

Still Small Voice

by

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DESCRIPTION

A writer comes to the end of his latest literary production.

CHARACTERS

- ROBERT WALSER, writer
- LISA WALSER, his sister/NURSE
- DOCTOR/CARL SEELIG/OFFICER 1
- ATTENDANT 1/INMATE 1/OFFICER 2
- ATTENDANT 2/INMATE 2/OFFICER 3

SETTING

Small rooms in two asylums. A field covered in snow.

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Scene 1

A small room in an asylum. An imaginary door to stage left, with an imaginary window in it. A desk, a chair, a bed, a dresser. A man at the desk: ROBERT WALSER. On the desk, writing paper and an artist's pencil sharpener. WALSER is hunched over the paper, writing in pencil. Everything he writes is in a very very small hand.

Observing him from the other side is DOCTOR and LISA WALSER, his sister. ROBERT stops, sharpens his pencil, continues.

SOUNDS of asylum can be heard: echoing voices in echoing corridors lined with tile, movements of equipment, etc.

LISA

Is this— What is it that he's doing?

DOCTOR

It appears to us to be writing.

LISA

“Appears”? Have you checked?

DOCTOR takes a page from his pocket, unfolds it, hands it to LISA. LISA scans the sheet.

DOCTOR

It may be words, it may be code, we can't tell because, as you can see, he has drafted it so incredibly small.

They look at each other. DOCTOR gestures for its return. LISA hands it back.

LISA

It—appears—so—painful—

DOCTOR

Whenever he handled a pen, his right hand—his writing hand—write/right—heh!—

LISA

Please—

DOCTOR

Why does it matter? His right hand, his writing hand, cramped up—

LISA

Why—

DOCTOR

I have no idea—I don't have time to be a writer. In any case, the pencil appears to leave his hand intact—and we don't have to worry about ink this way.

LISA

He does this—

DOCTOR

All day. Every day.

LISA

Is he—is Robert—I must use his name—

DOCTOR

Is he what?

LISA

Is Robert ever—

DOCTOR

Come on.

LISA

Is he disruptive? I'm sorry for so many questions, it has been [a while]—

DOCTOR

They're of no concern to me. Up to now you have been his only visitor. No, there was one other—no matter. By your question do you mean does he manifest—

LISA

I suppose I mean that.

DOCTOR

Then no. Quite the opposite.

LISA

And that would be—

DOCTOR

He often shows nothing. He's quite easy to handle.

LISA

So then why—

DOCTOR

It really has nothing to do with him. New management of the asylum and all—he is just going to have to move because they want him to move, that is the order.

LISA

But do you think he should? In your pro[fe]ssional]—

DOCTOR

I am not of management, Miss Walser—I'm just a doctor—thus, no one will listen [to me]—

LISA

But in your professional opinion—please—it would be helpful—

DOCTOR

You know your brother's diagnosis.

LISA

It was I who brought him here—

DOCTOR

So then [you know]—

LISA

I did the paperwork—

DOCTOR

Ah—

LISA

Such endless—signing—and—humili[ation]—

DOCTOR

You shouldn't upset [yourself]—

LISA

I've never believed it. The diagnosis.

DOCTOR

It's more or less the standard one we're asked to supply at Waldau—

LISA

Passive voice—

DOCTOR

You have caught me out.

LISA

You sound—

DOCTOR

I am—I have never liked it or the passive voice—

LISA

Then why [do you]—

DOCTOR

I like food on my table as well as the next.

LISA

But in your professional opinion—please—it makes a difference—

DOCTOR

No it won't, not in times like these—

LISA

To me, it will [make]—please—

DOCTOR

Well—it seems to me—

LISA

Yes?

DOCTOR

It seems to me he suffers—has suffered—more from unhappiness than from anything else. Perhaps something in the family—

LISA

Our eldest brother died at fifteen.

DOCTOR

Ah—

LISA

You asked.

DOCTOR

Rhetorical—not expecting an answer—

LISA

Another actually ended up here—years ago—now gone—yet another—

DOCTOR

You should save this for the next—

LISA

Yet another did himself in—Robert said he “did himself a good turn”—how the body at the end of the rope—

LISA makes a “turning” gesture.

LISA

He’s a writer, after all.

DOCTOR

I understand he was published—

LISA

Always the good child, Robert—always polite—even when he hates or angers—

They watch him scrawl.

LISA

How much [time]—

DOCTOR

You have a few days. He—

LISA

Robert.

DOCTOR

Robert has a few days.

LISA

No chance?

DOCTOR

Not under this new management.

LISA

May I?

DOCTOR pushes open a door—the SOUND of an opening door. ROBERT does not look up.

DOCTOR

Come see me afterwards—perhaps I can—we can—

LISA

I do remember that you are not management.

LISA steps through. DOCTOR lets the door shut—SOUND of shutting door. DOCTOR leaves.

ROBERT writes, truly unaware of LISA's presence. Perhaps we hear the SOUND of ROBERT's writing amidst all the other sound. LISA waits. Waits. Finally.

LISA

Robert.

The pencil pauses, held barely above the paper.

ROBERT

I believe I know who you are.

The pencil point touches the paper. ROBERT writes another line as he speaks.

ROBERT

But I am also choosing not to believe anything. Holding both beliefs at the same moment. That is freedom.

ROBERT scrawls some more, then stops, lays down his pencil.

ROBERT

There. I apologize for my rudeness, but you've come to Judas me, haven't you? I'm sorry—that [was not]—I am not ready for visitations that I have forgotten were coming—

LISA

I don't what to say, Robert. What to do. The owners have pled necessity—

ROBERT

I am not in this place to write but to be mad.

LISA

And that has cost the rest of us a great deal.

ROBERT

I told you none of that cost would come from me.

LISA

As if we could have let you stay in those filthy rooms, drunk, embarrassing—

ROBERT

Sometimes love, concern, and interest have eaten me up—
everyone so worried—

LISA

I'm very tired—could you—

ROBERT

Of course, of course—how coarse of me to not stop the course
of—

ROBERT brings his chair to LISA, places it behind her.

ROBERT

Please sit—

LISA sits.

ROBERT

Did you notice how butler-like I placed [the chair]—

LISA

You say you're trying to be mad, but you are writing.

ROBERT

That—yes—it's—

ROBERT stares at the desk, then walks to it and writes another line.

LISA

The doctor showed some of it to me. I couldn't read—

ROBERT

I let him take a sheet because he is an autumn wind with sticky
fingers. Well, it is what it is. Whatever it is—it reminds me—

ROBERT goes silent.

LISA

Yes? Of?

ROBERT

That I am, frankly, a Chinese—I am not going to go.

LISA cries—not wails, not sobs.

ROBERT

If it knew how things would end, fruit perhaps would have little desire to ripen.

LISA

(drying her eyes)

Always the cryptic one, Robert.

ROBERT

Not like Mama.

LISA

I have not thought of her in a long time. I haven't. Have you?

ROBERT

I prefer to sit here in the simplicity of my wants. I have gotten good at that—I have perfected— Remember, I am a Chinese.

DOCTOR enters. He looks at them through the door. They do not notice him.

LISA

Robert—

ROBERT

No.

LISA

Robert—

ROBERT

This is my job application—well, not really, but in my book—do you remember this story in my book? You read my book, right? Right?

ROBERT holds himself as if reciting.

ROBERT

“Esteemed Gentlemen”—that’s how we had to address the managers of the bank when I worked there—“Esteemed Gentlemen”—though they really weren’t—never mind—

LISA

You cannot imagine how much pain—

ROBERT

“Esteemed Gentlemen”—I always put everything in my writing that happened to me—“Esteemed gentlemen...Large and difficult tasks I cannot perform, and obligations of a far-reaching sort are too strenuous for my mind....Assuredly there exists in your extensive institution, which I imagine overflowing with main and subsidiary functions and offices”—

LISA

We have to make—

ROBERT

Ssh—I’m applying—“Assuredly there exists in your extensive institution work of the kind that one can do as in a dream? Yes?” That has always been my job application, Lisa.

LISA

Robert!

ROBERT

(ignoring LISA)

“Esteemed gentlemen, I am, to put it frankly, a Chinese; that is to say, a person who deems everything small and modest to be beautiful and pleasing, and to whom all that is big and exacting is fearsome and horrid.”

ROBERT and LISA lock eyes.

ROBERT

I will not go.

Two ATTENDANTS join DOCTOR.

LISA

You will go whether you want to go or not. They will make you go [whether you]—

ROBERT kneels in front of LISA, picks up her right foot, takes off her shoe.

ROBERT

You have such small feet—always—they hardly make a dent on the skin of the earth—not like mine—big knobby parentheses—

ROBERT takes her other foot, takes off the shoe.

ROBERT

And this one—on foot is always the best way to travel—stay close, not go far—though, with enough time, everything is within walking distance—though one doesn't have to—

LISA just stares at ROBERT.

ROBERT

That—that is a Mother look.

(lets her foot go)

Rage mixed with sugar and then squeezed in a garlic press until the very piss of it eats away the lock to the family mausoleum and all secrets are made to move away.

ROBERT replaces the shoe on one foot, then the other. He holds the feet in the palms of his hands.

ROBERT

These are feet worth making a new world for. Don't be angry with me.

LISA delicately lifts her feet out of ROBERT's hands and puts them on the floor. She touches his cheek.

LISA

Never angry, Robert—given all we've—everything we've—but for those of us who have to live in the world that you don't like—

DOCTOR knocks on the door—a SOUND like doom. ROBERT and LISA look up. The two ATTENDANTS stick their faces in the window. DOCTOR knocks again. LISA goes to the door, opens it. They enter. ROBERT remains kneeling.

DOCTOR

What has he decided?

ROBERT

You can fling your words at me directly, if you'd like—here, look at me—my complacent burrs will catch every syllable.

DOCTOR
(ignoring him)

What has he decided?

LISA
You barely gave us time to [discuss]—

DOCTOR
What was there to discuss? The management—

ROBERT
Lisa?

LISA and DOCTOR look at ROBERT. ROBERT holds up his hand in a “halt” gesture.

ROBERT
(to LISA)
“Esteemed gentlemen”—eh?—you know, “esteemed gentlemen”—perhaps I could make my job application to them.

DOCTOR
What is he talking about?

ROBERT
I am talking about Chinese, of course.

DOCTOR
Look, the decision has already been made—I told you that—it’s a matter of moving forward, not [back]—

LISA
He will go, it’s just that—

ROBERT again holds up his hand in a “halt” gesture. He rises. The two ATTENDANTS take a step forward. ROBERT sits at his desk, picks up his pencil, hunches over, and writes—all done in movements both deliberate and robotic.

No one moves—they watch ROBERT write.

ROBERT
(looking up)
I would prefer not to.

ROBERT goes back to writing. DOCTOR makes a gesture to the ATTENDANTS. They flank ROBERT. ROBERT writes. They grab him under the armpits. Like a spasm, but also with calculation, ROBERT embraces his papers against his chest and clutches his pencil, clamps his arms against his side. The ATTENDANTS work to lift him out of the chair.

ROBERT

Wait!

LISA

Let him go.

The ATTENDANTS look at DOCTOR, who nods. They let him go. ROBERT lands back in his chair. ROBERT puts down his papers, arranges them neatly. He picks up the pencil sharpener and, with choreography, puts it in his pocket.

ROBERT

This is my muse.

ROBERT picks up his papers, clamps them against his chest, clamps his arms against this sides, and assumes a fearful expression.

ROBERT

I would prefer not to, but—all right.

The ATTENDANTS hesitate. To encourage them, ROBERT loosens his arms a bit so that they can, if they choose to, replace their hands under his armpits. DOCTOR gestures impatiently. The ATTENDANTS grab him again and lift.

ROBERT resists, but not really—he fights, but without any real hope of winning. He VOCALIZES his grief, but while part of the grief is honest, part is also feigned—a show of grief. In short, the “dragging of Robert from the room” should be choreographed to feel both tragic and comedic—in other words, opera.

ROBERT is removed from the room. DOCTOR and LISA do not speak at first.

LISA

You didn't [have to]—

DOCTOR

Important to make room for the truly ill—

LISA

My brother is—

DOCTOR

Is what? Ill?

DOCTOR takes ROBERT's writing out of his pocket and hands it to LISA.

DOCTOR

This is your brother. Who can read that? It looks like code or just hen-scratchings. Artists.

DOCTOR puts an unwanted hand on LISA's shoulder.

DOCTOR

Perhaps you need some comfort after all of this—

LISA grabs DOCTOR's hand and mashes it really hard against her breast. He tries to pull away, but she will not let him. Finally, he manages to get his hand back. He grabs her by the throat, but before he tightens his grip, she drives the heel of her hand against his forehead, between the eyes. He lets go. The SOUNDS of their struggles and breathing are amplified by the bareness of the room.

LISA

Comfort?

LISA blows her nose into her hand and wipes it on his jacket. DOCTOR leaves, the SOUND of the banging door like doom finished. LISA wipes her nose clean with the sleeve of her coat, reaches inside her coat to adjust her clothing.

LISA

Comfort.

LISA looks over the sheet of ROBERT's writing. She tears off a small corner of it, places it on her tongue, chews it, swallows it. The SOUND of a voice-filled wind fills the room.

Transition.

* * * * *

Scene 2

The common room at Herisau asylum, 1936. A desk, a couch, a dresser, chairs. A window, perhaps indicated by a hanging frame. Draped on the couch is a coat and hat.

On the desk, brown paper lunch bags and any number of other craft items—pipe cleaners, beads, etc.

SOUND of branches knocking against a window and wind outside. SOUND of radiator pipes knocking, hissing steam, footsteps in echoing hallways.

ROBERT stands in the middle of the room. INMATE 1 and INMATE 2, both wearing dirty white lab coats, loose dark pajama trousers, and slippers, watch him. At first ROBERT is still, then he flings his right arm over his head and falls to the floor on his back. SOUND of a body falling on hard ground. ROBERT doesn't move.

ROBERT
(from his back)

That won't do.

INMATE 1

Why or why not?

ROBERT

The right arm—I cannot appoint the right arm toward Biel in the proper fashion if I—

INMATE 1 points to the west with his right arm—which is not the direction of ROBERT's arm. He leaves his arm extended.

INMATE 1

His appointed pointing—see what a compass I am.

INMATE 2

So just squiggle your body around.

ROBERT

What?

INMATE 2

Squiggle. Your. Body. Arm's gotta go where the body falls. Physics of your basic [type]—

ROBERT

No the arm doesn't.

INMATE 2

Yes the arm [does]—

ROBERT
(sitting up)

But even if yes the arm, such post-fall recalibration will not serve my point.

INMATE 1 bends his outstretched arm to touch the top of his head.

INMATE 1

The only point you come to comes at the top of your head—

INMATE 2

And what would your point be, asking the most boring of follow-up questions.

(to INMATE 1)

You can bring it to rest.

INMATE 1 rests his right arm in his lap, as if it were broken. ROBERT gets up.

ROBERT

I was never able to make a proper noose for myself. So, this must be the way.

ROBERT flings his right arm up over his head again, but this time falls at the angle indicated by INMATE 1. SOUND of a body falling on hard ground. INMATE 2 goes to the window, looks out, looks at ROBERT, looks out again.

INMATE 2

You threw it more west this time, more Biel-ish.

INMATE 2 continues to stare out the window.

ROBERT
(from the floor)

How was the form?

INMATE 1

Do such outward shows matter [to you]—if you do it in the depths of alone, who [will see]—

ROBERT

How was the form?

INMATE 1

You looked exactly like a man condemned.

INMATE 2

Like an unsequenced old building in the town of Biel.

ROBERT

My sister persists there. In Biel.

INMATE 2

It is a rabid day out there. So forcefully "day."

INMATE 1 points upward with his left arm. SOUND of an arm pointing upward.

INMATE 1

Sun up.

Points to the floor with this left arm. SOUND of an arm pointing downward.

INMATE 1

Sun down.

Points up again with his left arm, but this time with less energy and a smaller SOUND.

INMATE 1

Sun up.

INMATE 1 rests his left arm in his lap, as if it were broken. SOUND of an arm being retired.

INMATE 1

That's it for this arm. I'm into my amputee regime for the moment.
If you have any clues about that, I'd be happy to eat them out of
your hand. Whenever you wished to offer [them]—

ROBERT sits up, his right arm pointing upward. INMATE 2 is staring out the window. INMATE 1 stares at ROBERT.

ROBERT

(drops his arm)

Doesn't feel right. Doesn't feel like the proper noose yet.

ROBERT gets up.

ROBERT
(to INMATE 1)

None, I'm afraid. But I appreciate your continued call for. It's been a while since I've been audienced. I'll try it again anon.

(to INMATE 2)

Shall we?

INMATE 2
(staring out the window)

Does that ever appeal to you?

ROBERT rummages around the material on the desk.

ROBERT

"That" out there? Or do you mean Biel? Where is my—

ROBERT picks up a pencil and a pencil sharpener. He sharpens the pencil.

INMATE 2

I mean anything outside a window. Meaning outside a window.

INMATE 1

Not again.

ROBERT

Doesn't exist—

INMATE 1

Here we go—

ROBERT

—as far as I've been able to recollect any of what others call "outside." Shall we?

INMATE 2

It has been, of late, to me. Appealing.

ROBERT lets his head fall. INMATE 1 shakes his head.

ROBERT

Don't.

INMATE 1

Don't.

INMATE 2

The day is being so hard the day out there, how can I not? I have memories.

ROBERT

Fight memories.

INMATE 1

They're just viruses, over-stimulated algae—

INMATE 1 shakes out his arms—SOUND of arms being shaken out.

INMATE 1

Regime of the amputee over.

(turns to INMATE 2)

Now—

INMATE 2 turns to them, and they see he is crying—not wails, not sobs. Neither ROBERT nor INMATE 1 make a move.

INMATE 1

Language has turned into liquids.

ROBERT

Come here.

INMATE 2 walks to ROBERT.

ROBERT

Roll it up.

INMATE 2 rolls up his right sleeve. His forearm is wrapped in a strip of torn white sheet covered in writing. ROBERT takes the arm and reads it until he sees what he wants.

ROBERT

Ah. "Freedom demands you be nothing to anybody. All freedom asks is that the only thing to which you offer your obedience is freedom. In everything else, obedience turns you into a xylophone for terror and a soft-tissue adjunct to machinery."

ROBERT looks at his words for a moment, dots an "i" or crosses a "t" with his pencil.

ROBERT

Roll it down.

INMATE 2 rolls down the sleeves. He wipes his eyes on the sleeve.

ROBERT
(to INMATE 1)

Open it.

INMATE 1 opens INMATE 2's lab coat. SOUND of buttons going through cloth.

INMATE 2's torso is swathed in a torn sheet covered by miniscule writing. ROBERT circles it until he finds what he wants, dots an "i" or crosses a "t" with his pencil.

ROBERT
Can we do more today?

INMATE 2 shakes his head no. ROBERT gestures to INMATE 1, who re-buttons the coat. SOUND of buttons going through cloth. ROBERT puts the pencil in his pocket. Then, without warning, he flings up his left arm and falls to the ground. SOUND of a body hitting.

INMATE 2
Perfect.

ROBERT
(sitting up)
All it needed was the left arm to free it up.

INMATE 1
Form was good, too.

ROBERT does it again just as CARL SEELIG enters, hat, coat, and briefcase in hand. INMATE 1 and INMATE 2 retreat to the desk, where they make hand puppets out of the papers bags and other materials.

SEELIG
Robert? Robert?

ROBERT
I'm not dead. I am doing cartography—finding the latitude of my longitude—

SEELIG puts down his briefcase, takes a pencil and a pad of paper out of his pocket, and writes something down.

ROBERT
(from his back)

I am setting in motion the last of my last will. Is he writing?

INMATE 1

Yes.

INMATE 2

The vulture has landed.

ROBERT

Ah. Carl?

SEELIG

Um, yes?

ROBERT

I will pretend not to notice that you are recording things issuing forth from this fossil. Nor will I make fun of you for wasting your life. And now—

ROBERT sits up.

ROBERT

“The city was fine and void.”

SEELIG writes.

ROBERT

“How quickly that is said!”

From his seated position, ROBERT flings up his left arm and falls back. SOUND of a half-body falling back.

ROBERT

„The world was as full of life as ever and as fair as in its fairest hour. Gently I crept away and went out onto the street.” My amanuensis?

SEELIG

Wait—yes—

INMATE 1 and INMATE 2 get up from the desk with paper bag puppets on their hands and walk toward SEELIG. The puppets speak.

INMATE 1

(in a voice)

I hear the futile untesticled Robert Walser is in Herisau.

INMATE 2

(in a voice)

I hear the leeches have gathered to feed in chorus.

SEELIG

Really—

INMATE 2

And they know how to write.

INMATE 1

Such smart leeches.

SEELIG

Robert—Robert—

ROBERT sits up.

ROBERT

In an asylum, you take your company however it comes, Carl,
cooked or crudités.

INMATE 1 and INMATE 2 circle SEELIG.

INMATE 1

Look at him suck it in.

INMATE 2

Do you think he'll record our deathless loopings?

INMATE 1

No.

INMATE 2

Because we won't be able to afford him a legacy that comes with
food and contracts.

INMATE 1 turns his puppet to ROBERT.

INMATE 1
(pointing to window)
Do you have any idea what is going on outside?

INMATE 2
(in SEELIG's face)
Heil!

SEELIG
How would you know?

INMATE 2
Heil!

SEELIG
Stop that!

INMATE 1
Just because I'm a paper bag doesn't mean that newspapers
don't make it past the window sashes. My button eyes can read.

SEELIG
Then why are you here if you're so well-[informed]—

INMATE 1
Heil!

SEELIG
Now you stop—

INMATE 2
With cartography being Hitlerized, with Mein Kampf stuck in their
teeth, can you tell me where windows start and end, where lunacy
remains unleaking, sewn shut in a cramped diagnosis—

INMATE 1
—and deposited in bare locked rooms that wear our names?

INMATE 1 & INMATE 2
Robert! Practice!

*As if on cue, ROBERT throws his left arm in the air and falls back. SOUND of hundreds of
ravens flying away.*

ROBERT

(from his back)

“The window is there for a reason—it prevents families and dictators from killing you with their compassion—”

SEELIG hesitates, but only barely, before he scribbles in his notebook.

ROBERT

(from his back)

Is he—

INMATE 1 & INMATE 2

Warning, warning, literary executor in hot pursuit with the fang of his pencil poised to wreak posterity on the world!

NURSE enters, taking short steps, looking around. She comes into the common area. Everyone looks at her except ROBERT, who is on his back. INMATE 1 and INMATE 2 take their puppets from their hands, retreat to the desk.

NURSE

I’m sorry—I heard—

SEELIG

It’s nothing—

ROBERT sits up.

ROBERT

Lisa?

NURSE

No—no—who is Lisa? Is everything all right?

SEELIG

It’s fine.

ROBERT

You could be Lisa.

NURSE

But I’m not. I just started today—

SEELIG

We're all right here—

(to ROBERT)

I have to talk [with you]—

ROBERT ignores him, walks to NURSE.

ROBERT

What is happening out there?

NURSE

Out there? That depends on which “out” and “there”—

ROBERT

So multiples.

NURSE

Well, that goes without saying.

ROBERT

But I just said it.

NURSE

Which is, perhaps, why you are who you are.

ROBERT gets two chairs, sets them down. He sits. He indicates for NURSE to sit, which she does. SEELIG kneels in back of them, pad and pencil in hand.

ROBERT

You are sure you are not Lisa.

LISA

Quite. Sure.

ROBERT

Do you know who Lisa is?

LISA

I don't know who you are. As I said—

ROBERT

Let me compose an erratic but moving aria that will sift your spirit but not prick your heart around.

ROBERT gives NURSE a wry face, indicating SEELIG in the background. NURSE smiles. SEELIG is ready. INMATE 1 and INMATE 2 exchange puppets, put them on, mime a conversation.

ROBERT

“From out of the dimness of the common room came the esteemed poet, accompanied by the nurse. I was struck by his childlike expression, red-flushed cheeks, blue eyes, and trim, golden mustache. He was already turning gray at the temple. His well-worn collar and necktie were set somewhat crookedly, his teeth not in the best condition. When the nurse wanted him to button the top button of his vest”—go, do it—

NURSE

"Sir, would you button the top button of your vest?"

ROBERT

(fling up left arm)

“When the nurse wanted him to button the top button of his vest, Robert rebelled: ‘No! The top button must remain open!’ He spoke in a melodious Barndutsch, as he had no doubt spoken in his youth in Biel.”

(whispering to NURSE)

How’s he doing?

NURSE

(looking at SEELIG)

He’s a very busy man.

ROBERT

Fighting against the faultiness—saltiness—of memory. You could be Lisa. You have her look.

INMATE 1

It’s his sister!

INMATE 2

Who lives close by and never comes!

INMATE 1

A—

INMATE 1 & INMATE 2

—bandoned.

ROBERT

That's not—

INMATE 2

Liar.

(to SEELIG)

Hey, Pencil! How's it feel to have your face deep in the trough,
tongue-up the lady's skirt, open-mouthed down the man's
trousers—

INMATE 1, bag puppet on hand, runs to SEELIG and circles him as he shouts.

INMATE 1

Heil! Sieg Heil! Heil! Sieg Heil! Heil! Sieg Heil! Heil! Sieg Heil!

SEELIG takes a swipe at INMATE 1 but misses him. NURSE half-rises to intervene, but ROBERT holds out a hand to stop her. INMATE 1 and SEELIG continue their dance.

INMATE 1

Heil! Sieg Heil!

ROBERT

It's your first day. Don't spoil it by being official—not yet, at least—

INMATE 1

Heil! Sieg Heil!

NURSE

A thing a brother might say. But I am official, even if I only
[started]—

ROBERT

Your noose, then.

NURSE rises. Her voice surprises in its strength.

NURSE

Stop it. Right. Now.

INMATE 2 stands up at the desk, puppet on hand, the puppet's face agape. INMATE 1 and SEELIG look at NURSE.

SEELIG

Thank you—

NURSE ignores him. She holds out her hand, waggles her fingers: give me the puppet. INMATE 1 hesitates—or makes a show of hesitating—then slinks to NURSE, places the puppet in the palm of her upturned hand. NURSE examines it, then puts it on her own hand.

NURSE

Have you no manners?

INMATE 1

Not while I'm here—

NURSE

Don't sass me! Just because you're committed doesn't mean you don't have a human layer.

ROBERT

They are all too human.

NURSE turns the puppet to ROBERT.

NURSE

Brother, please—

ROBERT smiles. NURSE turns back to INMATE 1.

NURSE

Just because you're diagnosed does not mean that "civilized" deserts you. Let your dreams use up the terror—inside the window, you will speak not like the ape you came from. Do we have an understanding?

NURSE makes the puppet purse its lips. When INMATE 1 does not answer, NURSE raises the puppet up, directs its attention to INMATE 2.

NURSE

Do we?

INMATE 2

(through the puppet)

Yes!

NURSE

Good.

INMATE 1

Yes! I said it first, I meant to say it first!

ROBERT

There go my carefully crafted rebels—

NURSE

Brother—

(to INMATE 1)

And sorry as well to—

NURSE indicates SEELIG.

INMATE 1

But for that I'm not.

NURSE

Then you are the ape you think you're not.

INMATE 2

(ape sounds)

Oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo--

NURSE

Maybe you should be up a tree—maybe we should use you for an experiment—

INMATE 1 looks at ROBERT, who shrugs, then at SEELIG. He indicates to NURSE to hand him the puppet, which she does. INMATE 1 puts it on.

INMATE 1

(through puppet)

Sorry.

INMATE 1 moves to the window, where he and the puppet stare outside.

INMATE 1

(in a whisper)

Sieg Heil, Sieg Heil—

SEELIG

Thank you—

NURSE
(to ROBERT)

I have to go—I'm not supposed to—and I'm also supposed to—

ROBERT
Visitations are so rare—

NURSE
I hope your sister—

ROBERT
My sister also hopes—I assume—

INMATE 2
(from puppet)
I'm not an ape!

NURSE
(to INMATE 2)
Then my work here is done.
(to ROBERT)
I have to [go]—

ROBERT
Lucky are all the others, then.

NURSE leaves; ROBERT watches her leave. The puppets of INMATE 1 and INMATE 2 watch her leave.

SEELIG
Robert— Robert—

ROBERT stares at where the NURSE left, does not look at SEELIG. INMATE 1 and INMATE 2 also stare.

SEELIG
Robert—

ROBERT
Yes—

SEELIG
You know I've been gathering—

ROBERT

Like a pack rat—neotoma cinerea, I think—shiny worthless objects— And?

SEELIG

Do you have any more?

INMATE 1 and puppet turn back to the window.

INMATE 1

(whispering)

Sieg Heil Sieg Heil Sieg Heil Sieg Heil—

ROBERT

Of?

SEELIG

Could you look at me?

ROBERT

I like what I'm seeing.

SEELIG

You're not looking at [anything]—

ROBERT

Annunciations.

(looks at SEELIG)

That's why you are doing what you do.

SEELIG

All right—

ROBERT

(back to staring)

That's the answer I would expect.

SEELIG

Do you? Have?

ROBERT looks directly at SEELIG.

ROBERT

Writings?

SEELIG

Yes—yes—

INMATE 2 drifts toward them, puppetless.

ROBERT

I told you—I have stopped that nonsense—I'm not here to write
but to be mad—

*INMATE 2 drifts in closer. INMATE 1 continues to whisper, perhaps even marches a little back
and forth. ROBERT shoots INMATE 2 a look. INMATE 2 stops.*

SEELIG

You're absolutely sure? I have only your interests at heart—

ROBERT

If I had an epitaph tattoo'd across the small of my back—

SEELIG raises his notebook.

ROBERT

—don't you dare—

*INMATE 2 lifts the notebook out of SEELIG's hand. SEELIG goes to retrieve it, but INMATE 2
keeps it out of reach.*

ROBERT

—most likely would have to curve around my love handles—thank
you—and probably across the top of my gluteus—are you
listening?—

*SEELIG faces ROBERT. INMATE 1 stops whispering. He puts the puppet on the desk and joins
INMATE 2. INMATE 2 rips a page out of the notebook and hands it to INMATE 1, who tears it
up into intricate bits with precise movements. ROBERT does nothing to stop INMATE 1.
SEELIG's body language shows that he wants to stop this, but he does nothing.*

ROBERT throws his left arm in the air but does not fall.

ROBERT

“I would wish it on no one to be me. Only I am capable of bearing
myself. To know so much, to have seen so much, and to say
nothing, just about nothing.” It would not have to be a large
headstone.

SEELIG can stand it no more. He rips the notebook out of INMATE 2's hands. He puts the pencil to the paper and struggles to write, puts down a word, maybe two, but nothing more comes.

SEELIG
(to ROBERT)

Could you [repeat]—please—

ROBERT lets his left arm fall.

ROBERT

The race is over. You have to go. The winter has come.

SEELIG

Please—

INMATE 1
(ape sounds)

Oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo--

INMATE 2

Stay outside the window.

ROBERT

Sorry. Winter.

SEELIG

Yes—yes—it is the nature of geniuses to be difficult—it is the difficulty that makes this work so—

ROBERT

Not all over my headstone, please—leave it for the galley-proofs when I have been sanitized. And thanks.

SEELIG gathers his materials, readies himself to go.

SEELIG

You may not want it—

ROBERT

Who says?

SEELIG

—but I will make sure you get it—

ROBERT

It will be too late and stale—but that will not bother you in the least, will it, since you trade in what you borrow.

SEELIG stares at ROBERT, then can't constrain himself. He drops his briefcase and pulls a small notepad and pencil out of his pocket, scribbles down ROBERT's last words, stows them away, leaves.

ROBERT and the INMATES say nothing. ROBERT walks to the couch, puts on the hat and coat lying there.

ROBERT

I have to go outside the window.

INMATE 1

But—sieg heil—

INMATE 2 takes off his lab coat and trousers. He is entirely swathed in ROBERT's writing. ROBERTS looks at him with what can only be called affection.

ROBERT

All right.

ROBERT pulls a pencil out of his coat, kneels, finds an empty space near the left ankle, and writes something. He puts the pencil away, rises. INMATE 2 re-dresses himself.

ROBERT

Finished, then—

Without preface, INMATE 2 embraces ROBERT, then moves away.

INMATE 1

The window is not for everyone.

ROBERT

“No! The top button must remain open!”

They laugh.

Transition.

* * * * *

Scene 3

Winter. Light of a winter's afternoon. A field covered in snow. ROBERT dressed and standing. Staring. Breathing in and out.

Then strong pain crosses his face.

ROBERT

Annunciation—

More pain. He fights it off, goes back to staring. Pain again. He fights it off. He takes off his hat, stares. And then it hits. ROBERT throws up his left arm, hat in hand, and falls. Three OFFICERS in dark coats and hats enter; one OFFICER has an old camera. They catch his body and lower it in a slow arc to the ground. SOUND of a long exhale. His left arm is thrown over his head; his hat lies a meter away.

When ROBERT's body is at rest, two OFFICERS pull out notepads and take notes of the death scene. The third OFFICER takes pictures.

NURSE enters, wearing a cape. She is cold, shivers, but does not take her eyes off ROBERT.

OFFICER 1
(to NURSE)

You have anything to say?

NURSE

I'm here to claim—he was one of ours—

OFFICER 1

That'll make identifying easier—

NURSE

The ambulance will be here—

OFFICER 1

We all have our duties.

OFFICER 1 yells to OFFICER 3.

OFFICER 1

Don't waste the film—

OFFICER 3

Not many pictures in life of dead writers in the snow—I can probably get some money [for this]—

OFFICER 2

Can't—police property—

OFFICER 3

There's always a way.

NURSE

Stop it.

OFFICER 1

Yes, stop it. He was a son of somebody—

OFFICER 3

So that obligates some weeping?

OFFICER 1 points to ROBERT.

OFFICER 1

That'll be you someday, so just shut up.

OFFICER 3 looks directly at OFFICER 1, and without looking at ROBERT, snaps one more picture of the corpse. OFFICER 1, face displeased, turns to NURSE.

OFFICER 1

Poor bastard.

SOUND of an ambulance bell, ravens flying off, crunch of feet in snow. NURSE looks up, throws back her cape. She flings her left arm over her head. But she does not fall. And she stares at her raised hand. OFFICER 2 circles the body writing notes.

End.