

The Gallerist

(A Tale of Desecration and Desire)

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*“All the talk we have ever heard
Uttered by bat or beast or bird --
Hide or fin or scale or feathers --
Jabber it quickly and all together!
Excellent! Wonderful! Once again!
Now we are talking just like men.”*

Rudyard Kipling

*“When my outward action doth demonstrate
The native act and figure of my heart
In compliment extern, 'tis not long after
I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
For daws to peck at: I am not what I am.”*

William Shakespeare

CHARACTERS

(an ensemble of seven actors: three men and four women)

THE NEW YORKERS

BERTRAM (BIRDY) PLOVER, a British born gallerist; mid-forties
CHARLOTTE LIMPBIN, a Manhattan real estate agent; early forties

THE LONDONERS

LUCILLE GREY PLOVER, Bertram's great-grandmother; early twenties
SELENA FEATHERSTONE, a musician and bestiary keeper; early twenties
LAURA FEATHERSTONE, Selena's cousin, a painter; early twenties
DOMINIC FEATHERSTONE, Selena's deceased father; late-forties
VANESSA FEATHERSTONE, Selena's devoted mother; mid-forties
SIMON DANE SPARROW, the London Times art critic; mid-thirties
DOCTOR NORMAN CRANE, an Irish-born physician; late forties
ROGER GANNET, a former soldier and law student; mid-twenties
DOCTOR BAINES BUNTING, DOCTOR PERCY SNIPES,
FATHER FINCH, FATHER QUAIL, FATHER GROUSE

SUGGESTED DOUBLING

BERTRAM / DOMINIC FEATHERSTONE / DOCTOR CRANE / FATHER FINCH
SIMON SPARROW / DOCTOR BUNTING / FATHER GROUSE
ROGER GANNET / DOCTOR SNIPES / FATHER QUAIL
VANESSA FEATHERSTONE / CHARLOTTE LIMPBIN

TIME

the present and the year 1919

PLACE

The cities of New York in the present and London in the past. A stylized set represents a police station, a pet shop, a cafe, several parlors, and an art gallery.

ACT I

(On a wintry night in New York City, the metallic clang of a door is heard. Dim lights reveal a shadow-strewn jail cell where BERTRAM PLOVER, a well-groomed Englishman, sits shivering beneath a blanket. HE sneezes into a handkerchief, then speaks to his audience of fellow prisoners.)

BERTRAM

Oh, for god's sake, stop staring! I shouldn't be here -- caged like a rabid dog with you drunkards and degenerates! If that's not hell enough, I've caught a ghastly cold that's likely to become pneumonia. *(pause, sniffing)* If I look familiar, it's because you've seen me on the telly, the Internet, and in all the papers. I'm the gallerist charged with vagrancy and assault, and now I'm being jailed for contempt of court, ha! That's true enough. I've got contempt all right -- for the doctors, the lawyers, and that sodding imbecile who calls himself a judge! Not an open mind in the lot! No one believes me, but since you insist on giving me your undivided attention, you should know that my case began nearly a century ago, after the First World War when an entire generation of Englishmen were slaughtered in the trenches. That's when great granny Lucille entered a London pet shop called Featherstone's Bestiary, which was mostly an aviary.

(Chirping CANARIES lead to a transition of place and time to London in 1919. The gloomy interior of a former pet shop is filled with empty cages, and a sign that reads "Featherstone's Bestiary." The chirps are followed by the squawks of PARROTS, the mews of CATS, the yaps of DOGS, and the snorts of PIGS. As the ANIMAL CHORUS crescendos, a loud knocking is heard, and SELENA FEATHERSTONE, a disheveled young wretch of twenty-two, enters.)

SELENA

Shush, shush! I'm coming, I'm coming!

(The ANIMAL CHORUS fades as SELENA opens the door to LAURA FEATHERSTONE and LUCILLE GREY. Both are in their early twenties and laden with luggage.)

SELENA

Oh, Laura! God, I must be a sight in this tatty robe!

LAURA

Selena, this is my friend, Lucille. Selena's my closest cousin.

LUCILLE

Hello.

LAURA

I'll unpack later, if that's all right. It's awfully dark; mind if I open the curtains?

SELENA

Not yet, Romeo's still sleeping. Oberon's nocturnal skitterings kept him awake.

LAURA

Who's Romeo?

SELENA

(pointing) He's the Persian in that cage.

LAURA

Tell Lucille how many pets you have here.

SELENA

Eighty-four. We're a limited bestiary, mostly birds, and we specialize in exotic dwarfs and minatures.

LAURA

They're so small only Selena can see them.

SELENA

Everyone thinks the cages are empty, but they're not. Cordelia's very pleased that you're moving in.

(CORDELIA, a miniature Pekinese dog, yaps.)

LAURA

I'm just staying till I find a flat.

SELENA

Stay as long as you like. I've tidied up the back room; the bed's made with fresh linens; and I've emptied the closet.

LAURA

Thanks. I'm teaching at Saint Martin's Academy, so I can help with expenses.

SELENA

So are you finished with Simon?

LAURA

Simon's finished with me.

SELENA

Does he know you're here?

LAURA

No. I gave him mummy's address to forward mail.

SELENA

What happened?

LAURA

If you must know, he found someone else, but that wasn't the worst of it.

(A mournful howl is heard as LAURA enters the parlor of SIMON SPARROW, a dashing man in his mid-thirties, who is leafing through her sketchbook)

LAURA

He said he was doing me a favor, he said,...

LAURA

....you're wasting your life.

SIMON

You're wasting your life,...

SIMON

...Laura dear, it's time to grow up and get over your delusion of having talent.

LAURA

What...? What did you say?

SIMON

You heard me.

LAURA

But I...I know I can draw, and my painting's improved -- you said so yourself.

SIMON

Did I? Well, you're competent, but hardly original. Surely, you've enough self-awareness to have gleaned that by now.

LAURA

But I...I'm still learning; I'm still young.

SIMON

Not that young -- now let me finish! What you have is discipline, and your portraits of children are charming, but not likely to appeal to collectors who've outgrown a need for nostalgia. And to be totally honest, I'm attracted to someone else.

LAURA

Oh...

SIMON

Surely you suspected...? *(pause)* Chin up, Laura, we've had our fun, but it's over, so there's no point in wasting time -- yours or mine. Look, we can't be expected to be anything but ourselves.

LAURA

Competent.

SIMON

Now, now, no need for tears. I was hoping we could be adults about this.

LAURA

You're asking me to leave...?

SIMON

Afraid so. *(pause)* Christ, you're making me feel like I'm corrupting an innocent child. Seriously, Laura, did you really expect the white wedding and cozy cottage?

LAURA

No.

SIMON

What then? Some Bohemian idyll in which you fill the galleries, and I proclaim you a genius?

LAURA

Aren't you ever mistaken?

SIMON

Not according to the Times. Apparently, Sparrow's arrows are spot on. It seems I'm "London's arbiter of taste, the man most trusted to feed the wellsprings of culture."

LAURA

Lucky you.

SIMON

Lucky me! The best thing about being a critic is access to good company, to men of indisputable genius, and believe me, they're a breed apart. Girls like you should be dancing at soirees, attending theatre, courting the chaps left to propagate the species. All I'm saying is stop trying to be something you're not, because -- trust me -- you won't find a single reputable gallery willing to exhibit your work. You know, the trouble is you're spoiled. Your parents gave you heaps of praise for meager talents, so you grew up expecting too much for too little.

LAURA

I can't believe you're being so cruel.

SIMON

Yes, well, call me a cad if you like.

LAURA

I called you my...my love, my muse.

SIMON

Women don't have muses, my dear; they *are* muses, or rather her surrogates.

LAURA

You've been drinking!

SIMON

So what? Since you brought it up, have you noticed there's no mythic muse for painters?

LAURA

You're drunk!

SIMON

(ignoring her) That's because she's elusive, unwilling to be pinned down to an image much less a name. She's also capricious. "The chosen" stand before their easels and she bestows new images, but the rest -- the dilettantes and dabblers -- don't interest the muse, so they're simply passed over. It's not their fault; it's not that they haven't made themselves available, but they simply don't see.

LAURA

Oh, I can see all right.

SIMON

But who opens their eyes? Who bestows vision? Mother Nature or Mother Nurture or the Muse herself? Of course, I'm speaking metaphorically because the Muse is just another word for the luck of inspiration, and some of us -- critics like me -- are given just enough to discern who is and who is not an artist, and you, my dear, are not.

(pause) Oh, for god's sake, stop staring like I'm the devil!

LAURA

You are!

SIMON

Well, fine, a little spunk might do you good. Start focusing on my faults; find me despicable and best forgotten. Now dry your eyes like a good girl, pack your bags, and I'll have them sent to your flat -- along with your paintings.

LAURA

I don't have a flat; I gave it up when I moved here.

SIMON

Now that was foolish; I had no idea. Does your mother approve?

LAURA

She thinks I'm rooming with Lucille, but wherever I go, you needn't bother sending the paintings -- just toss them in the rubbish!

SIMON

I can't do that.

LAURA

Oh, I'm sure you can.

(LAURA returns to SELENA and LUCILLE as SIMON departs.)

LAURA

What if he's right? What if I am wasting my life?

LUCILLE

You're not; he's wrong!

SELENA

The fiend, the jackal!

LUCILLE

I hope he drowns in his “wellspring of culture!” My god, what arrogance! He doesn’t feed the wellspring; he poisons it!

SELENA

With venom -- the viper!

LAURA

If only I could hate him.

LUCILLE

Don’t waste your time!

SELENA

Bollocks! Declare war! Your weapons are your paints and brushes; set up your easel right here! Paint the beasts of my bestiary, my hybrids of the earth and sky!

(DOGS bark, CATS meow, CANARIES sing!)

SELENA

We’ll become The Bestiary Gallery. You’ll exhibit here for all the great collectors of London, of Paris, of the world!

LAURA

Oh, please shush, Selena!

LUCILLE

She has a point; you must keep painting.

SELENA

If no gallery accepts you, then create one of your own! Look at these empty walls crying to be filled!

LUCILLE

This would make a fine gallery. What do you think, Laura? Are you listening?

LAURA

I can’t think; I’m too depressed. (*she sighs*) Let’s take a walk; I need some air.

LUCILLE

I’ll treat you to breakfast. You’ll feel better after some hot tea.

LAURA

Wait here, I need a moment to freshen up.

(LAURA grasps her baggage and departs. There's an awkward pause as LUCILLE stares at the empty cages.)

SELENA

I know what you're thinking, but just because you don't see them doesn't mean they're not there.

LUCILLE

Can they see me?

SELENA

Yes.

LUCILLE

Do they mind being in cages?

SELENA

We're all in cages; at least they know the dimensions of theirs.

LUCILLE

Do you feed them?

SELENA

When I leave treats, they vanish, so even souls need sustenance. *(pause)* Are you an artist as well?

LUCILLE

I intend to write novels, but for now I teach grammar and composition at Saint Martin's. That's where Laura and I met. *(pause)* She said your parents opened the shop when you were a child.

SELENA

Father was a zoologist, and mummy loved animals, especially birds. Their specialty was exotic species, so they named the shop "Featherstone's Bestiary" after a volume of whimsical beasts. Father wanted to call it "The Bard's Bestiary" as a tribute to Shakespeare, which is why the animals are named after his characters. The shop's closed now, but we'll open again when Laura fills the walls with paintings!

LUCILLE

How can Laura paint what she can't see?

SELENA

I'll describe them; they'll materialize through my words and her brush. Together we'll show the world how marvelous they are.

LUCILLE

I'm afraid Laura hasn't painted much of anything lately. She's been depressed for weeks, since she suspected she was losing Simon.

SELENA

Why do women bother with men? There's hardly any left, and animals make better companions. Isn't that right, Gertie?

(GERTRUDE, a Siamese cat, mews.)

LUCILLE

Laura insists on staying with you, but if things don't work out, I have a spare room -- just so you know.

SELENA

Oh, I'm certain we'll get on. (*presenting a peacock feather*) Before you leave, please take one of Horatio's plumes.

LUCILLE

It's lovely, but if Horatio's invisible, how can he produce such colorful plumes?

SELENA

That's his secret, but he manifests new ones every day -- so do my parrots, cockatoos and tiels. While I sleep, they leave feathers on the floors of their cages, then I sell them to milliners all over London.

(LAURA enters.)

LAURA

I see Selena gave you a feather.

LUCILLE

Yes. (*to Selena*) You're welcome to join us if you like.

SELENA

No, thank you. Besides, if I come, you can't talk about me. (*to Lucille*) I'm sure you'll ask Laura why I'm not in an asylum, but I'm no longer considered a threat -- just an embarrassment. Now I'm harmless as a fly with slender gilded wings.

LAURA

Shall we go?

SELENA

A fly whose buzzing melody came to make thee merry, ha, ha!

(A PEACOCK squawks as SELENA, LAURA, and LUCILLE stand frozen in the past, while BERTRAM reappears to speak to his fellow prisoners.)

BERTRAM

Are you sober? Are you listening? Can you picture the cousins? Selena looked older, but they were born only three months apart -- Lena with the goldie locks, Laura with brown. Their mothers even dressed them alike, sent them to Miss Swan's Academy where Laura learned to draw, while Selena excelled at the piano, sang, danced, and was a model student. Her teachers declared her brilliant, destined for great things, and to top that, boys followed her like puppies. Who'd have guessed their futures?

(SELENA waltzes off as LAURA and LUCILLE seat themselves at a table laden with tea cups and a platter of scones.)

BERTRAM

When the girls were seated in the cafe, Lucille said somebody ought to give Selena...

BERTRAM

...a good scrub.

LUCILLE

A good scrub...

LUCILLE

...is what she needs! And the place reeks of cats even if there aren't any!

LAURA

I can't believe you asked her to join us! What if she'd said yes?!

LUCILLE

I knew she wouldn't.

LAURA

How?! How can you know something like that? She's totally unpredictable!

LUCILLE

Sorry, it won't happen again. Where does she get the feathers?

LAURA

I haven't the foggiest. I've heard she sometimes walks the streets and gives them away, just hands off feathers to complete strangers. Of course, everyone knows she's not all there, which is why they call her Loony Lena or Dotty Lotty.

LUCILLE

How sad, poor thing.

LAURA

A year ago she was the loveliest, most gifted girl in the world. Everyone adored her, except me, and after her engagement to Roger Gannet, I wished her dead.

LUCILLE

My god, Laura.

LAURA

A better person would have been proud of her, and wished her happiness. Sometimes I feel guilty, as if my hatred infected her. Perhaps Simon's right: the muse knows I'm wicked, so she's passing me by.

LUCILLE

That's nonsense; such feelings aren't unnatural. Besides, that's past, and what's left to feel now except pity. You do feel pity, don't you?

LAURA

After Aunt Nessa had her committed, I went to visit. There she was, slouched in a chair, her hands trembling, her dress rumpled, her hair in knots. Later, I wept for hours, and the worst of it is, no one really knows what happened. The day her father passed away, she came down with symptoms of the Spanish flu. We thought we might lose her, but after she recovered, she became weepy and prone to strange outbursts, until one night...

(A CAT'S screech is heard!)

LAURA

...she went totally beserk.

(CATS yowl, DOGS howl, and BIRDS shriek as SELENA appears in the bestiary, wielding a knife, stabbing through the bars of cages. Gradually, the bestial cries recede until all the animals have been slain. SELENA collapses, her nightgown splattered with blood. Moments later, her mother, VANESSA FEATHERSTONE, rushes into the bestiary.)

VANESSA

Selena...? My god, what...? What's happened?!

(SELENA gestures towards the cages.)

VANESSA

Oh, no, what in heaven's name...? (*walking past the cages*) Ohhhh, my dear Dogberry, my sweet Eleanor... Selena, what...what have you done?! Why...?

SELENA

You know why, Vanessa.

VANESSA

How could you?! Selena, look at me!! Look at me!!

SELENA

The strange thing is, their souls survived. I can see them...

VANESSA

You're very sick, Selena; you need help.

SELENA

Can't you see them, Vanessa?

VANESSA

Stop calling me that; I'm your mother! How could you do something so...so cruel, so perverse?

SELENA

Dodie whispered.

VANESSA

I'm calling Doctor Crane!

(SELENA'S voice deepens as SHE points the knife at VANESSA who steps back.)

SELENA

Whilst he suffered, you loved another.

VANESSA

Put down that knife!

SELENA

(lowering the knife) No grieving widow's weeds for thee.

VANESSA

What's wrong with you?!

SELENA

No lamentations of grief.

VANESSA

Give me that knife! If you don't, I'll scream bloody murder! I mean it, Selena, what you've done is a crime! Now I'm calling Doctor Crane or the police -- your choice!

SELENA

Call both, then I'll expose thy lechery!

VANESSA

Go right ahead -- because it's obvious you're barking mad and should be put away!
(glancing at the cages) Oh, dear God, my precious birds -- not one of them spared.
What am I going to do?

SELENA

Sop and mop the blood, bury the carnage, then leave the bestiary to Selena -- to me!

VANESSA

Never! And in case you're not aware of what you've done, there's nothing left to leave!
(snatching the knife) Give me that!

SELENA

Owwwww!

VANESSA

(backing towards the door) Stay there! I'm calling Doctor Crane!

(VANESSA marches off, followed by SELENA
as LAURA continues speaking to LUCILLE.)

LAURA

The family tried to keep the slaughter quiet, but everyone knew. Then Roger broke off their engagement, and Selena was committed to Shearwater Asylum. When she finally came home, she begged Aunt Nessa to let her back in the shop where she'd sit for hours on end, chattering to the cages.

LUCILLE

It sounds as if the shock of her father's death caused a nervous collapse.

LAURA

But it wasn't a shock; we expected it, though everyone adored Uncle Dominic -- we called him Dodie. His last weeks he refused to see anyone except Aunt Nessa and Iago, his pet monkey, who was trained to fetch his medicines. Even animals loved Dodie. For years he was the chief zoologist at the Natural History Museum -- when he wasn't riding or acting at The Player's Club. Selena said he'd wanted a son, which may be why she excelled at everything -- to please him.

LUCILLE

And did she?

LAURA

He worshipped her. He insisted I paint her portrait, but I kept making excuses, though I often draw her face. When I last saw Aunt Nessa, I showed her my sketches of...

LAURA

...Selena.

VANESSA

Selena!

(LAURA joins VANESSA, who is seated with a sketchbook in her lap.)

VANESSA

Oh, my dear, how beautiful she was -- every feature in perfect proportion!

LAURA

(*joining Vanessa*) I have dozens more.

VANESSA

Show me, please!

LAURA

(*turning the pages*) That's Selena in profile, and here she's singing, and here she's gazing pensively. Her likeness appears whenever I'm just scribbling to fill the page.

VANESSA

Perhaps her spirit is guiding your hand. Do you feel that? Do you feel some force controlling you?

LAURA

No, it's just that she's so familiar, she's etched in my memory.

VANESSA

When did you see her last?

LAURA

Months ago.

VANESSA

Then you noticed that she doesn't walk or talk like herself. At first I thought she was plagued by guilt, but now I'm certain she's been taken over or...displaced. I know it sounds daft, but hear me out: for years Selena and Iago sat at Dodie's feet, listening with rapt attention while he read his favorite poems and plays -- the adoring repositories for all his recitations. But now, you see, Selena's become the repository.

LAURA

What are you saying...?

VANESSA

I'm saying his spirit has taken residence in her body.

LAURA

You think Uncle Dodie's spirit is inside Selena?

VANESSA

No, not Dodie -- his monkey, Iago!

LAURA

Iago?!

VANESSA

Surely you remember? The small capuchin always perched on his shoulder. Dodie and Selena called him Gogo. They spoiled him rotten, but he was vicious, spat at everyone, especially me. In any case, I'm responsible; none of this would have happened if only I'd listened! *(pause)* A few days before he lost consciousness, Dodie was in his study. He was so frail, I was surprised he found the strength to raise his voice and call...

VANESSA

...Vanessa!

DOMINIC

Vanessa,...

DOMINIC

...love!

(VANESSA approaches DOMINIC FEATHERSTONE, her sickly husband, holding a monkey's corpse.)

DOMINIC

I've dealt with Gogo, dispensed a merciful dose of morphine. He never knew what hit him, poor devil.

VANESSA

(approaching Dominic) Oh, my dear, I'm so sorry. Give him to me, and I'll see that he's buried.

DOMINIC

No, I want you to take him to Dunlin's Taxidermy, see that he's properly preserved. Then after I pass on, I want him buried beside me, in my coffin.

VANESSA

You're not serious...?

DOMINIC

Instruct the undertaker to place Gogo's head next to mine.

VANESSA

Yes, dear, but remember Esther Whimbel? She wanted Roscoe buried beside her, but Father Grebes said rabbits and pets of every sort were forbidden in consecrated cemeteries.

DOMINIC

What utter rubbish! In any case, the casket will be closed, so Grebes need never know. Please, just do as I ask, then we'll go to blazes together.

VANESSA

Nonsense, you'll go straight to heaven.

DOMINIC

Not bloody likely.

(DOMINIC departs as VANESSA returns to LAURA.)

VANESSA

I knew Dodie wasn't long for this world, so I bundled Iago in rags and stuffed him in the furnace. Of course, fool that I was, I didn't make the connection, not even after Selena's breakdown. But the night before I had her committed, I heard noises coming from the bestiary.

(Screeches are heard as dim lights reveal SELENA pacing, speaking with a deepened voice.)

VANESSA

She was agitated, so I tried to calm her. I said...

VANESSA

....Selena?

SELENA

Selena...

SELENA

...dare not sleep. Dark dreams torment her, and she longs for dearest Dodie.

VANESSA

(stroking her) Yes, dear, we all miss him. Now go back to bed; you're still not yourself.

SELENA

Not myself!? Are these not my breasts, my belly, my snatch to scratch?

VANESSA

Selena!

SELENA

A pity there's not more of this too too sullied flesh to fondle, to stroke and poke.

VANESSA

You're being indecent; now stop speaking nonsense! What's gotten into you?!

SELENA

What indeed?! How I've yearned to be a comely maid. 'Tis jolly folly being fussed and feted with puds and pastries. Ohhhh, eeeeeiiiiiee, eiiiiiee, eiiiiiee...

VANESSA

Stop screeching! Look at how slovenly you've become, and your manners are appalling! I'm told at breakfast you ate six scones, most of the marmalade, and all the jam!

SELENA

Jam, jam, the monkey man!

VANESSA

And for heaven's sake, take a bath!

SELENA

Why? Do I smell clammy, mammy? Scummy, mummy?

VANESSA

Have you no shame?!

SELENA

Nay, none. We beasts live well enough without it, but I possess other qualities: I can leapeth, creepeth, flit, shit, and spit in your eye! (*spitting*) Ha, ha!

VANESSA

(*wiping spittle*) Uhhhhh, how disgusting!

SELENA

Be sweet or I'll take a nip of your tit, yum, yum!

VANESSA

(*wielding a wooden spoon*) Now back off, or I'll swat you! I've been trying to decide if I should keep you home or have you committed, so consider yourself forewarned: you'll be leaving this house tomorrow!

SELENA

Ha, ha, eeeeeeeee, eiiiiieee!

(SELENA screeches, then chases VANESSA until SHE rejoins LAURA.)

VANESSA

It wasn't until she'd been taken away that the obvious occurred to me: After all, who of us hated the bestiary? And where did all that ghastly shrieking come from? From Iago, that's who! He's the one who butchered the animals! But as I said, it's my own fault. If only I hadn't burned the bloody beast!

LAURA

But if it's your fault, why didn't his spirit affect you?

VANESSA

Because he knew it would torment me more to destroy Selena! Iago's all about revenge. You remember Iago in Othello?

LAURA

Wasn't he the villain?

VANESSA

The forerunner of all villains -- a deceitful, conniving, prevaricating predator!

LAURA

I remember when Uncle Dodie played Othello, with his face painted black. We thought the role suited him since both men adored their wives.

VANESSA

Believe me, Dodie was no Othello, and I'm no Desdemona. The analogy only applies to Iago. When Dodie baptized the animals, he chose names arbitrarily, but Iago's suited him. He was a born hellion, always snappish, reaching into cages to pull tails, poke eyes, and bite anything he could sink his teeth into. He's always been a ravenous scavenger, only now he's feeding off Selena. Look at me, Laura, are you listening?

LAURA

Yes, but I...I only saw Iago once, years ago. Have you told anyone else?

VANESSA

I made the mistake of confiding in Doctor Crane who prescribed...

VANESSA

.... laudanum and bed rest.

DOCTOR CRANE

Laudanum and bed rest!

(DOCTOR NORMAN CRANE appears, writing a prescription as VANESSA joins him. HE speaks with an Irish accent.)

DOCTOR CRANE

For *you*, Vanessa! Witnessing your pets being slaughtered has affected your perceptions. Mind you, I own two pugs, so it's perfectly understandable; I'd be devastated.

VANESSA

But you don't believe me; you think I'm insane!

DOCTOR CRANE

I'm a skeptic, a man of science, so I think you're distraught. I also think mothers tend to believe their children have incorruptible natures. They deny their capacity for cruelty.

VANESSA

Rubbish! Mothers admit their children can be savages, but Selena was exceptionally kind, as you very well know!

DOCTOR CRANE

And that's exactly why you can't accept that she's capable of brutality, so you've imagined she's....well,...

VANESSA

Possessed! "Possessed" is the word! I should never have told you!

DOCTOR CRANE

Nonsense, I'm glad you did, though it's one thing to be possessed by a human ghost, and another by a monkey.

VANESSA

You've been my doctor for years, so you know I'm not prone to irrational fantasies. You may also know that I rarely dislike any animal. If they're mischievous, it's almost always because they're afraid, but Iago was a fearless creature.

DOCTOR CRANE

But being a creature as you say, isn't he limited? He can't possibly be as shrewd as you give him credit.

VANESSA

You're a fool if you think animals can't be cunning and manipulative! I know you're not religious, but I believe animals have souls and feel deeply. Even though Iago was despicable, he loved Selena. He loved her so strongly that his spirit found the force to enter her. But it's wrong, it's evil, because he's deprived her of her talents, her marriage, her happiness!

DOCTOR CRANE

What about *your* happiness? I'm trying to digest what you're saying, but can't help noticing you don't look well yourself.

VANESSA

I'm not. I can't sleep, and when I do, I still wake up exhausted.

DOCTOR CRANE

Perhaps that's the crux of your problem, and naturally, you're still mourning Dodie.

VANESSA

I'm finished mourning Dodie! The person I'm mourning is Selena -- who she would have become. Don't you remember how luminous she was, how full of life?

DOCTOR CRANE

Yes. (*pause, he sighs*) I can't believe I'm saying this, but if you're still a practicing Catholic, you might consider consulting a priest.

VANESSA

We've already met with three, all of them bunglers! We also met a medium who took one look at Selena, then dashed out of the room, but she knew, she knew.

DOCTOR CRANE

What about her psychiatrists? Surely they've had some insights.

VANESSA

None that were credible.

DOCTOR CRANE

(pause, he sighs) I'm sorry, Vanessa, but afflictions like Selena's are beyond me.

VANESSA

Yes, I can see that.

DOCTOR CRANE

Perhaps they're even beyond science.

(DOCTOR CRANE departs as VANESSA returns to sit beside LAURA.)

VANESSA

Selena was miserable living with me, so I furnished the rooms behind the bestiary. Naturally, I hired nurses, but she chased them away. Lately, she refuses to see me, but the maids bring her meals and keep the place tidy. So now it's your turn, Laura; you're my last recourse.

LAURA

What do you want me to do?

VANESSA

Move in with her, stay a few weeks, and paint her portrait. It will give you an excuse to look into her eyes, and ask her outright if she's Selena. Whenever I try, she spits in my face. You see, when I saw her last, I feared he'd completely taken over, but when she woke from her nap, there was a spark of recognition, then she clasped my hand and said, "Mummy." We even chatted about my garden before a shadow cast itself over her eyes, and she was gone.

LAURA

But where? Where does she go and how?

VANESSA

I haven't a clue. Perhaps she's still inside, but overcome. Meanwhile, the beast is using her body, making her touch herself in lewd, unseemly ways, and her voice deepens when he mixes drama with doggerel, vulgarizing the poetry he'd heard from Dodie. Oh, how I hate him! If I could kill him outright, I'd strangle him with my bare hands!

LAURA

(pause) Auntie, have you tried asking Roger's help?

VANESSA

Heaven's no! I don't want him seeing her like this! You're the one who'll find her; you'll bring her back!

LAURA

Well, I...I could ask her to pose.

VANESSA

Promise me you'll try, promise.

LAURA

What if she refuses?

VANESSA

Convince her!

LAURA

Well, I...I suppose...

VANESSA

Perhaps you don't want to; perhaps you prefer her like this.

LAURA

No! No, of course not!

VANESSA

You needn't pretend to love her; I'm not expecting that. *(pause)* Do you really think we didn't notice how you'd avoid sitting beside her, and only feigned applause at her recitals. It wasn't Selena's fault she shined so brightly. Some girls are born to bask in the center of the stage while others stand aside. I'm sorry, but it's a fact: most simply aren't blessed with Selena's talent or vitality.

LAURA

Or parents who indulged her every whim!

VANESSA

Touché, dear, but she was none the worse for it. Of course, I admit it wasn't fair how you were always thrown together, with everyone fawning over Lena while Laura faded in the shadows. Well, now Lena's faded; now she's the pathetic one. Forgive me, I didn't mean to imply...

LAURA

No, of course you didn't.

VANESSA

I've offended you and I'm sorry, but I'm at my wits end. What matters now is that Selena needs your help. *(standing)* You know where to find her.

(VANESSA departs as LAURA turns to LUCILLE.)

LAURA

That was months ago, and I've done nothing.

LUCILLE

You don't seriously believe she's possessed?

LAURA

Of course not, but since I'm feeling wretched anyway, I might as well make amends with my aunt. Misery's made me fearless.

LUCILLE

And feckless! I doubt you'll last the week.

(PARROTS squawk as BERTRAM is seen in his cell.)

BERTRAM

Are you still awake and wondering what connects the horrors of the past to those of the present?

(As BERTRAM speaks, lights reveal LUCILLE.)

BERTRAM

Well, Lucille was my great granny! When mum died and left me her house, I found a storeroom filled with paintings unlike any the world has ever seen. There was also a chest filled with feathers atop a manuscript tied with string. So there I was: divorced, depressed, and drained by my patrons' pathologies -- mostly alcoholic dementia. You see, I tended bar in a posh pub in London, but was always drawn to the arts -- even dabbled with paints myself. So knowing how you Yanks are keen on us Brits, I sold the house and shipped its contents and myself to New York to seek a new vocation as...

BERTRAM

...a gallerist!

CHARLOTTE

A gallerist....

CHARLOTTE

...did you say? Not here!

(BERTRAM has joined CHARLOTTE LIMPKIN, a real estate agent, who escorts him to a property that resembles Featherstone's Bestiary.)

BERTRAM

Yes, it's perfect; I'm certain.

CHARLOTTE

(reading notes) According to the deed, it was built in 1927 as a bakery, then became a series of restaurants, antique shops, and eventually a pet shop, which explains the cages. Frankly, it's not an ideal location. Except for the church on the corner, it's depressed; the crime rate's escalated; and from what I can tell, there's not much foot traffic.

BERTRAM

There will be -- a proper stampede!

CHARLOTTE

The ceiling's cracked; the walls need plastering; the floorboards are warped; and the plumbing's ancient, so pipes might need replacing;

BERTRAM

I like things that need work. The minute I walked by, I knew this was the place.

CHARLOTTE

Well, Mister Plover, don't say you weren't warned.

BERTRAM

Please, call me Bertram or Birdy if you like.

CHARLOTTE

Then call me Charlotte. What kind of art do you plan to exhibit?

BERTRAM

Timeless and extraordinary, mostly paintings that resemble birds, and there's dogs, cats, rabbits, and reptiles. I'm calling it "The Bestiary Gallery." I'll invite you to the opening.

CHARLOTTE

Thanks. I'm an art lover myself, and have my own menagerie: three grey parrots, two scotties, and a cat. In fact -- if I'm not being presumptuous -- I'd like to help. I mean, if you need someone to recommend carpenters and electricians.

BERTRAM

If you're serious, I'd be most grateful. Ha, look, here! Tucked behind this cage is a peacock's plume! Now that's a good omen! In Christian art, the peacock's a symbol of immortality. I'll wager these walls have stories to tell -- if only they could speak.

CHARLOTTE

What will you do with the cages?

BERTRAM

Keep them. They'll suggest the creatures who inspired the art.

CHARLOTTE

Well, Birdy, if you're sure, then we should leave and tackle the paperwork.

BERTRAM

Yes, let's get on with it and have done! Perhaps to celebrate, we could have dinner -- bring your husband along.

CHARLOTTE

I'm single, but I'd be delighted. Will your wife be joining us?

BERTRAM

No wife, no children, divorced, and newly arrived!

(Pause as BERTRAM and CHARLOTTE depart, and a BIRD whistles from the bestiary of the past, summoning LAURA who stands before a canvas on an easel. SHE sips wine while SELENA opens a cage door, and LUCILLE stands aside, watching.)

LUCILLE

So who are you painting tonight?

SELENA

Cleopatra! She was a miniature cockatiel, but now she's a bright explosion of feathers. It's a challenge to make her stand still; she's prancing all over the shop.

(As SELENA scampers after CLEOPATRA, LAURA paints with sweeping gestures.)

LUCILLE

I love how you've painted the head purple and the beak green.

SELENA

(stopping to inspect the canvas) No, no, no! Her top knots higher, and her tail unfurls *(pointing)* to there.

LAURA

(painting) Like this?

SELENA

Yes!

LUCILLE

Extraordinary how the feathers coil into such tiny spirals.

SELENA

The milliners love them best, and whenever Cleo sings, violet lights dance about her head.

LAURA

Speaking of singing, don't you miss your parties -- with everyone gathered round the piano while you played?

SELENA

I've forgotten how.

LAURA

You don't forget a talent like that. What if we move a piano in here? Then you could...

SELENA

No!

LAURA

Why not?

SELENA

Because I said so! I don't want to play or dress up and be charming!

LAURA

Sorry, I only asked because... Well, I'm sure you realize you're not like...you were.

SELENA

Then what am I? A monkey? *(to Lucille)* Laura's been chatting with Mummy. Of course, everyone thinks I'm beastly, but aren't we all? Didn't Mister Darwin prove we're just another species of mammal?

LUCILLE

Yes, he did.

LAURA

Lucille's an atheist. She doesn't believe we're God's creatures, made in his likeness.

SELENA

If God made his creatures in his likeness, then isn't God an ass and a pig and a snake?

LAURA

Perhaps, but he's mostly like human beings who have consciousness. We're supposed to be superior.

SELENA

But are we? Are we really like God or is God like us?

LAURA

Since God came first, we're like him. We know what's morally right and wrong, which is why we suffer.

SELENA

Which isn't very kind of God, but as Dodie used to say, life can't be a bed of roses without the thorns.

LAURA

Your's was. Everyone loved you, Selena, except for those of us who were envious.

SELENA

So are you here to gloat or because you pity poor me?

LAURA

Pity, though I pity myself as well. We've both been unlucky in love.

SELENA

Really? Was I unlucky?

LAURA

A week before your illness, your photograph was in the Times as the exceptional beauty engaged to the dashing Roger Gannet.

SELENA

I tend not to think about the past; I live entirely in the moment, though lately for about ten minutes of every hour, a weight is lifted from (*touching her breast*) here. Then a light

SELENA (cont'd)

turns on inside and I feel completely free, like...like who I must have been.

LAURA

Is now one of those ten minutes?

SELENA

Yes.

LAURA

Then how can I hold you? How can I keep you here?

SELENA

You can't. Sooner or later it happens; something...

LAURA

What...?

SELENA

Pounces! Right into me, then the light dims and I'm famished, fretful, filled with a blinding rage, and I...I forget. Then gradually I become more myself.

LUCILLE

Tell me, Selena, if I'm not prying, did your doctors suggest any remedies or theories?

SELENA

Of course!

(VANESSA and TWO DOCTORS appear in white lab coats.)

SELENA

They all agreed I'm bonkers. One told Mummy I was...

SELENA

...a classic case.

DOCTOR BUNTING

A classic case...

DOCTOR BUNTING

...of a girl who once possessed a single consciousness, but now has two.

VANESSA

Obviously! Any imbecile can see that!

SELENA

Another doctor, a student of Professor Freud's, said I had...

SELENA

.....acute neurasthenia.

DOCTOR SNIPES

(with a German accent) Acute neurasthenia....

DOCTOR SNIPES

...from repressed sexual longings for her father.

VANESSA

For Dodie...?

DOCTOR SNIPES

These longings became embodied in your daughter's mind as imaginary animals that were dormant, asleep in cages. Then after her father died, her grief unhinged the cages and they sprang free.

VANESSA

Her imaginary animals sprang free...?

DOCTOR SNIPES

Yes, then her decent, moral self tried to kill off the beastly selves, but instead of killing the imagined animals, she killed off the real ones.

VANESSA

I never heard such rubbish in all my life! Come, Selena, let's go!

(SELENA kicks the doctor. Then VANESSA marches off, followed by the DOCTORS, one hobbling.)

SELENA

I gave the old quack a swift kick in the shin! God, I must be a devil when I'm not like this.

LUCILLE

Don't you know?

SELENA

I told you, I forget! But since we're being so honest, *(to Laura)* why don't you enlighten me, tell me the worst.

LAURA

Now? In front of Lucille?

SELENA

Why not? You'll tell her anyway.

LAURA

(pause) At night, when you can't sleep, you make shrill sounds. Sometimes I peek in and watch you lurching and leaping about.

SELENA

As if I were regressing? As if Mummy's right, and soon I'll start craving bananas and sprouting a tail?!

LAURA

Don't be daft.

SELENA

You never knew Gogo; *(pointing)* that was his cage. Whenever he escaped, the shop looked like a whirlwind passed through, leaving gnawed paws, tattered ears, feathers everywhere. Mummy wanted to sell him, but Dodie took a fancy to him and moved him into the house. He had razor sharp teeth, and one day he latched onto Mummy and took a bite of her cheek. She bled profusely; there was a terrible row; and Gogo was banished from most of the rooms.

LAURA

But he loved you, didn't he?

SELENA

Oh, yes, he'd climb onto my lap and comb my hair, stroke my arms, and stare for hours on end. Sometimes he slept with me, and would even perch on the edge of the tub and watch me bathe. *(to Lucille)* Can you believe I was ever worth watching?

LUCILLE

You still are.

LAURA

Did your mother tell you that I sometimes draw your portrait when I'm sketching? She thinks your spirit guides my hand.

SELENA

Old Mummy's chock full of theories, isn't she? That's because she doesn't hold me responsible, but I am. *(to Lucille)* I'm the one who thrust the blade into their hearts, but they've forgiven me. Why else would they let me see their souls? Did you know that after Laura paints them, they feel free to leave?

LUCILLE

You mean you stop seeing them?

SELENA

I mean they're no longer there.

LAURA

You never told me that!

SELENA

All six of the birds you've painted are gone. They slowly resume their original forms, then fade, and poof! They vanish altogether.

LAURA

Where do they go?

SELENA

To heaven I imagine, or into the paintings. Perhaps it's true that artists capture the souls of their subjects.

LUCILLE

You mean like that story of Oscar Wilde's? You remember: there's a man named Dorian whose portrait reflects his spirit growing old and decrepit while his body stays young.

LAURA

But if the animals disappear when I paint them, aren't their cages empty?

SELENA

Of course -- you frisky pig!

LAURA

Lena!

FALSTAFF

(snorts!)

SELENA

Not you, Falstaff!

LAURA

Selena, if the spirits fade after I paint them, shouldn't I be painting Iago?!

SELENA

But I've never seen his soul! All I know is when this "thing" comes, my skin prickles, my heart quickens, then I smell the foul stench of his...waste. That's why I think it's Iago. He wasn't always clean, but neither am I, ha, ha!

LUCILLE

(checking her watch) Oh, dear, it's time I left. I have piles of essays to correct. Good night, ladies.

LAURA

See you tomorrow.

SELENA

Good night.

(LUCILLE departs.)

SELENA

I thought she'd never leave.

LAURA

I thought you liked Lucille.

SELENA

Why would I? She's a tedious drudge who thinks I'm demented!

LAURA

Nonsense, she's very...sympathetic. *(pause)* Listen, Selena, if you and your mother are convinced it's Iago's spirit affecting you, has anyone actually called him out and confronted him? Your mother mentioned some priests.

(VANESSA and THREE PRIESTS appear.)

SELENA

The three blind mice! The first mouse said we should...

SELENA

...pray to Saint Agrippa.

FATHER FINCH

Pray to Saint Agrippa,...

FATHER FINCH

...the patron saint of female infirmities.

SELENA

The second mouse said...

SELENA

...pray to Saint Dymphna.

FATHER QUAIL

Pray to Saint Dymphna,...

FATHER QUAIL

...who comforts deranged children.

SELENA

The third sprinkled water on my head and mumbled.

FATHER GROUSE

(making the sign of the cross) Sanctus deus, beatus is penuriosus parvulus.

SELENA

Then he called on the...

SELENA

....devil.

FATHER GROUSE

Devil,...

FATHER GROUSE

...reveal thyself! Satan, Lucifer, Beelzebub!

VANESSA

(pause) His name is Iago.

FATHER GROUSE

Iago, reveal thyself! *(long pause)* Apparently, he won't come out when summoned.

SELENA

Especially by a fat Nancy!

VANESSA

Selena!

FATHER GROUSE

What...?

FATHER GROUSE

You have an offensive tongue, young lady!

SELENA

And you like buggering boys, old fruiter!

VANESSA

Shush, Selena! *(grasping Selena's hand)* Come! Let's go!!

SELENA

(shouting back) Faggot!

(VANESSA and SELENA run off, then SELENA returns to LAURA.)

SELENA

We also met with a medium who took one look at me, then wet her knickers and ran.

LAURA

But what about you? I mean, have *you* ever tried to summon him?

SELENA

(*pause*) Nearly every waking moment of every hour I felt remotely like myself -- until I realized it was futile. When I first felt it might be him, I'd kneel and beg, "Please, if you're listening, if you ever loved me at all, then leave my body, give me back the days and nights that belong to *me*, not to you, so go away, go away, get out, out, out!!!"

(Furious, SELENA starts slapping her own face, but LAURA grasps her hands.)

LAURA

Stop that, stop it right now! Look at me! Stare into my eyes and come back; come back and stay, stay Selena!

(SELENA starts gasping for air and grunting. When SHE speaks, her voice becomes deep and raspy.)

SELENA

Grrrrrrrruuuuu, grrrraaaaa...

LAURA

Can you tell me what's happening, what you're feeling? Are you...?

SELENA

Aye, 'tis her greedy sweetie! Kiss me!

LAURA

No!

SELENA

'Tis the crud in her blood, the rot in her pot...

LAURA

Stop that!

SELENA

...the pox in her box, the lump in her rump,...

LAURA

Please stop!

SELENA

...the fart in her heart! (*making gaseous sounds*) Pppppprrrttt...

LAURA

That's disgusting!

SELENA

Tsk, tsk, am I too rude and crude for thy ladyship?

LAURA

Yes!

SELENA

Fair Selena hath a strumpet's crumpet, a tart's heart -- full of spittle, shittle and snot!

LAURA

No, no, Selena's generous and good.

SELENA

And misunderstood -- aren't we all? Methinks the snitch a cheeky bitch.

LAURA

Oh, stop jabbering! Selena, if you can hear me, please know that no matter what he says, I won't believe him!

SELENA

Selena's deaf, dearie, dwindled in the dark -- from nymph to imp.

LAURA

You're the imp!

SELENA

Guilty as charged.

LAURA

Can't you see you're hurting her? People think she's mad.

SELENA

And incurably sad. (*sniff, sniff*)

LAURA

If you really loved Selena, you wouldn't force your will on her!

SELENA

Lovely Lena had her pick; now she's lovesick for my prick.

LAURA

Rubbish! She wants a man, not a beastly monkey! You made her kill innocent animals!

SELENA

Guilty again' 'Twas hate I ate for supper, hate I drank for tea; hate that flayed the beasties, and hate that made them flee.

LAURA

But they didn't flee; their spirits came back!

SELENA

Aye, 'tis their transitions, the passage 'tween this piss pot and paradise.

LAURA

What about you? Are you in transition?

SELENA

Nay, my ghost hath a host. Afore me fair Selena fingered the ivory keys, but now she fondles the fleshpots of pleasure she'd kindly share with her comely (*making kiss smacking sounds*) cousin.

LAURA

Oh, shush! Now I'm going to let go of your hands, but stop slapping Selena!

(Pause as LAURA slowly releases Selena's wrists, then drains her glass of wine.)

LAURA

Now that we're on speaking terms, what will make you go away?

(SELENA snatches the wine bottle, gulping the remains.)

LAURA

Give me that! You drank it all, you glutton!

SELENA

Aye, I've grown a piggish sot! Thirst needs quenching like a wench needs wenching!

LAURA

Back to my question -- what will make you disappear? What do you want?

SELENA

Affection -- tender and true. Lust comes with thrust, but a mere embrace willst my hunger erase.

LAURA

Are you saying you'll leave after an embrace?

SELENA

Aye, anything for thee, dearie.

LAURA

You promise?

(SELENA nods, then opens her arms and LAURA walks into them, allowing herself to be embraced.)

SELENA

Ahhhhhh, now press the pillows of my lips.

(LAURA and SELENA kiss, gently at first, then feverishly.)

LAURA

Ooowwww! Stop that! (*backing away*) We can't; it's indecent!

SELENA

(*grasping her*) Nay, 'tis spunky monkey love.

LAURA

Let go!

SELENA

Tsk, ts, methinks thou art unplucked, unfucked!

LAURA

Shush your mouth!

SELENA

A maid whose buds ne'er bloomed, doomed to withered tits...

LAURA

You malevolent bully!

SELENA

...and wizened twat!

(SELENA grasps LAURA'S arm, making monkey-like grunts. LAURA struggles, then succumbs, and THEY kiss passionately as BIRDS twitter, CATS purr, and DOGS howl. Then darkness descends, and BERTRAM appears in his cell.)

BERTRAM

Surely even you lowlifes can understand how two vulnerable, rejected young women longing for affection wound up longing for each other. Oh, I'm sure you know all about rejection and injured self-esteem, how it opens the cage door to the beasts within. The question is: to whom did Laura succumb? The beauty or the beast? Or had they become inextricably intertwined? (*reading a page*) To quote granny Lucille's purple prose: "Laura and Lena enjoyed months of harmony, conjuring paintings by day while at night humming birds nested in their hair, calico kittens licked their faces, and goldfish slithered between their thighs." Then one morning,...

BERTRAM

...a note...

SELENA

A note?

BERTRAM

...appeared, tacked to the door.

(BERTRAM retreats as SELENA approaches LAURA who is painting.)

SELENA

(*reading the note*) It's from mummy! She wants to call on Wednesday -- for tea! She wants to discuss my seeing another medium. Absolutely not!

LAURA

She misses you, Selena; she loves you.

SELENA

She's wasting time and money, the silly cow!

LAURA

Selena! Are you Selena?

SELENA

Yes, yes! Why can't she leave us alone?!

LAURA

She wants to help you; she blames herself.

SELENA

She should! Dust to dust, ashes to ashes -- poor Gogo.

LAURA

You're certain you're Selena?

SELENA

Everyone changes, Laura, love, everyone grows for better or worse.

LAURA

Not like you; even your hair's turning the color of his...

SELENA

Fur...? Ha! You don't know the half of it.

LAURA

What do you mean?

SELENA

You really want to know?

LAURA

Just tell me.

SELENA

I'll *show* you if you promise not to toss your supper. (*lifting her skirt revealing hairy legs*) I knew you'd hate it.

LAURA

Don't you?! For god's sake get rid of it; shave it off, all of it -- now!

SELENA

I've been shaving for weeks, every blessed night while you're asleep. But it keeps growing, and now it's on my arms and chest!

LAURA

We can't let this happen; we have to fight back, which is why we need your mother!

SELENA

No, no, no!

LAURA

You don't have to see her; take a walk or visit your milliners.

SELENA

You're repulsed now, aren't you? You hate how I've grown uglier by the hour.

LAURA

No, but it's frightening, as if you're progressing through a...a metamorphosis. Remember when we studied the Greeks? How Ovid believed humans would be happier if they turned into birds and beasts.

SELENA

Ha! What does bloody Ovid know?! What beast did he become? When did he grow fur or feathers? Never, that's when! Forget Ovid, and look what we've accomplished: my visions through your brush -- just as I predicted! Those horrid doctors said I anthropomorphize animals, but they *do* have personalities. It's obvious from the paintings, isn't it, Shylock?

(A miniature POODLE yaps!)

LAURA

I confess I was only humoring you at first, but the more I paint, the more I realize you've guided me towards a whole new style, a new sense of freedom with colors. Of course, I'm only the copyist; you're the brave one, the visionary.

SELENA

The fool who's gone to bloody hell and back, that's me!

LAURA

Let's show them to your mother.

SELENA

And the whole bleeding world -- including Simon Sparrow!

LAURA

That's why I've only signed initials. If we have an exhibition, we'll say the artist is an Italian recluse named Lorenzo Fabrizzio.

SELENA

Yes, and Lorenzo lives in Florence with his pet cats and rats.

LAURA

After I finish Ariel, I'm going to paint Iago.

SELENA

No, you can't! I told you I can't see him!

LAURA

But you can describe how he was, and perhaps...

(A knock is heard.)

SELENA

Who the hell is that?! Look through the peep hole!

LAURA

Oh, God, it's Roger.

SELENA

I can't see him! Tell him I'm asleep; tell him I'm sick; tell him I'm dead!

LAURA

Hide in the bedroom! I'll put him off.

(SELENA dashes off. LAURA opens the door to
ROGER GANNET, a handsome young man.)

ROGER

Hello, Laura. Please forgive me for not calling first. I ran into Selena's mother at the atheneum. She told me you were here. She also forbade me to come, but I took the chance you'd let me in.

LAURA

I'm afraid Selena's not available just now.

ROGER

Would you mind if I step inside? I'll only stay a minute.

LAURA

Well, all right.

(Pause as ROGER enters and seats himself.)

LAURA

Would you like some tea?

ROGER

No, thanks, just some information.

LAURA

I...I'm sorry your wedding was postponed.

ROGER

Canceled, actually -- her mother insisted. She said Selena had a complete breakdown, and wasn't likely to recover any time soon. *(pause)* I've missed her. Will you please tell her that?

LAURA

Yes, of course.

ROGER

Thinking about Selena got me through the war. Since they wouldn't let me visit, I wrote, but she never answered -- not once. You know, I'm not afraid to see her. She couldn't be any worse than the horrors I've seen in the trenches. Believe me, I know what it's like to feel fear, to be trapped and alone. You lose parts of yourself in a war, parts that will never come back, but I didn't expect to lose Selena. I keep trying to get on with my life, but I can't stop thinking about her, so please, Laura, talk to me, tell me what's happened.

LAURA

What have you heard?

ROGER

Rumors mostly, that she's become wild and unruly, the crazed slayer of animals.

LAURA

The person you describe is *not* Selena, but I can't explain without betraying her confidence. Let's just say she's waging her own private war.

ROGER

(pause) Does she ever mention me?

LAURA

She tends to live in the present.

ROGER

Does she still play piano and sing?

LAURA

No.

ROGER

What a tragic waste. *(pause)* It's awfully generous of you to care for her.

LAURA

We seem to be helping each other.

ROGER

(pause, looking around) These paintings -- who did them?

LAURA

No one you'd know.

ROGER

They're quite...extraordinary. The feathers on that bird are so vivid, it seems about to fly off the canvas. Are they for sale?

LAURA

They will be.

ROGER

What are they doing here?

LAURA

The artist needed a place to...hang them, to store them.

ROGER

(pause, gazing) Incredible -- the details. Who is he then; what's his name?

LAURA

Well, he's very...discreet; he prefers to remain obscure.

ROGER

(approaching the easel) I see he has another parrot on the easel, so he paints here as well. Ah, his initials are L. F. *(pause)* The same as Laura Featherstone's. *(pause)* These are your paintings, aren't they? *(pause)* You shouldn't be so modest, but you certainly had me fooled. Honestly, Laura, I'm impressed -- bowled over really.

LAURA

Selena's my inspiration; this is what she sees.

ROGER

My God...

LAURA

She claims to see the souls of animals; she hears them too. Their birdsong turns into colors.

ROGER

(pause) Has anyone else seen them?

LAURA

You're the first.

ROGER

I won't be the last.

LAURA

(pause) I hear you're back at Oxford.

ROGER

Studying law, though my powers of concentration seem to have suffered...

(Suddenly the door opens and SELENA enters, looking chimpish, wild-eyed, and carrying a fistful of feathers.)

LAURA

Selena!

ROGER

Selena...?

SELENA

Aye, Roger the Dodger! *(presenting the feathers)* For thee: a posy of plumes!

LAURA

(to Roger) Please leave!

SELENA

Nay, stay! There stands her Romeo, and methought she was enamored of an ass, ha, ha!

LAURA

Oh, Roger, please go!

SELENA

How about a kiss? What?! Art thou repulsed by rancid breath? The fust of female fluxes?

LAURA

Selena, please!

SELENA

Am I such a fright? Little me? Have I become an outcast, demented and deranged?

ROGER

You're still...lovely.

SELENA

Nay, I've grown a sot's pot and there's hair on me bum!

LAURA

Oh, shush!

SELENA

But the worms in my mouth oftentimes turn to butterflies.

ROGER

I...I'm so sorry you've been ill.

SELENA

How like winter hath thy absence been; what dark days seen, but to behold thee now, even finer than afore: larger, nobler, wiser!

LAURA

It's time for Roger to go home!

SELENA

Nay, nay, not so soon! (*stroking Roger's face*) Such a sweet cheek. Forgive her clammy hands -- she sweats like a sow, doth Selena, but she hath infinite longings, for the body serves the soul.

LAURA

Oh, please, please, go back to your room!

SELENA

Lusty Laura craves thee for herself! Envy is the cornfly in her eye, and no wonder. (*to Laura*) A kind heart hath our Roger.

LAURA

How can I make you stop speaking?!

SELENA

You can't! *(to Roger)* Tsk, tsk, do I spy a tear, a drop of despond?

LAURA

Please, Roger, if you don't leave, I swear I'll scream!

ROGER

I...I'll come again.

SELENA

(snatching Roger's arm) A farewell kiss would not be amiss.

(SELENA kisses ROGER, who backs away, then leaves.)

LAURA

You horrid beast! Look what you've done?! Now Roger will think she's an ogre!

SELENA

Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds.

LAURA

Oh, shut up! I hate how you speak, how you've ruined her life! I should have tied you to the bed, locked the door, and tossed the key! Oh, what must he think!

SELENA

What he thinks matters naught; what he feels even less.

LAURA

What he feels is revulsion!

SELENA

Aye, and pity which is poison to romance, but 'tis Gogo Selena truly loves.

LAURA

Bollocks! 'Tis Gogo she hates! And I'm going to paint him straight to hell!

SELENA

Nay, you'll ne'er capture Gogo, heh, heh.

LAURA

Oh, shut up! Shut up! (*pause, she sighs*) I need a drink. Why don't you go to the cupboard and fetch a bottle of wine?

SELENA

Aye, milady, I profess a craving for the spell of spirits, how it makes us bold and bawdy!

(SELENA departs as LAURA snatches a key, and locks the door. Moments later SELENA is heard pounding.)

SELENA

Let me in, trickster!

LAURA

Not till you leave Selena alone!

SELENA

Never! Past cure she is!

LAURA

Go away!

SELENA

Frantic mad!

LAURA

Go to hell!

SELENA

With ever more unrest!

LAURA

(*seizing a fresh canvas*) I'm going to paint you, paint you till you die!

SELENA

Eeeeeeeiiiiiiiiiii!

(LAURA remains painting while SELENA shrieks are followed by howlings, mewlings and chirpings as the bestiary of the past becomes The Bestiary Gallery in the present where BERTRAM is playing a recording of the same animal sounds. As the sounds fade, CHARLOTTE stands aside, admiring paintings stacked by the walls.)

BERTRAM

(turning off the voices) You see, I'll play the animals' voices which along with the cages suggest the creatures that inspired the art. I'm planning to group the birds here on the blue wall; the dogs, pigs, cats, rats, and rabbits on the green; and reptiles on the red.

CHARLOTTE

What about this chimp?

BERTRAM

Actually, he's a monkey. The Featherstones had a pygmy capuchin who was a favorite of Laura's uncle. I assume he's the one.

CHARLOTTE

You sure he's a pygmy?

BERTRAM

With the gonads of a gorilla, ha!

CHARLOTTE

He needs dusting.

BERTRAM

Dusty is he? *(sniff)* And he stinks like he's been stored in a whorehouse hamper. My great granny wrote a book about him called The Beast Within. In fact, I scanned all six hundred and twenty pages, then mailed it to Scribners who plan to publish.

CHARLOTTE

Birdy, that's wonderful! It sounds like a horror story.

BERTRAM

Oh, yes, a real sodding bastard he was -- very pissed off about being euthanized and incinerated. His name's Iago, and they're using his portrait on the cover.

CHARLOTTE

Is Iago for sale?

BERTRAM

Never! We're tethered together for life. I loathed him at first, thought I'd hang him in the loo, then gradually I discovered something marvelous: In this whole wide world, this is the one particular painting that speaks to me; this is the painting that truly understands. It's like finding a new friend who knows all my sorrows, not to mention the grudges I hold, the cruelties I long to avenge. Have you ever found such a picture -- the one painted just for Charlotte Limpkin?

CHARLOTTE

No.

BERTRAM

You think I'm balmy?

CHARLOTTE

Not at all. I've found poems and novels that speak to me, that consoled me when my husband left me for a man. *(pause)* I was so depressed, I thought I'd die. No one could comfort me -- until I retreated to my bed with a stack of books. They let me escape into lives more pathetic or heroic than my own.

BERTRAM

(pause) Didn't you suspect your husband was gay?

CHARLOTTE

No, and neither did he -- until I introduced him to a colleague at my agency. Anyway, that was years ago; we were only twenty-three.

BERTRAM

There's been no one since?

CHARLOTTE

Yes, but nothing that lasted.

BERTRAM

I was married for seventeen years. Then my adulterous wife left me for a genuine blue blooded lord of the realm. He was everything I was not: rich, handsome, and highborn. Iago understands betrayal, and he's a wonderful listener, the safest of confidantes.

CHARLOTTE

And cheaper than a therapist, but still, he's only a painting.

BERTRAM

Bite your tongue! He's a presence, aren't you, old boy? Until Iago, I'd no idea what art was capable of. Of course, I've always admired paintings, though I didn't appreciate how some can show you yourself, even the dark, aberrant corners. The devil of it is, when I stare at him for any length of time, I start to drift and indulge my fantasies.

CHARLOTTE

What kind of fantasies?

(As BERTRAM speaks their names, SELENA and LAURA appear, suspended in memory.)

BERTRAM

Lately, I think of the past, of Selena and Laura standing before her easel. They live in the pages of granny's book, but are more real to me than my neighbors. Of course, I also indulge in fantasies of the present.

CHARLOTTE

Like what?

BERTRAM

Like kissing you for starters. *(pause)* Might I...?

CHARLOTTE

Well,...yes.

(BERTRAM kisses CHARLOTTE)

CHARLOTTE

Ouch, you're biting my neck!

BERTRAM

Forgive me. I...I get carried away.

CHARLOTTE

No biting!

(THEY embrace, and resume kissing. Then BERTRAM emits a grunt as lights fade to black.)

END OF ACT I

ACT II

(At night in his Manhattan jail cell, BERTRAM shivers while confiding in his fellow prisoners.)

BERTRAM

Aaacchooo! Did I mention I'm here for calling the judge a sodding narrow minded prick -- serve him right if I catch my death. Of course, I ought to be grateful. Thanks to the publicity, the book's selling ever so well, and the gallery's a gold mine. *(pause)* Now since we're all so chummy, I'll tell you about the tea party where Vanessa took one look at Laura's paintings and called them...

BERTRAM

...chimeras.

VANESSA

Chimeras!

(VANESSA and LUCILLE appear at the bestiary, gazing at the paintings while LAURA pours tea.)

VANESSA

That's what they are -- mythical mutations! Is this what they call "expressionism"?

LAURA

These are the spirits of the animals that lived here. Their shapes emerged slowly, and before Selena saw them, she heard them, and before she heard them, she felt their breaths.

VANESSA

Like apparitions...?

LAURA

Like images from a world we're not supposed to see.

VANESSA

Haven't you got something stronger than tea? Some sherry perhaps?

LAURA

Yes, of course.

(LAURA leaves.)

LUCILLE

Look how she's painted every strand of these feathers.

VANESSA

Yes, extraordinary. *(pause)* Of course, I'm no judge; they could be all frippery and nonsense. They're certainly colorful.

LUCILLE

And whimsical; I love how they've all sprouted wings.

VANESSA

So has Laura. How ironic that she's the one flourishing. She was such a mousey girl; we were hoping she'd marry well. *(pause, she sighs)* What a pity you didn't know the real Selena. You've no idea the torment of watching a brilliant child frittering away her youth -- all gone to waste! Now who will have her?

LUCILLE

Laura will. They'll manage the gallery together, and someday they may even find husbands. They're not spinsters yet.

VANESSA

Oh, why isn't Selena here?! Has she really gone out or is she sulking in her room?

(LAURA returns with glasses and a decanter of sherry.)

LAURA

She's out selling feathers. And in case you're wondering, they do seem to materialize on the floors of the cages.

LUCILLE

Have you actually seen them materialize?

LAURA

Well, no.

LUCILLE

So she could be slipping them in while you sleep.

VANESSA

Feathers! What nonsense! Tramping the streets like a common peddler! Can't you stop her?

LAURA

No.

VANESSA

(pause) Since I won't be seeing her, perhaps you'll enlighten me: How is her health; has she lost weight?

LAURA

We try to cook nourishing meals.

VANESSA

Does she eat them with a fork?

LAURA

More often than not.

VANESSA

Does she sleep?

LAURA

When she isn't agitated.

VANESSA

We must persuade her to see Mister Sanderling; he's a highly respected clairvoyant. He asked if I'd be willing to share Selena's pain, to draw it into my body to relieve her suffering. Of course, I said, it's the least I can do. *(pause, sipping sherry)* He wants to meet you as well, but seriously, Laura, *(gesturing to the paintings)* what will become of all this? Do you really think the world cares one whit what Selena sees and you paint?

LAURA

Perhaps not, though Roger seemed quite enthused.

VANESSA

Roger...? Was he here?! *(pause)* Answer me!

LAURA

He came by unexpectedly. I tried to turn him away, but he insisted.

VANESSA

Oh, God, he didn't see...? How could you?! That's not friendship; that's betrayal!

LAURA

No, Auntie, no! Selena said she'd stay hidden, but she came out! He made her!

VANESSA

How?! Did he barge into her room?

LAURA

No, no, not Roger, I meant...

VANESSA

Iago!

LAURA

I couldn't stop him; neither could she.

VANESSA

Oh, god, was he...?

LAURA

Rude, vulgar, and aggressive? Yes! I was mortified.

VANESSA

Well, that ends that, not that I dared hope. (*pouring more sherry*) Have you painted her portrait as I asked?

LAURA

Look, Auntie, I know you expected me to tuck tail, drop everything, and save Selena, but now I know painting her won't help. However, there is something that might.

VANESSA

What?

LAURA

Selena said whenever I paint the animals' spirits, they fade, then vanish. She said she can't see Iago's, but whenever I suggest painting him anyway, she becomes agitated, which makes me think it might...affect him.

VANESSA

Then do it for god's sake! What are you waiting for?

LAURA

For you -- to describe him. I've already started, but I only saw him years ago when he was young. (*bringing out a canvas*) Here.

VANESSA

Oh, no; Iago grew fat. Paint a pot belly, and his fur was a drabber brown.

LAURA

I'll get my palette!

VANESSA

And make his face rounder. Dodie overfed the beast. When he wasn't eating, he was belching and making obscene noises.

LAURA

(pause, painting swiftly) Like this?

VANESSA

Much better. *(pause)* Perhaps I shouldn't tell you, but I suppose you ought to know why Iago meant so much to Dodie. I never really understood until the last day we spoke. I was bringing his medicine, when he grasped my hand, and said...

VANESSA

...I need to confess.

DOMINIC

I need to confess.

(VANESSA has joined DOMINIC who appears frailer.)

DOMINIC

We both know I haven't much time.

VANESSA

I'll call Father Grebes.

DOMINIC

No, I need to speak now, while I still have my wits. It's about Gogo: surely you know he's meant more to me than a mere companion. He's been like a brother, but he's also played the lover in dreams I dreamt when I seduced little girls.

VANESSA

When you what...?

DOMINIC

It's not uncommon for men to feel attracted to young flesh, even their daughters.

VANESSA

You didn't...? Tell me you didn't!

DOMINIC

No, thanks to Gogo. He saved me from myself, and saved her innocence -- that's why I'm beholden to him. You see, when he fondled and caressed her; when he sat nestled in her lap or slept curled astride her lovely little...

VANESSA

Stop it! That's revolting! Perverse!

DOMINIC

But you see, I could feel what he felt.

VANESSA

That's impossible!

DOMINIC

Not for voyeurs with vivid imaginations, not if sensations can be passed from one throbbing beast to another.

VANESSA

Stop talking nonsense!

DOMINIC

Believe me, Gogo had powers. Ever since I ended his life, I've felt his presence. He comes at night with his eyes on fire. He sits on my chest, and his nails pierce my skin.

VANESSA

It's the laudanum; it's made you delirious!

DOMINIC

Then how do you account for this?

(DOMINIC exposes his chest, revealing his wounds.)

VANESSA

Good lord, they do look like burns or...bites. There must be spiders in the bedding. I'll have the linens stripped.

DOMINIC

No, it's Gogo! He feels betrayed and vindictive. I should never have drugged him; I should have let him die a natural death.

VANESSA

You're very ill, Dodie; the cancer's affecting your mind. Now please, go to bed; let's forget we ever spoke of this.

DOMINIC

I thought you'd understand; you always said animals had souls. *(pause)* At least we're preserving his corpse -- he'd like that. You'll see to it.

(DOMINIC shuffles off as VANESSA returns to LAURA and LUCILLE.)

VANESSA

Of course, I'd already disposed of the beast, and four days later Dodie passed away.
(*pause*) You can stop gawking now, Lucille, and tell us what you think.

LUCILLE

I'm sorry, but you and Laura believe in dimensions that I...I can't quite...

(SELENA bursts in, and LAURA quickly tosses a cloth over her painting of Iago.)

SELENA

Hello, Mummy! Lucille!

VANESSA

Selena, my dear, I'm so glad you're here! Oh, you are looking better; the roses are back in your cheeks!

SELENA

I shaved them just for you. Did Laura tell you I've grown a bit shaggy? (*displaying her hairy legs*) Now all I'll need is a barrel organ, ha, ha! (*pause*) Cat got your tongue, Mummy? Lucille? (*to Laura*) At least they haven't gone screaming from the room, ha, ha! (*to Lucille*) So did you have a nice tea party?

LUCILLE

(*pause*) Yes,... lovely.

LAURA

Would you like some?

SELENA

No, but I'd love some sherry! Fetch me a glass!

(LAURA departs as VANESSA pours herself another glass.)

LUCILLE

(*pause*) Laura's been showing us her paintings.

SELENA

Our paintings! They're my visions, so they're mine too!

LUCILLE

Yes, of course.

SELENA

(to Vanessa) We're going to be known as The Bestiary Gallery? We're planning a proper opening with invitations sent to all the critics. You'll both be invited as well.

LUCILLE

What will you do with the cages?

SELENA

Keep them as part of the exhibit.

LUCILLE

I'd love to help if you need me.

SELENA

You can pass the hors d'oeuvres.

(LAURA enters with a glass and fills it with sherry. SELENA quickly drains it, then pours another.)

VANESSA

Should you be drinking?

SELENA

Yes, should you? Would you like a feather, Mummy? You could add it to your hat.

VANESSA

(accepting the feather) Thank you, dear.

SELENA

My supply's dwindling. Fewer birds means fewer feathers, but once we sell the paintings, we'll be rich! Do you have a favorite?

VANESSA

I...I don't know. They're all quite...unique.

SELENA

Can you tell which spirit belonged to which animal? *(pointing)* That's Prospero, that's Mistress Page, and that's Viola. If we could label ourselves zoologically, what beast would you choose? A bird?

VANESSA

Yes, I suppose, something bright, like that parrot.

SELENA

Lucille?

LUCILLE

I've always loved cats, so I'd choose a tiger or a leopard.

SELENA

And what beast would Laura choose?

LAURA

Since I love the sea, a dolphin or sea lion.

SELENA

Or an ass if you think I don't know what's hiding behind that cloth! (*whipping the cloth off the canvas*) Tsk, tsk, you haven't captured his spirit at all.

LAURA

I thought you couldn't see it.

SELENA

I couldn't till two nights ago when I felt a weight on my stomach. I opened my eyes, and glimpsed a ghoulish old thing in the shape of an ape, with pointed ears, a fat knob of a nose, and fingernails like spikes. I'm quite certain it's Gogo.

LAURA

Why didn't you tell me?!

SELENA

I'm telling you now, so keep painting before he pounces!

LUCILLE

(*pause*) Selena, I was wondering: if the animal spirits vanish, where do they go?

SELENA

To quote the bard, "They go we know not where." But what do you care? (*to Vanessa*) Lucille thinks we're all bonkers, don't you? Come now, fess up!

LUCILLE

I'm not judging you, but I never believed in spirits or ghosts, even as a child. At least these aren't your garden variety -- no rattling chains or knocking on walls.

VANESSA

Well, I don't give a toss what you or anyone thinks! If painting Iago's spirit will drive him away, then send him to hell, Laura! Bring back my Selena!

SELENA

Your Selena will never come back; that girl's gone and good riddance!

VANESSA

That girl was brilliant and about to marry a perfectly charming man!

SELENA

A man she didn't care two figs about! Your Selena had a very large hole in her heart which may be why Gogo found it so bloody easy to squeeze through.

VANESSA

That's not true, you were always kind; compassion was one of your gifts.

SELENA

Bollocks! Selena just pretended to love everyone while feeling ever so superior. What little compassion she had, she spent on the animals -- like you, Mummy. Don't you prefer pets to people?

VANESSA

I don't believe you didn't love Roger. You often said how you missed him.

SELENA

I lied. He's the grabby sort, always holding hands and kissing, but Selena didn't feel much, never has -- not for Roger or any man, not the kind of passion she'd read about in novels. (*gazing at Laura*) At least she didn't feel such things till..

LAURA

Would you please stop talking about yourself in the third person!

VANESSA

Yes, it's most annoying.

SELENA

Sorry, but to quote the bard again, "I am not what I am." I - I - I!

VANESSA

(*to Laura*) Has Selena been taking her medicines?

SELENA

I'm right here, Mummy; you can ask me yourself.

VANESSA

Have you been taking your medicines?

SELENA

I think so.

LAURA

You think so?! Oh, splendid, that's just jolly! *(to Vanessa)* I lay her pills out every morning.

VANESSA

From now on be certain she swallows them.

SELENA

I suppose I swallow them, though I'm not keen on the blue ones. They make me hungry, me-me-me!

LAURA

If you're hungry, why don't you have some cake? Lucille, would you please cut the cake?

SELENA

Yes, a jolly thick slice! Of course, I mustn't get fat or Mummy won't approve, will she? *(gesturing to the painting)* Make the whites of his eyes a swampy yellow, like Dodie's before he died. *(pause)* That's right. *(patting Laura's shoulder)* We cousins are very compatible; we'll stay chums forever -- kissing cousins!

LAURA

Oh, shush, Selena!

SELENA

When birds do sing, hey, ding a ding ding, sweet lovers love the spring!

LAURA

Selena! *(pushing her away)* I can't paint with you hovering over me!

SELENA

Why is one kind of love better than another? At least Gogo loves me with all his heart and soul. He loves me more than Mummy loves me, more than Laura loves me.

LAURA

Stop talking nonsense! Don't you realize what you're saying is Iago's doing, his influence! He has no shame, no restraints!

SELENA

Neither do we, ha, ha!

LAURA

When Selena drinks, she talks rubbish!

SELENA

Ha! I may be a proper mess, but I know what I say and what I feel, and what I (*sniffing*) smell, and it's Gogo -- he coming! Damn! How can I stop him, mummy?! How?!

VANESSA

Hold on to yourself! Control your thoughts! Think what you'll do when he's gone!

SELENA

When he's gone, we'll move to a castle by the sea.

VANESSA

Yes, you'll be a princess!

SELENA

A queen! Every inch a royal highness! I'll start each day with breakfast in bed! Servants will bring trays of pastries! By my bedside, there'll be vases filled with roses (*lowering her voice*) that grow to seed...

VANESSA

No, no, come back! What happens after breakfast?

LAURA

Your bath!

SELENA

In a marble tub! Of steaming water scented with the finest French perfumes (*lowering her voice*) and bathe in fiery floods...

VANESSA

No, stay! After the bath, what will you wear?

SELENA

Only the softest silks will touch my skin, and the air! The air I breathe will be cool and fresh instead of (*deepening her voice*) the foul cloying stench of his corpse where the jewel of life was robbed! (*grunting*) Uhhhhh, uhhhh...

VANESSA

Selena, hang on, say no! (*embracing her*) Say no, no, no,...

VANESSA

...no, no, no!

SELENA

No, no, no!!

SELENA

(*pointing to Laura, furiously*) You are the curse! (*to Vanessa*) And you are the cause!

VANESSA

Stop it! Now leave! Leave Selena; you're killing her!

SELENA

Nay, I'd not shed her blood nor stain that whiter skin than snow. (*turning to Laura*) Oh, cuz, cuz, dost thou know how many fathoms deep I am in love?

LAURA

Then do as I ask, and leave Selena!

SELENA

Forfeit thy palette!

LAURA

No!

SELENA

(*trembling*) Thy brush bristles!

LAURA

Good!

SELENA

I'm woozy with waning. To be or not to be, is that the question?

VANESSA

Yes, and you are *not* to be!

SELENA

Oh, devil, devil, out of my sight!

VANESSA

Out of my daughter!

LAURA

Out of my cousin! (*painting with sweeping gestures*) Out of her ears!

SELENA

(*clasping her ears, becoming deaf*) Naaaayyyyy...

LAURA

Out of her eyes!

SELENA

(*covering her eyes, becoming blind*) Eeeeeiiiiiiiiieeeeeiiiiiii!!!

LAURA

Out of her mouth!

(SELENA opens her mouth and is struck dumb.)

LAURA

Out of her arms!

(SELENA'S arms flop to her sides.)

LAURA

Out of her legs!

(SELENA'S legs buckle; and she falls in a faint.)

LAURA

Selena...?

VANESSA

Oh, my dear.

LUCILLE

(*gasping*) Ahhhhhhhh!

LUCILLE

Should we call a doctor?

VANESSA

No!

LAURA

Help me lift her to the couch.

(LAURA, VANESSA, and LUCILLE carry SELENA to the sofa, and cover her with a blanket. Then suddenly SELENA lurches, gasping as if her heart has been thrust from her throat!)

LAURA
(*gasping*) Ohhhhhh...

LUCILLE
Jesus!

VANESSA
Good God!!

(SELENA slumps back on the sofa, unconscious.)

VANESSA
(*pause*) Do you think he's gone...?

LAURA
No, he's here; he's in this room. I can smell him...

(Lights flicker as shrill monkey cries resound, and the invisible SPIRIT OF IAGO is let loose. HE grasps and spins a terrified VANESSA in circles! LAURA attempts to catch her, then she too is spun about the room while LUCILLE gapes in horror.)

VANESSA and LAURA
(*screaming*) Yiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!!

LUCILLE
Laura! Laura, stop! Stop!!

(Lights cease flickering as LAURA and VANESSA collapse. The monkey screams fade as the PAINTING appears to vibrate, then falls to the floor.)

VANESSA and LUCILLE
(*gasping*) Ahhhhhhhh!

LAURA
Bloody hell!

LUCILLE
Laura, are you all right? Can you stand...?

LAURA
(*breathless, rising*) I think so. (*pause*) Aunt Nessa...?

VANESSA
(*catching her breath*) My...my head's spinning. Where's Selena? Is she...?

LUCILLE
She's asleep. What just happened...?

LAURA
Shhhush...

(LAURA cautiously retrieves the painting from the floor, returns it to the easel, then backs away.)

VANESSA

Look at his eyes -- glowing with malice.

LAURA

His nails are so sharp, it looks as if he could claw through the canvas.

VANESSA

And leap out! Cover him -- quickly!

LAURA

(covering the painting with a cloth) Should we burn it?

VANESSA

No! He came through fire once; he might come again!

LAURA

Lucille, will you hide it?

VANESSA

Where no one can find it, someplace dark and damp where it will wither and rot!

LUCILLE

I...I don't know...

LAURA

You're not afraid, are you?

LUCILLE

(pause) There's a spare room used for storage in...

LAURA

Don't tell us where! Just take the bloody thing! Get it out of the building, out of our lives! *(thrusting the painting at Lucille)* Now leave, please leave!

(LUCILLE departs with the painting as VANESSA and LAURA approach SELINA.)

VANESSA

When she wakes, we'll scrub away every vestige of his loathsome filth!

LAURA

Oh, Auntie, feel her forehead; she's feverish. We have to call...

LAURA

....a doctor.

BERTRAM

A doctor,...

BERTRAM

...back then was useless, and could only prescribe "tincture of time."

(Back in his cell, BERTRAM speaks while LAURA and VANESSA carry SELENA off.)

BERTRAM

Of course, today doctors would scorn the very idea of simian possession. They'd send Selena to a neurologist who'd order brain scans which would reveal heightened electrical activity in her left temporal lobe caused by trauma, impact, faulty chemistry, even hypnotic suggestion, but screw the bloody neurologist! Laura and Vanessa knew Selena was possessed, then became *un*possessed, and in a few months had recovered sufficiently to host the opening of her gallery -- nearly a century before I opened mine -- under the same stars, the same moon. Oh, wouldn't it be lovely if time allowed us to...

BERTRAM

...step back.

LAURA

Step back...

LAURA

....Roger. That's Iris, and she's meant to be seen from six feet away.

(BIRDS sing as the Bestiary Galleries of the past and present intersect: now BERTRAM strolls into his gallery and stands opposite LAURA who is speaking with ROGER while CHARLOTTE joins BERTRAM.)

CHARLOTTE

The paintings look...

CHARLOTTE

...magnificent!

ROGER

Magnificent,....

ROGER

...a marvel at any distance.

CHARLOTTE

You were right about...

CHARLOTTE
...the cages.

ROGER
The cages...

ROGER
...are a nice touch.

CHARLOTTE
But mute the canaries.

BERTRAM
Too shrill are they?

CHARLOTTE
You don't need the sounds;...

CHARLOTTE
...the colors sing!

ROGER
The colors sing,...

ROGER
...and have you noticed how people stand close, then suddenly step back?

CHARLOTTE
I've never seen New Yorkers so dumbstruck!

ROGER
London's never seen such beguiling creatures.

BERTRAM
Great granny would be proud. *(handing Charlotte a book)* Speaking of which, I have a present for you.

LAURA
Lucille's writing a book about the paintings. It's called ...

LAURA
...The Beast Within.

CHARLOTTE
(reading the title) The Beast Within.

BERTRAM
Your very own copy! As I said,...

BERTRAM
...it's a lurid tale.

LAURA
It's a lurid tale,...

LAURA

...of the supernatural.

BERTRAM

But also a romance.

(Now BERTRAM and CHARLOTTE stand gazing.)

ROGER

I see Selena's chatting up the critics. Isn't that Simon Sparrow standing by the indigo rabbits?

LAURA

Yes.

ROGER

Do you think Sparrow's arrow will go up, down, or inbetween?

LAURA

I don't know, and don't care.

ROGER

Well, I say it will point up, up, up! *(pause)* Selena certainly seems to be thriving in her new role. I suppose this is a sort of debut, a coming out after seclusion.

LAURA

Her mother wants her home so she can go back to being the bright, shining beauty everyone adored.

ROGER

You think that's possible? *(pause)* Neither do I. She marched right up to me, said she was cured and in love with someone else. *(pause)* Of course, she has every right to change her feelings.

LAURA

And you? Do you feel the same?

ROGER

Sometimes. I can't seem to erase the image of her I carried to France. *(pause)* Your friend, Lucille, said I should forget Selena, and start courting her cousin instead. *(pause)* Is that true? Should I be courting her cousin?

LAURA

If you wish.

ROGER

I didn't know it was an option.

LAURA

Before you went to war, nearly every girl in London was smitten with you.

ROGER

Really? Well, I can only handle one, so when may I call on you?

(Before LAURA can respond, LUCILLE and SELENA approach. SELENA is transformed, radiant, and beautifully dressed.)

SELENA

Laura, darling, are you enjoying our triumph?

LAURA

It's a bit soon to call it a triumph.

LUCILLE

Not at all; your guests are spellbound.

SELENA

Oh, here he comes. (*whispering to Roger*) Laura's old beau.

(SIMON SPARROW approaches.)

SIMON

Good evening, Laura, dear, you're looking well.

LAURA

Hello, Simon. I believe you've met Selena, and these are our friends, Lucille Grey and Roger Gannet. May I present Simon Sparrow.

SIMON

My pleasure. (*to Laura*) I must say, I'm impressed. It's no small feat for two young ladies to open a gallery.

SELENA

Laura's more suited to managing one than to filling its walls, don't you think?

SIMON

She's obviously cultivated a very fine eye.

LAURA

Selena's the visionary; the gallery was her idea.

SELENA

So will Sparrow's arrow point up or down?

LAURA

Selena, you can't ask that!

SELENA

Why ever not? Besides, everyone knows critics can't be trusted. He's just as likely to write something flattering as he is to write that they're loathsome. History is the true critic, isn't that so, Mister Sparrow?

SIMON

Quite, but as a matter of fact, I approve, and I'm eager to meet the artist. Is he here?

SELENA

I'm afraid poor Lorenzo's in mourning -- in Florence.

SIMON

I'm sorry. A death in the family...?

SELENA

His cat. As you can see, he's a devout animal lover.

SIMON

What I see is the work of someone who believes in the beneficence of beauty, in the responsibility of the artist to elevate the souls of his subjects.

SELENA

Did you hear that, Laura? What a clever boots to notice the subjects are souls!

SIMON

The paintings reflect a profound rapture, a transcendent ecstasy as expressed by the fanciful plumage. *(to Roger)* Don't you agree?

ROGER

Oh, yes, the parrots especially. They're a tribute to nature's extravagant beauty.

SELENA

(to Simon) But does beauty lead to virtue?

SIMON

No, it often leads to sentimental rubbish, but Mister Fabrizzio is an unorthodox original. What appeals to me about these birds is their energy, the daring lust for life revealed by every curl of the quills. I imagine him twirling his brush like the baton of a conductor! I dare say Mister Fabrizzio is quite a young man.

LAURA

Well...

SELENA

Yes, ...

SELENA

...but also peculiar, and like many artists, he's a fickle hearted fool.

SIMON

He's hardly a fool. He's glimpsed something unique and mastered the tools to share it.

SELENA

You ought to know, since you're paid to discern the good from the bad, the fresh lot from the rot, the worthy from the scurvy...

LAURA

Selena! I'm afraid she gets carried away.

SIMON

She has cause to celebrate. The Bestiary Gallery is a fine addition to London's cultural life. So will Mister Fabrizzio be returning to London?

SELENA

Yes!

LAURA

No.

LAURA

Perhaps, but he's very...reclusive.

SIMON

Please give him my compliments, and I'll be sending a photographer tomorrow.
(to Roger) A pleasure meeting you, sir. *(bowing)* Ladies.

(SIMON departs.)

LAURA

(whispering) I wish you'd be more discreet!

SELENA

(*to Roger*) See what a nag she can be. Come, Roger, dear, we need more champagne!

(SELENA takes ROGER'S arm and departs, leaving LUCILLE with LAURA.)

LUCILLE

She does *not* need more champagne. Oh, cheer up, Laura, you're going to be rich!

(Now CHARLOTTE and BERTRAM continue their stroll about the gallery.)

CHARLOTTE

I see you've sold...

CHARLOTTE

...some paintings.

LUCILLE

Some paintings...

LUCILLE

...have already sold! Everyone's saying they're...

LUCILLE

...fascinating!

CHARLOTTE

Fascinating,...

CHARLOTTE

...isn't it? How Miss Featherstone gave birth to new species.

BERTRAM

When you read the book, you'll learn their true origins.

CHARLOTTE

Will you miss the paintings?

LUCILLE

Will you miss the paintings?

LAURA

Yes.

BERTRAM

Yes,...

BERTRAM

...they've freed me from the pub.

LAURA

They've freed me from conformity.

BERTRAM

They may even lead to love.

(BERTRAM clasps CHARLOTTE'S hand and THEY stand immobile as LAURA speaks with LUCILLE.)

LAURA

Roger wants to call on me, but I dread telling Selena.

LUCILLE

Why? She said she doesn't love him. For god's sake, Laura, you're not on a leash, and she's looking quite recovered.

LAURA

It's an act. She's usually moping about, searching for the spirits she no longer sees. I was in a funk myself, afraid I might not have sufficient inspiration to keep painting, but I've started a dwarf horse, and he's...remarkable.

LUCILLE

Splendid! So you don't need her.

LAURA

But she needs me; she clings like a...a lovesick school girl.

LUCILLE

It's obvious she adores you, and why not? You've proven to be her truest friend.

LAURA

I'm afraid it's more than that. *(pause)* I know it's not unusual for girls to have flirtations, but the feelings Selena should have for Roger, she has for...for me. She's so passionate, always kissing and ...

LUCILLE

Shush, Laura! This is neither the time nor place!

LAURA

Nobody can hear us. Look, I didn't expect you to approve. I thought she'd change when he left, but she still feels the same.

LUCILLE

And you...? What do you feel?

LAURA

Less than I did, and I...I'm relieved.

LUCILLE

Are you saying you liked her better when she was...

LAURA

No! No, of course not! At least I hope not, but I suppose it made her behavior... excusable. And mine.

LUCILLE

I don't understand you, Laura.

LAURA

I don't understand myself. Sometimes I think we were both under his spell, but if I leave, what will become of her?

LUCILLE

She'll go home, that's what! She might start playing piano and attract new suitors. Listen, Laura, you have a right -- a duty -- to pursue your own future. Tonight you've sold enough paintings to rent a flat of your own. Till then you can stay with me. Surely you realize that someday people will find out who Lorenzo really is, and don't you want to marry and have children? For heaven's sake, let Roger court you. You like him, I know you do, so tell Selena you're leaving, tell her tonight!

LAURA

Tonight...?

LUCILLE

You know, it's possible you underestimate her. She might wish you well. Surely she's grateful; (*gesturing to paintings*) you've given such radiant life to...

LUCILLE

... her visions.

CHARLOTTE

Her visions...

CHARLOTTE

...are so hallucinatory.

(LUCILLE departs as CHARLOTTE speaks.)

CHARLOTTE

(*pointing to a painting*) What animal is that?

BERTRAM

That's Roderigo, a hedgehog.

CHARLOTTE

And this...?

BERTRAM

A scarlet macaw named Cassio who just sold for fifty thousand dollars.

CHARLOTTE

Oh, Birdy, that's fantastic! Was the London gallery as successful as yours?

BERTRAM

The night they opened, they sold nearly every painting, though the buyers never actually received them -- which is why they're here.

CHARLOTTE

What happened?

BERTRAM

Apparently, after everyone left, Selena told Laura...

BERTRAM

...the paintings aren't for sale.

SELENA

The paintings aren't for sale!

(SELENA approaches LAURA as BERTRAM and CHARLOTTE glimpse the past.)

LAURA

What did you say...?

SELENA

They're half mine, and I want to keep them!

LAURA

It's too late; they've already sold!

SELENA

Then *unsell* them! Give back the money!

LAURA

We can't do that; it's not ethical! What's wrong with you?!

SELENA

What's wrong with me is you! Didn't you notice how everyone looked at you? They think you're heroic for taking care of poor, pathetic Selena. Well, I'm still part of this, so don't be such a greedy pig!

LAURA

How dare you! That's cruel and unfair! Really, Selena, you must learn to control your tongue. It's one thing to think such things; it's another to blurt them out.

SELENA

You want me dead!

LAURA

Don't be silly!

SELENA

My own mother didn't come!

LAURA

You told her not to!

SELENA

Did I? Well, I'm sick of words -- my own and everyone else's! The best thing about the bestiary was that nobody talked. They yapped and chirped and mewed, and we got along just ducky -- till I killed them.

LAURA

Iago killed them!

SELENA

Sometimes I think he's still inside.

LAURA

Well, he's not!

SELENA

I wish I'd vomited up his blood and bones so I'd be certain.

LAURA

Of course, he's gone! His hair's gone; his voice, his stench. Trust me, he's gone!

SELENA

I miss his eyes.

LAURA

We don't need them; we have our own. In fact, I started a new painting. If you turn the canvas on the easel, you'll see for yourself.

SELENA

I already have -- the crimson horse.

LAURA

Well, what did you think?

SELENA

(pause) The fire that was kindled is still burning.

LAURA

Thank you for that. Oh, Selena, cheer up, we have so much to celebrate!

SELENA

You have. I saw how Roger stared at you; he's falling in love. You'll have each other, and I'll have nothing and no one, which is why I want the paintings -- my keepsakes.

LAURA

What if I paint something especially for you? Your portrait!

SELENA

No!

LAURA

Then anything you wish.

SELENA

It won't be the same. *(gesturing)* These were *ours*; we made them together.

LAURA

We'll always be close, and we have the gallery. Try to think of the future.

SELENA

What future? When I imagine the future, I see a sour spinster with a horrid past who nobody invites to tea much less down the aisle. *(she sighs)* At least you know.

LAURA

Know what?

SELENA

How it feels to love someone who no longer loves you back. Simon's a snake, but he was right to say you're blind -- blind to true love when you should seize it with both hands and your whole heart and soul. *(pause)* There's nothing I wouldn't do for you, Laura; I'd lie and steal and...

LAURA

Please stop! You realize you've gone from being possessed to being *obsessed*.

SELENA

Is it wrong to need each other?

LAURA

What you need is to be *unobsessed*!

SELENA

Why? For where thou art, there is the world itself.

LAURA

Will you never cease quoting and speak for yourself?!

SELENA

But his words express my thoughts: My bounty is as boundless as the sea; my love as deep the more I...

LAURA

Oh, shush! Listen, Selena, you'll have to forgive me, but it's time I told you: *(pause)* I'm afraid I have to leave; I never intended to stay.

SELENA

(pause) But you did love Selena, didn't you? -- when she was me. Well, she was and wasn't, but she's just me now, or what's left.

LAURA

Of course, I loved you, and always will -- as my cousin, my friend, and my...muse.

SELENA

We haven't touched since he left.

LAURA

He didn't leave; we expelled him.

SELENA

So no more monkey business...?

LAURA

Sorry. *(pause)* It's time we got on with our lives.

SELENA

You'll never find what we had. I need a drink.

LAURA

No, you don't. Really, Selena, you shouldn't drink so much; it's most unbecoming.

SELENA

I won't, I promise, not another drop if you'll stay. Please, Laura, won't you give me a chance to be better. Can't we begin again?

LAURA

No, not here. I'm sorry, but I...I want my own home, a family...

SELENA

Fine! Then I'll keep the paintings!

LAURA

We'll talk tomorrow.

SELENA

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, creeps in this petty pace.

LAURA

I'm going to bed!

SELENA

Life is but a walking shadow.

LAURA

Turn off the lights when you leave!

(LAURA departs and SELENA starts to weep.)

SELENA

Out, out, brief candle.

(SELENA turns off the lights, leaving shadow-strewn moonlight. Then SHE slips a knife from her pocket, and slashes every painting in the gallery!)

SELENA

Out! Out! Out! Out! Out! Out! Out!

(SELENA continues shouting “out!” as SHE slits the canvases, and the sounds of escaping SPIRITS are heard: BIRDS shriek; CATS screech; DOGS howl; and PIGS snort. After SHE finishes cutting, the ANIMAL cries fade, and BERTRAM turns to CHARLOTTE.)

BERTRAM

That night Selena slashed every painting in the gallery, releasing the creatures’ souls to their celestial planes.

(SELENA drains a glass of champagne, turns, hunches over, then collapses.)

BERTRAM

Then she snuffed out her own brief candle with a thrust of the knife to her heart.

(Moonlight turns to sunlight as LAURA enters the gallery in her robe, and spies SELENA’S body.)

LAURA

Selena...? Oh, no, oh, my dear, my darling... Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh...

(LAURA’S mournful cries are echoed by the howling of HOUNDS as SHE cradles Selena’s head in her arms, and darkness descends.)

BERTRAM

Selena was buried in the family plot with a headstone that reads: Fare thee well. Now boast ye death, in thy possession lies a lass unparalleled.

CHARLOTTE

If all the paintings were ruined, where did these come from?

BERTRAM

A few days after the funeral, Laura, Lucille, and Roger met in the gallery.

(LAURA and LUCILLE, dressed in mourning, enter the gallery, followed by ROGER who carries a tripod and camera.)

ROGER

Can't any of them be salvaged?

LAURA

No, which is why I'm going to repaint...

LAURA

...every blessed one.

BERTRAM

Every blessed one...

BERTRAM

...was repainted!

LAURA

Then something of Selena will survive.

ROGER

But why photograph them? Can't you refer to the originals?

LAURA

No.

LUCILLE

Her aunt's off her trolley and plans to burn the lot, then sell the gallery.

ROGER

But they're *your* paintings, Laura!

(LAURA shivers, wiping her forehead.)

ROGER

Are you all right?

LAURA

No, I thought I was strong enough to come here, but I...I'm not. Please take the pictures without me. *(to Lucille)* Stay with Roger; I'll meet you later at the flat.

(LAURA departs as ROGER ignites the flash of his camera, and begins taking pictures of the paintings.)

ROGER

After Laura paints them, does she plan to exhibit again?

LUCILLE

I should think so. I told her I'd store the paintings as she finishes them. I already have the mad monkey. Did Laura tell you about Iago?

CHARLOTTE

Was Roger told about Iago?

BERTRAM

Yes.

ROGER

Yes,...

ROGER

...it sounds farfetched. I'm no Doctor Freud, but I think Selena was traumatized by the war. I was in France, and most of her former suitors were killed, so when her social life ended, she had no use for her genial self.

LUCILLE

Who can blame her? It's infuriating how this country expects girls to be charming and submissive after slaughtering its eligible men!

CHARLOTTE

Maybe the monkey was Selena's way of escaping repression, then she lost control and went from being free to being...feral.

BERTRAM

But what if it's true? What if our minds have gaping wounds which invasive spirits can enter? Of course,...

BERTRAM

...everyone has a theory.

LUCILLE

Everyone has a theory,...

LUCILLE

...it's all in my book, and Laura's the heroine.

ROGER

Will she have a happy ending?

LUCILLE

That's up to her. Just don't let her aunt know you're courting. She'll accuse Laura of stealing you from Selena. She blames her for everything, and Laura blames herself -- it's so unfair!

ROGER

(focusing his camera) That's why I want to get away from here. I'm going to ask her to marry me. If she agrees, we'll move to The Cotswolds. She'll have her own studio.

CHARLOTTE

So did they marry?

BERTRAM

The book ends with the Gloucestershire County records of the birth dates of their three children.

CHARLOTTE

But Laura never exhibited again...?

BERTRAM

That was left to me, and believe it or not, I've had three offers for Iago, one so exorbitant, I'm tempted to sell. Of course, he'd be furious.

CHARLOTTE

If you're not going to sell him, hide him in the closet.

BERTRAM

Oh, he'd hate that; he's claustrophobic from his years in storage, aren't you old boy?

CHARLOTTE

He's a painting, Birdy; he's pigments in oil.

BERTRAM

Nonsense! I told you, he speaks to my soul.

CHARLOTTE

Well, you know his language. When we make love, you grunt like Tarzan and the apes.

BERTRAM

So you think I'm bonkers, do you?

CHARLOTTE

Definitely.

BERTRAM

I consulted a therapist who claims it's not the painting that's affecting me, but some hypnogogic suggestions from the novel. You're right though: since he's not for sale, I ought to hide him.

(As BERTRAM reaches for the painting, his hands vibrate, then HE grasps his chest. ROGER'S camera flashes as BERTRAM gasps, then collapses.)

CHARLOTTE

Birdy, Birdy, are you all right? Speak to me, say something!

BERTRAM

(speaking with a deep rasp) Perdition catch my soul.

CHARLOTTE

What...?

BERTRAM

Spirit of love, how fresh thou art.

CHARLOTTE

What did you say?

BERTRAM

Lambkins...

BERTRAM

...we will live!

IAGO'S VOICE

We will live!

CHARLOTTE

What!?

ROGER

What...?

ROGER

Did you say something?

LUCILLE

No, but do get on with it!

CHARLOTTE

Somebody call an ambulance!

(ROGER'S camera flashes, lights black out on the gallery, and BERTRAM returns to his cell to address his fellow prisoners.)

BERTRAM

Charlotte thought I'd had a stroke, so I was taken to the nearest hospital, sedated, and felt fine till the meds wore off. Then I hoofed it to Central Park and started rummaging through the trash. The next thing I know, I'm chasing squirrels and biting chaps on the ass -- that's when they arrested me. It was bloody hysteria, I tell you -- being called a rabid ape and worse! Now I'm on meds again, but when I'm out of this cage, I intend to exorcise the beast! Oh, yes, priests, psychics, electric shocks -- whatever it takes! Then I'll reconcile with Charlotte, reopen the gallery, and write the sequel to granny's freaky fiction. *(pause as he sniffs and twitches)* Oh, shit, here he comes again, but nay! *(rasping his voice)* Nay! Nay! This is my home of love; I have ranged and return again, eeeeeiiiiieeeeeeeeeeeeeee...

(BERTRAM leaps about as his screeches rise to a piercing pitch, then cease abruptly. The lights black out and an OWL hoots, "who, who, who?")

End of Play