSER, a petite, unkempt, red headed young woman stands facing an audience of detectives.)

AMBER

Like where to even start. So, okay, maybe you detectives like things in order, like from the beginning. Right. Look, I didn't expect so many of you -- not that I'm scared. I'm totally into danger, but later for that. I wouldn't even be here if The Fang's wife hadn't tracked him down which is how she wound up at that creepy apartment in Harlem. So like picture the Doc sitting at his desk typing his memoirs or whatever. Everything's black: the walls, the chairs, his desk, and he's got these freaky skulls lined up on a shelf.

(As AMBER continues, dim lights reveal the sparsely furnished apartment of DOCTOR RODERICK RONDEL who sits at his desk, tapping the keys of his computer.)

AMBER

So The Fang's wife starts knocking at the Doc's door. At first it's just tap, tap...

(A tentative knocking is heard.)

AMBER

Then it's bang, bang!

(AMBER retreats as more insistent knocks are heard, and RODERICK looks up to acknowledge the frantic woman calling from behind the door.)

MARGARET

Doctor Rondel...? Hello...? Hello!

RODERICK

Who is it?!

MARGARET

Margaret Madrigal! I left several messages!

RODERICK

About what?!

MARGARET

My husband! He's missing!

Sorry, but I'm busy!

RODERICK

I can pay you!

MARGARET

No thanks!

RODERICK

I can pay you a great deal!

MARGARET

Go away!

RODERICK

May I leave my card?

MARGARET

No!

RODERICK

I have a note from your former colleague...

MARGARET

Leave me alone!

RODERICK

Oh, please, Doctor, I drove all the way from Roxbury! I'll just hand you his note and leave!

(RODERICK shuffles to the door. The moment HE cracks it open, MARGARET thrusts a note in his hand.)

MARGARET

There! Now won't you please let me in?

RODERICK

No!

(As RODERICK starts to close the door, MARGARET thrusts it open and dashes into the room.)

RODERICK

What the devil...?

MARGARET

Please! Please hear me out!

RODERICK

You can't just barge in here!

MARGARET

I...I'm sorry, but I...

RODERICK

Leave this instant or I'll call the police!

MARGARET

If you'll just listen...

RODERICK

Oh, Christ, don't tell me you're about to cry.

MARGARET

Forgive me, but I...I'm desperate.

RODERICK

Sorry, but damsels in distress don't move me.

MARGARET

I...I feel faint; could I sit a moment? Then I'll leave, I promise.

(MARGARET draws a handkerchief from her purse and blots her tears.)

RODERICK

Look, I know why you're here, but I left the department months ago.

MARGARET

Yes, but I was told you were the best in the city.

RODERICK

In the world! Look, whoever you are...

MARGARET

Margaret.

RODERICK

(pause, he sighs) When I was employed, I was asked to identify two kinds of people: the living and the dead, but my specialty was the dead, so if your missing person is...

MARGARET

But that's the problem, we don't know! At first everyone assumed Rudy was at a retreat which he never attended. The police didn't have any luck either, and I almost gave up in despair until someone sent me this.

(MARGARET reaches into her purse, draws forth a small pointed object, and drops it on the desk.)

RODERICK

A tooth...?

MARGARET

Not just any tooth. It's a canine with a diamond embedded in the center -- the result of an adolescent whim. The police think it's a prank, but it's his, I know it!

RODERICK

Did they check his dental records?

MARGARET

There aren't any. Rudy only saw a dentist as a child and no x-rays were taken. His full name is Rudolph Villanelle, and he's been missing for nearly a month. I need to know if he's alive, and I heard that you're a forensic medium, that bones speak to you.

RODERICK

Oh, really? Bones speak to me, do they?

MARGARET

That's what I was told -- that you have psychic powers.

RODERICK

And you believed it?

MARGARET

Well, no, not at first, but if it's possible...?

RODERICK

It is, but after I resigned, the dead had the decency to leave me alone. Now why don't you do the same.

(MARGARET sighs, then starts to leave but turns.)

MARGARET

I don't understand. Why would you want to stop sharing such a rare gift?

RODERICK

Ha! How naive you people are!

MARGARET

Fine, but I...I just want to understand.

RODERICK

Do you...?

(RODERICK grasps a skull from the shelf and approaches MARGARET.)

RODERICK

All right then, imagine that you're holding a cranium like this, possibly excavated from a construction site. You'd either employ a computer or do it the old fashioned way and make a cast to determine tissue depth, then apply clay and start sculpting until a recognizable human face appears. But all I have to do is clasp the cranium and voila: a stranger suddenly materializes -- not looking his best, mind you. My last case was a monstrosity caked in blood with his eyes gouged, his wounds seeping yellow pus, maggots crawling from his mouth...

MARGARET

Stop! Please! You've made your point.

RODERICK

With clothing, photographs, or emotionally invested objects, the deceased would simply whisper, telling me where their bodies were buried, and if they were murder victims, they might reveal how and by whom they were dispatched. Then the police would unearth their remains, DNA tests would confirm their identities, and the perpetrators would be arrested.

MARGARET

Well, wasn't that gratifying?

RODERICK

Not when fellow officers accused me of being a fraud, a freak, or even a suspect, although some learned to accept and even respect me. My captain referred to me as “a forensic intermediary.”

MARGARET

So is it true that most victims know their murderers?

RODERICK

Yes, though I’ve had my share of abandoned infants, neglected grannies, vagrants exposed to extreme weather -- some so demented, they couldn’t even tell they were dead.

MARGARET

Then you don’t see the radiant souls we read about?

RODERICK

What I see looks like faded films, projected visions of deteriorating mortality that I assume is some sort of transitional phase between here and the world beyond. Now I’ve said enough, so please leave, and don’t forget your tooth, which by the way is *not* a bone. Teeth are made of calcium phosphate, dentin and pulp, but bones are organic collagen.

(MARGARET snatches her smartphone from her pocket, taps it, then thrusts it in RODERICK’S face.)

MARGARET

Here! This is Rudolph! He was forty-two!

RODERICK

(glancing, then turning away) You still don’t understand what you’re asking. Surely you’re educated enough to know that there’s no such thing as objective observations. In other words, the dead have had their effect -- which is why I’m divorced, depressed, and sick of being in perpetual mourning.

MARGARET

I...I’m sorry; I didn’t realize...

RODERICK

Look, even if I agreed to help, what good would it do?

MARGARET

It would give me and his colleagues some closure.

RODERICK

Ha! That's what you think, but suppose he was tortured? Then you won't get closure; you'll get nightmares -- trust me, I know.

MARGARET

But if he was murdered, you could help me find his killer. He'll be arrested, there'll be justice.

RODERICK

You mean "revenge."

MARGARET

Well,...yes. In fact, that's why I think he disappeared. You see, Rudy was a theatre critic who wrote under the name V. Villanelle. He had a huge online following and was widely respected, but also reviled. His enemies called him "The Fang" -- because of the tooth.

RODERICK

It does appear denser and longer than most.

MARGARET

Yes, it made his smile seem...

RODERICK

Vampiric...? Is that what the V stands for?

MARGARET

No, it's for Viscount. He was the only son of a British earl who loved plays and poetry so much he changed his name from Villers to Villanelle.

RODERICK

So do the police have any suspects?

MARGARET

Hundreds! The detectives read his reviews and amassed a long list -- all the playwrights he'd excoriated. When they searched his office, they found folders filled with hostile, life-threatening letters, and now everyone's convinced he's been murdered, but I think he's hiding.

RODERICK

Even from his wife?

MARGARET

Yes, but we're separated, and I've filed for divorce.

RODERICK

I see. *(pause)* Well, I can assure you he's not among the living. In fact, he's right here.

(RODERICK points as an approaching apparition appears: the dimly lit SPIRIT OF THE VISCOUNT VILLANELLE.)

MARGARET

Oh, I...I don't see...

RODERICK

But I do! Thanks to the mistake I made of touching his tooth. *(pause)* I'm afraid his hands are covering his throat as if he can't speak. Now he's coming closer, gesturing to my phone.

(RODERICK'S smartphone jingles as HE jumps, startled, then reads his screen.)

RODERICK

Good god, he's texting me! *(reading)* "Too many threats on life. Moved to cabin in the woods."

(MARGARET slumps in a chair, her hand at her breast.)

RODERICK

You're not going to faint, are you? Hang on! I'll get some water!

MARGARET

Have you got something stronger?

RODERICK

Scotch all right?

MARGARET

Yes, anything...

(RODERICK opens a cabinet, removes a bottle of scotch, two glasses, and pours as MARGARET speaks.)

MARGARET

Where is he now?

RODERICK

(pointing) Over there, by the wall.

MARGARET

(raising her voice) Rudy! If you're listening, please tell us where you're buried and how you died!

(Pause as the VISCOUNT'S SPIRIT flutters his fingers and RODERICK's phone chimes.)

RODERICK

(reading) "Murdered by pack of deluded hacks."

MARGARET

Who?!

RODERICK

(reading) Playwrights! They're great grudge holders -- twelve in all."

MARGARET

Twelve? But how...?

RODERICK

(reading) "One sent as emissary: Amber Spenser."

MARGARET

I'll call the police!

RODERICK

(pause, reading) "No police! Meet Amber."

MARGARET

Yes, of course, Amber will know the others.

RODERICK

(pause, glancing down) What?! You can't be serious!

MARGARET

What...? What did he write?

RODERICK

"Meet Amber here." Absolutely not!

MARGARET

I...I'm sorry, I realize that's a terrible imposition. *(raising her voice)* Now Rudy, listen: how can we get Amber to come here?!

RODERICK

(pause, reading) She's vain so claim that you're a fan interested in producing her plays. Here's her number." *(to Margaret)* You heard me; I won't allow it!

MARGARET

Oh, please! As I said, I'll pay you.

(MARGARET opens her purse, retrieves a check, signs it, and drops it on Roderick's desk.)

MARGARET

Here!

RODERICK

Are you deaf?! I said no!

MARGARET

I hope it's sufficient.

RODERICK

Nothing's sufficient!

MARGARET

You haven't even looked.

RODERICK

Because I'm not interested!

(RODERICK'S glances at the check.)

RODERICK

My god...

MARGARET

What...?

RODERICK

Fifty thousand dollars. Rather exorbitant, isn't it?

MARGARET

You're worth it.

(RODERICK sighs then reluctantly pockets the check.)

RODERICK

Oh, all right -- damn! I'll text her, then let's get this over with. The sooner she comes, the faster you're out of my life. Oh, Christ, now he's drifting towards the bedroom.

MARGARET

Should we follow?

RODERICK

No! Now he's gone, vanished -- poof!

(Lights flicker then fade to black.)

SCENE 2

(AMBER reappears, addressing the detectives as MARGARET and RODERICK stand frozen in time.)

AMBER

So the forensic freak texts me and I fall for his bullshit and set up a meeting as soon as I get off 'cause I'm at work waiting tables. When I get to know them better, I figure that Margaret sees the glass half full, but his is half empty and spiked; like the words from her mouth are all pearls and his all lizards and toads. The freak says his life's been...

AMBER

...regrets, bitterness...

RODERICK

Regrets, bitterness,...

RODERICK

...preternatural violations of nature. Grief is the street I stroll, ha, ha!

AMBER

Can you fucking believe it? You detectives will appreciate that he's a posterity nut who records and remembers everything which is cool since now you'll believe me, right? Anyway, he explains why in his place...

AMBER

...everything's black.

RODERICK

Everything's black...

RODERICK

...since I'm told the deceased have an aversion to black.

(AMBER departs as RODERICK pours another scotch.)

MARGARET

What about all these skulls?

RODERICK

Souvenirs from the staff at the morgue.

MARGARET

(pause) Since you're an artist, I wonder if you'd draw Rudy -- how he looked just now.

RODERICK

No thanks, I'd prefer to draw you.

MARGARET

Me...?

RODERICK

Yes! Let me get my sketch pad.

MARGARET

I...I'd rather you didn't.

RODERICK

Look, I've done what you asked; now it's your turn.

MARGARET

(pause) Well,...if you insist.

(RODERICK retrieves a sketch pad and begins drawing.)

RODERICK

Now turn slightly to the left -- yes, perfect! I see you're blushing; how quaint.

MARGARET

May I speak?

RODERICK

If you must.

MARGARET

You'll tell me if he reappears?

RODERICK

Yes.

MARGARET

(pause) I always imagined the dead gazing down at the tops of our heads, as if they were passing by in glass-bottomed gliders.

RODERICK

Afraid not, some even emerge from under the rugs which is disconcerting.

MARGARET

Oh, dear, though I still consider your unique sensitivity a gift. Some people would hang out a shingle, join the lecture circuit, appear on videos, yet here you are.

RODERICK

Yes, I'm such fun.

MARGARET

Have you always had this ability?

RODERICK

No, thank god. I had an uneventful childhood in Queens, then attended Columbia thinking I'd become an orthopedic surgeon.

MARGARET

So bones have always been of interest?

RODERICK

Indeed. I'd be replacing knees if I hadn't witnessed a purse snatching. When the police asked for a description, I volunteered to sketch the thief, and my drawing led to his arrest. Their usual artist was impressed. He suggested I join the force, and since I much preferred drawing people to cutting into them, I became a forensic artist. After several years, I was called to identify the victims of a bread factory fire. That's when I had my first encounter -- brought on by the femur of a baker from Brooklyn. Then a few more started making appearances. At first I was terrified, thought I was going insane, but the police psychiatrist had the same response as you: "Consider it a gift," she said, "and carry on with the Department's blessing."

MARGARET

(pause) Well, I suppose you've had to acquire a degree of...detachment.

RODERICK

Yes, but that didn't stop me from becoming a cynical catastrophist -- to quote my ex.

MARGARET

I...I'm sorry.

RODERICK

It's my own fault. There's an empathy threshold I seem to have reached, so I've joined the living dead, holed up in my hovel. Christ, I can't believe I'm telling you this -- must be the scotch.

MARGARET

I understand you're also teaching.

RODERICK

At City College: three courses in drawing which scarcely covers the rent -- which is why I'm accepting your check against my better judgement. Now could you please tilt your head a bit to the right? Good. So are you staying in the city?

MARGARET

I teach creative writing at Hunter, so I have an apartment here in Manhattan. In fact, I aspired to being a playwright, but gave it up. My own inner critic was agonizing over every word of every line of dialog -- which is what playwrights do, of course, but one day my characters stopped speaking or I stopped listening, so I trashed the lot -- everything printed and everything stored -- gone forever!

RODERICK

(pause) It must have been a challenge being a playwright married to a critic.

MARGARET

Well, yes, though what he really wanted to be was an actor -- until he had a skiing accident that shattered the bones in his right leg which healed three inches shorter than the left. He was devastated and felt doomed to the sedentary arts, so he became a critic. His opinions are respected but he's often so harsh, we can't go to restaurants or theaters without his victims causing a scene -- cursing or tossing drinks in his face.

RODERICK

Oh, dear.

MARGARET

Oh, he loved it! He's driven by an obsessive need to impress people, but now that he's gone, I realize how little I knew him -- I can't even name his favorite plays or playwrights.

RODERICK

What about his family?

MARGARET

There's no one left, not even a cousin. The police asked why I hadn't reported him missing sooner, but we were living separate lives. *(pause)* You say you feel like the living dead; well, so do I, though not now -- not in your company.

RODERICK

And I'm no longer sorry you're here. You have very distinctive bones, especially your mandibular ramus. Amazing, isn't it? How bones endure centuries beyond organs, which is why they belong more to death than life, though you're very much alive, your flawless flesh still bonded to your frame, still emanating...radiance. Would you mind if I adjusted your hair?

MARGARET

No.

(RODERICK gently pulls back Margaret's hair.)

RODERICK

You have such lovely eyes...

MARGARET

So do you.

RODERICK

To think I wanted you to leave.

(MARGARET gazes up as RODERICK bends down then kisses her. SHE responds, then backs away.)

MARGARET

I...I'm sorry, but I...I'm seeing someone.

RODERICK

Ah! So is that the real reason you want to find his lordship? In other words, you need his remains so you're legally free to marry this other man...?

MARGARET

No, not at all! And Elliot and I are only dating.

RODERICK

Was it true what you said -- about feeling like the living dead?

MARGARET
Yes.

RODERICK
Even with Elliot?

MARGARET
Sometimes.

RODERICK
Then he's not the right one.

MARGARET
You're not being fair; you don't know him.

RODERICK
True, but I have extraordinary intuition.

MARGARET
About someone you've never met?!

RODERICK
No, about you. *(pause)* You see, when your vision includes the deceased, a veil is lifted so to speak; you realize that nothing matters -- nothing but the real intersections, the people who move something inside you, who make you feel more alive. Of course, I realize we're just getting to know each other, but kissing you made me feel like...

MARGARET
What...?

RODERICK
Like a frog turning into a prince -- though we'd have to do it again to be certain.

(MARGARET smiles; their lips meet and the lights dim to black.)

SCENE 3

(Hours later a disheveled MARGARET is posing for RODERICK as loud knocks are heard. MARGARET quickly buttons her blouse and RODERICK opens the door.)

AMBER

Hi, I'm Amber, I'm here to see Margaret Madrigal...?

RODERICK

Yes, come in.

AMBER

(pause, noticing Margaret) Are you're the lady who wants to produce my plays...?

MARGARET

I...I'm Margaret.

RODERICK

Won't you take a seat.

(AMBER seats herself.)

MARGARET

(pause) I'll be candid, Amber: the real reason I called is that it seems you knew my husband, the drama critic...

AMBER

(leaping up) Oh, shit!

MARGARET

Don't leave!

(RODERICK blocks the door.)

RODERICK

You heard the lady.

AMBER

What do you want?!

MARGARET

Where is he!? We know he was murdered by a group of playwrights.

AMBER

Murdered...? He wasn't murdered!

RODERICK

Just tell us what happened.

AMBER

Nothing! Are you a cop?

RODERICK

No.

MARGARET

Doctor Rondel is a forensic intermediary.

AMBER

A what...?

MARGARET

He contacts the spirits of the deceased which is how we found you.

AMBER

(pause) So you're saying he speaks to the...?

RODERICK

Actually, they speak to me.

MARGARET

That's how we know you killed him.

AMBER

No way! He's lying!

RODERICK

Please, just sit down and tell us what happened.

AMBER

Why? You won't believe me.

RODERICK

Try us, we might.

AMBER

Promise you won't call the cops?

RODERICK

We promise. Now please sit.

(AMBER sits.)

MARGARET

Can you tell us where you last saw him?

AMBER

In the woods. Someone in our group knows an ex-cop hacker who tracks people through their phones and cars, so that's how we figured where he was.

MARGARET

Go on.

AMBER

(she sighs) It started when we all wrote our names on scraps of paper and put them in a pot. So my name got picked which bites 'cause I'm not sure I have the guts, and the two guys who were supposed to come with me chickened out. But one of them loaned me his car which is how I found his cabin.

(As AMBER continues, SHE evokes the past, drawing forth a gun, then turning to encounter the VISCOUNT who wears a velvet robe and speaks with a British accent.)

AMBER

Hi, remember me?

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

No. Is that a real gun?

AMBER

Yeah, and if you don't want me to blow you away, you'll sit and do as you're told.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Who the hell are you?

AMBER

I'm the girl you called a prime example of the decline of literacy! You said my plays were the most idiotic doggerel ever typed by a twat.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Sorry, I hit the wrong key; I meant "twit."

AMBER

Right. You trashed everything me and my friends ever wrote. There are twelve of us, and I'm their messenger.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE
How did you find me?

AMBER
How do you think?

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE
A trail of bread crumbs...?

AMBER
Everyone thinks you're dead.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE
Obviously not "everyone."

AMBER
Why are you hiding?

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE
I like the woods; this is my den.

AMBER
So what do you do here?

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE
Dress up like grandma and trick little girls into following me home.

AMBER
Oh, yeah?

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE
Then I make indecent demands in case you're interested.

AMBER
No thanks. Now it's my turn to make demands, so here's what you're going to do: you see this sheet of paper? All your victims copied the meanest, snarkiest sentences from your hatchet jobs, so after you look them over, you're going to eat your own words while I record you in the act.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE
Ha, ha! I see, so I'm to be humbled -- humiliated.

AMBER

Right, and then you'll go viral.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Do I really deserve this?

AMBER

Yeah, at last count you caused seven breakdowns and three suicides: two from drugs and the last hanged herself -- and they're just the ones we know about.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Impressive. You people really ought to develop thicker skins.

AMBER

But then we wouldn't be playwrights, would we?

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Really, darling, why bother? Who gives a damn about plays?

AMBER

Thousands, maybe millions! There's online workshops and new theaters performing new plays all over the city, so yeah, people do give a damn!

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

(pause, staring) Ah, you must be the playwright they call Little Red.

AMBER

Maybe.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Then I think you'd like my woods. Why don't you stay here with me?

AMBER

Fuck no!

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

If you stay, you won't be little anymore. You'll expand from all the fresh fruits, meat pies, and buttery buns I'll bake -- not to mention the babies you'll breed after we roll in the hay. Here we can live according to instinct, indulge our appetites, do whatever we bloody well please.

AMBER

No way, and don't get any ideas! If I go missing there are plenty of people who know where I've gone and they'll finger you!

(AMBER hands the VISCOUNT the sheet of paper and aims her phone camera at his face.)

AMBER

Now take this, read it, then eat up!

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

And if I refuse, you're going to shoot me?

AMBER

That's right.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Not bloody likely, and you can't force feed me, now can you?

AMBER

You're starting to piss me off. Just eat the damn words and I'll leave!

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

So why didn't your friends send a man for gods sake? You're just a cunning little fox.

AMBER

A fox with a black belt in karate and -- what are you doing?!

(The VISCOUNT has crumpled the paper into a ball.)

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

I've decided to humor you, so I'll gobble my words quickly -- yum, yum!

(The VISCOUNT pops the balled paper into his mouth.)

AMBER

Wait! Not so fast!

(The VISCOUNT chews, then chokes, grasping his throat.)

AMBER

Oh, shit! Oh, no, don't croak on me!

(The VISCOUNT falls to the floor gasping as AMBER pockets her phone.)

AMBER

Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck! I'm outta here!

(The lighting alters and AMBER returns to the apartment to face MARGARET and RODERICK.)

AMBER

Before I left, I turned back and saw him sit up and puke out the paper -- gross. Sorry but it was.

RODERICK

So you're sure he wasn't...?

AMBER

No way, he was still breathing! (*pause*) but maybe after I left he stroked out or had a heart attack.

MARGARET

When did this happen? How long ago?

AMBER

Two weeks.

MARGARET

Two weeks! Is it possible he's been lying there...

RODERICK

I'll make a call to the Montreal police.

(RODERICK takes his phone from his pocket and approaches AMBER.)

RODERICK

Here: type in his address.

AMBER

Yeah, okay.

(AMBER types the address into the phone and returns it to RODERICK who leaves to make the call in private. Then MARGARET faces AMBER.)

MARGARET

Now, Amber, can you please tell me how he looked?

AMBER

Wasted, like hungover, with a beard and bad breath.

MARGARET

And his tooth...?

AMBER

What about it?

MARGARET

(holding the tooth) How did he lose it?

AMBER

Fuck if I know.

MARGARET

You didn't send it...?

AMBER

Why would I do something so stupid?

(MARGARET draws a notebook and pen from her purse.)

MARGARET

Write down the names of the playwrights in your group -- all of them.

AMBER

No way; we swore an oath.

MARGARET

Do you have that recording you mentioned?

AMBER

No, I left my phone in a bar before I had a chance to send it around so it's gone, but at least I snatched his plays.

MARGARET

What plays...?

AMBER

He had stacks on his desk with no name, so I figured they were be his.

MARGARET
Did you read them?

AMBER
Yeah.

MARGARET
Do you remember what they were about?

AMBER
Maybe. Why?

MARGARET
I'm curious.

AMBER
Right. *(pause)* Oh, yeah, one was about a girl whose skin was so sensitive her tears left bruises on her cheeks.

MARGARET
And she lived in rooms lined with feathers.

AMBER
Right. And there was another about swans and a hedgehog named...

AMBER
...Hans.

MARGARET
Hans.

AMBER
So are they his plays or yours?

MARGARET
He's a critic; he doesn't create, he castigates.

AMBER
Even the work of his wife?

(RODERICK enters.)

RODERICK
I've called a former colleague with the Montreal police. He's sending a car to investigate.

AMBER

Just keep me out of it.

RODERICK

I'm afraid that might not be possible, but don't worry, if the coroner's able to determine the cause of death was a heart attack, then you're not guilty of murder; however, you are guilty of stalking, breaking and entering, and aggravated assault. I don't know Canadian law, but you shouldn't get more than five years.

AMBER

What assault?! I didn't touch him!

RODERICK

Nevertheless, he died.

AMBER

Then he got off easy! *(to Margaret)* Your husband was one mean ass dick who did more damage than he'll ever know.

MARGARET

Because you let him.

(The lights flicker then black out.)

MARGARET
What's happening?!

AMBER
Fuck!

RODERICK
Relax ladies.

RODERICK
Rooms touched by death are subject to blackouts, brownouts, and sporadic flickerings. Trust me, it's just another day at Roderick's House of Horrors.

AMBER
(mumbling) Jesus...

RODERICK
I'll get a flashlight.

(RODERICK retrieves a flashlight as AMBER starts to leave.)

AMBER
Sayonara!

MARGARET
Wait! Don't leave!

RODERICK
Not so fast!

(RODERICK grasps AMBER'S arm.)

AMBER

Hands off, creep!

(AMBER kicks RODERICK then runs off.)

RODERICK

Owwwww! Shhhhit!

MARGARET

Wait! Amber, wait!

(MARGARET starts to follow AMBER, but RODERICK takes her arm, pulling her back.)

RODERICK

Stop, Margaret! You'll never catch her!

MARGARET

Damn!

RODERICK

At least now we have plenty of evidence.

MARGARET

What evidence...?

RODERICK

I've been recording everything from the moment you arrived. See that clock? It's a video surveillance device -- one of the perks of working for the police.

MARGARET

Is it still recording?

RODERICK

Yes.

MARGARET

Then would you please turn it off?

RODERICK

If you insist.

(RODERICK taps the clock.)

MARGARET

(pause) She's obviously on drugs -- all that restless pacing.

RODERICK

Did you notice how she tends to stand on tiptoe -- as if she had springs in her shoes!

MARGARET

How can she think she's not responsible?! I'm calling the police!

RODERICK

She'll be easy to track with that flaming hair, but let me call. I still have connections.

(RODERICK turns to make a call as lights flicker then dim to black.)

SCENE 4

(MARGARET is in the interrogation room addressing the audience of detectives.)

MARGARET

I...I wasn't aware that there were so many of you. Are you all detectives? I'm asking because I was hoping this interview would be kept confidential. I'm a very private person -- unlike Amber who's shamelessly exploiting the situation for her own self-promotion. In fact, the whole city seems to be joining her fan club. I'm told she's creating a new audience for bad plays, and here's here latest blog.

(MARGARET pulls out her phone and reads.)

MARGARET

“If you're looking for Amber, she's girl gone,
Falsely accused of doing wrong;
For shaming the vicious Viscount V,
Poor little Amber was forced to flee.”

One of her fan's responded:

(glancing at her phone): “If you're searching for Amber, the girl who fled,
Don't look towards land but to water instead;
She's raging a river, a storm at sea,
That's rocking the boat that carries me.”

It's all terribly trite but heartfelt and since you've asked what transpired after Amber left Doctor Rondel's apartment, I can tell you that the lights snapped back on and the phone rang. It was the Montreal police. Roderick answered and told me...

MARGARET
...the house is empty.

RODERICK
The house is empty.

(RODERICK has approached MARGARET in the past.)

RODERICK
There's no sign of the Viscount -- or anyone for that matter, and the morgue has no record of anyone fitting his description.

MARGARET
Then he must be alive! Amber was right, and he fainted or had a seizure.

RODERICK
But how...? How could he appear to me if he wasn't dead?

MARGARET
Maybe he was having a near-death experience -- floating between worlds. That might explain why he was indistinct and couldn't speak.

RODERICK
Trust me, Margaret, when people die, they tend to stay that way.

MARGARET
But what if his heart stopped and started again...? Then what if he left his home and died somewhere else? Would you be willing to touch the tooth again -- to be sure?

RODERICK
I'd rather not.

MARGARET
(*pause*) Sorry, I shouldn't have asked, but I...I could pay you more -- whatever you wish.

RODERICK
That's not the point!

MARGARET
Well, then... (*pause*) I...I suppose I should leave.

RODERICK
No, no, stay -- please. (*he sighs*) Oh, all right! Give me the damn tooth!

(Pause as MARGARET rummages through her purse.)

MARGARET

Oh, dear, it not here. Did I leave it on your desk? (*pause, searching*) No... Maybe it fell on the floor... (*pause, groping*) I don't see it -- oh, no! What if Amber took it? When the lights went out, she could've snatched it!

RODERICK

That's possible.

MARGARET

The little beast!

RODERICK

Relax, Margaret, sit down. Let's have another drink.

(RODERICK refills their glasses.)

RODERICK

I've been meaning to ask: why did his lordship choose to pillory playwrights? I mean why not pick on poets or novelists?

(As MARGARET responds, SHE evokes the past and the VISCOUNT appears more formally dressed.)

MARGARET

I asked him that and he said...

MARGARET

...playwrights need the most attention.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Playwrights need the most attention.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

After all, plays are the the poor invalid cousin of the arts. That's because they have fewer readers and small audiences which is why playwrights tend to be undervalued, underpaid, and assumed to be less stable -- which of course they are.

MARGARET

And why they need more kindness, more tenderness. You've never understood that true playwrights possess a purity of purpose; they write because they're driven, compelled to express their music through words meant to be spoken, words that resonate and keep us in touch with our feelings or to quote Dylan Thomas, "that change the shape of the universe."

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Ha! So you want to reshape the universe, do you?

MARGARET

I'm not talking about myself, but some people believe that plays spoken aloud in theaters emanate subatomic ripples, that they alter the world the way frogs leaping into ponds make concentric circles that expand, growing wider and wider.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

What rubbish! I'm afraid if anything's providing the circles it's technology, only it's expanding with trivia, consuming our days till we "go gentle into that good night."

MARGARET

Which is why we need the theatre more than ever.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Oh, Christ! How can you say such things without blushing? Really, it makes me want to slap your pretty face.

MARGARET

(backing away) Please don't! I'm still recovering from the bruises you gave me last time.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

What is it about you that makes me want to lash out? Could it be your blathering like an imbecile about things you can't possibly comprehend given your limited capacity to create anything remotely original.

MARGARET

At least I know I need to be nourished by words as much as food, even if sadistic bastards like you make people like me feel so shamed and inhibited, we become mute and fade into oblivion.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Sorry, my dear, but I have to live up to my reputation as the Plague of Playwrights, the Vampire of Verse sucking self esteem from inflated egos.

MARGARET

Why did I ever marry you?

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Because you loved playing Cinderella, dressing up for opening nights -- even for plays by rivals you deemed unworthy of praise. *(stroking Margaret's back)* But you especially loved your heart racing, your knees buckling, every muscle in your lithe body convulsing while you leaned back and I opened you up like a purse.

MARGARET

You used to say “rose” -- opened you up like a rose.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Did I...?

MARGARET

But you think of me as a purse!

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Better a purse than a curse, ha, ha! (*glancing at his watch*) Ah, I’d better leave; I have friends waiting.

MARGARET

I thought you were staying for dinner. I...I was going to broil lamb chops -- your favorite.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Sorry, I made plans.

MARGARET

If you leave, don’t come back; I’m serious, I’ll change the locks!

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Oh, dear, am I being banished? Not that I blame you; I’ve been a bitter disappointment, haven’t I? You equated my title with deep affinities, expecting me to grow warmer, wiser, more worthy of your beauty and affection. You thought I’d help you turn straw into gold, that I’d crown you Queen Margaret, the Diva of Drama, but instead you’re the goose girl who became the ogre’s whore.

MARGARET

The ogre’s bank!

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

If the person I am is not the person you perceived, whose fault is that?

MARGARET

I admit I was naive to believe you had the same feelings for me that I had for you. (*she sighs*) I’m sick to death of feeling sorry for myself, but I’m sorry for you too. I think how much better you might have been, that whatever good you might have done was stolen from you.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Oh, bollocks! I just can't be who *you* want me to be, and I certainly don't want to be pitied, caressed and fawned over. That's what *you* want!

MARGARET

Maybe, but I take full responsibility for my...mistake.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Me! I'm your mistake because I haven't fulfilled your infantile needs, but what you really need is something tangible to hate me for, so here, take this!

(HE slaps MARGARET'S face and SHE gasps, recoiling in shock!)

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

There! Now I'll see you when I return -- or not.

(The VISCOUNT departs as MARGARET turns to rejoin RODERICK.)

RODERICK

Did the bastard really hit you?

MARGARET

Yes, I hated him then, but hated myself more for not slapping him back! Still, it would be wrong to let you think he couldn't be charming. When we first met, he embodied my ideal: a proud, courtly, cultured prince of a man who could discourse on any subject. I'm sorry you only saw him for a few minutes.

RODERICK

But I only told you what I thought you wanted me to see -- not what I actually saw. *(pause, he sighs)* It's a strange ontological mystery, but even the dead radiate light: the best are the brightest, but his lordship only emitted a weak shimmer. I'm hesitant to tell you, and perhaps I shouldn't, but...

MARGARET

What...? Please tell me.

RODERICK

(pause) I saw a human form, but superimposed was something else, something feral with yellow eyes and a faint musky stench. Sorry, Margaret, but your Viscount was one of the most appalling apparitions I've ever encountered.

MARGARET

(pause) There's always reasons people are the way they are; it takes a monster to make a monster, especially if his mother died when he was four, and his father shipped him off to Canada to live with a lunatic.

RODERICK

A lunatic...?

MARGARET

His Uncle Asher. He was a taxidermist who believed that objects could be infested by ghouls, then leap to life and attack. That's one of the few things Rudy told me about his childhood: how he overcame a morbid fear of everything sharp: knives, scissors, needles, but especially the teeth and claws of the animals his uncle made him shoot. When he told me, I mentioned how his pen was wickedly sharp, and he confessed that when he wrote, he felt energized, high on the power of his own malevolence.

RODERICK

He actually said that?

MARGARET

Oh, yes.

RODERICK

You realize that everything you've told me describes a narcissistic sociopath: he was bold, disinhibited, and mean -- a soul-slaughtering sadist hired by the media to express his contempt for all the world to read. Yet somehow he adopted a personality charismatic enough to seduce you.

MARGARET

Me and dozens of others -- men as well as women.

RODERICK

Did you ever wonder if you might have succumbed to a suggestive state induced by hypnosis?

MARGARET

No, not really, but I suppose that would help explain why I let the abuse continue. Maybe I shouldn't mention this, but he especially enjoyed making love when I was bleeding.

RODERICK

Ah, and did he relish red meat, preferably rare?

MARGARET

Yes.

RODERICK

Was he nocturnal? More active between dusk and dawn?

MARGARET

Well, yes, he usually wrote at night and slept during the day, but so do many writers.

RODERICK

Tell me, did he travel in packs?

MARGARET

If you mean did he have male friends, then yes. They played poker.

RODERICK

Did they hunt?

MARGARET

Yes, hares, deer, moose -- even beavers and bison.

RODERICK

Did he howl at the moon?

MARGARET

You're joking, right?

RODERICK

Did he?

MARGARET

No, though his snores sounded like growls. *(pause)* I think what really bothered me was observing other couples: how they held hands, chatted, and laughed, and it made me realize what we were missing. There was rarely any tenderness or kind words, just ravenous lust. When I attempted to discuss this with Rudy, he accused me of being too needy, too demanding. Eventually we started drifting apart, and he began...

RODERICK

(pause) Prowling...?

MARGARET

I minded at first, but later I was...relieved.

RODERICK

What about those retreats you mentioned?

MARGARET

He said he sometimes needed to leave the city and get...

MARGARET

...back to nature.

RODERICK

Back to nature?

RODERICK

Margaret, there's something you should know. At first I wondered, but now I'm certain. *(pause, taking a breath)* You married a revenant. If you haven't heard of revenants, then you should know they've become popular among fantasists, but there's evidence that they actually exist. Apparently they infuse themselves into susceptible humans so they can indulge their blood lusting habits.

MARGARET

You mean like vampires?

RODERICK

No, that's fictional nonsense. I'm talking about *canis lupis* -- that's the genus and species of wolves, and while most are social, even monogamous, some become revenants.

MARGARET

I can't believe what I'm hearing.

RODERICK

How can you doubt it with all the savagery in the world? Where else could it come from?

MARGARET

Human nature!

RODERICK

Humans are animals, often enslaved by the basest of instincts, but revenants are spiritual infestations, reveling in rapes, arsons, lootings and shootings. Some manifest their cravings as outright assassins, either directly with guns and knives, or indirectly with drones, maps and a mouse. Believe me, there are revenants functioning in virtually every profession. We can't always tell when we're encountering one, or worse, when we become one ourselves. *(pause)* I feel I'm failing to convince you.

MARGARET

I...I don't know what to think. I mean, I always suspected that his hunger was perverse, but never inhuman. *(pause)* I...I feel like such a fool...

RODERICK

What you are is a vulnerable woman who succumbed to a powerful force. Truth be told, the minute you mentioned his name, I knew who he was. In fact, I've read many of his reviews, and knew all about his disappearance.

MARGARET

Then why didn't you say so?

RODERICK

I didn't want to get involved -- ha!

MARGARET

Are you sorry...?

RODERICK

No, in fact I'm hoping you never leave.

MARGARET

Really...? But I feel so corrupted, so lacking in whatever attracts -- what was it you said? -- "a real intersection." How can you feel the way you do after all I've told you? How can you want to draw someone so misguided, so...insubstantial?

RODERICK

Oh, you're more than substantial. Your hair alone is enough -- a torrent of silk flowing from the tower window. I keep wishing I was a humming bird and could entangle myself, but since I'm grounded, I'll settle for sketching you again -- only this time in profile. Would you mind unbuttoning your blouse to expose your clavicle?

(MARGARET unbuttons her blouse.)

RODERICK

Now look this way; turn your head. Yes! Perfect! Later I'll add a crown of jewels.

MARGARET

And are you the king?

RODERICK

Not till I'm kissed.

(MARGARET kisses him.)

MARGARET

So are we trapped in a fairy tale?

RODERICK

Isn't everyone? Now stay still, don't move; I need to sharpen my pencils.

(RODERICK departs as lights dim to black.)

SCENE 5

(MARGARET continues addressing the audience of detectives.)

MARGARET

Sorry to keep rambling, sharing such intimate details, though I'm sure you detectives have heard your share of disgusting and depraved testimonials and I...I do want to cooperate. Of course, Roderick can confirm everything I've said. You'll be questioning him too, won't you? (*pause, she sighs*) Now where was I? Oh, yes, I was in my apartment grading papers when Roderick called and insisted I come right away, and there was Amber, extremely upset. She was convinced that...

MARGARET

...they're being murdered.

AMBER

They're being murdered!

(MARGARET has entered the apartment where RODERICK and AMBER are seated.)

AMBER

The Fang's alive and getting his revenge!

RODERICK

But exactly did they die?

AMBER

Suspiciously, that's how!

RODERICK

Sit down, Margaret. Apparently, a blind playwright fell down a flight of stairs, concussed, then passed on.

MARGARET

Well, if he was blind...

AMBER

He was in his own home and totally sober!

RODERICK

Then two days later a playwright drowned in her tub while another fell off -- where was it?

AMBER

The Fulton Street platform!

MARGARET

You mean...?

AMBER

The train! He was pushed!

MARGARET

Oh, god, how awful, but couldn't the timing just be a tragic coincidence?

AMBER

No way! I've warned the others; he knows who they are.

MARGARET

But that's absurd, although... Oh, dear.

AMBER

What...?

RODERICK

Go on, speak up!

MARGARET

Well, I once heard Rudy say that most playwrights were wasting their lives and should be put out of their misery.

AMBER

We need bodyguards!

RODERICK

That's impractical, though if what you suspect is true, then you'd be a prime target. I don't suppose you've shared your suspicions with the police?

AMBER

Actually, yeah, but they said they need evidence, so it's up to you. If I find some pictures and stuff, can you conjure their ghosts?

RODERICK

I'm not a magician; I can only summon the ones who want to be summoned, and bones are my primary conduit. Of course, the fact that I don't see them, doesn't mean they're not here.

AMBER

But if you can't see them, can you still tell if they're around?

RODERICK

Sometimes they emanate sensations of restlessness -- like negative ions before a storm, so the answer is yes, I can.

AMBER

So is anyone here now?

RODERICK

Possibly, but with your incessant pacing it's hard to sat.

(AMBER starts to text on her phone.)

MARGARET

Who are you texting?

AMBER

Everyone I know!

(while texting)

“Heed these words if you give a rat’s ass,
Life will be short if you let The Fang pass
Into your presence awake or asleep,
Now you’ve been warned: stay clear of the creep!”

MARGARET

Then you just send it without a second glance?

AMBER

Yeah, I’m a spontaneous flash playwright. My specialty is dialog in couplets at city slams. That’s when we meet in bookstores and read our stuff:
“Where throats burn hot and tongues catch fire;
Our words spit fuel upon the pyre.”

MARGARET

(mumbling) My god...

RODERICK

So that’s a flash play?

AMBER

Written in a flash to be read in a flash.

MARGARET

And forgotten in a flash.

AMBER

Look, I get it: You're marginalized and unappreciated, so you resent people like me.

MARGARET

No I don't, that's ridiculous!

AMBER

I've read your work; I get the passion and imagery, and you're cool, but you're also a cliché. Anyway, to me anything that calls itself a play is a play.

MARGARET

Yes, it's a great time to be a creative writer; everything's fair game. The first playwrights were poets and myth-makers, but now my students write skits with titles like "On sorting socks." or "While filing my nails." Of course, my response is only my own biased opinion, but I believe good plays are densely crafted works of art that take time, effort, imagination, and change the way we see the world. In the words of Robert Frost, "It begins with a lump in the throat and ends where emotion has found its thought and..."

MARGARET

...the thought has found its words."

AMBER

The thought has found its words.

AMBER

Yeah, I remember you quoting him in class.

MARGARET

Oh, you were one of my...?

AMBER

Yeah, two semesters ago.

MARGARET

I...I'm sorry, I didn't recognize you.

AMBER

My hair was blue then, and I came at night with a hundred other drones, all of us writing shit, but you got us started.

RODERICK

Was she a good teacher?

AMBER

Yeah, she told us not to be slaves to old forms, to find our own voices and not forget that the smallest details are sometimes better than spilling our guts. Her class was where I wrote my first bat play in the same meter as “The Raven.” She even helped my friends get jobs, and sent us to readings and free theaters. Thanks to her I’m writing every day, and I’ve got over three thousand followers and counting.

MARGARET

(mumbling) Impressive...

RODERICK

With all this attention, are you being paid?

AMBER

Fuck no, not a cent! What about you, Doc? I notice that stack on your desk. Are you writing ghost stories?

RODERICK

My grim tales, mostly recounting some of my experiences identifying the casualties of war. When asked why they volunteered, a few admitted they wanted heroic lives, though I often wondered if they meant deaths. Many had watched family members suffer the indignities of dying, and wanted none of it. On the battlefield, they had three choices: either survive intact; survive with afflictions; or check out in bright blasts of bowel bursting assaults. It’s violent and messy, and if the politicians who send them there could see what I saw, they’d think twice about playing their war games.

MARGARET

So is your book political? Are you attempting to end the insanity?

RODERICK

Why not? Is that asking too much? But seriously, will anyone want to read anything so depressing?

MARGARET

Yes.

AMBER

No.

(The lights flicker, then turn off.)

AMBER

Whoa!

MARGARET

Not again.

RODERICK

Oh, damn...

MARGARET

At least there’s some moonlight.

RODERICK

I’ll get the flashlight.

(RODERICK leaves as music fades in.)

MARGARET

(whispering) Do you hear that?

AMBER

Yeah...

(AMBER sways as dim lights reveal the VISCOUNT'S SPIRIT entering unseen by Amber and Margaret. HE controls AMBER'S movements like a shadowy conductor of a hypnotic ballet. Then AMBER grasps MARGARET'S hands and THEY waltz around the room. RODERICK enters and observes them until the VISCOUNT'S SPIRIT departs and the lights are restored.)

MARGARET

What...? What just happened...?

RODERICK

You were waltzing; it was enchanting.

MARGARET

(to Amber) But why...? Why did you grab my hand?

AMBER

Fuck if I know. My shrink says I have no impulse control.

MARGARET

But you heard the music...?

AMBER

Yeah.

RODERICK

My neighbor's a violinist.

(AMBER'S phone rings and SHE glances down.)

AMBER

Shhhit! I'm late for work! I've gotta go; so long, Roddy!

(AMBER dashes off.)

MARGARET

Roddy...? She calls you Roddy?

RODERICK

Apparently.

MARGARET

(pause) While we danced, she was stroking my back.

RODERICK

I noticed; cheeky devil, isn't she?

MARGARET

She's so careless, so out of control. How can she live like that?

RODERICK

Don't ask me, but what a coincidence -- that she was your student.

MARGARET

Not really, I run into them all the time. You're starting to like her, aren't you?

RODERICK

She amuses me, her acceptance and delight in herself. She shines, adds a little glitter to these rooms. Of course, I can only take a small dose of glitter, and she can't help it if she doesn't hold herself to your standards.

MARGARET

Why should she? The world loves her as she is, but how can anyone create anything meaningful when everyone's gawking, expecting great plays under pressure -- it's insane. *(she sighs)* I hate the caprices of the theatre world. It's like a hungry giant devouring people, then spitting them out, and the outs resent the ins until the ins become the outs and the cycle never ends, and it's so random and unfair.

RODERICK

I suspect you were offended when she called you a cliché.

MARGARET

Well, yes.

RODERICK

I wasn't going to mention it, but I've penned a few plays of my own.

MARGARET

Oh...?

RODERICK

They're kept in storage, embalmed in formaldehyde. I felt my drawings didn't adequately capture the suffering of my apparitions, but my god, the reams of rubbish, mostly rhymed couplets -- not unlike Amber's.

MARGARET

I'd love to read them.

RODERICK

Never! Although there is one dreadful little ditty I happen to recall, a sort of metaphysical monologue that I swear came directly from a victim who fancied himself a poet. Are you ready?

MARGARET

Yes.

RODERICK

"One night I beheld a young man's head,
Attached to a body presumably dead.
Oh, ghost, I cried, why appear to me?
There are things the living aren't meant to see."
Want to hear the rest...?

MARGARET

Of course!

RODERICK

"The ghost replied, I need your eyes;
Bear witness to my cruel demise.
I need your ears to hear my tale,
Through you true justice will prevail."
You want me to continue?

MARGARET

Oh, yes!

RODERICK

God knows why I remember such drivel. You promise you won't think less of me...?

MARGARET

I promise.

RODERICK

“My lips now speak the tragic truth;
 She passed the pox, destroyed my youth.
 Then loved another, said we’re through,
 She caused my death, so now it’s you
 Must slay the girl who loved me not,
 Then toss her in a ditch to rot.”
 Ha, ha! I made you smile! Now let’s hear one of yours.

MARGARET

Oh, no, since Amber retrieved them, I’ve been constantly revising, trying to write what I hope I’m capable of writing as the playwright I wish I were. In fact, yesterday I started revising a play about a poet, but I’m having trouble with a villanelle..

RODERICK

I’ve never attempted a villanelle. I’m not even sure what it is.

MARGARET

It starts with five tercets with the first and third lines recurring alternately at the end of the other tercets.

RODERICK

Can you give me an example?

MARGARET

Well, my first tercet goes like this:
 “Oh, slayer of such tender lives
 Who flees to woodlands all alone,
 Haunted by dreams of mournful cries.”

RODERICK

What’s next?

MARGARET

More tercets:

RODERICK

Well, go on.

MARGARET

“He tracks his prey with sharpened eyes;
 With savage pen impales the poem,
 Haunted by dreams of mournful cries.
 This feral fiend they once thought wise,
 Whose brutal judgements they bemoan,
 Oh, slayer of such tender lives.
 Soon bristles on his neck arise;
 He morphs throughout from blood to bone,
 Haunted by dreams of mournful cries.”
 It goes on a bit, and ends with a quatrain containing both the first and third lines.

RODERICK

My god, Margaret, listen to yourself! You knew! You knew the Viscount was a revenant!

MARGARET

What...?

RODERICK

“This feral fiend?” “He tracks his prey?” It’s all there! Clearly, he inspired your poem, though maybe not consciously; somehow you knew what he was yet didn’t know you knew.

MARGARET

So you’re saying my poem was more awake, more aware, than I was...?

RODERICK

Did Sleeping Beauty know she was sleeping? Aren’t our destinies influenced by other people’s perceptions of us -- even unconscious ones. In any case, I admire your efforts and I’m not an impartial judge. I grew up reading poems, plays, and novels.

MARGARET

Were your parents writers?

RODERICK

No, but they were avid readers, especially my father who was always defending the loftier impulses, a cheerleader for truth and beauty while being a feckless fucker of students. I guess I shouldn’t speak ill of him -- I’m worse. At least he preferred the living to the dead.

MARGARET

What are you saying...?

RODERICK

The real reason I ceased being a forensic intermediary is that I'd become obsessed with their presence, their strangeness. But I neglected my wife who left me, and then I left the force. Since I'm no longer employed there, I've stopped summoning them, but I also stopped drawing -- until you came along. In fact, I was wondering if you'd be willing to remove your clothes so I can study the alignment of your vertebrae. The truth is I've come to admire your beauty even more now that I know what it hides.

MARGARET

If you mean my secrets, I'm afraid I've told a roomful of detectives -- complete strangers! Oh, why am I always compelled to reveal so much more than I intend? And to the police!

RODERICK

Because they know the city's a dense forest, and they're the wizards who draw out our darkest tales, but fear not: They're also spellbound by the media's cyber world which means they've heard worse and have short memories. So will you pose for me?

MARGARET

Only if your spying gadgets are turned off, and you have to be naked too.

RODERICK

Really? You're serious...?

MARGARET

Absolutely! I only want you wearing the emperor's new clothes. Now I'm going to your bedroom to undress.

(MARGARET departs as lights dim to black.)

SCENE 6

(Lights focus on RODERICK who faces the audience of detectives.)

RODERICK

Why am I here?! I was told my surveillance recordings would suffice in lieu of my having to appear in person. In fact, I'd have nothing to do with this case if Ms. Madrigal hadn't employed my services -- not that I regret her doing so. *(pause, he sighs)* With regard to my personal observations: I believe the vanished viper of a critic was in the grip of a lupine revenant. *(pause)* Ah, yes, I can see by your condescending smirks that you think I'm a deluded crank, but clearly he conspired for us to meet Amber who claimed he was causing no end of mischief and murder. After three deaths from presumably accidental causes, Amber returned with the victims' photographs and slippers, but I couldn't summon a shadow. Then three days later she appeared at my door explaining that...

(By now AMBER has joined RODERICK in his apartment.)

RODERICK
...there was a crash.

AMBER
There was a crash!

AMBER
Four more croaked driving to Jersey when they veered off the highway into a fucking pole. The driver was wasted which was weird 'cause he's in AA, so maybe somebody spiked his drink. That's seven playwrights down, so don't tell me it's a coincidence! I even called the cops again, but the dick-heads accused me of being off my meds.

RODERICK
You're on medication...?

AMBER
So what? You think I'm making this up?

RODERICK
No, it's obvious you think these tragedies are premeditated murders.

AMBER
Executions! And The Fang's responsible!

RODERICK
But how? How can you possibly know?

AMBER
(pause, she sighs) If I tell, you won't believe me.

RODERICK
Try me; I'm more gullible than I look.

AMBER
Right. *(pause)* I know 'cause when it happens, I get flashes, like pictures from crime scenes, then I wake up in a sweat and have total recall which is like weird 'cause before I never remembered my dreams.

RODERICK
Has anyone witnessed The Fang or someone resembling him anywhere near the accidents?

AMBER
Fuck no 'cause he's morphed into something we can't see, but how?

RODERICK

From pure spite I imagine.

AMBER

So you believe me...?

RODERICK

Let's just say I've seen things I can only describe as manifestations of malice, though I tend to be skeptical of prophetic dreams.

AMBER

Right. *(pause)* Look, I have a favor to ask: would you mind if I crashed here tonight?

RODERICK

Here...?

AMBER

Yeah, maybe I won't dream if I'm not sleeping in my own bed. Just last night I dreamt this actor who writes his own plays got whacked near Times Square while riding his bike, so I told him to take the subway, but he said forget it -- the dick!

RODERICK

So is he all right...?

AMBER

I don't know.

RODERICK

Look, isn't there some other place you can stay? What about your parents?

AMBER

They live in Jersey, but the last time I went home my mom went apeshit when she saw my tats -- tattoos.

RODERICK

Well, what about your fellow playwrights?

AMBER

No way! They're targets, and I need someplace safe. Look, I won't be any trouble, just for tonight.

(Pause as AMBER twitches, then appears to undergo a subtle change, lowering her voice.)

AMBER

You're not afraid of me, are you?

RODERICK

Of course not.

AMBER

Maybe you should be. *(smiling)* Little Red's got a whole basketful of goodies, so we could have some fun.

RODERICK

Fun...?

AMBER

Just the two of us. *(stroking his arm)* I know you like me.

RODERICK

Not that way.

AMBER

Why not? Margie will never know.

RODERICK

That's right, because you're leaving.

AMBER

Too bad. You're missing out on the fuck-fest of your dreams.

RODERICK

Stop talking nonsense! I mean it! I don't know what drugs you're taking, but your pupils are dilated and you're behaving badly.

AMBER

Tsk, tsk, so why don't you teach Little Red to mind her manners?

RODERICK

Because I'm not like that!

AMBER

But what strong arms you have. The better to rip off my clothes and jam it into me like...

RODERICK

Stop it! Stop this instant and get the hell out!

AMBER

(pause, she sighs) Okay, Roddy, whatever you say.

(AMBER starts to leave.)

RODERICK

Wait! Wait. *(pause, he sighs)* All right, you can stay. You can sleep in the spare room, but only because it's late and you could get into trouble. Tomorrow you'll have to find other accommodations; I'm not running a hotel!

AMBER

I really thought you liked me.

RODERICK

I do, but I'm not a candidate for seduction.

AMBER

Why? 'Cause you crave Margie?

RODERICK

That's none of your business. *(pause, he sighs)* Some things can't be explained, especially to an oversexed drug addict, but trust me, it can happen.

AMBER

What...?

RODERICK

A person can finally meet his destiny.

AMBER

And live happily ever after?

RODERICK

Maybe.

AMBER

Must be nice.

RODERICK

It's especially nice when you both feel the same, when you care about each other beyond sex; when you care about another person's thoughts and feelings, their health and happiness. Haven't you ever been in love?

AMBER

Not really, I do hookups, mostly with guys I meet in bars.

RODERICK

Then I hope you're protecting yourself. *(pause)* There's fresh linens in the hall closet. Take what you need, then go to bed.

AMBER

Okay, but do you mind if I play some music?

RODERICK

Just keep it down.

(RODERICK starts to leave then turns to watch as AMBER turns up the volume on her phone and dances. As RODERICK departs, the VISCOUNT'S SPIRIT appears, shadowing AMBER'S movements until the lights dim to black.)

SCENE 7

(RODERICK continues addressing the audience of detectives.)

RODERICK

I suppose I shouldn't confess this to a room full of detectives, but frankly I was enthralled watching Amber dance. It was if she was expressing the grief of being young in these dark, tumultuous times. Somehow I forgot I was watching until I sensed something moving behind her, something not visible except as a shadow, then suddenly...

(AMBER and the VISCOUNT'S SPIRIT spin round the room.)

RODERICK

She was spinning round and round, faster and faster, like a mad dervish until she collapsed on the sofa.

(The VISCOUNT'S SPIRIT departs)

RODERICK

Before I woke up the next morning Amber had left. Then later the news featured a video of a cyclist being struck by a taxi -- just as she predicted. She left a limerick on my desk that I happen to have with me.

(RODERICK fetches the poem from his pocket and reads.)

RODERICK

“An actor who travelled quite light,
Rode the streets of New York on his bike;
But he made the mistake
Of neglecting to brake,
And was rammed riding through a red light.”

(As RODERICK continues, MARGARET appears, and
BOTH face the detectives at presumably different times.)

RODERICK

I mentioned to Margaret that I’m suspicious of prophetic dreams, but I’m sure she told you
that the accuracy of Amber’s were quite...

RODERICK

...uncanny.

MARGARET

Uncanny...

MARGARET

...how Amber recalled the details of her dream about a dramaturge who was changing
a lightbulb while balanced precariously on a ladder. Amber called to warn him, but...

MARGARET

...he fell.

RODERICK

He fell...

RODERICK

...cracked his head on a countertop and expired of a cerebral hemorrhage.

MARGARET

Then four days later a playwright writing a farce in quatrains had...

MARGARET

...an accident.

RODERICK

An accident...

RODERICK

...while strolling down Morton Street when...

RODERICK

...a brick slipped.

MARGARET

A brick slipped...

MARGARET

...off a ledge of scaffolding.

RODERICK

And onto the poor man's head.

MARGARET

Then his fiancé threw herself off the roof. She wrote plays in...

MARGARET

...blank verse.

RODERICK

Blank verse....

RODERICK

...was her specialty. The Times included a few lines in her obituary.

MARGARET

You know, you detectives should be questioning...

MARGARET

...Amber.

RODERICK

Amber...

RODERICK

...can explain how last Sunday she texted Margaret and me.

(Now RODERICK and MARGARET freeze in time as AMBER appears to face the audience.)

AMBER

I asked for another meeting with Roddy and Marge. They can confirm that I mentioned how attending funerals was getting to be a drag. I've been writing elegies, and thought they wouldn't mind hearing one, (*drawing forth her phone*) so listen up and I'll share it with you too.

AMBER

“Don't ask us not to weep for you,
To say you've morphed into morning dew;
To pretend your smiles are beams of light;
All your thoughts swift birds in flight.
All those poems that say don't weep,
You're not really dead, not even asleep;
That you're the hundred winds that blow,
The diamond glints upon the snow.
It's just not true, we know you're gone;
Your friends no longer hear your song.
So we'll stand by your grave instead,
And weep because we know your dead.”

(By the last line, AMBER has returned to Roderick's apartment to face RODERICK and MARGARET.)

MARGARET

Lovely, very comforting.

AMBER

Derivative and cynical, right? I know I write shit.

RODERICK

What do you want?

AMBER

Your attention. *(pause)* Remember two nights ago when we had that record breaking freeze?

MARGARET

Yes.

AMBER

I dreamt this gay couple were holding hands on a park bench, and guess what? On the news there were two guys downing shooters in Central Park. They stopped to rest on a bench, fell asleep and froze in each other's arms. And guess what? The cops are finally noticing what all vics have in common.

MARGARET

So tell us, Amber, did the cops question you? Did they ask where you were during these incidents?

RODERICK

You can't seriously suspect...?

MARGARET

Of course, haven't you...? *(pause)* Well...?

RODERICK

But how could she have caused that car crash?

MARGARET

She drugged the driver's drink, and that bike rider's -- not to mention the frozen lovers. Think about it: what made them all so careless? Drugs! Which Amber has access to, *(to Amber)* right...?

AMBER

Maybe.

RODERICK

Well, what about that man on the ladder?

MARGARET

How do we know she wasn't actually there to knock him off? And she could've pushed the blind man down the stairs, and the one who fell on the subway tracks.

RODERICK

All right then, explain the brick incident. How could Amber have been in that building on Morton Street?

MARGARET

Ask her.

AMBER

(pause) I still have a key from when I hooked up with a guy who lived there.

MARGARET

(To Roderick) So she could've let herself in, leaned out the window, waited for him to pass and pushed the brick off the scaffolding. *(pause, to Amber)* So what do you think? Are your dreams premonitions or premeditated schemes?

AMBER

But why? Why would I harm my friends?! And if I did, why don't I know what I'm doing while I'm doing it?!

MARGARET

Why do you think?

AMBER

(pause) 'Cause I'm possessed, right? 'Cause The Fang's like some kind of body snatcher who's using me to kill off my friends, right? *(pause)* So should I shoot myself now or later?

MARGARET

For now just take a deep breath and try to relax.

(AMBER takes a deep breath.)

RODERICK

So tell us, Amber, have you noticed blocks of time that you can't remember, that seem to be missing.

AMBER

Yeah, plenty.

RODERICK

Anything else out of the ordinary?

AMBER

Yeah, I sleep a lot and wake up in weird places, and I'm always hungry but don't use a fork, and slobber like some gross gomer. Lately I don't even show up at readings of my own plays, and yesterday I got sacked at work 'cause I'm always late. On top of that my roommate's leaving 'cause I bring home horny hookups.

MARGARET

If you lost your job, how will you pay the rent?

AMBER

I'm good for another month.

MARGARET

You can stay with me.

AMBER

Thanks but you'd have to put locks on the doors 'cause I have cravings, like wanting to paw people inappropriately: men, women; old young, straight, gay, bi, trans -- it doesn't make any difference, does it, Roddy?

MARGARET

(to Roderick) You didn't...?

RODERICK

No! No, of course not! How could you even think...?

MARGARET

Sorry...

RODERICK

(to Amber) What else have you noticed?

AMBER

Sometimes I find myself dancing at sleazy clubs, or leaping across streets, and I've stopped shaving my legs and started cutting myself like this.

(AMBER takes out a knife and slashes her arm!)

MARGARET

(gasps) Oh, for godssake!

RODERICK

Jesus! Give me that!

(RODERICK snatches the knife.)

AMBER

Then I like to suck the blood -- yum! I can feel myself creeping people out. *(grasping Roderick's arm)* Like even now I'd like to lick your face.

RODERICK

(pulling away) Stop that!

AMBER

And while I'm spilling my guts, there's something else you should know. *(pause)* The Fang's dead -- definitely dead. I know 'cause I buried him. *(to Margaret)* Sorry, Marge, I would've told you sooner, but didn't know for sure till my shrink put me under hypnosis.

RODERICK

(pause) Margaret...? Are you all right?

(MARGARET nods.)

RODERICK

Don't stop now; please tell us what happened.

SCENE 8

(Lights dim as AMBER evokes the past and the VISCOUNT VILLANELLE appears in his cabin.)

AMBER

He called me a fox; he said...

AMBER

...I have standards.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

I have standards,...

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

...expectations. As a titan of taste, I want your poems to break my heart.

AMBER

What heart?!

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Ha, ha! I'm just saying that you playwrights settle for so little. You're all shallow, tone-deaf clones, programmed to accumulate friends and be "liked" as the mediocrities you've become. Why do you all post invitations to workshops and productions before rolling the words in your mouths, tasting them on your tongues? (*he sighs*) Once, in days of yore, there were ambitious court scribes who copied tributes on momentous occasions: births, deaths, wars and weddings, and every word, every syllable, every vowel and consonant had to be utter perfection -- some even matching the tolling of the temple bells. Oh, why am I wasting my breath? You no longer even use pens much less quills dipped in blood.

AMBER

Yeah, well, you've made plenty of playwrights bleed.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Ah, but I've made my share of mistakes: early in my career, I exalted doggerel and pummeled precious gems, though now I tend to be superior to the plays I'm forced to attend. I attempt to judge by creativity versus conformity, principles of punctuation, as well as laws governing grammar, reality and civility -- all of which have collapsed thanks to insane politicians, archaic religions, and barbarians dropping bombs, determined to destroy everything beautiful. Of course, the anarchy of the internet has rendered people like me passé. Now everyone's a critic with legions of friends. I have my own share of course, but it's not like the good old days when I could ruin reputations with the tap of my keys. But really, I'm weary of people and their unctuous flattery, their shrill laughter, and the manic pace of the city: the filth fueled air, the garish lights, the sonic assault of music and cruel indifference to nature. Think of all the trees leveled, the stars obliterated by buildings holding multitudes who've forgotten that Manhattan was once rolling hills carpeted by grasses, with forests of noble creatures foraging for food and water. Oh, how I crave the elixir of fresh streams, though I suppose you prefer vin ordinaire, your favorite peasantry plonk.

AMBER

Yeah. (*pause*) So do you just sit here all day...?

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Oh, no, I walk miles in every direction because "These woods are lovely, dark and deep," though we who venture into the deep take some of the dark back with us.

AMBER

(mumbling) No shit. *(pause)* What's wrong with you anyway? You look sick.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Sick of myself, my memories, of being stuck in the same old story. *(pause)* I've never told a living soul, but once upon a time it wasn't love at first sight between Mama Bear and me.

AMBER

You're kidding; you're blaming your mother.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

She blamed herself. After four years of pretending, she opened a vein and bled to death on the Persian rug.

AMBER

I...I'm sorry, but why...?

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

You mean why didn't she love me? I suspect she sensed the meanness in me or perhaps the loss of my father made us both mean. In any case, I was banished from the royal roost and sent to live here with Uncle Clyde though I called him Hyde since he was such a moody bastard. You saw the shelves in the library? They're filled with the works of playwrights he admired, mostly Shakespeare and the others dead before their time, though the suicides were his favorites: playwrights like William Inge, Yukio Mishima, Spalding Gray, Jane Arden, John Patrick, Sara Kane and countless others. They all paid a perilous price for the pursuit of seeing their works staged, lauded and applauded.

AMBER

Was your uncle a playwright?

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

God no, though he worshipped them, especially those who aroused his feral, fatalistic nature, the wild, stealthy canid within. Together we devoured the poor beasts we hunted and butchered, and oh, how we loved their lupine lullabies. *(howling)* Ouuuoooooooo...

AMBER

Jesus! *(covering her ears)* Shut up!

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Wolves are so much nobler: they mate for life, work collaboratively, possess great, soulful intelligence...

AMBER

And scare the shit out of us!

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

But never forget: they were here first; they link us to our prehistoric, undomesticated selves which explains our congruent appetites -- oh, how I'd love to paw your plump little breasts.

AMBER

Oh, gross! Back off creep! Look, just eat the damn words and I'll leave!

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

(pause, he sighs) So why didn't your friends send a man for gods sake? You're just a cunning little fox.

AMBER

A fox with a black belt in karate and -- what are you doing?!

(The VISCOUNT has crumpled the paper into a ball.)

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

I've decided to humor you, but I'd rather gobble my words quickly -- yum, yum.

(The VISCOUNT pops the balled paper into his mouth as AMBER grasps her phone.)

AMBER

Wait! Stop! I need to record...

(AMBER aims her phone as the VISCOUNT chews, then suddenly chokes, grasping his throat.)

AMBER

Oh, shit!

(The VISCOUNT collapses.)

AMBER

Oh, no, don't croak on me!

(AMBER falls to her knees by the VISCOUNT'S corpse as lights dim to black.)

SCENE 9

(AMBER has returned to Roderick's apartment and continues speaking to MARGARET and RODERICK.)

AMBER

The truth is when I stooped down to help him, he blew his last sick breath in my face. Then this voice in my head told me to drag him into the woods where I buried him under a pile of leaves. Then I went back to his place, swiped a pile of papers, and split. If the police use dogs, they'll find him. *(pause, to Margaret)* He was a dick, but he was your husband, so I...I'm sorry. *(pause, to Roderick)* So aren't you going to call the cops?

RODERICK

You'd be arrested.

AMBER

Yeah, but if I'm locked up, I can't be offing people and watching their friends bawling at memorials. So go on, call them; I don't give a shit; I can't live like this.

RODERICK

Yet you seem to feel empathy, you care...

AMBER

Not enough! Why else can't I stop craving the chase, the kill, and then *(she sighs)* the nap in the shade when it's over. *(pause)* What's wrong with me? What happened?

RODERICK

It appears the Viscount possessed a preternatural force that transferred itself or migrated into you. Such forces usually resembles animals, and in your case -- well, it's obvious.

AMBER

(pause) Sometimes when I'm staring into mirrors, my lips ride up showing my gums and teeth like this. Then I think how people used to call me Little Red, only instead of being eaten by the wolf, I'm the one who's eating.

RODERICK

Are there specific times when it...intrudes?

AMBER

You mean invades, violates, and embarrasses the shit out of me?! Mostly at night, but I don't know it's coming till I'm doing something I'll regret like pole dancing on subways. I hate it, though sometimes it's cool to see guys with their eyes popping 'cause they know I'm I'm hearing howls that could send the train off its tracks.

(AMBER starts to slowly dance while she speaks.)

AMBER

The weird thing is if I don't do what I'm doing then I feel like the whole city will crash and burn, the whole planet spin out of orbit.

RODERICK

Stop it, Amber, stop dancing!

(MARGARET grasps AMBER'S arms, then pushes her into a chair.)

MARGARET

Sit still!

AMBER

(pause) So what now? Do I hire an exorcist and start wearing a crucifix? Or maybe I need a woodsman with an axe to chop it out of me.

MARGARET

What did your psychiatrist prescribe?

AMBER

Heavy meds and a trip to Bellevue, but even under hypnosis, the shrink thinks I'm making this up. She tells me to keep writing about how it feels, so I wrote another shitty poem I can't seem to forget.

MARGARET

So tell us.

(AMBER takes a deep breath.)

AMBER

“Where was my fairy godmother
When something slipped it's feet inside my own?
So forget gravity, forget who Amber was.
Now she longs to be stuffed back
Into smooth soft skin that doesn't sprout fur
Or make her tongue want to lap up your soul.”

(pause) That's my last poem. You should follow me to Central Park and watch how I leave trails of dead animals when I take my walks. Then when I'm home, I look in the mirror at my bloody teeth -- gross.

MARGARET

Speaking of teeth, did you take the tooth I showed you?

AMBER

Yeah.

MARGARET

I want it back.

AMBER

(pause) Okay, but are you sure? I mean, what if that's what's made me who I've become.

MARGARET

Are you suggesting that the tooth is related to the transference...?

AMBER

Maybe.

RODERICK

But if you thought it had power, why didn't you destroy it?

AMBER

'Cause I'm so fucking dense I just thought of it!

MARGARET

So were you the one who mailed it to me?

AMBER

Maybe.

MARGARET

Did you or didn't you?!

AMBER

Yeah. Sorry, I lied when you asked the first time.

MARGARET

How did you get it? Did you wrench it from his...

AMBER

No! Fuck no! It was with the poems on his desk -- in the envelope with your address.

RODERICK

He could've extracted it himself.

AMBER

I figured I should do what he asked, so I mailed it, but then when I saw it again, I snatched it back.

MARGARET

Why?

AMBER

Fuck if I know why I do anything! All I know is I had to have it!

MARGARET

Do you have it with you now?

(From beneath her shirt, AMBER removes a necklace with the tooth as a pendant, and hands it to MARGARET.)

AMBER

Yeah, here.

MARGARET

(pause, staring) It's always reminded me of a claw -- bleached and filed to a point -- his mean, mad soul hammered down to a diamond studded tooth.

AMBER

Yeah, granny, the better to eat you with, *(growling)* grrrrrrr...

MARGARET

Shush! Stop that!

RODERICK

(to Margaret) Put the tooth down!

(MARGARET places the necklace on the desk.)

RODERICK

Margaret, You realize if the tooth is related to the transmigration, then his lordship intended you to be the recipient.

MARGARET

But why didn't it affect me when I had it?

RODERICK

It's possible you didn't have it long enough, or Amber was more sufficient to the task.

AMBER

Lucky me.

RODERICK

(to Amber) You're young, open, and...vulnerable. *(pause)* So tell me, have you ever wanted to do away with Margaret or me?

AMBER

Not yet. So far my victims are mostly guys -- a refreshing change.

MARGARET

I keep wondering: how could I be so naive? How could I have married a stranger...?

RODERICK

Perhaps at the time you considered a stranger ideal, though most people want more.

MARGARET

(pause) Do you...?

RODERICK

(staring into Margaret's eyes) Oh, I want it all.

MARGARET

What if she's not willing to give it?

RODERICK

That would be tragic -- for me.

MARGARET

And me.

AMBER

(leaping up) And me! You've got to stick together; you're all I've got! My friends see me coming and run for their lives.

MARGARET

Amber, please sit down, you're making me nervous.

(AMBER sits as MARGARET draws a small notebook from her purse.)

MARGARET

(to Roderick) After you told me about revenants, I did some research. *(reading.)* “When a person accepts or receives a revenant, it’s called “integration.” Some revenants take on the characteristics and desires of the original human hosts when they impose their wills on new hosts.” So if Rudolph was the original host, then Amber has to cease doing the things he enjoyed -- so no more dancing or eating rare meat.

RODERICK

Or seducing strangers.

AMBER

So stop being his slut, his creature, his killing machine...?

MARGARET

(reading) “If the possessing spirit originated from a specific host, then knowing the host’s weaknesses may destroy it.”

RODERICK

So what were his lordship’s weaknesses -- aside from being cruel, promiscuous, and criminally insane.

MARGARET

(pause) Envy. When reviewing plays from living writers that inspired awe, the diminishment he felt made him sick, even feverish -- not that it kept him from writing such savage reviews that the playwrights were perceived as pathetic failures.

RODERICK

So the revenant hated feeling reverence.

MARGARET

What he loved was feeling contempt, especially for clichés, mixed metaphors, and alliteration which he said was the surest sign of an inferior talent.

AMBER

You use it!

MARGARET

So do you.

RODERICK

And so do I, but so what? You’re not suggesting playwrights start writing superior scripts that make the beast shrivel and die? That could take months! Years! We need a plan that’s immediately effective! In the meantime, Amber can’t leave the premise without us.

MARGARET

But what if it leaves Amber and infests someone else? What if his rampage doesn't stop till he's killed every playwright in every country until all meaningful, memorable dialog is utterly wiped out and extinguished, leaving the last gasping word ever wrought, ever spoken...

RODERICK

Jesus, Margaret!

MARGARET

Well, that's a worst case scenario.

AMBER

No shit.

MARGARET

(pause, she sighs) If only we could find words so perfectly pure and powerful that when we spoke them, they inspired empathy and obliterated all oppressive ideologies...

(A phone rings.)

AMBER

Oh, shit!

RODERICK

(to Amber) Answer it!

AMBER

It's not mine. *(pointing to Margaret)* It's yours!

MARGARET

(drawing forth her phone) Hello? *(pause)* Yes, this is Margaret Madrigal. *(pause, then whispering to Roderick)* It's the police; they found a body with Rudy's wallet. They asked if they could send some photographs of his clothing...? *(into the phone)* I...I don't...

(RODERICK gently takes the phone from MARGARET.)

RODERICK

Hello, I'm Doctor Rondel, a friend of the family. *(pause)* Yes, please, send the pictures.

(Pause as MARGARET and RODERICK stare at her phone screen, then MARGARET speaks.)

MARGARET

Yes, that's his jacket. *(pause)* And those are his shoes...

(RODERICK takes the phone from Margaret's trembling hands.)

RODERICK

Hello? *(pause)* Yes, I'll tell her and we'll get back to you.

(Pause as RODERICK hangs up and takes a deep breath.)

RODERICK

The hunter who found him was tracking a rabid wolf. Because of the warmer temperatures and omnivorous forest creatures, there's barely enough of him left to warrant an autopsy...

(MARGARET turns away, covering her mouth.)

RODERICK

Are you all right? I'm so sorry, that was very insensitive of me.

MARGARET

(pause) So the wolf was devoured by wolves....

RODERICK

Shall I call back and tell them to send his remains to the city morgue?

(MARGARET nods.)

RODERICK

Then we can return the tooth to its source.

AMBER

And bury his ashes in stone. *(pause)* That's how the wolf in the story died; he fell off granny's roof and into a stone trough.

MARGARET

That's how I ended my villanelle.

(closing her eyes)

“So came the hour that dimmed his eyes,

Encased in stone, he cannot roam.

Oh, slayer of such tender lives!

Haunted by dreams of mournful cries.”

(pause) Roderick, would you be willing to hold the tooth, to summon him one last time?

RODERICK

What if I do, then what...?

MARGARET

Then I'll tell him he has to stop; he has to leave Amber and go back where he came from.

AMBER

Yeah, tell the wolf man if he doesn't leave me alone, I'll cut him out and chop him to pieces!

(RODERICK picks up the tooth and closes his eyes. After a few moments, he opens his eyes and frowns.)

RODERICK

Sorry, nothing. *(he sniffs)* Actually, there's a slight odor...

(Lights flicker, followed by a menacing growl.)

MARGARET

(gasping) Oh, no...

RODERICK

Good god.

(AMBER starts twitching as the VISCOUNT'S SPIRIT appears, his face morphed to that of a WOLF. The VISCOUNT/WOLF and AMBER spin wildly around the room, leaping and twirling while lights flash. Finally, MARGARET and RODERICK grasp AMBER'S arms as SHE writhes violently between them, then opens her mouth to howl.)

AMBER

Ou ououoooooooo...

(MARGARET and RODERICK join the howling.)

AMBER

Ou ououoooooooooooo....

MARGARET

Ou ou hoooooooooooo...

RODERICK

Ou ououoooooooooooo...

(Slowly all THREE hunch their shoulders, then collapse to their knees as lights fade to black.)

EPILOGUE

(Weeks later in the police interrogation room: AMBER, MARGARET, and RODERICK stand facing the detectives from different areas at presumably different times.)

AMBER

Like what to even say; I've told you...

AMBER

...everything I know.

MARGARET

Everything I know...

MARGARET

I've told you already.

RODERICK

Apparently there was enough of his corpse to warrant an autopsy after all, and it proved the Viscount died of a coronary thrombosis, so...

RODERICK

...Amber was absolved.

MARGARET

Amber was absolved,...

MARGARET

...but the poets' deaths have been reclassified as possible homicides, so...

MARGARET

...Amber's a suspect.

RODERICK

Amber's a suspect,...

RODERICK

...but you don't have any evidence, do you?

MARGARET

No more playwrights have died, but the question you should be asking is...

MARGARET

...where is he now?

RODERICK

Where is he now?

AMBER

Where is he now?

MARGARET

Revenants have been known to replicate, so...

MARGARET

...is he in me?

RODERICK

Is he in me?

AMBER

Is he in me?

MARGARET

You see, I worry because I find myself dancing.

RODERICK

I have a craving for raw meat, and...

RODERICK

I'm constantly aroused.

MARGARET

I'm constantly aroused.

AMBER

I'm constantly aroused,...

AMBER

...and hooking up with strangers.

MARGARET

Amber, Roderick, and I have stayed together, and lately we're drawn to...

MARGARET

...the woods.

RODERICK

The woods.

AMBER

The woods...

AMBER

...are awesome, but I'm freaked out by fires, and trees are still being chopped and milled for...

AMBER

...paper.

RODERICK

Paper!

MARGARET

Paper,...

MARGARET

...whole forests felled for plays!

MARGARET

Amber's famous.

RODERICK

Amber's famous,...

RODERICK

...she has thousands of followers.

MARGARET

She has a producer, a publisher and a Broadway opening next month.

AMBER

My agent wants me to attend the opening, but I can't leave...

AMBER

...the cabin.

MARGARET

The cabin.

RODERICK

The cabin,...

RODERICK

...is where we live now, surrounded by...

RODERICK

...trees.

AMBER

Trees.

MARGARET

Trees.

MARGARET

Once upon a time our forests were perfect.

AMBER

They'll be perfect again when all of you are...

AMBER

...dead!

RODERICK

Dead.

MARGARET

Dead.

AMBER

(pause) Like what did you expect?! Not all fairy tales end happily!

(AMBER tosses back her head and howls, then is joined by MARGARET and RODERICK.)

AMBER

Ou oooooooooo...

AMBER

Ou ou oooooooooo...

RODERICK

Ou ou oooooooooo...

MARGARET

Ou ou oooooooooo...

(Lights fade to black.)

End of Play

