

THE FOOL AND THE RED QUEEN

A Play

By

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Characters:

THE FOOL

THE RED QUEEN

CHORUS/INNKEEPER

RIKKI: A young, dark man.

Author's note: The CHORUS is in italics; played by the same actor who plays the INNKEEPER. Dialogue in parentheses are asides.

SCENE: Minimal; abstract version of a medieval court; other scenes, such as the hovel, should be simply indicated.

1. The Summons

QUEEN: Bring me my Fool, I say, he's the only one who listens to me, he's the only one who does what I tell him to do. Everyone else is too weak. The Fool is strong and he is willing. The Fool is willing to obey, for his own good. Not my good, I don't need any good, it's not for me. It's for his own good, for example, when I tell him not to drink, when I tell him not to smoke and not to stoop. (*Enter the FOOL*)

QUEEN: Don't stoop, Fool, stand up straight, I say, or you'll look old. You're not getting old, but you stoop, so you look old.

FOOL: I am getting old.

QUEEN: No. Stand up straight. And don't take those pills you like to take. The red ones, the white ones, the other ones, don't take them, they won't save you. They're invented by the apothecaries to help you to get old. They grind up the powders and put them in capsules and sell them to people like you. Fools, like you. Did you hear me? The Pharmaceutical Guild wants you to get old so you'll take more pills because that is in their interest. They want you to get old, so they give you pills. So you'll get old and buy more pills.

Did you follow that?

QUEEN: But you must listen to your Queen, who loves you, who cares about you, who wants you to be healthy and young and independent, so nobody has to take care of you, not me nor anyone else, so you'll be healthy and strong and stand up straight and be good to your Queen.

FOOL: I am. Look. I'm standing straight.

QUEEN: Good. I am your Queen, and I'm too busy to take care of you. You understand, Fool? It's for your own good. Everything I say is for your good, not mine, your own good, so I hope I'm not talking to the wall, I hope I'm not wasting my breath, my energy, which is not unlimited. The energy is royal, precious, but not unlimited, not endless, royal but finite, as you know, so I cannot waste one iota of my precious energy, so I'd appreciate it if you would pay attention when I'm talking to you, Fool.

Silence.

QUEEN: You're not present. I can see that you're not present. I can feel that you're not present. Where are you?

FOOL: Here I am, my Lady.

QUEEN: Don't call me your Lady. I am not your Lady. I don't belong to you. I don't belong to anyone but my God.

FOOL: Who is your God? Is it Rufus?

QUEEN: No. I do not belong to Rufus, who is invisible but audible. I belong to no one. I am alone, and I am the Queen. If not for me, you would be dead, Fool.

FOOL: I regret my space, Madam. I feel unworthy of my space, the space I fill, the void I am, on Earth, and I loathe all the other inhabitants as well, Ma'am, for taking up the space that they take, themselves, walking around, breathing the air, getting money and getting old, I loathe them all, each day, a little more of the loathing.

QUEEN: You talk too much, Fool. Your job is to listen to your Queen. That's what I pay you for, that's why you have your livelihood. Otherwise you'd be dead. You have no livelihood without me, so roll over, roll over, Fool, and weep.

The Fool weeps. He sees himself rolling on the floor and weeping. He has lost himself entirely. He rolls on the floor, tears flowing down his face. He has abandoned all hope. He weeps for the end of his foolish dignity, his posture of manliness and stoical endurance. He has no name, no past, and henceforth he is nothing but a slave to his Queen.

QUEEN: Did you knock, Fool? You may not enter my chambers without knocking. Knock first, Fool, if you seek admittance, and bow your head. And wear something

over your mouth, a handkerchief, a bandana, over your mouth, so I don't smell your breath, Fool, or see you breathe, or see your teeth or your tongue, or your lips, or even sense your mouth at all, Fool, that evil, sensual mouth, so put something over it, a mask, cover up your mouth and put a mask on over your face, because I don't want to see your eyes. I don't want to see your eyes, either, those longing eyes. I don't want to see those sorry, anguished eyes, so put a mask on over your mouth and over your eyes and grope for the door and knock. Actually, cover your head, cover your whole head, Fool, with a cowl, or with a hood. I don't want to see your bowed, defeated head. Actually, go away, Fool. Don't bother to knock. I don't want to see you at all. Stay away from my sight, Fool.

And so he disappears, our Fool, as though he had never existed. No eyes, no mouth, no head, no balls, nothing. The door is closed and the Fool is no more. He is banished by the Queen and is no more. He faces the darkness by himself. Sorrow fills his chest. He breathes sorrow and darkness. He is no one, nothing, but he breathes. He is breathing. Sorrow and darkness breathe him, and he waits for death.

Can death be awaited? What is that death for whom or for which the Fool waits, being himself no more? No longer himself, without history, without a future, the Fool breathes and waits. He feels his sorrow and he waits.

He waits for movement, motion, which is death, like everything else, like water, air, earth and fire, coming endlessly and at last for the Fool.

But first the Queen calls, the Red Queen calls for her Fool.

QUEEN: Why are you standing there? So far away? So far away in the gloom? You can come closer. Come closer. Don't stoop. Don't cringe. Stand up straight. Come closer. Don't touch me. No touching until I tell you, until I give you permission to touch. Did you brush your teeth? Did you wash your mouth, with mouthwash, strong mouthwash? Stay where you are. Don't move. Stay. Can you speak?

FOOL: Yes. I am a sensitive and intelligent person.

QUEEN: Good. Only smart people are allowed to serve the Red Queen.

FOOL: And I will walk your dog and wash your carriage.

QUEEN: How smart you are.

FOOL: Make a path for you. Scatter rose petals on the path. Clear the way. Brush the suitors aside.

Suitors? Are there suitors for the Queen?

QUEEN: There are no suitors for the Queen, Fool.

There are no suitors for the Red Queen, for the Queen is mad, but there are those who are envious, and those who are angry. And there is of course, resentment, resentment, we should mention resentment, that most human of hates, falling upon the Red Queen and upon the Fool, as well.

FOOL: I will brush them aside, the envious ones and the angry ones, who want to smack you.

QUEEN: Oh!

FOOL: And who want to throw you down and trample you. Grab you by the hair and molest you. Be hard with you. Severe. Thrust into you and make you cry out and make you beg, make you moan.

QUEEN: No!

FOOL: No. Those I brush away so that only I can stand before you, bowing and scraping, and not knowing why, kneeling and stooping, murmuring and prevaricating, submissively.

QUEEN: Good! Oh, good!

FOOL: All I have ever wanted was your attention. Attention was what I wanted always.

QUEEN: And when I was not there?

FOOL: I dreamt of you. I occupied myself with dreams of you and thoughts of you and fears of you and anxious hopes for your re-appearance somewhere.

QUEEN: Yes, that's how you are.

FOOL: True. Pining away with various fantasies of the mind. I can't help it. I must dreamily serve. I must chime away on everything, like the lines in a snowflake, each one supporting the other. Imagine the sound they make, the chiming, the necessary rhyming in the patterns? And I wonder, is that the matter of it, the endless rhyming pattern of the universe?

QUEEN: I don't know, Fool. How can you be so dreamy and so low at the same time?

FOOL: It's because my father dreamt, and his father, fools all, dreaming and avoiding the proper work of the mind. The work of the body we know: to bow and to kneel, to jump and fetch, to twirl and bend over backwards, all so as not to offend the royal presence above.

QUEEN: Of course, you are paid, and your father was paid also, and his father.

FOOL: Not much.

QUEEN: But enough to keep you.

FOOL: Just enough. (We are worms.)

QUEEN: You and your father and his father as well. Room and board and a penny or two to go to the fair.

FOOL: Yes, and to the Conference of Fools, where I rehearsed the appropriate postures and gestures, poses and attitudes, the proper tones, and the magic of invisibility: How to return to nothing from something, a trick of the mind in the presence of the Queen, a realization of actual insignificance, an inner alignment making one effectively unseen. We fools showed our experience in these life-preserving strategies – how we prevaricated and vanished, how we denied ourselves and vanished, how we abased ourselves and vanished, how we came to see our nothingness, how we were truly non-entities, non-existent, and yet of service still, and thus useful to Her Majesty and worthy of support.

QUEEN: Poor Fool.

FOOL: The poor Fool, who is me, is sensitive. He is sensitive, and through no fault of his own, having been born, now he ages and loses his powers. One by one, gradually, his powers diminish, he withers; like all life, he declines, he grows old and less useful to his Queen, and yet he must remain of use or he will be cast away like detritus, like a disturbing fault or a weakness, like a friend who can no longer remember you, a useless being who

can no longer serve. And that is why we fools must meet – for mutual support, to devise strategies, to keep away the withering of time, of course hopelessly, and yet in the hope of dying like men.

QUEEN: My heart softened just then, but only for a moment. I know you. You're an actor. And that's what you learn at your Fool's conferences – acting – acting is what you learn secretly, inside the walls of the castle – don't think I don't know, I know what you learn inside the walls, a pretense, a consideration, a behavior, an ever-adjusting manifestation, depending on my mood – yes, mine, my mood and disposition. Is that not so?

FOOL: Harsh.

QUEEN: Even for me it is harsh, with all my treasures and prerogatives. Why, Fool?

FOOL: Because you will lose everything. Nothing will remain. None of the treasure, none of your prerogatives, not even your name will survive. The Red Queen and all of her treasure, all of her wiles, all of her prerogatives and all of her reasons and all of her righteousness and all of her demands and all of her gains, will be lost forever. There is nothing but the present, my Lady.

QUEEN: Let's stick with that, then. I am the Queen.

FOOL: Your Majesty.

QUEEN: Touch me. You may touch my hand, Fool.

The Fool, head bowed, arms crossed over his heart, inches forward toward the Queen.

QUEEN: Not that way, Fool. Move. Take steps. A man must take steps. Take a step, Fool. (The Fool takes a step.) Head up, so I can see your eyes, but not directly. Here, like this. Over my shoulder, like this, look there, so I can see your eyes.

The Fool adjusts his gaze.

QUEEN: Don't cry for God's sake. You're so teary, Fool, such an emotional Fool, you like to roll on the floor and weep. But not now. Say something instead. Say something in your own behalf, Fool.

The Fool is speechless. Tears well up.

QUEEN: No sudden moves, Fool. You can move your head, but not suddenly. Keep your hands still. That's right. And breathe. Please remember to breathe. You can breathe normally. Breathe normally, why don't you, deeply, and with sighing. You sigh like a sheep. You can breathe without sighing. You can breathe without weeping.

The Fool breathes.

QUEEN: Good. You can touch my waist now. You can touch my waist. You can touch my waist, if you want. You want to? Touch my waist? Touch the flesh at my waist, the tissue of fat, of muscle and sinew and blood of my waist, this wrapping here around my waist, would you like to touch? Go ahead and touch my fabulous waist, if you want, with your right hand. Do you want to? Go ahead.

The Fool touches her waist with the fingertips of his right hand.

QUEEN: That's good. Just don't move your hand around. Keep your hand still. Good. Don't move your hand around.

The Fool's right hand trembles.

QUEEN: You're trembling. Now you tremble. There, there, lightly, lightly. Good. Don't move and remember to breathe. Breathe normally.

The Fool is not breathing.

QUEEN: You're holding your breath. Don't hold your breath. Let go, why don't you? It's absurd to hold your breath like that. You could die, Fool. You could die for lack of breath. Let go.

The Fool chokes.

QUEEN: Oh! Don't gasp! You're gasping for breath!
What's wrong with you? Go away! Get away from me!
Away, Fool!

The Fool runs. He runs in place, but he runs. He gasps for breath and runs as hard as he can but he does not advance in space. There is no advancement, no displacement, no encroachment, but the Fool runs. Who is he, really? He is the clown, the cuckold, the coward, the dog. Not you or me. Certainly not me. And the Red Queen? She is Kali the Destroyer, someone like that, the Spider Woman, the Earthmother, empowered by the forces of life for tyranny and the torment of the willing.

2. The Dreaded Event Comes to Pass

QUEEN: I gave you every possible chance, Fool. But you have weaknesses. You have weaknesses and you can't control them. They are too much for you and you must go. I cannot abide weaknesses. They are abhorrent to me. That's just the way it is. Even though you try. You tried and you tried.

FOOL: I tried!

QUEEN: But it was just a performance. Actually, it was the performance of a performance, which failed in the end.

I couldn't follow that.

QUEEN: You're good at it. I have to admit, you're a good fool, Fool. You're obedient and you try, but now you're not quick enough, your wit has failed you, your weaknesses have caught up with you, and you are no longer present.

I couldn't follow that, either.

FOOL: (It's intimidation.) Why?

(No one knows why, inferior, superior, no one knows. But it's because of the past. Wouldn't you say?)

QUEEN: It's because of the food. You're not there because of the food. Because of the alcohol and the pills, the candy and the soda. That's why you're not here, that's why you have to go.

FOOL: No, no, it's not true! I am here! I'm right here!

QUEEN: I don't know where you are. You dream and you stutter. You have gauze all over your face. You have a veil over your eyes. And you seem to be wearing a box. And you seem to be wearing a mask. You have been frozen in by your performance!

FOOL: A box? I'm not wearing a box!

QUEEN: I'm tired of it. I'm tired of the performance, Fool. I've explained it all already. The box is there over your heart. There's a box over your heart and that's it for me. I can't have a Fool who wears a box over his heart because of his weaknesses.

FOOL: Oh! Where is my-my-my helper?

QUEEN: Don't stutter. Don't dream. You have no helper, Fool.

FOOL: Why is this happening to me?

QUEEN: It's because of the past, when you were attacked.

He was attacked!

QUEEN: You were attacked, and you had three options: Fight, flight, or freeze. You couldn't fight, because you were only a little boy, after all, and you couldn't run away, after all, because then how would you live? And so you froze. And so now you freeze. And that's how you're not present for the Queen. And that's why you're not present for the Queen.

Let's take a pause. I'm not sure I followed that.

QUEEN: I'm sorry, Fool. I've said I'm sorry. I didn't mean it in those days. I didn't mean it, after all. I was out of my mind, out of my mind. Do you forgive me, after all?

FOOL: I forgive you.

QUEEN: Good. You're on crutches and there's a box over your heart and a veil over your eyes, and gauze is over your face and you're almost mummified. But you forgive me.

FOOL: I'm not on crutches! I'm not mummified!

QUEEN: The crutches are the food and the alcohol and the pills and the dreaming and the aging – and so on and so forth, as I have no need of any further explanations. No explanations are needed, for I am the Queen. No explanations, no further explanations are forthcoming – I am your Queen. Be gone. (He does not move.)

The Silence of Hell.

3. Another thing.

QUEEN: And here's another thing, Fool. What'll you do when you're old and you don't remember anything and you can't take care of yourself?

FOOL: I don't know.

QUEEN: Doesn't that frighten you?

FOOL: Yes.

QUEEN: It frightens me, I know that. I know it frightens me, and I don't care what you think, or what they think, in the town or in the city, in the park or at the Fair. I couldn't care less. As far as I'm concerned, it's not a moral issue. I am the Red Queen and I have to think of myself first. That is the only moral issue, to think of myself first. The rest is weakness.

Silence.

QUEEN: Say something, Fool.

FOOL: You think of yourself first. I always think of you first, also. I never think of myself first. I think that's obviously wrong.

QUEEN: You're just repeating what I said earlier. You're going round and round. I won't play that game anymore, going round and round. Say your own thought. Don't say my thought, say your own thought, if you have a thought. (Silence) I don't have time. I don't have any more time for this.

FOOL: I think it's wrong to think of myself first.

QUEEN: I think of myself first, and I don't think that's wrong.

FOOL: But you are the Queen, so I think of myself first.

QUEEN: Did you hear that?

FOOL: I meant, so I think of you first, because you are the Queen.

QUEEN: There's an example of what I've been trying to say to you, which is that you are not present, so you don't hear anything. You hear the opposite of what is being said. Can you hear that? Can you hear me now?

FOOL: Yes.

QUEEN: What did I say?

FOOL: You think of yourself first, because you are the Queen. And I do the same thing, which is to think of you first.

QUEEN: Don't go round and round. I don't have time for this. I want to live another kind of life. I don't want to live this life, going round and round.

FOOL: Yes, I don't blame you.

QUEEN: You're main problem is that you're not here. You're missing in action. (Pause. Then The FOOL does a sudden back flip.)

FOOL: How was that, my liege?

QUEEN: Astonishing. Put your little hat back on, please.

FOOL: What?

QUEEN: Don't say what. Put your little hat back on. It fell off while you did whatever you did. (He puts his hat back on.) What was that supposed to prove?

FOOL: It proves that I'm here. I'm not missing in action. I am capable of movement, quick movement, and with a maximum of balance, a complete turn in the air, and I landed on my feet, and you hardly noticed.

QUEEN: Of course I noticed. How could I not notice?

FOOL: You saw it, but you didn't believe it.

QUEEN: How could I not believe what I saw?

FOOL: Because you think I'm old.

QUEEN: You are old. But what is most frightening to me is that you are not here. You are not here in the sense of presence. In order to be here, you need to Intend to be here. That is the Law of the Realm. And you have no intention because you can't remember your intention, because you're old.

Could you follow that?

QUEEN: I didn't make the Law. I inherited the Law. But I accept the responsibility of the Law. Do you think it's easy? To accept all these Laws, to be responsible for the Laws of the Realm?

FOOL: No.

QUEEN: Did you say, No?

FOOL: Yes.

QUEEN: It makes me sad. I'm sure you can understand that. Can you?

FOOL: What?

QUEEN: Don't say what, say whether or not you can understand my sadness.

FOOL: No.

QUEEN: Did you say, No?

FOOL: Yes.

QUEEN: This is impossible. I'm trying to be kind.

FOOL: I understand.

QUEEN: That's not what you just said. You said you didn't understand. And now you say you understand. You contradicted yourself again.

FOOL: I'm sorry.

QUEEN: That's not enough. It's not enough to be sorry. (She weeps). You say you're sorry, but you don't mean it. Anyway, I don't want you to be sorry, I want you to be real. I want you to be here in the room, a real person, who is interested in life and responsible for his life and for the Laws of the Realm.

FOOL: I am.

She weeps.

FOOL: Look! I can count to fifty going up with my right arm while counting down with my left arm, can you see that?, and at the same time I can hop twenty-five times with my left leg and twenty-five times with my right leg, alternatively, and at the same time do a four-quarter swiveling of my head, like so.

QUEEN: I couldn't follow that.

FOOL: (Standing still) And then I jump straight up and down ten times. See that?

QUEEN: No!

FOOL: You missed it!

She stops weeping and laughs.

QUEEN: You crack me up, Fool. Go away now.

The Fool freezes.

QUEEN: I need a break. (Pauses. Reclines.)

Sighs.

QUEEN: Fool?

FOOL: Here I am!

QUEEN: I keep coming back to the same subject, because we don't seem to be getting anywhere, except round and round, so I'll bring it up again, if you don't mind.

FOOL: What is the subject?

QUEEN: The subject is age and the loss of faculties.

FOOL: And the fear thereof.

QUEEN: The fear as well, thank you. The fear in me and the fear in you, which comes from facing the issue,

confronting it head on, without evasion, straightforwardly, according to the Laws of the Realm.

FOOL: I didn't follow that.

QUEEN: I'll say it again, I don't mind repeating myself, if I have to, because you are someone I care about, obviously, someone who has been in my service these many years, so I feel some responsibility toward sharing the truth with you, Fool, even though you may be incapable, through no fault of your own, of hearing a word I say. Are you listening?

FOOL: I am.

QUEEN: Did you say, Yes?

FOOL: I said, Yes.

QUEEN: All right then, I'll go over it again: what will you do when your memory is completely gone?

FOOL: It's not.

QUEEN: You didn't hear what I said.

FOOL: It's not gone. It may never be gone.

QUEEN: And then, when you're all alone and you won't be able to take care of yourself and you won't remember anything, I will tell you what you will do.

FOOL: What?

QUEEN: You will wish for death. There cannot be anything else there, in that moment, like another kind of thought, or an image or a memory, nothing, only the wish for death.

FOOL: Are you speaking for all of us now?

QUEEN: And you will feel an enormous pity, the pity of dragons, of titans, of gods, the pity of a dark, endless universe.

FOOL: Yes, truly.

QUEEN: Yes, you will feel the anguish of a weeping dragon, yes, a pitying mythical monstrous weeping god.

FOOL: Are you speaking of Rufus now?

QUEEN: Rufus? Where were you, Fool? I wasn't speaking of Rufus for one iota, not for one second, not at all! Where were you? Fool! You did not hear me! You were absent, as usual!

FOOL: I thought that was very good, actually.

QUEEN: Good? What was good?

FOOL: Your expression. I thought it was good.

QUEEN: Never mind!

FOOL: And true. I couldn't have said it better. I will even forsake my children. A day will come when I will forsake my children.

QUEEN: Your children?

FOOL: My children from a secret wife, before you, before I came into your service, before that, my children from then, a boy and a girl and a girl.

QUEEN: Oh! Children?

FOOL: You don't know about them. I never told you. I'm sorry.

QUEEN: Who cares? A boy and a girl and a girl?

FOOL: Yes.

QUEEN: Who cares? Even though I am barren, even though I am beyond child-bearing, even though the very thought is disgusting, the very thought of sexual reproduction is disgusting and obscene, an impossible thought – I don't care. I don't give a rat's ass.

FOOL: You don't?

QUEEN: No. That was in a past life. Why should I care? That was in a life long ago, a tale from long ago, before you entered my domain, so why should I care?

FOOL: I'm glad. I'm glad you don't care. I say what I say in support of your expression, only in support, how one day I will forsake and be forsaken, and how the tears of the Dragon will flow at that time.

Now The Fool weeps.

QUEEN: They flow now, Fool.

FOOL: Yes. The tears of the Dragon are flowing copiously – they flow copiously with a mighty grief, a monumental sorrow.

The Fool weeps.

FOOL: The sorrow of the forsaken, the sorrow of the sacrificed.

The Queen watches as the Fool weeps. Her eyes are bright and cold. Her expression is severe.

FOOL: For I must forsake and be forsaken. I must forsake my children so they are unburdened of me, so they don't pity me or take me in, accept me or deny me.

QUEEN: Good, fool. Very good.

FOOL: I must sacrifice myself for their sake, so they are free of me, and then I must suffer abandonment, alone.

QUEEN: That's right. That appears to be your Fate. Yes, and then you will blame me, your Queen. And then, in your dotage, if you have any thoughts, if you are capable of thought, you will accuse the Queen, the murderous, abandoning Queen, she whom you will continue to serve until your dying day, until your last moment, until your last breath.

FOOL: Why? Why will the Fool serve until the moment of his death?

QUEEN: Because it is his nature. It is his nature to serve. He can't help it, he must serve. He has no normal ego, no "I am so and so and I'm okay because I was born, I am so and so and just as good and sound as you because I appeared on Earth just as you did," like a normal human being, no, he does not have that, like a normal human being would have.

FOOL: Oh! Then what is he? What does he have?

QUEEN: He is a Fool with the nature of a Fool. He thinks he was born a mistake. He thinks he was born inferior. He thinks he was born in a fever, or under a cloud, or on the side of a road in a ditch. He thinks he was born

incomplete, without that comment in his brain that says he's A-okay, like anyone else, just as equal as anyone else, he was born without that part in his head that says he's just as good as him and her, though they are worms like him, worthless worms just like him – so he's a Fool.

FOOL: Not the Queen. The Red Queen is not included there, as one of those.

QUEEN: No. The Queen was born with a superior gene, a superior gaze. Not at all like him or her. It's just the opposite of the Fool. It is not my nature to be commanded. It is not my nature to suffer Fools.

The Red Queen smiles with magnanimity, with satisfaction, with the certitude of Natural Law.

QUEEN: It is my nature to judge and to criticize, to order and to direct and to punish. It is my lawful right.

The Fool sighs and holds his face together. He no longer weeps as he did before.

QUEEN: But nonetheless the Fool resents his superiors, as he must do – not only the Queen, but any old him and her, misters and misses that come along, he resents them, too, because the Fool must fear them and stoop slightly before them, if not bow, and lower his gaze, and feel poorly about himself in comparison to them, and hate them for it, and on top of that he must smile.

The Red Queen smiles.

QUEEN: And now he looks forward to a dreadful death, the poor Fool, abandoned and forsaken, with a pathos that is mythical in its grandeur, and yet true. True, so true, so sadly true.

4. The Red Queen and the Fool Relax

QUEEN: Relax and take it easy. Have a cup of coffee.

I don't want a cup of coffee.

QUEEN: It will make you feel better. Take my word for it.

FOOL: Did you have a childhood, Ma'am?

QUEEN: Of course I had a childhood. I am the daughter of a King. It was a childhood like no other. It was a childhood as the daughter of a King. Not many who can say that. Certainly, you can't say that, Fool, being the son of a madwoman, but that's neither here nor there, neither here nor there, nor anywhere in my Realm, my expansive, beautiful Realm.

FOOL: It is nowhere, Ma'am.

QUEEN: Oh, shut up, you idiot! False idiot! Sly idiot! I had a childhood surpassing all childhoods, the daughter of a handsome King.

FOOL: Congratulations.

QUEEN: Don't be sly with me, Fool. Nothing happened, nothing bad happened, nothing terrible happened, nothing serious happened, except the ruling of the Kingdom, the administration of the Realm and the household as well, the household, as well, with me in it, and my siblings, and the dogs and the cats. And I was cared for by my Mom and by my Dad, and the servants, and by Rufus, as well, though I didn't know it at the time.

FOOL: By Rufus?

QUEEN: Yes, of course, I didn't know at the time, but I'm sure he was there, looking out for me, watching over my progress.

FOOL: I see. Rufus.

QUEEN: I was looked after in every possible way you can think of, Fool. The splendor of it all is beyond you, the simple grandiosity, the polish, the shine of the Realm was and is, was and is, simply beyond your comprehension. So, stick with the jokes and the philosophical advice, Fool, and forget about psychological insights into the childhood of the Queen.

You are repeating certain phrases. Why are you repeating phrases?

QUEEN: What's that? Did you make a remark?

FOOL: No, I didn't say anything.

QUEEN: Are the walls talking now?

FOOL: I didn't say anything.

QUEEN: Why are you repeating yourself?

FOOL: Am I? Am I repeating myself?

QUEEN: Yes, you repeat yourself constantly, constantly.

FOOL: Constantly?

QUEEN: You heard me? Am I talking to the wall?

FOOL: No.

QUEEN: Did you hear me?

FOOL: Yes.

QUEEN: What did I say?

FOOL: You said, I repeat myself constantly.

QUEEN: You do, that's what you do, Fool. As if we could talk together meaningfully about childhood, when you had no childhood to speak of at all. It's one long slapstick moment isn't it, a moment of high comedy, a fall down clowning, cowering moment, isn't it?

FOOL: Yes, yes.

I mean, No, no.

QUEEN: She hits you, you fall down, you run away weeping. Again. She hits you, you fall down, you run away weeping. Again. No. You raise your arm, like so, in defense, like so, then she whacks you, you fall down, you weep, you run. Like that. You raise your arm, like so, in defense, like so, then she whacks you, you fall down, you weep, you run. Like that. Again. Am I right? It's just one long repetition, one long moment repeated again and again, am I right? That's your childhood, Fool.

FOOL: No, thank you.

QUEEN: I beg your pardon?

FOOL: I said, no thank you.

QUEEN: For what? I didn't give you anything but the truth, my friend, an unvarnished history of the Fool. And yet you

have the nerve to make inferences, to infer a mote in the shoe of the Red Queen.

That's not right. You meant a scruple, not a mote.

QUEEN: Excuse me?

FOOL: You meant a scruple not a mote. A scruple is a pebble, a mote is a speck of dust, I think, a particle, inferring or implying error or disability, a mark or a defect.

And you didn't mean your shoe, you meant your childhood.

QUEEN: You should know, Fool.

Should we speak of shoe behavior here? Namely, what is the Queen doing, Her Majesty, the Red Queen – is she trying on her shoes?

QUEEN: Do you like these?

Red. Red shoes.

FOOL: Yes. I do. And I like the feet that's in them.

QUEEN: You would.

FOOL: I do.

Red shoes, slowly fitting, slowly tightening.

QUEEN: Oh! They hurt! (She flings the red slippers at the Fool, who ducks.)

FOOL: I'm sorry.

QUEEN: Why are you sorry?

FOOL: I'm sorry your little shoes didn't fit, Ma'am.

QUEEN: And I'm sorry I missed hitting you.

They adjust their physical postures and attitudes.

QUEEN: Got your begging bowl out, Fool?

FOOL: No.

QUEEN: Go and find food for yourself. Go and forage, go out and beg.

FOOL: No, it's not time and I'm not hungry. I'm sorry about your slippers.

QUEEN: Go down to the village and hold out your bowl.

FOOL: No.

QUEEN: Go on, sit in front of the church or the Inn, with your begging bowl, and see what happens there.

FOOL: No. I am not a beggar.

QUEEN: Yes, you are, you beg for crumbs, constantly wanting my attention.

FOOL: No.

QUEEN: You can't say No. It's not allowed.

FOOL: Why not?

QUEEN: You are from the underclass and you have no religion, that's why.

Could you follow that?

FOOL: I don't see what one thing has to do with the other.

QUEEN: Even though you consider yourself a certain type, a spiritual type, a holy Fool, a warrior even, which is a joke, because you have no real religion, because you grew up under a rock with the cockroaches and the lice, and you are a prey, therefore, to your weaknesses.

FOOL: I won't beg.

QUEEN: You are a beggar.

FOOL: The Sun is three quarters of its way across the sky.

QUEEN: So what does that have to do with it? What could that possibly mean?

FOOL: You see, there in the window, where the Sun is? Look! See where the Sun is!

QUEEN: I see. There, you reveal your ignorance and your lack of understanding.

FOOL: It's time for tea now, Mi'lady, is all I'm saying.

QUEEN: All right, I'll have tea. I'll have high tea now. Go get it, Fool, it's time for tea.

FOOL: Last night I saw the crescent moon sinking slowly in the western sky.

QUEEN: Oh?, so what?

FOOL: It gave me a feeling of existence. Fleeting, just a moment, there I was, on the surface of the planet earth, looking up, looking up through the castle window, sunlight shining on the moon. "I am in a planetary system" I thought, "which moves like a clock."

QUEEN: It's tea time, Fool. Make yourself useful if you can. Hobble over to the kitchen and tell them I want my tea.

FOOL: That's why I am in your debt. That's why I'm so fortunate to live in a castle. Here I can look up. I can contemplate the starry world and see my true insignificance.

QUEEN: Your days are numbered, Fool, and you will soon beg.

FOOL: I thought-thought-thought –

QUEEN: Don't stutter, Fool. And stop being afraid of me. I can't tolerate that anymore.

FOOL: All right. (He stands).

QUEEN: And stop standing there, immobile. Are you frozen?

He stands frozen.

QUEEN: Move. I want my tea, and sandwiches without the crust, one ham, one cheese, separate from one another. Can you do that?

He hesitates, a moment of defiance, he feels a pain in his chest, sees a certain cruel glint in her eye.

FOOL: Yes, I'll just run right off to the kitchen and tell them to make your little sandwiches for you, without the crust.

QUEEN: Thank you. And to think you'd like to be a lover, too, on top of everything else! All your other difficulties and tasks. So, what are you waiting for?

FOOL: I thought you were going to say something more about me, something prescient, something penetrating.

QUEEN: You're dreaming, as usual. I don't think about you at all.

FOOL: I'll go now, Ma'am, for the tea.

QUEEN: Go, go. And take the shoes with you, why don't you?

FOOL: The shoes?

QUEEN: They don't fit. They're too small. And we have the dancing coming up.

FOOL: Yes, Ma'am. (Exit the FOOL.)

QUEEN: (A trumpet blast, OFF) Rufus? Yes, I think it's time for renewal, for revival, for resurgence! War!

For War?

QUEEN: Yes! War! (Exit the QUEEN)

WAR! The QUEEN has declared WAR. Too many young people rushing about with nothing to do, too much loose change bouncing around, too much trash lying in the streets, too much idleness in our craftsmen, emptiness in the minds of our intellectuals, stinking farts in our men of business – and there's money to be made this way and that! Let's get things right again! RUFUS knows the way! Off we go to War! The QUEEN has declared War!

5. Dancing.

(MUSIC OFF)

QUEEN: Oh, look! The people have come to watch the children dancing!

The children of the court, not all scions of the nobility – some of them lame, some of them dwarves, some slaves – children of all ages, have come to demonstrate their excellent dancing.

QUEEN: See how they all feel like they deserve the best, the very best that life can offer! Isn't that amazing? And they all think they're intelligent! Not one of them thinks they're stupid, not a single one!

FOOL: Not one, your Majesty. And I am here, too, thinking the same thing.

He wants to utter nasty epithets to himself, about himself: coward, coot, idiot, booby, and so on, a whole caravan of epithets marching through his head. With an effort, he keeps them to himself.

QUEEN: See! See only the greed for life, more life, more sweet life! Every single one of these precious little dancing children thinks they so richly deserve my unbelievable beneficence! Yes?

FOOL: Yes, I see. They do. And thanks to you.

QUEEN: Yes, Fool. There's your secret intelligence, Fool, the flicker of thought in your right eye, or your left eye, the wink of a thought, that you are included here to watch the precious dancing. (Music. Children are dancing, OFF.) See and consider, Fool: the stupefied dancing of the dancers, the stupefied watching of the watchers. Look, and see for yourself.

FOOL: I do see, M'Lady! Stupified, indeed.

QUEEN: Look. These children are not present. They are jumping around in the darkness of biological necessities. Some of these children could be yours, for all you know, Fool. It's all Reproduction, mainly.

FOOL: They are dancing, the children, that's all. They are dancing and having a good time.

QUEEN: Yes, they are, and they think they have every right to a good time, and their parents do, too. And the courtiers, and the staff, and you. Yes, they have every right, every right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

FOOL: Is that barbaric?, Ma'am, and must it lead eventually to War?

QUEEN: Yes. War. War will bring them into the present, Fool, and make them finally accountable.

FOOL: By killing most of them?

QUEEN: Yes. It will be necessary. It is necessary to have them killed. Some of them will surely die, but now they frolic about for their parents and the nobility, their parents and the nobility, and I. Some of those present will flee, and some of those absent will die.

And the music plays on.

FOOL: And the music plays on. They hear it with their bodies, mindlessly, as you so bitterly said.

QUEEN: War is coming. War will make them think again.

FOOL: Or run for their lives.

QUEEN: Rufus knows, and so do I, who 's here and who shall die, and what's what, what to do and what to say, how I shall act and who shall be spared.

FOOL: Sure, Rufus knows.

QUEEN: Don't mention Rufus in that tone of voice.

FOOL: What tone?

QUEEN: And don't play that game with me.

FOOL: What game?

QUEEN: That game, the question game, on and on, for days on end, for years and years. Like, "What tone?" "What game?" I'll just say one more clear thing and then I'll stop, because I have other matters to attend to, and to think about, and to plan, none of which you do or can do, that is, plan or think or take responsibility, so I'll not go round and round with you, round and round with you, Fool. I have much more important things to do than that, much more important, and I don't want to talk anymore.

FOOL: And that one more thing?

QUEEN: One more thing?

FOOL: You were going to say one more, clear thing.

QUEEN: I said it.

FOOL: What was it?

QUEEN: What I said. There, you see, no awareness there, no presence there at all, Fool.

Not true. That's not true and not fair. He wants to say. I am here in the flesh, in the dying, withering, rotting flesh.

FOOL: That may be true. I won't argue. I'm not sure I understand what you mean. But I'm willing, I'm willing to accept my weaknesses, my obvious limitations.

He says that instead.

QUEEN: That won't get you very far, Fool. And when you go, I want you to go far. Ha, ha.

She thinks that was intelligent. The chickens have come home to roost, she thinks.

QUEEN: The chickens have come home to roost.

FOOL: I'm sorry. Please don't banish me.

QUEEN: Of course you're sorry. How could you not be sorry? But you must be exiled, and there must be war.

FOOL: Exiled?

QUEEN: Exiled. Far, but not too far. To the town of Marapol perhaps, on the sea. You will have a stipend. You won't have to worry. You won't starve. You can take off your foolscap. Won't you be glad of that, at last?

FOOL: I don't know.

Actually, the Fool is crushed. It is one of the aspects of Foolishness to be crushed, to be bent over in anguish at the news of the hardship of exile.

QUEEN: To have a stipend, to take off your foolscap, I should be glad of that, if I were you.

FOOL: I'm not glad. (They walk. The music stops.)

QUEEN: And you'll be far from the conflict and out of my way.

FOOL: I would much rather serve, and kill people.

QUEEN: No, you wouldn't. You don't have a clue, actually, as to what you mean or what to say. And you've never killed anyone, as far as I know. Unlike myself.

FOOL: How shall I live, if I'm not in your service?

QUEEN: You will live as you've always lived.

FOOL: I'll be alone.

QUEEN: Alone. Yes. You'll wake up and groan, your body aching, because you don't know how to take care of yourself, and you'll be depressed, because you don't know how to think properly or what to do with yourself. You don't say, Glory be, it's good to be alive, you say Holy shit, another day, my back aches, what'll I do now? And soon the Queen will call and give me orders, I'd better get up and prepare for duty. And you'll get up with another groan, only no one will hear you but yourself and your God. And then you'll have your precious coffee which I now supply for you on a daily basis, and you'll thank your stars for that, only from now on you'll have ordinary coffee in an ordinary cup, which is what you deserve, ordinary coffee in an ordinary cup, not a chalice, not a golden cup made by artisans; and instead of orders to follow you'll have yourself, your own self, to manage, encourage and maintain, and get yourself through the day, and have your rewarding glass of wine, your precious glass of end of day rewarding glass of wine, and then you'll pray for death. No, wait, first you'll sit quietly and find some kind of God, not the living spirit, not Rufus, but some kind of personal God in your mind, and you'll hope for forgiveness from it.

FOOL: I see. I'll be waking up alone, not feeling sorry for myself, alone.

QUEEN: Yes, you'll wake up alone in the morning, feeling sorry for yourself, still groggy in the morning from your last night's precious glass of wine, and while you make your coffee you will hope for quiet and forgiveness, and try to set a plan for the day, some sort of redeeming plan for the day. Yes, to justify your existence, to pay me – no, to pay the Universe for your very existence – like a juggling act in the market.

FOOL: Sounds like foolish entertainment to me, Ma'am.

QUEEN: Absolutely. And then you'll practice your foolery, or tomfoolery, foolery, at any rate, pretending this and that and the other. How to juggle different items, like pills and bottles, or chocolate kisses, yes, pills and bottles and chocolate kisses, juggled by hand in and out of the mouth. First to juggle and then to prance, or dance, yes, dance, pretend to dance to an inner music, a divine chorus, a melody unique to the Fool and his foolishness.

FOOL: Yes, tomfoolery. Unique to me, myself.

QUEEN: I know you, and I know how you think. It's not that I'm psychic, I won't say that, but I do know what you think. And now, after all these years, you're asking me, what is foolishness, and what does it mean?

FOOL: No, I'm not asking.

QUEEN: I'll tell you, anyway. It's pretending to be a Knight in Armor, is what it is, it's the idiot savant on a mission. And what is the mission? I'll tell you.

Dance, thinks the Fool, or juggle bowling balls.

QUEEN: No, the mission is for the Fool to be respected and admired for his intellect and his talent, his charm and his grace. To be loved for his kindness, his false humility – so he's on a fool's errand, indeed, if you ask me, and you did – you did ask me – to be admired for his nothingness, his total nullity, his incapacity to do, or be, anything at all, but act the Fool.

FOOL: I can sing and I can play and juggle and do a backflip and be a boon companion.

QUEEN: Idiot relief.

FOOL: And you? What will you do when I'm gone?

QUEEN: Yeah, yeah, well, well. I have spoken with Rufus and I know what to do, what to plan, how to act, as I've said for the hundredth time.

FOOL: Rufus?

QUEEN: Regarding what I must do as Queen, to make War and to make Peace, afterward, which was a very important point that was made, to think ahead to the

making of peace once we have defeated the enemy. But this is not the kind of plan that you would think about because you don't know how to take any responsibility, whereas I do, because that's all I do. I never have time for myself. I never do what I want to do, only what the kingdom wants. I can't wait. I can't wait until the War is over so I can have some peace and quiet and do what I want to do.

FOOL: I hope so, too.

QUEEN: I know exactly what to do and what to say, how to behave and how to satisfy my friends and defeat my enemies. I trust my Guardian, Rufus, who has never let me down.

FOOL: Good. I'm glad. Thank you.

QUEEN: For what, Fool? The Dance is over. Everybody go home.

6. The Fool Goes to the Queen's Chamber.

QUEEN: You are a thorn in my side, and a coward, Fool.

Cowardice. To be accused of cowardice.

FOOL: I'm sorry. I'm sorry you said that.

QUEEN: How dramatic.

The Queen sinks lower in her royal lounge, feeling that she has been denied her honorific, her due respects.

QUEEN: What do you want?

FOOL: Do you remember the Chinaman?

QUEEN: Of course I remember the Chinaman, Master Chang. Are you trying to be sly now?

FOOL: No. I was reminded of when I first came to you, and how he made me wait.

QUEEN: Sentimental?

FOOL: I thought then, Is this me, sitting here, the Servant, awaiting word from my Mistress?

Having first been insulted by the Chinaman.

FOOL: He would not give me tea.

Sit down and wait, he'd said, or go away and come back later.

FOOL: Proudly, but dutifully, I withdrew. I bowed first, cursing the old Chinese fucker under my breath, and then sat down in an unobtrusive place, in a corner, out of the

way, and watched the clients coming and going, the pensioners, the dependents, the happily unaware citizens of the State, coming and going and making their obedience obnoxiously known, as the Chinaman seated them according to rank.

Now, as then, the Fool had failed to bow and to proffer the proper gift, which is heart-shaped, a marshmallow encased in chocolate, something like that, and then the Chinaman had refused to admit him into the chamber, and made him wait outside in the cold, his hood up around his eyes as he cowered, the un-admitted and disdained.

QUEEN: And now you've done it again. You've barged right in again.

FOOL: Whatever happened to Master Chang?

QUEEN: You know what happened. You're being manipulative now. He walked into the woods and we never saw him again. All right?

FOOL: There was no one there, and so I knocked, softly.

QUEEN: Now, or then? Because then the Chinaman was there, Master Chang was there, guarding my perogatives and my privacy.

FOOL: I mean now.

QUEEN: So why do you bring him up? Why do you mention Master Chang?

FOOL: Because I remember him.

QUEEN: How dare you, knowing what responsibilities I have, what I have to go through for my people? The sacrifices I have to make for the stupid and the lame, the decrepit and the dying? And now you, the Fool/coward, like a jackal, sniffing up my ass and insinuating yourself into my good graces.

FOOL: What, my Lady?

QUEEN: You heard me. To not accord me what I deserve, not pay what is owed to me by virtue of my status as the Red Queen?

FOOL: I remember, then and now: I thought I was trying my best. I said that aloud. I thought I was trying my best. I'm sorry. I said that to the Chinaman and to you. And I heard myself and was appalled.

QUEEN: Then and now?

FOOL: Yes. Because I heard my servility, which is not true. Because I heard my dishonor, which is a lie. Because I heard my intimidation, which is an act.

QUEEN: Rufus? Did you hear? He 's so dramatic. You hear the drama there? The Fool is an actor! And he brings up the Chinaman, Master Chang, who is long gone! Why?

FOOL: I remembered him.

QUEEN: I don't believe you. You are being manipulative. You have a motive for bringing him up, for barging into my quarters and bringing up the Master. What is the reason for that? What do you want by bringing up Master Chang?

FOOL: He was old and he disappeared.

QUEEN: Is it Rufus? Is it Rufus you're trying to get at?

FOOL: No, I don't think so.

QUEEN: What, then?

FOOL: I am afraid of banishment, of exile, and of a lonely old age. I don't want to end up like Master Chang, who walked away quietly into the woods.

QUEEN: Ah, at last! I've gotten it out of you! Leave me, Fool. Exit the way you came in.

FOOL: Just one more thing, my liege.

QUEEN: Yes?

FOOL: Stand up. Please?

QUEEN: Alright, Fool. (Stands) What do you want? Don't touch me. (Pause. The FOOL slaps the QUEEN, hard.)

A shocked silence.

QUEEN: You have slapped the Queen, Fool.

FOOL: I have.

QUEEN: You will hang for it.

The FOOL bows and withdraws.

7. At the Hotel Marapol. The Fool Dreams of the Red Queen

FOOL: Innkeeper? (Enter the INNKEEPER)

INNKEEPER: Yes?

FOOL: I dreamt of her last night, the Red Queen. She was everywhere, not smiling, ubiquitous, but not present, remaining in the background, perhaps a menace, perhaps a criticism.

INNKEEPER: Angry?

FOOL: No, not angry, she was perhaps scathing in observation, in watchfulness, waiting for another mistake or mishap on my part.

INNKEEPER: You slapped her.

FOOL: Yes, I was angry. Vindictive. Very enjoyable.

INNKEEPER: You will hang, Fool.

QUEEN: (OFF) Now there's a truth. But in his dreams, he wants to be taken care of. And guess by whom? By me, I, his Queen, as if I hadn't others to take care of, as if the whole State was not dependent on me! As if there was no War! As if I had no other responsibilities!

FOOL: Yes, I awoke feeling in terror, guilty of being myself, finally, which gives the wrong impression, as though I was actually someone, as you have often said, Innkeeper, a double-forked idiot –

INNKEEPER: I never said that.

FOOL: – and yet I am aware of every tiny, minuscule personal event, such as a slap, a thought, a gesture, an emotion, a snorting and smacking of my lips, like a pig or a baboon, dreaming and then scratching –as though torturing myself, half asleep, a Fool watching himself and

his behavior, as though he existed, as though there were a seer and the seen – and so the image of the double fork.

INNKEEPER: I couldn't follow that.

FOOL: Yes, it was me, myself, my own behavior, groaning and scratching myself, having become morally or mortally anxious in the night. Thinking of Her. And then, still dreaming, I got up and ran. I ran away in my underwear screaming softly to myself of my own idiocy. Grasses tore at my flesh as I maniacally ran faster and faster, screaming as only a human lunatic can scream – straight into the lake where my feet sank into the soggy bottom.

INNKEEPER: And then?

FOOL: I stopped. I laughed like an imbecile. I thought, Ah so this is what an imbecile is! Not that I didn't already know. I had been one before. It was in my repertory, as a Fool, so I knew what it was and I could give it its proper name. Imbecile. And I kept it quiet so She, or the Chinaman, or Rufus for that matter, who were spying on me from their corner of the Spirit World, could not use the laughing and crying as an excuse to send me away – to an asylum, to a madhouse, this being perhaps my biggest fear of all, that is – to be sent away roughly, in a strait jacket, by ambulance, to a prison for the mentally ill. (A sound of horses, OFF.) What was that?

INNKEEPER: The arrival of the Queen.

FOOL: Oh! I knew it!

INNKEEPER: And here she is, Sir, Her Majesty, the Queen.
(Enter the Red Queen.)

QUEEN: You may go, Innkeeper.

INNKEEPER: My liege. (Exits)

QUEEN: You will hang, Fool. (Pause) But not today.

FOOL: Why not?

QUEEN: Don't be an idiot, Fool, I'm giving you a break.

FOOL: Please continue.

QUEEN: I have spies you know, everywhere. Everyone tells me everything, but of course you knew that, because you didn't say too much, did you?

FOOL: When, your Majesty?

QUEEN: No games, Fool. The people tell all, because they fear for my favor, just as you do. You'd tell me if I asked, wouldn't you?, because you were dependent on my employment, like the others, and you don't want to hang.

FOOL: No, M'lady. (She whacks him with her pink umbrella.)

QUEEN: No. The answer is no. You get that? You understand that? They, my subjects, they tell me everything. There are no secrets from the Red Queen. Didn't you hear what I said a moment ago, one mere moment ago? Had you not heard?

FOOL: What did you say?

QUEEN: There, you did it again. I can't stand it anymore. Your position here is transitional.

FOOL: What?

QUEEN: Again! I forbid you to do that anymore!

FOOL: What?

QUEEN: That! Say "What?" (Strikes him again with the umbrella.) Play that stupid game with me! As though you hadn't heard, as though you hadn't understood!

FOOL: I - I - I'm sorry.

QUEEN: And now the stutter, on top of everything else! You may as well tell me, for the last time, the very last time, what people are saying, what people are thinking, what they are planning, for we are very tense now, as we

prepare for War. (Pause) Speak up, Fool. It's your last chance.

FOOL: They say they don't know, for they are simple-minded creatures who can't expect to know anything if they are not told; so they don't know anything, and yet they find themselves in the dumbest country in the whole solar system, and they think that war is a game and not a game, because they haven't been told which it is, and, at the same time, they hope they can survive the day and eat their dinner and, finally, that their favorite sons and daughters are not killed by this coming slaughter.

QUEEN: That was incomprehensible. And you, Fool?

FOOL: I spoke of my fears, of insanity and exile, of abandonment and loneliness, and death, absolute helplessness before the inevitable, and, more than that, by somehow causing my own downfall by foreseeing it.

QUEEN: Oh, for God's sake! Rufus, do you hear?

FOOL: What I mean is, I was afraid of what might happen, I saw it happen, and then it happened.

QUEEN: Rufus! Can you hear me? (Silence) Well, he won't speak now. Things must be done properly, according to the protocol, the rites, and so on, and then he speaks.

FOOL: (Quietly) Let the dead stay with the dead and leave the living alone.

QUEEN: You spoke, Fool?

FOOL: No, Ma'am.

QUEEN: We shouldn't bother the dead?

FOOL: No, Ma'am.

QUEEN: Not for something stupid like this. Don't say anything, please. I need a moment. (Pause) All right. I'm all right now. I'm fine. You can speak for yourself now, if you wish.

FOOL: For myself?

QUEEN: For yourself.

FOOL: I am a poor Fool.

QUEEN: You are, and you'll be poorer still in the days to come.

FOOL: Oh, no doubt.

QUEEN: Get over it finally. It's like you said. What's going to happen is going to happen, so get over it.

FOOL: The people want to stay alive and have enough money to live on, Ma'am.

QUEEN: Of course, they do.

FOOL: They don't want to die and at the same time they want their standard of living to go up.

QUEEN: Well, they can't have both, can they?

FOOL: I don't know.

QUEEN: Not without War, they can't.

FOOL: They want to live and they want to make money and they can't have both?

QUEEN: No.

FOOL: They wonder why.

QUEEN: There isn't enough to go around, that's why. Well, I can't waste any more time here. There is nothing to be gained. We just go round and round. You will go to the town, to the Hotel Maropol, and await my coming there.

FOOL: What shall I do there, Ma'am?

QUEEN: I told you once already. You're not listening. You'll wait. You'll watch and pay attention, and then I'll come and see you and you'll tell me what I need to know. Do you understand?

FOOL: Yes, Ma'am, I do.

QUEEN: And then you will hang. (Exit the QUEEN)

8. At the Hotel Marapol.

INNKEEPER: Do you have money?

FOOL: Yes. I kept my coins over the years. Gold and silver and copper, too, as I capered and danced, and yammered and fell down. Sometimes coins fell from above, and I gathered them up with an obsequious smile and stored them in my little treasure bag, and now I have hundreds of coins.

INNKEEPER: Good. Will you take wine?

FOOL: No, God forbid.

INNKEEPER: Who is God that he should forbid?

FOOL: The Queen forbids it.

INNKEEPER: That's another story.

FOOL: God is the mountains, God is the sea.

INNKEEPER: No. The mountains are the mountains and the sea is the sea.

FOOL: They say we all come from the first spark of light in the vast dark. We are all the same being.

INNKEEPER: How awful.

FOOL: Awful.

INNKEEPER: Awful. We are pulled toward death and there is nothing we can do. Even a Fool knows that.

FOOL: What pulls us?

INNKEEPER: The moon, obviously. And then to say in addition that we are all the same being is to say that we are less than nothing. In any event, it is an awful thought and a useless thought, like all thought. Even the Queen —

FOOL: Yes?

INNKEEPER: She eats, shits, and grows old.

FOOL: Definitely.

INNKEEPER: So she is not God.

FOOL: Maybe God shits and eats and grows old, so, I take it as a call.

INNKEEPER: A call?

FOOL: Yes, to attend. In this case, to attend the Queen.

INNKEEPER: As you wish.

FOOL: Yes. The Queen is my death. Therefore, I place her high above me. She looks down on me from a high place, like God, on my grave.

INNKEEPER: It's an illusion. The war, for example, is uncontrollable, once it starts. You can tell her that for me. No. Never mind. Keep it between us. I, too, swing upon a thread for her favor, and I will probably be the hangman for you.

FOOL: I know, Don Antonio. May I call you Don Antonio?

INNKEEPER: One cannot control wars. And her God can't, either. He is of course helpless. I won't mention his name. (Rufus) He has reached the status of the Unmentionable. All he will do is to tell her what she wants to hear, that the war was inevitable, that she is meeting her responsibilities, and so on, which will calm her for the moment, and make her feel in the right.

FOOL: And you, Don Antonio?

INNKEEPER: I mind my own business and see to the plumbing.

FOOL: And avoid bitterness.

INNKEEPER: I avoid the show of bitterness, like you, Fool. Now, have a glass of wine and forget your troubles.

FOOL: No. She'll be coming back soon. I'm going to hang, and must have all my wits about me.

INNKEEPER: Well and good.

FOOL: You'll see her fine white horses gallop into the courtyard and her little royal foot step out of the carriage, in her little red shoes, and then watch her tediously slow, regal approach, followed by her vicious dogs, and her minders, and then feel her masked eyes on you, measuring your will – well and good until then, Don Antonio.

INNKEEPER: I take your point, Sir. I'll bow and scrape and kneel and kiss her hem when the time comes, like you, Fool.

FOOL: Not me, Innkeeper. Tell me, who is that fellow at the table? There, the one with the goblet of your fine red wine? The wine sits there, but the fellow doesn't drink it.

INNKEEPER: He is a soldier. He neither eats nor drinks. When war was declared, he went on a murder spree. Now he touches neither food nor wine.

FOOL: I, too, have thought of murder. Often I have thought of it. At least a beating, a rape, I have thought often of those.

(The INNKEEPER crosses to the SOLDIER, whose name is RIKKI. They whisper together. The Fool looks at the ceiling. Someone grunts. The FOOL rises, sits down. The Innkeeper returns to the FOOL'S table and stands at a discreet distance, head bowed.)

FOOL: You spoke to him?

INNKEEPER: Yes. He says you are both banished now from the Kingdom, and destined to hang. It's the beginning of the end. (The INNKEEPER shifts his feet and clears his throat.)

FOOL: May I join him later?

INNKEEPER: He does not wish to give up his solitude. He does not wish to explain himself. He contemplates death, and he advises you to do the same. But he asks, perhaps you can accept a glass of wine?

FOOL: Look. He just waved and nodded. Did you see?
(Waves and nods and smiles back) Yes, please thank the soldier, and I believe I will take a glass of wine with him.

INNKEEPER: But the Queen is coming, Sir.

FOOL: Come closer. (Innkeeper takes a step. The Fool whispers:) After she leaves. Bring the wine later, Innkeeper.

INNKEEPER: I understand, Sir.

FOOL: And I shall do as the soldier does.

INNKEEPER: His name is Rikki.

FOOL: Ah, yes, Rikki. Please thank Mr. Rikki.

INNKEEPER: I will, Sir. (The INNKEEPER shuffles off. The FOOL nods and waves to RIKKI, off. SOUNDS of an approaching horse and carriage.)

9. Where is my Fool?

QUEEN: (Entering) Where is my Fool?

FOOL: I am your Fool no longer, Madam.

QUEEN: Open the damn door!

FOOL: The door is open! Come in!

QUEEN: Ah, there you are. (She doesn't look at him. He tries a deep bow, but can't pull it off.)

FOOL: I'm sorry,

QUEEN: For what?

FOOL: For failing to bow. It was useless. I'll do a back-flip instead. (He remains still.) There. You missed it.

QUEEN: You're too old for back-flips, Fool.

FOOL: True enough.

QUEEN: And silly tricks. Why didn't you come to the door when I called you? And why do I have to bounce over rocks and ditches all the way to this place, pulled by lame horses and followed by mangy dogs, followed by screaming lunatics in rags? (*Silence*) Don't go silent on me now, Fool. I didn't come all this way for silence! What do the people say?

FOOL: They say I am banished and then will hang.

QUEEN: Well, that's true enough. Banished and then hung, like the dog you are.

FOOL: Why not just hang me now?

QUEEN: I need you for the time being, Fool, as a spy.

FOOL: Yes, the further news is and that the war is lost.
(Silence. She hits him with a stick.)

FOOL: Why did you do that?

QUEEN: Because you're not answering me. You are not attending me.

FOOL: I spoke. I answered you.

QUEEN: You are my subject. And I hate you. I hate your physical presence. (The Fool does not respond. At first. Then he slaps her, hard. Pause.)

QUEEN: Ah, we're at it again, on the merry-go-round. At the Hotel Marapol.

FOOL: Don't ever hit me again.

QUEEN: Fetch the Innkeeper. (The FOOL waves. Enter the INNKEEPER.) Well, Don Antonio. This person, formerly my fool, is to hang.

INNKEEPER: I have been informed, your Majesty.

QUEEN: Be sure he suffers dearly. (The INNKEEPER nods, the FOOL looks at the sky.) What are they saying now, Innkeeper, about the Red Queen?

INNKEEPER: They are sad.

QUEEN: As well they should be. We are at War.

INNKEEPER: Some have gone on murder sprees. Others have returned with parts missing. Legs, hands, eyes, arms, feet. Others have found religion.

QUEEN: Who is that fellow over there, sitting with his wine?

FOOL: He is a soldier. He was responsible for the massacre of a village.

QUEEN: Is that so, Innkeeper?

INNKEEPER: Yes. Rikki orders a glass of wine, the best one of the region, a gleaming burgundy, deep red, and when it comes, he does not drink.

QUEEN: Why not?

INNKEEPER: He is repentant, Madam.

QUEEN: It's absurd, the subjectivity of people, wouldn't you say, Innkeeper?

INNKEEPER: I would, Madam.

QUEEN: And what are the people saying, Innkeeper, about the Realm?

INNKEEPER: Gone to the dogs, Ma'am.

QUEEN: Excellent answer. And that fellow there, Rikki, with the wine?

INNKEEPER: The chief of all dogs, Ma'am.

QUEEN: Indeed. Then we must have him shot, before he bites someone.

INNKEEPER: Immediately, your excellency.

QUEEN: Wait till, Dawn, Innkeeper, when I have settled my business and am gone from here.

INNKEEPER: Yes, of course.

QUEEN: Come closer, Innkeeper. (The Innkeeper takes a step.) Not too close. Stop there. (The Innkeeper stops) Fool, rise. (The Fool rises.) Take a step back. (The Fool takes a step back.) Now, Innkeeper, tell me, and what do they say of the Queen?

INNKEEPER: That she is quite mad.

QUEEN: There. You see, Fool? He dares to tell the truth. Give us an explanation, Innkeeper.

INNKEEPER: The problem is that she believes her thoughts, and then she says them aloud, and she believes those, and they count as actions, and then as actions she cannot retrieve them, and so her life is lost to illusion.

QUEEN: Why illusion? Where is the illusion there?

INNKEEPER: That is the problem of human speech, Madam, the human mind, the human situation.

QUEEN: I didn't get that.

INNKEEPER: Why, for example, she thinks she is divinely inspired, Madam, and that her fool is frail, and that he will soon hang.

QUEEN: What about the Fool?

INNKEEPER: He is old but not frail, he is strong and loyal and obedient-minded and very intelligent.

FOOL: Well said, Innkeeper!

QUEEN: And he will hang. The Fool is useless. He has no memory. He stoops so that his breath is labored. You can't breathe if your head is down continually and

endlessly. And his breath stinks on top of that, because of an inner rot.

FOOL: (Oh! Holy shit!)

QUEEN: He takes pills for his various aches and pains and he has no idea what he is taking, even though I have spoken on his behalf, spoken frequently on his behalf, about his health, including even to Rufus, to preserve the Fool's health, but to no avail, because he doesn't listen, and he drinks wine against my ideas, I mean my orders, secretly, and he thinks I don't know, the Fool.

FOOL: (Oh, no! I knew she knew. And she knew that I knew she knew. Anyway.)

QUEEN: That's why he is so interested in the idiot over there, the Soldier, whoever he is, sitting with his holy wine, his stupid addiction. And the man is a deserter, and he must be executed at dawn.

FOOL: (Oh, shit. That's too bad.)

QUEEN: Otherwise, they will think I am weak, they will think I am careless, and we can't have that in the Realm. The Queen is not mad, you see, only responsible and careful, ruthless and scrupulous, and we can't have that in the Realm, I mean carelessness and lack of discipline, an appearance of weakness from the authorities. We can't have that, and so the soldier must die.

FOOL: Wait. And the soldier, Rikki – does he have anything to say?

INNKEEPER: He refuses an explanation, Sir, except to say that he enjoyed the killing and the rape and the rage. Even now, he goes over and over it in his mind, and he is prepared to die.

QUEEN: Good, then. Step away, Innkeeper, while I finish with this old Fool.

INNKEEPER: As you wish, Madam. (He steps away.)

FOOL: (Obsequious!)

QUEEN: I shall no longer tarry here.

FOOL: (Tarry!)

QUEEN: I want to be gone from this stupid place.

FOOL: (The door is open!)

QUEEN: I've had enough of Fools and everybody else. I shall rule alone from now on. You? You're useless. I asked you to stay here as my spy, but you don't hear anything, you don't see anything, you don't know anything, so you're useless, and to make matters worse, you conspire with the Innkeeper and sympathize with a

deserter. So what good are you to me? You may as well hang sooner than later.

FOOL: If I spoke with the Innkeeper, it was to gather information, and I have not exchanged a single spoken word with the poor soldier.

QUEEN: The poor soldier! You have no idea of the reasons for things, why things are the way they are, why I am the way I am, the choices I make, the responsibilities I have – you know nothing.

FOOL: Where shall I go then, to die?

QUEEN: You will hang in the square, witnessed by all the people.

FOOL: (Those still alive.) Have pity, Ma'am. I'd rather hang in solitude.

QUEEN: I am Queen of the Realm. I can't afford pity.

FOOL: The people said not a bad word about you, Ma'am, not one. (They are afraid to.)

QUEEN: Plans, Fool. They have plans. I know all about it. The usual rebellion, the usual slaughter. And how dare they speak of Rufus?

FOOL: No one spoke a word of Rufus. No one knows anything about Rufus.

QUEEN: That's a lie.

FOOL: I tried to do my duty, Ma'am, in line with my ancestors.

QUEEN: You don't understand – about me and my father, Great King that he was, or about the Wisdom of Rufus and the accessibility of the Spirit World, how simple and effective it truly is – so your duty isn't much use to me. Ancestral or otherwise.

FOOL: None at all? Not even to hit on the head with a parasol?

QUEEN: None. Not even as a whipping boy. Summon my carriage!

FOOL: Summon it yourself!

QUEEN: Innkeeper!

INNKEEPER: (Entering) Here, your majesty!

QUEEN: Summon my carriage!

INNKEEPER: At once!

QUEEN: My thanks, Innkeeper. Now I leave the rest of this morning's business to you. See that you take care of it.
(Exit the RED QUEEN)

10. The Innkeeper's Explanations

INNKEEPER: I was long in service to her father, the King. In those early days, when the time came for explanations, I despaired; first I lost my temper, and then I lost what I thought was my mind. Look what Nature has wrought, I was thinking; the imbecilic eating machine, he can't help himself, and then he has to feed the little ones, and if he has some time on his hands he has to be entertained, he must watch something that flickers and be entranced. "He wants to escape his agony at any cost," said one of our Assembly, after the first war, "what harm is there in that?" "It just makes the swarm slower," said I, "and the larvae fatter for that something larger that eats it." I received some catcalls for that one. The argument went on and on into the night and came to nothing. This was the 2nd Conference of Magistrates, held here at Marapol, in the early 80's.

FOOL: I couldn't follow that, Innkeeper.

INNKEEPER: When the King was alive there were no suitors for the crown Princess, and when he died, they were spurned by the Red Queen.

FOOL: In other words, when she was young, she doted on her father, and when he, the Father, died, she remained devoted to his memory?

INNKEEPER: Yes. When the King died we listened to his moaning for days on end. He refused to stop breathing. There was a rumor that the King had buried his treasure at the bottom of the castle lake. All the fish died. The prize carp, and the miniature turtles, too, fell to the bottom, poisoned, they say, by the gold. I, the new Deputy Commander, along with the rest of the servants without seniority, was made to wait in the town. It was at that time when the future Red Queen began communing with her personal God, Rufus, in order to speak with the spirit of her father.

FOOL: And so the Chinaman was hired as an intermediary?

INNKEEPER: Yes, to act as receptor for the ghost of the King. But you knew that, of course. The Chinaman, considered the great diviner of his age, was imported from Nanking at great expense, but when he finally arrived after three months at sea and many adventures, it was found that he could not communicate with the dead King. Such is the great alchemy, simple, unknowable and pure in itself, it's own nature – but uncontrollable.

FOOL: Go on with the story.

INNKEEPER: And so the Chinaman, the Master of the *Tao*, came with his wisdom to the Red Queen. Across the seas he came. The wind brought him from afar. The wind – for what is wind, but motion, and what is motion without stillness? – brought the Ancient Chinaman from afar. And so, and so. And so on.

FOOL: He could not communicate.

INNKEEPER: The Chinaman could not communicate with the spirit of the father – because there was an impediment, an obstacle, an interference, a misunderstanding, a mistake, an arrogance, perhaps a falsity – a spirit spoke through the Chinaman, but it was not the King who spoke.

FOOL: Red. There is something in the color, red?

INNKEEPER: Yes.

FOOL: Angry, stormy, resentful, punitive.

INNKEEPER: Perhaps it was the King, after all.

FOOL: No, I don't think so.

INNKEEPER: No, I agree, I think it was in her, after all, the Red Queen, through whom the spirit spoke, and the Chinaman, helpless, a failure, began a fast, and made himself thin, transparent, and gasped, and died, finally, in the woods near the lake, and no one has found his body to

this day. He has disappeared into the elements as though he had never existed. (Pause) I'll say no more, and attend instead to the Red Queen's business, which will be the end of that wretched soldier over there, that rapist and murderer, Rikki, who sits before his glass of wine waiting for me now.

11. The Death of Rikki.

RIKKI: I look at the wine, at the color red. I feel myself looking. I lose my attention. I realize that and I return my gaze. I look at the glass. I feel my life is coming to an end, its proper and natural end. I look at the sunshine in the glass. I feel its beauty and my stomach tightens. I have had no alcohol, though I sense its strong spirit in the wine. I breathe. The air is crisp and sweet, like the air of my youth. I have absolutely no judgment upon anything, including myself. I am forgiven. The Innkeeper approaches, as he must, as he should. I listen to his footsteps, not slow, not quick, right on time, like a hunter, like a man. I am his quarry, his destination, my death is his duty. He is coming to strangle me, on the orders of the Red Queen. But he is in no hurry, his duty is clear and inevitable. He knows I will not run. I have fasted three days and nights and I have not moved from the table. Every hour I pour the wine into the dust, a perverse libation to the spirit world, an imitation of the blood running in the streets on the day of the massacre. I had become intoxicated by wine and the exhilaration of slaughter. First

the exhilaration of slaughter, the pleasure of indiscriminate killing, unbounded destruction. And then there was the madness of drunkenness and then the rape and murder of virgins. I will never be right again but I want my mind to be dry, free of alcoholic delusion, alcoholic thinking, the inflation of the ego, the bloating of the self. My path is easy because my executioner is on his way. My penance is short. Perhaps a count to a hundred and back.

(The INNKEEPER steps on stage, a garrote over his arm in place of his napkin.)

INNKEEPER: Watch as I approach the little Soldier, who is motionless as he sits in his chair staring at the wine. See how he is buck naked now, having burned his uniform and underclothing. (The stench could be smelled for miles.) Watch as I slip the rope around the Soldier's neck. His sweaty neck, red from the sun. His head is bare and I can see the movement of lice, whitish in his black hair. He takes a deep breath. When I greet him he is courteous but says he has made his peace and has nothing more to say. He encourages me to do my job well and then to clean up well after him, suggesting scavengers and beasts, perhaps, as the most effective and proper way to dispose of him. I say nothing. Perhaps I grunt. I notice a blue haze on the horizon, smoke from distant fires, the smoke of war. And then I tighten my grip around his throat. I am cutting off his breathing, I am stopping the flow of blood to his head. He gargles and his lungs gasp. He does not struggle, but spasms once or twice, and his eyes roll. A sigh (I imagine

gratitude in it) and the Soldier is gone. His name was Rikki. I took note inwardly of the fading light and then, slowly, deliberately, trying hard to know my footfalls in the sand as I walked, made my way back to the Inn, leaving the Soldier in his chair, as he was, for the vultures and the jackals, as he had requested with his final breath.

12. The Red Queen Visits the Fool in His Hovel.

QUEEN: (Entering) What is that smell?

FOOL: I don't smell anything.

QUEEN: It's you, yourself. It is the smell of corruption.

FOOL: I am not corrupt, woman.

QUEEN: Think of your children.

FOOL: Think what of my children?

QUEEN: How they must be influenced.

FOOL: How?

QUEEN: By the corruption of their father.

FOOL: I am not corrupt. The Kingdom is corrupt.

QUEEN: In his service to the Kingdom.

FOOL: I have weaknesses, but I have endured them and disputed with them.

QUEEN: You have been corrupted by this evil society, which I have striven to wipe away and purify – with fire and war, the best means possible for purification and renewal, as I have told you many times. But of course ultimately it is a personal question, a question of conscience, a question of honesty in relation to the spirit world, is it not?

FOOL: I'm sorry. I wasn't listening.

QUEEN: Fool!

FOOL: But I see a caravan coming – I see it well, full of monsters wielding sabres and shouting insults, calling me names, the “corrupt fool, the nonsense man, the dishonored one, corrupted by the world” – and it's all a lie! (Pause) No reason for that. No one deserves that from himself.

QUEEN: I beg your pardon?

FOOL: I won't get on that caravan!

QUEEN: What caravan? We have stopped all caravans since the beginning of the war.

FOOL: Never mind.

QUEEN: What are you talking about?

FOOL: You go round and round. I won't go round and round with you.

QUEEN: Well, you see why you're in your terrible situation - alone and dishonored and abandoned by your children. It's because you don't listen. It's not my fault. You don't know how to listen because your mind's been corrupted by this culture that is destroying itself. Not me, itself!

FOOL: I am not abandoned by my children.

QUEEN: Where are they?

FOOL: They prosper in an uncorrupted country. They thrive.

QUEEN: You might have joined them if you weren't to hang.

FOOL: I don't think so.

QUEEN: Yes, I doubt it they want the old Fool around. Otherwise you'd be there now and not be living in this outhouse near my castle.

FOOL: They live happily and in peace. I wouldn't want to disturb them.

QUEEN: Well, you can stay here for one day. Then you must get off this hill. We are tearing down these old places and buiding a new Royal compound.

FOOL: And the lake?

QUEEN: We're filling in the lake. We'll have a new dancing complex for the children where the lake is now.

FOOL: Walls around the compound?

QUEEN: Eight feet high, with shards of broken glass on top, and nails sticking up.

FOOL: How sad.

QUEEN: Not for me, Fool. It's a new beginning.

FOOL: I think of all the Sages and the Masters, the Rabbis and the Priests, the Messengers and the Saints, the Prophets and the Teachers of old.

QUEEN: So good, Fool, to seek out the wise advice of the elders, to learn the traditional preparations for an honorable death – willingly and not alone, with friends and relatives – perhaps even your children – and with guidance from Above, go to meet your maker like a Man!

FOOL: That wasn't you speaking, that was Rufus.

QUEEN: No, that was me, restored to sanity and responsibility at last, and the Realm will be made new from this moment on. Take our advice, old man, and seek help, before it's too late. But it's already too late, isn't it?
(Pause) However, you have made a friend of the Innkeeper, and he has interceded for you.

FOOL: How so, Madam?

QUEEN: I have spared you the ignominy of hanging. You may kill yourself. But you must get off this hill. Get off it now. Get off it soon. Get off it Today, and kill yourself, Fool. (Exit the QUEEN)

13. The Death of the Fool.

FOOL: And so, after many years of service, I was banished from my home and from the presence of my Mistress, the Queen. I packed my meager possessions into a box, my instruments – tambourines and flutes, mainly – my costume and ornamental vest, some bedclothes and my foolscap. I tied the box to my horse and rode slowly down the steep path, my feet hard on the stirrups so as not to fly to my death, but I must say – the thought had passed through my mind to let it go, let myself soar off the hill into a heavenly peace, and thus cancel right then what seemed certainly in store for me – an eternal, relentless, nameless,

pain. Down the hill I went, my heart heavy with this affliction I could not name, a grief mixed with anxiety mixed with loneliness. I missed the sound of her voice as she said, "Come, Fool," or "Stay. Fool" or "How are you, Fool," the voice of companionship, of home. I missed the view of the vast ocean and its many shades of blue and gray, and of how it met the sky at the horizon as though it marked a higher world, the beginning of heaven. I missed the crisp clean air up there on the hill. And I missed my room, with its simple cot and a desk and a chair, and a basin, and a candle, just so, and the portraits of minstrels and clowns, gifts of the Red Queen, which I did not bring with me in the box. Where to go? Who to speak to and ask for help? What to do?

QUEEN: Look what the damn Fool has given up. It's extraordinary, you'll have to admit. Protection and security, a place in the hierarchy of the State, and of course, the funds of the State, the money that comes automatically, by virtue of the Law of the Realm.

FOOL: And the rooms and corridors, the patios, the furniture, the secret doors I knew so well – and the way the fog rolled in in the morning and burned off in the afternoon. "Look how happy the sun is," I said at one point, idiotically "to be released from the fog!"

QUEEN: "You don't say," I said, "How imaginative." I have given him leave to kill himself, as opposed to the humiliation of a public hanging.

FOOL: I rode my horse down to the village below. "How could this be happening to you," I thought, "your life is over, even as the air washes your face to prepare you for your shroud." A storm was raging. Sand and dust were cleansing my face. The wind howled and whistled. I felt as though my face were insubstantial, a kind of nothing, an anti-face, a face without flesh, with a brow, a forehead, cheekbones and a jaw, but devoid of flesh. I could see out through squinty eyes, through narrow slits, the devastation of the village. I could not see anything left alive, not even a dog. "Where are the women and children?", I thought, "Where are the warriors of Revolution?, "Who will bury me according to the rites? Or must I climb to a high place and let the birds pick at my corpse?" But there were no birds. My eyes began to tear and my stalwart horse to stumble downward as I rode. I could hardly breathe. Finally we crashed over a large rock and I fell forward off the horse and hit the ground with a thud. I was bleeding from my ears. "How strange," I thought, "Dust to dust, after all. Dust to Dust." It was a mantra that would not stop. "Dust to dust, after all. Dust to dust." It was as though all those years in the service of the Queen had been a lie, perhaps a distraction. Perhaps I did not see enough of my actual situation: the flesh peeling from my bones, the thought fading from my eyes like water from a pond. Now my breath grew shallower and then I fell into the soft ground. It was as though my grave had been prepared (as it was of course, years ago, by the Queen) and now all I must do is lay down softly, no fuss, no sound,

just lay my weary bones down into the ground, which received me like vapor, like breath. And then the earth exhaled into the fog, with a murmur, and a light shone, flickered, on the horizon, God knows why, and I had become a part of the Earth forever, like the wise Chinaman of old.

Epilogue

14. The Fool In Paradise

FOOL: Ah. No virgins, no sex. No bodies in parts, no blood splattered fingers or guts: just the spirit of goodness, still, eternal. No air, no Earth forever. No forever. No burning. No fire. No movement, no flowing. No water, no ice. No Queens or Kings. No violence, only light and the touch of light. No supremacy, no inferiority. Only Being.

THE END

Murray Mednick
Pacific Palisades
11/14/13