

The Sin Eater

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DESCRIPTION

Margaret Pasqualini, a professional photographer, is arrested at a photo lab for taking nude pictures of her son, pictures she said were part of an exhibit she was putting together as a final project for her class in advanced photographic techniques. Police had been notified by the lab owner about the pictures and were forced to arrest Pasqualini when she refused to accompany them to the station. Rather than agree to a plea bargain in her subsequent conviction for malicious destruction of property and disorderly conduct, she instead chooses to go to jail for 30 days. There she meets Vera Cortez, serving 25 years for being an accomplice in the murder of her own child.

Cortez, as she prefers to be called, is from East Harlem, but she originally grew up in Puerto Rico, from a family which provided her a good education and a comfortable home. At 17 or 18 she became involved in the independence movement, specifically in working for the release of Los Quince (fifteen Puerto Rican men and women in American jails, accused of being members of either FALN or Los Macheteros). She narrowly escaped the FBI crackdown that resulted in the arrest of scores of Puerto Ricans, and her family shipped her off to live with relatives in New York City.

There, she struck out on her own. Unfortunately, life did not treat her well: she had two children with two different men and eventually ended up in an abusive relationship (with whom she has a third child). This man killed her daughter by beating her to death; Cortez is arrested and convicted as an accomplice to the murder and agrees to serve 25 years in prison.

Their month-long relationship opens up the possibility for a real and vital connection between people who, though from completely different classes and experiences, can find common ground. The Sin Eater also raises questions about the thin line between art and exploitation.

CHARACTERS

- MARGARET PASQUALINI, photographer, mid-30s
- VERA CORTEZ, prisoner, mid-30s, originally from Puerto Rico
- GUARD, African American female, mid-30s.

TIME

- Before the advent of digital photography

SETTING

- Women's prison

MISCELLANEOUS

- Two beds, a footlocker at the foot of each.
- A table and two chairs
- A deck of cards
- A small boombox
- A small bookcase, overflowing with books
- Ornament: posters which indicate Puerto Rican pride, small Puerto Rican flag, diploma (associates degree in communications)
- An area for GUARD -- her "locker," with a small table
- A shoulder mike for GUARD

NOTE: No attempt should be made to create a "real" jail cell in terms of size or spacing. For instance, put the beds in the audience if it can be managed or perform the play in the round or do it a big space like a gym.

NOTE: Suggestions are made throughout the script for sound and music, but the director and sound designer are free to change these.

NOTE: The ends and beginnings of scenes usually use "lights down" followed by "lights up." However, in line with the fact that one of the characters is a photographer, there could be a strobe effect at the ends and the beginnings of some, if not all, of the scenes to duplicate the taking of a "snap shot." Stage business or music/sound can be used to cover if the actors need to make changes between scenes or, where possible, the "snaps" should follow one hard upon the heels of the other.

NOTE: The director is free to have GUARD check in whenever he or she feels it's appropriate.

Scene 1

SOUND: Selection from opening of Lou Reed's "Busload of Faith" from "New York."

Bare stage. MARGARET PASQUALINI, VERA CORTEZ, and GUARD enter set up the "cell" for the play. They snap their fingers.

* * * * *

Scene 2

SOUND: Music morphs into the background sounds of a prison.

CORTEZ is asleep.

GUARD stands with MARGARET PASQUALINI. MARGARET wears a light jacket and holds a paper bag.

GUARD

You okay? You got your stuff.

To each statement MARGARET shrugs -- what can she really say?

GUARD

You've been given thirty days, not thirty years, so head down but head up, too -- passes quicker that way, though it's gonna feel like a glacier no matter what. And don't forget to remember it's all good even when it isn't and that the world you have outside never disappears. All right, now I'm going to call for the door to open, and whatever happens, just keep cool -- head down, head up, all right?

GUARD speaks into her shoulder mike.

GUARD

5 - 1 - 7 - 6 - open.

SOUND: Squawk/static from the shoulder mike.

SOUND: Metal door pounds open.

GUARD guides MARGARET into the cell. CORTEZ jerks awake.

CORTEZ

Tamara?

GUARD

It's not --

CORTEZ

Tamara?

GUARD

It's not Tamara.

CORTEZ

Tamara --

GUARD

It's not Tamara --

CORTEZ

What --

GUARD

It's the dream. Again. Need aspirin?

CORTEZ

I can take care of it myself --

GUARD
Always tough coming out of the dream.

CORTEZ
You done with your analysis?

GUARD
If you're ready to play nice.

CORTEZ
So this is she.

GUARD
This is her.

CORTEZ
The new beef.

GUARD
Don't be nasty.

CORTEZ
The virgin territory.

GUARD
Better but not by much.

GUARD guides MARGARET into the cell.

GUARD
Clock is now ticking officially. She doesn't
bite. I've had her tested.

GUARD steps outside the cell.

GUARD
5 - 1 - 7 - 6 - closed.

SOUND: Door slams closed.

GUARD gives MARGARET a "look," then leaves.

CORTEZ
That footlocker is yours -- open it, put your
stuff in.

MARGARET opens the footlocker, puts her bag and jacket in, closes it.

CORTEZ
That bed is yours, so sit down on it -- as she
says, I am not known to bite.

MARGARET sits.

CORTEZ

Standard operating procedure, so that things start right right off. I am tired, and I am going to get some sleep, so I do not want to be disturbed. You are only here for a month -- I live here, Boricua prisoner of war -- you are just a radar blip, so --

MARGARET

Thought you wanted to sleep.

CORTEZ gives her a look that say, "What did you just say to me?"

MARGARET

You said you were tired, so --

CORTEZ gives MARGARET a straight look that MARGARET holds.

MARGARET

You say you want to sleep, so you should take your sleep.

CORTEZ

The rules of the house are what I say they are.

MARGARET

Goes without saying.

CORTEZ

I will say it anyways.

MARGARET

I'm just a blip of beef.

CORTEZ

Not even that. Now I will sleep.

But before CORTEZ can lay down, MARGARET lays down and faces the wall.

CORTEZ

No one has slept away the whole thirty days.

MARGARET

Wanna bet?

CORTEZ

What are you willing to bet?

MARGARET ignores her.

CORTEZ lies down to sleep as well.

* * * * *

Scene 3

LIGHTS: Night in the cell -- dim, indirect.

CORTEZ sleeps.

MARGARET rolls out of bed. She creeps over to look at CORTEZ's face, studies it until CORTEZ stirs. MARGARET leans back, then leans back in to study the face. She frames it in a "shutter" made by placing index finger against index finger and thumb against thumb, making a square. She "snaps" a photo by closing and opening the "shutter."

CORTEZ stirs again, and MARGARET sits back on her bed.

CORTEZ jerks out of her sleep.

CORTEZ

Goddamn it! Goddamn it!

CORTEZ moves around the cell, waving away the demons.

CORTEZ

Leave me alone -- just leave me alone -- Tamara -
- Tamara --

CORTEZ stands there, staring into the dark, then becomes aware that MARGARET is watching. They lock eyes.

MARGARET gets up and takes from her footlocker a child's tee-shirt, tucks it under her pillow.

They both lay back down. The night continues.

* * * * *

Scene 4

GUARD at her "locker." She fixes her shirt, her hair, etc. Next to her is a rolling cart with two lunch bags on it.

She takes a notecard from a pocket and moves it back and forth to get it in focus.

GUARD

Goddamn getting older sucks.

She pulls glasses out of a shirt pocket and puts them on. She scans the card, perhaps even reciting along with it, then puts it back. Glasses off, finishes her preparations.

GUARD

All right. Looking good. Daughters of mine, I hope you're sleeping well. You know I hate doing the graveyard shift. Because these graves are always ready to pop -- and I sure do not want to be popped. And it ain't like it's Lazarus re-born that comes out if and when they do --

GUARD snaps her fingers to the words.

GGUARD

-- pop pop pop open. But I do it because it lets you both sleep well in your own beds in your own rooms in our own house.

GUARD rolls the cart to the cell as a klaxon rings.

SOUND: A wake-up call, prison sounds.

* * * * *

Scene 5: The First Degree

MARGARET is jolted out of sleep. CORTEZ rises, smoothes her bed, stands at attention ready for head-count. MARGARET, looking haggard, does the same.

GUARD

Arise ye unwashed of the earth -- the "a lá carte" breakfast cart has arrived.

GUARD hoists the two bags.

GUARD

You are my last -- and my testament says that the last shall be last.

MARGARET shakes her head no.

GUARD

One day is fine -- upstairs, they expect that -- but after two days, they get nervous -- three days makes trouble all the way down the line which means all the way down to me.

MARGARET waves the bag away.

GUARD

Take it -- and get 'em off my back. Eat it or not -- I don't care if you turn it into trash through your mouth or chucking it out. But I am not going to suffer for your suffering.

CORTEZ

Take the bag.

MARGARET takes the bag. CORTEZ takes her bag.

GUARD

Thank you both so kindly.

CORTEZ smiles back.

CORTEZ

Do not mention it.

GUARD

Don't encourage her, all right? Show her some part of your good side.

CORTEZ, in jest, sticks some body part forward as her "good" side.

CORTEZ

That's my best good side.

GUARD does not smile, but does a little, then rolls the cart away.

MARGARET puts the bag down. So does CORTEZ. MARGARET takes out crackers, nibbles on them, stares. She is a mess of tics and jerks.

CORTEZ

Eat more than that, rent check, or you are not going to make it.

MARGARET gives her a blank look.

CORTEZ

"Rent check." Goes out after a month.

MARGARET toys with the crackers.

CORTEZ

Eat them or put them back.

MARGARET eats the crackers. CORTEZ opens her own bag, takes out her crackers, and eats them.

MARGARET

Just -- more sitting around --

CORTEZ

I explained yesterday what "lockdown" means. I explained the bag lunches. You brought stuff to our desert island -- use it.

CORTEZ takes a thick book to read.

MARGARET

Not used to sitting so still --

CORTEZ

No hurry to be in a hurry around here.

MARGARET

I'm used to drinking coffee and cracking jokes and busting somebody's balls if they're not doing the job and this sitting around just drives me nuts. What are you reading?

MARGARET's leg bounces.

CORTEZ

Chill.

MARGARET

Sorry.

MARGARET taps her fingers on the table.

CORTEZ

I said --

MARGARET paces.

CORTEZ

I told you, no parades.

MARGARET sits and fidgets.

CORTEZ

You do have the scorpions --

MARGARET

Just --

CORTEZ

Just what?

MARGARET

Just -- thinking.

CORTEZ

Just control it.

MARGARET

Can't just turn it off --

CORTEZ

Just have to. It gets very close in here.

MARGARET's leg jumps up and down.

MARGARET

I'm trying!

CORTEZ

Not hard enough.

MARGARET

So --

CORTEZ

So --

MARGARET

So -- you seem to give a lot of advice.

CORTEZ

Those scorpions make you deaf to advice --

MARGARET

Yeah?

CORTEZ

Because they force you to face without the chance
to look away that you are a loser --

MARGARET

Is that what your scorpions do to you at night?
"Tamara, Tamara" -- shit! sorry, I'm sorry --

CORTEZ puts down her book and moves toward MARGARET.

CORTEZ

You need some self-discipline.

CORTEZ sits in the other chair across from MARGARET. After a pause,
CORTEZ simply places her hand on MARGARET's jumping leg. MARGARET's
leg goes still.

CORTEZ

I told you you could do it. Now offload what you
are thinking.

MARGARET

Wouldn't even call it thinking, all right -- all
jumbled --

CORTEZ

Like smoke up in your head --

MARGARET's leg shakes. CORTEZ calms it.

CORTEZ

Smoke, jumbled --

MARGARET

My son -- it's my son I'm thinking about --

Son's name?	CORTEZ
Alex.	MARGARET
Age?	CORTEZ
Four.	MARGARET
Married?	CORTEZ
Alex?	MARGARET
You, <u>tonta</u> .	CORTEZ
I am married.	MARGARET
Have a name?	CORTEZ
Matthew.	MARGARET
He treats you well?	CORTEZ Your husband, not Alex.
Yes.	MARGARET
Cheat on you?	CORTEZ
Not that I know about --	MARGARET
Yell at you?	CORTEZ
No.	MARGARET
Hit you?	CORTEZ
Never.	MARGARET

CORTEZ

Provide for you?

MARGARET

We've got -- we run -- a small construction company together.

CORTEZ

Equal down the middle?

MARGARET

I go out on the jobs -- he makes sure the money makes it into the bank account.

CORTEZ

So you are a "woman in the building trades."

MARGARET

Apprenticed my way through a shit-storm of men to become that.

CORTEZ

That makes you proud.

MARGARET

I've earned all my certificates, earned all my chops, and though the word is "foreman," I get to be the boss -- and that is sweet.

CORTEZ

A little revenge.

MARGARET

For having had "Property of the Cunt" sprayed across my locker? Yeah -- who wouldn't -- for all the -- but it seems stupid now --

CORTEZ

Who can tell, forewoman? So, nice son. Husband who treats you human. Entrepreneur. A life composed.

MARGARET

Not that it's all --

CORTEZ

It is never all that, is it? -- but it does not sound bad.

MARGARET

No, no, it's not bad at all.

CORTEZ

So what would make you go away from what is "not bad at all" and bury yourself here with me?

MARGARET doesn't answer.

CORTEZ

Notice your leg?

MARGARET notices how still it is.

MARGARET

Huh.

CORTEZ

And without my hand.

MARGARET

Huh.

CORTEZ

Not about me wanting to know -- about you wanting to tell. Unless I read you wrong.

MARGARET

My leg.

CORTEZ

Yes -- the world is full of signs.

MARGARET

Huh. It's just -- all so stupid --

CORTEZ

"Stupid" is trying to sleep through it all --

MARGARET

You were right [about] --

CORTEZ

That I learned on my apprenticeship. Look, just start.

MARGARET takes a deep relaxing breath.

MARGARET

What would make me leave. Okay -- okay. Disorderly conduct. Plus malicious destruction of property. I damaged a photo lab. I fought a police officer -- two -- forewoman resisted arrest --

CORTEZ

Did it take more than an hour to print your pictures?

MARGARET

No --

CORTEZ

Then they did a bad job.

MARGARET

No! It wasn't [anything like] -- they wouldn't give me back what was mine when I asked for it. And they called in the police --

MARGARET falls silent. MARGARET's leg jumps. CORTEZ points at it. MARGARET controls it.

CORTEZ

So these pictures needed a police escort.

MARGARET

It was nothing.

CORTEZ

Will not wash. Pictures of whom?

MARGARET

Of Alex -- my son, Alex.

CORTEZ gets up. She lets the silence hang.

MARGARET

I didn't do anything wrong.

CORTEZ

You wrestled with police officers.

MARGARET

I didn't do --

CORTEZ

You "damaged" property --

MARGARET

-- anything wrong.

CORTEZ

What do you think you did?

MARGARET

It's what they did.

CORTEZ

You are the one in here.

MARGARET

They were just pictures of Alex.

CORTEZ

Not "just," obviously --

MARGARET

For a photography class, a project for a class --
but people said they saw -- things --

CORTEZ

You gave them some reason.

MARGARET

No reason! I knew what I knew, solid --

CORTEZ

So, just the mama lion defending her cub --

MARGARET

Against all their filth --

CORTEZ

They offer you a deal?

MARGARET

I could've taken a deal. Eighteen months of
probation, 50 hours of community service, \$300 in
restitution, and a written apology.

CORTEZ lets MARGARET's refusal hang in the air, as if it were the
stupidest thing CORTEZ had ever heard.

MARGARET

I couldn't, I really --

CORTEZ

But you would be at home right now --

Silence.

CORTEZ

But those pictures, amiga -- maybe in here is
where you should be, a mother who abandons her
child --

MARGARET

Did not abandon -- I protected --

CORTEZ

You chose principle --

MARGARET

Yes!

CORTEZ

With your whole family starving for you to stay.

MARGARET

Alex Alex Alex! My principle is Alex!

CORTEZ lets that statement hang in the air as well.

MARGARET

How hard is it to understand that.

CORTEZ

That question is not about me. Can he? And when. And how.

MARGARET

He'll understand because I'll tell him, that's how. When he grows up.

CORTEZ

I am sure the anticipation of that keeps a smile on his four-year old face. Come on, say it, this is really all about you, yes?

MARGARET

About me for him -- so he'll know --

CORTEZ puts on a quizzical face which says, "Know what?"

MARGARET

So he'll know that nothing ever happened.

CORTEZ

Except that you disappeared on him for a month.

MARGARET

He'll see that was a small price --

CORTEZ

Such faith.

MARGARET

I'm tired.

CORTEZ

Principles and selfishness combined --

CORTEZ lays out a game of solitaire.

CORTEZ

I read about you. When she told me you were coming. That is why I wanted you in here. The prison librarian gave me articles.

MARGARET

My tax dollars at work --

CORTEZ

Yeah.

MARGARET

If you know, then why are you jerking me [around]
--

CORTEZ

Because the prison librarian's articles did not
give me the information I want.

MARGARET

The dirt --

CORTEZ

"Dirt" is not what I want -- but we will get to
that later.

MARGARET

I want to get to it now.

CORTEZ

We will get to it later. For now, you get this
about all this: lines, Margarita Pasqualini. On
a tiny island like ours, lines mean everything.
Keeping them clear, making them straight --

MARGARET

And what info can I get for some lines that'll
keep you off my back?

CORTEZ

I can give you my name.

MARGARET

That's it?

CORTEZ

I know you have not read about me.

MARGARET

That's it?

CORTEZ

That is it.

MARGARET

So read me your name.

CORTEZ

Cortez. I have a first name -- Vera -- but do
not use it. I go by Cortez. You, I am calling
Pasqualini.

MARGARET

No.

CORTEZ

Pascua, the feast -- Pasqualini, the little feast
--

MARGARET

No.

CORTEZ

So read your right name to me.

MARGARET

I go by Margaret. Not Pasqualini, not a little
feast. Definitely not Margarita.

CORTEZ

Say that again.

MARGARET

Which part?

CORTEZ

"I go by -- "

MARGARET

I go by Margaret? I go by Margaret.

CORTEZ

Now we have some lines.

MARGARET

On our little island.

CORTEZ

For the turn of a moon.

MARGARET

You like this all the time?

CORTEZ

No -- sometimes, Margaret, I talk a lot.

MARGARET

Even in your sleep.

CORTEZ

That -- that is good -- I can respect that.

MARGARET

Means you shut up now?

CORTEZ continues to play the game. MARGARET goes to the table.

MARGARET

You missed the seven.

Instead of moving the seven, CORTEZ gathers the cards together, shuffles, and sets up a new game.

CORTEZ

My mantra: In for a dime, in for the dollar.

MARGARET

I didn't do anything wrong.

CORTEZ

I think you still come up ninety cents short.

CORTEZ continues to play. MARGARET musses up the cards, then goes to her bed and lies down. CORTEZ rearranges the cards, sets up a new game, continues to play.

* * * * *

Scene 6

GUARD at her "locker" doing her preparation.

She takes the notecard from its pocket and moves it back and forth to get it in focus until finally, with a little exasperated sigh, she pulls glasses out of a shirt pocket and puts them on: getting older still sucks.

She puts it back and picks up a book, leafs through it.

GUARD

Daughters of mine, if there's a usual smell in this place -- something forever underneath the bleach and menstrual blood and fumigator's poison -- it is regret. It's something I'd love to keep you from feeling -- but you're gonna feel it anyway.

One last hitch of her belt, one last shift of her shirt.

GUARD

That's why I wear a fresh uniform every day, why I drive you crazy about doing my wash. I want to wear the smell of life outside when I arrive here on the inside and let it cover me as long as it can.

GUARD snaps her fingers.

GUARD

Sleeping daughters of mine -- you are why I have so little regret in life.

* * * * *

Scene 7: The Second Degree

GUARD hands CORTEZ a book through the cell doors.

GUARD

Here's your book. We have to cool doing this for a bit --

GUARD points heavenward.

GUARD

Los gigantes -- cracking down on any "fraternizing" -- funny word to use with women, isn't it.

CORTEZ

I am cracking up about it like the dawn.

GUARD

Whole lockdown thing always gives 'em a hard-on -

CORTEZ

That must be interesting.

GUARD

No it's not. But by the end of business today it's going to be over.

CORTEZ

We always manage to figure it out.

GUARD

How goes it?

MARGARET

We talk.

GUARD

Open university with this one. Gotta go -- hard-ons call.

CORTEZ

I wonder what the sound of that is like.

GUARD

One hand slapping?

This actually gets CORTEZ to smile as GUARD simulates masturbation.

CORTEZ

You better not let your daughters --

GUARD

You know I am the best of mothers to them.

GUARD leaves. CORTEZ watches her.

MARGARET

You give her books?

CORTEZ

The "best of mothers" asks for my books.

CORTEZ starts to put away the book.

MARGARET

Can I?

CORTEZ hands MARGARET the book.

CORTEZ

You may.

MARGARET

Houses of Healing.

CORTEZ recites as if from memory.

CORTEZ

"A Prisoner's Guide to Inner Power and Freedom."

MARGARET

Why would she want to read [this] --

CORTEZ

Think about that for a moment. You thinking?
Think this: you think we are the only prisoners
in here?

MARGARET thinks about it, nods, realizes. She holds up the book.

MARGARET

Is it okay --

CORTEZ

Read on --

MARGARET opens to the first page, reads, looks up at CORTEZ.

CORTEZ

Good, yes?

MARGARET nods. CORTEZ starts to play solitaire as MARGARET leafs
through the book.

CORTEZ

You ate today.

MARGARET

You mean I got it all down.

CORTEZ

Only took you a week.

MARGARET

Incarceration as my diet plan. When do we do something other than sit around?

CORTEZ

Soon, from what we just heard -- I suppose they finally found who and what they wanted to find. And I can go back to my class.

MARGARET

A class?

CORTEZ

Not important. More important is, I have a question for you: what is it like, being famous?

MARGARET

Is that what you call it?

CORTEZ

You were -- you were known. A known person. Maybe you still are.

MARGARET

Wouldn't call what crapped on us as being "famous."

CORTEZ

You had your picture in the papers --

MARGARET

Cat in a tree can get that --

CORTEZ

News at six, again at eleven --

MARGARET

Same with the cat --

CORTEZ

Reporters mucking in your garbage --

MARGARET

My bones and egg shells --

CORTEZ

You have another definition?

MARGARET thinks.

MARGARET

It felt like being raped.

CORTEZ

Ever been raped?

MARGARET

No.

CORTEZ

Then it did not feel like that. Try again.

MARGARET

You read what the prison librarian gave you --
you tell me.

CORTEZ

And as I told you, the public record never gives
me the right details.

MARGARET does not respond. She shuts the book.

CORTEZ

You do have the right to remain silent.

MARGARET

No, no, it's just -- nature specials, on the
public television station --

CORTEZ

With the lions --

MARGARET

With the lions eating the antelope that isn't
even dead yet. "Picked up for child porn." The
perp walk. The radio talk shows where I'm pegged
as the demon mother.

CORTEZ

Daughter of Satan, I heard.

MARGARET

The bitch of Beelzebub. Everyone ripping out a
hunk and carting it off.

CORTEZ

The papers did draw you up as a real bitch --

MARGARET

Anything can and will be used against you --

CORTEZ

The way you refused the cops, the way you decided to come here. One said you were burying yourself here for "artistic expression" -- a radical artist -- Political Prisoner --

CORTEZ holds up two fists.

CORTEZ

-- Zero Zero.

MARGARET

Which is just a double nothing, a big double [nothing] --

CORTEZ

Did they get the bitch-part right?

MARGARET

What does all your detail-reading tell you?

CORTEZ

I have not seen it in you yet --

MARGARET

Maybe because I'm malnourished, eh? -- underjuiced -- a quiet volcano --

CORTEZ

No, it is not that --

MARGARET

Then what?

CORTEZ

I think closer to the lion than the antelope.

MARGARET

You think I'm ready to kill something? Really?

CORTEZ shrugs in a way that says, "Well, aren't you?" MARGARET doesn't answer. CORTEZ indicates her solitaire game.

CORTEZ

Am I missing anything?

MARGARET reviews the cards.

MARGARET

The six.

CORTEZ

Right. I miss so much sometimes.

MARGARET

Yeah, sure.

CORTEZ

Would you like to make a living out of taking your pictures?

MARGARET

I'd like to do that. Look, I am not ready to kill somebody --

CORTEZ

Not a cheap dream to pursue --

MARGARET

I am not --

CORTEZ

I heard you, consider yourself heard -- you are the undernourished volcano --

A moment.

MARGARET

Red queen to black king.

CORTEZ

Ah --

MARGARET

No, it's not cheap -- the photography. Matthew made sure I had the money to pay.

CORTEZ

You were taking a class --

MARGARET

Called "The Human Form."

CORTEZ

I have one of those.

MARGARET

The class --

CORTEZ

You can laugh at my joke!

MARGARET

That was a joke?

CORTEZ

The words, man, not my human form!

MARGARET

I thought it was a proposition.

CORTEZ

To you?

MARGARET

I'm not worthy?

CORTEZ

No taste for leather belts with tools in them.

MARGARET

There're worse things to have around your waist.

CORTEZ

The ball peen hammer is all yours to play with.

MARGARET

But the pleasures of the wrench --

MARGARET makes a "wrench" motion and sound.

CORTEZ

As I said, all yours.

CORTEZ makes the "wrench" motion and sound back to MARGARET.

CORTEZ

The class.

MARGARET

The class. The class.

CORTEZ

You're staring into space.

MARGARET

The class. Thought it was the best thing that ever happened to me.

CORTEZ

You should see your face.

MARGARET

You should see my face from this side! No, it was great -- made me, you know, stretch. Eeelllastic. Re-think things.

CORTEZ

The wrench.

MARGARET

The wrench. We got this assignment: photograph an emotional state of being using a person.

CORTEZ

The word was "using."

MARGARET

A person, yeah, using a person -- as an example, you know, a representation, an -- an image of. See, I didn't start off as a photographer.

CORTEZ

Woman in the building trades.

MARGARET

Just doing useful stuff, you know -- I mean, I'm building, right, slapping things up. But that's how the pictures even got started, of Matthew's and my work, so we'd have, you know, a record, a portfolio. Then one day --

MARGARET gets up and moves.

MARGARET

I gotta move around.

CORTEZ

Approved --

MARGARET makes a little bow.

MARGARET

So, yeah, one day -- the sunlight, laying across an old hammer and screwdriver against each other on a bench, you know, just bunged up, bitten -- they, I don't know, they struck me -- just, you know, solid -- heft. I had the camera around my neck, so, snap, snap -- really, just useless pictures -- the building trades and everything --

CORTEZ

But they gave you pleasure.

MARGARET

Yeah.

CORTEZ

Doing that gave you pleasure.

MARGARET

Yeah -- that, and that something so -- regular -- became -- unregular -- with just some light laid across it -- average sunlight -- that -- touched me. So snap, snap -- I took the feeling with me, and I liked that I could take it, you know, like smuggle it out, all mine. "Taking" --

CORTEZ

A new feeling for you?

MARGARET

Which one?

CORTEZ

The big one, of course: power.

MARGARET

Maybe -- it's --

CORTEZ

It is okay if it is.

MARGARET

When the knuckleheads sprayed "Property of the Cunt" right across my locker -- fucking stencil letters -- they had to plan that -- that's power, front and center, just like their dicks --

CORTEZ

But different.

MARGARET

But this was different --

CORTEZ

From the side --

MARGARET

And underneath.

CORTEZ

For yourself --

MARGARET

And clean -- clean -- mine --

CORTEZ

So click.

MARGARET

And in the darkroom -- Cortez, when I saw the negatives on that first roll of film I developed myself, and then the first print, like, blooms in the developer tray -- at first there's nothing, and then it's there --

MARGARET makes gestures of blooming and appearing magically.

MARGARET

Something I took --

CORTEZ

Smuggled out.

MARGARET

Whew! I was hooked. Closest thing to joy I'd felt since -- since --

CORTEZ

Since whatever.

MARGARET

Since whatever! Nothing compared to it. All by itself.

CORTEZ

All yours.

MARGARET

Yeah. So I started taking pictures of people on the site -- just like with that hammer and screwdriver -- the light -- comes across -- the regular turning into -- but in them, something in them that they never saw they had. But I could see it. The light could see it. Me and the light -- we partnered.

CORTEZ

First real laugh that has come out of you.

MARGARET

I had my first "gallery show" in a diner!

CORTEZ

"Hold the arroz."

MARGARET

"Adam and Eve on a raft!" Food was good, come to think of it. But when people saw themselves up there, you know, in a frame -- special -- and then they saw other people seeing them and liking what they saw -- even buying some of the pictures -- that changed something in them.

CORTEZ

Because you had changed.

MARGARET

The change in them changed me.

CORTEZ

Changes all around.

MARGARET

I could do -- I could make -- not just Alex's Mom
or Matthew's Maggie --

CORTEZ

You were becoming unregular yourself.

MARGARET

It's always been best when I just -- I don't know
-- when all of me is just like a lens, letting
the light through. Just like that first time,
with the tools. No thoughts, just eye.

CORTEZ

Who can forget their first time, eh?

MARGARET just shrugs, goes silent. CORTEZ keeps playing.

CORTEZ

Okay, you got the easy stuff out --

MARGARET

I know --

CORTEZ

-- but you still need to finish this dollar --

MARGARET

It's hard -- it's hard to talk with ashes in your
mouth.

CORTEZ plays.

CORTEZ

But it is not impossible.

MARGARET

It's like I'm spraying across my own locker.

CORTEZ plays.

MARGARET

So.

CORTEZ

So.

MARGARET

So.

A deep breath.

MARGARET

Slowly -- real slow, but steady -- seeing things this way sucks you in -- sucked me in -- let's keep it straight. I got -- greedy. Studio equipment, more classes -- I got ambitious.

CORTEZ

We come to The Human Form.

MARGARET

And that drained -- it was so expensive --

CORTEZ

Matthew was okay with that?

MARGARET

I can't say that he was -- but him being him, he --

CORTEZ

And then the pictures.

MARGARET goes to say something, but then doesn't.

CORTEZ

"Using" a person -- "taking" a person -- those were your chosen words.

MARGARET

I -- looked at Alex, and I thought, Innocence.

CORTEZ

And so you wanted to take that --

MARGARET

I wanted to capture --

CORTEZ

No, I think you said "take" and "use."

MARGARET

Capture -- what it felt like when I gave him a bath and smelled his skin, read his books to him, when he says "I love you."

MARGARET makes the ASL for "I love you." CORTEZ signs "Thank you."
MARGARET makes the sign for "Wow!"

CORTEZ

I have deaf people in my family. Now you have another thing about me. And you have a little mute boy.

MARGARET

That in your articles?

CORTEZ

Margaret -- everything except your tit size was in the articles.

MARGARET

Glad they left me one thing.

CORTEZ

Only because they had no use for it.

MARGARET

This wasn't in the papers, so you wouldn't know this -- my "state of being" with Alex -- Alex, Alex in innocent italics. So I talked it over with Alex --

CORTEZ

With a four-year-old --

MARGARET

I asked him if he'd like to get his picture taken, which he loves anyway. And I had this idea -- this flash --

CORTEZ

The genius of the "no clothes on" -- Margaret --

MARGARET

There wasn't anything that some -- master hadn't stuck up on a wall in some museum -- in one I even have wings on him, like a cherub -- from a set-up by this guy Caravaggio, of a naked Cupid -- a master -- so why would anyone think --

CORTEZ

You say you saw Innocence --

MARGARET

That's what I saw --

CORTEZ

But you say that this ambition of yours is like a lion --

MARGARET

He wasn't naked in all the pictures!

CORTEZ

Most likely you should not have "done" Alex that way at all.

MARGARET

I didn't "do" Alex --

CORTEZ

A four-year old naked child up on the wall does not happen by accident. He was put there by his mother for all the world to gawk at. Yes? That is "doing" Alex. They gave you the trouble you were asking for.

MARGARET

He liked it --

CORTEZ

You knew this how.

MARGARET

I'd done it before -- I mean, taken pictures of him before, naked --

CORTEZ

In the bathtub, right --

MARGARET

And in his bed --

CORTEZ

Right there -- click, click --

MARGARET

He got a kick out of it --

CORTEZ

Not important -- what kind of mother would get a kick out of doing that? Eh?

A long pause.

CORTEZ

You have fallen silent.

MARGARET

I'm -- not -- sure -- what --

CORTEZ

In here, anything is possible.

MARGARET

Forget it -- done, we're done.

CORTEZ puts her cards down.

CORTEZ

Are you that kind of mother? Black queen to red king -- you are a figure of importance and I want to know how a figure of importance thinks. What really happened? Answer me, Margaret. What happened that day?

MARGARET

Nothing "happened."

CORTEZ

You have Alex thinking this was going to be fun -
- yes? Come on, answer me.

MARGARET

We set up the pic[ture] --

CORTEZ

We?

MARGARET

Matthew and I.

CORTEZ

Bathtub?

MARGARET

In my studio.

CORTEZ

Your studio. Your place.

MARGARET

I took my son -- into the studio --

CORTEZ

Your studio --

MARGARET

Alex and I had a great --

CORTEZ

Into your studio, this child who cannot talk --

MARGARET

This is --

CORTEZ

Wait, Margaret -- the two people he loves the most -- and take his clothes off --

MARGARET

This is foul --

CORTEZ

-- doing this is fine -- he is my child -- spread
him out for all these stranger's eyes -- for my
class, my ambition --

CORTEZ pretends she's doing the photo shoot with ALEX, mock-taking
pictures, interspersed with the "ka-chick" of a photo being taken.

CORTEZ

Another point of view, another viewfinder --
"Lindo, smile for me" --

MARGARET

Twisting --

CORTEZ

"Look adorable, honey pie" --

MARGARET

-- it --

CORTEZ

This is the POV of Alex as a little island in the
sea of your studio.

MARGARET

That's not --

CORTEZ

"Oh, my sweet cheeks."

MARGARET

That is not --

CORTEZ

Invade the little island with love. "My little
angel" --

MARGARET

You shit!

CORTEZ

Do this. Raise that. Extract the riches. Lift.
Spread. Steal it, use it, take it all away.

MARGARET tries to knock the "camera" from CORTEZ's hands.

CORTEZ

Whoa! What sort of mother did the photo lab see?

MARGARET knocks the "camera" out of CORTEZ's hands.

CORTEZ

Can't stop it that way.

MARGARET

Keep your filth away from him!

MARGARET bellies right up to CORTEZ during the next lines. CORTEZ is passive, letting MARGARET do this -- it is clearly CORTEZ's choice to do this.

MARGARET

How could you know, how could you kn[ow] --

CORTEZ

Would you kill me?

MARGARET

-- how could you know anything --

CORTEZ

Would you kill me --

MARGARET

-- about what Alex and I had that day --

CORTEZ

Kill me --

MARGARET

How could you? If you were a mother, you'd know --

CORTEZ

Would you kill me right now --

MARGARET

-- bottom feeder --

CORTEZ

-- right now if you could?

MARGARET

You're just like them, just like them all --

CORTEZ

Would you kill me to protect Alex?

MARGARET

I did not let them take away anything anything and not you not you either not any of the blood-suckers and bottom feeders and dickheads with spray paint --

CORTEZ

That is a long line of people to kill --

GUARD comes around, and MARGARET backs away.

GUARD

I am assuming this is a high-level intellectual discussion that's echoing down the hallway here.

CORTEZ

Margaret was doing some explaining for me.

GUARD

Inside voices, you know -- even my daughters understand that much. You all right?

MARGARET gestures that she's fine. GUARD exchanges a look with CORTEZ, lingers for a moment, then leaves.

CORTEZ

So you would do it.

MARGARET

What?

CORTEZ

Kill me -- kill me, kill me right now, if you could.

MARGARET

Kill you?

CORTEZ

To protect Alex.

MARGARET

Kill you?

CORTEZ

You are on fire.

MARGARET

You -- stay -- aw[ay] --

CORTEZ

You would do it --

MARGARET

Back off --

CORTEZ

The power you have --

MARGARET

Just back off.

CORTEZ

Something so loved it drags the beast up to the light -- snap snap --

CORTEZ makes a "shutter" with the thumbs and index fingers of each hand -- a square -- and puts it up against her own right eye.

CORTEZ

If you do not make really, really, really clear lines --

CORTEZ squeezes the fingers shut, then open, as if they were a shutter.

CORTEZ

-- you end up hurting the people you are supposed to protect -- all of us are islands, Margaret, all of us need the lines -- you have that power -
-

MARGARET

Always -- always -- the right lines with Alex --

CORTEZ

Always.

MARGARET

Always. Clean. Clear. Straight. Straight. Straight. Lines.

CORTEZ picks up the cards and goes back to playing.

CORTEZ

Well, Margaret, he got lucky then with you. Because he was being chased by someone with artistic ambition -- the center of the universe. Lines do not matter much to people like that -- just doing a transcription of your testimony. He got a lucky cut of the cards.

MARGARET watches CORTEZ play the cards.

MARGARET

A cut of the cards --

MARGARET makes the "shutter" with her own fingers and looks at CORTEZ.

MARGARET

Look at me.

CORTEZ continues to play cards.

MARGARET

Look at me.

CORTEZ looks up. MARGARET snaps the "shutter."

CORTEZ

You see --

MARGARET

I just took a "mate" I know nothing about.
Here's what happens next.

MARGARET makes believe she's taking a print out of a tray and holding it up, letting it dry.

MARGARET

Is this all I got? Is this you?

CORTEZ leans in.

CORTEZ

Your lighting is dim.

MARGARET looks at the "print."

MARGARET

I'll tell you what I see.

MARGARET mimes hanging the "print" up to dry and stands in front of it inspecting it.

CORTEZ

Careful, shape-thief -- do not steal my [soul] --

MARGARET

I see -- right in here -- an island -- a face
floating like an island --

CORTEZ

Isla is not hard -- laced in my delicious accent.
Anything else?

MARGARET

Words. "Shape-thief," "turn of the moon" --
poet, maybe. Poetry to me, at least. Sounds
good enough.

CORTEZ

Still looks dim.

MARGARET

So how about we do a little touch-up -- bring out
the shadows? You know, just a notch.

MARGARET holds her thumb and index finger apart to indicate "notch."
CORTEZ looks at MARGARET as if deciding something, then gathers the
cards together and neatens the pile.

CORTEZ

I can give you your notch.

CORTEZ takes the hanging "print" and rips it up. To MARGARET's
surprise, CORTEZ begins to dance to a song in her head.

CORTEZ

I was hot! Hot! Imagine the light of 19 years old -- the age of majority -- this beautiful face in a very dangerous time. "Viva Puerto Rico libre!" That is how it was, in my beautiful 19th year in Ponce. "Viva Puerto Rico libre!" Filled with revolutionary ambition! "It is time to wake up, Borinqueños! Remember El Grito de Lares! Pedro Albizu Campos, and our mother, Lolita Lebrón! Free Los Quince. Unchain yourself from the clown called Uncle Sam! Wake up, boricuas, commit the sin of memory!" But then my family, for my own good, they said --

CORTEZ shifts.

CORTEZ

I don't care, Mamá -- let the fucking F.B.I. take me, I am not going to go live in New York with --

CORTEZ stops dancing, claps her hands together as if she had been slapped. Starts dancing again.

CORTEZ

Yes, Papá, I am sorry, I should not have spoken -
- No, Papa, I can't tell you who I know! I won't --

Again stops dancing, again a slap. Dancing again.

CORTEZ

(sarcastically)

But Pablo, my dearest brother, I know about your investments -- in those companies that butcher -- enough: I don't want to waste --

Stop, slap.

CORTEZ

"You do not know what my own good is." But -- la guagua aérea --

CORTEZ makes an airplane motion and sound.

CORTEZ

-- and I am deposited in San Manhattan Juan, ahora Nuyorican, Ame-Rícan. On the island of the enemy in the dead country. Mi familia perdida. And I turn into the lost soul they thought I was already. Estoy aún en el paisaje lejos de mi visión.¹

1 Julia de Burgos, Song of the Simple Truth, "#2: Intimate," (pp. 6-7)

CORTEZ catches her breath lowers her voice.

CORTEZ

Me busco.

MARGARET

Looking for what? What are you looking for?

CORTEZ

Estoy aún en el paisaje lejos de mi visión.

MARGARET

What vision, Cortez? You know me, I'm all about vision.

CORTEZ does not answer.

MARGARET

What vision are you looking for?

CORTEZ

And that is how I came to reside in the dead country -- my own dead country.

MARGARET

What's your vision?

CORTEZ

Since then, so much blood has just -- evaporated.

MARGARET

What do you mean? I don't understand.

CORTEZ

You would not. Could not.

MARGARET

You don't know that. I've earned all my certifications, don't forget.

CORTEZ

Enough.

MARGARET

Not yet.

They look at each other. CORTEZ gathers the cards.

GUARD re-enters on her rounds.

GUARD

Everything all right?

MARGARET

Yes, ma'am -- right as rain.

GUARD
Whatever that phrase means.

MARGARET
It could be the coming of water to feed the land
-- see, she's rubbing off me.

GUARD
Cortez?

CORTEZ
We were actually talking about nature specials on
public television.

GUARD
Uh-huh.

MARGARET holds up the book.

MARGARET
And I'm starting to do a little light reading.

CORTEZ
Like you said, we have a very high intellectual
level in here.

GUARD
It smells like that and it smells like something
else. But right as rain?

CORTEZ
Like the photographer said -- a summer shower.

GUARD goes to leave.

CORTEZ
You know --

GUARD turns back.

CORTEZ
Maybe you should write a book about us. That is
the only way some of us are ever going to get out
of here.

CORTEZ gathers up the cards, builds a house of cards.

GUARD looks at the two of them, turns, leaves.

* * * * *

Scene 8

GUARD at her "locker" -- it's the end of her shift. She goes through
the notecard routine. Then she does something different.

GUARD pulls out a small voice-recorder and looks at it. She glances around to see that she's alone, then she begins recording something.

GUARD

I am going to write a book. This is for my daughters.

GUARD stops, pauses the recorder. She stares for a moment, composing her thoughts, then starts again.

GUARD

Over the Visitation Room should be this sign:
"Here you will find all the words that have not been said that should have been said or need to be said or were said all wrong or said right but too late -- it will be no different for you."

GUARD stops, turns off the recorder and puts it away.

GUARD

That's a pretty good start.

GUARD snaps her fingers.

GUARD

My daughters, may you continue to be well tonight. I will be home soon.

* * * * *

Scene 9

GUARD stares through the "bars" at MARGARET. MARGARET stands stock still, wearing her jacket, staring out through the bars of the cell but not at GUARD.

CORTEZ is on her bed, book in hand.

GUARD

5 - 1 - 7 - 6 - closed.

SOUND: Metal door slams shut.

GUARD

Keep an eye.

CORTEZ

Aye.

GUARD

You know how easy this isn't.

CORTEZ

Aye aye.

GUARD leaves. MARGARET continues to stare.

CORTEZ

At home, Margaret -- everything all right at home?

MARGARET does not answer but simply stares. Then she moves to the other side of the cell, stares. She takes off her jacket and lays it neatly over her arm.

MARGARET

The light in here -- the light never changes in here. Out there to in here -- over there to over there -- it's all the same wash. No harbor. Contrast. Hell for a photographer.

MARGARET turns to CORTEZ.

MARGARET

Could they make that visiting room any more heartbreaking?

CORTEZ

That is what it is supposed to do.

MARGARET

Matthew is depressed and angry. Alex is drawing red faces with black tears. No one sleeps well. Guard said it was as good as could be expected.

MARGARET puts her jacket in her locker. She picks up one of the chairs and holds it at arm length by the legs until her arms shake and she can't hold it anymore, then lets it drop.

MARGARET

Fuck.

MARGARET puts the chair down.

MARGARET

I don't know why they call it the visitation room. Not like you'll ever have any visitations in there. No fucking angel in its right mind would visit there. No fucking annunciations would make it through the metal detector.

CORTEZ

Does this mean that you are going to not eat again?

MARGARET looks at CORTEZ and decides to let the humor in.

MARGARET

It's all good even when it isn't and the world
outside never disappears. And I'll eat. And I
won't try to sleep it all away.

CORTEZ

Who is saying the angel did not arrive?

MARGARET lies back on her bed, hands behind her head.

MARGARET

Thank you for not beating me up about it. I
already had your voice ringing in my head.

MARGARET closes her eyes. CORTEZ reads. Lights fade.

* * * * *

Scene 10: The Third Degree

MARGARET on her bed reading, one book in her hand, one on the bed.
GUARD enters with CORTEZ, who is carrying a math text book.

GUARD

5 - 1 - 7 - 6 - open.

SOUND: Metal door pounds open.

GUARD guides CORTEZ into the cell.

GUARD

Watch yourself.

CORTEZ makes a dismissive gesture.

GUARD

I mean it. 5 - 1 - 7 - 6 - closed.

SOUND: Metal door slams shut.

GUARD half-leaves. CORTEZ hesitates, then slams the math book down.
CORTEZ and GUARD lock eyes, then GUARD leaves.

MARGARET reads the spine of the book.

MARGARET

Ah, your algebra.

CORTEZ

Math -- sucks.

MARGARET

Some women find math hard, Cortez --

CORTEZ
The numbers just jump around --

MARGARET
I know I did, on the job --

CORTEZ
Like a -- goddamn knife stuck in my eye --

MARGARET
If you finish this -- then your degree, right?

MARGARET signs the letters "B" and "A."

CORTEZ
Bullshit. Artist.

MARGARET
Bachelor of Arts. Vera Cortez, B.A. More than
I've done.

CORTEZ
Not now. I cannot. Not now.

MARGARET
All right. Sure. Just trying to --

But MARGARET doesn't finish, seeing how agitated CORTEZ is. CORTEZ
flips through the book, exasperated. MARGARET continues to read, half
an eye on CORTEZ. Finally, CORTEZ slams the book shut.

CORTEZ
I just -- cannot -- get it to stick!

MARGARET
Let it rest --

CORTEZ
You do not underst[and] -- I have got to make it
stick.

MARGARET
It'll stick, it'll stay -- if you relax, it'll
come --

CORTEZ begins to pace.

CORTEZ
You --

MARGARET
What?

CORTEZ
Forget it.

MARGARET
You're pacing. Chill.

CORTEZ
Are you any good at this?

MARGARET
(bad DeNiro)
You talkin' to me?

CORTEZ
What?

MARGARET
Are you talkin' to me? Sorry, bad --

CORTEZ
What the fuck was that --

MARGARET
Sorry. Joke, small -- very small --

CORTEZ
Well?

MARGARET
I used to hack my way through math.

CORTEZ
Yes?

MARGARET
Yeah.

CORTEZ
Well?

MARGARET
Well, I don't know, Vera -- you keep me pretty busy here. Have to finish the poems of Julia de Burgos which you gave me to read --

CORTEZ
Fuck you --

MARGARET
You know, me busco and all that --

CORTEZ
Fuck you.

CORTEZ grabs the book and slams it on the table.

MARGARET
Wait --

CORTEZ
Fuck everyone like you.

MARGARET
-- I was just kidding --

CORTEZ
Fuck you all.

MARGARET
Just kidding! Bad timing! Course I'll give you
a hand. Let me get the book.

MARGARET gets the book. CORTEZ grabs her by the throat and backs her
across the cell. MARGARET drops the book, grabs her wrist.

CORTEZ
I do not need irony --

MARGARET
You're hurting me --

CORTEZ
-- from an Anglo kid-fucker bitch --

MARGARET
You're hurting --

CORTEZ
Get away from me! You're useless!

CORTEZ lets her go, steps back. They glare at each other.

MARGARET
But in not very many days I get to leave.

CORTEZ goes for her throat again. MARGARET knocks away the hand and
pushes CORTEZ, hard. It catches CORTEZ unaware.

MARGARET
Enough!

CORTEZ
You are a fucking pervert.

MARGARET
And you're an idiot.

The GUARD walks in and surveys the scene.

GUARD
What's the state of the state here?

CORTEZ
Could not be better.

GUARD
And nothing but the truth?

CORTEZ
So help me.

MARGARET
Yes.

GUARD
Keep it that way.

MARGARET
We are maintaining. Right?

CORTEZ pivots away from MARGARET. GUARD leaves.

CORTEZ
You do not know, so back off.

MARGARET pushes CORTEZ, not hard, just enough to make CORTEZ take notice.

MARGARET
I'm in for a dollar.

CORTEZ
In for a doll[ar] --

CORTEZ laughs.

CORTEZ
Ditz rolls the dice --

MARGARET
You in?

MARGARET stands there defiant. CORTEZ looks around to see if the GUARD will come back, then retreats with a dismissive gesture.

CORTEZ
You are not worth it.

MARGARET picks up the book.

MARGARET
So -- why?

CORTEZ
Go read.

MARGARET
I asked you why!

CORTEZ
Your neck?

MARGARET
So why?

CORTEZ
Your neck?

MARGARET
Fine. So why?

CORTEZ
The numbers, I told you -- they jump --

MARGARET
You crack my throat because --

CORTEZ
I cannot nail them down.

MARGARET
So nail me instead?

CORTEZ
You do not know --

MARGARET
How do you know what I know?

CORTEZ
It makes me crazy.

MARGARET
It makes you mean.

CORTEZ
It makes me forget.

MARGARET
It makes you a human being.

CORTEZ
I do not need -- not this time of year -- I do
not need -- not from you, not from anyone -- I do
not need people -- anything -- telling me "no" --

MARGARET
What does spring have to do about it --

CORTEZ
Look, I am sor[ry] --

MARGARET
Why this time --

CORTEZ
I am s[orry] --

MARGARET
Why --

CORTEZ
That -- all that -- from way back --

MARGARET
Back --

CORTEZ
From the dead country.

MARGARET
I want to help you --

CORTEZ
Put the book down.

MARGARET
No -- I'll hold it.

CORTEZ
Stop wanting to help. Give me the book -- what
are you doing?

MARGARET
Nothing.

CORTEZ
What?

MARGARET
Way back.

CORTEZ
Give me the book.

MARGARET
Dead country.

CORTEZ
Not where I want to go.

MARGARET
You really want to show some sorry?

CORTEZ
I never said the word --

MARGARET
Tell me --

CORTEZ

I never say the word --

MARGARET

Tell me what keeps you waking me up at night.
You owe me that.

CORTEZ circles around her. MARGARET does not move.

CORTEZ

Owe you? Owe you?

CORTEZ sits on MARGARET's bed.

CORTEZ

All right. This bed -- this is mine. This is
mine.

MARGARET goes to sit on CORTEZ's bed. CORTEZ pushes MARGARET away.

CORTEZ

No. Mine, too. My space. All mine, all the
time. You get none.

MARGARET

Don't get stupid --

CORTEZ

Do not feel privileged.

MARGARET

Privi[leged] --

CORTEZ goes to MARGARET's footlocker and starts piling things on the
bed.

MARGARET

Hey --

CORTEZ

Eminent domain.

As much as she wants to, MARGARET does not touch CORTEZ. She puts the
book on the table.

MARGARET

Hey --

CORTEZ

Subtraction. Division. You own nothing that
ain't mine -- call me Puerto Rico. Oooh, a
picture of Alex --

MARGARET

Put that --

CORTEZ

Nope.

CORTEZ puts the picture in her pocket.

CORTEZ

Mine. All mine. Now what are you going to do, little island?

MARGARET

This is not about --

CORTEZ

Tú no sabes what this is about.

MARGARET

Give it back --

CORTEZ

Fuck you, "Property of the Cunt" -- owe you? You are the dead country I do not want to go back to.

MARGARET

This dead country is not me, it's you -- give me back --

MARGARET lunges to get her picture back, but CORTEZ easily choke-holds her.

MARGARET

Let me go! You fucking witch!

MARGARET tries to wrestle free, and as she does so she swings her elbows around, one of which catches CORTEZ hard in the temple/cheek/bridge of the nose. CORTEZ falls to her knees.

In half a heartbeat MARGARET grabs the math book and looms over her. She raises the book to hit CORTEZ deliberately, really means to do it, not just impulse -- then doesn't.

MARGARET

Cortez? Cortez? Cortez?

CORTEZ

You taking roll call?

MARGARET

Cortez -- never done that to anyone.

CORTEZ

Two cops, right?

MARGARET

Well, them -- yeah, but never on the [job] --

CORTEZ
Should have --

MARGARET
Sorry.

CORTEZ
-- remembered that.

MARGARET
Here --

CORTEZ
Hands to yourself. Man, that hurts!

CORTEZ gestures MARGARET to back off.

CORTEZ
I will survive.

CORTEZ mockingly repeats the line a lá Gloria Gaynor. Then they are at a loss for the moment.

CORTEZ
Irony -- fuck, that hurts! --

MARGARET
Irony?

CORTEZ
That irony act of yours -- "oh, I'm so busy" --

MARGARET
Meant it to be, you know, friendly.

CORTEZ
You were feeding on Vera Cortez looking weak --

MARGARET
Oh, suck my --

CORTEZ
You took respect from me --

MARGARET
Like I said, suck me. I tried to make you laugh
-- remember how to laugh, independentista? Ha ha
ha ha ha? Can't someone just want to make you
laugh, dickhead?

CORTEZ, looking at MARGARET as she overemphasizes the syllables of the word, suddenly lets out a genuine laugh -- and the tension breaks.

MARGARET goes to put her stuff back in the footlocker.

CORTEZ

Why didn't you?

MARGARET

What?

CORTEZ

You know -- the -- book -- up --

MARGARET

Maybe because you're not a cop. Or a lab tech.
I don't think I smack things down that I respect.

CORTEZ watches MARGARET put her things away.

MARGARET

I'm not going to push, all right -- spring, why
you come back from one math class and you're
okay, and then this one and you're not -- me
busco -- "I seek myself" -- Julia [pronounced
like "Julia Roberts"] --

CORTEZ corrects her.

CORTEZ

Julia.

MARGARET

Julia de Burgos -- see, I read everything you
give me --

CORTEZ

The word is bruja.

MARGARET

For what?

CORTEZ

Witch. You said "witch."

MARGARET

I did say "witch." I guess I don't smackdown
witches, either.

MARGARET motions to CORTEZ. CORTEZ hands the picture of Alex back to
MARGARET.

CORTEZ

Yerba bruja is also a plant in Puerto Rico.

MARGARET

Yeah?

CORTEZ

Each leaf has its own seeds, so you can take a cutting and plant it anywhere and it will grow.

MARGARET

And that's supposed to be you.

CORTEZ

It is a tough plant.

MARGARET

Yeah, well, maybe, but you have obviously never carried pipe with fat-assed thugs who hate you just because you lack a prick and who would just as soon chuck you off the scaffolding as drink their coffee -- while they're drinking their coffee. Yerba bruja never had a chance.

CORTEZ

Never thought getting algebra-tutored would be so hard on the body.

MARGARET

A bruise is like a negative.

CORTEZ lays down on her bed.

MARGARET

So do this, then, bruja: $x^2 + 5x + 6$. Factor it.

CORTEZ figures it in her head, raises her arms and, using sign language, says "x plus 2 times x plus 3."

MARGARET

Bueno, bruja. There is hope for you yet.

MARGARET sits at the table and opens the math book.

MARGARET

Now, where do you want us to start?

CORTEZ sits at the table, pivots the book to her, turns to a specific page, and pivots it back to MARGARET.

CORTEZ

This is what gave me the witch.

MARGARET

Ah.

MARGARET reads as lights go to black.

MARGARET exits.

* * * * *

Scene 11

CORTEZ pops a tape into her small boombox; out comes tinny Puerto Rican dance music.

SOUND: Good Puerto Rican dance music, but tinny.

CORTEZ begins to dance.

The GUARD escorts MARGARET back. They watch CORTEZ dance. She sees them, but she keeps on dancing.

GUARD

Her first days -- she beat misery into that floor.

MARGARET

For what?

CORTEZ breaks into the conversation.

CORTEZ

You want to know about me, read the transcripts yourself. Do not bother her.

CORTEZ shifts her focus to GUARD.

CORTEZ

If you keep --

CORTEZ pops a dance move.

CORTEZ

If you keep -- come on -- if you keep your feet moving --

GUARD

If you keep your feet moving --

GUARD pops a dance move.

GUARD

-- they can never put chains on 'em.

CORTEZ

Yes!

GUARD

5 - 1 - 7 - 6 - open.

SOUND: Metal door pounds open.

MARGARET steps into the cell.

GUARD

5 - 1 - 7 - 6 - closed.

SOUND: Metal door slams shut.

GUARD and CORTEZ share a hand gesture in the air. GUARD leaves.
CORTEZ stops the music.

CORTEZ

This time?

MARGARET takes a paper from her pants pocket.

MARGARET

Alex sent me this.

At first CORTEZ does not take it or look at it. MARGARET encourages her. CORTEZ takes it.

MARGARET

Elephants in the Land of Smiles --

CORTEZ tries to hand it back, but MARGARET is busy taking off her jacket and putting it away.

CORTEZ

Nice -- here --

MARGARET

Matthew came up with the title.

MARGARET still doesn't take the paper.

MARGARET

Good, huh?

CORTEZ pushes the paper towards MARGARET.

CORTEZ

I said "nice."

MARGARET takes the paper and puts it away as CORTEZ hits "Play" on the boombox and starts dancing again. She makes her way to MARGARET and begins showing her the steps; MARGARET does her best to follow, eventually sort of getting it. For a few moments they dance together, awkwardly but with determination and even amusement, though there is an edge to CORTEZ's movements.

MARGARET then indicates for CORTEZ to wait a second, and MARGARET goes to her footlocker and gets a tape. She swaps out CORTEZ's tape for hers: 1930s/1940s swing music, Glenn Miller-ish.

SOUND: Good Lindy music but tinny.

CORTEZ

You came to jail with that?

MARGARET

Matthew and I like to Lindy.

MARGARET starts dancing a few steps of the Lindy. CORTEZ looks at her, puzzled. MARGARET encourages CORTEZ to do the steps. CORTEZ does, and then MARGARET partners her as well until they do the Lindy together. MARGARET, on a whim, spins CORTEZ out and back.

Then CORTEZ stops the tape. CORTEZ begins to dance a combination of salsa and Lindy, combining rhythms. MARGARET picks up on it, and for a moment they dance a hybrid dance, in silence until lights fade to black.

CORTEZ and MARGARET get into their beds.

* * * * *

Scene 12

GUARD at her locker. She checks her face in the mirror.

GUARD

I am past "past my prime" and I still have a zit.
Jesus in heaven. Where is the justice in that?

GUARD puts on her glasses. She holds the voice recorder in one hand and the notecard in the other, then turns on the recorder and says what is on the card.

GUARD

Prayer of the Prison Guard. Dear Lord. There are nine separate cell blocks here, surrounded by dark woods, hyphenated by razor wire. Here we house the fallen, the sullen, the melancholic, the miserable, the angry, the violent, the victimized, blasphemers, seducers, flatterers, grifters, hypocrites, traitors, murderers -- and we carry them chained across the river -- they come without their coins -- they come with nothing -- their sins on their anguished backs -- most stay lost and crush their hearts -- but some find ways. It's the damndest thing to see a lifer steal hope from the garbage, to see the criminal steal peace from the punishment. But let's not forget -- we all do this time together because there but for the grace of God or the luck of the draw, goes my motherfucking ass. Amen.

GUARD turns off the recorder, puts it and the card away, then snaps her fingers.

GUARD

Daughters, I am trying to keep you safe.

GUARD straightens her uniform, puts away her glasses, one last look in the mirror.

GUARD

And a zit. Who says God doesn't have a sense of humor?

* * * * *

Scene 13: The Final Border Crossing

Night in the cell. MARGARET sits on the edge of her bed. CORTEZ murmurs in her sleep.

CORTEZ

Tamara -- Tamara -- Tamara -- Tamara --

CORTEZ jerks awake.

MARGARET

Beat you.

CORTEZ pulls herself upright.

MARGARET

Hey --

CORTEZ

Fine --

MARGARET

Need aspirin?

CORTEZ

I am fine, I said --

MARGARET

Who's Tamara?

CORTEZ

What do you care?

MARGARET

You were saying it just now. Over and over like you've done every night ever since I got here --

CORTEZ

As I said --

MARGARET

On fire, in your sleep -- the name, over and over again -- Tamara --

CORTEZ

And I ask you again: What do you care?

MARGARET

Because it's Cortez who's saying it.

CORTEZ

You are freed tomorrow -- you do not have to, nothing making you, so go back to sleep.

MARGARET

House rules have changed.

CORTEZ

Because Cortez said it?

MARGARET

Because Cortez has been saying it.

CORTEZ

And you think your thirty days has made you ready?

MARGARET

I am ready.

CORTEZ

Yes?

MARGARET

Yeah. Yes.

CORTEZ

You are sure?

MARGARET

I am ready.

CORTEZ

Then go ahead. Ask.

MARGARET

Vera Cortez, why are you here?

CORTEZ

I am here, Margaret Pasqualini -- you find me here -- because I helped kill my daughter. I helped kill my daughter. You, my Americanita, have been dancing with a murderer.

MARGARET's body has just taken a blow.

CORTEZ

You called for it -- time for our border-crossing. Spring is the cruelest time for me because Tamara -- my Tamara, my lost daughter -- would be fourteen this month.

The following must be delivered with little sentimentality and to MARGARET. It should not be staged in a separate light or as if time were suspended or using any other kind of monologue trick.

CORTEZ

I had a family. In the dead country. I had three children -- now there are only two. I cannot say "I have" any more.

He beat them. My daughter and son -- Tamara and Michael -- Tamara three and Michael just a year old. They were not his. I had had them with two other men -- my rebellion in exile on the island of strangers. Of course, my family rejected them completely -- not their blood -- so I went with him because he said he would take me in. My savior -- but really my colonizer.

To show you how the fear had turned my mind to ice -- I even had a child with this man -- Jawanza -- calculating changes, hoping for softness, figuring he would not beat one of his own. But I had just given him fresh meat.

He had this "thing" about Tamara -- it seemed to inspire him for pain. One night, drugged, he started belting her. "Thirty nine lashes" he kept yelling. Locked in the bedroom with Jawanza and Michael, both of them trying to crawl inside my ribs, I -- could not -- move.

Then it stopped. He dragged a chair. Tamara screamed -- screamed once, just once -- then quiet. Waited. Waited. Then opened the door -- and I wanted to tear my eyes out. He had tied Tamara to his chin-up bar -- her arms slung over it so she hung from her armpits -- just like a little Christ rag-doll. I remember my eyes -- straight to her right hand -- I watched a drop of blood bead up and then fall. Then another. Then one more. By the fourth one I had cut her down. El Señor Muerte had passed out on the table, hissing like a dragon.

And what did I do? I took her into the bathroom and washed her off and put her to bed -- such a good mama! The dragon hissed. I waited.

The next day, I went to wake them for day care -- I had a job. No breath. I held this hand just over her mouth, as I did sometimes at night, to feel their breaths. Nothing. I screamed, just once, like Tamara. The dragon came.

"You're gonna help me," it said -- and I obeyed. And here is what we did. We dropped Jawanza and Michael off at day care, like the good parents we were, then we dumped her body in the rough grass by the side of the highway -- his decision, not mine, but mine because I did nothing to stop it. I watched everything from the side view mirror, numb as stone. Then we found a police officer and told her that Tamara had disappeared -- maybe even kidnapped! Two days later, they found her, and he started playing the kidnap for all his worthless self was worth. But I knew they would find the truth. And even if they did not, how could my heart hold any peace? I had held my dead daughter in my arms, helped trash her body. Peace? What island could offer me that asylum?

So while the dragon steamed in his sleep, I called the detective who had given me her card, from the corner phone, one dime to my name. Dialed and hung up, dialed and hung up, and when I finally did connect, I was ready to cut it off in half a breath. She knew, she knew, because at one point, my mouth so thick with shame I could not speak, she said to me, "In for a dime, in for a dollar." I told her everything. I paid. She was kind.

And when the police came, and the social workers took Michael and Jawanza for foster care, and they cauterized the dragon, and I could feel the cuffs embrace my wrists -- it was the first time in a long, long time I felt safe. I was finally back on an island: lines were drawn; the monster drowned; and I could begin my shame.

I took twenty-five on a plea bargain. He got sixty. Tamara would be fourteen this month.

CORTEZ lifts up her pillow and takes out a piece of colorful cloth.

CORTEZ

This is from her funeral dress. Under my pillow, just like your tee-shirt.

CORTEZ hands it to MARGARET.

CORTEZ

That's my dollar. So. Nothing to say? You always have something to say.

MARGARET

Um -- I can't -- I think we -- should -- go back to sleep --

CORTEZ

You said you were ready. You said you were ready.

MARGARET's voice comes out in a hiss.

MARGARET

You helped kill your child!

CORTEZ

Yes.

MARGARET

Not just "helped" -- you killed your own child.

CORTEZ

It comes to that.

MARGARET

All that -- swill about protecting Alex -- that spew about oppression, about "lines" and "keeping people safe" -- she was never safe with you --

CORTEZ

She's gone, which makes her the only safe one around here.

MARGARET

No.

CORTEZ

Did not think it was going to end this way, did you?

MARGARET

No no no no --

CORTEZ

You thought, whatever I had done, we would be in solidarity, de mujer a mujer, con un corazón grande y calido. But now you have something much more complicated than that, much more -- rich -- than that.

MARGARET

I am not under[standing] --

CORTEZ

That cloth -- keep it close, it soothes you.
Listen.

MARGARET

I don't understand.

CORTEZ

Here is what comes before her name escapes from me each night. Just when I may have slipped over the border into peace, or at least emptiness, I am called -- sounds like lost voices draw me to this bright light -- which I know is Tamara but with no body, just this knife-white light. I reach, but it slides -- here, then there -- but it never disappears. And then, always, there is a moment -- when it allows me to arrive.

LIGHT: A bright light bathes MARGARET.

CORTEZ

I shape my hand --

CORTEZ puts her hand up to MARGARET's face but does not touch it.

CORTEZ

-- I circle it, un abrazo de mi niña perdida --

CORTEZ circles her arms around MARGARET but does not touch her.

CORTEZ

-- and for one breath -- one breath -- I feel pardoned. She tells me I can now get rid of hope and shame: I do not need hope and shame. She offers me a truce. Una tregua.

LIGHT: The bright light goes out.

CORTEZ

And just when I think, finally!, at last!, peace!, she leaves -- and the truce -- dissolves. I wake up on the rough edge of the road -- here -- still breathing, still caring, still shamed. And then the first bell rings. And then the day breaks open.

MARGARET

And you expect me --

CORTEZ

Do not get ahead of yourself --

MARGARET

I am not going to be --

CORTEZ

How do you know what you are going to be or not going to be?

MARGARET

I know I won't --

CORTEZ

You are in a strange country now, Margaret -- house rules have changed again -- who knows?

MARGARET

(holding up cloth)

You killed your daughter --

CORTEZ

We need to move on.

MARGARET

It's like you don't have any --

CORTEZ

What I do have, Margaret, is a vision -- of life -- all my political about the borders and lines and power -- that has been my life. But it is not just Puerto Rico, "libre, libre," Lebrón, Lebrón, Lebrón -- that is just one step, just one step toward reaching the border that heals us.

MARGARET

But you killed your daughter.

CORTEZ

All I need -- to cross that last border -- into the peace the truce can bring -- is Tamara. But she will not guide me, be my coyote. And why?

MARGARET

Because you killed her!

CORTEZ

Every night she tells me why she will not guide me.

MARGARET

She denies you peace -- good for her --

CORTEZ

You are doing such good work, Margaret --

MARGARET

What are you talking [about] --

CORTEZ

That cloth under my ear, the one you grip so hard, so righteously, whispers, "Mami, how you can come in to this new day, this new way, if you cannot trust some one person enough to tell them the whole story?"

MARGARET

Come on.

CORTEZ

That is what it says.

MARGARET

You've never told anyone? I don't --

CORTEZ

Never the truth whole.

MARGARET

I don't believe that.

CORTEZ

Bits, junk, lies -- never "and nothing but the" because those I have shaken awake in that bed would either try to one-up me in pain or shut me out. And I have come too far over this ocean to let anyone or anything deny me.

MARGARET

So why me --

CORTEZ goes right up to MARGARET's face and peers into it.

CORTEZ

Do not bend -- stay with me. You have gone this far. Keep looking. Tell me what I have seen in you that lets me say all this. This is your final test.

MARGARET

Final test?

CORTEZ

Tell me.

MARGARET

Test?

CORTEZ

Tell me. Come on.

MARGARET

You saw --

CORTEZ

Go on. Go.

MARGARET

You saw I would take Tamara's side.

CORTEZ

Defend the oppressed.

MARGARET

I would give you no shadows to hide in.

CORTEZ

Like Tamara's light in my dreamwalk.

MARGARET

And you saw --

CORTEZ

Go on --

MARGARET

You saw I would not feel sorry for you.

CORTEZ

You would bring me an eye bitter and acid. To see myself whole.

CORTEZ breaks off the eye contact.

CORTEZ

I knew I could count on you to be my coyote.

MARGARET

Forgive you --

CORTEZ

Forgiveness?

MARGARET

Isn't that what you want?

CORTEZ

Forgiveness is not required. Forgiveness is never required of the sin-eater.

MARGARET

The sin-eater?

CORTEZ

You, my sin-eater. That is you, what you are.

MARGARET

Sin. Eater.

CORTEZ

You do not know?

MARGARET

I know what a sin-eater is -- I'm Italian!

CORTEZ

So -- what you have been tested for.

MARGARET

Tested?

CORTEZ

Yes.

MARGARET

To eat your --

CORTEZ

To take it on --

MARGARET

All those humiliations --

CORTEZ

I had to see if you could take it on, take it in.
From the day I started reading about you, I
wondered -- you are no common mother, you.

MARGARET

What do you feel right now?

CORTEZ

A soft peace.

MARGARET

I don't.

CORTEZ

The sin eater is not supposed to.

MARGARET

I get to carry these -- images -- this sin --

CORTEZ

You are doing what it is in your nature to do --

MARGARET

It's not enough. Not enough for you to tell just
me. She's not some discard. She is your
daughter.

CORTEZ

Was.

MARGARET

Is. Is! You think the slate's clean just because -- to a stranger? If you don't keep faith with your child every day --

CORTEZ

Chulita, we have gone all past judgment, past "paying my debt." I have paid. In full. Now it is on to the next: life with Tamara after Tamara. Or, in another word -- oh, the Italian is not going to like this! -- redemption.

MARGARET

Redemption. For you.

CORTEZ

I have that -- ache.

MARGARET

For you?

CORTEZ

Not the dead Tamara, the gone Tamara, the sin you squeeze so preciously, that cloth you clutch. Keep the cloth! Dance with the dead all you want! The Tamara who redeems me will come when we all change the lines that now turn us into our lowest devils. Listen to me --

MARGARET

I can't --

CORTEZ

Listen to me -- women on every building site, huh? you can understand that -- all colors, all shapes, not attacked! Can you understand that?

MARGARET

Yes!

CORTEZ

That is Tamara.

MARGARET

That's bullshit!

CORTEZ

It is the better world you want.

MARGARET

Not this way --

CORTEZ

Who says you get to pick the way? Children born to parents who want them, like Matthew and Margaret, with shelter, food, dignity. That is Tamara.

MARGARET

It's just more bullshit!

CORTEZ

No more tribes about language or pigment or power or violence. No more Puerto Rico -- blinded by wanting a nation -- what is a nation except another way to keep the outsiders outside? -- no more "property of the cunt," but citizen of a better world! All that in the word "Tamara." I give you the old so I can raise my new daughter.

MARGARET

You leave me with knives in my eyes, this picture of you --

CORTEZ

It will take time --

MARGARET

They can hack out all my organs while I'm still alive if I have to turn as cold and as acid as you to be this new kind of human being --

CORTEZ

It will take time.

MARGARET

All this new world mouth music makes me sick to my stomach. You make me sick to my stomach.

CORTEZ

Tamara --

MARGARET

Stop it --

CORTEZ, with gesture and body, commands the stage, so to speak, and grabs MARGARET's attention. Her next lines are in the nature of a dance performance.

CORTEZ

Link:
the transnation of the airplane, la guagua aérea,
carries me from the montañas of the jíbaro
to the capital of the empire, Nueva York, city of
Harlem bantustans,
Gringolandia perforated by sub-dermal pop-rockéro
frequencies,

where the world's oldest colony is a suburb of
Brooklyn,
and San Manhattan Juan is a jazz riff of
diaspora,
and our unwanted emperors hold their death grips.
Bam!

The plane touches down.

Bam!

We have jumped the pond.

Bam!

Immediate Nuyorican.

Bam!

Instant Ame-Rícan,

Bam!

The new mestizo of the hyphen-nation.

Bam!

Born in the desires that fall between acá and
allá.

In the plane we Puerto Ricans inhabit this
smeared-edged borderland,
a frontera between the emptinesses of
destination,
we are the postmodern, we are Tamara,
the "land of all of us," pan-everything,
the new non-nation, our bodies the location
of this postmodern archipelago, each of us
double-helix'd
by DNA of fax and phone and email and
the universal declaration of the human right to
human rights
and that we will be divided and conquered, fucked
and fucked-over,
extracted, redacted, burned, twisted, packaged,
and forgotten
no more, no more, no more, nunca más.
We float confused, contradictory, ambiguous,
ambivalent,
torqued, tidal, multi-tongued, lunar-mad --
But we are also large, we include multitudes,
and Tamara is a new world between acá and allá --
feel it in your nostrils, look for it under your
feet,
hear the stars beat out ritmos de bomba y plena
in the very pulse of the universe,
all of us universal, all of us at home in the in-
between.
Tamara.

CORTEZ finishes, breathless. MARGARET stares, then grabs the tee-
shirt from her under her pillow and hugs it. They hold.

CORTEZ lies on her bed.

* * * * *

Scene 14

GUARD at her locker. GUARD does the notecard routine.

GUARD

Written over the gate of this House of
Correction: "All ye who enter here -- if what you
did wasn't wrong, something down the road will
be, or was, and all this will be for that." Sin
is democratic. Have to remember to record that
one.

GUARD snaps her fingers. MARGARET grabs her bag and jacket from the
footlocker.

GUARD

Sleep well, my bright children.

* * * * *

Scene 15

MARGARET waits with GUARD.

MARGARET

What's taking them so long?

GUARD

These new security procedures -- I'm not sure
Christ would pass. You got everything?

MARGARET

All my faculties intact.

SOUND: Static in the shoulder mike.

GUARD leans in to hear.

GUARD

Copy. Your entourage just came through the gate.

MARGARET

Cortez says you have daughters --

GUARD

Time is over.

MARGARET

Not till I'm out the gate.

GUARD relents.

GUARD

I have two.

MARGARET

Are they doing okay?

GUARD

They made up the phrase "pride and joy" just for me.

MARGARET

That's good. That's good. Wish I had something I could give you.

GUARD

You'll be in my book. And develop your own pictures in your own home -- keep the clothes on the kid.

GUARD takes the paper bag.

GUARD

I got to check this before we go in.

GUARD inspects the bag and pulls out the strip of Tamara's cloth.

GUARD

I know you didn't come in with this.

MARGARET takes the cloth, fingers it.

MARGARET

It's a gift -- sort of.

GUARD takes it, rolls it in the tee-shirt.

GUARD

Out of sight, out of mind. Conversation is now at an official end. Let's go.

MARGARET

Twenty-five years -- a quarter-century --

GUARD

Are you saying that's how long it felt to you?

MARGARET

I am prone to exaggeration.

GUARD

Maybe parole will be her resurrection. Let's go.

MARGARET

"If you keep your feet moving" --

GUARD gives MARGARET a look, then softens.

MARGARET

That is shit worth officially leaving with.

MARGARET and GUARD exit.

* * * * *

Scene 16

CORTEZ alone, playing solitaire. She gets part of the way through the game, then stops. Stands. Stares. Then she moves to the other side of the cell, stares.

CORTEZ

You are right. The light never changes in here.
Out there to in here -- over there to over there
-- it is all the same wash. No harbor.

CORTEZ sits back down, picks up the cards, but doesn't continue. Stares from one side to the other.

* * * * *

Scene 17

GUARD enters carrying a photographer's portable frame for hanging a backdrop, which will be set up in front of the "cell." She sets it down, exits.

Several seconds later, GUARD returns carrying a chair, a canvas backdrop, and a cosmetic case. She puts them down, exits.

Several seconds later, GUARD returns, MARGARET following with a camera case, a tripod, and a briefcase.

GUARD

Most sane people stay left when they leave this place.

MARGARET

That's why sane people never get anything done.

GUARD points at the briefcase.

GUARD

Let me see it again.

MARGARET hands it over; GUARD checks it, hands it back.

GUARD

Your husband and kid must really love you.

MARGARET

It's very Christian to be kind to crazy people.

GUARD turns to exit.

MARGARET

Hey! Your daughters?

GUARD

As of today, still mine.

MARGARET

Good.

GUARD

Glad you remembered to ask.

MARGARET

And the book?

GUARD

Each day is a page.

MARGARET

Maybe we can make it part of what I'm doing here.

GUARD

I won't say no and I won't say yes.

MARGARET

I can work with "maybe." I'm good with "maybe."

GUARD

Then maybe it is.

MARGARET

I guess I'll take it from here. Thanks.

GUARD exits. MARGARET brings over two chairs and starts to hang the backdrop; as she does, CORTEZ enters with the GUARD. The GUARD leaves. As MARGARET speaks, she prepares for the shoot: puts lens on camera, sets up tripod, etc.

CORTEZ

Well.

MARGARET

Hello.

CORTEZ

Hola.

MARGARET

You got my letter.

CORTEZ

Obviously.

MARGARET

So what do you think?

CORTEZ

A photography project.

MARGARET

Yes.

CORTEZ

Is that not what nailed you the last time?

MARGARET

And look what that got me. As I said in the letter -- I received --

CORTEZ

For photographing women in prison.

MARGARET

Yes. Abused women -- women who have killed their children --

CORTEZ

Why?

MARGARET

I say a lot of things when people ask me that. And I really do believe what I say. About making my photography useful, after trying to make Alex into something he wasn't. You pointed that out to me, thank you very much. But that's all second. You know why I'm here.

CORTEZ

I do not have to do this.

MARGARET

Didn't see you being dragged in here. Leave. But you'll leave knowing why.

CORTEZ

I will hang -- for the moment -- it gets me out.

MARGARET

I didn't put this into the letter because it was too late -- I've already arranged to have a gallery show the pictures. Part of a benefit for battered women. Auctioned off to raise money.

CORTEZ

Really.

MARGARET
Book and website to follow.

CORTEZ
Your cut?

MARGARET
Everything out of pocket. And the grant.

CORTEZ
And the goodness of your heart.

MARGARET
Actually, Señora Cortez, dead wrong about that.
I'm doing all this out of the coldness of your
heart.

CORTEZ
You should be careful with your words.

MARGARET
As careful with you as you were with me.

CORTEZ
Revenge?

MARGARET
Don't flatter yourself.

CORTEZ
You are not making any money at it.

MARGARET
So it isn't greed. Or ambition. Or lust, sloth,
gluttony, envy -- what's to envy?

CORTEZ
I guess I will say "ouch."

MARGARET
C'mon, Vera -- you know: only one sin left.

CORTEZ does not respond.

MARGARET
All right, then, Vera -- straight and simple
anger. At you. For being a coward.

By this time MARGARET has finished her set-up. She has set two chairs
in front of the backdrop.

MARGARET
I was not going to let you get away with it.

MARGARET hands CORTEZ the piece of cloth from Tamara's dress.

CORTEZ

I think I will leave.

MARGARET

Sit. Please. Por favor.

CORTEZ

We are finished.

MARGARET

I called you a coward. I named you. Where's your dollar now?

CORTEZ

I am fresh out.

MARGARET taps her breastbone.

MARGARET

Right here -- it sticks. I can't get it past. This whole little star called Tamara hangs right here and explodes, every day. I try to catch the pieces and smash them back together and I can't do it! I am filled with sadness and [defeat] --

CORTEZ

The condition of the sin eater, the human condition.

MARGARET

So. I'm not going to do this "it" alone. You are going to help me.

CORTEZ

No, I am not. I am done. Use somebody else.

CORTEZ moves to get the GUARD.

MARGARET

"Poema al hijo que no llega."²

CORTEZ turns slowly to face MARGARET.

MARGARET

"Poema al hijo que no llega."

CORTEZ

Speaking Spanish now? Not well, I have to say.

MARGARET

I learned something. For you. Ammunition.

2 Julia de Burgos, Song of the Simple Truth, pages 490-491.

CORTEZ

So you have come as the warrior.

MARGARET

"Poem to the Child Who Doesn't Arrive." She came to me in a dream and fed it to me.

CORTEZ

In a dream.

MARGARET

Why not? Things came to you in dreams all the time. "No sé cuándo ni dónde / pero sé que vendrás." Come on!

CORTEZ

"I don't know when or where -- "

MARGARET

" -- but I know you will arrive."

They peer at each other.

MARGARET

"Child of mine, bathed by sublime tenderness / I have dreamt you a thousand times, / but where can you be? / Why don't you rebel and burst into the world...?" Listen to me, Vera! "You will arrive at my arms on a solemn day / when everything at my side will dress in light. / There will be light in the shadows..." That's why I'm back here: it's up to me to bring the light to the shadows so that she is not abandoned. And not alone. You are going to help me finish eating this sin.

CORTEZ

And how did your grant proposal --

MARGARET

By having you be the first voice out of the shadows. By being Tamara's voice.

CORTEZ

You are giving communion now.

MARGARET

Very simple equation, Vera: you killed your daughter with silence. Like I said, a coward. And a fool, too, expecting some droopy-assed middle-aged white chick sin-eater to shift the universe for you. Sloppy, sloppy, sloppy.

MARGARET goes to the camera.

MARGARET

This is what I bring -- this "eye" -- but the shadows need your voice from underneath -- you don't do this, you kill off Tamara, old and new, for good. But if you speak out -- do now what you should have done then -- then maybe no more Tamaras get fed to the dragons. That's my new world. That's my half-assed attempt at redemption -- I remembered your word.

CORTEZ

You want a truce.

MARGARET

I want your coöperation. Your pictures, your voice -- their pictures, their voices -- a thirty-page grant proposal in eight words --

CORTEZ

You want more than my coöperation.

MARGARET

I would love to make you pay -- but I did learn something from you, after all, about keeping our eyes bigger, our hearts large -- that's what brought me back, to you.

CORTEZ

To me.

MARGARET

So we could work together.

CORTEZ

So, a truce, then --

MARGARET

A truce is for combat.

CORTEZ

You brought the ammunition.

MARGARET

True, but --

CORTEZ

If I agree, I come opposing everything you think and feel is right. So it will be a truce.

MARGARET

Are we that divided?

CORTEZ

Your -- sentimentality, your kind of righteousness -- so sweet, so weak --

MARGARET

If it doesn't come from the heart --

CORTEZ

Tamara's death punctures my heart every day.

MARGARET

I sometimes think your heart's a stone --

CORTEZ

My heart is atoned -- you don't understand that.

MARGARET

No, I don't.

CORTEZ

I did not give you Tamara -- she will never leave me. You never had her. What is in this --

CORTEZ shows the cloth.

CORTEZ

-- is that endless loop of breast-beating you seem to find so inspiring. I am done with the smell of burned skin. Time for me to prepare for my release.

MARGARET

So you're not big enough to face --

CORTEZ

Stop it! Stop it. I wish you could see your face right now -- not the good, strong, open, scared-into-life face that was here a year ago, that was my coyote, that helped me cross the border. No, now it is a judge's face. Here is another Julia for you: "But I was made of nows..." "Nows!" Hear that, Margaret -- dragging no more corpses around! "But I was made of nows / and my feet level...would not accept walking backwards..." Hear that -- not backwards! "...and I went forward, forward, / mocking the ashes to reach the kiss / of the new paths."³

CORTEZ, standing near MARGARET, kisses her.

CORTEZ

New paths, querida -- that is where Tamara and I are going. Do you want to come?

3 Julia de Burgos, Song of the Simple Truth, "I Was My Own Route," #20 (pp. 56-57)

MARGARET, to her surprise, seems pacified by the kiss.

MARGARET

I don't want Tamara repeated -- new paths, too.
And I'm going to tell the story.

CORTEZ

You go, girl! I am just not convinced the liberal guilt thing is the way to do it. All of us here own our own shame -- fully vested. No one here needs to be wept over. But if you are set on that, then you need some balance, some frame for your picture -- a bite of the pepper with the sugar.

MARGARET

What?

CORTEZ

The gallery, the benefit --

MARGARET

Yeah?

CORTEZ

Too clean. Too much of the liberal guilt thing.

MARGARET

So shoot.

CORTEZ

Very funny. Put these pictures in the dead country, too -- here, in a church, a bodega, a school, even just hang them on a fence -- in a diner -- you're good at that -- anywhere but just a gallery. And you have to get the do-gooders to go there.

MARGARET

I'm listening.

CORTEZ

You need a context. You need charts of ownership and income and health and education. If you want no more Tamaras in the morgue, they need to know how much of the dead country they own -- they have to own up. They need to cross the borders, not just feel oh so lagrimoso and sensitized. Those are my terms. And if you do not accept them, I will make sure no one sits for you. That is my ammunition.

MARGARET

I agree -- bigger picture, bigger world.

CORTEZ

Bueno.

MARGARET

So do we have our truce?

CORTEZ

That is up to your anger.

MARGARET

My anger -- to one side. Partnership, then, for the moment.

CORTEZ

Peace along the fronteras.

MARGARET

We'll call the truce Alex and Tamara.

CORTEZ

Tamara and Alex.

MARGARET

Tamara and Alex, then. The name of the truce. Anything else?

CORTEZ

Ask me formally if I want to do this. You have asked everyone else -- now ask me.

MARGARET

Vera Cortez, would you like to participate in this project -- in the name of Tamara?

CORTEZ

In the name of Tamara, yes.

Things get quiet.

MARGARET

Now what?

MARGARET

Sit down.

CORTEZ

You are going to take the pictures now?

MARGARET

Nothing formal. I'll come back out later for the set-up shots. Now it's just to get people used to the camera.

CORTEZ

I do not even know what I look like. According to you, I have devil's horns.

MARGARET

The only horns you have is because you haven't seen a man in a long time.

CORTEZ

For a white piece, you do have a mouth.

MARGARET

Here's a mirror.

CORTEZ

A mirror.

CORTEZ looks at herself tentatively.

CORTEZ

A brush?

MARGARET hands CORTEZ a brush. MARGARET brings over a small box with some simple cosmetic items in it.

CORTEZ

It has been so long. No brush, no make-up. Just my game face. What now?

MARGARET

Get comfortable. Just look at the camera and pretend there's no one behind it.

CORTEZ

That is easy to do.

MARGARET

For a brown piece, you do have a mouth. We have lots of time. Now, try a smile out on me.

CORTEZ is a bit uneasy, not sure whether to smile fully or not. MARGARET goes to the camera, takes pictures.

MARGARET

And talk to me.

CORTEZ

About?

MARGARET

Tell me about Tamara.

CORTEZ

Tamara.

MARGARET

What was she like? Go ahead -- it's all right.

CORTEZ

Tamara liked to sing. She had a bird voice,
breathy, almost like a whisper.

CORTEZ takes a pose.

CORTEZ

Did that work?

MARGARET

Whatever feels natural.

CORTEZ

"Natural" is easier said than done.

MARGARET

You're doing fine. Tell me more.

CORTEZ takes some poses.

CORTEZ

She liked to sing to herself. I would stand
outside her room and listen. She made up words -
- she could rhyme well -- and tunes. Barely a
whisper sometimes.

As MARGARET prepares to take the next picture, CORTEZ stands up and
moves toward her.

MARGARET

What are you [doing] --

CORTEZ

How do you work this thing?

MARGARET

What?

CORTEZ

Show me.

MARGARET

Press this down halfway -- that's the autofocus.
Then just pop it.

CORTEZ

Sit down. Sit down.

MARGARET sits down. CORTEZ pops a picture by accident.

CORTEZ
Sorry, sorry. Okay, get yourself settled -- is that the right thing to say? I want you to talk to me.

MARGARET
You bruja!

CORTEZ
Talk to me about Alex.

MARGARET
This is so strange. I've never sat here.

CORTEZ
Talk.

MARGARET pauses in her speech to take poses. CORTEZ takes pictures at those points.

MARGARET
Alex. He's mute, so he can't sing, like Tamara. But he draws a lot. And he loves to swim. He's a lot like us -- he likes to build things. How I'm doing?

CORTEZ
You will learn. This have a timer on it?

MARGARET
You can even set the number of pictures you want.

CORTEZ
Focus?

MARGARET
Press here to set it. When you're ready, press this button. It beeps to warn you.

CORTEZ
Will it make coffee?

MARGARET
Next model.

CORTEZ
All right. Sit down.

MARGARET sits down.

CORTEZ
A truce gets an official record.

MARGARET
Tamara and Alex.

CORTEZ focuses on MARGARET, then presses the button. CORTEZ sits beside MARGARET.

CORTEZ
This is not going to be easy.

MARGARET
But, man, is it going to be great.

SOUND: Camera beeps three times.

Three successive pictures.

* * * * *

Scene 18

SOUND: Music from Lou Reed's "New York"

GUARD joins MARGARET and CORTEZ. Let the actors get their applause. Then the houselights come up, and the three of them dismantle the stage, reversing what they did in the beginning, and when there is nothing left to take away, they do not return.