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2014

And I will hold you/when you are broken

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Meyers, Lisa Flora. "And I will hold you/when you are broken." MFA (Master of Fine Arts) thesis, University of Iowa, 2014.
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AND I WILL HOLD YOU/
WHEN YOU ARE BROKEN

by

Lisa Flora Meyers

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the
Master of Fine Arts degree in Theatre Arts (Playwriting)
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

May 2014

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Dare Clubb

Graduate College
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Lisa Flora Meyers

has been approved by the Examining Committee
for the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts
degree in Theatre Arts (Playwriting) at the May 2014 graduation.

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PREFACE

I write this preface under the specter of death; my father called today to tell me that my grandmother, his bright and active mother, had succumbed to the cancer growing thick inside her for the last few years. It wasn't unexpected; she had been moved to hospice and confined to bed and pain medications. Her last few days were fractured and hazy from the drugs and the pain. My father didn't have a lot to say on the phone. After a few sad words about death, our conversation drifted into the mundane - school, work, the antics of the house cats. I made him laugh with a thought about his also-recently-deceased father, a man with a warm heart known for his social inappropriateness. We imagined a scene where he stood in heaven, complaining that the harps were too loud, making absurd demands for the angels to cater to him. In this laughter, we imagined him alive, imagined all his quirks were still a part of our lives.

I write plays to remember the dead, to honor the sick and heartbroken, to create hope out of misery and anxiety. I have always written about ghosts and memories, and this play is no exception: *AND I WILL HOLD YOU/WHEN YOU ARE BROKEN* is as much about the dead as the living. Branch, worn down by his sickness, is nurtured by three powerful forces: his loving partner, Daphne, the spirit of his deceased mother, Rose, and an ancient creature, Alma, a magical guardian of the earth. I am engaged by the way humans help each other through the worst of times, the transformative power of love.

I got into playwriting, as opposed to other kinds of creative writing, because of the intensely collaborative nature of theatre. I liked that I wasn't alone in my creative process, that I could work with actors, directors, designers, and technicians to fully realize my

artistic ambitions. More importantly, a play is deepened by its collaborators; the human beings who help bring the work to life bring their own hearts and histories, their own experiences with love and loss. I am just beginning the rehearsal process for this play, which will be presented in May as part of the New Play Festival, but it is already being deepened by its collaborators. During callbacks, my director elicited real tears and passionate emotions by prying into some deeper questions of the play: what do you do when the world is about to end? Is love enough to save the world from tragedy?

My parents will be coming to see the show. My mother has cancer, which, as of this writing, is undetectable after surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation. She will continue chemo, and medical tests, but this news is promising – it means, maybe, hopefully, her treatment is working, that she is a little further from death’s door. I wrote this play after her diagnosis. Branch’s disease in the play is not cancer, per se – it is a mythical disease that mirrors a dying Earth, a manifestation of the fear of global disaster in our own world. My mother’s sickness and my character’s sickness have inspired the play’s dramatic questions: what do you do when someone you love is hurt or sick or dying? How do you love them? How can they love themselves? Can this love be transformative?

I’m an optimist at heart and I tend to hope for the best. I put a lot of faith in people’s ability to be open-hearted, devoted, and proactive about change. I write plays that deal less with interpersonal conflict and focus more on forces like death and disease, and how humans can cope. I often weave magical and non-realistic elements, as well as poetic language, to create unique styles and genres that best reflect the emotional resonance of my

ideas. I like to see the beauty in everything, and I love beautiful language, the way words flow and spark and dance.

Hope can only go so far. No matter how positive your outlook, and how much you love them, people still get sick and die. It's the ugly truth at the center of the human experience. A person, if they love other people, will be forced to endure their heart being ripped open by bad news phone calls and death after death, expected and unexpected, each with the fresh sadness of a human being with thoughts and feelings and history ripped out of the world. I write plays to honor the dead, and to try to keep their spirits alive. I write to try to solve the problem of how to keep living in the face of the morbid human condition.

I think about the story my dad and I created on the phone, the vision of my grandfather complaining in heaven. I remember the way my grandfather talked, and the way he laughed, and the way he showed his family love with tenderness and wisdom. I am inspired and strengthened by his love, and by the love of all those who have passed. I keep them with me and try not to forget. I write characters infused with the traits and stories and voices of all the people I have met. I carry their stories and write them down and seek to connect.

This is an optimistic play about apocalypse. I don't know if it has a happy ending, but, in any case, it has a lot of love – and what else is there in this world?

CHARACTERS AND SETTING

ALMA - ancient, female, the Earth's caretaker

BRANCH, 30s, male, sick of being sick

DAPHNE, 30s, female, a doctor and lover

ROSE - 30s, a ghost, an imprint of love

Setting: Earth, in the future, after a series of natural disasters. It is hot and getting hotter.

Notes on set: There are three main areas, which can be expressed abstractly.

1. A clearing, with a single tree, barren of leaves.
2. Alma's space, a room full of arcane miscellany
3. Branch and Daphne's room, mostly bare but for a mattress.

There are moments of magic in the play, notably in the last scene, which seem to have impossible staging; these moments especially should be created with the magic of shadow and illusion, rather than expressed literally.

AND I WILL HOLD YOU/WHEN YOU ARE BROKEN

Prologue

(A tree, bare of leaves.

The tree and its branches resemble visible veins.

Rose wears something loose and ethereal. She is a memory, a ghost.

Branch sits at her feet. He is young.)

ROSE

The doctor said you were dead inside me.
Your heartbeat was undetectable.
You would never breathe.

I didn't believe other mothers
when they said they already loved
a baby they'd never seen

a person who was just an idea

but I loved you.

The day I went to cut you out
was a miracle day.

I expected something
cold and blue and lifeless
and instead I saw pink cheeks

and heard you scream.

I thought I'd loved you back to life

but you were weak
and would grow up weaker

you were small.

BRANCH

I'm still small.

ROSE

And so is your tree.

Your father and I planted this tree for you,
when we knew you were coming into the world.

It's just a little sapling,
but it'll grow up tall,
and so will you.

You will always be a miracle.

BRANCH

I'm scared.

ROSE

Why are you scared?

BRANCH

I don't know.
It's just a feeling.
I feel like I woke up scared into the world.

ROSE

I'll build you a treehouse and teach you to climb.
I don't want you to ever be scared.

Don't ever let your sickness stop you.

BRANCH

How can you build it?

ROSE

With my hands.

BRANCH

I don't think that's possible.
I think you're dead.

ROSE

Oh.

BRANCH

I think you died the day I was born,

the day I came out broken.

ROSE

Don't be mean.
Don't tell lies.

BRANCH

Dad told me you were beautiful.
And that's how I picture you.

We don't have any pictures left,
after the floods.

Sometimes I try to draw you.

I know what it's like,
to love a person you never met.

ROSE

I wish you could have heard my lullabies.

BRANCH

What will happen when I get older?
When I get sicker?
Who will take care of me then?

ROSE

Shh.
Shh.

Go to sleep.

(Rose carries Branch to the bed and tucks him in).

1.

(Alma, the elder, is in her space. It is musty, old, strangely vibrant with arcane miscellany.

A violin sits on a stand, beside a chair.)

ALMA

This is the story of Branch and Daphne and the end of the world.

I am the storyteller, the old witch in the woods. I am the watcher.

If there are God or gods, I have not met them.

I do not know what happens when we die.

I used to think I couldn't ever die, but here I am – aging like the rest of you, and weak.

This is a story about lovers and pain and growth and sleep and death and soil and sky and fear and hope.

This is a lullaby.

(She snaps.)

Sunlight. Too hot. Way too hot.

(On the other side of the stage, an oppressively bright light illuminates Branch, sleeping fitfully on a cot.

Branch's space is bare, but for an unlit candle and a small wind-up alarm clock on the bedside table. It is ticking.

Alma is magic, and makes magic words. As she speaks, her words become actions.)

Branch lies in bed, sweating.

Branch is very sick, sick in a way that makes his whole body hurt.

There was a time before the pain, but he was just a little boy then. He used to play and skin his knees and get rough and not realize how fragile a body might grow up to be.

He's used to the pain, but it still makes him angry, the kind of anger that can accidentally flare, and hurt the people he loves.

He is lucky because he has Daphne.

(Beat. Daphne enters.)

Daphne, his lover, radiates with light. She wears a robe. She kneels beside Branch's bed with a washcloth, and wipes the sweat from his brow.

Daphne is a doctor by profession, though lately, she spends more time caring for her lover than her patients. She is scared to leave him alone. She is scared she will come home from work one day and find she is alone in the world, that her lover's pain has finally broken

him.

She crawls into bed with Branch and holds him, gently. She does not want to wake him, but he's never quite asleep; he is jerked in and out of consciousness by his pain.

(Daphne crawls into bed with Branch and holds him, gently.

The alarm clock continues to tick.

Alma picks up the violin.)

I have heard the music the Earth makes since the land was young and hopeful.

I don't know if my aging ears are the reason the sound has become discordant. I don't know how much longer my fingers can lift music into the sky.

(Alma begins to play a song, something simple and sad, as the alarm clock ticks rhythmically. Daphne continues to hold Branch.

The violin is out of tune, and Alma attempts to tune it by ear.

A string breaks.

Alma sighs, then sits and begins to restring the violin. She watches Branch and Daphne.

The clock ticks for a few more seconds, then rings.

Branch makes a sound of irritation.)

BRANCH

Augh!

DAPHNE

Sorry.

(Daphne reaches to shut off the clock.

A moment of silence.)

You told me you wanted to get up.

BRANCH

I don't know.

DAPHNE

You told me you didn't want to stay in bed all day.
You told me it makes you feel lousy.

BRANCH

It does.
I did.
I just need a few more minutes.

DAPHNE

Okay.

BRANCH

It hurts a little when you hold me.

DAPHNE

Oh.
I'm sorry.
I'll stop.

(She turns away.)

BRANCH

Don't -
Just.
Gentler.

(Daphne turns back and tries to be gentler.)

Can you tell me something beautiful?

DAPHNE

Like what?

BRANCH

Like a story.
A beautiful memory.

(Daphne closes her eyes and thinks.)

DAPHNE

My mother.

BRANCH

What about her?

DAPHNE

Everything about her.

BRANCH

What's the first thing?

What's the most powerful beautiful thing?

(Daphne thinks.)

DAPHNE

She had these pearls.
From her mother, maybe?
I always loved them,
wanted to possess them.

It doesn't make sense
that I remember, but
I remember as a baby,
reaching up to grab them.

They imprinted on me -
as far as I knew,
the pearls were my mother,
and I felt a baby's longing
for maternal connection,
for the oneness of baby and mother.

When I got a little older,
she told me that each pearl
came from an oyster,
a gross and slimy thing
that grew little spheres of accidental beauty.

She told me they didn't
make pearls anymore.
The oysters couldn't do it.
They were too sick.
They gave up.

I got the pearls when my mother died,
and I cherished them.
I knew as long as I had them,

she was still with me.

I took them off every night before bed -
I put them in my bedside drawer.
I said a prayer every night,
a wordless thing, an incantation,
as I wrapped them in fine fabric
and went to sleep.

(Beat.)

I had to leave them,
when the floods came.
Everything happened so fast.
I never thought of myself
as a materialistic person, but I mourn them -
five years on,
I still feel naked without them.

(Beat.)

I'm sorry.
That got sad.

How are you feeling?

BRANCH

Same.

DAPHNE

Oh.

(Beat.)

What can I do?
Are you hungry?

BRANCH

Dunno.

DAPHNE

I think I have an apple.

BRANCH

Hurts my teeth.

DAPHNE

Not a crisp one.
A regular one.
Sort of soft and mealy.
I can make applesauce.
I have a little bit of cinnamon.

BRANCH

It's your food.
It's precious.
I can't take that away from you.

DAPHNE

You're hungrier.
You hurt more.

BRANCH

I might just throw it up.
It'd be a waste.

DAPHNE

You might not.
It might make you feel a little better.
It'd be worth it
if you feel a little better.

(Beat.)

You're my honey.

BRANCH

You're my sugar.

DAPHNE

Applesauce?

BRANCH

Okay.

DAPHNE

Thank you.

(Daphne stands.)

I'll go make it.
You stay put. Rest.

BRANCH

Not like I have a choice.

DAPHNE

What does that mean?

BRANCH

I mean I can hardly move.
Of course I'll stay put.
If you never came back from the kitchen,
I'd probably die here.

If something happened to you,
I'd probably starve.

DAPHNE

Well, I'm coming back,
so you don't have to worry.

(She kisses him on the forehead.)

Close your eyes and think of something beautiful.

(She exits.)

ALMA

He closes his eyes, but he cannot think of anything beautiful.

2.

ALMA

Daphne and Branch met a few years back,
after the latest disaster.

As Branch struggles to sleep,
he remembers the day
he lost his father
and met the woman he loves -
a memory of pain and fear

mixed with sweetness.

(Darkness. The sound of rushing water.

Branch sits on the bed, shivering, with the blanket around him.

Daphne enters.)

DAPHNE

Are you all right?

BRANCH

What?

DAPHNE

Are you okay?

Can you hear me?

Are you injured?

BRANCH

I don't know.

DAPHNE

I'm a doctor.

I can help.

BRANCH

I fell and got the wind knocked out of me.

I guess I'm still in shock.

I was with my father and I lost him.

I told someone to put him on the list -
the list of the missing and the dead.

I don't know if he's missing or if he's dead.

If he's dead, I'm all alone.

DAPHNE

You aren't.

I'm right here.

I'm Daphne.

BRANCH

Branch.

(Beat.)

My father and I had a piece of land.
We were farmers -
We had fields of corn
and sheep.

Now everything is drowned
and dead.

(Beat.)

I'm so hungry.

DAPHNE

We have some food.
But there are many who are hungry.
There are children who are hungry.

You may have to wait a while.

BRANCH

I understand.

(Beat.)

What am I supposed to do now?
Where am I supposed to go?

What kind of work is left to do?

DAPHNE

You can help me, if you'd like.

BRANCH

I'm not a doctor.

DAPHNE

I'm not just a doctor.

People need all sorts of help these days, not just medical.

I bring food to people.
I help them put their homes back together.

BRANCH

I'm sick.
My body doesn't work very well.
But I'd like to help.

DAPHNE

Some people just need stories.
Some people just want to hear another person's voice.
It gives them hope.

(Beat.

She squeezes his hand.)

I'll be right back, Branch.
Just stick with me.

(She exits.

Rose enters.)

BRANCH

Are you here to bring me to the next world?
I feel cold -
I can feel my life draining out.

(She puts her hand in his.)

ROSE

You're warm.
You're alive.

BRANCH

I can't feel you.

ROSE

Remember how I love you,
and you'll feel me.
You can feel the dead around you
if you let yourself remember.

BRANCH

The last time the floods came,
I was little.
Dad held me in his arms and we ran
to higher ground.

We left all the pictures and relics
of you, the house where I was born,
the tree Dad planted for me.

We rebuilt our lives,
but what good did it do?
Everything is washed away again.

(Beat.)

Is Dad there?
Is he with you?

ROSE

No.

BRANCH

Oh.

(Beat.)

Maybe that means he's still alive.

ROSE

I don't know.

I am bound to you,
to watching you -

I do not walk with other spirits.
I have not met any higher powers.
I will follow you until you stop hurting.

BRANCH

I'm so scared.

ROSE

You should go with this this woman,
this healer.
Daphne.
She cares about you.

BRANCH

She just met me.

ROSE

She cares about everyone.
It's a good trait to have when everything's gone to pieces.

BRANCH

It hurts a little worse every day.

ROSE

I'm sorry.

BRANCH

I wish I had died before I was born.

ROSE

You were born to give lightness and beauty
to an ugly, wretched world.

(Beat.)

I had hoped to be an opera singer,
growing up.
As a little girl,
I went to the opera,
and heard a woman sing a beautiful song
enriched by an ugly pain.

I wanted to have that magic power -
the power to make pain into music.

But when the earth started breaking,
there was no time to sing.
I took up carpentry and traded a sweet voice
for callused fingers.

But when you were growing,
I sang every day.

I wanted to fill you with beautiful music,
so you could repair the world with your sweetness.

You should follow the doctor,
and help her,
because that's all there is -
love and comfort and music.

Don't wish for death.

What I would give to sing again -
to breathe and feel music in my lungs.

(She kisses him on the forehead and leaves.

Branches lies down.)

3.

(Alma begins to play the violin again. It is still a little out of tune.)

ALMA

Daphne and Branch intertwined their lives
and grew together.

They traveled and as Daphne healed,
Branch sang lullabies to the sick and dying.

Despite the angry ugly world,
they fell in love.

Another memory,
still a few years
before Branch is confined to bed:

photo
synthesis.

Snapshots of new love and
reckless hope.

(The lights on Branch go lower, cooler.

She stops playing and watches.

Branch sits up in bed, and Daphne climbs in with him.

They kiss.

A light like a camera flash freezes them in a kiss.

They laugh.)

DAPHNE

That was awesome.

BRANCH

Yeah?

DAPHNE

Hell yeah.
The best ever.

BRANCH

Better than this morning?

DAPHNE

Totally.

BRANCH

And last night?
And yesterday morning?

DAPHNE

It keeps getting better
and better.

(Beat.)

Aren't you tired?

BRANCH

Don't worry about me.
I'm not your patient,
I'm your boyfriend.

DAPHNE

Boyfriend?

Does that make it less fun?
Labeling it?

BRANCH

I like it.
I like you.

DAPHNE

I like you more.

BRANCH

I like you the most.

DAPHNE

Not possible.

BRANCH

I was thinking -
I was wondering if you wanted to take a walk today.

I know you said you wanted
to go on more walks.

DAPHNE

I'd like that.

BRANCH

There's this path that winds through
a whole bunch of trees.

Big tall, old trees.

Survivors.

BRANCH

When I was little,
I used to have a treehouse.

DAPHNE

I'm jealous.
I always wanted a treehouse.

BRANCH

It was the best.
I had a friend and we had a secret clubhouse,
with a bunch of rules and rituals.

We used to go wandering,
foraging for little treats,
little flowers and sticks
and berries.

I'm surprised we didn't poison ourselves
with those berries.

Little children always think
they're immortal.

DAPHNE

Not me.
I was nervous.
I was always very cautious.

As a kid, I read textbooks
on human anatomy.
I already knew all the ways
I could bruise and bleed.

BRANCH

I bet you were no fun at all.

DAPHNE

Nope.
I was smart.
I thought smart was better than fun.

BRANCH

And now you're both.
Smart and fun.
And pretty.

DAPHNE

You're making me blush.

(Beat.)

Let's go walking.
I feel restless.

BRANCH

I can think of other outlets for your energy.

DAPHNE

Branch, come on.

(She gets out of bed and grabs his hand.

She helps him out of bed.)

Do you need your cane?

BRANCH

Yeah, I think so.

(She retrieves the cane from under the bed and gives it to him.)

DAPHNE

Do you feel up for it?

BRANCH

Yes.

DAPHNE

Are you sure?

BRANCH

Stop.
I know what I'm up for.
I'm an adult.

DAPHNE

Sorry.

BRANCH

It's okay.
I know you just
care about me.

DAPHNE

I really do.

BRANCH

Let's go.

(They walk downstage into a clearing of trees.

Another flash of light like a photograph freezes on them holding hands and looking up.)

DAPHNE

This is the best place in the whole city to see the stars.

I used to walk here with my dad.
 He was the one who taught me science.
 He was the one who gave me books
 and told me that books were precious,
 that knowledge was precious
 that no matter what happened,
 I could keep what I knew in my head
 and it would be there forever.

When he grew old and began to lose
 his mind, it broke my heart
 more than knowing his body was failing.
 I know how to treat a body.
 I know how to keep a body going,
 how to keep a heart beating,
 but I could never give him back
 what he used to know,
 the thoughts and memories
 blinked out of existence.

I wish I knew everything he knew.
 I wish I could have written down
 every word he ever spoke,
 remember not just his words
 but the way he spoke them.

They say it won't be long
 until you can't see the stars anywhere.
 Our kids won't know the stars
 except for pictures.

BRANCH

Our kids?

DAPHNE

Our metaphorical kids.
The next generation.

BRANCH

How long do you think they'll make it?
How many more generations
do you suppose there'll be?

DAPHNE

I don't know.
I don't like thinking about it.

(Beat.)

I still help babies come into the world.
I still deliver babies into happy mothers' arms.

I have to believe they have a future.
I have to have hope.

BRANCH

If things get better -
if I get better -
I wouldn't mind a baby.

I bet it's nice to show a little human
all the beautiful things in the world.

We could each grab a little hand
and go on walks together.

We could see the world
through hungry, curious eyes.

(Beat.)

I don't usually let myself think about that.

DAPHNE

Hope is a powerful drug.
Happiness makes you live longer.

BRANCH

Well then, as long as I'm with you,
I'll live forever.

(They kiss.)

I'm tired.

DAPHNE

Should we go back?

BRANCH

Can we sleep here,
under the stars?

DAPHNE

We should get up
before it's too light out.

I don't want us to burn.

BRANCH

Let's just rest
for a while.

(They lie down together.

They hold each other.

The lights get darker, but they are bathed in moonlight and starlight.

Lights out on Branch and Daphne.

In the blackout, Branch crosses back to the cot, and lies down.)

4.

ALMA

The days of long walks
and raucous lovemaking
have been replaced by quiet comfort.

The memories in Branch's mind
fracture into the present,

(Beat.)

I'm going into town to see some patients.

Will you be okay?

BRANCH

Yeah, I'm fine.

DAPHNE

If you need me -

BRANCH

I'll be fine.

DAPHNE

I love you.

(Beat.

She holds his hand, gently.)

BRANCH

I love you, too.

DAPHNE

I'll be home soon.

I hope you can eat.

I hope you can sleep.

BRANCH

I'll try.

(Daphne exits.)

ALMA.

Branch tosses and turns.

He feels weak,
but strangely determined.

He lifts himself out of bed
and grabs his cane.

(Branch lifts himself out of bed and grabs his cane.)

It takes a while.
It is not easy.

He takes a bite of the applesauce.

(He does.)

He chokes it down.
It is sweet and perfect,
like his lover.

He considers leaving a note,
but does not.

He tries to ignore
the vision of Daphne's tears
when she finds him missing.

He tries to convince himself
that she'll be happier
without him.

He leaves and hopes
he'll find shelter
by sunrise.

(Branch exits to the clearing.)

5.

BRANCH

This is the note I'd leave you
if I were not such a coward.
Well.
If I were not such a coward,
I would not leave you.

You didn't do anything wrong,
my darling.
You've only ever done everything right.

You have kept me alive
with your love.

I have hurt for as long as I can remember,
but -

the first few months
exploring your body
made my body feel
whole and beautiful.

And as I loved you deeper,
I felt I might transcend
the weakness of my flesh.

I thought you could be strong enough
for both of us.

I see now I've become a burden to you.
I see the light's gone missing from your eyes
and you are tired.
I am making you weak.
I am wearing you down.

And as my pain grows,
I feel more and more helpless -
dependent on your selflessness.

I had to go, I had to let you live.

You are young and lovely.
Your energy, brilliant and vibrant
will save so many -

but it is too late for me.

I am a dying man in a dying world.

6.

(Branch and Rose.)

BRANCH

I have been wandering a long time.

ROSE

Rest.

BRANCH

If I rest, I will die.
If I stop, I will sink into the ground
and decompose.

Did you feel the worms and bugs
as they ate your flesh?

Does it hurt to be dead?

Do you see what's on the other side
of today?

Do things get worse?

Is there a future
or are these the last breaths of the world?

ROSE

I only know as much as you know.

BRANCH

Oh.

ROSE

Do you love Daphne?

BRANCH

Of course I do.

ROSE

I almost left your father.
I had a bag packed by the door.

I loved him,
but I ached with wanderlust.

I thought I ought to see the world
before it fell apart.

(Beat.)

But then I found out about you –
found out you were growing inside me.

So I stayed.

(Beat.)

I worried that my bad thoughts were what hurt you,
that my indecision poisoned you.

(Beat.)

I would have stayed forever,
loved you always,
kept you safe.

BRANCH

I know.

(Beat.)

I just couldn't hurt her anymore.
I couldn't weigh her down.

ROSE

I hear a voice,
a woman singing up ahead.

It's just a little farther up ahead.

BRANCH

I could stay here and die and go back to the earth.

ROSE

Keep moving.

(Rose exits.)

7.

(Alma exits her space into the clearing.

She holds a basket of flowers.)

ALMA

This is how we meet -
when he leaves on weak legs
in search of independence.

This is the forest near my home.
There are not usually people here.

It has been a long while since
I have met a human being.

The sun is rising -

(She snaps. A warm light.)

Branch is growing
very, very tired.

BRANCH

Hello?

(Branch sees her.)

Thought I heard someone.
Been walking a while.
I thought I might be the last person left in the world.

Don't know how long I've been gone,
but probably long enough for everyone to die.

(Beat.)

Are you alive?
Can you speak?

Don't be scared.
I'm sick.
I wouldn't be able to hurt you.
I'm too weak.

ALMA

I'm not scared.

BRANCH

Oh.

(Beat.)

Should I be scared of you?

(Alma considers.)

ALMA

Not today.

(Beat.)

Are you hungry?

BRANCH

Yes.

I'm very hungry.

ALMA

Oh.

(She offers him the flowers.)

Can you eat these?

BRANCH

They're flowers.

ALMA

I can eat them.

They're sweet,

and soft.

They float down the throat.

(Beat.)

I'm not sure if
your kind
can eat these things.

It's been a long time
since I've met your kind,
been a long time

since I spoke in your tongue.

(Beat.)

I have bread at my house.
And cheese.

Cheese?

BRANCH

I have a goat.

ALMA

Wow.

BRANCH

Do you need a place to rest?
To come in from the sun?

ALMA

Yes.

BRANCH

(Beat.)

Is there some way I can pay you?

ALMA

Is there something you have?

BRANCH

No.

ALMA

You can pay me with your company.
It gets lonely.

BRANCH

Thank you.

ALMA

My house is over here.

(She starts to cross.)

He has difficulty following behind her.)

Do you need a hand?

BRANCH

No.

(He follows her, slowly, into her space.)

Can I sit down?

ALMA

Yes, of course.

(Branch sits down.

He sighs with incredible relief.)

You aren't well.

BRANCH

No.

I am very unwell.

ALMA

I have seen your sickness before.

BRANCH

You have?

ALMA

It is an old sickness.

It's the same sickness inside the Earth.

It started at the surface

and it's climbing into the core.

BRANCH

I want to feel better.

ALMA

Let me make you something.

BRANCH

Are you a doctor?
 My lover is a doctor.
 She has spent so much time
 trying to help me.

She is so clever -
 so talented.
 She has been wasting her skill.

ALMA

I'm not a doctor.

BRANCH

What are you?

ALMA

Where is your lover?

BRANCH

I had to leave her.

ALMA

I'm sorry.

BRANCH

What are you?

ALMA

Rest.
 I'll make you something.

(Branch lays back in the chair and closes his eyes.)

Alma begins to prepare something in the cooking pot.)

As Branch falls into
 an enchanted sleep,
 Daphne comes home
 to an empty bed.

(Daphne enters her home.)

She sees that Branch is gone.

Alma picks up her violin.)

She knows at once that he is gone forever -
that he has summoned
extraordinary strength
to leave her.

And the sound she makes upon her discovery
is a sound of great sorrow,
the sound of a person whose heart
has suddenly burst.

(Alma plays a discordant wail, then puts down the violin.)

Daphne sinks to her knees and cries.)

8.

(Daphne sits at the edge of the cot.)

DAPHNE

I always thought I would lose you
in spirit first, and be left with your
empty body.

That's how it happened with my parents -
first her, with a sudden stroke,
and then him, so very slowly.

I thought I would have to bury you,
to put you in the ground
and feed you back to the earth.

I had a thousand nightmares about that day -
but I never saw this coming.

We have confessed in whispers
our fear of the end of the world
but it seemed so far away
as long as I kept you close.

Should I go looking for you?
Will you find your way back?

How far can you make it
before you fall apart?

I hope you are not
lost and suffering.

I hope you are not alone.

9.

(Alma puts a little liquid in a bottle.

Branch is sleeping in the chair.

Alma plays a lullaby on the violin.

Rose enters.)

ALMA/ROSE
(sung)

Go to sleep but do not die
Go to sleep but do not die
Rest easy and when you are woken
I will hold you when you are broken

(Branch slowly wakes. Rose exits.

Alma puts down the violin.

Spoken:)

Did you sleep well?

BRANCH

Yeah, it's weird.
Better than I sleep at home.

ALMA

It's a spell.

BRANCH

Excuse me?

ALMA

An incantation.
It keeps the place quiet and peaceful.

BRANCH

What are you?

ALMA

It's hard to explain.
You can call me Alma.

BRANCH

Branch.

(Alma offers the bottle.)

ALMA

I have something for you.

BRANCH
(hopeful)

Really?

(A pause.)

ALMA

I have bad news.

BRANCH

Oh.

(Branch inhales.)

ALMA

I have seen inside you
and you are not long for this world.

(Branch exhales.)

He is sad, but not surprised.)

I have something for you
that will release you
from the pain of your body.

It's a growth potion,

made from the ground-up root
of a sick and dying tree.

It's like an antivenom -
a curative made from a toxin.

I have used it on some plants
affected with your sickness,
but I have never tried it on a human being.

BRANCH

Is it poison?
Will I die?

ALMA

No.

It will give you a different body.
A different life.
A new way of existing,
of nourishing the earth.

Once you drink
what's in this bottle,
everything you used to be
will be memory.

Your pain will be a memory.

BRANCH

And Daphne?

ALMA

Your lover?

(Branch nods.)

You left her.

BRANCH

I know, but -

ALMA

Your body as you know it will be gone -

you will not be able to look for her.

(Beat.)

I know the choice is not easy.

BRANCH

I was hurting her.

I was holding her back.

(Alma puts the bottle into Branch's hand.

He looks at it for a moment.

He opens it.)

ALMA

Wait.

Not here.

BRANCH

Where?

ALMA

Out there.

BRANCH

I don't have the strength to stand.

(A moment. This is hard for him.)

Will you carry me?

ALMA

Yes.

(She lifts him. She is oddly strong for an old woman.

She carries him into the clearing.

She sits him in down in the grass.

He has been holding his cane. He lets it go.

He lifts the bottle again.)

ALMA

I'm sorry
for how much you had to suffer.

(He drinks from the bottle.

There is a flash of bright, overwhelming light, so bright that Alma and Branch cannot be seen.

After a moment, there is violin music. It is sweeter, but not quite in tune.

The light dims and Branch is gone. Only his cane remains in the clearing.

Alma is sitting in her space, playing the violin.)

8.

(Daphne enters the clearing.

She sees the cane.

She breathes. She is sad, but not surprised.

The music stops.)

ALMA

Daphne comes into the clearing. She has been walking for days and her clothes and body are dirty. Her skin is burnt by the sun and there are dried tears on her face. She has stopped crying. She is out of tears.

She sees her lover's cane and knows he has been there, knows this is the last place he ever was. She considers a funeral ritual. She considers her goodbye, but then:

A tree begins to sprout out of the earth.

(A tree begins to sprout out of the earth.)

It is beautiful and lush. It is strong and powerful.

It reaches so high she can't see the top.

She starts to climb it.

(Daphne climbs the tree.)

The growth potion is infused in the tree, and as she climbs, it rains down and covers her body. She is tired and dehydrated from her journey, so she drinks the rain and begins to lose herself. She starts to forget, and she feels lighter, younger, as the sky gets dark and cool with nightfall.

(Alma snaps. The sky darkens.)

There is moonlight and the tree itself seems like it is glowing.

The higher up she gets, the more she forgets who she is. She knows she is a wild and perfect creature, a child of nature.

She reaches the top, and that's when she sees Branch.

(Branch is sitting in a little house at the top of the tree.)

She does not remember his name, or her own name, or how they know each other, but she knows there is a deep connection there, a love as old as the earth.

(Daphne smiles and sits next to Branch.)

Hi. DAPHNE

Hi. BRANCH

Welcome to my treehouse.

It's pretty cool. DAPHNE

I know. BRANCH

I used to be kinda scared of heights.
But I don't feel scared with you. DAPHNE

BRANCH

I'm glad.

DAPHNE

I don't think I've ever seen so many stars.

(Branch holds her hand.

They look up into the sky.

Alma plays a song on the violin. It is sweet and close to perfect.)

END OF PLAY