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EXT. BROAD STREET -- PHILADELPHIA -- PRESENT DAY -- DAY

A gray, late afternoon/dusk, cold enough to see breath.

A trash truck moves building to building, stopping periodically. Each stop, a TRASHMAN jumps from the back of the truck, moves to the alley between buildings.

The Trashman flips the lids from the cans, grabs the plastic bags within, tosses them into the rear of the truck. He bangs the side of the truck, the truck moves on.

As a hip-hop beat punctuates these images, a mature female voice recites def poetry over:

AMERICA (V.O.)

...but the streets --
 They ain't the lonely thing;
 That's reserved for the game of
 hide and seek you play after dark,
 When things come alive in the park,
 When everyone just looks for that
 spark
 To light their way or their barrel;
 And warmth is measured in the
 number of bodies you got layin'
 next to you...
 If you got any at all,
 'Cause like I said,
 The night's the lonely thing.

A hundred feet up, a FIGURE bends into a trash can in another alleyway. A threadbare, ratty wool coat hovers above mismatched, shredded Ugh boots.

Various pieces of trash fly as the Figure rummages through the can.

At the sound of the trash truck airbrakes, the VO poetry ends abruptly as the Figure stands, swings around.

This is AMERICA MORRISON, late 30s, early 40s, African-American, dirty, dusty braids, with the body language of a cheetah in the Veldt. She bends around the alley corner, eyes wide.

AMERICA

(rhythmically)

Shit. Shit.
 God damn it.

America jumps back to the trash can, vigorously digging through it.

AMERICA
 (from inside the can)
 Fuckin' guys early one day,
 Late the next...

Trash flies.

AMERICA
 Can't never get no schedule set...
 How'm I s'pose to get...

America jumps up, a small pad of paper in her hand.

AMERICA
 Ah-hah!

America flips through the empty pad, kisses it, and tucks it into her coat. She wraps the lapels across her chest, hustles up the street, looks back to gauge the trash truck's progress.

EXT. SYMPHONY HOUSE RESIDENCE -- BROAD STREET -- DAY

A towering high-rise of luxury apartments, fronted by an oversized burgundy awning covering a rich red carpet.

America approaches, eyes the main entrance warily, then moves to the mouth of an alleyway at the side of the building.

She flips off the lid to a trash can and starts to rummage through it.

ARKIS (O.S.)
 What the fuck I tell you about
 comin' around here, bitch?

America spins to face the hawkish features of VERNON ARKIS, doorman/building manager of Symphony House. Fear crosses her face as she backs against the alley wall.

ARKIS
 Didn't I tell you I'd smack your
 sorry ass? You remember that?

Arkis makes a lunge at America, but she ducks under his arm's swing. But not quite far enough...Arkis gets a hand on her coat, pulls her back around. A roundhouse slap bounces off America's head.

America screams and kicks wildly, enough to back Arkis off. She runs from the alley and onto Broad Street.

Arkis chases her as far as the sidewalk.

ARKIS

There's more where that came from,
you don't stay away from here, you
understand? This trash is too good
for you, you hear? Fuckin' bum.

America dodges cars as she hurries across Broad Street. She
turns and yells back across the traffic.

AMERICA

Your voice
Is noise...
You busboy,
Altar boy,
Asshole...

America tucks into a storefront entrance, watches Arkis go
back into Symphony House.

AMERICA

Fucker.

EXT. ENTRANCEWAY -- SYMPHONY HOUSE -- DAY

Arkis moves toward the Doorman's station, but stops when an
ELDERLY JAPANESE COUPLE exits the lobby elevator. A smile
explodes on his face.

ARKIS

(syrupy fawning)
Mr. and Mrs. Yamada. How are we
today? Going for a walk? Nice
morning for it.

Mr. Yamada gives a perfunctory bow of the head to Arkis as he
guides his wife out onto the street.

MR. YAMADA

Ohayoo gozaimasu.
(good day)

Arkis watches them go. The smile on his face changes to a
smirk of disdain.

ARKIS

(under his breath)
Learn-a to speak-a de English,
gook.

As Arkis turns back into the lobby, he nearly slams into a
smiling CHARLIE EMSON, 20s, a smallish, rail thin man.

Charlie stands rocking from foot to foot, carrying a pail and mop. His facial features import that he's a person with Down Syndrome .

ARKIS

Jesus, Charlie! You retards are always sneakin' around, goddamn it! Honest to God, if your daddy hadn't owned this building...

CHARLIE

I'm sorry, Vern--

ARKIS

It's Mister Arkis to you, Charlie. Don't want the tenants to think we're buddy-buddy, now do we? Next thing you know, they'll be splittin' my tips with you. Start moppin' that lobby.

Charlie smiles and proudly lifts the mop and bucket, then moves back toward the elevators.

INT. LOBBY -- SYMPHONY HOUSE -- DAY

Charlie starts to mop the floor.

The elevator doors open and a WOMAN emerges. She's average size, but her features can't be seen, as she is wrapped in a full-length, black wool cape, the hood of which is pulled down over her head and face.

The only thing visible are her hands -- black skin, thin fingers, and a large blue diamond cluster ring.

Charlie stops mopping as the figure approaches.

CHARLIE

Hi, Ms. Fanning.

ROBERTA FANNING stops a moment, her hand reaching out of the cape and touching Charlie's arm before moving on.

EXT. ENTRANCEWAY -- SYMPHONY HOUSE -- DAY

Roberta passes Arkis, who doesn't see her. He's on the phone.

ARKIS

(quietly)

Yeah, it's open, but it's gotta be right now...

(MORE)

ARKIS (CONT'D)
 (seeing Roberta)
 Call me back.

Arkis leaps to the door a tad late to open it for her.

ARKIS
 (again fawning)
 Hey, Ms. Fanning. Lovely day.

Roberta ignores Arkis, moves out onto Broad Street.

Arkis turns back to the Doorman's station.

ARKIS
 Freak.

CHARLIE
 You shouldn't talk like that about
 Ms. Fanning, Vern--
 (off Arkis' vicious
 stare)
 Uh...Mr. Arkis. Anyway, she writes
 pretty poems.

ARKIS
 Uh-huh.

CHARLIE
 I read them in school. She's a
 Nobel person.

ARKIS
 Yeah, well, she ain't written shit
 in years. And in a couple months,
 she ain't gonna be livin' here
 either. Hidin' upstairs under a
 hood ain't payin' no bills. Now
 shut up and get that mop swingin'.

EXT. BROAD STREET -- DAY

America sees Roberta leave. She notices Roberta wrapping her
 hooded cape tighter around her body.

AMERICA
 Gotta get me one a' them...

America grabs the lapels of her tattered coat and tries to
 wrap it tighter around herself. With a glance toward Symphony
 House, she moves across and up the street, past a MAN in a
 business suit and cashmere overcoat.

INT. ENTRANCEWAY -- SYMPHONY HOUSE -- DAY

The Man enters and walks to Arkis. On the Man's arm is a YOUNG WOMAN, maybe 30, in a short skirt and fur-trimmed, white leather jacket.

The Man pulls an envelope from his pocket and hands it to Arkis.

MAN

I'm to give this to Vern.

ARKIS

Vernon.

MAN

Excuse me?

ARKIS

Vernon. You're to give that to Vernon.

MAN

What's the difference?

ARKIS

Nothing. I can just make you say it, that's all. You want to say it or you want to take your honey somewhere's else?

The Man stares at Arkis a moment.

MAN

Vernon. Okay?

Arkis looks into the envelope.

INSERT: THE ENVELOPE

Arkis's thumb slides across a stack of twenties.

BACK TO SCENE

Arkis looks up and smiles. He hands the Man a key.

ARKIS

Fifth floor. It's booked at six, so that gives you...

(checks his watch)

...fifty minutes. Can you get it done in fifty minutes, stud?

The Man takes the key, moves to the elevators.

Charlie glances at the Man and Young Woman, then at Arkis, then goes back to his mopping.

EXT. BROAD STREET -- DAY

America moves up the sidewalk, the rhythm of her walk sounding cadence for her talking.

AMERICA

(to herself)

Can you hear me, 'Zette?
I keep rhyming, yet
Do the rhymes I'm saying
Somehow find you maybe?
Everyday I try to
Send this message to you,
Do you hear it, do you?
Can you hear me, 'Zette?

America passes SQUINTS, a graying, bespectacled, homeless man impossible to age, warming himself on a subway grate.

He sees her, rises quickly, and falls into step with her.

SQUINTS

Hey, Miss America. Who's you
talkin' to?

America doesn't look at him.

AMERICA

Nobody.

SQUINTS

(laughs)

Uh-huh. You always talkin'. Makin'
them poems. Any luck today?
Anything you can share? I'm a
little hungry.

America shakes her head.

SQUINTS

Where you goin' now?

AMERICA

Nowhere.

America picks up her pace. Squints has a hard time keeping up, finally slows to a stop.

SQUINTS

Walkin' awful fast goin' nowhere,
America.

America cuts away from Squints as she reaches the corner of South Street, crosses the street.

EXT. SOUTH STREET -- NIGHT

America slows as she approaches a neon-lit club entrance.

The club's door is framed by posters and a large sign above it that reads, "STANZAS -- Philadelphia's Premiere Poetry Stage".

Several PATRONS stop at the door, show the SECURITY MAN their ID, pay the cover.

America tucks tightly behind the last group of Patrons, head down. As the Patrons move into the club, America tries to move with them.

A hand grabs America's arm.

SECURITY MAN

Whoa, whoa, whoa, sweetheart. Where you goin'? Let's see some ID and ten American dollars.

America pulls her arm from his grasp. She points to the Patrons just entering.

AMERICA

I'm with them.

SECURITY MAN

Uh-huh.

(calls to the Patrons)

Hey. You know her? She with you?

A couple of the Patrons shake their heads.

SECURITY MAN

Thought so.

(to America)

Move along, honey. Nothin' for you here. Let these folks through.

He tries to guide America aside. She sloughs off his hand, tries to enter the club again.

The Security Man stands and blocks the door.

SECURITY MAN

I ain't fuckin' with you now, girl.
 Move on down the way 'fore I call
 five-oh on ya.

America glares at him a moment, then moves off. The Security Man turns to a COUPLE, checking ID.

America stops at the end of the club building, looks back, then glances up at a billboard on the building wall.

INSERT -- THE BILLBOARD

It's an announcement of an "American Poetry Symposium / Sponsored by the University of Pennsylvania / For the Purpose of Endowing the Wordsworth Chair in Poetry / Poetry's Top Names in Performance."

At the bottom of the poster is a picture of a distinguished BLACK MAN, and the words "Moderated by Orrin Mays Stanley, Chairman, UPenn's Department of English Literature".

BACK TO SCENE

America stares at the picture of Orrin Mays Stanley. Her jaw sets. She glances at the Security Man, whose back is to her.

America pulls out a marker, steps to the poster, and maniacally crosses out the picture of Stanley. She then moves off quickly up the street.

EXT. EMPTY LOT -- NIGHT

The typical bombed-out look of an abandoned neighborhood.

At the back corner of the lot, a group of HOMELESS MEN and WOMEN crowd around a barrel fire. They have monikers that are more description than names: WHISPER, SNACKS, FINGERS, BOSTON, LITTLE JEANNIE. Squints is there too.

America approaches, sits on a concrete block.

SQUINTS

(to America)

This the nowhere you was in such a
 hurry to get to?

America crinkles her nose at Squints, pulls out a pad and starts to write.

BOSTON
 (to Squints)
 What you talkin' 'bout?

AMERICA
 (without looking up)
 He's talking 'bout nothing.

SQUINTS
 Nothing. Nowhere. Same thing. Both
 here.

SNACKS
 Got that right.

Whisper throws a table leg on the fire.

WHISPER
 (obvious why the name)
 What you doin', A?

America pulls the notepad closer to her body, curls around
 it.

AMERICA
 Nothin'.

SQUINTS
 Is everything nothin' with you?

FINGERS
 We may be homeless, but we ain't
 blind, Sugar.

BOSTON
 Uh-huh. Last time I looked, what
 you doin's called writin', not
 nothin'.

AMERICA
 (looking at Squints)
 Nothin' you'd be interested in,
 then.

SQUINTS
 How you know that? Maybe we would
 be.
 (looks at the others)
 Right?

A chorus of "Uh-huhs" and "That's right."

LITTLE JEANNIE

Read us some, honey. Take us outta
here a minute or two.

America shakes her head.

WHISPER

Go on, A...We wanta hear.

America looks around, then slowly pulls her notepad out,
turns it to the light of the fire.

AMERICA

Called "Eye of God."

America looks around the circle. All eyes are on her.

AMERICA

Under the black sky
Where I can't tell the moon
From the halogen streetlamp
That hangs over me
Like the eye of a God in judgment,
I wonder why it's me here
And not some other poor slob.
Why I'm the lonely one on the
lonely streets under the lonely
night
With the eye of God in judgment...
But the streets --
They ain't the lonely thing;
That's reserved for the game of
hide and seek you play after dark,
When things come alive in the park
When everyone just looks for that
spark
To light their way or their barrel;
And warmth is measured in the
number of bodies you got layin'
next to you...
If you got any at all,
'Cause like I said,
The night's the lonely thing
And the only thing that makes it
right...
The only bright spot down here on
this earth...

(MORE)

AMERICA (CONT'D)
 Is the touch of another's warmth,
 The sound of another's voice,
 The wet of another's tear
 Shed for me and us alone in this
 Night
 Under this light
 Under this moon
 Under this eye of God.

America stops. All are silent. The only movement is Whispers' head, which nods in agreement or approval, or maybe both.

EXT. STREET ALONG FRONT OF EMPTY LOT -- NIGHT

A van slows and stops. The driver, MARCUS SIMPSON, 50s, and his passenger, CARL LYSTECKI, 40s, look across the lot at the group of huddled homeless.

SIMPSON
 Maybe over there.

Simpson and LystECKI exit the van.

EXT. EMPTY LOT -- NIGHT

Simpson and LystECKI approach the group, all of whom stand like deer about to bolt into the invisibility of the forest of buildings around them.

America shrinks behind the group, then slinks toward a building behind her.

SIMPSON
 It's okay, folks. This isn't a roust. Just looking for someone is all. I'm Marcus Simpson...some of you may know me from Social Services.
 (to Whisper)
 Arnold, you saw me last week, remember?

WHISPER
 (looking at others)
 Name's Whisper.

SIMPSON
 Yes. Whisper. I'm sorry.
 (indicates LystECKI)
 This's Carl LystECKI. I'm helping him out tonight.

Lystecki holds up a very outdated, but recognizable picture of America.

LYSTECKI

I'm looking for a young woman. Her name's America Stanley, but I'm told she's using the name America Suzette Morrison.

SQUINTS

Suzette!?

The group snickers.

SQUINTS

Don't know no Suzette.

LYSTECKI

How about America? You know America?

Little Jeannie opens her arms to the vacant lot.

LITTLE JEANNIE

You're lookin' at our America, mister.

INT. BURNED OUT BUILDING SHELL -- NIGHT

America moves quickly through the building, her footing sure through practice. She can see the group talking to Simpson and Lystecki through the paneless windows as she moves quietly away through the building and into the night.

EXT. STREET ALONG FRONT OF EMPTY LOT -- NIGHT

Simpson and Lystecki approach their van.

SIMPSON

That's the best place I can think of. You want to circle around a while?

Lystecki doesn't react, pulls out his cell phone and dials.

LYSTECKI

(into phone)

It's Lystecki. She wasn't where we heard she'd be...Yeah...No, I won't. I'll find her. Just a matter of...Okay. What time?...Where?

Lystecki closes his phone, climbs in the van.

SIMPSON

Client?

LYSTECKI

(nods)

Always in a hurry.

Simpson smiles, puts the van in gear and drives off.

INT. UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA -- REGENT'S BOARD ROOM --
NIGHT

ORRIN MAYS STANLEY, 60's, a distinguished black man who holds himself with the crispness of a man acclimated to seldom being contradicted, touches off a cell phone and turns back to the room.

He faces three OLDER GENTLEMEN -- REGENTS of the University of Pennsylvania.

ORRIN

I'm sorry, gentlemen. Where were we?

REGENT 1

I was just saying that I believe the symposium will be good for the university, Orrin. Good for community relations, good for our image.

ORRIN

But you proceeded without my approval. And I won't --

REGENT 2

We don't need your approval, Dr. Stanley. Just your involvement. But if you'd rather not, I'm sure we could --

ORRIN

Are you threatening me, John?

REGENT 3

Gentlemen, please. There's no need for disharmony here. We're all working toward the same goal, are we not?

ORRIN

Are we? What we're endowing here will be the premiere position in American poetic letters. Are we going to muddy it's reputation before we even bestow it? The Wordsworth Chair in American Poetry requires -- no, demands -- the highest level of craft. Do you really think we're going to find that in a Bohemian street poetry...nightclub?

REGENT 1

You ever been to one of those readings, Orrin?

Orrin doesn't even consider answering.

ORRIN

I told you who I feel would be right for the Chair. Roberta Fanning is a Nobel laureate, the voice of a generation. A poet equal to the Chair's namesake. And she lives right here in Philadelphia.

REGENT 2

And she hasn't been seen in public, nor published one word in God knows how long.

ORRIN

Word has it that she's readying a new manuscript right now. But what's that got to do with it anyway? It's my department. It should be my decision who sits--

Regent 1 rises from his chair.

REGENT 1

Orrin, please.

Regent 2 moves to a coffee cart, pours a cup.

REGENT 2

It's a matter of relevance. And if you'd be honest with yourself, you'd know it. Times are changing.

(MORE)

REGENT 2 (CONT'D)

If we as a university want to attract the coming generations -- and their tuition dollars -- then we must dress ourselves in the fashions of the day.

ORRIN

What about standards? What about taste? Do we discard them along with our responsibility to those who handed them to us?

REGENT 1

Of course not. That's where you come in, Orrin. You'll make the recommendation.

ORRIN

Then I insist that Roberta Fanning--

REGENT 3

Then perhaps you ought to personally invite her to the symposium, Orrin. Because we are committed at this point. The next chair will come from that competition. That is our decision.

Orrin stares at Regent 3, then at the other two. Then he turns abruptly and leaves the room.

INT. LOBBY -- SYMPHONY HOUSE -- NIGHT

Roberta Fanning, still wrapped in her cape and hood, enters, several books in her arms.

Arkis leaps up, walks beside the hooded, hidden form.

ARKIS

Evenin', Ms. Fanning. At the library again?

Roberta says nothing, moves to the elevators. Arkis punches the floor button in the elevator.

ARKIS

There you go.

The doors close without Roberta saying a word.

ARKIS

Freak.

INT. ROBERTA FANNING'S PENTHOUSE -- NIGHT

Roberta drops her keys and books on a side table as she enters. She sloughs off the cape, drops it on a nearby chair.

Roberta's 50s, with aristocratic features and intelligent eyes, but her body language is tired, almost fragile, as if moonlight would crush her.

Roberta moves into the kitchen, makes a cup of tea.

She then returns to the main room, sits at a desk that overlooks the skyline.

Roberta picks up a legal pad of paper, poises a pencil over it, then begins writing.

ROBERTA (V.O.)

Those in our hearts never really
leave;
A piece of them continues;
They may leave us here alone to
grieve,
As if the grieving gives them
virtue.

Roberta stops, tears off the page, wads it up and tosses it toward a waste basket. She puts pencil to pad again.

ROBERTA (V.O.)

When loved ones leave us suddenly,
A piece of them remains
To aid us in the grieving,
To dissipate the pain.

Roberta stops again, scratches this last verse out almost angrily, tears the page up and tosses it.

ROBERTA

Damn it.

Roberta is startled by the ring of her phone. She touches the speakerphone button.

ROBERTA

Yes.

WALLINGS (O.S.)

(on speakerphone)

Roberta. My name's Mike Wallings.
At William Morris. I believe Bill
Condon told you I'd be calling?

ROBERTA

I seem to recall Bill mentioning something, yes. How is he?

WALLINGS (O.S.)

Enjoying retirement, I hear.

ROBERTA

He deserves it.

WALLINGS (O.S.)

Yes he does. He'll be missed by both of us, I'm sure. He was a good agent. I learned a lot from him.

An awkward moment of silence. A throat clear.

WALLINGS (O.S.)

I, uh...I'm calling about the new book, of course.

ROBERTA

Of course.

Roberta reaches across the desk, picks up a large manila folder stuffed thick with pages.

WALLINGS (O.S.)

I was wondering how it's coming? It's a bit...overdue, I think is the way the publisher put it today.

Roberta thumbs through the pages in the folder, then places it back on the desk.

ROBERTA

Yes, well, I'm still rewriting a bit.

Another moment's silence.

INT. PETER MILL'S OFFICE -- MILLS AND BRACE PUBLISHING -- NIGHT

MIKE WALLINGS stands next to the large desk in the well-appointed office, the phone to his ear.

WALLINGS

I understand you've been doing that for quite a while now.

INTERCUT: TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

ROBERTA

It takes time, Mr. Wallings.

WALLINGS

I understand, yes. Of course. But hear me out on this...The University of Pennsylvania is endowing a new Chair -- the Wordsworth Chair in Poetry -- and word is they want someone with your credentials --Nobel Laureate, former State Poet Laureate.

ROBERTA

Sounds interesting.

WALLINGS

Yes. But they also want someone who is writing today. Now. Which means we need to get this new book out, or at least in the pipeline. I don't need to tell you how important it would be to tie your appointment to the Wordsworth Chair with the release of the book. How close are you?

ROBERTA

(glances at folder)

Oh, I'm close.

WALLINGS

Then I can pick up the manuscript? Say Friday? Would Friday work?

Roberta sits back in her chair, unsettled. She doesn't answer.

WALLINGS

Roberta?

ROBERTA

I just don't think --

WALLINGS

Roberta...We don't have any more time. Mr. Mills reminded me today -- rather pointedly, in fact -- that he paid you a substantial advance almost two years ago.

Roberta drops her head, rubs her temples with her free hand.

WALLINGS

We need to give them something.

ROBERTA

I will not give them a manuscript that's not ready, Mr. Wallings. I simply--

WALLINGS

You don't have a choice, Ms. Fanning. They're threatening legal action.

A long silence.

WALLINGS

So I will come by on Friday, then.

Again, silence.

WALLINGS

Roberta?

ROBERTA

Yes. Yes, Friday.

WALLINGS

Good. Thank you Roberta. This will work out, I promise you. I look forward to meeting you.

Roberta punches off the phone, opens the manuscript on the desk, turns a couple of the pages.

ROBERTA

It'll be here, but it's shit.

Roberta takes her tea cup to the windows and looks out at the night city skyline.

INT. PETER MILL'S OFFICE -- NIGHT

Wallings punches off his phone, looks up across the desk at PETER MILLS, a dark, sharp, edgy man sitting with his fingers tented in front of his face.

MILLS

You think she'll have it?

WALLINGS

Sounded like it, yes.

MILLS

She better. I'm through waiting.

INT. 30TH STREET STATION -- NIGHT

Almost completely empty. The large clock hanging from the ceiling in the center of the station reads 3:22 am.

In a dark corner, huddled into the back of an alcove, America sits scribbling on her little pad, a can of Lipton Iced tea balanced on her knee.

AMERICA (V.O.)

The quiet numbs,
Plumbs your soul,
Makes you remember the unquiet
times
When all of life seemed to be
screaming,
When even your own soul wailed like
a coyote in the canyons;
But now it's quiet.
So quiet.
And there's no quiet like middle of
the night quiet,
Alone on the planet quiet,
Wondering where you fit quiet,
Looking for where you stepped off
the track quiet,
Afraid you'll never get back quiet.
That's the quiet that numbs...

EXT. BROAD STREET -- DAY

Early morning rush hour. Bright and cold.

America, trying in vain to wrap herself against the cold, moves up the street, checking trash cans, panhandling the occasional PASSERBY in the thick commuter crowd.

INT. LYSTECKI'S CAR -- DAY

Carl Lystecki sips a cup of coffee, watches the street.

THROUGH THE WINDSHIELD

he sees America. He checks the old photo, then sets the coffee on the dashboard, exits the car.

EXT. BROAD STREET -- DAY

Lystecki tries to cross the street, moving toward an unsuspecting America.

A car almost hits him. The DRIVER honks his horn, curses out the window.

America hears this, looks up. She sees Lystecki coming quickly across the street, his eyes on her. She takes off.

Lystecki pursues her, about 60 feet back. Both of them dodge around and through the thick crowd of rush hour PEDESTRIANS.

America dashes across a cross street just as a bus pulls around the corner, which blocks Lystecki's view.

America sees the burgundy awning of Symphony House 30 feet ahead. Standing at the doorway is Vernon Arkis. He's busy with a DELIVERY MAN.

America slows her pace, moves expertly among the crowd.

When she comes to the alleyway next to Symphony House, she ducks into it.

The bus finally clears the intersection, allowing Lystecki

to continue. He looks for America, but can't see her. He runs past Symphony House and on up Broad.

INT. ALLEYWAY BESIDE SYMPHONY HOUSE -- DAY

A pile of trash bags near a big dumpster. America is tucked into the wall beside the dumpster, several trash bags pulled around her. Her eyes are wide, her breath rapid.

The side door to Symphony House suddenly flies open, bangs against the wall, scaring the bejesus out of America. Her shriek scares the bejesus out of Charlie, who has emerged with a trash bag in each hand.

America jumps up from her hiding place, moving like a mongoose sizing up a cobra -- short, up and down, side to side shifts, uncertain whether to run or fight. Charlie smiles at this.

Charlie's smile disarms America. She stops her odd movements. Then starts again. This makes Charlie laugh out loud.

CHARLIE
What are you doing?

America stops. She looks to the mouth of the alley, then back to Charlie.

AMERICA
Playing hide and seek.

CHARLIE
You are?

AMERICA
Uh-huh. And I need a place to hide.
You have a place to hide?

CHARLIE
No...

AMERICA
How 'bout...

America points to the basement door.

CHARLIE
Inside?
(off America's nod)
Sure. I guess so.

America darts inside. Charlie watches her, then drops the two trash bags in his hands and follows her in.

EXT. BROAD STREET -- DAY

Lystecki stops. It's obvious he's lost America.

LYSTECKI
Shit.

Lystecki turns and retraces his steps back up Broad.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- BASEMENT -- DAY

Concrete and block walls, bare-bulb stark, sooty, dusty.
Stored junk, huge heaters and blowers, assorted equipment.

Charlie closes and locks the door, then turns. No America.

CHARLIE
Where are you?
(no answer)
Are you hiding now?

Charlie hears a noise. He walks around one of the blowers, into a large open space. He sees America next to a huge pile of trash bags. She's bent over one, searching through it.

CHARLIE
You gonna hide in a bag?

AMERICA
(without looking up)
Looking for treasure.

CHARLIE
There's no treasure in there.
There's only trash.

AMERICA
Oh, no. No, no. Look...

America reaches into the trash bag and pulls out a small, hinged box -- the kind a new watch comes in.

AMERICA
See? A treasure box. Just need the
treasure.

Charlie smiles big, his face full of fascination.

A trash bag suddenly falls from a chute opening in the ceiling, lands on the pile. America is startled, jumps back, does her mongoose thing again.

Charlie laughs, points to the chute opening.

CHARLIE
That's where they come from. From
upstairs.
(proudly)
I carry them out.

America goes back to the bag, but glances warily at the chute above as she does so.

CHARLIE
Any treasure?

AMERICA
Always treasure...

She pulls out a ballpoint pen, clicks it.

AMERICA
See?

Charlie smiles, takes the pen from America, who digs back into the bag, comes up with a single blue, wool glove.

AMERICA

Oh, yes... The hand gets
The warm threads...
(holds the glove up)
Real treasure.

CHARLIE

But there's only one.

AMERICA

Better than none.

America digs into another bag, stiffens, and stands upright, something in her hands.

AMERICA

Oh...

CHARLIE

What?

America turns, a huge smile on her face. She shows Charlie an almost full package of Oreos Extra Creme.

AMERICA

(poetically)
Somebody doesn't seem
To like the creme in-between.
You like the creme?

Charlie nods eagerly. He and America plop down onto the pile of bags. America hands Charlie a cookie, takes one for herself. They both twist them apart to get the creme.

CHARLIE

Treasure.

AMERICA

(around a mouthful of
cookie)
Mm-hmm. Good treasure.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- LOBBY -- DAY

A TALL BUSINESSMAN, 40s and balding, with a THIN REDHEAD, 20s, on his arm, approaches Arkis at the doorman's stand.

The Tall Businessman hands Arkis an envelope, takes a key from him.

ARKIS
Five-Twelve. One hour.

The Tall Businessman nods, moves toward the elevators.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- BASEMENT -- DAY

Charlie and America both twist open cookies, lick the creme.

CHARLIE
Where do you live?

America points to the alley door.

CHARLIE
Outside?
(off America's nod)
It's cold, isn't it?

AMERICA
Sometimes a choice
Is not what they give;
Sometimes a choice
We make just to live...

CHARLIE
(smiling at her)
I wouldn't want to live outside.

AMERICA
Sometimes you need to hide
And not be found;
A game of hide and seek
On neutral ground...

CHARLIE
I used to play hide and seek. I was
good. Mom could never find me. You
want to play with me?

AMERICA
Be warm and left alone.
Only game I want to play.
Be warm and left alone.
(she glances at Charlie)
Okay?

CHARLIE
You talk like my book.

America hands Charlie another cookie.

AMERICA

What book?

Charlie twists the cookie open.

CHARLIE

Come on. I'll show you.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- BASEMENT -- CHARLIE'S ROOM -- DAY

America sits on a small cot, looks around the walk-in-closet-sized room. There's a small desk with a lamp, a chifforobe, a nightstand. Movie posters on the walls.

CHARLIE

I used to live upstairs...before...

Charlie's face skews a bit -- a painful memory.

AMERICA

Upstairs?

CHARLIE

(nods)

But this is where Vernon tells me I live now.

America looks around the room. Her eyes fall on a book on the nightstand. On the cover is a picture of a black woman -- a younger Roberta Fanning. America picks up the book, looks at it.

CHARLIE

That's Ms. Fanning's book. She lives upstairs.

INSERT: THE BOOK

A dog-eared copy of "The Constancy of Soul", Roberta Fanning's first book of poetry -- a banner across one corner proclaims it "Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature".

CHARLIE (V.O.)

It's my favorite. You talk like it.

BACK TO SCENE

AMERICA

I talk like it?

CHARLIE

Uh-huh. Like in poems. You read poems?

America's face freezes, her eyes defocus. She nods slowly, then looks down at the book as she opens it. She looks at a poem closely, reading it to herself, her finger running down the lines.

America turns the page, reads another. She's a little excited.

AMERICA

Oh...

CHARLIE

You like it?

America nods.

AMERICA

Like my mother...
(looks to Charlie)
Where is she?

CHARLIE

Upstairs. But she hides too, like you. She wears a...a kind of...

Charlie tries to indicate a hood, then wraps himself in his arms.

CHARLIE

...thing...around her. Kind of hides.
(excited)
Maybe she'd like to play with us.

AMERICA

Charlie, I...

The elevator ding nearby stops her, and the angry voice of Vernon Arkis makes America drop the book and stand in abject fear.

ARKIS (V.O.)

Charlie! Where the hell are you, boy? Why aren't you upstairs watering the plants like I told you?

America is once again the mongoose...terrified, not knowing where to go, what to do.

Charlie puts his finger to his lips, then moves to his door.

CHARLIE

Be right there, Vern...uh, Mr.
Arkis. I'm sorry. Be right there.

ARKIS (V.O.)

Don't want to have to hold back
your dinner, you hear what I'm
sayin'?

CHARLIE

Be right there.

At the sound of the elevator doors closing, Charlie takes America's hand and guides her to the alley door. America bounds up the steps and into the alley.

CHARLIE

Come back when you want to get warm
and look for treasures. And we
still have to play hide and seek.

America smiles at Charlie, then moves quickly up the alley toward Broad Street.

Charlie watches her go, then sighs, and goes back into the basement.

EXT. ALLEYWAY ENTRANCE ONTO BROAD STREET -- DAY

America emerges from the alley, but jumps back immediately.

Standing at the entrance of Symphony House, talking to Arkis, is Lystecki. He shows Arkis the photo. Arkis nods his head, points up and down the street.

America looks to the back of the alley for another way out. It's a dead end. And Charlie's already gone, the door closed.

EXT. SYMPHONY HOUSE ENTRANCE -- DAY

Arkis hands the picture of America back to Lystecki.

ARKIS

She's a pain in my ass is what she
is. Filthy bitch. If it were up to
me, I'd smack her with--

The doors suddenly open and Roberta Fanning, again hidden in her cape and hood, exits.

Arkis, with a glance to Lystecki, pops into fawning mode, his voice loud.

ARKIS
Uh...Miss Fanning! Hello!

EXT. ALLEYWAY ENTRANCE ONTO BROAD STREET -- DAY

America leans up against the wall, listening.

ARKIS (O.S.)
Anything I can do for you, Miss Fanning?

EXT. SYMPHONY HOUSE ENTRANCE -- DAY

Fanning ignores Arkis completely, moves down the block.

Arkis turns back to Lystecki, his hardass face on again.

ARKIS
As I was saying...

LYSTECKI
(disdainfully)
Yeah, yeah. I got it.
(hands Arkis a card)
And before you go smacking anybody, give me a call, she comes around again.

Lystecki moves off. Arkis sucks his teeth and watches him go before he tears up the card.

EXT. BROAD STREET -- DAY

Fanning passes the alley entrance, where America leans up against the wall.

America peers around the corner, sees Lystecki moving away and Arkis going back inside.

America jumps out of the alley, blends into the crowd, and moves up the street, several paces behind Fanning.

America tries to tighten her ratty coat against the cold.

Her eyes fall on Fanning ahead of her, the cape and hood wrapped around her, looking warm.

America quickens her pace.

EXT. CORNER OF BROAD AND WALNUT STREETS -- DAY

Fanning stops, looks at the lights, and seeing she can cross, steps into the intersection.

Two seconds later, America reaches the curb. She calls out.

AMERICA

'Scuse me! Hey! Hey, Miss Roberta
Fanning!

Fanning stops in the near lane of the intersection and turns, looks back into the eyes of America.

AMERICA

I have poems too;
And maybe you
Can help me to...

At that instant, a delivery truck runs the light on Walnut, broadsiding an SUV on Broad. The impact of the collision hurls the SUV across the intersection, where it slams into Fanning.

Fanning is thrown two dozen feet back onto the sidewalk, where she rolls like a ragdoll, ending up on her stomach, broken, bent and unconscious, her cape covering her like a shroud.

America backs against the wall of a building, stunned.

AMERICA

I didn't mean...I didn't...

Shocked PEDESTRIANS, and a moment later, a UNIFORMED COP, rush to Fanning's side. The Uniformed Cop reaches for his shoulder mic.

UNIFORMED COP

Fourteen-twenty to base. I need a
bus at Broad and Walnut, stat. Got
a pedestrian down. Looks bad.

The Uniformed Cop reaches down and pulls the cape from Fanning to better assess her condition. He tosses the cape to the side.

The cape lands at the feet of America Morrison, who looks down at it, then around at the CROWD collecting to gaze at the drama unfolding before them. No one looks at America.

EXT. BROAD STREET -- DAY

A caped and hooded figure moves quickly up the street away from the commotion on the corner, where an ambulance pulls up.

Occasionally, a shredded Ugh boot will protrude from the bottom of the cape.

Tucked back into the hood, the frightened face of America Morrison looks down, only interested in getting as far from that corner as possible.

Suddenly there is red carpet beneath her feet.

EXT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- DAY

The voice is unmistakable.

ARKIS

Good morning again, Ms. Fanning.
Did we forget something? Let me get
the door for you.

America stands frozen.

ARKIS

Ms. Fanning? You comin' in?

America's eyes glance over the carpet toward the door. She sees Arkis' foot take a step toward her.

ARKIS

Ms. Fanning?

America immediately moves past Arkis and through the door, head down and tucked back into the cape's hood as far as possible.

INT. LOBBY -- SYMPHONY HOUSE -- DAY

America moves blindly across the lobby, head down, not knowing where she's going. She glances up, sees a hallway in the corner, heads for it.

ARKIS

Where you goin', Ms. Fanning?

America stops, steals a glance back at an approaching Arkis. Desperate, she takes a tentative step, then stops again.

ARKIS

What's up? You all right, there?

Suddenly, the elevator doors open. Inside the car is Charlie Emson, a pump canister and watering wand in his hands.

Charlie smiles at the hooded figure.

CHARLIE

Hi, Ms. Fanning.

America immediately moves into the elevator.

CHARLIE

I'll take you up.

Charlie pushes the Penthouse button, then stands back. He smiles and half-waves at Arkis as the doors close.

ARKIS

Everybody's a fuckin' nutcase...

INT. ELEVATOR -- DAY

Charlie and the concealed America ride up in silence.

Charlie steals a glance toward the caped figure next to him, then smiles. He sets the canister and wand down, reaches into his jacket. He pulls out his copy of Roberta's "The Constancy of Soul."

CHARLIE

I was just showing this to a new friend, Miss Fanning. She liked it. It's my favorite, too.

Charlie thrusts the book toward America.

America hesitates a moment, then reaches out a hand from inside the cape to take the book. But the hand she offers wears the blue wool glove she pulled from the trash bag earlier.

Charlie instantly recognizes the glove, and peeks around and up into the hood. Charlie's jaw drops, then a smile appears.

INT. JEFFERSON HOSPITAL EMERGENCY ROOM -- DAY

Neurosurgeon DOCTOR EVAN CRAIN snaps off his gloves, looks to the TREATMENT NURSE across the gurney from him.

CRAIN

Monitor her vital signs, send her upstairs immediately. I'm going to prep.

On the gurney, it's just possible to make out the swollen, bruised, and lacerated face of Roberta Fanning.

Crain looks to the Uniformed Cop standing nearby.

CRAIN

Know who she is yet?

UNIFORMED COP

No ID. Nothing. Nobody nearby knew her. She gonna make it?

They walk to the nearby elevator. Crain holds the doors.

CRAIN

Don't know. Looks like bleeding in her brain. I'm not even looking at the broken hip, ribs, or leg yet. Won't know the extent of the damage 'til I get in there. It would help to know her medical history.

UNIFORMED COP

I'll keep lookin' for someone who knows her.

Crain nods and steps into the elevator.

INT. PENTHOUSE FLOOR FOYER -- DAY

Charlie and America emerge from the elevators. America is nervously looking around for a way out.

AMERICA

I'm not her...

CHARLIE

You look like her, in the cape and all...

AMERICA

(still moving)

Yes... But a thing doesn't make
Another thing true...
Doesn't make
Another one you...

CHARLIE
But it's her cape. Where's Ms.
Roberta?

America stops, looks at Charlie.

AMERICA
She's...hiding.

Charlie takes a moment to process this.

CHARLIE
(a smile spreading)
Oh-h-h-h...she's playing...

AMERICA
Yes. She's playing.

CHARLIE
And you're s'pose to hide?

America isn't really paying attention. She's looking around
for a way out.

AMERICA
Yes. Yes, I'm...I'm
hiding...here...
(anxiety level rising)
No...I'm...I don't...
(realizing there's no way
out)
Where is this? How do I get...?

Charlie points to the Penthouse door.

CHARLIE
This is Ms. Roberta's house.

America stops, looks at the door, then Charlie.

CHARLIE
She always leaves the key here...

Charlie bends, pulls up the corner of a doormat, picks up a
key.

CHARLIE
...so I can water plants, leave
mail.

Charlie takes the key, opens the door. America immediately
scurries inside. Charlie remains in the doorway.

CHARLIE

I better go. Vern will be looking for me.

The mention of his name stiffens America.

AMERICA

Don't tell him...

CHARLIE

He's not playing, right? He never plays.

America shakes her head.

CHARLIE

(cheerfully)

I'll come back later, okay? After my work. Bye!

Charlie backs out, closes the door, leaving America standing alone in the Penthouse Foyer.

AMERICA

(whispered)

Oh, shit.

INT. LECTURE HALL -- UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA -- DAY

An amphitheater, with 30-40 students slouching in chairs, taking notes.

At the front of the hall is Dr. Orrin Mays Stanley, impeccably dressed in expensive suit and tie. His name, and "Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Age of Romantic Poetry" is written on the blackboard behind him.

ORRIN

One cannot underestimate the importance of Coleridge and Wordsworth to the world's literature. With the publication of their collaboration, "Lyrical Ballads", in 1792, they began the Romantic Era of poetry, perhaps the greatest era of poetry this world has ever seen. In fact, given what is out there today, I doubt we'll ever see quality poetry like that again.

AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENT
Doesn't it depend on the time and
place, Doctor?

ORRIN
What's that?

AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENT
Shouldn't the value of what an era
calls its "rhymed literature" rest
in how it expresses that era's
emotional connection to itself? I
mean, have you read or heard any of
the hip-hop or def poetry out
there? I suspect your Symposium for
the Wordsworth Chair will be
offering --

ORRIN
First, it's not my Symposium. It's
public relations, period. Second, I
don't "suspect" anything I hear
there will hold a candle to someone
like Coleridge or Wordsworth or
Blake. Theirs was the poetry of
discipline -- of meters and
structure, of language that uplifts
rather than destroys, that
expresses the power of God in man,
a future of hope and compassion for
one another.

During this last, the door at the upper back of the hall
opens quietly, and Carl Lystecki steps into the room.

Orrin catches sight of Lystecki, moves to the lectern.

ORRIN
There's a reason, sir, why a
university with the stature that
this one has -- that you are
privileged to be allowed to attend -
- is endowing a chair to William
Wordsworth and not to "50 Cent."
(closing his folders and books) The
next 200 pages for Wednesday. Good
afternoon.

Orrin mounts the stairs quickly to the door, where Lystecki
has already exited.

EXT. UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA -- COMMONS MALL -- DAY

Orrin and Lystecki walk among students, their conversation in hushed tones.

ORRIN

How can someone live on the streets of Philadelphia for so long and not be found?

LYSTECKI

It's a big city, Dr. Stanley. If someone doesn't want to be found --

ORRIN

She's mentally ill, Mr. Lystecki, and habitual, if she fits the mold. You just need to find the pattern, a trace.

LYSTECKI

Which I think we have. We think she's working Broad Street right now.

ORRIN

"Working." My God. It sounds like a criminal enterprise.

LYSTECKI

Sir, it was just a figure of --

ORRIN

Look...I hired you to handle this quietly. I don't need an embarrassing situation developing right now. And I certainly don't want to relive...Well, that's none of your business. She's my daughter. I just want her found and properly cared for... institutionalized. Please do that, Mr. Lystecki. It's what you're being paid to do.

Orrin turns from Lystecki and walks away.

INT. ROBERTA FANNING'S PENTHOUSE -- DAY

America sits on the edge of an ottoman, still in the cape. She reaches into the cape's pocket, pulls out a small wallet. She looks at the ID of Roberta Fanning.

AMERICA

I'm so sorry...

America rises, takes off the cape, and moves into the apartment. She wanders slowly, touching knick-knacks, running her hand on the fine, smooth wood of the dining room table. She wanders into the kitchen.

INT. KITCHEN -- DAY

America opens the refrigerator, looks inside at the wealth of food and smiles.

AMERICA

Your food...

I'm you...

My food...

All good...

America takes bread, cold cuts, cheese, mustard -- an armful -- and sits at the small kitchen table, makes herself a sandwich, begins to eat ravenously.

America pulls her notepad and pen from her pocket, flips to a blank page, begins to write as she eats.

AMERICA (V.O.)

How YOU know what empty is
 When you got all a' this
 Stuck inside a freezin' box --
 Every day you get to eat
 What others only dream about...
 One or two bites tops
 Is what the have-not's got
 If you're lucky, yet
 Even that's a lottery win.
 But here inside, you got a feast
 Feed us ALL a week, at least...

America stops, considers the last line. Then she jumps up, opens the fridge and pulls out more food, takes it to the table. She starts to make a lot of sandwiches.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- LOBBY -- DAY

A MAILMAN drops a large plastic container of mail at the Doorman's desk, where Arkis sits reading a sports magazine.

Arkis watches the Mailman leave, then picks up a radio unit.

ARKIS

Charlie. Mail's here. Get your ass
down here and deliver it.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- NINTH FLOOR HALLWAY -- DAY

Charlie sets the watering wand down, fumbles for his radio.

CHARLIE

Okay.

Charlie moves to the elevators.

INT. PENTHOUSE KITCHEN -- DAY

America places the last wrapped sandwich in a large
department store shopping bag, hefts it to see it's weight.

America carries the shopping bag of sandwiches into the main
room.

INT. PENTHOUSE MAIN ROOM -- DAY

America approaches the front door, sets the bag down, and
picks up Roberta's cape, puts it on, pulls up the hood.

America picks up the bag, takes a deep breath, opens the
front door.

And screams.

Charlie screams back. He stands there with the mail.

AMERICA

Stop doing that!

CHARLIE

I'm sorry...I didn't mean...

(seeing the cape)

You leaving?

America nods, then moves toward the elevators.

CHARLIE

Vernon's down there.

America stops, distraught.

AMERICA

Oh-h-h-h...

CHARLIE
 Want me to help you?
 (off America's nod)
 Okay. Listen...

Charlie pushes the elevator button.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- LOBBY -- DAY

Evening rush hour. A number of RESIDENTS are coming in, being fawned over by Arkis.

The elevator doors open. America stands, in cape and hood, shopping bag in hand, Charlie next to her.

CHARLIE
 (quietly)
 Okay. Just walk to the door.

America starts to move across the lobby with her normal quick step. Charlie surreptitiously grabs the cape and gives it a tug.

CHARLIE
 (whisper)
 Slower.

America slows down, takes a more methodical step.

CHARLIE
 (whisper)
 Yeah. Like that.

When they make it to the front door, Charlie opens it for America as she moves out onto Broad Street.

Arkis looks up from his desk, where he's doing something with a Resident. He bolts to the door, shoves Charlie out of the way.

ARKIS
 (to Charlie)
 Whatta you doin'? Get the hell outta here.
 (to America)
 Sorry Ms. Fanning...

But America is already moving up the block.

Charlie moves back toward the elevators, doing his best to contain his excited glee.

INT. LYSTECKI'S CAR -- DAY

Lystecky again sips coffee.

THROUGH THE WINDSHIELD

he sees the caped figure moving up Broad, but looks away, uninterested, takes another sip of coffee.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM -- NIGHT

The Nurse approaches the bed, on which lies Roberta Fanning, her head and most of her face covered in bandages, a breathing tube hanging from her mouth, a saline drip-line running to her arm.

Dr. Evan Crain listens to her chest.

NURSE

How's she coming?

CRAIN

I honestly don't know. I've done all I can. Keep talking to her. It might help. There's evidence coma patients are lucid on some level.

NURSE

It would be nice to know her name.

EXT. EMPTY LOT -- NIGHT

America sits with Whisper, Boston, Little Jeannie, Fingers, and Squints around the fire at the back of the lot. They all eat the sandwiches.

SQUINTS

Where'd you get these again?

BOSTON

Who cares?

WHISPER

Hear that. Thanks.

(smiles to America)

Suzette.

America stops mid-bite, eyes wide.

AMERICA

Don't call me that.

WHISPER

Why not, honey? Man says it's yo'
name.

AMERICA

My mother's name...

Little Jeannie hears something in America's voice. She leans
in close to America.

LITTLE JEANNIE

You and your momma don't talk no
more?

America shakes her head, then holds up her notepad.

AMERICA

I try. I write everyday like she
did -- like we talked when I was
little. I figure she'd hear me best
that way. But she doesn't answer
back...

Little Jeannie nods understanding.

LITTLE JEANNIE

She passed?

Little Jeannie sees the answer in America's eyes, nods again.

LITTLE JEANNIE

Talk us one of those poems you got
there, sweetie. Like you'd talk to
your momma.

FINGERS

Yeah, A. That'd be nice.

America thinks a moment, then pulls out her pad, flips a few
pages.

AMERICA

A hand, a pen, a will,
No words;
A mind, a desire, A potential,
No thoughts;
A need, a wish, A dream,
No fulfillment;
A song, a lyric, A voice,
No sound; A love, a friend, A
companion,
No connection;
A mother, a father, A family,
No understanding;

The crackle of the fire is the only other sound. No one's even chewing as they listen intently to America.

AMERICA

A touch, a glance, A hope,
 No recognition;
 A prayer, a faith, A calling,
 No followers;
 A God, an earth, A creation,
 No faith;
 A breath, a heartbeat, A life,
 No freedom;
 A you, a me, An us...
 A you, a me, An us...
 A you, a me, An us...
 ...Is all.

America stops. No one speaks for a moment.

LITTLE JEANNIE

Right on, girl. All we got is each other, right?

WHISPER

Amen.

INT. BURNED OUT BUILDING SHELL -- NIGHT

Everyone's asleep around a small fire tucked into a corner. Squints and Little Jeannie have their arms wrapped around each other. Whisper, Fingers, and Boston are huddled together like spoons in a drawer, an old tarp over them.

America lies near one wall, newspapers covering her length. She stares at the starry sky visible through a jagged hole in the concrete above her.

She sighs, then slowly and quietly slides the papers from her and rises. She carefully puts a broken two-by-four on the fire, then tiptoes away from the group.

INT. JEFFERSON HOSPITAL -- MAIN ENTRANCE -- NIGHT

America enters, moves to the Receptionist's desk. An elderly CANDYSTRIPER, 70s, with a wrinkled face dominated by a sweet smile, looks up.

AMERICA

I'm looking for someone.

CANDYSTRIPER

We have lots of those, sweetie.

AMERICA

She was hurt bad in the street.

CANDYSTRIPER

Do you know her name?

America hesitates.

AMERICA

Roberta Fanning.

The Candystriper touches her keyboard.

CANDYSTRIPER

Nobody here by that name, sweetie.
You family?

America hesitates a second, then nods.

CANDYSTRIPER

Your momma?

America smiles slightly.

CANDYSTRIPER

Well, if she was in a traffic
accident, she'd probably be on
Trauma...that's the seventh floor,
honey. It's after hours, but since
it's your Momma, you go on up.

America smiles, moves to the elevators.

INT. JEFFERSON HOSPITAL -- 7TH FLOOR HALLWAY -- NIGHT

After-hours quiet. A solitary NIGHT NURSE rises from the Nurse's station and moves down the hall of one wing.

The elevator doors open. America emerges, sees the nurse walking away, wanders in the opposite direction. She looks quickly into each room as she passes it.

America peers into the last room of the hall. In the dim light, she makes out a black hand on the sheets.

INT. ROBERTA'S HOSPITAL ROOM -- NIGHT

America enters, gently closes the door. She moves to the bedside, looks at the bandaged Roberta Fanning.

AMERICA
 (whispered)
 Oh, my sweet God.

America brings a nearby chair to the bedside and sits. She touches Fanning's hand gently, then takes it in her own.

She leans near Fanning's ear.

AMERICA
 I'm America. You don't know me,
 see,
 But it was me
 That made you be...
 Here...

America looks up at Fannings' eyes, black and blue and closed. Then back to the ear.

AMERICA
 Can you hear me?

America looks again at Fannings' face for any recognition. She then begins to speak, hesitantly, without cadence or rhyme.

AMERICA
 Just listen, then.
 'Cause Charlie says we're a lot the
 same.
 And if we are,
 I need to talk to you.
 First and all,
 I'm so sorry you're here.
 I didn't mean for you to get hurt.
 I just wanted to ask you...you
 know...
 ...to find out how to make my
 poetry strong.
 Like yours.
 Charlie says your poetry is heard
 by everybody, so I thought...
 I mean, I just want mine to be
 heard by one person, you know?
 Just one.
 Her name is...was...Suzette.
 She's gone now, but maybe you know
 how...to...

America drops her head. This is hard. The sing-songy cadence of her speech disappears...

AMERICA

I don't know. I just want her to hear my poems so she knows I learned from her and hers can't be bad if that's so. But I don't know how to get her to hear it, and I figure maybe you have a way, since so many people hear yours. But now you're here and they think I'm you...If it's okay, I'll stay there, okay? It's warm. Good place to hide. Just 'til you get better. 'Cause maybe I can find how you do it, you know? How I can get her to hear me like they hear you.

America looks up at Fanning again.

AMERICA

I hope you're hearin' me.

EXT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- NIGHT

Late. A street sweeper goes by as America, swathed in cape and hood, enters.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- LOBBY -- NIGHT

America -- in cape and hood -- walks past the Doorman's desk, where the night man, JOHNNY JANOSIK, 70s and white-haired, sits in a rumpled uniform watching football on a small portable TV.

Janosik sees the hooded figure, looks back to his TV.

JANOSIK

Evenin', Ms. Fanning.

INT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE ROBERTA FANNINGS' PENTHOUSE -- NIGHT

America bends, pulls key from under the doormat, opens the door and enters.

INT. ROBERTA FANNING'S PENTHOUSE -- NIGHT

America drops the cape on the couch and moves to the windows that overlook the city, lit up in the night.

AMERICA (V.O.)

A city lights itself
 From inside,
 Like a ball of fire
 Rests beneath it all
 And shimmers through
 The holes man pokes In the surface
 to let it out.
 Is that how the soul
 Shows itself to others?
 Through holes punched into
 The flesh that surrounds it?
 I wonder...
 Could she see my light tonight?

America turns from the window and begins to walk past the desk. But her eye for treasure spies a new legal pad on the desk. She instinctively tucks it under her sweater.

Something else catches her eye...the file of yellow legal pad paper that is Roberta Fanning's new manuscript.

America picks up the file, opens it, sees the first poem.

She sits down, turns on the desk lamp and begins reading.

ROBERTA (V.O.)

PLAYGROUND
 Children aren't afraid
 Of pain when they play;
 It's not in the world for them;
 The earth is soft,
 It catches and kisses,
 Caresses like a mother or kin...

America's face skews.

AMERICA

(under her breath)

No...

ROBERTA (V.O.)

Teachers don't see,
 And accidents will happen,
 There's tragedy, they say, but not
 here...

AMERICA

(louder)

No, no, no...

America picks up a pencil, takes a clean pad of paper, and begins to write.

AMERICA (V.O.)
 (in a hip-hop, def
 style)
 Children know no fear,
 They don't think pain's sharpness
 Will rear
 It's head;
 So they run
 Like it don't exist for them;
 They jump
 Like the earth is soft;
 hey fall
 Like arms will catch them,
 And lips will caress them,
 Like the playground is their
 mother.

America taps her forehead with the pencil, nods, then continues writing.

AMERICA (V.O.)
 The teacher looks
 The other way,
 Like accidents happen
 On other days
 And never here,
 Like tragedy don't know this
 address...

America smiles at her work. She picks up the page, then looks at Roberta's manuscript file, at all the pages in it that resemble the page she just wrote.

America reaches inside her coat pockets, pulls out her pads, and various scraps of paper on which she's scribbled poem after poem.

America picks up a few of the pages from Roberta's file, looks at them, then looks at the scraps of paper from her pockets.

AMERICA
 (whispered to herself)
 This is the way they're supposed to
 look...like this...

America gets up, moves to the dining room table. She spreads out her scraps and notebooks around a pad of legal paper.

She takes a scrap of paper with a poem on it, looks at it, then bends into transcribing it onto the pad.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- HALLWAY IN FRONT OF APARTMENT 512 -- NIGHT

Charlie approaches 512. He stops and leans against the doorjamb, puts his head against the door. He hesitantly puts a key into the lock and turns it.

He quietly enters.

INT. APARTMENT 512 -- NIGHT

The lights are on, but low. Soft, sexual jazz plays. In the deep background can be heard an occasional moan.

Charlie wanders, smiling at things he sees. He sits on the couch and picks up a throw pillow, smells it, then hugs it.

Charlie moves to a small table and picks up a photograph and smiles -- a MAN and a WOMAN, their arms around a small BOY, a younger Charlie.

Charlie touches the Woman's face with his fingers, then turns at a sound...

And is suddenly faced with a LARGE FAT MAN, naked, holding two highball glasses, who is just as surprised to see Charlie.

LARGE FAT MAN
Who the fuck are you!?

Charlie bolts for the door.

LARGE FAT MAN
What the fuck are you doing in here!?

WOMAN (O.S.)
What is it, baby?

Charlie throws open the door and runs into the hallway.

INT. CHARLIE'S ROOM -- NIGHT

Charlie runs into the room. He curls up on the bed, whimpering. He looks down at the picture he still holds in his hands. He pulls it to his chest as his closing eyes squeeze tears onto his cheeks.

The elevator dings, the sound of the doors sliding open.

ARKIS (O.S.)
Emson! You sorry little fuck! Where
are you?!

INT. ROBERTA FANNING'S PENTHOUSE -- DAY

Dawn. America lies asleep, bent across the dining room table, a pencil still in her hand.

Spread in an arc around her head are the pages and pages of America's poetry, now transcribed onto legal paper.

America awakens and slowly sits up. She rubs her eyes, then looks over the pages. She gathers them, and places them in a file folder like the one Roberta's manuscript is in.

America carries her file to the desk. She picks up Roberta's file and replaces it with her own, then puts Roberta's on

the floor with a stack of other files.

America puts her hand on her file of poems, looks up to the ceiling.

AMERICA
I've done them like hers.
Can you see them now?
Should I read you one?

She opens the file, picks up one of the poems, reads it aloud.

AMERICA
You fear I am made
From all her dark shades,
Colored by what
You called second-rate;
But what you fear's part
Of your misguided heart,
Of language so sharp
It lacerates;
Where were you when
I needed you then,
In silence so loud
It still desecrates?
But that voice still calls
From within those walls
Where once you made it
Capitulate.
And know I will strive
To keep it alive,
As her voice in mine
I incorporate.

America lets the page drop to the desk, thinking. Then she sets her jaw and moves toward the door.

EXT. STANLEY HOUSE -- 39TH AND WALNUT -- DAY

A tree-lined college street. Brick sidewalks. Large old houses with wrap-around porches.

America stands by the trunk of a large oak tree, staring across the street at her childhood home.

LITTLE AMERICA (V.O.)

Oh, Mommy, I miss you;
Why did you leave?
It's awful without you;
Can you still see me?

INT. STANLEY HOUSE -- LIVING ROOM -- 1968 -- DAY -- FLASHBACK

A mantelpiece of family photos -- combinations of a distinguished African-American Man, a beautiful but fragile-looking African-American Woman, a small African-American Girl.

A nearby wall of photos -- the African-American Man in doctoral graduation robes, the African-American Woman autographing books.

A television in the corner, sound down, shows live images from the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, 1968.

LITTLE AMERICA (V.O.)

It's days since you kissed me
Or told me your love;
Is everything all right
With you up above?

The room is filled with MOURNERS, in black, talking in hushed tones, sipping coffee. A group of WOMEN whisper.

WHISPERING WOMAN 1

...found her hanging in the
basement, can you imagine? Leaving
her daughter like that? And Orrin?

WHISPERING WOMAN 2

Don't feel sorry for Orrin. Her
writing was never good enough for
him. Wouldn't give her no credit --

WHISPERING WOMAN 3
 -- Off her medication is what I
 hear.

WHISPERING WOMAN 1
 Uh-huh. And it runs in the family,
 you know. Poor little thing.

An ELDERLY AFRICAN-AMERICAN MAN, 70s, rises from a chair,
 leaves the room.

INT. STANLEY HOUSE -- HALLWAY -- 1968 -- DAY

The Elderly African-American Man moves quietly down the hall
 to face a closed door.

LITTLE AMERICA (V.O.)
 Grandad, he tries,
 But it's not the same...

The Elderly African-American Man knocks on the door and opens
 it.

INT. STANLEY HOUSE -- STUDY -- 1968 -- DAY

Orrin Mays Stanley, younger and thinner in his 30s, stands
 ramrod straight in black suit and tie, using the light from a
 window to read a large book. He doesn't look up when the door
 opens.

ELDERLY AFRICAN-AMERICAN MAN
 Orrin. What you doin', son?

ORRIN
 I have a lecture tomorrow. I'm
 preparing.

ELDERLY AFRICAN-AMERICAN MAN
 You have a wife fresh in the
 ground's what you have. And a
 daughter who needs her daddy.
 People's talkin' out there.

Orrin closes the book, gazes out the window.

ORRIN
 Let them talk.

He sets the book on the desk, walks to the Elderly African-
 American Man.

ORRIN

And never mention my wife again.
She made her choice. Where's
America?

INT. STANLEY HOUSE -- LOFT WRITING ROOM -- 1968 -- DAY

Orrin opens the door, walks to the desk, looks down at a couple of books that rest on it.

LITTLE AMERICA (V.O.)

And since you've been gone,
Daddy's not said your name.

INSERT: THE BOOKS

The title of one is "Missives from Dark Quarters". The author's name is Suzette Morrison. The second is titled "Moments", the author Suzette Morrison Stanley.

BACK TO SCENE

Orrin turns the books over, then squats, and looks under the desk.

America Stanley, 8, small in short dress, sweater, and pigtails, sits under the desk, writing on a notepad.

ORRIN

Come out of there, America.

America pushes further back under the desk.

LITTLE AMERICA

No, Daddy! I want to stay here and
write poems like Mommy did!

Orrin takes her arm, pulls her out from under the desk.

ORRIN

You're not to come into this room
again. Do you understand?

LITTLE AMERICA

But daddy--

ORRIN

You'll not take the same path she
did, America. Not on my watch.

He escorts a whimpering America from the room.

MONTAGE: VO poetic stanzas run beneath each of the scenes that follow them, and with each scene, the poetic delivery becomes more insistent, more def, and the voice more mature and strident

10-YEAR-OLD AMERICA (V.O.)

I don't like you, Coleridge,
I don't like your words;
You speak from a dead time
Not part of my world...

-- America sits at a table, writing on her pad. Orrin approaches, takes her pad and pen, sets one of his large books in front of her, taps it. America shoves the book from the table, runs from the room;

14-YEAR-OLD AMERICA (V.O.)

At what single point
Did I lose connection
With what now looks back
From my own reflection?
Who is that there,
Seeking salvation?

-- Orrin walks past America's bedroom door and looks in. America sits in front of a mirror on the closet door, her nose on the glass, staring at herself, her lips moving in silent recitation;

18-YEAR-OLD AMERICA (V.O.)

You don't speak for me, old man
You don't make the decisions
anymore...
I don't listen.
I choose what matters now.
I choose what makes better sense.
This is my world now, old man.
My world.

-- Orrin bangs on the door to the writing room, tries the locked handle. Inside, America sits on the desk, one of Orrin's large texts of romantic poetry on her lap. She crosses out words and phrases in the book, rewrites them.

25-YEAR-OLD AMERICA (V.O.)

Down deep in the fibers of each of
us...
The clarity of ourselves shines out
like a beacon on a rough shore...
A beach of impossible assail;
But we look for that beacon,
Each of us;
We cry out for it,

(MORE)

25-YEAR-OLD AMERICA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

We dig our nails into it when they
try to take it from us...
And when there's no other way to
let that beacon shine...
We turn it off.
We put it away.
We hide it from even ourselves.

-- America sits in the Stanley living room, rocking, rocking,
rocking -- her eyes staring straight ahead, disconnected.
Nearby, Orrin is on the phone, agitated.

ORRIN

I need her admitted tonight. No,
not tomorrow! Tonight!

Orrin looks back at America, then turns back into the phone
call.

ORRIN

Yes. Her name is America Stanley --

America jumps up.

25-YEAR-OLD AMERICA

My name is Morrison! America
Morrison!

America runs to the front door, opens it and disappears into
the night.

Orrin drops the phone, runs to the door.

ORRIN

America!

He looks onto the street.

ORRIN

America!

EXT. STANLEY HOUSE -- 39TH AND WALNUT -- PRESENT DAY -- DAY

America comes out of her memory, to the sound of Orrin's
voice.

ORRIN

America?

America looks across the street. Orrin, briefcase in hand,
stands on the curb, looking at her.

ORRIN
America, is that you?

America looks at Orrin intensely for a moment, then turns and hurries down the block.

Orrin crosses the street, dodging a car, trying to follow her.

ORRIN
America! Please! Stop!

But America is too swift, and disappears around a corner.

Orrin stops his pursuit.

ORRIN
Damn.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- LOBBY -- DAY

America, hidden in the cape, enters and moves toward the elevators. As she passes the Doorman's stand, Arkis jumps up.

ARKIS
There she is.

Mike Wallings, in sharp, expensive clothes worn to imply unplanned and casual, stands as Arkis moves from the Doorman's stand.

ARKIS
(to Wallings)
Come on.

Arkis and Wallings move toward America.

ARKIS
Ms. Fanning. Hold up a minute.
Someone here to see you.

America keeps moving to the elevators, reaches out and presses the UP button.

ARKIS
Ms. Fanning...

America doesn't move as Arkis and Wallings come next to her. She continues to look down. Inside the hood, her face is a mask of terror.

ARKIS

Guy here says he's your agent. I tried to phone up, but no answer. Obviously.

WALLINGS

I'm Mike Wallings, Ms. Fanning. From William Morris. We spoke on the phone?

Wallings extends his hand in front of America. America hesitates, then snakes a hand out of the cape.

AMERICA

Mm-hmm.

Wallings leans around, tries to catch a glimpse of the woman before him in the cape, but just as he does so, the elevator doors open.

America instantly moves into the back corner of the car.

Wallings looks at Arkis, who shrugs his shoulders, rolls his eyes.

ARKIS

(to Wallings)
Tried to tell ya.

WALLINGS

(to America)
Do you mind if I come up, Ms. Fanning? We need to talk about the new manuscript.

America is motionless. Wallings moves into the car.

WALLINGS

What floor?

ARKIS

Penthouse.

Wallings pushes the button. The doors close.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- PENTHOUSE FLOOR FOYER -- DAY

America, still in the cape and hood, approaches the Penthouse door, Wallings behind her.

She stoops, pulls the key from under the mat, opens the door and enters. Wallings follows her.

INT. PENTHOUSE -- DAY

America moves into the apartment, drops the key on a side table.

WALLINGS

We're all excited about this book, believe me. It's not everyday a Nobel poet delivers a new collection of work. And I'm sure you're as excited as we are about the possibilities for the Wordsworth Chair, right? Great promotional opportunities there.

America stops in the middle of the room, without turning. An awkward silence, as Wallings stares at America's back.

WALLINGS

So...uh...

America takes a deep breath. She reaches up, and drops the hood onto her back. Then she turns and faces Wallings.

Wallings smiles and extends his hand.

WALLINGS

A pleasure, Ms. Fanning.

America shakes his hand.

WALLINGS

I may be new to the agency, but it's an honor to take over as your agent.

America stands transfixed, a deer in headlights.

WALLINGS

Perhaps I can take a look at the manuscript? Would that be all right, Ms. Fanning?

America's eyes dart to the desk, where her file of poetry lies, then back to Wallings.

Wallings catches the eye move, goes to the desk.

WALLINGS

Here? This it?

Wallings picks up the file. America immediately reacts.

AMERICA
No, don't...!

But Wallings is not deterred.

WALLINGS
It's okay. I'll just take a quick
look through it.

Wallings turns to the windows, sits in a chair. He opens the file and begins reading.

America is frozen. She doesn't smile, doesn't blink, doesn't move a muscle. But after a moment, she slowly removes the cape, drops it on a chair.

AMERICA
(quietly)
Tea.

Wallings looks up.

WALLINGS
Hmm? What?

AMERICA
Tea.

WALLINGS
Uh...sure. Tea would be great.

Wallings goes back to the file. America backs into the kitchen.

INT. KITCHEN -- DAY

America prepares the tea. As she does so, she sneaks a peek now and again at Wallings in the main room.

AMERICA
(whispering)
WhatamIdoingWhatamIdoingWhatamIdoin
g ...?

INT. PENTHOUSE MAIN ROOM -- DAY

Wallings turns a page, reads, turns another page, reads. A short, amused breath escapes his lips, which expand into a smile.

America emerges from the kitchen, carrying two mugs of tea. She approaches Wallings, stops several feet from him, wary of getting close.

Wallings looks up. America stays put. Wallings rises slightly, enough to reach out and take the mug of tea from America. He puts the mug on the sill next to him.

America backs off a step, sips her tea, eyeing him.

Wallings turns another page, then another, shaking his head. America sees this, checks the most direct path to the door.

WALLINGS
(looking up)
This is...

America picks up the cape, moves toward the door.

WALLINGS
...remarkable.

America stops, looks back at Wallings.

WALLINGS
I had no idea you had such a...a
"young" voice. It's terrific,
Roberta.

AMERICA
It is?

WALLINGS
Yes. Absolutely. It's edgy,
current, a modern voice. Like this
one...
(flips back a couple)
(pages)
"Salvation Sister." A beautiful
piece.

Wallings takes out the page, holds it out to America.

WALLINGS
Here. Read it for me.

America looks at the page, covered in her scrawled hand. She shakes her head.

AMERICA
No...it's not...

WALLINGS

Please, Roberta. Poetry's meant to
be read aloud.

Wallings offers her the page again.

America reluctantly takes it, looks at it, then begins to read. Her voice is quiet at first, then the force begins to come as she connects to the emotions in the words.

AMERICA

I looked to you as a Salvation
Sister,
And you did not back down
From the props or the obligation.
You kept the light in your eye,
And in my seeing it flare,
You replaced the shine in mine.
You came to me with no shame
And a rebuilt innocence
Of spirit and life,
And reassured my own reachings-out.
You shared your soul
And in the passing,
Gave me mine again --
In soft love,
In sensual caress,
In whispered words
Only my heart has retained.
They will echo
And re-touch me,
Float me softly,
Hold me warmly,
Pass me securely
On to the next day.

She looks up to see Wallings smiling.

WALLINGS

I can see why you won the Nobel.

Wallings takes the page from America, puts it back in the file, tucks it under his arm, stands.

WALLINGS

I can't tell you how excited about
this I am. I'm going to push for
this to be released immediately. We
have to set up some readings, too.

AMERICA

Readings?

WALLINGS

Absolutely. I'll make some calls today. You need to get out there right now with this.

AMERICA

What "out there"?

WALLINGS

Your voice is amazing, Roberta. If people hear you reading this stuff, they're going to want to buy it. Trust me. I know a dozen clubs that'll book you tonight.

AMERICA

No. No, I can't--

Wallings moves toward the door.

WALLINGS

And wait'll that guy at Penn reads this...that Wordsworth Chair is as good as yours--

AMERICA

Penn? What guy?

WALLINGS

Stanley, I think his name is. We're going to be lobbying for you to--

America jumps at Wallings, grabs her file of poetry. Several pages flutter to the floor.

AMERICA

No, no, no, no, no...

WALLINGS

Roberta--

AMERICA

Don't call me that.

America stoops and gathers the fallen pages.

WALLINGS

I'm sorry...Ms. Fanning. Let me help you there.

America blocks him.

AMERICA

No. They're mine. I need them. You can't have them.

WALLINGS

Ms. Fanning. We talked about this. You have an obligation to Mills/Brace.

America holds the file close to her chest.

AMERICA

No. They're for someone else.

WALLINGS

Someone else? Who? We have a contract--

America points to the door.

AMERICA

Go. You go.

WALLINGS

Ms. Fanning. Mr. Mills is--

America opens the door.

AMERICA

Go! Go, go, go!

Wallings puts up his hands, moves into the hall.

WALLINGS

All right, all right. But we have to --

America slams the door closed, stands transfixed, looking at it. Then she turns, places the file on the desk, and picks up the cape.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- BASEMENT -- DAY

The elevator doors open. America emerges. She walks quickly around the huge heating units, looking.

AMERICA

(quietly)

Charlie? Charlie!

America finally finds the area where Charlie's room is. She moves to the doorway. It's dark in the room.

AMERICA

Charlie?
You in there, Charlie?
Where you been, Charlie?

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- BASEMENT -- CHARLIE'S ROOM -- DAY

America steps into the dark room. She stumbles around, finds the lamp, turns it on.

On the bed, Charlie lies curled, facing the wall. America sits on the edge of the bed, pushes Charlie.

AMERICA

Gotta go.
People gonna know.
Can't stay.
Gotta go 'way.

Charlie doesn't move. America nudges him again.

AMERICA

Charlie. Hey.

Slowly, Charlie begins to roll over. He still holds the picture.

AMERICA

Gotta say goodb...

She stops cold when she sees Charlie's deeply blackened eye.

AMERICA

Oh. Oh, God.

Charlie scootches up against his pillow, his eyes down in embarrassment.

CHARLIE

I went somewhere...not s'posed to.

AMERICA

Who...?

CHARLIE

I made somebody mad, and then
Vernon...

Charlie struggles for the description, finally giving up and just mock-socking himself in the eye.

CHARLIE

...you know.

America points up.

AMERICA
Hawkface? He...?

America swings her arm, stops her fist as it comes close to Charlie's face, Charlie wincing and pulling back. Charlie nods.

America stands, starts her mongoose thing. But it's not in fear this time...there's an angry energy to it.

AMERICA
Ooh...Oh, damn...Damn, damn,
damn...

Charlie is disturbed by this. He curls further into himself.

CHARLIE
Don't. Don't do that.

America sees his discomfort. She stops, moves to the bed, sits next to Charlie. America puts her arm around him, pulls him to her. They rock on the bed together, hugging.

INT. STANLEY HOUSE -- 39TH AND WALNUT -- DAY

Orrin Mays Stanley enters his study, picks up the phone. He checks a card in his hand, then dials.

RECEPTIONIST (V.O.)
Mills/Brace.

ORRIN
Yes. I would like to speak with
whoever's in charge, please.

RECEPTIONIST (V.O.)
That would be Peter Mills. Who's
calling?

ORRIN
Dr. Orrin Mays Stanley, University
of Pennsylvania.

RECEPTIONIST (V.O.)
One moment.

INTERCUT -- Orrin at home / Mills at work

MILLS
Dr. Stanley. Peter Mills.

ORRIN

Yes, Mr. Mills. I'm calling about Roberta Fanning. I understand she's still with your firm.

MILLS

Yes, she is. We're very proud to have her.

ORRIN

I'd like to talk with you about our upcoming Symposium and the Wordsworth Chair we're endowing.

MILLS

This is quite a coincidence, actually.

ORRIN

Why is that, sir?

MILLS

Well, I was just going to call you about the same thing.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- BASEMENT -- CHARLIE'S ROOM -- NIGHT

America and Charlie lie next to each other on the bed, talking. America rhythmic patter is gone.

AMERICA

So I thought if I could be Roberta, you know, I might get my poems out right, and Mom might hear 'em, and...I made them look like hers, but that might not be good, 'cause now there's this...man...who thinks my poems are hers, and wants me to...and I don't think I can--

CHARLIE

(interrupting)

My dad always said to think I can, think I can, think I can, 'cause it's only other people who think I can't.

AMERICA

It was always my father who said I can't.

CHARLIE

Can't what?

AMERICA

Write poems.

CHARLIE

Your poems are good. Don't listen.
He was just scared, maybe. My Dad
was. About me. Dads are like that,
and they say stupid stuff they
don't mean when they're scared.

(looks over at her)

Did your Dad name you a country, or
your Mom?

America thinks a moment, tapping a rhythm on her knee.
Then...

AMERICA

My mother loved The idea of What
America said it was: Hope and
possibility, Freedom and equality;
She wanted me to have them all, I
s'pose...

CHARLIE

Good poem. Maybe it's already
working, see? You loved your Mom,
huh?

(off America's nod)

Me too. Where is she?

America points up.

CHARLIE

Mine too.

AMERICA

How?

CHARLIE

Airplane. My dad was driving. It
went into an ocean. I was at
school.

AMERICA

And you came here?

CHARLIE

Upstairs. The judge put me here
'cause my Dad owned it. But then
Vernon said he was my new Dad and I
had to stay down here, and not go
upstairs except to work.

AMERICA

Huh.

CHARLIE

But some nights, I go up there to where I used to live. He doesn't know. I like it there. It smells like Mom. But he's there now sometimes, and other people go there too. There was somebody there last night. Big and fat. And he yelled, and it made Vernon real mad.

Charlie touches his swollen black eye.

CHARLIE

I get scared when Vernon's mad.

America sits up, nods.

AMERICA

Me too.

CHARLIE

But I'm not afraid with you.

Charlie hugs into America. America looks down at him, then hugs him back.

AMERICA

Me either.

EXT. BROAD STREET -- NIGHT

Mike Wallings sits in his car, talks on his car speakerphone.

WALLINGS

Yes, it's good...it's damn good. She's writing with a whole new voice, very hip.

MILLS

(on phone)

Think it's got a market?

WALLINGS

These days? Huge. Russell Simmons started it awhile back, the def poetry craze and all. Still going strong. This new stuff could even be another Nobel or a Pulitzer, we push it right.

MILLS
 (on phone)
 Then go get it.

WALLINGS
 She won't give it to me...

INT. PETER MILL'S OFFICE -- NIGHT

Mills sits at his huge desk.

MILLS
 Hey, I've already paid for it. It's mine. She said you could pick it up, so pick it up.

WALLINGS (V.O.)
 (on phone)
 She seemed pretty adamant about--

MILLS
 I don't give a shit what she is. Put it in my hands tomorrow, Wallings, or don't bother calling me about anything again. Got it?

INT. WALLINGS' CAR -- NIGHT

Wallings sits up.

WALLINGS
 Yes sir.

The phone clicks. Wallings reaches out, touches a button.

WALLINGS
 Dial Roberta Fanning.

The phone beeps and boops, then rings. And rings. And rings. Wallings touches off the phone, exits the car.

INT. CHARLIE'S ROOM -- NIGHT

America sits with Charlie on his bed. She reads from Fanning's book.

AMERICA
 We are Sometimes lovers,
 Full-time partners
 In a scheme to fool the world.
 But no one

(MORE)

AMERICA (CONT'D)
 Ever seems to be listening;
 You can't fool anyone
 Who won't hear your words.
 But if blessings were in season,
 I'd buy you a dozen,
 And leave them on your doorstep
 So you'd stumble on them at dawn,
 And wonder where I been.

America closes the book.

CHARLIE
 I like that one.

AMERICA
 Uh-huh.

CHARLIE
 I like 'em all. Wish I had more
 poems.

America thinks a moment.

AMERICA
 You want to hear more?
 (off Charlie's
 enthusiastic nod)
 Okay.

She gets up, begins to don the cape.

AMERICA
 Come on.

Charlie smiles hugely, jumps off the bed, follows her out the door.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- BASEMENT -- NIGHT

America points toward the alley door.

AMERICA
 Can we go out here? Don't want to
 go near...

CHARLIE
 ...that man we fear...

America stops and smiles at Charlie.

AMERICA
 Is that a poet I hear,
 Next to me so clear?

Charlie jumps.

CHARLIE

YES!

They both laugh as they climb the short steps and exit into the alley.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- LOBBY -- NIGHT

Mike Wallings enters, walks to the doorman's stand. Arkis looks up at him.

ARKIS

Thought you left.

WALLINGS

I did, but...just realized I left something up in Miss Fanning's apartment.

(moves toward elevators)

I'll just run up real quick.

ARKIS

No, no, no...can't let you do that, pal.

WALLINGS

I was just up there...

ARKIS

Sorry...

Wallings walks to Arkis, pulls out a roll of cash, peels off a fifty dollar bill, palms it into Arkis' hand.

WALLINGS

I won't be two minutes.

Arkis glances at the bill, then pockets it.

ARKIS

Clock's runnin'.

Wallings moves to the elevators.

EXT. SOUTH STREET -- NIGHT

America, in Roberta's cape and with Charlie by her side, approaches Stanzas. A large crowd is gathered outside, waiting to get in.

A banner drapes across the club building's front -- "TONIGHT!
POETRY SLAM! TOP NATIONAL POETS! U-PENN WORDSWORTH CHAIR!"

America and Charlie move toward the doors. The Security Man is checking ID's again, and there's a YOUNG WOMAN with a clipboard near him.

America approaches the Young Woman, still draped in the hood and cape.

YOUNG WOMAN

Yes, Ma'am. And you are?

America pulls Roberta's ID from the cape's pocket, shows it to the Young Woman. The Young Woman's face immediately lights up.

YOUNG WOMAN

Oh, Miss Fanning! What a pleasure!

She extends her hand, takes America's hand and tries to look into the hood while she shakes. But America just nods, keeps her head bowed.

YOUNG WOMAN

I'm Jocelyn Baker, with the
Wordsworth Chair Committee at
UPenn. We were so hoping you would
attend. And who is this young man?

Charlie smiles and extends his hand.

CHARLIE

I'm Charlie. I like poems.

YOUNG WOMAN

Well, don't we all. Please, come
in. I'll show you to the special
area we've reserved for
participants.

Jocelyn Baker turns and guides America and Charlie into the club.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- PENTHOUSE FLOOR FOYER -- NIGHT

The elevator doors open. Wallings emerges and moves to Roberta Fanning's door. He knocks. Waits. Knocks again. Then he bends and pulls the key from beneath the mat. He opens the door and enters.

INT. ROBERTA FANNING'S PENTHOUSE -- NIGHT

Wallings moves quickly into the main room, then to the desk. He picks up America's file of poems, glances into it, then leaves.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- PENTHOUSE FLOOR FOYER -- NIGHT

Wallings puts the key back under the mat, and moves to the elevator.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- LOBBY -- NIGHT

Wallings emerges from the elevator, and moves toward the street door, file under his arm.

ARKIS

Get what you needed?

Wallings gives a big smile and a thumbs up as he goes through the doors.

WALLINGS

Oh, yeah. I did indeed.

INT. STANZAS -- VIP AREA -- NIGHT

A roped-off area toward the back corner of the club. Several

POETS stand in the space, listening to another poet, DARNELL WINSTON, 30's, spotlighted on an otherwise darkened stage.

Tucked into a dark corner of the roped off space are America and Charlie. America remains in the hood and cape. Charlie is enraptured with Darnell's performance.

INT. STANZAS -- ON STAGE -- NIGHT

Darnell stands behind a microphone, his eyes closed, his body undulating slightly.

DARNELL

...And we spoke of an evening,
This woman and I,
Of fantastic envisionings
We'd both gorged ourselves upon.
And we asked what we've been,
And what we shall be,
And why we shall be.
And yes, we spoke of finally

(MORE)

DARNELL (CONT'D)

Coming to the joining of ourselves.
 And she said,
 "Someday you'll pull together, man.
 I can see it in your eyes
 And hear it in your words.
 And I'll be ready for you...Then."
 I looked at her.
 "Fine," I answered,
 But I don't really believe it;
 See, I'm the kind of person
 Who inflates easily and
 Deflates violently.
 Two minutes ago
 I felt inflated,
 But at this moment,
 I'm deflated,
 Like somewhere the night found a
 pin
 And stuck me,
 And now,
 Like Caesar's Last Breath,
 I am nothing but molecules in air,
 Empty and alone.

Darnell steps back from the microphone, drops his head, then bows.

The full house of PATRONS applauds, a few cheers ring out.

An EMCEE mounts the stage, gives Darnell a hug as he departs, grabs the mic.

EMCEE

Give it up for Darnell Winston,
 from En, Wy, Cee! That poem,
 "Caesar's Last Breath", is included
 in his new book of the same title.
 It's out now on the St. Martin's
 imprint, you can pick it up
 wherever...

INT. STANZAS -- VIP AREA -- NIGHT

As the Emcee runs down a couple of announcements, Charlie looks to America, still tucked into the corner, hood on.

CHARLIE

He was good, huh, Miss Fanning? You
 like his poem?

AMERICA

It was okay.

Charlie looks up into the hood.

CHARLIE
You should do a poem.

INT. STANZAS -- ON STAGE -- NIGHT

The Emcee leans over at the edge of the stage. Jocelyn Baker, the Young Woman from the door, speaks quietly into his ear, looks over toward the VIP area.

The Emcee nods, stands and takes the mic.

EMCEE
Ladies and Gents, this is your night of nights! Because I have just been informed that we have in the house tonight one of the great voices of American stanzas -- a Nobel Laureate and, I understand, one of the leading contenders for the Wordsworth Chair at Penn...

INT. STANZAS -- VIP AREA -- NIGHT

Charlie and America listen intently.

EMCEE (O.S.)
...please welcome to the Stanzas stage for a very rare public appearance...Miss Roberta Fanning!

The Crowd erupts in cheers and applause.

Charlie spins and looks up at America, a huge smile on his face.

CHARLIE
That's you!

America's eyes seem to fill the entire hood. She shakes her head.

AMERICA
Oh, God...no...can't...

CHARLIE
Don't say can't. Remember?

AMERICA
But what if...?

Charlie points at the stage.

CHARLIE
Maybe she'll hear you better from
up there.

This stops America. She looks at Charlie.

EMCEE (O.S.)
Please, Miss Fanning! Grace the
Stanzas stage!

AMERICA
You think?

Charlie shrugs, then smiles up at America again, reaches out
and takes her hand, gives it a tug.

CHARLIE
I'll go with you.

America moves toward the stage. She keeps the hood low as
they walk through the VIP area. America hesitates.

CHARLIE
Go tell her a poem.

Charlie lets go of America's hand just as the Emcee reaches
out to help her up the two steps to the stage.

America moves on stage. She keeps the hood low, so the
spotlight casts a dark shadow across any features that might
be seen.

EMCEE
Miss Fanning.

The Emcee hands America the mic. She takes it with a shaking
hand, as the crowd quiets.

America puts the mic to her lips under the hood.

AMERICA
(almost whispered)
This is for my mother.

America looks to the side of the stage at Charlie.

AMERICA
And to my new friend.

Charlie smiles. Slowly, quietly, America begins.

AMERICA

I feel the rust again,
 Sitting in disgust again;
 I'm loose
 And lying down among those dying.
 Sinking fast again,
 Running from my past again;
 I'm hollow
 And lying down among those sighing.
 Seems like I'd learn in time,
 And get myself in line in time,
 And try to stand among those
 living.
 Looking back again,
 What's ahead seems black again,
 I'm blind
 And lying down among those crying.
 Nothing to say again,
 My soul as numb as clay again,
 I run
 And lie down among those hiding.
 Seems like I'd learn in time,
 And get myself in line in time,
 And try to stand among those
 giving.

America's voice breaks with emotion. She stops. The silence is so palpable everyone in the room is afraid to breathe.

AMERICA

And yet you stay again,
 Ready to light the way again,
 You love,
 And make me lie among those hoping.
 I'll try to turn away again,
 But you're with me all the way
 again,
 You hurt for me,
 And pull me from the groping.
 Perhaps with you,
 I'll learn in time,
 And get myself in line in time,
 And stand again among those living.

America lets the mic drop slowly to her side, doesn't move a muscle.

A single clap sounds in the crowd, then a second, then more, then a cascade of applause and "Bravo!" erupts. The crowd stands, as the roar of approval builds.

America turns and walks to the steps and down to Charlie.

AMERICA

Come on.

She immediately moves toward the side door of the club.

INT. STANZAS -- FAR SIDE BACK WALL -- NIGHT

Orrin Mays Stanley stands transfixed, his eyes following the caped and hooded figure that just left the stage. Regent 1 stands near him, applauding.

REGENT 1

You were right about her, Orrin.
She's the one.

Orrin suddenly moves across the back of the club toward the VIP section, his eyes on the hooded figure moving toward the side door.

Orrin reaches the roped VIP section just as America and Charlie reach the side door.

ORRIN

Miss Fanning! Miss Fanning!

America stops in the door, glances back, sees Orrin unhooking the velvet rope and coming toward her. Her eyes maintain contact on him for a second or two, then she bolts through the door, Charlie right behind her.

EXT. SMALL SIDE STREET -- NIGHT

America and Charlie run toward South Street. As they turn the corner onto South, Orrin emerges from the side door.

ORRIN

Miss Fanning! Wait! Please! I must
talk with you!

Orrin runs up to South, looks both ways. But South Street is packed with pedestrians and traffic, and America and Charlie have evaporated into them.

EXT. SOUTH STREET -- NIGHT

America and Charlie walk toward Broad Street.

CHARLIE

That was...oh, that was...So cool!
They all clapped! You were so --

AMERICA
I don't think she heard me.

CHARLIE
But --

AMERICA
You said she would hear me. I don't think she did.

CHARLIE
Why not?

AMERICA
I still can't feel her. If she heard me, wouldn't I feel her?

Charlie is quiet for a while, then...

CHARLIE
Maybe it was the wrong place.

EXT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- LOBBY -- NIGHT

A hooded America, with Charlie by her side, enters and moves toward the elevators.

Johnny Janosik looks over his paper at them.

JANOSIK
Evenin', Miss Fanning. Charlie, what are you doin' out this late?

CHARLIE
(proud smile)
I went to poetry with Miss Fanning!

JANOSIK
Did you now? Vernon know that? You supposed to...

AMERICA
(firmly from the hood)
He was with me.

JANOSIK
Yeah, sure, Miss Fanning. Sure. Good night, now. Good night, Charlie.

CHARLIE
(cheerfully)
Goodnight, Johnny!

The elevator door opens, and America and Charlie enter.

INT. ELEVATOR -- NIGHT

America and Charlie ride up. Second floor. Third floor.

CHARLIE
I want to show you something.

AMERICA
Okay.

Charlie reaches out, pushes button 5. The elevator slows and stops. The doors open.

CHARLIE
Come on.

America and Charlie move down the long hall. When they get to Room 512, Charlie stops, puts his finger to his lips.

CHARLIE
Shhhhhh...

Charlie leans his head against the door, listens, his eyes on America. After several moments, he smiles, pulls out a key and inserts it into the lock.

AMERICA
Charlie. You sure...?

CHARLIE
Come on.

Charlie pushes open the door. They enter.

INT. APARTMENT 512 -- NIGHT

Dark. Quiet. Charlie moves with familiarity to a side table, turns on a small lamp.

AMERICA
What are we doing here, Charlie?

CHARLIE
It's okay. Nobody's here. Come on.

Charlie waves for America to follow him. She tiptoes behind him.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- LOBBY -- NIGHT

Vernon Arkis enters, his arm around a leggy PLATINUM BLONDE in a short, tight mini-skirt and a white leather jacket trimmed in fur. They're laughing and appear to have been drinking.

ARKIS

(to Janosik)

Hey, Johnnie! How's it goin',
buddy? Wantcha to meet somebody.
This's Elly. Elly, meet Johnny.

ELLY

Hi, Johnny!

JANOSIK

Hello, young lady.

ELLY

Oooh...You're pretty cute for an
old guy.

ARKIS

Hey, hey, hey...don't be gettin'
any ideas, baby. You're with me
tonight, remember?

(to Janosik)

Be upstairs for awhile. Maybe a
long while.

Arkis laughs, guides Elly to the elevators.

ARKIS

Come on, baby. Let me show you my
place.

INT. APARTMENT 512 -- NIGHT

Charlie leads America to a large closet near the main windows of the room. He opens the closet doors, reaches up and pulls a light switch. A bright light illuminates the closet, and the area in front of it.

Charlie reaches to one side of the closet, pulls out a large artist's portfolio envelope, sets it on the floor. He pats the floor.

CHARLIE

Sit.

America drops the hooded cape on a nearby chair, moves next to Charlie, squats down.

Charlie opens the portfolio, pulls out a small stack of sheet paper, some two foot square, some smaller, some rectangular. He spreads them out.

They're watercolors. Small paintings of park scenes, the shoreline of the Delaware River, still-lives, several studies of a small boy. They're quite good.

Charlie touches them lovingly.

CHARLIE

My mom's.

AMERICA

She did these?

CHARLIE

Uh-huh.

(points to the window)

She sat there. Painted and hummed songs. I sat on her lap sometimes.

America looks at Charlie as he looks at the paintings, runs his hand over them.

CHARLIE

This is where I come to be with her.

AMERICA

She's here?

CHARLIE

It feels like it.

(looks at the paintings)

I see her here.

(touches them)

I feel her...here...

(looks up at America)

Where was your Mom? Maybe that's where you should go.

America stares at Charlie, sits back against the door. She's about to say something when a loud commotion in the hallway is heard.

INT. HALLWAY IN FRONT OF APARTMENT 512 -- NIGHT

Arkis and Elly weave up the hall to 512, laughing. Arkis fumbles for the key.

ARKIS

Got it here someplace...

ELLY
Come on, Vern...I want a drink.

ARKIS
(annoyed)
Okay, okay...

Arkis finally finds the key, tries to get it into the lock.

INT. APARTMENT 512 -- NIGHT

America and Charlie scramble. Fear covers both their faces.

They gather up the paintings, stuff them back into the closet.

AMERICA
(whispering)
Where...?

They hear the key enter the lock.

America enters the closet, pulls Charlie in after her, then closes the doors, pulls the light switch. The closet goes dark.

The apartment door swings open, bangs on the wall as Arkis and Elly stumble in. Arkis closes the door, moves into the room.

ELLY
Ooh...nice place, honey...

Arkis hits a couple of lights, moves toward the bar.

ARKIS
Yeah, not bad, huh? Bedroom over there, another one over there. And the bar's right here, you minx. Get over here.

Elly joins him at the bar.

ELLY
Got any champagne?

ARKIS
Fuck no. Whattaya think this is?

INSIDE THE CLOSET

America and Charlie huddle together in the dark, look through the louvered closet doors at Arkis and Elly.

AT THE BAR

Arkis opens a cabinet door, pulls down a bottle and two glasses.

ARKIS

We're drinkin' Johnny Red.

Arkis slops whiskey into the glasses, slides one to Elly.

ELLY

How long you been here, baby?

ARKIS

Maybe a year.

ELLY

It's decorated nice.

ARKIS

Used to be a family here. Had a retard for a kid. Fuckin' asshole father flew his plane into the drink, killed himself and the wife.

ELLY

Where's the kid?

ARKIS

Well, that's the beauty of the PA courts -- Dad owned the building, left it in the will that the kid's gotta stay here. Judge made him a ward a' the state until he was 21, then he could be on his own with...
(quotes his fingers)
..."supervision".

Arkis spreads his arms, aims his fingers at himself.

ARKIS

Guess who that is?

ELLY

Where's the kid now?

ARKIS

So he turns 21 eight, nine months ago, I move him down to a room in the basement. Place like this is a waste on a retard, don'tcha think? He ain't smart enough to know any better, state don't care any more, so they don't come around, father's will pays the bills, hey...nobody's the wiser. Rent it out by the hour to you girls for extra cash, stay here when I want...I'm golden.

INSIDE THE CLOSET

America glances over at Charlie, whose pained face reveals that he is smart enough to know better.

AMERICA

(whispered)

Bastard.

AT THE BAR

ELLY

Smart guy. 'S'why I like you.

(slides off her coat)

So...which bedroom, Einstein?

Arkis comes around the bar, puts his arm around Elly, guides her toward the far bedroom.

ARKIS

Why not both? We can start in here.

Elly giggles, starts kissing Arkis' ear as they disappear into the bedroom.

A moment later, rock and roll starts playing in the bedroom.

INSIDE THE CLOSET

America carefully pushes the closet door open, listens. Agiggle or two can be heard amid the rock.

AMERICA

(whispered)

Let's go.

America and Charlie crawl out of the closet then quickly scoot across the room to the front door. America realizes she doesn't have the cape.

AMERICA

Shit.

America runs back, grabs the cape, goes back to the door.

America turns the knob, pulls the door open, slips into the hall. Charlie follows, letting the door close quietly.

INT. HALLWAY IN FRONT OF APARTMENT 512 -- NIGHT

Charlie immediately runs to the stairs at the end of the hall.

AMERICA

Charlie! Wait!

Charlie doesn't stop.

AMERICA

Charlie!

Charlie hits the stair door at full run, disappearing into the stairwell.

America turns and looks at the door of Apartment 512.

AMERICA

You sorry son of a bitch.

INT. CHARLIE'S ROOM -- NIGHT

Charlie sits on his bed, looking at the picture of his mom, dad, and himself. Tears glisten on his cheeks. America comes to the door and looks in.

AMERICA

He's an asshole.

CHARLIE

I know. But he's only what he is.

AMERICA

What do you mean?

CHARLIE

Miss Roberta said it...

Charlie opens Roberta Fanning's first book.

CHARLIE
See, look...

Charlie finds the page, reads.

CHARLIE
Men are only what they are,
Achieve the most they have within;
We can only hope for par,
Accept the best, forgive the sin.
(looks up at America)
See? He is what he is.

AMERICA
You're askin' a lot
To forgive that sot...

CHARLIE
My Mom always says, "Everybody
deserves forgiveness, and if not
that, then understanding."

AMERICA
She "says"?
(off Charlie's nod)
When you sit in her place...Where
she was...you can...?
(points up)

CHARLIE
Uh-huh.

AMERICA
My mom's place is somewhere I can't
go.

CHARLIE
Why not?

America doesn't answer. Just defensively wraps her arms
around herself.

CHARLIE
If you want to hear her, maybe you
have to.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- LOBBY -- NIGHT

A hooded America exits the elevator and moves across the
lobby.

Janosik stands as she goes by.

JANOSIK

You want I should call you a cab,
Ms. Fanning?

America doesn't stop.

EXT. STANLEY HOUSE -- 39TH AND WALNUT -- NIGHT

America walks up 39th Street, across the street from the Stanley home. She stops under the oak tree, looks at the dark house. Then she crosses the street.

America follows a hedge walk along the side of the house to the back. She climbs the stairs to the back door. She tries the knob. It turns.

America quietly enters the house.

INT. STANLEY HOUSE -- NIGHT

The kitchen is dimly illuminated by under-cabinet lights. The sound of classical music can be heard.

America moves into the

HALLWAY

where the music grows a bit louder. A dim light from the living room splashes onto the floor in front of the stairway.

America peeks into the living room. Asleep in an easy chair, a book of poetry open on his lap, is Orrin Stanley. A nearby radio is the source of the music.

America quietly ascends the stairs, moves down the hallway, carefully opens the door to her mother's loft writing room, and enters.

INT. STANLEY HOUSE -- LOFT WRITING ROOM -- NIGHT

America enters the dark room, closes the door. She finds the desk lamp, turns it on.

America looks around, then closes her eyes and breathes in deeply through her nose, smelling the room, holds her breath.

When she lets it go, she opens her eyes, moves to the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves along one wall. She searches the rows of books, until she finds what she's looking for.

America pulls several books, takes them to the desk, lays them out in front of her, and sits. She touches them one at a time.

INSERT -- PAN OF SEVERAL BOOKS -- titles are visible, among them:

"Scents of an Afternoon, a book of poetry by Suzette Morrison".

"The Whisper of Obligation, poems by Suzette Morrison".

"When Hearts Collide, new poems by Suzette Morrison Stanley".

BACK TO SCENE

America looks to the ceiling.

AMERICA

It's me. America. I'm back. Are you there?

America opens one of the books to a dog-eared page. She holds it closer to the light and reads silently.

SUZETTE MORRISON STANLEY (V.O.)

To My Little One
 Night died slowly as the dawn grew older;
 The mist left the grass as the sun grew bolder;
 Sleep fled my eyes and I turned on my shoulder;
 And there, lying near me, was you.
 The coarseness of midday put an edge in the air;
 That weighed on my body and blinded with glare;
 Then I sensed a new softness near me somewhere;
 And there, reaching toward me, was you.
 The coolness of evening brought a light breeze
 That moved through the grasses and shuffled the leaves;
 And just as the chillness gave me unease,
 There, wrapped around me, was you.

America pulls the book to her breast, hugs it, closes her eyes, rocks in the chair. A tear traces down her cheek.

AMERICA

I hear you, Momma...I hear you...

INT. STANLEY HOUSE -- LIVING ROOM -- NIGHT

Orrin's eyes pop open. He sits up and listens. He reaches over and turns off the radio, listens again.

INT. STANLEY HOUSE -- LOFT WRITING ROOM -- NIGHT

America reclines on the chair, head over the back, eyes closed, still hugging the book, reciting to the ceiling.

AMERICA

See, he spoke to you of his
tradition;
He spoke to me of waste.
You tried to speak of exploration;
I tried to speak too late.
I tried to show him my paper,
I tried to show him faith;
But he's got walls,
And I've got bars,
And we both have fear to face...

INT. STANLEY HOUSE -- LANDING OUTSIDE LOFT WRITING ROOM -- NIGHT

Orrin stands silently, listening to the recitation within.

He reaches down, turns the knob quietly, pushes the door open.

INT. STANLEY HOUSE -- LOFT WRITING ROOM -- NIGHT

Orrin stands in the door, stunned to see America. He listens as she continues.

AMERICA

And where were you, father dearest,
Lost among your truths?
Where an eye's an eye, a limb's a
limb,
And dreams are of no use.
Well, if I'm the one to lose a
hand,
Then I'm the one to deal.
And all my cards are not yet
played,
And my last ones aren't yet real.

ORRIN

America...

America bolts up so quickly, she knocks over the chair she was sitting in.

AMERICA

Jesus...!

Orrin takes a step into the room.

ORRIN

What are you doing here, America?

How...?

America does her mongoose thing, breathing hard.

AMERICA

I'm talking to Mom. It's the only place...she...I...

Orrin's face falls.

ORRIN

Your mother's gone, America...she took herself away from us. You've never accepted that fact.

AMERICA

No! She's here!

AMERICA

No, America -- she's not. It's in your mind. You're ill--

America holds up Suzette's book.

AMERICA

Right here!

(touches her heart)

And here!

(touches her head)

And here!

America stands a little straighter, lifts her head.

AMERICA

And she's in my poems. Her voice is my voice.

Orrin takes another step into the room.

ORRIN

In a way that might be true, yes,
because both your talents were...
well --

AMERICA

Were what?

ORRIN

Not every bird is a nightingale,
America.

AMERICA

Is that what you told her, Daddy?
Seriously?! Did you ever consider
what that would have done to her?
Did you love her at all?

Orrin is speechless for a moment. No one's ever spoken to him
like this, and certainly not about Suzette.

Orrin's shoulders drop.

ORRIN

There's not a day goes by that I
don't think...that maybe I...that
maybe I was...that I contributed...

But he can't get it out.

America moves to the desk, picks up a book.

AMERICA

Why wouldn't you let me read her
poems, Dad? Or read them to me? Why
wouldn't you let me come in here
and read mine to her? Why?

ORRIN

(defensively)

Poetry is tradition, America. It is
discipline. And history. I wanted
you to know that. Good poetry is --

AMERICA

Who made you the judge of what's
good and what's not?! Did you ever
take the time to read what she
wrote? Did you ever listen to her
read her poems? Really listen?

The sting of this accusation plays on Orrin's face. He lowers
himself into a nearby chair.

ORRIN

(quietly)

There's a benchmark, America. There
always has been, always will be.
Her voice was not as strong as
those I had to make heard in my
classroom, the type that I think
still need to be heard today.

AMERICA

No? You don't think so?

America opens the book in her hands and reads.

AMERICA

What do you see when you watch me?
Do you look for the shadows that
are chasing me from you?
Or do you look for the softness
that I offer you?
Do you ignore the reflection of the
hardness you offer me?
When you look, do you see me,
Or a wish?
Do you want to touch me,
Or would that constitute
acceptance?
Do you want to find an answer
within me,
Or have you convinced yourself it
isn't there?
What do you see when you watch me?
Do you see the emptiness at all?

America slams the book closed.

AMERICA

Strong enough for you?

America hands the book to Orrin as she passes him on her way
to the door.

AMERICA

It's called "To Orrin". But I doubt
you ever bothered to read it.

America exits to the stairs.

Orrin looks down at the book, then stands quickly, follows
America to the landing.

INT. STANLEY HOUSE -- LANDING OUTSIDE LOFT WRITING ROOM --
NIGHT

Orrin comes to the railing, as America goes down the stairs.

ORRIN

You don't understand. I have an obligation.

America stops at the front door.

AMERICA

Yeah. Like somebody else I've run into lately. He blew it too.

ORRIN

I have an obligation!

AMERICA

Don't worry. I won't embarrass you anymore.

America goes out the front door, lets it slowly close behind her.

Orrin stares at the door a moment, then slams his hand on the railing.

INT. ROBERTA FANNING'S HOSPITAL ROOM -- DAY

Dawn is just breaking outside. America enters the room, closes the door quietly. She pulls the chair to the bedside, sits down.

Roberta Fanning is still comatose, still bandaged.

America leans her head on the bed, near Fanning's head, stares off at nothing, speaks low and slow.

AMERICA

I found her. We talked. Traded poems.

(smiles)

My heart doesn't hurt so much now. I think I should thank you for part of that. 'Cause bein' you brought me there, you know? You and Charlie.

(sits up, looks at)

(Fanning)

What do I do about Charlie? What would you do?

EXT. EMPTY LOT -- DAY

A chill morning. America, in the cape but with the hood down, moves across the back of the lot toward the corner where Whispers, Boston, Little Jeannie, and others are just firing up the barrel.

Little Jeannie's face lights up when she sees America.

LITTLE JEANNIE

Well, lookit here. Where you been hidin', girl? We thought you wuz taken.

AMERICA

Just been...you know.

WHISPER

Uh-huh. We all been "just been'n'", ain't that right?

(all laugh)

Well, whatever. Those two guys keep drivin' by now and again, Miss A, so keep your eye open.

America warms herself at the barrel.

AMERICA

When do they come?

BOSTON

Off and on. Mostly at night.

AMERICA

One of them was a Services guy, wasn't he?

BOSTON

Mm-hmm. Simpson. Social Services. Other guy's a private dick, sure as shit.

WHISPER

Acts like a dick.
(to Little Jeannie)
Sorry.

LITTLE JEANNIE

(to America)
Why, honey? You need somethin'? A doctor, maybe?

America shakes her head.

AMERICA

I just want to talk to him. But not the other one.

WHISPER

'Bout what?

AMERICA

I just want to talk to the Services guy, that's all. Only him.

WHISPER

(more insistent)

'Bout what?

LITTLE JEANNIE

Shhh, Whisper. You ain't her daddy.

(to America)

You know where the Social Services building is? Down off Race Street on 15th?

(off America's nod)

That's where he is. You can ask for him, they'll tell you where he is.

AMERICA

Simpson.

LITTLE JEANNIE

That's what he said. Best to go end of the day. Catch him in the lot, you don't wanta go in, you know?

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- LOBBY -- DAY

America, hood up, enters the lobby, moves toward the elevators.

Arkis jumps up the moment he sees her.

ARKIS

Hey, Ms. Fanning. There you are.
Hold up a minute.

America stops at the elevators, head down, hood obscuring her face, as always. Arkis joins her, holds out a card to her.

ARKIS

This guy was here this morning.
Twice already. Said to give you his card, and tell you he'll be back.

America, head bowed, looks down at the card.

INSERT -- THE CARD

Beneath the logo of the University of Pennsylvania, is the name, Orrin Mays Stanley, in straight, block letters.

BACK TO SCENE

America palms the card, pushes the elevator button.

ARKIS

You want I should send him on up
when he comes?

The elevator doors open. America steps in.

AMERICA

No.

The doors close.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- ROBERTA FANNING'S PENTHOUSE -- DAY

America enters, drops the cape, sits by the window. She looks down at the business card still in her hand.

AMERICA

Shit. Shit, shit, shit.

America stands, walks toward the kitchen. As she passes the desk, she glances at it.

She stops cold.

There's nothing on the desktop where yesterday there was a file -- a brand new file of brand new, fresh-written pages. Her pages.

America jumps to the desk.

AMERICA

Where...?

America frantically spins, eyes the entire room in one sweep.

AMERICA

Oh, God! Where...?

America runs into the kitchen, runs back out. She disappears into the adjoining bedroom, reappears a moment later.

AMERICA

Where, where, where, where, where,
where, where...

America goes back to the desk, opens the drawers, slams them closed. No file. No poems. Nowhere.

AMERICA

Ah, NO! NO!

America turns in mid-cry, takes a step toward the door, but the shrill ring of the telephone stops her, the cry stuck in her throat. She looks at the phone as it rings again.

America moves to the desk, thinks about it. The phone rings again. She reaches out, picks up the receiver, puts it to her ear.

ARKIS (V.O.)

(through phone)

Miss Fanning?

America doesn't utter a sound.

ARKIS (V.O.)

Miss Fanning? You there? It's Vernon Arkis.

AMERICA

Yes?

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- LOBBY -- DAY

Arkis stands at the Doorman's stand, on the phone. Before him stands Orrin Stanley, briefcase in hand.

ARKIS

It's Vernon, Miss Fanning.
Downstairs. That guy I mentioned to you? He's here again, wants to come up.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- ROBERTA FANNING'S PENTHOUSE -- DAY

America looks down at the card, crumpled on the desk.

AMERICA

No.

ARKIS (V.O.)

Well, he's been here twice already, Miss Fanning. Maybe...

AMERICA

No. I told you no.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- LOBBY -- DAY

Arkis lays the phone on his shoulder, looks at Orrin.

ARKIS
She says "no", pal. Pretty much
says it all, far as I'm concerned.

ORRIN
May I speak with her on the phone
for one moment?

Arkis just looks at him.

ORRIN
Please?

Arkis rolls his eyes, puts the phone to his head.

ARKIS
He wants to talk to you, Miss
Fanning. Hold on.

Arkis hands the phone to Orrin, who turns away from him as if
it gives him privacy.

ORRIN
Miss Fanning? My name is Orrin Mays
Stanley. I'm with the University of
Pennsylvania.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- ROBERTA FANNING'S PENTHOUSE -- DAY

America stands transfixed.

ORRIN (V.O.)
(through phone)
I'm here about the Wordsworth Chair
endowment of the Literature
Department of the university.
You're familiar with it?

AMERICA
(whispered)
Yes.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- LOBBY -- DAY

Orrin smiles.

ORRIN

Well, we'd like to offer you the Chair, Miss Fanning. An endowment that includes a house on campus, an annual six-figure stipend, and the opportunity to teach, if you wish to.

Silence.

ORRIN

I've been in touch with Peter Mills this morning -- over at Mills/Brace? He said he'd be calling you too. He tells me your new book is spectacular, and neither of us could be more --

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- ROBERTA FANNING'S PENTHOUSE -- DAY

America's eyes fall to the desk.

AMERICA

My new book...?

ORRIN (V.O.)

Yes. Lying Down Among Those Dying, I think he said the title was -- that incredible piece you performed last night at Stanza's. I've not heard a piece like that in, well, decades, really. You have a voice that must be heard, Miss Fanning and I --

AMERICA

I don't--

ORRIN (V.O.)

-- would really like to discuss this in person, if I may, Miss Fanning. Perhaps if now is not a good time...

AMERICA

No...

ORRIN (V.O.)

All right, well, then, perhaps --

America hangs up the phone, drops into the chair by the desk.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- LOBBY -- DAY

Orrin turns, hands the phone to Arkis.

ORRIN

She hung up. Can you call her back?

ARKIS

Look...I'm gonna save you some trouble here, okay? You're wastin' your time with that one. Believe me. As squirrely a bitch as you're ever gonna meet. Give it up.

ORRIN

(stiffening)

Your opinion is not what I'm seeking here, sir.

ARKIS

(a fierce stare)

No? Too bad. 'Cause that's all I'm offering.

Orrin stares back, but then turns and moves to the doors.

As Orrin exits, Mike Wallings enters, moves toward the elevators.

WALLINGS

(to Arkis)

Going up to see Roberta Fanning.

ARKIS

No you're not. Appears she ain't seein' anybody.

Wallings stops a moment, then moves to Arkis. He reaches out, puts a fifty dollar bill on the Doorman's stand.

WALLINGS

Got a surprise for her. Wouldn't want to spoil it, now would we?

Arkis picks up the bill, folds it.

ARKIS

I love surprises.

Wallings smiles, moves to the elevators.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- ROBERTA FANNING'S PENTHOUSE -- DAY

America is still in the chair, her head in her hands, leaning on the desk.

A knock on the door startles her. Another knock, then the muffled voice of Wallings.

WALLINGS (O.S.)

Miss Fanning? It's Mike Wallings.

America moves quickly to the door, opens it.

AMERICA

Where's my pages? You stole them!

Wallings steps into the penthouse, closes the door.

WALLINGS

Hardly.

AMERICA

I want my pages back.

Wallings moves into the main penthouse space.

WALLINGS

And you'll get them back. In book form. First copies should be coming off the presses later today. Modern printing...amazing, isn't it?

AMERICA

No! I told you you couldn't have them. They're not...

WALLINGS

(turns to face her)

It's a done deal, Roberta. You signed a contract over two years ago, took the rather large advance Peter Mills provided. He's been very patient, and now he's collected what he paid for. Simple business transaction.

Wallings pulls a paper from his inside jacket pocket, unfolds it.

WALLINGS

Which leaves us to discuss the other part of that contract you signed -- promotion.

(MORE)

WALLINGS (CONT'D)

I have here a preliminary schedule of personal appearances we've arranged, starting this Friday at two o'clock --

AMERICA

No, no, no --

WALLINGS

At two o'clock at the University of Pennsylvania, where you'll be introduced as the holder of the new Wordsworth Chair in Poetry.

Wallings holds the paper out to her. America moves away, as if Wallings was thrusting a cattle prod at her.

AMERICA

Not possible. Huh-uh.

WALLINGS

It's a prestigious honor. It will drive sales. Promotion is a huge part of publishing, Roberta. You know that. I know you're a little shy, but...

America moves to the penthouse door, opens it.

AMERICA

You don't understand.

WALLINGS

Roberta...

AMERICA

Please leave.

WALLINGS

Look --

AMERICA

Get out! Leave me alone!

Wallings drops the paper on the desk, moves to the door.

WALLINGS

I'm just the messenger, Ms. Fanning. If you won't work with me on this, the next person you'll deal with is one of Peter Mills's attorneys, and I don't think --

America pushes Wallings into the hallway.

AMERICA

You don't know what you've done.
You don't know anything. Just leave
me alone. You hear me? Leave me
alone!

WALLINGS

It's too late, Roberta...we're
committed and so are you --

America slams the door closed.

AMERICA

(to herself)
Shit. Shit, shit, shit.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- STAIRWELL -- DAY

America, in cape and hood, moves quickly down the stairs. She
reaches the bottom and pushes open a door marked "Basement".

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- BASEMENT -- DAY

America moves through the basement.

AMERICA

Charlie?

No answer.

America looks inside Charlie's room. It's empty.

AMERICA

Charlie? You here?

America hears a noise in another section of the basement. She
moves toward it, toward the alley exit.

Charlie is carrying trash bags out.

AMERICA

Charlie.

Charlie turns, smiles when he sees America.

CHARLIE

We gonna look for more treasure?

America shakes her head.

CHARLIE

Read some poems, then?

AMERICA
 (anxiously in a hip
 hop rhythm)
 Right now
 I have to go.
 But I need to let you know...

She stops the rhyme, takes a deep breath, squats in front of Charlie, takes his hand.

AMERICA
 I have to go somewhere right now,
 Charlie, but I need to talk to you
 when I get back. It's important.
 For you.
 (she smiles)
 Okay?

CHARLIE
 (smiles back)
 Okay.

America gives Charlie a hug, then climbs the steps and disappears into the alley.

INT. HOSPITAL HALLWAY -- DAY

The elevator doors open. America moves into the hallway toward Roberta's room.

INT. ROBERTA FANNING'S HOSPITAL ROOM -- DAY

America enters, pulls the chair to the bed again. She leans into the still-comatose Fanning.

AMERICA
 How you doin' today, girlfriend?
 Still sleepin'?

America pauses, drops her head on the bedsheets, silent a moment, then whispers in Roberta's ear.

AMERICA
 You need to wake up now, Ms.
 Fanning. You have to come back.
 'Cause I can't do this anymore.
 Bein' you used to be okay, you
 know? Nice warm place to hide out,
 food, this nice cape.
 (sighs deeply)
 (MORE)

AMERICA (CONT'D)

But some shit's come down, and it's gonna get hairy, and I just can't be you anymore. It's prob'ly already out of control...there's a book of poems that'll have your name on 'em, that...well, you'll see. And they want to give you that Chair at Penn tomorrow. Jesus. Wait'll Orrin finds out. He'll kill me.

America tries to look into Fanning's eyes.

AMERICA

But mostly it's Charlie, Ms. Fanning. He's such a good kid. And he knows more'n most. He knew how to help me, anyway. He gave me the one thing I needed most in my life. And now he needs some help. But I can't help him and be you. So tomorrow it's gonna get crazy around here. This room's gonna get pretty crowded. And I prob'ly won't be allowed to come back. So you better get ready. Now's the time. You gotta come back real soon, okay? Real soon.

America stands, straightens the sheets over Fanning.

AMERICA

(pulling the lapel of
the cape)

I'll need this one more day. I'll bring it back after. If I can.

America takes Fanning's hand and squeezes it, and smiles. Then she turns and exits.

INSERT -- ROBERTA'S HAND

The right index finger moves...

EXT. DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES -- DAY

America stands to the side of the building by a chain link fence that surrounds the adjacent parking lot.

Hood on, she watches the street and the sidewalks, dancing from foot to foot to keep warm.

She stops when a car -- marked "Dept. of Social Services" on it's side -- pulls through the gate into the lot and parks near the building.

Marcus Simpson climbs from the car, moves toward the side entrance to the building.

America intercepts him.

AMERICA

'Scuse me. You're Mr. Simpson, right?

Simpson stops, looks toward her.

SIMPSON

Yes. Marcus Simpson. Who's that?

America pulls the hood from her head.

AMERICA

It's America. America Morrison.

SIMPSON

America! Wow. Been looking for you a while. You're not easy to find.

AMERICA

I need to talk.

SIMPSON

Well, come on in. I'll do whatever I can for you.

AMERICA

Not for me. For a friend.

SIMPSON

Okay.

Simpson holds the door for America as she enters.

SIMPSON

Who's your friend?

AMERICA

His name is Charlie.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- LOBBY -- DAY

Charlie is back close to the elevators, mopping the floor. He moves lethargically, his head down, his eyes on the floor.

Arkis leans on the Doorman's stand, reading a newspaper.

The elevator doors open, and a GREY-HAIRED BUSINESSMAN exits the car. A SMALL REDHEAD, in tight, red leather and chewing gum, is on his arm.

Charlie glances up at the couple, then sadly turns his eyes from them.

The Grey-haired Businessman drops a key on the Doorman's stand, points a finger at Arkis and heads for the door.

The Small Redhead looks back and waves.

SMALL REDHEAD

Bye, Vern.

Arkis looks up, shakes his head with disdain. He glances over at Charlie, who's looking at him.

ARKIS

What're you lookin' at? Get back to it.

America, in hood and cape, enters and moves toward the elevators.

Arkis drops the paper, stands straight.

ARKIS

Hey, there, Ms. Fanning. How are we today?

America stops. Inside the hood, her jaw has set, her eyes indicate she's thinking about something. But she holds it in, continues to the elevators.

Charlie waits there, eyes on America, but darting to Arkis and back. A smile creeps onto his face.

CHARLIE

Hi...Miss Fanning.

As the elevator doors open, America looks at Charlie.

AMERICA

Can you help me with something upstairs, Charlie?

Charlie looks at Arkis, who shrugs. Charlie leans the mop against the wall and joins America in the elevator.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- ROBERTA FANNING'S PENTHOUSE -- DAY

America points to the couch by the windows, as she sits in the chair nearby.

AMERICA
Sit a minute, Charlie.

Charlie drops onto the couch, a smile on his face.

CHARLIE
We gonna do poems?

AMERICA
I need to talk to you about something, okay?
(off Charlie's nod)
Charlie...I'm going to be leaving here tomorrow.

Charlie immediately comes to the edge of the couch.

CHARLIE
Why? No, I don't want--

AMERICA
I have to, Charlie. I don't belong here.

CHARLIE
But --

AMERICA
Listen to me a minute, okay? I'm just starting to understand this stuff myself, so let me get it out.
(she takes his hands)
Charlie, you've shown me more than you'll ever know. You brought me out of a dark pit. You gave me back the one person I've been looking for since I was eight years old. And you may have given me someone I never had.

CHARLIE
Who's that?

AMERICA
That doesn't matter right now. What does matter is that you understand something.

(MORE)

AMERICA (CONT'D)

You showed me a poem by Miss
Fanning -- about forgiving people
because they're only what they are.
Remember?

(off Charlie's nod)

Well, there's some people we should
forgive and there's others we
shouldn't. Some we need to give the
benefit of the doubt to, and others
that don't deserve any benefit at
all. Can you understand that?

CHARLIE

There's good people and bad people.

AMERICA

(smiles)

Yes.

CHARLIE

And that's why you're going to
leave? Bad people?

AMERICA

No. Tomorrow some things are going
to happen, though. Things are going
to change for you. And for me, I
suppose.

(off Charlie's frown)

Don't be afraid. For now, I just
want you to understand that no
matter what happens, you will
always be my
best friend, Charlie. My best
friend. I want you to know that.

(touches his face)

And to know that I love you.

Charlie looks at America. Tears well up in his eyes.

CHARLIE

My mom used to tell me that.

AMERICA

Well...now I will.

Charlie comes off the couch into America's arms. They hug
each other tight enough to cut off breath.

INT. MILLS/BRACE PUBLISHING -- MIKE WALLINGS' OFFICE -- DAY

Wallings leans back in his office chair, paging through a fresh copy of *Lying Down Among Those Dying* by Roberta Fanning.

Peter Mills sits across from him.

WALLINGS

Looks great, Mr. Mills. When's it go out?

MILLS

Already on its way. We'll flood the Penn campus area tomorrow for the Wordsworth Chair ceremony. The media's been alerted, correct?

WALLINGS

All the top local and national networks, all three major city papers. Penn's promised a big turnout.

MILLS

And Fanning?

Wallings sets the book down, sits forward.

WALLINGS

No word.

MILLS

No word?!

WALLINGS

Dr. Stanley said she wouldn't see him. And she hasn't answered any calls since yesterday.

MILLS

This better not blow up in our faces, Wallings. I'd hate to think we're launching a book and funding a chair, and --

A SECRETARY knocks on the doorjamb, leans into the room.

SECRETARY

You have a call on six, Mr. Wallings. A Roberta Fanning.

Wallings grabs for the phone.

WALLINGS

Finally!

(punches on speaker)

Miss Fanning. I'm so glad to hear from you.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- ROBERTA FANNING'S PENTHOUSE -- DAY

America stands at Roberta's desk, phone to ear.

INTERCUT -- MILLS' OFFICE/ROBERTA'S PENTHOUSE

AMERICA

I'm calling to let you know that I'll be attending the ceremony at the University of Pennsylvania tomorrow --

WALLINGS

Terrific --

AMERICA

And that I'll be reading a new piece written especially for tomorrow, if that will be all right.

WALLINGS

Absolutely. Couldn't be more perfect.

AMERICA

I'll also be making an announcement.

WALLINGS

An announcement.

AMERICA

Yes.

WALLINGS

About...?

AMERICA

I'll leave that for tomorrow.

WALLINGS

Yes...but Miss Fanning...this announcement...is it something PR should --

AMERICA

'Til tomorrow, Mr. Wallings.

INT. MILLS/BRACE PUBLISHING -- MIKE WALLINGS' OFFICE -- DAY

The phone emits a dial tone. Wallings clicks off the speaker.

WALLINGS

What do you suppose that's going to be?

MILLS

Whatever it is, you better hope it doesn't fuck up the launch of this book.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- ROBERTA FANNING'S PENTHOUSE -- NIGHT

The neon numerals of an electric clock glow 4:12.

Bent over the desk, her hands illuminated by the only circle of light in the room, America sits writing on a legal pad. She stops, looks over the page, then tears it off the pad, folds it, and puts it into her pocket.

America bends over and pulls the file of Roberta Fanning's new manuscript from under the desk where she'd put it a few days ago. On it she places a sticky note, on which is written:

INSERT: THE STICKY NOTE:

"Charlie -- these are Roberta's newest poems. I thought you'd want to read them. Give them back to her when she comes home. I'll see you. America."

BACK TO SCENE

America stands, picks up the cape and file and turns out the light.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- BASEMENT -- NIGHT

America emerges from the stairwell, makes her way to Charlie's room.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- BASEMENT -- CHARLIE'S ROOM -- NIGHT

America lays the file on the nightstand next to a sleeping Charlie. She looks at him, pulls his blanket up a bit, then leaves.

EXT. UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA -- HULLIHEN HALL -- DAY

A brisk day, but bright with sun. A very large, animated crowd surrounds the front steps of HULLIHEN, and spills out over the quad in front. On nearby tables are stacks of Roberta Fanning's new book.

At the top of the wide steps at the front of the hall is a podium with microphones. Behind the podium, a line of chairs filled with VIPs, among them Peter Mills, Mike Wallings, and the Regents of the University.

At the end of the line sits a caped and hooded America Morrison.

Orrin Mays Stanley addresses the attentive crowd from the podium.

ORRIN

...and like the namesake of this prestigious new position dedicated to the highest standards of poetic expression, the voice that will hold it is clear, strong, and representative of the kind of ability rarely seen in today's literary pantheon. Ladies and Gentlemen, it is with great pride, pleasure, and respect that I give you the first holder of the Wordsworth Chair in Poetry at the University of Pennsylvania -- Miss Roberta Fanning.

The crowd erupts in applause. The VIPs on stage stand applauding and look at the hooded figure at the end of the line of chairs.

America slowly rises, and makes her way to the podium, where Orrin waits. Orrin picks up a ribbon with a large amulet and places it over America's hooded head, then steps aside as she turns to the crowd.

America unfolds the page of legal paper, spreads it on the podium, clears her throat.

The crowd hushes.

AMERICA

This is for all those who know
 want, those who know fear, those
 who know loneliness.

She pauses, glances into the crowd. Along the edge of the
 quad stand Whisper, Little Jeannie, Boston, Fingers, and
 Squints.

AMERICA

Where is it written
 We're allowed to ignore
 A sister or brother unluckily born?
 Who let us claim blindness
 Or swear we don't hear
 That cry, that whimper, that moan,
 that tear
 As it falls to the breast of a
 child?
 Who gave us permission
 To show them our backs?
 These darkened, forgotten wounded
 who lack
 A voice to cry mercy
 And plead for a hand
 To hold them, or touch them or pray
 with them and
 Maybe promise release for a while.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- LOBBY -- DAY

America's reading runs under:

Marcus Simpson enters, flanked by a DETECTIVE in plainclothes
 with a badge hanging from his jacket pocket, and two
 UNIFORMED POLICE OFFICERS.

AMERICA (V.O.)

How can we give up obligation to
 change
 The lives of those wounded and
 maimed?

Arkis looks up as the four men approach him, then abruptly
 stiffens as he realizes who and what they are.

AMERICA (V.O.)

Have we lost our compassion
 And let empathy slide?
 Are we really so filled with self-
 interest and pride
 We can't see it's ourselves we
 defile?

As the Detective turns Arkis and begins to cuff him, Simpson walks to Charlie, who stands with a mop in his hand, riveted by the unfolding scene. Simpson extends his hand.

SIMPSON

Hi, Charlie. My name is Marcus. I'm a friend of America's...you probably know her as Roberta. She asked me to come see you.

EXT. UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA -- HULLIHEN HALL -- DAY

America's voice strengthens.

AMERICA

So when do we raise up our voice in refrain,
And call for the end of their pain?...

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- LOBBY -- DAY

Arkis is escorted from the building by the Uniformed Police Officers.

AMERICA (V.O.)

For there is no real distance
Between them and us...

Simpson opens the key cabinet behind the Doorman's stand, takes the keys for Apartment 512 from their hook.

AMERICA (V.O.)

And there but for God go we and
it's just...

Simpson turns to Charlie, holds up the keys, points to the elevator, and smiles at him. Charlie smiles back.

EXT. UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA -- HULLIHEN HALL -- DAY

America pauses a scant moment for emphasis, then...

AMERICA

That it may take nothing more than
a smile.

America stops, folds the paper. When they realize she's finished, the audience erupts, as do the VIPs. Orrin beams, looks to Regent 1, who nods his head.

Orrin takes a step toward America, but realizes she hasn't moved from the podium. She stands unmoving, hood still pulled over her head.

ORRIN
Miss Fanning?

AMERICA
(leaning to Orrin)
If you don't mind, I have something
else to say.

ORRIN
Of course. Please.

America waits for the applause to die down. When it doesn't, she puts up her hands in an attempt to quell it.

AMERICA
Please. Don't. I don't deserve it.

This guts the applause, and it dies quickly. Many in the crowd look at one another, uncertainty on their faces.

AMERICA
See, you liked that poem, and I
appreciate it. I really do. I've
tried to get my poems heard for a
long, long time now.

Mills looks to Wallings, who looks to Orrin, whose eyes are riveted on his Wordsworth poet, Roberta Fanning.

AMERICA
But you see...
(a tough swallow)
Roberta Fanning didn't write that
poem. Or any of them in that book.
'Cause she couldn't. Roberta
Fanning's in Jefferson Hospital.
She's been there a while. Ever
since she turned to look at me in
the street. My name...

America reaches up and grabs the hood.

AMERICA
...is America Morrison.

America drops the hood back onto her shoulders.

A collective gasp rises from the crowd. America turns and looks at Orrin, who's been figuratively gut-punched into immobility, his eyes wide, his jaw dropped open.

MILLS

What the hell...?

America turns and speaks to Orrin, but the microphone picks up her words.

AMERICA

I'm sorry, Orrin. I could tell you how all this happened but it doesn't matter now. Not to you, and frankly, not to me anymore. I just can't take Miss Fanning's life from her more than I already have and I don't want you to be left holding the bag for a lie I created because I was fucked up, alone, and afraid. But I'm none of those things anymore, because I'm not alone anymore. Somebody smiled at me and taught me that you and me are just doing the best we can, and we'll both have to accept that.

America takes off the ribbon and amulet, hands it to Orrin, who looks down at it, then back to his daughter.

ORRIN

America, I --

AMERICA

Thanks for thinking I was good enough for this. Mom would have liked that.

America turns and walks down the stairs and into the crowd, where Whisper, Little Jeannie, and the rest wait for her.

As they move off toward the street, a clap is heard. Then another, then another and another.

As America and her friends turn onto Market Street, the applause has become thunderous.

INT. STANZAS -- NIGHT

A packed house. A single spotlight aimed at the stage.

SUPER -- "SIX MONTHS LATER"

The spotlight is trained on America Morrison. She stands tall at the mic, dressed in crisp, stylish corduroy skirt and cardigan sweater, her dreads pulled back and bundled neatly behind her head.

AMERICA

...And so you and I tonight,
As we love,
And sit laughing at fate;
Time is lost for us --
Sent away --
The hours can wait.
You ask to know me.
Very well.
I'm open to you,
I am now willing.
Travel me,
And do what you'll do.

America steps back from the mic, bows. The audience applauds enthusiastically.

America moves from the stage as the Emcee comes to the mic.

EMCEE

Philly's own America Morrison,
folks. Give it up.

As she steps off the stage, a WAITRESS approaches America.

WAITRESS

Some people over in the far corner
would like to see you. Say they
know you.

America looks, but it's dark in that section of the club.

AMERICA

Okay. Thanks.

America makes her way through the tables toward the corner, accepting handshakes and thanks from Patrons. As she draws close, and her eyes adjust to the light, she stops.

INT. STANZAS -- CORNER BOOTH -- NIGHT

In the corner booth sit Orrin Stanley and Roberta Fanning.

AMERICA

What are you...?

Orrin stands, smiles sincerely.

ORRIN
Please, America. Join us.

America hesitates.

ORRIN
Please.

America looks to Roberta. She smiles and nods. America sits.

ORRIN
I hope you don't mind our coming.
(indicates Roberta)
You know Roberta Fanning of course.

America looks to Roberta and offers her hand.

AMERICA
In a way. Hi, I'm America.

Roberta takes her hand, smiles warmly.

ROBERTA
I've heard a lot about you.

AMERICA
You look better than when I last
saw you.

ROBERTA
I'm doing okay. A little stiff,
walk a little funny.

AMERICA
Look...I...I think I owe you an
apology. A lot of them, really...

ROBERTA
You've already apologized.
Unnecessarily, I might add.

AMERICA
I have?

ROBERTA
Mm-hmm. Several times. In the
hospital.

AMERICA
How could you know that? I thought
you were...

ROBERTA

Part of me was. But some part of me heard you. And your concern for Charlie. I'm convinced that's what brought me back. You don't need to apologize to me, America. It's me that owes you a great debt.

AMERICA

But I stole your name, your life.

ROBERTA

You just borrowed it. Until you found your own.

Roberta holds up a copy of *Lying Down Among Those Dying*, the name below the title now being America Suzette Morrison.

ROBERTA

And judging from this, I'd say you've found it. Congratulations.

AMERICA

Thank you.

(looks to Orrin)

But you didn't come all the way down here just to tell me that.

ORRIN

No. No, we didn't. America, there is no reason on earth for you to consider what I'm about to ask you. Because I have failed you as many ways as a father can fail his child. All I can hope is that perhaps we can find a way back to each other, if you're willing.

AMERICA

We can try.

ORRIN

Then perhaps you'll also consider this: Roberta has refused to accept the Wordsworth Chair. She says the critical and commercial success of this book...

(picks up America's book)

...makes you far more worthy than she.

America looks to Roberta, surprise on her face.

ROBERTA

Your voice is the voice of today,
America, not mine. It's a voice
that needs to be heard clearly.

America looks back to Orrin.

ORRIN

She's right, America.

This hits America...recognition from her father overwhelms
her.

AMERICA

I...don't know what to say.

ORRIN

Say you'll accept the Wordsworth
Chair. It would be a personal honor
to me if you would.

America sits stunned. She looks down at her hands on the
table for several moments, then looks up at Roberta, then
Orrin.

AMERICA

On one condition. And it's non-
negotiable.

ORRIN

Yes?

AMERICA

We share it. Roberta Fanning and
America Morrison. Together. It's
the only way I'll do it. You always
told me we can't ignore what's come
before -- that history and
tradition are as valuable as what
we hold dear today. That's a lesson
we can only teach together, the way
I see it.

America meets Roberta's eyes.

ORRIN

Roberta?

Roberta smiles at America, nods at Orrin.

ROBERTA

I accept.

ORRIN
 (smiling broadly)
 Wonderful! The best of both
 worlds...

Orrin is interrupted by the Waitress approaching the table.

WAITRESS
 Miss Morrison? They want you on the
 stage.

Time for your last recitation.

AMERICA
 Thanks.
 (to Orrin and Roberta)
 I'll see you later, okay?

ORRIN
 We'll be here.

INT. STANZAS -- ON STAGE -- NIGHT

America approaches the mic.

AMERICA
 I'd like to dedicate this poem to
 my father, and my friends Roberta
 and Charlie.

The spotlight focuses on America. The room goes silent. She
 begins, her voice strong and resonant.

AMERICA
 You're the light in a darkened
 room;
 You're new life in a barren womb;
 You're the crack in a hard cocoon;
 You're the notes of a forgotten
 tune.

EXT. UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA -- CAMPUS ROW HOME -- DAY

America's recitation continues under:

The door opens and America emerges from the house, a backpack
 slung over her shoulder. She closes the door, locks it with
 the keys in her hand, steps off the porch, moves up the
 sidewalk.

AMERICA (V.O.)
 You're new blood in a bloodless
 world;
 You're new wind to help a flag
 unfurl...
 You're new eyes that remove the
 blur,
 You're the kiss of a lover's word.

America waves at two students who call out to her as she crosses the street, walking toward the main campus.

EXT. UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA -- QUAD -- DAY

The recitation continues under:

America and Roberta sit on the grass, surrounded by students, books open on their laps, engaged in animated conversation.

AMERICA (V.O.)
 You were a map for a woman lost;
 You were solace when the tempest
 tossed;
 You were hope when the stars got
 crossed;
 You helped me find the things I
 lost.

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- LOBBY -- DAY

The recitation continues under:

America enters, waves to a new DOORMAN, who smiles and waves back.

AMERICA (V.O.)
 So if in this life you find,
 Too many moments cold and unkind...

INT. SYMPHONY HOUSE -- HALLWAY IN FRONT OF APARTMENT 512 -- DAY

The recitation continues under:

America knocks on the door, waits.

AMERICA (V.O.)
 Remember that for me you shine...

The door opens. A radiantly smiling Charlie Emson welcomes America with a hug as a puppy jumps and runs around their legs.

AMERICA (V.O.)
You are the dearest friend of mine.

FADE OUT:

THE END