

A Round of Slaughter

by

Michael Bettencourt
67 Highwood Terrace #2, Weehawken NJ 07086
201-770-0550 • 347-564-9998 • michaelbettencourt@outlook.com
<http://www.m-bettencourt.com>

Copyright © by Michael Bettencourt
Offered under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike License
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>

DESCRIPTION

The conflict between artists of different purposes.

CHARACTERS (in order of appearance)

- * SIGNET
- * OLEAGE
- * SILL
- * BALKIS
- * CICISBEO
- * CINCHONA
- * DISMAS
- * SECULOR
- * CISTA
- * GRIG
- * ANZAC
- * SPUR
- * GROAT

NOTE: Spur and Groat can be played by the same actor.

SETTING

The stage is divided into four playing areas: SIGNET's writing studio, with a long workbench and some stools; the bedroom, with bed, small table, and a clothes-pole; OLEAGE's office, with desk and chairs; an open space used for various other scenes.

* * * * *

SCENE 1

SIGNET, in a separate light reading a letter, wears a long overcoat or duster with pockets, camouflage-style pants, pull-over shirt, heavy shoes.

OLEAGE, dressed officially, in a separate light, recites what the letter says.

OLEAGE: (*as if in mid-sentence*) —having rendered the most extraordinary service that any one person can give to one’s country—

SIGNET: (*agitated*) Wait! Wait!

SIGNET reads silently. After a moment, OLEAGE repeats.

OLEAGE: —having rendered—

SIGNET: Wait!

OLEAGE pauses briefly, then begins.

OLEAGE: —having rendered the most extraordinary service that any one person can give to one’s country—

SIGNET: He is such a bucket-shitter.

SIGNET reads silently. After a moment, OLEAGE starts.

OLEAGE: —the service you have rendered as a playwright, as an artist of the stage, often in defiance—

SIGNET: (*reading along with OLEAGE*) —the service you have rendered as a playwright, as an artist of the stage, often in defiance— (*to herself*) A shite-spreader.

SIGNET reads silently. After a moment, OLEAGE starts.

OLEAGE: —but service always rendered with authority and as our public conscience.

SIGNET walks into OLEAGE’s light, and OLEAGE turns to her.

OLEAGE: Of course, our recent history has been unkind to artists like you—

SIGNET: Such buttery crap, Citizen Oleage.

OLEAGE: Unkind to artists unappreciated for their power and purpose.

SIGNET: Spread it around.

OLEAGE: (*smiling*) But given our state’s remarkable and recent translation to democratic rule—

SIGNET: The barbarians spreading it around—

OLEAGE: —we can now think—what had once been unthinkable.

SIGNET: Had been made unthinkable.

OLEAGE: Thus our invitation to you—nay, our solicitation, our suit—

SIGNET: You want me back.

OLEAGE smiles, breaking from the “officialese.”

OLEAGE: We want you back, Citizen Signet.

SIGNET: You want me to whitewash the blood—

OLEAGE: We want you to bloody the whitewash.

SIGNET: I'll start with a quart of blood from you.

OLEAGE: Taken by teeth or needle?

SIGNET: As if those were my only bloodletters.

OLEAGE: Let me get back to—

SIGNET: By all means.

OLEAGE: (*back to the “officialese”*) Our solicitation—our suit—

SIGNET: By all means necessary.

OLEAGE: Our solicitation—our suit—for you to return to the land of your home so that you can,
through your craft, grace the ears and eyes and hearts of your compatriots—

SIGNET: I am free to rollick on home.

OLEAGE: Yes.

SIGNET: Yes.

OLEAGE: Grace us with your incomparable works of the stage as well as the fullness of your heart.

SIGNET begins to circle OLEAGE as he speaks. Within a few steps he turns and offers her his hand, and, palm to palm, they continue to circle as if dancing.

OLEAGE: Therefore—in great anticipation—your reply.

SIGNET: I have already winged it.

OLEAGE: Now we can arrange our common lives—

SIGNET: I begin today.

OLEAGE: —so that the affairs of state and the affairs of art speak in a parallel language.

SIGNET: Is that likely?

OLEAGE: Join your words to us as we shape the future.

SIGNET: We shall see.

OLEAGE and SIGNET look at each other for several beats.

SIGNET: Close your eyes.

SIGNET licks her thumb and makes the sign of the cross on each of OLEAGE's eyes.

SIGNET: I will make you all see so much better.

OLEAGE: And now you.

SIGNET closes her eyes. OLEAGE does the same thing to SIGNET but makes an "X."

OLEAGE: For us, "X" marks the spot where we put the funeral coins.

SIGNET shoves OLEAGE away, who smiles and exits.

Hard music for transition.

SILL enters naked and gets into bed—his clothes hang on the pole.

SIGNET takes off her clothes and throws them into the bedroom area, runs and jumps into SILL's arms, and they fall onto the bed wildly. Music stops, and so do they.

* * * * *

SCENE 2

Bathrobes for SIGNET and SILL hang on the clothes-pole. They are the same size, so that they can be worn by either person.

SIGNET: Let me get the letter.

SILL: Don't get up—don't break the moment—

SIGNET gets the letter from the coat.

SILL: Then while you're up, throw me that.

SIGNET throws him the robe while looking over the letter. She takes her own robe and puts it on.

SILL: *(referring to the robe)* I can't believe you kept this.

SIGNET: *(half-hearing him)* Why not?

SILL: It would require sympathy on your part.

SIGNET: *(not hearing him)* They will re-publish everything.

SILL: Is that what it says? That's very good.

SIGNET: Everything.

SILL: You deserve it.

SIGNET: Even material not yet published. Yet conceived.

SILL: Not enough?

SIGNET: It's fine—it's fine fine fine—

SIGNET holds up the letter.

SIGNET: In the midst of this so-called “winning”—my winnings—perusing this offer of “enough” while rotting in my city of exile—what is my first thought—my first pulse—when I think about touching our blessed soil?

SILL: A rhetorical or actual [question]—

SIGNET: Is it a fast hand held out to my scarred fellow writers, those who stayed and resisted?

SILL: Subject for a tedious breakfast—come back to bed—

SIGNET: To re-visit geographies of anguish and bliss?

SILL: There's no need—

SIGNET: No. None of those my first pulse.

SILL: Then what, your first pulse?

SIGNET: It is to bed you—

SILL: Well, why not?

SIGNET: In swift and pounding savagery—

SILL: Signet's signature—the flying buttress. Come back. I am a fellow playwright—so that's one checked off—and a scene of bliss, yes? That's another. This pounding feels so old-hat and welcome.

SIGNET: I'm not finished.

SILL: No, of course not.

SIGNET: My first thought—my first free thought—is, in swift and pounding savagery, to bed the one whom everyone here and not-here has named “coward.”

SIGNET waits for SILL's reaction.

SIGNET: Even as they're pouring gifts into my lap—you. Whom everyone has named.

SILL: Named—

SIGNET: My lap did not feel the weight of the gifts—just the wetness of your name.

SILL: Not cowardly to stay in the way [I stayed]—

SIGNET: Give—your robe—give it to me.

SIGNET takes hers off, takes SILL's. SILL puts hers on.

SIGNET: Better. Holed up in that dreary rain-soaked city called “asylum” we all read your—
work—

SILL: The gossipers in exile—

SIGNET: We could get your—work—yes—we monitored. How many repeats of the same official
formula, we wondered—

SILL: Wondering from safe nurseries—

SIGNET: How many of those polished bootlicking plays, we mused, would Sill the laureate write
before his fingers rebelled? We worried, we did, about the health of our country's
laureate.

SILL: No idea, Signet—you have no idea—what it was like here to be here.

SIGNET: Not the Sill we knew—had known.

SILL: No idea.

SIGNET: But even closer to me—because it is always me, Sill—closer to the question
actually—

SIGNET grabs SILL's crotch.

SIGNET: —at hand—

SILL: Stop it—

SIGNET: —that's not how you wrote when I was climbing you—when we all gathered—

SILL: Hiding like animals—

SIGNET: —ideas and spit flying like swallows feeding—what we would use, remember, you and me—spit—

SIGNET takes SILLS's hand and spits in it, rubs their palms together.

SIGNET: Writing and fucking all abusing the same fluids. Remember? Many nights, fingers buried between my legs and then my smell littering the pages as I wrote after coming, licking my fingers to get the taste of the loose words spilling on the page the way you spilled onto me. Do. You. Remember?

SILL: I remember. I remembered.

SIGNET grabs his crotch again.

SIGNET: I can feel your member remembering—good.

SILL: Stop it. So I stayed here—and that plagued everyone?

SIGNET: (*shrugging*) That hardly matters now—

SILL: Did it plague you?

SIGNET: (*ignoring his question*) The exiles-coming-home are sharpening their tongues—

SILL: Did it?

SIGNET: —for slitting Sill's ribs. Righteousness intoxicates them—they're all now as smug as Lazarus risen.

SILL: But you? You were with them. What is in your mouth?

SIGNET: (*laughing*) What is in my mouth?

SIGNET sits on the bed.

SIGNET: Sill, I know better what is better. Memories of Sill's composition, of that Sill before this Sill. This is why I oozed—because I remembered. In this mouth, you ask? Then here it is: I am going to bring Sill back to Sill—I am going to save him. It is what you need.

SILL: Returned to save me?

SIGNET: With the gut of this letter, Sill—not publications, not recognition, but a commission—a commission from—

SIGNET laughs.

SIGNET: —the people!

SILL: Commission?

SIGNET: A play for a command performance—any subject I want. On the occasion of their one-year self-congratulation for joining humanity, yes. Stage, actors, dramaturds—

SILL grabs the letter, reads.

SIGNET: By all means, read.

SILL: I cannot believe—

SIGNET: My dearest chuck—

SILL: I cannot believe this—

SIGNET: Is that venom on your lips?

SILL: (*throwing the letter down*) Nothing.

SIGNET: That's nothing with fangs.

SILL: That—that—meant to be mine. Promised to me!

SIGNET: You could not do this, Sill. You couldn't. Not now. Not without some deep scourging. They know that.

SILL: I am better than you are—

SIGNET: I am home—

SILL: Better craftsman—

SIGNET: —and you are thinking “better”?

SILL: —better thinker—

SIGNET: “Better” hardly matters—

SILL: Because I had—have—the discipline of the art! Not like you—you—giving in to impulse and this lavender exquisiteness—sensual beyond any thought of how to control—and then ambitious, yes, and immodest in your ambition—

SIGNET: Because I want to be heard—that is the point, after all—

SILL: Oh, the people hear you, all right!

SIGNET: And that means nothing to you? Eh?

SIGNET does something to get his attention.

SIGNET: They hear me because I give in to the impulse to sniff their soles of their shoes and smell the fear on their breaths and hate the cowed yipping of their voices and their gray clouded eyes and word all of it so that even a deaf-mute—even a politician—even a laureate!—would be smacked down and enraged—

SILL: And they all love you.

SIGNET: Except those with the guns and the hearts of leather—the ones who loved you up.

SILL: And now the guns give you commissions—

SIGNET: And don't love you anymore.

SIGNET moves closer to him.

SIGNET: My thought—

SILL: That was mine—

SIGNET: My hope was that we could work this together. My way to save you.

SILL: Save me so I can feel their thrust, the same way they're thrusting it to you?

SIGNET moves away.

SIGNET: Guess what, Sill?

SILL: I'm sorry.

SIGNET: Guess what, laureate? I am no longer wet and in my saving mood. Leave.

SILL: I'm sorry.

SIGNET: No you aren't, even if you are. Get out.

SILL: I don't want to argue—

SIGNET: We will not argue. You have suddenly run out of room.

SIGNET violently, pushes SILL out of the bed. As she speaks she takes SILL's clothing and smacks him with each piece as she hands it to him.

SIGNET: Take your spite and stuff it into your classical forms—churn out more pristine crap. The commission is now mine. Why did I even think to think of you? A stupidity that love of an old love pukes up. Well, friend, I am cured. Get. Out. Now.

Enter BALKIS, who stamps on the floor to simulate knocking on the door. He wears clothing similar to SIGNET's, including the overcoat.

BALKIS: I am here, Citizen Signet.

SIGNET: You drain my spirit, you starve my heart, I will not ever stop loving you, but I will love you no more. So much for welcome, and so much for home. Go!

SILL leaves, brushing past BALKIS, who politely does not notice SILL's state of undress.

SIGNET: Tectonic plates grind—

BALKIS: Citizen Signet?

SIGNET: Grind and grind—what point is the effort? what point is a heart?

BALKIS: Citizen Signet?

SIGNET: Do I look older to you?

BALKIS: We all look older because we are older. Every day.

SIGNET: Yes, but from when I used to be here.

BALKIS: I never knew you were here when you were here, so—

SIGNET: Who are you?

BALKIS: Citizen Balkis.

SIGNET: Citizen Balkis—what grinds your heart to ambitious dust?

BALKIS: Nothing.

SIGNET: Why?

BALKIS: Because I have purpose in life.

SIGNET: And what's your purpose today?

BALKIS: To speak to you.

SIGNET: I don't even know who you are.

BALKIS: You summoned me. "Come at ten," you said.

SIGNET: Yes. Yes. The—

BALKIS: Interview, you said.

SIGNET: Yes.

BALKIS: Something about a play—

SIGNET gets the journal from the overcoat and pulls out a chair.

SIGNET: Yes.

BALKIS: Though I don't go in for them much.

SIGNET: Interviews?

BALKIS: Plays.

SIGNET: Neither do I. Sit.

BALKIS sits.

BALKIS: Now, it's only been recently that my talk has been allowed about what we are going to talk about, so naturally I am a bit nervous about speaking as to the likes of you.

SIGNET: You don't like my likes.

BALKIS: Also, there is a cost for the presentation.

SIGNET: You charge.

BALKIS: Freedom to make contracts as one desires—in the new Constitution. And since naturally I have no talents beyond this particular display—

SIGNET fishes coins out of the overcoat and drops them in his hand.

SIGNET: Will this do?

BALKIS: This is worth at least a double take. Thank you.

SIGNET: Well?

BALKIS: I must warn you—

SIGNET: Warn me.

BALKIS: It is not for the faint.

SIGNET: I have never been one of "the faint."

BALKIS: I can give you your money back now—but not after.

SIGNET: Not to be rude, citizen, but shut up and show me your contract freely entered into. And talk to me while you enter said contract—ignore me while I take notes.

BALKIS takes off his coat; under his shirt, on his back, are two noticeable lumps. He takes off his shirt and two white angel wings pop into view—small, clearly unable to lift him, but otherwise perfect. SIGNET quickly jots notes, sketches.

SIGNET: Talk to me, Citizen Balkis.

BALKIS: Medical experiment, they said—

SIGNET: To do—

BALKIS: They never said why or what. To me, at least.

SIGNET: What did they do?

BALKIS: For the new state, the doctor said—made no sense to me. But the money was good—

SIGNET: Food?

BALKIS: Enough for a year—full family.

SIGNET: They bought you.

BALKIS: I was ready to be bought by those who had brought me low.

SIGNET: “The new state” you said—turn a bit—

BALKIS: As they laid me down on the table—new state, new state of man, bring down the angels, lift up the slime of human nature—to be honest, Citizen Signet—

SIGNET: By all means, be honest—

BALKIS: I could scarcely hear them through the medicine—all I remember is “angles”—
“angles”—bring down the “angles”—

SIGNET: And when you woke up? A bit more—excellent.

BALKIS: When I woke up—

SIGNET: Lift your arms— When you woke up—

BALKIS: I really did feel different.

SIGNET: I'm sure. Put them down.

BALKIS: No, not in that way.

SIGNET: Then how?

BALKIS: I felt. Chosen.

SIGNET: Except that the wings couldn't lift you up.

BALKIS: Of course not—too small.

SIGNET: May I?

BALKIS: Included in the price.

SIGNET fondles and pulls on the wings, occasionally taking notes.

BALKIS: You're not sickened?

SIGNET: By other things, not by these. So beautiful and so useless.

BALKIS: True—no lift.

SIGNET: And can't be moved?

BALKIS: They didn't promise much.

SIGNET: Useless.

BALKIS: And beautiful, like you said.

SIGNET: I will tell you why they did it.

BALKIS: That would be nice.

SIGNET: I will tell you why you are going to be central in my play.

BALKIS: Central.

BALKIS indicates his shirt.

BALKIS: Are you finished?

SIGNET: No—a double take, remember?

BALKIS: All right—but it is cold.

SIGNET: The new man—you, Citizen Balkis. Twisted into a horrible useless beauty.

BALKIS: Not that horrible. I'm chilled.

SIGNET: Not the shirt.

BALKIS: You are being cruel.

SIGNET: I paid for it. Citizen Balkis, as accepting as a sheep's throat to the knife.

BALKIS: I had family—

SIGNET: Go ahead—try to move them.

BALKIS: You know I can't. Could you close your robe?

SIGNET: Family—the eternal excuse, isn't it?

BALKIS: Your robe.

SIGNET: "I had family." And you? No dignity?

BALKIS: I actually believed—

SIGNET: Ah—they got you because you "actually" believed. They made you a freak because you "actually" believed.

BALKIS: I am cold.

SIGNET: That's why you will be the icon of my play, Citizen Balkis. The belief that twisted men into "angles" perverse.

BALKIS: I'm honored—it's cold—my shirt—

SIGNET: No.

BALKIS: You're hard.

SIGNET: Go ahead—move them.

BALKIS: I can't.

SIGNET moves close to BALKIS.

SIGNET: Aren't you disgusted with yourself? No anger at those who made you a monster?

BALKIS: I make a good living—

SIGNET: (*hissing*) I'm sure your family loves the support of a freak. You're no different than the Sons of the Republic!—The Angelic Heroes!—who died in the meat-grinding wars.

SIGNET checks the wings.

SIGNET: No movement yet.

BALKIS: They can't!

SIGNET: Every sideshow needs a freak, and you are going to be mine.

SIGNET checks again.

SIGNET: Not yet. The "new man" of the new society—ecce homo!—our ideal cripple, our crippled ideal—

BALKIS: I have tried to do my best—

SIGNET: My play is going to bury you—

BALKIS: My shirt—

SIGNET says nothing. BALKIS fumbles to put on the shirt but struggles with it—arm wrong-side out, etc.

SIGNET: And you aren't the only one, Citizen Balkis—

BALKIS: (*muttering*) I've got to put on my shirt—

SIGNET: You're just one of an army of freaks—whole battalions of trussed-up, crook-backed, club-footed, contorted-six-ways-from-Sunday "new men"—

BALKIS: Goddamn this shirt!

SIGNET: All are going to be in my play! Citizen Balkis—what do you have to say to those who did this to you?

SIGNET looks at the wings.

SIGNET: Not yet.

BALKIS does not reply, gets the shirt on.

SIGNET: You can say it in my play. You can tell them what you think about what they did to you—

BALKIS: Stop this!

SIGNET: The freaks shall inherit my earth!

BALKIS: I've got a nice life!

SIGNET: The rachitic angel—the failed experiment—what a destiny!

BALKIS: Don't—don't—

BALKIS looks at SIGNET in deep distress, and SIGNET faces BALKIS, searching. Then BALKIS' face changes to a mixture of surprise and fear: the wings have moved a little.

SIGNET: What?

BALKIS turns his back to her; there is a slight quivering under the cloth of the shirt.

BALKIS: Look.

SIGNET: I can see.

BALKIS: Look.

SIGNET: You are coming to terms, Citizen Balkis. Like all of us.

BALKIS: What am I supposed to do?

SIGNET: What do you think Gabriel did when he first flexed his wings?

BALKIS: I don't know. Your heart does not bleed.

SIGNET: Oh, it bleeds all right, Citizen Balkis, but not without training—you will have front-row seats on opening night.

BALKIS puts on his overcoat.

BALKIS: They won't stop twitching.

SIGNET: Mine never do, either.

BALKIS: I do not feel as peaceful.

SIGNET: That's why you want to go home to your family and get out of my company.

SIGNET digs more coins out of her overcoat.

SIGNET: For your extra service.

BALKIS: You are cruel to make me feel so unpeaceful.

SIGNET: Hold off on that opinion—I hope to change the adjective for you.

SIGNET touches his face.

SIGNET: Go home, broken angle. Your extra service has shown me a way.

BALKIS leaves.

Music: rock and roll.

SIGNET dresses as OLEAGE moves into his office. OLEAGE holds a sheaf of manuscript pages: the first draft.

* * * * *

SCENE 3

SIGNET walks into OLEAGE's office. Music stops.

OLEAGE: It has all your marks.

SIGNET: But I see no marks upon it.

OLEAGE: I wouldn't want to limit your draft that way.

SIGNET: I don't draft, Citizen Oleage—I just write. You can criticize whatever and whenever you want.

OLEAGE: Whatever your name for what you do, Citizen Signet, this is—well—

In OLEAGE's moment of hesitation, SIGNET grabs the script out of OLEAGE's hands and goes to rip it in half. OLEAGE takes it back from SIGNET before she can do it.

OLEAGE: Ah, ah, ah. Citizen Signet, move over there—I prefer a little distance from someone so fully loaded. Good. What did you think I was going to say?

SIGNET: I was going to destroy it before you did.

OLEAGE: Then you'd be destroying a very unusual—and delectable—document. Eh? Not complete—it is a draft—

SIGNET: It is a work.

OLEAGE: Whatever the name, it is remarkable.

SIGNET: Who can trust a bureaucrat's "remarkable"?

OLEAGE: I'll say it again—remarkable—

SIGNET: Repetition is not proof.

OLEAGE: —remarkable so far—one thing I do want to point out—but in a moment. This reminds me of that one you wrote—

SIGNET: No recitation of my past works, please—

OLEAGE: Many all ready for proofing—as promised.

SIGNET: I'm not fond of the "proofing."

OLEAGE: No typos, misprints, must—

SIGNET: I don't need to autopsy myself.

OLEAGE: If you want them, I can get you assistants.

SIGNET: I want them—

OLEAGE: Consider them approved. Good—now I feel our temperature dropping. Polarities reversing.

SIGNET: What is it you want to say to me?

OLEAGE: Some positive feedback? On your work. I've heard that writers like that sort of thing?

SIGNET: So feed me back.

OLEAGE: Let's begin at the beginning. Right from the top, you make me focus with the descent of the angel—I can see right away you're trying to match what you've gone through—

SIGNET: Been put through—

OLEAGE: What you've come through.

SIGNET: We weren't there by choice! It wasn't a pilgrimage!

OLEAGE: Citizen Signet—the polarities rising again. Unnecessarily. You. Can. Let. Go.

SIGNET: So can you.

OLEAGE: So can we all.

SIGNET: It's just hard to hear that all of the torturing you—the junta of the corpses!—now chooses to be as soft as the wool between a lamb's eyes—that you want art.

OLEAGE: A difficulty easy to understand.

SIGNET: And my blood roils at that easy understanding of yours. Don't pretend to know.

OLEAGE: Fair enough.

SIGNET: Just because lies come out softly now doesn't stop them from being lies.

OLEAGE: That's why we expect our artists to keep the times honest. What?

SIGNET: Do you ever fear that your tongue will fall off from sheer embarrassment at the things that come out of your mouth?

OLEAGE: Embarrassment comes from being powerless, Citizen Signet. Therefore, I am never embarrassed.

SIGNET: Ah.

OLEAGE: (*indicating the manuscript*) Let's just make your work our common ground—for the moment. As I was saying, this opening—the descent of the broken angel. The “crooked angle,” as you name him. Name “it.” As our guide. I can see the shafts of light on the descending body, the hush of the audience palpable. Who else would prepare us like that? Not Sill. Not Sill, eh?

SIGNET does not take the bait.

OLEAGE: No.

OLEAGE flips more pages.

OLEAGE: And here—I think the re-creation of the Last Great Battle by the amputees in the veterans' hospital—prosthetic arms and legs lobbed like incoming artillery—"a shin at twelve o'clock high!"—I laughed and choked at the same time!

SIGNET: I spit all over those words—to give the scene its proper smell.

OLEAGE: And it smelled to the high heaven you wanted it to smell. All of it so superb in execution—even for a draft. Excellent work.

SIGNET: Have I passed? What?

OLEAGE: Just curious.

SIGNET: About.

OLEAGE: Why you didn't respond—

SIGNET: To?

OLEAGE: To my mention of Sill.

SIGNET: Is this for extra credit?

OLEAGE: You know we almost gave this to him.

SIGNET: I had heard almost.

OLEAGE: I like Sill. He is respected—

SIGNET: Yes.

OLEAGE: In his way.

SIGNET: You have used up his "way" until he has only talent left to offer you.

OLEAGE: Plenty of talent—skill, aptitude—marksmanship. But he is very much the artisan—do you know what I mean? I think you know what I mean. Now, he would begin in realism—the unities—

SIGNET: Any artist can begin any way he wants.

OLEAGE: Subject, of course, to the need of the people for art to offer them something useful in their lives.

SIGNET: Your tongue is still attached—amazing. What would be useful for “the need of the people,” Citizen Oleage, would be for the junta of corpses to stop telling the people what they need that would be useful in their lives.

OLEAGE: All right—we have reached that moment, Citizen Signet, where the phase of positive feedback has ended—where your circle now becomes just a bit tighter. I like you, Citizen Signet, have always respected—a pull, of sorts, between—and you should know, if you already don’t, that I was the Archimedes that levered you back here to retrofit the new regime. And you certainly know I crave theatre—thank God you will straighten its spine! But don’t mistake any of this or that for affection. At this moment you do not have the brevet to banter with me.

SIGNET: The spread of the butter on the bread?

OLEAGE: The beds that one has made—and unmade. So, just to finish the discussion: I was asking you if you knew why we hadn’t given this to Sill.

SIGNET: (*indicating the manuscript*) I’d prefer to continue the autopsy.

OLEAGE: He wanted it too much.

SIGNET: I prefer—

OLEAGE: And wanting it too much, he would have done everything just right—and it would have smelled—talking about smells—like the forty-seventh version of his first play. Sill has served his purpose—at least for us. This is now what is ascending as the angel descends. This. Your play. Our play. New voices. It is important to keep that in the forefront—

OLEAGE taps his forehead.

OLEAGE: —up here. Now, we just need to add one more thing.

During the next lines SIGNET becomes more and more agitated by OLEAGE’s words—she prowls.

OLEAGE: Our finest writer has one more thing that needs her—attention. The President—our leader, the President—there has to be made room. The audience more than just overhearing his name. His exploits.

SIGNET: He is there.

OLEAGE holds up a single page.

OLEAGE: The dedication. Very economical. But not—drawn in—throughout.

SIGNET: You said a play that would honor the struggle—

OLEAGE: Yes—

SIGNET: That would acknowledge, finally, our fall into sanity.

OLEAGE: Yes—

SIGNET: And that is what I am doing.

OLEAGE: Good.

SIGNET: When that angel drops into sight, I want the audiences' lungs to collapse.

OLEAGE: And they will.

SIGNET: When the old patriotisms about “singing of arms and the man” are bodied in the wooden arms of war cripples crashing to the hospital floor, I want their stomachs to wrench at the sight of these living fag-ends of “dulce et decorum est” dancing like the puppets they were—they are—

OLEAGE: Spit and polish—always has been your method.

SIGNET: To keep the free mind safe and alive—

OLEAGE: The mirror, as it were, up to nature.

SIGNET: Up to your nature—up to all of theirs—up your nature—up yours!—and then crack!

OLEAGE puts a hand on SIGNET to stop her moving.

OLEAGE: All of that is very true. Very nice. But. Something more of him before I bring something to him for a read. More of him towards the beginning.

OLEAGE hands the manuscript toward SIGNET, who refuses to take it. OLEAGE smoothly moves behind her and, with his right arm over her shoulder, grabs her by the left breast and pulls her against him.

OLEAGE: There has been suffering. And mistakes. In the name of “for reasons of state.” But now, you—you—are a “reason of state”—an “affair of state”—you, yes—and that, I firmly believe, bodes well. We need truth, Citizen Signet, yes—as medicine. We also need what makes us proud. I am sure you can make a double star of both.

SIGNET grabs OLEAGE’s wrist.

SIGNET: Funny—no sign of a heartbeat.

OLEAGE: None?

SIGNET: I would have sworn you had a heart.

OLEAGE: Funny how the heartless find one another out.

OLEAGE releases SIGNET, not roughly, not softly.

SIGNET: I will find a way to kill you next time.

OLEAGE hands her the script.

OLEAGE: Show me your next—version—show it to me soon. And what is it that actors say? “Use the energy”? Use your bile well—I expect no less from our defender of broken angels.

* * * * *

SCENE 4

Musical transition as SIGNET crosses to her writing studio and OLEAGE exits.

Papers attached everywhere: floor, walls, even from clips attached to the ceiling. Also hanging, perhaps even like wind-chimes, are dozens of flensing and filleting knives. Prominent is a large long chart that SIGNET uses to track the narratives. She has filled it with signs, lots of handwritten notes, etc., and at times she needs to get up on a small stool or ladder to read. Also prominent is a small tower of thick

manuscripts: the galley-proofs. The studio should look like the writer's version of a crowded and working painter's atelier.

SIGNET: *(going down the chart)* If this tracks to here, and the angel's story to here—the Lazarus parade shows up here at the veterans' hospital—then this has to follow—

CISCISBEO and CINCHONA enter and stamp on the floor as if knocking on the door. At that same moment, SIGNET has a full-bodied sneezing fit, only managing sentence fragments between sneezes.

SIGNET: Come in—

CISCISBEO and CINCHONA enter, watching, waiting, respectful.

SIGNET: Goddamn this. Goddamn. Who are— Shit. Who are you? Enough already—enough!

SIGNET sneezes for a few seconds more, then stops—paused, as if waiting for the attack to come back.

CISCISBEO: It's cold in here.

CINCHONA: More like chilled.

CISCISBEO: I would agree with "chilled."

SIGNET: It's an old slaughterhouse converted—what else would you expect?

SIGNET waits for other sneezes. None come.

SIGNET: Good.

CISCISBEO: I wouldn't expect much from a slaughterhouse.

CINCHONA: Except slaughter. It's good for that.

CISCISBEO: Well-designed.

CINCHONA: Is that why they've put you here—

CISCISBEO: To chill you?

SIGNET: I chose this place—my choice. Isolated so I wouldn't be bothered—so who are you bothering me?

Pointing at each other as they speak.

CICISBEO: Cinchona.

CINCHONA: Cicisbeo.

SIGNET: Again. This cold stiffens my eardrums.

CICISBEO: Cinchona.

CINCHONA: Cicisbeo. Your assistants.

CICISBEO: Government funded.

SIGNET: Citizen Oleage selected you?

CINCHONA: Asked us.

SIGNET: Are you his spies?

CINCHONA: Of course not!

CICISBEO: Of course not!

CINCHONA: We're here to work.

CICISBEO: We're here to serve.

SIGNET: At government expense.

CICISBEO: More money for you.

CINCHONA: It is cold in here.

CICISBEO: We agree on that.

SIGNET: I like it cold—hardened nipples keep my mind sharp.

SIGNET points to her nipples.

SIGNET: Gun turrets.

CICISBEO: (*pointing to hers*) Spear-points.

CINCHONA: (*pointing to hers*) Thumb-tips.

SIGNET: My mind must be very sharp at the moment.

CINCHONA: (*to CICISBEO*) Now, that is a measure we haven't considered.

They touch each other's nipples as if to test the theory and nod, agreeing with something between the two of them.

SIGNET: Watching you do that suddenly made me feel warmer.

CINCHONA: You have a mountain of papers.

CICISBEO: A mess of a mountain.

SIGNET: It's how I work—it's how my thoughts think themselves!

SIGNET points to her head.

SIGNET: Thought comes in—then, like Athena, leap out—slam!—to here. Up it goes.

CICISBEO: How do you find anything?

SIGNET: They find me—they hunt me down like Diana, running me to ground. How well can you read?

CINCHONA: Test me.

SIGNET hands her the top fat volume of galley-proofs. CINCHONA opens it and begins to scan lines with her index finger. Suddenly, her body gives a small but definite chill.

CINCHONA: Misplaced modifier.

She shows it to SIGNET.

SIGNET: Not mine.

CINCHONA: Wouldn't think so—you're so above them. What would you like?

SIGNET: Unmisplace it.

CINCHONA: Good.

CINCHONA looks around, gesturing.

CINCHONA: Where, where, where—

SIGNET hands her a pencil and CINCHONA corrects the error. While CINCHONA makes the correction, SIGNET turns to CICISBEO.

SIGNET: Do you do—that?

CICISBEO: No, I do this.

CICISBEO makes a distinctive gesture. SIGNET hands her a galley-proof. CICISBEO reads, then makes the gesture and shows SIGNET the book.

CICISBEO: Comma splice.

SIGNET hands CICISBEO a pencil.

CINCHONA: Then unsplice it.

CICISBEO: Done.

CINCHONA: Do we pass?

SIGNET: *(repeating their gestures)* How did you come to this and that?

CICISBEO: Our fathers—both grammarians.

CINCHONA: Both teachers—relentless drilling.

CICISBEO: His drills would have made an oil company—

CINCHONA: Or a dentist—

CICISBEO: Or a Marine—

TOGETHER: Envious.

CINCHONA: Old joke.

CICISBEO: Our fathers had us read your plays. Even when we weren't supposed to.

SIGNET: Brave—or foolish—men.

CINCHONA: Neither—they didn't like them.

SIGNET: Well—

CINCHONA: But they knew greatness—

CICISBEO: Their word.

CINCHONA: —when they saw it. They were brave—

CICISBEO: Not foolish—

CINCHONA: —about that. Greatness had to be honored.

CICISBEO: Has to be honored—present tense.

CINCHONA: Yes.

CICISBEO: So here we are.

SIGNET: In a slaughterhouse.

CICISBEO: I want to ask you more about that—

SIGNET: Take a deep breath. Do either of you smell the old blood? Do you?

SIGNET hits several of the knives to make them chime, sniffs.

SIGNET: I do all the time. Turns my nipples to iron.

SIGNET points to the chart.

SIGNET: See this.

CINCHONA: Clearly.

SIGNET: This is the score of the song that I am going to sing. And see this, where it begins? Right there at the beginning? See that figure there. Cinchona, what is it?

CINCHONA: It is a bloody knife.

SIGNET: Sporting—Cicisbeo?

CICISBEO: Sporting a bloody head.

SIGNET: Severed head. Head on a spit. That's the presiding icon of the days to come. You look—what's going on behind those [faces]—

CINCHONA and CICISBEO look at each other.

CINCHONA: I think my nipples have hardened.

CICISBEO nods in agreement.

SIGNET: Does that mean you want to stay?

They both nod yes.

SIGNET: Each of you—galleys. Get the crap out of the way so we can get on with the gut-work. Go find a place to work—I think you're both quite capable of making yourselves comfortable.

SIGNET talks to herself as she peruses her chart. CICISBEO and CINCHONA each begin to read, gesturing as they come across mistakes and then correcting them.

SIGNET: This stinking archeology—this is what you have asked for, unpulsing Oleage—and when the curtain rises—whose head piked on the knife there? Whose head will it be? I always work out of a slaughterhouse—it is always my point of origin. Healing, celebration, what you've said you want—we'll see, we'll see—the angel travels there, then to the village of one-eyed widows grieving—go, my Hermes, go, go swiftly—

*The three women continue working as the lights cross-fade to the bedroom.
CINCHONA and CICISBEO exit.*

* * * * *

SCENE 5

SILL enters the bedroom, stands. SIGNET hits the knives so that they ring like chimes, then crosses to SILL.

SIGNET: Look at me, Sill.

SILL: Why did you ask me here?

SIGNET: Look at me.

SILL: Why would you want me h[ere]—

SIGNET: Look at this flesh—does it still riddle you? It riddles me.

SILL: I am always riddled by you.

SIGNET: It is a poor, poor instrument, isn't it? Look at it.

SILL: Why have me come here when your broken angel can bless you hourly?

SIGNET: I am tired of the arc of the angel. I want you.

SILL: Whom you don't respect.

SIGNET: Great respect. Greater understanding.

SILL: Why do you want me here?

SIGNET: Because—as I said—this too, too sullied flesh is tired of her angel.

SIGNET steps across the bed and begins to undress SILL, who neither resists nor helps.

SIGNET: The angel has drained the flesh, Sill—you, mirror, as it were, up to nature—solid—is what I need. I feel extracted—I need infusion.

SILL: Your play infuses you.

SIGNET: Confuses me. I am gripped in ways I cannot even give tongue to.

SILL: Why hold me?

SIGNET licks him.

SIGNET: Thirsty for your salt. In ways you cannot imagine. Everything comes to me now as grist.

SIGNET grabs his crotch.

SIGNET: Your mirror, as it were, is what I need.

SIGNET goes to unbuckle his pants, but SILL stops her and moves away.

SILL: You only call me back to move yourself forward—

SIGNET: Forward me, please!

SILL: Just because you're—extracted—and—

SIGNET: And?

SILL: Lonely.

SIGNET: And you?

SILL: And I? I come because I cannot stay away if unsheathed Signet says come.

SIGNET: And come is what I want you to do!

SIGNET starts to push him playfully.

SILL: There is nothing but this play for you, Signet.

SIGNET: Enough! Tonight, forget!

SILL: No room for anyone else—

SIGNET: I am making room for you—come, conqueror! Rut! Rout!

SILL: And yet I still come to you—like a puppy—

SIGNET: Give me your dog!

SILL: So that I can watch you leave me behind.

SIGNET: I like your behind!

SILL: When it is time to return to yourself.

SIGNET: You are too serious!

SIGNET wrestles SILL to the bed and climbs on top of him. As she does, DISMAS enters OLEAGE's office, takes a chair, comes downstage, and sits.

SIGNET: Much too long-faced—both of us—too restrained—I need a bruise—will you bruise me?

DISMAS: Ahem.

SIGNET looks up, tries to ignore.

DISMAS: Ahem.

SIGNET: Go away.

SILL: What?

SIGNET: Not you.

SILL: Then—

SIGNET: Nothing.

SILL: Who's onstage now?

SIGNET: I was hoping that you here would have—expelled him by now.

SILL: Lover as septic system—

SIGNET: Stop it.

SILL: It's a role. Who?

SIGNET: Dismas.

DISMAS: I have come.

SILL: You spoke with The Butcher?

SIGNET: Today.

SILL: That explains everything.

SIGNET: Oleage thought I should. I shouldn't have.

SILL: You shouldn't have at all—better to have two scorpions dance on your eyes.

SIGNET: But he knew I had to.

SIGNET puts on her coat, takes out her journal and a pencil, and walks into OLEAGE's office. SILL, both rejected and fascinated, watches as SIGNET interviews DISMAS.

SIGNET: I knew I had to. The Butcher sitting there like a squat toad. Venomous. Citizen Dismas.

No response.

SIGNET: Is it the place? The time? A woman?

DISMAS: The "honorific."

SIGNET: "Citizen"—I think it's a wonderful—lubrication.

DISMAS: Hmm.

SILL: You always prick.

SIGNET: *(a sliding gesture with her hands)* A social grease that mashes up the classes—

DISMAS: Grease is something you would like—from what I have heard.

SIGNET: Yes, I would— *(to SILL)* —grease made me think of you— *(to DISMAS)* —yes, I would, from what I know.

DISMAS: Oleage—"Citizen" Oleage—said you wanted to interview me. That is not my way.

SIGNET: We are all in chartless waters here.

DISMAS: But he thought my consent would lend—weight.

SIGNET: It is ponderous work we do.

DISMAS: So I gave consent.

SIGNET: Which brought you here.

DISMAS: Also know that I moved to kill your commission.

SIGNET: I appreciate your disdain—and also for not carrying the day, which now allows me to eat!

SILL: Signet—

DISMAS: You need nothing from me. We are done.

SIGNET: Could not let him off so easily. *(to DISMAS)* But how can I not interview the President's brother? You loom—large in our recent history. You shall loom equally large in my play—centrally large—

DISMAS: You make it sound—grander than it was. I did my duty.

SIGNET: A duty of such large proportions.

DISMAS: Duty is duty, large or small.

SIGNET: But if pressed—I'm pressing you—

DISMAS: I see myself as part of a historical necessity.

SIGNET: You mean bones scalded in quicklime—

The air is filled with the feeling that if DISMAS thought he could get away with it, he would gut her on the spot for that remark.

DISMAS: You think of that image because it fits one fit to live in a slaughterhouse.

SIGNET: I work in a slaughterhouse.

DISMAS: A typical empty artistic gesture.

SIGNET: Any artist with a grain of soul knows he works on the killing floor.

DISMAS: All gesture—all bloviate. A slaughterhouse! Maudlin and cowardly and liberal. You were not here when the real work needed to be done.

SIGNET: Real work executed by you—

SILL: (*disbelieving*) Executed— Signet—

DISMAS: You think you know—but all known from your fashionable exile. Resistance! Rebellion! Death! That was work? They don't call it a "play" for nothing—a sport for children in playpens. What?

SIGNET: (*pointing to her temple*) I am watching that large vein there. (*to SILL*) Burst!!!

DISMAS: You are vulgar.

SIGNET: It is imperially inflamed. (*to SILL*) Spew!!!

DISMAS: Vulgar—and suicidal.

SILL: Listen to him, Signet.

SIGNET: A writer, Citizen Dismas! Of "necessity" vulgar, mob-like—isn't that how we act now—the mob our master, the crowd our conscience?

DISMAS: Enough! Are there specific questions?

SIGNET: Will there be specific answers?

DISMAS: Do you have any specific purpose at all?

SIGNET begins to prowl around DISMAS.

SIGNET: When arms blown off from soldiers in the Last Great Battle go arching through the air because they obeyed Citizen Dismas to slam their bones against a wall that his generals warned had no strategic worth—when pride and arrogance detach arms and send them arching—then I am purposed to write the words “arching” and “arm” and “blood” and “bastard” and “executed” because those are the words the vulgar slaughterhouse writer requires.

Prowl stops.

SIGNET: I have more.

DISMAS: Why did they ever select you?

SIGNET: Misplaced paperwork is my guess. Too late now—I’ve got the thing half done. In my play—you will understand this—in my play I have a man who owns a slaughterhouse. He sings songs of utopia—perfection—to his butchers as the carcasses swing down the line. They hack while he tries to blind their hearts to the meat at the ends of their knives—they all hate him. They may meat-hook him by the end of the play—I am not sure what transcendence he will reach. Any resemblance to the living or the living-dead is completely coincidental.

SIGNET moves back to the bed, taking off her coat.

SILL: He will have you quartered and re-drawn.

SIGNET: He will make pieces out of me—the same thing I want to make out of him.

SILL: I marvel at the stupidity of your courage.

SIGNET: I marvel at the courage of my stupidity.

SILL: Come here. Come here.

SILL takes her chin in his hand and moves her head as if looking for something.

SILL: Soft.

She slaps his hand away.

SIGNET: What?

SILL: I want to see if there is any Dismas left.

SIGNET hesitates, then offers her face again. He gently moves it from side to side.

SILL: Tilt this way—then that—

SILL brushes her cheek softly.

SILL: He seems to have left behind only a little ash.

SIGNET: My face, Sill.

SILL: Yes.

SIGNET: It is not a beautiful face.

SILL: *(brushing it gently again)* Not at peace, no.

SIGNET: Watching that toad today—

SILL: That would take its toll—

SILL goes to touch her face again, but SIGNET pulls away, shaking her head no.

SIGNET: Not what you think. Not taking a toll. Not only that.

SILL: Then what?

SIGNET: Excited—

SILL: Excited?

SIGNET: Yes.

SILL: By that?

SIGNET: No, by this: that he, this envenomed toad, had to sit there and let me hover over him like a fly he couldn't eat—this compressed power couldn't move until I moved—

SILL: If he had wanted to move—

SIGNET: I know—

SILL: —he would have moved, Signet—with a crush.

SIGNET: I know that! But for a moment—a moment—he couldn't—constrained—by me—and in that moment—

SILL: What? What?

SIGNET: I felt what Dismas must feel often—

SILL: Brutal? Nothing?

SIGNET: Power. Having. The power. To make the word or the gesture stick!

SILL: Between someone's ribs.

SIGNET: In their eye if you have to!

SILL: Please!

SIGNET: What writer wouldn't want it?

SILL: That is an ugly thought.

SIGNET: Not you?

SILL: Never.

SIGNET: Never?

SILL: Have you forgotten I saw your toad total up the corpses into the quicklime?

SIGNET: Not forgotten that you prospered by staying.

SILL: Which at least let me give people some comfort.

SIGNET: Some healing. Some beauty.

SILL: And that's not for you?

SIGNET spreads her arms wide, takes a wide-legged stance, as if to say, "With this face and body? With my life?"

SIGNET: I have never believed in beauty, Sill. Once you aim for beauty, then a deadness blooms in the brain—"sweetness and light" take over, and then—pfft! Happiness! Followed by betrayal!

SILL: And you think what—you felt—in that room—with—

SIGNET: Go on, spit it out!

SILL: That you felt life?

SIGNET: What else is it?

SILL: I couldn't—

SIGNET: Speak truth to power, Sill—you think that takes beauty—comfort?

SILL: It doesn't take—

SIGNET: With beauty, you get to be—laureate—but that's as far as—

SILL: At least not a beast—

SIGNET: What does it take, Sill? Do you have any idea?

SILL: (*pointing to her face*) Too much hate. It's twisting you.

SIGNET dances while she speaks, in a greater and greater frenzy.

SIGNET: It's not hate, you beautician—it is rage! Fury! Don't you ever feel it? Don't your guts eat themselves alive every minute in this country? Don't they? You—you think I want to be Dismas—don't be dense! I don't want him—I want his freedom! I want his capacity so that my words will purge the earth of his filth—my gestures grind their bones to dust—my spit like thunder, my shit like artillery, annihilate the whole damn corruption! Apocalypse fucking everything! Everything, Sill! Everything! Everything! That's not hate, Sill—that's a blessing for us all!

SIGNET stops dancing, exhausted. SILL waits.

SIGNET: (*softly*) A blessing.

SILL: Look at you.

SIGNET: "Look at you." "Look at you": his comforting response! All you can offer the exhausted one? Look—he stares at the beast; that look does not comfort me. And now he looks away—so accommodating. Sill, Sill, why aren't you with me on this, Sill? Why aren't you writing this with me?

SILL: I can't—

SIGNET: You should, Sill—you can, still— Why are you backing away?

SILL: I need—to breathe—

SIGNET: Don't! Don't!

SILL: Stay—away—

SIGNET: I don't—I don't mean you—no, no—Sill—I am exhausted—I am exhausted—by—
doing—being—alone—this is not why I wanted you to come here—

SILL: Get Sill to give you a good reaming—that's why!

SIGNET: That's not why—

SILL: Stay—back! Pneumatic Sill—the laureate's piston—gives you a good cleaning out so you can plow on to your next execution.

SIGNET: Sill, forgive me—my only refuge—not you included in—

SILL: Harder—you're much harder—like a rock against me—destroy everything to save it—
crush—me—

SIGNET moves to him.

SIGNET: Sill—

SILL: I can't—I can't— There was a time—

SIGNET: There is always “there was a time”—but what now?

BALKIS, as a vision, enters.

BALKIS: He’s already said he can’t, Signet. He won’t. Don’t waste your time. He has to leave.

SIGNET moves in closer to SILL, as if to ignore BALKIS.

BALKIS: There is no time to bring him back. There is only time for me.

SILL looks up and sees BALKIS. Their eyes meet.

SILL: Signet—

SIGNET: Don’t talk.

BALKIS: *(to SILL)* You know she has to.

SILL: *(to BALKIS)* Let her rest.

SIGNET looks up with surprise on her face, seeing that SILL has spoken to BALKIS.

BALKIS: There’s rest enough in the grave.

SIGNET: You see him.

SILL: *(to SIGNET)* I’ll stay.

BALKIS: You can’t. He can’t. It will be a betrayal!

Slowly, painfully, SIGNET extricates herself from SILL and goes to BALKIS, clearly unwilling, just as clearly determined to leave.

BALKIS: *(to SILL)* Thank you—you helped her get empty enough to get back to me. How pneumatic of you.

In the studio, in a ghost light, CICISBEO and CINCHONA enter and move the knives so that they chime. SILL responds to the noise.

SILL: Signet. Answer me this before you leave: Will the butchers meat-hook the owner or not?

SIGNET: What?

SILL: Of what kind of utopia does he sing to them? Why would they be angry to have in their ears a world without pain when the meat weighs so heavily on their bones? Unless they are in love with pain—but why would any sane heart be like that? And yet—there are such hearts with such a love. I know exactly their feel and pitch, their weight and fall. Because I know Signet.

SILL leaves but does not completely exit; he turns and looks at SIGNET, as if through a closed door. SIGNET crawls into the bed and pulls up the sheet. SILL hesitates a moment more, then completely exits. BALKIS comes to the bed.

BALKIS: Broken angels always come first.

BALKIS kisses SIGNET on the temple and exits. The knives continue to chime.

* * * * *

SCENE 6

The writing studio, with SECULOR, the leader of the church, and CISTA, the leader of the university, as well as GRIG, ANZAC, and SPUR, the three actors. SIGNET will enter later.

SECULOR: Where is she?

GRIG: She is not here.

SECULOR: And who are you?

GRIG: Actors.

SECULOR: Why are you here and she is not?

GRIG: To act, of course.

ANZAC: Is this like the catechism, Father? "Who is God?"

SECULOR: Act what?

ANZAC: "Why did God make me?"

SECULOR: Quiet!

ANZAC: I'd like to know.

SECULOR: Act what?!

CISTA: Bishop—

GRIG: The final draft—

SPUR: Version—

GRIG: Version, yes—of the play.

SECULOR: Final version?

CISTA: She always uses “version,” Bishop, not draft.

SECULOR: (*referring to GRIG*) I was speaking to him.

CISTA: But now you've heard it from me.

SECULOR: I don't want to hear it from.

CISTA: That doesn't matter to me.

SECULOR: Actors and intellectuals—

CISTA: Theatre began in the church, Bishop Seculor.

SECULOR: Not in my church.

CISTA: It is not really your church.

GRIG: He is a hard—

ANZAC: —row—

SPUR: —to hoe.

SECULOR: My church, my rule. Look around you—a slaughterhouse!

CISTA: I understand her point—

SECULOR: Her point is to lie.

SECULOR points at the “score.”

SECULOR: A laboratory for lies.

CISTA: And your church has never lied.

SECULOR: (*pointing*) And they—

SPUR: Look at that finger!

SECULOR: —are nothing but liars.

ANZAC: No Christ-like humility in that finger.

CISTA: The certainties of your Church must be so comforting.

SECULOR: Certainty provides no comfort—because infidels—

GRIG holds up his index finger like a sword and does a pretend sword-fight with SECULOR’s finger—but does not actually touch SECULOR’s finger.

GRIG: That un-Christly finger again!

SECULOR: —never rest in their attack—

GRIG: En garde!

SECULOR: —on faith.

GRIG: Back! Back!!

SECULOR grabs GRIG’s sword-finger and would, if he chose, break it. GRIG freezes. Everyone freezes.

SECULOR: (*to GRIG*) Shut. Up. You. Idiot.

CISTA comes over and disengages them without actually touching SECULOR, eases GRIG back.

CISTA: And the faithful must always feel persecuted to remain faithful—is that the subtle point you wanted to make to the younger generation?

CISTA and SECULOR face each other, SECULOR wanting to say, but won't, "Don't you ever do that again," CISTA wanting to say, but won't, "Don't be such a buffoon."

SECULOR: Because we are now more than ever in the time of infidels.

CISTA: (*indicating actors*) Him? Them? Hardly. I doubt they can spell "infidel" much less act like one. I would be more cautious around the ones wearing the political ties and policy suits than these children.

SPUR: I-N-F-I-

ANZAC whacks SPUR to shut him up.

CICISBEO and CINCHONA enter SIGNET's bedroom. They help SIGNET get up and move her towards the studio.

GRIG: I thought we could now speak freely without being crisped—

SPUR: And bone-broken—

ANZAC: As heretics.

SECULOR: One of the more toxic illusions in the days of infidels—

GRIG: What do you want of her?

SECULOR: I would tell you?

SPUR: Telling us is as good as telling her.

CISTA: Citizen Oleage told us that he thought we should talk to her—about our views. (*to SECULOR*) It's not a state secret.

SECULOR: Everyone already knows our views.

CISTA: Knows your views—

SECULOR: And not yours?

CISTA: It is easier to understand the things that never change.

SECULOR: Like your being a gungel.

CISTA: Much better than a bully.

ANZAC: Bishop, your views haven't changed since God whizzed in Paradise—

SECULOR: I'm leaving—we're obviously not important enough for her to be prompt.

SPUR: We'll tell her you were here.

GRIG: Her areolas will be very hardened at having missed you.

As SECULOR and CISTA make to leave, SIGNET arrives, with CINCHONA and CICISBEO.

SECULOR: Well.

CISTA: Citizen Signet.

SIGNET: (*ignoring them, to the assistants*) Have you prepared everything?

CICISBEO: We have brought you the actors.

CINCHONA: We have made the copies of the scripts.

CICISBEO: The space is set.

CINCHONA: The time to run is ready.

SIGNET: Then let's get started.

SECULOR: Citizen Signet—

SIGNET: You're not needed.

SECULOR: Citizen Oleage—

SIGNET: I already know what I need to know about you both. It's not that hard.

ANZAC: Said so.

SECULOR: We've heard certain rumors—

SIGNET strikes the knives; they chime.

SECULOR: Citizen Signet!

CISTA: We are in a slaughterhouse, Bishop—

SIGNET: If you are so eager to contribute, then riddle me this, both of you, our institutional leaders of soul and mind: why did you—why do you both still—in the name of the patria, fuck over the beliefs you say you hold dear to those beating chunks you call hearts?

CICISBEO: Hit most—

CINCHONA: Palpable.

SIGNET: Time's up! Do not even bother to answer because I have already signed off on the answer—you will hear it when the wind blows it through your bung-holes on opening night. Go.

SECULOR goes to strike SIGNET but is restrained by CISTA—this time, CISTA touches SECULOR.

SIGNET: A putrid certainty spews out—

THE THREE ACTORS: Spews.

SIGNET: —at the speed of wrath—

CINCHONA & CICISBEO: (*with an emphasis on the "r" sound*) Wrrrrath.

SIGNET: —when uncertainty lances the boil.

CICISBEO: Certainty recoils from—

CINCHONA: The prick of truth.

SIGNET: Spur, you played a priest once—

SPUR: (*to SECULOR*) I did play a priest once. In a play. (*indicating CISTA*) At the university. I did.

SIGNET: How many penances?

CISTA: (*to SECULOR*) Let us go.

SPUR: A mess of 'em to atone for the mess. Goodbye.

CISTA: Now.

ANZAC: God bless!

GRIG: Good speed.

SIGNET: Let us move on to the opening night.

SECULOR and CISTA move to OLEAGE's office and sit—lights do not yet come up on them.

ANZAC: Was that smart?

SIGNET: Anzac, if I had ever thought about “smart,” I would have stayed in exile.

ANZAC: And deprived us of our mother's milk?

CINCHONA: It's always about breasts.

CICISBEO: And those that want them.

GRIG: What's wrong with breasts?

SPUR: And mother's milk?

SIGNET: There will be plenty of mammaries later if this works out. Are you all ready to suffer the slings and arrows?

DISMAS joins SECULOR and CISTA in OLEAGE's office.

GRIG: That "One for all" stuff?

SIGNET: It's not a joke—we hang together or we hang separately. Cinchona, the scripts.

CINCHONA and CICISBEO: go to a pile of thick manuscripts and hand them out, two of them to SIGNET, for a total of seven.

SIGNET: This has a short fuse. Its shrapnel is merciless and loving—though they'll miss the part about "loving." (*meaning SECULOR and CISTA*) Those two still carry weight, even if it is dead-weight. Now, actors—

SPUR: Saltimbancos—

ANZAC: Gammoners—

GRIG: Mountebanks—

CINCHONA: Charlatans—

CICISBEO: Artists—

SIGNET: Kindling for the bonfire—let us begin

* * * * *

SCENE 7

Lights crossfade out on the writing studio—all exit, leaving the scripts there except for SIGNET, who takes one with her—and up on OLEAGE's office. OLEAGE and SILL join the others, SILL standing just to the outside of the group.

SECULOR: Can you do nothing? Will the President do nothing to stop this?

OLEAGE: What, precisely, are you referring to?

SECULOR: Oleage—functionary—

OLEAGE: "Minister," Bishop, never func[tionary]—

SECULOR: —let me ask again.

DISMAS: It is all a disaster.

SECULOR: We heard it's finished!

OLEAGE: Almost finished.

SECULOR: You don't know?

OLEAGE: It has been the policy not to interfere—

CISTA: And the President—he's been reading?

OLEAGE: What I pass on to him.

SECULOR: What you pass on to him? Not everything?

OLEAGE: He does not have time for everything—

CISTA: He's approved—

OLEAGE: What I have passed on to him.

CISTA: Word is, Citizen Oleage—you know how these things get around—that she has written something very disturbing—

OLEAGE: It has its—theatrical—elements.

CISTA: Not entirely respectful.

OLEAGE: Entirely theatrical.

SECULOR: Cista, shut up—

CISTA: It sounds very interesting—

SECULOR: You mince around like an arthritic mouse.

CISTA: Says the gout-ridden cat.

SECULOR: This play will serve up falsehoods and rumors in the service to what this tramp thinks is truth, and it will not celebrate us.

CISTA: We called her back in order to celebrate her—

SECULOR: So that she would celebrate us—we've hired the whore, and she should—

CISTA: Your charity is astounding.

SECULOR: (*to DISMAS*) What is your brother going to do? Even he is not immune.

DISMAS sniffs several times.

SECULOR: What?

DISMAS: Did I just smell treason?

CISTA: He meant not immune to the poison of her pen—his gout sometimes slurs his thinking—

SECULOR: Yes, of course—civil unrest, the people encouraged to reach beyond themselves—it will all flow from this play.

DISMAS: If it is seen.

SECULOR: (*to OLEAGE*) Is there an effort to do—that?

DISMAS: It is more a matter of what he has already done.

SECULOR: Oleage?

OLEAGE does not answer.

SECULOR: "Minister."

OLEAGE: The President was not entirely—flattered by—

DISMAS: By what the state's money had bought for itself. (*to OLEAGE*) You speak far too slowly.

OLEAGE: He, of course, wants to honor the society's artists—he recognizes their importance to the on-going commitment to our democracy—

SECULOR: Enough of the speaking!

OLEAGE: No—if I can be, for a moment, forward about the President's thoughts because they are his thoughts and thus important to us all.

DISMAS: My brother really does believe the tripe Oleage is going to say.

CISTA: Here, here!

SECULOR: But what does it matter?

DISMAS: Are you—again—implying that my brother does not matter?

SECULOR: No, no—but what does it matter if a decision has now been made?

OLEAGE: The President honors artists of all kinds.

DISMAS: He does.

OLEAGE: He sees them as valuable citizens.

DISMAS: Believe it or not.

OLEAGE: But they should also realize that they are citizens as well as artists—

SECULOR: Ah—now I see the groundwork—

OLEAGE: Yes.

CISTA: This is not—appropriate.

SECULOR: Cista thinks he has to uphold academic freedom—as if you ever had anything worthwhile at that nursery you run over there—

CISTA: This is not how it had been discussed.

DISMAS: Times change—rapidly.

OLEAGE: In the affairs of state.

CISTA: So what is going to be done? Is the whole thing to be cancelled, after all the announcements?

DISMAS: Oleage.

OLEAGE steps out of the office and signals to SILL, who enters.

SECULOR: Ah! Well!

DISMAS: My brother, in his infinite wisdom, has proposed a different path. *(to SILL)* You know why you are here?

SILL: Citizen Oleage—

DISMAS: You can drop that.

SILL: Yes. It was explained to me.

DISMAS: How quickly can you write? You know our timeline—our deadline—

OLEAGE: The President is willing to shift the commission—as you have already guessed.

SILL: There is not that much time—

DISMAS: How quickly, Citizen Sill?

SILL: Quickly enough for the purpose.

SECULOR: Will you start today?

SILL: Yes, of course.

SECULOR: Tell me—

SILL: Tell you what?

SECULOR: Why is she the way she is?

SILL: I wouldn't know.

SECULOR: Come, come—you sleep with her. Slept with her, for years. Or are you saying that it is better not to know someone like Signet too well in order to sleep with her? I imagine she may exhaust a man rather quickly if he gets too close.

SILL: My feelings have nothing to do—

DISMAS: This is irrelevant—if you want details, Seculor, go stick your eye to the keyhole. We have a disaster here we need to correct—the people require that we do right by them, by all the sacrifices that they have made to bring to bear the freedoms we enjoy. Those are my brother's words, by the way. Not mine. Me? Throw her in jail, rape her a time or nine— (*to SECULOR*) —you can watch, if you want—all right with you, Sill?—and then shut off the light.

OLEAGE: We should also add that the President still wants to honor an artist—

DISMAS: Punctilious—

OLEAGE: That the people so clearly honor themselves—

DISMAS: He doesn't want riots, in other words.

OLEAGE: So her plays will be printed, the festival will bear her name—

SECULOR: But not her play.

OLEAGE: Not in its present form. It will be the laureate's play.

DISMAS: Act one in a week from the laureate.

SILL: In a week.

SECULOR: This is only appropriate—she has forfeited her chance because she decided to follow her own path rather than the one offered her. An artist should be free, of course, but not too free—otherwise, the memories all get twisted and the people become confused.

OLEAGE: I think we can probably leave it there.

DISMAS: In a week, Sill. And it better be good.

SILL leaves and walks downstage center, in darkness.

SECULOR: Think he's safe?

CISTA: He will produce the product. But it won't be very good.

DISMAS: No wonder he wants to empty himself into her—hope to suck up a little of her fire by swimming in her muck. She does have fire, that much is clear. Right, Oleage? I've heard you champion her to my brother. "Brilliant," I think I heard you say. "Challenging." I wonder at your motives.

SECULOR: The thing about jail—

CISTA: I thought we were through with doing that.

SECULOR: She does seem to be asking for the—honor.

CISTA: What pretext could we have now?

DISMAS: We have plenty of left-over pretexts, Cista. "Misuse of public funds," for one. "Reasons of state" always works. Look, she wants to demean us one way or another. Prove her superiority. It is ever thus with people like her—she feels empty unless martyred. So let's oblige—at least for a week or two. We'll chalk it up to the problems with transitioning into a democracy—a hold-over from a former state of being troglodytes. We'll apologize profusely.

SECULOR: We can't overlook her offense.

CISTA: She's done nothing but speak her mind.

SECULOR: As if that were nothing. How soon—

OLEAGE: The President's signature has already dried.

DISMAS: A week or two—for the show of it. If we are going to be called the sons of whores—and we are sons of whores—we might as well act out our natures. It makes everything easier all the way around for everybody. Wouldn't you agree?

Lights crossfade from OLEAGE's office to downstage center on SILL. All exit except for OLEAGE, who goes to the writing studio, collects the left-behind scripts, and remains there. SIGNET joins SILL.

* * * * *

SCENE 8

SIGNET slams the script into his body.

SIGNET: Here.

SILL: It's finished.

SIGNET: And so am I. Read.

SILL: "The stage: bare. In black. Descending, in a single light, is the angel, the 'broken angle.'"

SIGNET: Continue.

SILL reads silently. As he does, SIGNET moves as SILL reads. After several moments of this, SIGNET stops and looks at SILL, who looks at her with a mix of pain and amazement in his face.

SIGNET: Yes?

SILL nods.

SILL: Yes.

SILL begins the same dance, and for a few moments they dance the play together. There is a pause as they look clearly and clearly at each other, then SILL exits reading. Lights crossfade to the writing studio as SIGNET enters.

* * * * *

SCENE 9

OLEAGE: Are these all of them?

SIGNET: Yes.

OLEAGE: Is that true?

SIGNET: You question my honesty?

OLEAGE: If you were I, you would question me exactly the same.

SIGNET: Probably. Yes, those are all the copies extant.

OLEAGE: Everything here will be burned—notes, notes on notes—

SIGNET: What is it with heretics and fire?

GROAT, the jailer, enters the writer's studio.

OLEAGE: Go.

GROAT tucks SIGNET's arms behind her and roughly escorts her downstage, OLEAGE carrying the scripts. GROAT tries to force SIGNET to kneel, but she resists until GROAT, with more force than he wants to use, gets her to buckle, and she falls on all fours.

OLEAGE: Don't force his hand—it irritates him.

SIGNET slowly lifts up one leg, like a dog going to piss.

OLEAGE: Groat.

GROAT takes a script from OLEAGE and whacks SIGNET on the back of the head so that she is pitched forward.

GROAT: Disrespect like that irritates me.

SIGNET: Groat, is it?

GROAT: I don't have a last name, and only certain ones get to use my solo name, and you ain't one of them listed.

SECULOR, DISMAS, and CISTA enter the cell. OLEAGE hands GROAT the scripts.

OLEAGE: You have made life so difficult.

SIGNET: I intended to.

DISMAS: What did you think you were doing?

SIGNET: Ah, The Butcher. Simple—truth.

SECULOR: What you say is the truth?

SIGNET: I say what I feel, I say what I see—what other truth is there?

DISMAS: Objective truth. Proper truth. Useful truth. You were commissioned—

SIGNET: To write the truth.

DISMAS: And not your sickness. Executions? Broken angels? A ballet with skeletons?

SIGNET: I wrote what I saw.

SECULOR: And all you saw was death? What does that say about you?

SIGNET: When everything has been built on the stumps of mass graves—

SECULOR: And who anointed you the desert's baptist?

SIGNET: Perhaps I was stupid to believe—

SECULOR: We wanted you to honor the progress we have made—

SIGNET: Truth is not an honor? A progress?

DISMAS: She will never understand—egotistical beyond all warrant.

SECULOR: Clearly thinks a breed apart.

CISTA: She's simply saying—

SECULOR: Shut up.

CISTA: She's simply saying that she's acting the way we say we want to be about—openness—
light—

SECULOR: Who ever said that what we say is what we want? That's for them, to keep their bellies quiet. And even she doesn't believe what she's saying. With ambition as spread-eagled as hers, you think she'll settle for being "the voice of the people"? Humbly vocalizing for the "little ones"? She likes the grind and bump of power as much as any of us—why do you think she came back?

CISTA: Seculor, stop this.

SECULOR: You were going to teach us about truth and reconciliation—well, we are all reconciled about the truth of you, and it's this: the new whore has to start at the back of the line.

CISTA: Seculor!

SIGNET: Apoplexy gives you some color.

GROAT raps her on the back of the head.

GROAT: Was that all right?

SIGNET: So—inquisition over. What happens now? I suppose you won't just let it go forward as it is and let the people make up their minds—

DISMAS: That is not going to happen.

SIGNET: Everyone is expecting something—

DISMAS: And it will be “something” they will get—we've already taken care of that.

OLEAGE: Citizen Dismas, perhaps not—

DISMAS: (*overriding him*) Perhaps yes. Sill will write what you should have written.

SIGNET: Sill?

OLEAGE: He's been commissioned with your commission.

SECULOR: Note the dismay of betrayal!

DISMAS: The people have no taste anyways—

SECULOR: Crestfallen!

DISMAS: —they'll eat whatever's on the plate for that day. If it weren't Sill, they'd get hard for bear-baiting.

SECULOR: Do you notice how, deflated, she does not even try to argue with us, use her superior reasoning to bring us kneeling next to her?

SIGNET: Why bang my hips against a dry root?

SECULOR: I suppose that could describe Sill, now, eh? Citizen Signet, one last inquiry: I'd really be interested in knowing why you think artistic irresponsibility should be exempt from civic responsibility.

SIGNET: I refuse to be the mouse.

SECULOR: Dismas?

DISMAS: *(to GROAT)* Break what you have to.

SECULOR: Crack, crack. Preferably in halves, quarters, and minces. *(to SIGNET)* Snap your pelvis like a wishbone.

SIGNET: As it was in the beginning.

SECULOR looks around and begins to laugh. DISMAS looks disgusted, CISTA dejected.

SECULOR: Now she's angling for sainthood. Careful, she might sprout wings at any moment! *(to SIGNET)* I can take the stink of rats—but such stupid self-pity? I'd have thought a truth-teller would be more honest with herself.

SECULOR exits, followed by CISTA.

DISMAS: I told you. There is power, and then there is power. You have the right, if you want to call it that, to speak truth to it. Just don't be surprised when it bites your head off in return.

SIGNET: I thought this was the new democracy.

DISMAS: Just a different set of teeth.

DISMAS exits.

OLEAGE: You see what I am up against. I fought for you as much as I could.

SIGNET: And then you stopped.

OLEAGE: There was only so far to go.

SIGNET: That is the difference between us.

OLEAGE: Are you scared?

SIGNET: Only when your half-masted love of art stands so close to me. Then it's more sick than scared.

OLEAGE kneels on one knee next to her.

OLEAGE: You flatter yourself that I would even be half-risen for you. When you were our "official outlaw" dancing in my office, then you had some rough beauty about you—slack-bodied as you were, I could imagine a squirt or two across your face. What would you think of that, Groat?

GROAT: Two-day old bread.

OLEAGE: Yes—she is a stale. No smart remark? That is very smart of you.

OLEAGE rises and crosses slowly behind SIGNET to her other side, then kneels again. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small round gold container, perhaps with a jewel on its lid.

OLEAGE: *(holding up the container)* Secular gave this to me—supposedly ancient, but he needed a favor, and so easily parted with— *(opens it)* It contains chrism—

SIGNET: Oil and balsam—

OLEAGE: For the anointing of sacraments, yes— *(to GROAT)* Hold her arms.

GROAT holds SIGNET's arms back, but she struggles so strongly that GROAT ends up putting his arm across her throat in a chokehold.

OLEAGE: Hold her head still.

As GROAT immobilizes SIGNET, OLEAGE opens the container and puts a small quantity of the chrism on his thumb.

OLEAGE: Did you forget?

OLEAGE, using the chrism, draws a large "X" across SIGNET's face, and then on her eyes, an echo of the "X's" he put on her eyes in Scene 1. A small amount of coloring could be in the chrism to make the mark visible on SIGNET's face.

OLEAGE: Was it sainthood you wanted? Well, then—anointed be. Groat, something funny as well—this is also how we mark condemned and decrepit buildings. How strange the world of symbols. Let her go.

OLEAGE and GROAT stand.

OLEAGE: As good as a squirt or two across the face, hey? She's yours if you want her.

GROAT: I prefer fresh bread.

OLEAGE: Well, then.

OLEAGE does a slight, mocking rendition of SIGNET's dance, then exits.

GROAT: When I leave, you will have no light.

SIGNET: Over-rated.

GROAT: The rats will gnaw at your fingertips, the floors are damp and never dry, you will hear screams the likes of which you will not want to remember—that's the truth.

SIGNET: Do they pay you enough to do this work?

GROAT: To see the come-uppance of many has sometimes been salary enough. I hate pretenders.

SIGNET: Did you fight in the wars?

GROAT: I went where I was told. I was born to do as I was told. And I've been told to leave you be. So leaving you be commences now.

GROAT exits with the scripts.

SIGNET: Don't leave! I can still write in my head—I can sketch it all out and remember it point for point if I concentrate, if I don't think— This is the proper payment for telling the

truth—remember it all! Don't lose a detail, a stitch, a scintilla of meaning! I have done what I could do, more than kept faith with faith— It is so dark—it weighs— Sill— betrayed—I will not bend!

SIGNET breathes heavily.

SIGNET: I will not bend!

The light fades.

SIGNET: I will not be bent.

Dimmer.

SIGNET: I will not— I will not—

Light fades to black as SIGNET looks around her in great fear: it is the first time in the play we see her actually afraid.

* * * * *

SCENE 10

SILL, CINCHONA, CICISBEO: , GRIG, ANZAC, SPUR, and BALKIS, wings uncovered, gather center stage. In a ghost light, SILL arranges the actors to do the prologue of SIGNET's script. BALKIS stands on the stool, arms outstretched, and when the action begins, GRIG and ANZAC will lift him firmly under his arms and hold his outstretched hands so that he looks as if he is both suspended and crucified. SPUR, CINCHONA, and CICISBEO: take up their positions. Suddenly CISTA joins the group—there is a moment of hesitation, then SILL replaces ANZAC with CISTA. SILL begins gesturing as if encouraging people to gather around, and then indicates to the actors to begin. BALKIS is lifted and carried in a circle, then lowered to the floor. The remaining actors gesture and mouth lines. When done, SILL gets up on the stool and tells the crowd what has happened to SIGNET; he overlaps the words with the people in the studio—this can be timed so as not to interfere with each other.

All during this, DISMAS, SECULOR, and OLEAGE meet in the writing studio. The dumbshow takes place while they speak and ends when they end.

DISMAS: What do you mean that there was an “unaccounted for” script?

OLEAGE: Sill has it.

SECULOR: Sill is working for us.

OLEAGE: Sill is working for love.

SECULOR: Where is Cista?

DISMAS: (*to OLEAGE*) What do you mean?

SECULOR: Cista?

OLEAGE: Sill has taken actors and is going to the street corners doing the prologue—part of it anyway. Then tells the story of Signet's signal punishment for the telling of the truth.

DISMAS: Stupidity of love. Love of shame.

SECULOR: I told Cista to be here.

OLEAGE: He is with Sill. There will be others. There already are. The crowds get bigger as the word of mouth lengthens.

SECULOR: What does your brother say?

DISMAS: What does my brother say?

OLEAGE: Your brother is an eminently practical man.

SILL: You all know her you all have come to respect her and—

OLEAGE: He knows the power of a rising popular opinion.

SILL: Know how she's fought on your behalf—and now she's—

OLEAGE: Her name is known.

DISMAS: Fools to do any of this.

SILL: —locked away by the state for the—

OLEAGE: He is pledged to the people.

SILL: —crime of telling the truth, for trying to—

SECULOR: Can we jail Sill?

SILL: —tell your story openly—

OLEAGE: Afraid the old days and ways are gone.

SILL: Demand freedom, demand—

OLEAGE: The President thinks the truth just might work.

SILL: —to see the play!

SILL and all the others exit, off to another street corner.

OLEAGE: The script is out. Apparently Sill will not be fulfilling his commission. It has already, shall we say, gone into rehearsals. The writer may not be redeemable, but the situation is. I am going to tell the President that there is a unanimous opinion to go forward with the play as planned. That we have seen the error of the old ways. That the will of the people should always and forever be the touchstone of—

DISMAS: Enough.

OLEAGE: As a round of slaughter goes, this one is fairly benign. Shall I have her released?

DISMAS gestures assent. Lights go to full black. In the darkness a tight spot opens on BALKIS center stage, just wide enough to include his head and wings. SILL and the actors enter downstage in darkness. SIGNET walks into her own light.

BALKIS: Oh, yes, I'm the one she based that opening scene on, the "broken angle," she called me—she called me that from the first day when I talked with her. I found her a bit forward, but I never doubted that she was going to do this play and do it just the way she wanted it done. Actually, no, they were never supposed to move, but now they can, thanks to Citizen Signet. Oh, I've had many offers—which is good, given the way things have been going. My life is changed.

SIGNET: Did they like the play, Balkis?

BALKIS: In the beginning, standing in the courtyard waiting to get in, buzz-buzz, you know—elites over there chattering away, the "salt of the earth" somewhat stunned by it all, most of them used to no more than jolly songs and rip-farting farces. Hard to say what was readily changeable.

SIGNET: But during it—

Lights come up on SILL and the actors.

SILL: They gasped.

SIGNET: Did they?

SILL: As if their lungs had collapsed.

SPUR: I heard sobbing from where I was on the stage.

SIGNET: Sobbing—

ANZAC: I smelled fear and release swirling off the loges.

SIGNET: They were raked.

BALKIS: Even the elites couldn't ignore anymore.

SIGNET: And after?

GRIG: Much can happen to a soul in three hours, Signet.

CINCHONA: Their hands burned in applause.

CICISBEO: Their eyes steamed.

SILL: Signet, their hearts changed.

SIGNET: How?

SILL: Who knows? Who cares? Every new direction is a new direction.

*OLEAGE enters. Lights are now up to full. BALKIS joins SILL and the actors.
SIGNET stands alone.*

OLEAGE: Congratulations, on behalf of the President.

SIGNET: I am sure he had a more comfortable seat than I did.

OLEAGE: For which he apologizes.

SIGNET: I have been dealt quite enough of his admiration.

OLEAGE: He wanted me to convey his gratitude at your having created exactly the art the people needed.

SIGNET: When all else fails, I suppose, let us tell the truth.

OLEAGE: Or at least a truth—one that convinces people that they have heard the truth. It's a fairly exchangeable commodity, wouldn't you say?

SIGNET: Not to me.

OLEAGE: That statement in itself is not entirely true—but in the afterglow we can let that pass. Of course, in thirty years, people may remember how this play felt to them—they may talk about what it was like to be at its premiere—even those who were never there but who want to borrow glory!—but in thirty years no one will be moved by it. Now is the time to enjoy the moment when a society admits that it has grown up enough—grown humble enough—to accept its blemishes as the trumpets of its redemption. You—the people's voice—take your rewards now! Which brings me to a pleasant duty. The President is having a dinner in your honor, and I am here to invite you to his table. He is full of praise for what you have done. Will you join him?

SIGNET exchanges a look with SILL, and then the others.

SIGNET: Yes. I will join him.

OLEAGE exits, followed by SIGNET, who does not look back. SILL and the others look at each other. CINCHONA and CICISBEO take pencils out of their pockets and break them in half.

Lights to black.