

THE POETRY OF HEARTS
(also titled THE SIGNATURE OF FEAR)

by R. T. Bowersox

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CHARACTERS

CONRAD "CONNIE" MIDDLETON
70's, British, though an American resident for almost four decades. A mythic poet, winner of every possible award for poetry extant, including the Pulitzer, twice. British Poet Laureate, known as the "Lion of the Haight", whose fiery political voice awoke a generation's sense of itself in the Sixties, then touched and calmed their hearts with stanzas so personal and touching it is said the Queen has cried at their reading. He's ill and weak, dependent upon oxygen and nursing help.

DELIA SPENCER MIDDLETON
Late 60's, British. Connie's wife of some 40+ years, but also has been responsible for marshalling the lifelong effort to promote Connie and his poetry. A strong woman, focused, who knows what she wants. She has spent most of her life guiding Connie's professional life, basking only in the reflected light of his success. She carries her own demons, inherited from her father and grandfather's unsuccessful fight for acknowledgement by Buckingham Palace.

CATHERINE MIDDLETON-NESTOR
Late 30's, American. Connie and Delia's daughter. Soft-spoken, but capable of her father's fire if called for.

Had molded a successful career in public relations and artist representation, but has withdrawn from it to try to help her husband, Mark Nestor, an artist in New York, who's lack of success and slide into alcoholism has begun to pull down their relationship.

ANDREW MIDDLETON

Late 60's, British. Connie's brother. The proprietor/bartender of a pub in London, and an everyman's philosopher. Carries a dog-eared copy of Robert Burns poetry with him everywhere, which he seems to use as a guide to all things in life. Calm and focused, not phased by too much.

CLAIRE DUNSTON

40's, Irish. An LPN, hired to help with Connie's care. An outspoken, rough-hewn woman with a decent sense of humor. Loves the bling of America, can't understand why anyone would want to go back to Britain.

MICHAEL CHARLES, ESQ.

60s. Attorney to Connie and Delia. A straightforward, by-the-book lawyer. Smart and can see all the angles of most any situation or opportunity, especially as to how it might benefit him.

ACT ONE, Scene 1

A modest home on the edge of the desert north of Phoenix, Arizona. Desert chic decor.

On the SR wall, a picture window overlooks the desert expanse. It has a wide windowseat sill that houses a low bookshelf under it. Upstage right, not quite to the back wall, a step up from stage level, is a small office alcove -- desk, bookshelves, small cabinet. The shelves are tight with awards, trophies, old magazine covers of Connie, etc. A hallway to another part of the house is behind the US alcove wall.

Center stage is an easy chair, a small table next to it. A small loveseat/sofa sits facing the chair, slightly angled CS to downstage left. A small coffee table sits in front of it. On the SL wall is a floor-to-ceiling bar piece, stocked with bottles and glasses and knick-knacks.

A hallway moves off upstage left, a credenza nearby. Slightly off Upstage Center is the front door to the house. A closet door is SR of it.

As the curtain music slowly fades with the house and pre-set lights, we hear the voice of Conrad Middleton:

CONNIE (V.O.)

*"The paths we took
Were of no consequence.
That we arrived at all is all;
That we hear the same song,
That we dance,
That we love.
We, who were children before,
Ascend this day;
We are change.
We are new.
We are the different path."*

LIGHTS UP.

Late Afternoon.

CONRAD "CONNIE" MIDDLETON sits in a wheelchair SL in front of the picture window, a plastic cannula across his face, an oxygen tank strapped to the back of the chair.

Connie writes on a yellow legal pad. He abruptly stops, tears the page from the pad, wads it up, tosses it.

Shit!

CONNIE

Connie stares out the window a few beats, then begins writing again. After a moment, the same result.

Fucking rubbish!

CONNIE

Connie tosses the page, then slings the tablet to the floor in obvious frustration.

Goddamn it!

CONNIE

DELIA enters from SL hallway with a box of books, sees Connie whip the tablet. She sets the box on the desk.

DELIA
 (light, amused)
 The muses absent this morning, are they?

CONNIE
 (miserable)
 Deceased is more like it.

As Delia moves to retrieve the tablet, Connie pulls a mashed pack of cigarettes from his robe, tries to dig one out.

DELIA
 Well, perhaps they want to be seduced a bit before offering up their pleasures...

(turns to Connie)
 ...you know, a little foreplay--
 (seeing the cigarettes)

Conrad!

(he continues)
 Connie!

CONNIE
 What?

DELIA
 You know very well what.

Delia reaches for the cigarettes, but Connie twists in his chair, keeps them from her.

CONNIE
 Leave me be.

DELIA
 I will not. Those things put you in that chair. Besides, light one up with that oxygen around your face, and tomorrow's news will have 'pyrrhic' and 'poet' in the same headline.

(setting tablet in his lap)
 Here, you dropped this.

Connie immediately tosses the tablet onto the window seat. Delia picks it up, and slides it between his leg and the chair.

DELIA
 Keep it close, dear. The muses may reanimate.

Delia kisses Connie on the forehead, moves to the office desk, begins to arrange the books for signing while:

CONNIE
(staring at the
desert)

I doubt it. I think they've finally abandoned me.

(beat)

My imagination's become as barren as that goddamned Arizona landscape.

DELIA
That desert air has kept you alive these last 20 years.

CONNIE
Define 'alive'.

DELIA
Don't be depressive. We're celebrating forty-five years together in two days and I'll not have you throwing a wet blanket on everything.

(beat)

I have some books for you to sign. We'll need them for Sunday's reading.

CONNIE
Which one?

DELIA
The FireStage Symposium. You're the featured reader. Michael booked it ages ago.

CONNIE
No. Which book?

DELIA
The Reckoning.

CONNIE
Why that one?

DELIA
I should say it's your finest work, but personally, I agree with the Pulitzer committee that *Whispers Among Lovers* is...though I was never comfortable with the preposition. Anyway, it's the only box of books we had in the basement.

Connie wheels himself to the desk.

CONNIE

FireStage. Wasn't I there years ago? I vaguely remember a fifth of McCallan and pissing in one of their potted palms. Why in God's name would they have me back?

DELIA

You're the Lion of the Haight, that's why!

Connie begins scribbling signatures across the book pages.

CONNIE

'Lion of the Haight'. *Your* fucking moniker, not mine. Marketing foolishness. Which has no place in the realm of verse, mind you.

Delia moves to the bar, pours white wine for herself while Connie signs the books.

DELIA

My 'foolishness' is why you're Conrad Middleton, British Poet Laureate, and not a footnote in an obscure textbook. Why your name is etched on the Thoreau and Twain Medals, the Frost, the Whitman, a dozen others. The Pulitzer -- twice on that one, for God's sake!

CONNIE

Didn't ask for any a' that.

DELIA

Would you rather I'd have done nothing? Would you have preferred staying a minor adjunct at goddamned Leeds, lecturing on Creative Writing and Modern Poetry six times a week?

CONNIE

The writing doesn't need a shill. It should speak for itself.

Delia packs up the signed books.

DELIA

Which it did, my darling. I just aimed the right ears at it.

(beat)

And I wasn't a goddamned shill!

Connie smiles up at her, sees her drink.

CONNIE

Got one a' those for me?

Delia ignores him, stands and shouts toward the SL hallway.

DELIA

Claire!

(to Connie)

You need to straighten yourself up. Catherine's due any minute, your brother too. Claire!

CLAIRE (O.S.)

Coming, Missus!

DELIA

Why is she always somewhere else when you need her? Good nurse, but...

CONNIE

(under his breath)

Irish Demon is what she is...

CLAIRE enters from SL hallway.

CLAIRE

Sorry, Mum. Was straightenin' the guest rooms. Lookin' forward to seein' your daughter again, I am. Lovely girl.

DELIA

Yes. Thank you. I'm sure she and Andrew will appreciate the clean rooms. And *I* would appreciate your helping my husband make himself more...presentable...before they arrive.

Claire immediately turns toward Connie, crosses her arms.

CLAIRE

Oh, yes, Mum. We'll get all tidied up, won't we, Mr. M?

Delia moves into SR hallway.

Claire and Connie watch Delia disappear, then turn their gazes at one another in a silent standoff for several beats. Then Claire sniffs the air.

CLAIRE

Yer leakin' again, aren't ya?
(beat)

I can smell it.

CONNIE

Bugger you.

CLAIRE

Betcha wish. Why didn't you call me to get you to the WC?
Save us both a lot of grief.

Connie begins coughing...it's
obviously quite painful. Claire
hands him a tissue, which he
accepts, then:

CONNIE

Don't understand why you didn't stay in Ireland. I'm sure
there's plenty of souls to torture there.

CLAIRE

Same reason you come here forty years ago: the action.

CONNIE

I didn't come here for any "action"--

CLAIRE

Oh, sure ya did. Everybody does. There's more goin' on
here than the rest a' the world in one sack. Especially out
West here.

(pulls out a folded
magazine)

My new Vegas Weekly.

(begins wheeling
him off left)

Take a look what's happening there *next week!* Cher's openin'
her new show, Bally's has a big new jackpot--tell me that's
not excitin'!

CONNIE

Oh, for God's sake!

And they're gone. A beat,
maybe two, before:

The door opens and CATHERINE
enters, a rollaway suitcase
with her.

CATHERINE

Mom? Dad? Hello? Anybody home?

Delia enters from SR hallway.

DELIA

Catherine! Darling! I was beginning to get worried!
(big hugs)

You should have let us pick you up, dear. Here, let me take
that.

Catherine sheds her coat, Delia puts it in the closet as:

CATHERINE

Wasn't sure when I'd get in. The taxi was fine. Loved the ride from the airport -- the desert's beautiful in the winter.

DELIA

Try telling that to your father.

CATHERINE

Still complaining, is he?

Delia guides Catherine into the room, indicates the desert through the window.

DELIA

You'd think a world-class poet could find *some* beauty in that, wouldn't you? Drink?

CATHERINE

Absolutely. White wine?

DELIA

I think so, yes. How was the flight?

CATHERINE

(sits in chair)

Long. And delayed. JFK is a mess.

DELIA

When wasn't it? God, I miss New York!

CATHERINE

It's different these days, Mother. Colder. Dirtier. Lonelier.
(with undercurrent)

DELIA

Not to me.

Delia brings two glasses of wine and sits.

DELIA

Center of the literary universe. Your father may have sparked his fire in the Haight, but it was in New York I was able to fan the flames.

CATHERINE

You were there at the right time.

DELIA

It was wonderful. We were out every night!

CATHERINE

I kind of remember.

DELIA

Well, you were just a toddler then. Readings, symposia, up all night around the kitchen table with the most talented people -- writers, filmmakers, playwrights, artists...I ever tell you about the night with Warhol?

CATHERINE

A hundred times.

A shared laugh.

DELIA

God, it was fun! *All* the right parties...I could make any connection we needed.

CATHERINE

I think it may have been easier then. For the arts I mean. Times have changed.

DELIA

Times are what you make of them.

CATHERINE

Uh-huh.

(beat)

Where is he...Dad?

Delia rises, goes to SL hallway.

DELIA

He needed a bit of sprucing up. You know how...
(into the hallway)

Connie! Catherine's here!

(back to Catherine)

...you know how he is.

CATHERINE

Still have Claire?

DELIA

(coming back CS)

Oh, yes. Couldn't do without her. Though she does tend to get under your father's skin now and then.

CATHERINE

She doesn't let him ignore her.

DELIA

I don't pay her to be ignored, darling.

CATHERINE

No ignoring an "Irish Demon", huh?
(another shared
laugh)

Is Uncle Andrew coming this year?

DELIA

Yes. Later today, or tomorrow morning. I forget. I think your father could do well with seeing him. Been a little dark lately.

Beat.

CATHERINE

How's he doing, Mom?

Delia sits again, sips her wine.

DELIA

Not well, sweetheart. The emphysema's getting much worse. That and the COPD's made it hard for him. Coughing spells that scare the hell out of me. The oxygen helps, but he hates to wear the...you know...

(indicates cannula)

CATHERINE

He writing at all?

DELIA

(brighter)

Seems to be. Has his tablet on his lap every minute. Hasn't shown me any of the new pieces, but I think we may be near another book soon, and --

CONNIE (O.S.)

Where's that gorgeous girl of mine?

Connie enters from SL hallway, walking slowly, but under his own power. No oxygen tank or cannula. Claire is by his side, tries to help him, but he slaps her hand away.

CONNIE

Hello, darlin'!

Catherine goes to Connie.

CATHERINE

Hi, Dad.

(big hugs)

I've missed you.

CONNIE

Aw, nothing much to miss here.

(a sharp look to
Delia)

Just a couple of ancients lost in the desert.

DELIA

(ignoring his jibe)

You remember Claire, dear.

CATHERINE

Of course.

(to Claire)

Nice to see you again.

CLAIRE

(to Catherine)

You too, Missy. Pretty as always.

(to Delia)

We all right here, then, Mum? I have some--

DELIA

Yes, yes. Thank you, Claire.

Claire disappears back into
the hallway. Connie drops onto
the couch, Catherine next to
him.

CONNIE

So how's my girl?

CATHERINE

Good. I'm...good.

CONNIE

And Mark?

Catherine seems to pull in
just the slightest bit, a forced
smile momentarily flashing on
her face.

CATHERINE

Oh, he's...he's fine.

CONNIE

He fly out with you?

CATHERINE

(quickly)

No. No, he's at the loft in New York. Working on his next show. Hopefully taking care of the cat.

CONNIE

Well, artists should paint, shouldn't they?

(to Delia)

You have one of those for me? Preferably of an amber color and a more masculine bouquet?

DELIA

Connie, I'm not so sure--

CONNIE

(struggling to rise)

Well, then I'll get it meself...

Catherine quickly rises, settles
Connie back down.

CATHERINE

I'll get it, Dad. Your usual?

CONNIE

Yes, darlin'. The green bottle. Two fingers, if you will.

DELIA

Connie, you shouldn't--

CONNIE

(looking right at
Delia)

Make it *three* fingers.

Delia holds the look a moment,
then turns away, sips her wine.
She's not happy.

CONNIE

(to Catherine)

How's that public relations...

(searches for the
word)

...thing...of yours doing?

DELIA

Conrad...

CONNIE

What?

CATHERINE

That PR "*thing*" of mine is fine, Dad. Billing over nine million this year, thank you very much.

DELIA

Darling! That's wonderful!

CATHERINE

Opening an office in London in the spring. A-list clients. It's going well.

CONNIE

Taking after your mother. Always knew you could do whatever you put your mind to.

CATHERINE

Well, it's not so much *my* doing at this point. I've got a good team looking after things for me.

(beat)

I've stepped back a bit.

Catherine delivers the scotch,
sits again.

DELIA

Meaning...?

CATHERINE

Meaning I'm limiting my personal client load is all. Focusing on one client for a while.

CONNIE

And who would that be?

DELIA

(a disparaging tone)

Not Mark.

CATHERINE

Yes, Mark. Thought he could use a little personal attention.

DELIA

And why would that be?

CATHERINE

Well, breaking him into the right galleries has been more difficult than I...we...expected.

CONNIE

Could'a told you that, darlin'. Bunch of vipers in that world.

CATHERINE

Dad...

CONNIE

You need an instinct for the jugular...

DELIA

He's suggesting you develop a taste for blood, you know.

CONNIE

Well, that's what it takes with those people. Remember the stories Rothko and Mapplethorpe used to tell us...?

CATHERINE

I can handle it, Dad.

DELIA

I'm not sure leaving your business for Mark is--

CATHERINE

He's not just my husband, mother. He's also a client. My reputation is tied to his success, as it is to any other person or firm I represent. You above all people should understand--

The phone rings.

DELIA

Now, who would that be?

Delia rises, moves to the phone on the bar, answers it.

DELIA

(into phone)

This is Delia Middleton.

CONNIE

(to Catherine)

Well, long as you're happy.

Catherine smiles, a bit weakly, nods.

DELIA

(into phone)

Oh, hello, Michael...Yes, he is...

Delia turns to Connie, points to phone and mouths "Michael".
Connie waves her off.

DELIA

(into phone)

What can we do for you?

CATHERINE
(to Connie)

Who is it?

CONNIE
(to Catherine)

Agent. And lawyer. Not sure which is worse, but both in one skin...

(wavers his hand,
rolls his eyes)

This makes Catherine laugh.

CATHERINE
Mom says you've got a new book going.

CONNIE
Your mother says a lot of things. Best to listen with a wary ear.

DELIA
(into phone)
My God! Seriously?

This brings Connie and Catherine's attention to Delia.

DELIA
(into phone)
When?...What do we have to do?...Yes, all right. We'll be here. Come tomorrow anytime...Yes. And thank you, Michael. Thank you very much.

Delia hangs up the phone, and turns to Connie and Catherine, a very bright smile on her face.

CONNIE
The FireStage people finally remember their potted palms? Withdrawing their invitation, are they?

Delia comes to them, sits, still beaming.

DELIA
No. They're going to want you more than ever.

CONNIE
I doubt that.

DELIA
Michael received a call from Washington an hour ago.
(MORE)

DELIA (CONT'D)

You, Conrad Middleton, are about to be offered the position of United States Poet Laureate!

CATHERINE

Oh, my God!

DELIA

You'll be the first poet to have held the Laureate position in both the United States *and* Great Britain.

CATHERINE

Oh, dad, that's wonderful!

DELIA

Which makes you the most honored poet in history, my darling. Above Warren, Frost, Dickey, Wilbur, Collins...all of them.

CONNIE

I'll be damned.

CATHERINE

It's about time.

DELIA

Yes, it is. We deserve it...worked hard for it.

Connie looks at her and smiles
perfunctorily, nods.

CONNIE

Certainly took their time, didn't they? Another year, they might have missed me.

CATHERINE

Don't even think that...

DELIA

Yes, not a time to be dark. You've just been handed the last key to the kingdom. A personal goal fulfilled.

CONNIE

I guess I have, haven't I? Haven't WE...

DELIA

(she raises her
glass)

To the Lion of the Haight!

CATHERINE

To the next American Poet Laureate!

DELIA

To all of us!

Catherine raises her glass to Delia's. They wait for Connie -- lost in a thought -- to raise his. After a moment he does so quickly and brings his glass swiftly to his mouth and downs its contents in one gulp.

Blackout. During the scene transition:

CONNIE (V.O.)

*"BERKELEY 1967.
Hot steel.
Sun-heated barrels aloft in row upon row,
Denying, refuting, unyielding.
Apparitions.
Rationalizations clinging to metaphors
With no further purchase;
Symbols of failure,
No direction, no reason, no vision.
Unaware they are naked, invisible, transparent.
Ghosts."*

ACT ONE, Scene 2

LIGHTS UP.

Very late night.

Connie sits on the couch, tablet in hand. He's writing again, an unlit cigarette in his hand. He coughs -- a deep, long hack that doubles him over. He recovers, scans the page he was working on.

He suddenly rips the page from the tablet, wads it up and angrily tosses it.

CONNIE

Damn it! Nothing but shit!

He drops his head into his hands.

CONNIE

(more despair and realization than anger)

Jesus.

Blackout. During the scene
transition:

CONNIE (V.O.)

*"How dare you?
How dare you take our youth,
The stars of the new morning,
And throw them to the dogs
In the jungles, in the rice paddies,
The hell on earth you created
To worship avarice, power, ego?
How dare you tell us it's in our best interests,
That there must be a line,
That we are the guardians, the angels,
The righteous,
When to all else, we are the Horsemen,
We, the Incubi,
We, the Slaughterers?
How dare you?"*

ACT ONE, Scene 3

LIGHTS UP.

Next Morning.

Catherine enters from US hall,
a cell phone to her ear with
one hand, a tissue in the other.
She's quite distraught.

CATHERINE

...no, I'm not...Mark, I'm not at all! You can't tell a
gallery owner to go fuck himself! That's a bridge I can't
unburn!...No, Mark. It's a game, can't you see that? They
control the board. You have to give them...*What!?*..How
can you say that to me?...after all I've...

(she breaks down,
weeping)

I love you, I do, but you can't treat me like this
anymore...I'm just...Please, Mark, don't. Mark! Mark!

(throws phone on
couch)

Goddamn it!

Catherine breaks down crying
into her hands. Delia enters
from SL hallway, calling back
into the hallway. She holds
glass of juice.

DELIA

Bring him out for breakfast when you're finished, Claire.

(MORE)

DELIA (CONT'D)

And don't forget his medications. I've got juice for him here...

(seeing Catherine)

Darling. What on earth is the matter?

Catherine tries to straighten up, dabs her eyes with the tissue.

CATHERINE

It's nothing.

DELIA

(sitting with her)

Hardly nothing. What is it?

CATHERINE

Really, mom, it isn't anything you--

Claire wheels Connie into the room.

CLAIRE

There you are, Mister. I'll get your meds.

CONNIE

Toss 'em.

DELIA

Connie, for God's sake...

(to Claire)

Thank you, Claire.

Claire exits into US hallway.
Delia hands the glass of juice to Connie.

DELIA

Honestly, Connie, there's no need to act the bull. She's only doing what we pay her to do.

CONNIE

Money ill-spent, if you ask me. What are you two up to?

Connie notices Catherine dab her eyes with a tissue.

CONNIE

(to Catherine)

What's all this, then?

DELIA

We were just getting to that...

Cate?
CONNIE

Dad...Really, both of you...
CATHERINE

Connie reaches out for
Catherine.

Darlin'...
CONNIE

Catherine goes to him, sits.

Honestly, it's not something we have to talk about now. We're
celebrating, right? Your anniversary...the Laureateship...
CATHERINE

Those will wait. We're your parents. Now what's going on?
DELIA

Catherine hesitates.

Mark, is it?
CONNIE
(off Catherine's
nod)
Thought it might be.

Not again. What is it this time? Drugs? A woman?
DELIA

No! Nothing like that.
CATHERINE

Wouldn't put it past him.
DELIA

Delia.
CONNIE
(to Catherine)
The work not coming?

Not for a while, no. Things just haven't gone his way. The
last show...the reviews were... well, it didn't sell. It
was a disaster.
CATHERINE

And...?
DELIA

Beat.

CONNIE

He's drinking again?

DELIA
(off Catherine's
nod)

Lord. I told you this would happen, didn't I? I told you after the last episode that you couldn't--

CONNIE

Delia, you don't know--

DELIA
(pointedly)

What, Conrad? *What* don't I know?

A long look between them, then
Connie turns back to Catherine.

CONNIE

I thought he was getting help with that.

CATHERINE

He was. But...

DELIA

What have you done about it?

CATHERINE

What do you think I did, mother? Everything I could! But he won't let me help him. And he's been...well...it doesn't matter.

CONNIE

He's not...hurting you...is he?

CATHERINE

Not intentionally, no...

DELIA

What's that supposed to mean?!

CATHERINE

It means we've had some pretty rough arguments, that's all. We've both gotten in our licks.

DELIA

My God! Are you telling me that--

CONNIE

Delia...

Delia and Catherine spit the next lines at one another simultaneously, frustration spilling over.

DELIA

I didn't raise my daughter to be someone's punching bag!

CATHERINE

You don't have to worry about me, mother! I can hold my own! I'm your daughter, after all.

CONNIE

Delia, both of you, for God's sake!

An awkward silence. Then...

DELIA

(matter-of-factly)

You have to get out of there, that's all there is to it.

CATHERINE

I have. For the time being.

DELIA

You've left him?

CATHERINE

(pointedly)

For the time being.

DELIA

When?

CATHERINE

A couple of weeks.

DELIA

My God. When were you going to tell us?

CONNIE

She's telling us now, Delia. Leave her b--

DELIA

(ignoring him)

Why didn't you call?

CATHERINE

I didn't need to bring you into it.

DELIA

That's ridiculous. Where have you been staying?

CATHERINE

A friend's place on the East Side.

DELIA

Foolishness. You could have come here.

(she rises)

That son of a bitch. Doesn't he realize how much you've done for him? How much you *can* do for him?

CONNIE

He's struggling, Delia. It happens.

DELIA

(firmly, to Connie)

We all struggle.

(firmly, to Catherine)

You can't slide off the cliff with him, Catherine. You bring him back to center if you can. If not, you show him what backbone looks like.

CATHERINE

I'm building one of the top PR firms in New York, mother. I know what backbone is.

(beat)

But I've put it all on the line for *him*, don't you understand? *He* goes down, *I* go down. But more than that, he's my *husband*. For better or worse, right? So what do I do? Be a bad wife or a bad agent?

DELIA

Well, if you don't walk away, you'd better be ready to get into the trenches. I know what I'm talking about. Hell, I'm still waging a battle your grandfather began--

CONNIE

(quickly interrupting)

Deely, I'm uh...I'm a bit chill. Would you mind terribly fetching my heavy sweater? I may have left it in the back of the car.

DELIA

Claire can--

CONNIE

Oh, don't bother her. Be a dear, will you?

DELIA

Yes, alright...

(as she exits)

But we're a long way from the end of this conversation.

CONNIE

Of course we are.

Connie holds the juice glass
out.

CONNIE

Why don't you make us each a real drink, there, daughter.
Just add a couple fingers to this.

CATHERINE

(taking his glass)

Should you be drinking? Mom said--

CONNIE

Shouldn't be doing a lot of things, now should I? Never let
that stop me.

Catherine moves to the bar,
Connie removes his cannula,
moves to the windowseat. He
pulls a pack of cigarettes
from his pocket, holds them
up.

CONNIE

Darling?

CATHERINE

(seeing the smokes)

God, I was hoping someone around here would have one of those.
I was thinking Claire might, but--

CONNIE

Well, best we not let *her* know. She and your mother seem to
take a particular joy in removing my greatest pleasures from
me.

Catherine takes him his drink,
trades it for the cigarettes.
They each light up. Connie
carefully removes a pane of
glass from the window and blows
his first puff out of the
opening.

CATHERINE

(referring to the
window)

Didn't know the windows did that.

CONNIE

Neither does your mother. Our little secret.

Catherine exhales out the window
and giggles.

CATHERINE

I feel wicked.

CONNIE

Wonderful feeling, isn't it?

CATHERINE

So Mom's still waging granddad's war with Buckingham Palace?

CONNIE

God, yes. I fear she may be lost to it, like he was. Fought it all his life, now she's taken it up. It's a damn familial curse--obsessed with an act of birth that will *never* be amended.

CATHERINE

You don't know that. Times change.

CONNIE

Buckingham Palace never acknowledges bastards, darlin', no matter the blood. But she just can't let go of it.

CATHERINE

I know how she feels.

Connie waits patiently.

Catherine stares into her drink.

CATHERINE

I've never loved a man like I love him.

(hugs Connie)

Except for you, of course.

CONNIE

Love is not always the blessing people think it to be, is it?

CATHERINE

(straightforwardly)

Love is fine, Dad. It's the sense of being alone I can't deal with. Lately, I've felt invisible. We sleep on opposite sides of the bed, turned away from each another, if he comes to bed at all. We used to stay up all night talking, laughing. After this last show failed, he's barely said two words to me.

CONNIE

Sorry, darlin'.

CATHERINE

He never leaves the loft except to go to the bar on the corner. Some nights he comes back, some he doesn't.

(MORE)

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

(beat)

There's nothing worse than realizing you're not even seen, like you're the smoke from his cigarette butt, slowly lifting up into the darkness...it's there, but you don't really see it.

CONNIE

I'm sure I gave your mother a few of those moments.

CATHERINE

But she hung in there, Dad. I don't know if I should.

CONNIE

She did, didn't she? But I often wonder if she ever got what *she* needed.

CATHERINE

Your light was bright enough to shine on both of you.

CONNIE

But she didn't see it as *her* light, did she? Just a reflection off me. But I do so wish she would just let it all go.

CATHERINE

It's not that easy to do. To let go.

CONNIE

Not so sure about that. Lately I've been thinking it may be. A Kierkegaardian leap, you know? Remember that poem of mine you liked when you were a little girl?
 "To stand on the edge,
 And open your hands,
 To step onto air,
 To loosen the bands."

CATHERINE AND CONNIE

"To trust in yourself,
 To believe that you might
 Be the bird of the morn,
 Or the star of the night."

They laugh together.

CONNIE

You remember.

CATHERINE

You recited it to me almost every night. Like a prayer.

CONNIE

Feels like that now, doesn't it?

CATHERINE

How do you mean?

CONNIE

A prayer. We use prayer to ask for change most times, don't we? But then we reject the change when it comes. I'm beginning to suspect holding on to things too long makes us irrational.

CATHERINE

But how do you know when to let go, Dad?

CONNIE

I think we probably know in here, darlin'.

(touches his heart)

If we'd listen. But we live too much in here, I suppose...

(touches her forehead)

...where fear most times drowns out the truth.

CLAIRE (O.S.)

Mister M, I've got your meds! Where are ya?

CONNIE

Oh, shit!

Connie and Catherine jump up, look around for somewhere to stash the butts. Catherine reaches toward the window.

CONNIE

No. Not in your mother's garden. She'll find 'em.

(beat)

Here.

Connie picks up the juice glass. They both throw their butts into it. Connie replaces the pane.

CLAIRE (O.S.)

Mister?

They both wave at the air, stopping guiltily just as Claire enters.

CLAIRE

Ah, there ya are! Got your meds here. And you've got your juice, I see. Here you go.

She puts a small pill cup in Connie's free hand.

In his other, he holds the
juice glass with the butts in
it.

CLAIRE

Bottoms up.

(off his blank stare)

Go ahead now. Don't want the missus gettin' on either one
of us about it, do we?

Connie is paralyzed, looks
over at Catherine, who's not
sure what to do.

CLAIRE

Go on. Don't make me look bad.

(as he hesitates)

Go on now! Drink up!

Connie looks to the ceiling,
then slowly pops the pills in
his mouth and very slowly brings
the juice glass to his lips
and drinks. His grimace says
it all.

Claire begins to straighten up
the room.

CLAIRE

Good man. Drink the rest of that juice, now, too. Good for
ya.

CONNIE

I certainly shall. In fact, might have a bit more...

(to Catherine)

Cate, would you mind?

CLAIRE

(turning to him,
reaching out)

I'll get it for you.

CONNIE

No! No, you're busy. Cate.

Catherine takes the glass.

CONNIE

(to Catherine)

And Cate -- less pulp this time.

CATHERINE
(barely containing
her laugh)

Be right back.

Catherine exits to US hallway.
Connie watches Claire as she
continues straightening up,
near the windows now.

CLAIRE
I can smell it, you know.

CONNIE
(innocently)
Smell what?

Claire waves her dust rag toward
the windows.

CLAIRE
Seriously?

CONNIE
I'm beginning to hate that nose of yours.

CLAIRE
My nose is not the source of the trouble, is it?
(beat, cleaning up)
You writers are more mess than my first husband, and he was
a mechanic.

CONNIE
Writing's not necessarily "neat". Read Ginsburg.

CLAIRE
He another big poem fella?

CONNIE
An arguable issue. Never read him, I take it.

Claire stops her work, smiles
at Connie.

CLAIRE
No. Can't say it was on the top of my readin' list.

CONNIE
You read poetry at all?

CLAIRE
Don't really, no.

CONNIE

So...you've never read mine, then?

CLAIRE

(suddenly concerned)

Wasn't aware it was a requirement for the job. I mean, I will if--

CONNIE

Stop. Delia didn't hire you for your literary background.

CLAIRE

(still a bit worried)

I mean, I don't *read* it, don't ya know. But I, uh...I *listen* to it.

CONNIE

You *listen* to poetry?

Claire sits near Connie.

CLAIRE

Well, sure. You ever hear Marty Robbins?

CONNIE

Robbins. No. Haven't had the opportunity. He British? American?

CLAIRE

Oh, he was as American as they come. Good writer, too. Let me see, uh...

(clears her throat,
then sings)

"Hands that are strong but wrinkled,
Doing work that never gets done,
Hair, that's lost some of the beauty
By too many hours in the sun.

Eyes that show some disappointment
And there's been quite a lot in her life,
She's the foundation I lean on...
My woman, my woman, my wife."

CONNIE

(flatly)

He's a singer.

CLAIRE

Well, he was. Dead now. Big star in Vegas at one time, though. Dreamy eyes.

CONNIE

Of course.

CLAIRE
But he's a good poet, too. Ain't song words poems?

CONNIE
(not sure how to
answer)

I--

CLAIRE
They rhyme and all.

CONNIE
Well, yes, but--

CLAIRE
And don't they just make your heart ache a little?
"She's the foundation I lean on,
My woman, my woman, my wife".
Lord, I'd'a died to hear Willie say that about me.

CONNIE
Willie?

CLAIRE
That deadbeat mechanic I was married to.

CONNIE
Oh, yes.

CLAIRE
But that's poetry, isn't it?

CONNIE
In some remote corner of the universe, I suppose it might be
considered "poetry".

CLAIRE
Well, there you go. So I guess, yeah, I'm into poetry.

CONNIE
(nowhere else to go)
I guess you are.

Claire rises, moves toward SL
hallway.

CLAIRE
So you'll have to sing me some of yours sometime.

CONNIE
Sing...?!

CLAIRE

Sure. I'd love to hear one. Didn't the Missus say you record your poems sometimes?

CONNIE

I have, yes, but not...

CLAIRE

Well, let me hear a few of 'em. And if they're catchy, you know...maybe you can send one or two of 'em up to Cher in Vegas.

CONNIE

Cher?!

CLAIRE

Maybe she'll do one in her new show. Never know, do ya?

CONNIE

My God.

Blackout. During the scene transition:

CONNIE (V.O.)

*"It was invisible, on the horizon,
Unnoticed, unimagined.
Not even a spark of a thought,
A nuance, a maybe.
The energy of optimism drove us on,
Blinding with searing belief,
Kept us from seeing the knife edge
Ahead, just beneath the surface,
Vicious, razored, ugly."*

ACT ONE, Scene 4

LIGHTS UP.

That afternoon.

Delia sits in the chair,
Catherine sits on the window
seat. Connie sits in his
wheelchair, a glass in his
hands.

On the couch is MICHAEL CHARLES,
Connie's agent/lawyer. Several
files and papers cover the
coffee table in front of him.

MICHAEL

Well, you certainly deserve it, and I know you've wanted it.

CONNIE

It's been on my mind somewhat, yes, but...

DELIA

But nothing. It's been a prize we've had our eye on for years, and you know it.

CONNIE

Might have been nice to have had years ago is all I meant.

MICHAEL

Well, it's yours now. And it's not just the position itself that's so intriguing. It's the opportunities it affords.

CONNIE

(staring into his
glass)

Opportunities?

MICHAEL

Well, besides the \$35,000 stipend you'll receive for the year you'll be Laureate--

DELIA

Seriously, Michael?

MICHAEL

That's the going rate.

CATHERINE

Wow. Maybe I'm in the wrong line of work.

MICHAEL

That's a drop in the bucket when you look at what else is possible.

CONNIE

(looks up)

Else? What else?

MICHAEL

Well, the publishing, for one thing. You'll definitely need to get that new collection finished immediately. It will no doubt be your biggest seller ever. And you can update all of your past titles with a few new poems written in the style of those older books, you know? Sell the old again as new? HUGE opportunity there. Quite a bit of money to be made from this when you consider all the aspects--

CONNIE

Nice bit of commission for you too, I suspect.

MICHAEL

Well, just the usual.

Uh-huh. Excuse me...

CONNIE

Connie hands his empty glass to Catherine.

CONNIE

Would you mind, dear?

Catherine takes the glass and stands.

CATHERINE

Sure. Anyone else?

Delia stops her with a hand to her arm.

DELIA

Connie, I don't think...

Connie removes Delia's hand, waves Catherine on.

CONNIE
(to Michael)

There's more?

MICHAEL

Well, it's endless, really. Audiobooks. *Enormous* market these days. You'll read your own, of course. Imagine, Delia -- The Lion of the Haight in his own voice. Priceless. We can find a studio right here in Phoenix, I'm sure. Shouldn't take more than a couple, three months to record all your titles. But the real money's in the appearances. Speaking fees and such. You'll be keeping me busy!

CONNIE

Stacking your silver already, eh?

CATHERINE

You sure you should be taking this on, Dad? Sounds exhausting.

Delia rises, moves to Michael and sits near him, all business.

DELIA

Well, we'll have to be selective with what we do, of course. Only the top venues and events for Conrad Middleton.
(to Connie)

But it *will* be nice to get back on the circuit, won't it? Do some of the new talk shows, symposia?

(MORE)

DELIA (CONT'D)

We can get back to New York, Connie...reacquaint with the old circles. May have to update my wardrobe, won't I?

Connie is obviously becoming agitated. He looks around for Catherine, who has taken the drink back to the bar.

CONNIE

Where's that glass, Catherine? You distilling the damn grain yourself?

Catherine delivers the drink, despite Delia's disapproval.

CATHERINE

Sorry. Here you are, Dad.

Connie takes a long pull on the drink, then stares into the glass for several beats. Then, like dropping a bomb...

CONNIE

Anybody ever turn this down, this Laureate thing?

MICHAEL

Excuse me?

DELIA

What?

CONNIE

Simple question. Anybody ever say no thank you, not interested?

DELIA

Don't be ridiculous. You don't say no to the Laureate!

CONNIE

Why not?

MICHAEL

I'm not sure I, uh...

CONNIE

(pressing Michael)

What if I say no?

DELIA

Conrad...

CONNIE
(to Delia)

Quiet.

(to Michael)

What if I say no?!

MICHAEL
Well...I suppose they'll move on to another...poet--

CONNIE
Good. Give someone else a chance.

DELIA
Connie! What in God's name are you talking about? You can't turn down the Laureate!

CONNIE
I can. Michael just said--

MICHAEL
Now, I--

CATHERINE
Dad, do you really think--

DELIA
He's not thinking at all, obviously. We're not going to discuss it. It's ludicrous to even think it.

CONNIE
Well, I *have* thought it.

DELIA
(pointedly)
Un-think it.

A sharp look from Connie.
Michael looks from one to the other, then:

MICHAEL
Look, um...Why don't I let you two talk this over, you know, and I'll stop back tomorrow. I can leave these documents...

DELIA
(glad for the distraction)
Yes, why don't you do that, Michael. Catherine, be a dear and get Michael's coat, will you?

Catherine moves to the closet as Michael moves to the front door. Catherine hands him his coat.

Nice to meet you. CATHERINE

You too. MICHAEL

Thank you, Michael. DELIA

Good to see you, Delia. MICHAEL
 (to Connie)
 Talk to you tomorrow, Connie.

Connie just raises one hand in farewell, then slugs back his scotch with the other. Michael exits.

Connie spins his wheelchair, holds up the glass.

Catherine! CONNIE

Yes, Dad... CATHERINE

Delia stops her.

Darling, why don't you go see about some lunch for us. There should be some chicken in the fridge, some salad things. I'd like to talk with your father a moment. DELIA

I'll just get Dad's... CATHERINE
 (indicating Connie's drink)

I'll take care of that. You get the lunch started, darling. DELIA
 (taking the glass)

Al-l ri-i-ght. Dining room? CATHERINE

Yes. That will be fine. DELIA

Catherine exits. Connie removes his cannula, rises from his chair, moves slowly toward the bar.

CONNIE

Might have let her get my drink first.

DELIA

You don't need another drink.

CONNIE

Don't tell me what I need!

DELIA

What is your problem, Conrad? You've just been handed the Poet Laureateship of the United States of America. You've run the table, man!

Connie turns, leans back on the bar, looks to Delia.

CONNIE

Jesus, Delia! How much is enough? What more need I do until it's considered a proper life's achievement? How much more 'til I can stop?

DELIA

You never stop! Ever! When you're given a gift--as you have been--it's your obligation to fulfill its ultimate possibilities.

CONNIE

You saying I haven't?

DELIA

I'm saying it's what's right, and you fight for what's right. My father never gave up!

CONNIE

Aw, not this again.

DELIA

He fought the Royals for recognition all his life. Never rested, never stopped. And neither will I.

CONNIE

Don't bring him into this. What's fighting for the recognition of the bastard offspring of some Buckingham Palace Duke got to do with me not wanting to accept another accolade that will obligate me--?

DELIA

It's the principle of the thing, Conrad!

CONNIE

Principle? I can't consider hanging up my quill because I'm supposed to give a shit about some distant spot or two of supposed royal blood in you and your father's veins?

DELIA

It's not the amount that matters, goddamn it! It's the presence! And I will continue to fight for his recognition! As you should fight for yours! For yourself! For us!

Connie sits, weary now.

CONNIE

Look, Delia, my love, my heart. It isn't that difficult. I'm...empty, you see. The vessel is dry.

DELIA

Don't be ridiculous. You forget who you are. You're Conrad Middleton.

CONNIE

Yes. And he's not a brilliant scientist a couple of test tubes short of a cure for cancer. He's just a poet. An *old, tired* poet.

DELIA

THE poet! Not "a" poet. Jesus, Connie! Who are they going to remember as the voice of your generation? McKuen? God, you could get diabetes reading him. Jenkins? Ginsburg, for God's sake?

Connie picks up the yellow tablet.

CONNIE

There is no more, Delia. Whatever syllables I could scratch on this pad would only dishonor those I'd written there before. Mere shadows.

DELIA

Even your weakest phrase is more powerful than any stanza lesser poets could offer.

CONNIE

This is empty for a reason, Delia! I have nothing left to put on it! Are you not hearing me?

DELIA

Of course I hear you. I just don't accept what you're saying.

Connie sits silent a moment,
his body seeming to shrink
into the wheelchair.

CONNIE

(quietly)
You are so attached to it, Deely. To controlling it all.
(MORE)

CONNIE (CONT'D)

(beat)

You know, I haven't seen you take a deep breath in years. Your hands are never relaxed and open. Even in sleep your face is tense.

Connie stands, moves toward SL hallway, then stops and turns to her.

CONNIE

Is all this -- these...these accolades, this public spotlight -- is all that really worth it to you?

Delia approaches him.

DELIA

What I don't understand is why it's not worth it to you.

CONNIE

It was. Once. I wanted it, yes. Wanted it badly. But now...

DELIA

Now, what? How can you work for something for so long, and turn it down the minute it's handed you?

CONNIE

I sat here last night with shit dribbling out of my pen, Delia. Worthless drivel. And I realized -- I can't do it anymore. It's gone. I can't be something I no longer am. It's time to let it go.

DELIA

I don't believe what I'm hearing.

CONNIE

I swear, I think you want this more than I do.

DELIA

What do you know about it? Tell me. When were you paying that much attention that you can tell me that you know what I want?

CONNIE

I always thought we wanted the same things.

DELIA

Why? Because I married you? Because I committed my life to making yours a success?

CONNIE

For which I will be forever grateful, but--

DELIA

(angry)

I had dreams too, you know. I had opportunities. But I chose *you*. And I *stayed* with you, despite the women, the whiskey.

(beat, then quieter)

What you could do with a pen seemed God-like to me, Connie. You were changing hearts -- whole cultures -- with *words*, for God's sake. Seeing *that* bloom full-flower was worthy of a lifelong commitment. It still is.

CONNIE

But this isn't about the writing anymore, Deely. It's about a figurehead position. Which is no more important than that damned royal title you're futilely chasing for your dead father.

DELIA

Go to hell.

CONNIE

This is about the damned spotlight, isn't it, Delia? I don't need that light shining on me anymore, but maybe you do.

DELIA

(growing anger now)

All my life I have watched the men around me struggling with themselves -- brilliant men, talented beyond rightful measure -- but constantly in their own way. And who has always been there, having their backs, shoring it all up? Me. ME! And for what? To be ignored by one obsessed with a status that will never be his because of his birth? Then to be ignored because another's talent is so incendiary it nearly burns him up in unnecessary excesses? It's so simple, Connie. Maybe I just want *you* to see *me*. To acknowledge that I'm standing next to you, that I'm playing a part. You say, "It isn't that difficult." Well, no my love, it isn't. Open your fucking eyes."

And with that, Delia moves to the SR hallway.

CONNIE

Delia!

But she's gone.

Connie sits a moment, deeply considering. He then moves to the window, picks up the phone, dials.

CONNIE

Andrew? It's your brother...Flight all right?...Good. We'll see you soon, then. Listen, you remember that time a couple of years back when you needed my help? Yes. Well, I'd like you to return the favor. I need you to do something for me...

Blackout. During the scene transition:

CONNIE (V.O.)

*"The dark unholy across the desert,
Unamused by our voices,
Without concern,
Unmoved by the spirit conjured out of hope,
Continued on in unimpeded gait,
While we stumbled by, believing in ourselves,
Committing to each other,
Determining a destiny we thought solid, impermeable,
Unwavering.
We believed! We so very deeply believed!"*

ACT 1, Scene 5

LIGHTS UP.

That evening.

Catherine sits gazing out the picture window.

Delia enters, a calendar and computer tablet in her hand, moves to the desk.

DELIA

Evening, Darling. Catch the sunset?

CATHERINE

Yes. It was beautiful.

(beat, seeing the calendar)

Planning something?

DELIA

Looking at flights and such. We'll have to be going to Washington in the next couple of weeks, I'm sure.

CATHERINE

Dad doesn't seem too excited about it.

DELIA

He'll come around.

CATHERINE
(looking out again)
It really is beautiful out here, isn't it?

DELIA
I've always thought so.

CATHERINE
Dad considers it a prison, I think.

DELIA
He refuses to accept he'd have been long since dead if we'd not moved here. He's got no lungs left.

CATHERINE
Not sure he cares anymore.

DELIA
Don't be silly. That's just a poet being maudlin. Speaking of maudlin, have you heard from that Bohemian bastard in New York?

CATHERINE
My husband's name is Mark, mother. And no, not since yesterday. There's no answer at the loft. Don't know if he's gone, or passed out, or just not interested in talking to me.

DELIA
You're better off without him, if you ask me.

Catherine joins Delia.

CATHERINE
Easy for you to say.

DELIA
Depends on what you want, darling.

CATHERINE
Meaning?

DELIA
He doesn't deserve you is all I'm saying.

CATHERINE
Excuse me, but what do you know about him? When did you ever do anything but look down your nose at him?

DELIA
I did nothing of the sort.

CATHERINE
You just called him a "Bohemian bastard".

DELIA

If the shoe fits...

CATHERINE

Goddamn it, mother!

DELIA

Goddamn it, yourself! How am I supposed to think of him, after what you've told us? If it were me, I'd have left him long ago.

CATHERINE

It was you, wasn't it?

DELIA

That's different.

CATHERINE

How is it different, mother? Dad was no walk in the park. You hung in there.

DELIA

That was me. It's not you.

CATHERINE

You don't think I can handle it? Trust me. Mark is no worse than dad was.

DELIA

That makes no difference. You're better than that. I don't want you wasting your time.

CATHERINE

Oh, so it's do as I say, not as I do, is that it?

DELIA

For want of a better cliché.

CATHERINE

And where does love come into it, mother? What do I do with this ache in my heart? Ignore it because you say I should?

DELIA

I just don't want that for you.

CATHERINE

What about what *I* want? This is *my* life we're talking about here.

DELIA

Yes, and I don't want you to squander it on a man who disrespects you.

CATHERINE

(with spleen)

It was good enough for you, wasn't it?

Beat.

DELIA

It's what we did then, Catherine. We fought through it, sunk our teeth in deeper.

CATHERINE

But there's got to be a point where you have to consider that you've lost, and move on, don't you think?

Delia looks at her daughter, thinking a beat. She sits.

DELIA

There was a time I thought about it.

Catherine sits near Delia.

CATHERINE

When?

DELIA

After the demise of Haight-Ashbury. Early 70s. There had been such energy there, so free. It's where we made his name -- The Lion of the Haight. But then it was suddenly all gone.

CATHERINE

What happened?

DELIA

Oh, the collapse of the dream, the Age of Aquarius in ruins. Vietnam. Innocence suddenly had to grow up, and hope sank into anger, then ennui, then despair. That was the fuel that produced *The Reckoning*, you know. His first Pulitzer. But writing it...or, rather, *living* the ride down with the hopes and dreams...it cost him. It was like his life was tracking the cultural fall, each day darker, each night longer, each moment angrier. It was a terrible time. For both of us.

CATHERINE

Why did you stay?

DELIA

I considered leaving. Briefly. I had some opportunities. I could have moved on.

CATHERINE

Why didn't you?

DELIA

Well, there was you. You were just starting to awaken to the world around you. So happy. I didn't want to disturb that.

CATHERINE

I would have survived.

DELIA

Of course you would have. That's not the point. I gave it a lot of thought. He was pretty far out on the edge around then. Living hard and fast. Drinking every night. Other women.

CATHERINE

Oh, mom...

DELIA

Oh, I knew they meant nothing. Young things, overcome by that "presence" he had. They caught his fancy for a night, he never remembered their names in the morning. They were only a symptom. I knew that.

CATHERINE

What did you do?

DELIA

I waited.

CATHERINE

God, why? You're telling me to leave. Why didn't you?

DELIA

I realized that by then *his* life was *my* life. I'd made an investment. In the both of us. And I decided I wasn't willing to lose everything I'd put into it. I decided that if success were to remain in our grasp, it would be me that closed the grip on it.

CATHERINE

Did you ever just think, I need to let him go? I need to look after myself?

DELIA

That where you are?

CATHERINE

(hesitantly)

Yes.

Delia touches her daughter's hand, smiles sadly.

DELIA

If I did consider it, it wasn't for long. He eventually came out of it, put it behind him.

(beat)

They need us, Catherine, the creatives do, like an engine needs a governor. It's like they're flailing at the universe, angry for the curse of talent they're burdened with. But that's the mechanism that fuels their art, you see. He needed me. If I left, we both lost.

CATHERINE

And how is that different for me--

DELIA

Mark is not your father, darling. I'm sorry, but his talent isn't as...well, I just don't want to see his failures become yours...

CATHERINE

Damn it, mother! Give me some credit, will you--?

She's interrupted by the doorbell and a knock. Delia goes to the door and opens it to reveal ANDREW MIDDLETON. He carries a satchel and a tattered copy of Robert Burns.

DELIA

Ah, Andrew! So glad to see you! Come in, come in.

ANDREW

(strong British
accent)

Hello, Delia. Lovely as ever, I see.

(to Catherine)

And Cate! My God, more beautiful every time I lay eyes on ya!

CATHERINE

(hugging him)

Hi, Uncle Andy! Still carrying Robert Burns I see.

ANDREW

Never go anywhere without my "Robbie", you know that.

Delia takes his arm, ushers Andrew in.

DELIA

Catherine, be a dear--unpack your Uncle Andrew's bag...

ANDREW

That's all right, Cate. Won't be necessary.

DELIA

Not necessary? Why not?

ANDREW

(a little unsure)

Well, I guess, uh...I think something's come up? It appears I'll not be staying.

DELIA

Not staying? Don't be silly. It's our anniversary. Lots of plans.

ANDREW

I know, but I'll be headin' back to Britain straightaway, I understand.

DELIA

Why?

CONNIE

He'll be accompanying me.

Connie has appeared in the SL hallway entrance, unnoticed by those at the door.

Delia spins.

DELIA

What?!

CONNIE

Hello, Andrew.

They hug.

ANDREW

Connie. You're looking well.

CONNIE

Didn't know you'd gone blind, brother.

ANDREW

Not blind. Just perfected me lyin'.

They laugh. Delia does not.

DELIA

What is this, Conrad?

An awkward silence, as Connie and Andrew glance at each other, then:

CONNIE

I'm going home, Delia. Andrew's going to take me. Us, if you will.

DELIA

You *are* home! This *is* your home!

CONNIE

My home is in Ottery St. Mary, the land of Coleridge. And I've been too long away from it.

DELIA

Oh, for God's sake! At this point you're more American than you are British.

CONNIE

(to Andrew)

One might take that as an insult, you know.

ANDREW

(sharing the joke)

Sit in my pub a few weeks, we'll put the Union Jack back in ya.

DELIA

(not finding it
funny)

For the love of God, you can't just wake up one day and decide to leave!

CONNIE

Been thinkin' about it awhile, actually. Decided last night.

DELIA

What would ever make you decide something so ridiculous?

CONNIE

Actually...I think it was that empty tablet I showed you. And...Cher...

DELIA AND CATHERINE

Cher...?

CONNIE

Nothing. I've made up my mind, that's all.

DELIA

Well, unmake it! We're about to ascend the mountaintop, Connie! You've been named American Poet Laureate! Do you realize what that means for us?

CONNIE

I know what it means for you. But I won't be accepting that honor.

DELIA
You're not serious!

ANDREW
I think he is, Deely.

DELIA
And so am I!

CATHERINE
Mom, maybe you and Dad should talk about this lat--

DELIA
(to Connie, ignoring
Catherine)
I'll not let you do this. I'll not let you throw away the
capstone of your career.

CONNIE
I was actually hoping you'd come with me.

DELIA
Really. And watch you slowly choke to death? Gasping for
every breath in that sea of humidity they call air over there?

CONNIE
Much as I appreciate your concern, I have a feeling that's
not the only reason you want me to stay.

DELIA
You'll die, Conrad! Don't you realize that?

Catherine sits near her father,
takes his hand.

CATHERINE
Dad, she's right. You shouldn't leave here. This is where
you need to be.

CONNIE
What I "need" is a couple a' fingers a' that whiskey over
there. Get me a glass, will ya, sweetheart? And one for
Andrew as well?

DELIA
Oh, for the love of God!

ANDREW
Stay where ya are, darlin'. Let a professional handle it.

DELIA
This is the most absurd thing I've ever heard...

CONNIE

More absurd than tilting at the Buckingham windmill for two generations, is it?

DELIA

That has nothing to do--!

CONNIE

It has EVERYTHING to do with it! It's the same damn thing! There comes a point where you've just got to let it all...!
(he calms himself)

Delia, please. Sit with me. Hear me out.
(when she doesn't move)

Please, my love.

Delia stands with her back to him a few beats, then turns and walks slowly to one of the chairs CS. As she does so...

DELIA

(to Andrew)

One of those for me as well, Andrew.

ANDREW

Comin' up.

Delia sits, her hands clasped in front of her. She's tight, like she may implode at any second.

CONNIE

Delia, I know you will find it hard to accept -- that a man that has, throughout his life...throughout *our* lives...displayed such voracious appetites, always sought the next indulgence...That *that* man would want nothing more. But...the fact is, it's over. *I'm* over. I'm so tired. All I want to do is lie down on my own earth and be absorbed back into it.

DELIA

You're committing suicide. I'll not sanction it.

CATHERINE

Dad, please. You need to think about this. You can't--

CONNIE

I have thought about it, darlin'. Long and hard.

Andrew delivers the drinks, stands near his brother.

CONNIE

All my life I've been a vessel into which, by some strange alchemy, was poured the mind of God. Now, each afternoon, I sit in a puddle of my own urine, waiting for the inevitable swabbing-down and scolding delivered by a rough-handed hireling who has a greater appreciation for my diaper rash than anything I may have written. I want to be done with it.

DELIA

You're just going to throw it all away, then, are you? You'd rather die alone in Britain than accept an honor you *deserve*.

CONNIE

I've got more honors than ten poets combined. I need no more. I doubt I'd survive this last one anyway.

CATHERINE

Don't talk like that, Dad. We need you here. *I* need you. Look, I'll move back here. We can let Claire go. I'll stay with you, help you.

CONNIE

(lovingly to
Catherine)

You have your own life, sweetheart. You can't be livin' mine.

CATHERINE

That life is slipping away from me anyway. I'll let it go, and--

CONNIE

No. I'll not have you making a decision like that because of me. Daughter, the time has come for me to open my hands, to let it slide through my fingers. You know...

"Be the bird of the morn,
The star of the night."

You need to let me do it.

(to Delia, softly)

And I want you to go with me, Deely. I want you to come home with me.

Delia moves to the windows,
looks out, then turns to him.

DELIA

I won't. I can't. To do so would be an agreement and I do *not* agree with this. You want to give up--

CONNIE

(exploding)

Goddamn it! I just want to....!

He begins to cough, hard. He
can't seem to catch his breath.

CATHERINE

Dad!

The fit continues.

DELIA

Conrad?!

(walks to SL hall)

He needs his oxygen!

(to the hallway)

Claire!

(to Catherine)

Help him to his room.

Catherine walks a still-
gasping/coughing Connie toward
the SL hallway.

DELIA

Claire!

Claire appears.

CLAIRE

Yes, mum...

(seeing)

Oh, Jaysus!

(to Catherine)

Help me get him back...

DELIA

Connie! Breathe, Connie! Goddamn it!

But the coughing worsens.

Blackout

END ACT 1

INTERMISSION

As the INTERMISSION music fades with the house and pre-set lights, we hear the voice of Conrad Middleton:

CONNIE (V.O.)

*"Oh, the wind it blows
Your hair in a dozen flowing
circles in front of my eyes...
and they're shining like the stars,
a million lost ancient arts
of beauty, all on your side.
and at your side,
by the morning light,
the blue of your eyes is my sky.
you are my life."*

ACT 2 Scene 1

LIGHTS UP.

Andrew stands at the bar, pouring himself a drink. Delia strides purposely into the room, confronts him.

DELIA

You have anything to do with this cockamammie idea?

ANDREW

No more'n you already know.

DELIA

You agree with it?

ANDREW

Not my decision, is it?

DELIA

That's not what I asked you.

ANDREW

Answer's the same.

DELIA

It doesn't bother you that he'll die if he goes back?

ANDREW

Of course I care if he dies, Delia. He's my brother. But he's his own man. Knows his own heart.

Delia moves to the sofa, sits.

DELIA

All my life I've supported him, through the good and the bad...

ANDREW

You were good for him, yes.

DELIA

I opened the doors, made sure he was heard. I made sure the spotlight shone brightly. Now he wants to throw it away?

ANDREW

That spotlight lit you up a bit too, now didn't it?

DELIA

This has nothing to do with me.

ANDREW

You sure?

DELIA

What are you implying, Andrew?

ANDREW

Nothin'. Look, the way I see it, people hold on to things. Longer'n they should, most times. Maybe you're--

DELIA

And you don't? You've had that dog-eared copy of Robert Burns sewn to your hand since I met you.

ANDREW

That I have. For no reason, either.

(points to his head)

Had it all up here for longer'n I remember. But that doesn't really have anythin' to do with Connie, now does it?

DELIA

How can you condone his just walking away?

ANDREW

I don't understand the attachments people make to things, to places. Never have. Couldn't care less myself. When you're takin' your last breath, one place is as good as another, is it not? But it matters to *him*...to *Connie*, don't it? And *he* matters to *me*. Simple as that.

Andrew moves to Delia, touches her gently.

ANDREW

We'll be leavin' tomorrow. And he wants you to go with us.

Delia looks hard at Andrew.

DELIA

(shaking her head)

No. No. I can't let him. I won't let him.

Delia turns on her heel and strides back up the hallway to the bedrooms.

Andrew watches her go, then shakes his head, sits on the couch, pulls out his Robert Burns, begins reading.

Claire enters from the SL hallway, carrying a pile of Connie's clothes toward the US hallway. Andrew looks up.

ANDREW

He all right, is he?

CLAIRE

The Mister? He is. I upped his oxygen a bit. That always helps.

ANDREW

That happen often? The coughing?

CLAIRE

Often enough these days.

She sets the linens down, moves to CS.

CLAIRE

He tells me he's goin' back to Britain.

ANDREW

That's his wish.

CLAIRE

Odd wish, you ask me.

ANDREW

How so?

CLAIRE

Well, aside from the obvious -- his health and all -- why would you want to leave here? America, I mean. Like leavin' the amusement park to go to a convent.

ANDREW

(amused)

Never thought of it that way.

She sits down, engaged now.

CLAIRE

Well, I mean, it's just the attitude, isn't it? Not all caught up in the proper and the stuffy. Here, they let it all hang out, as they say.

ANDREW

Do they?

CLAIRE

You ever been to Las Vegas?

ANDREW

No.

CLAIRE

Oh, now, that's where you'll see what I'm talkin' about. Bright and flashy, with the lights, and the bells ringin', all that bling. *That's America, now...*

ANDREW

You like it there, do ya?

CLAIRE

What's not to like? Anythin's possible. Give you an example: I'm sittin' at the slots, down the end a' the row. And I'm pumpin' in quarters, playin' the max, 'cause you don't win shite playin' one or two. And I'm puttin' 'em in and pullin' the arm, and down sits this wee bit of a grandmother at the machine next to me. She throws in a quarter and pulls. Nothin', a' course, so she drops in another. Nothin' again. So I figure I'll invest in some karma and I turns to her and I says, "You want to win the big money, dearie, you got to play the max". She giggles a wee granny giggle and says, "Five?" And I says, yes, and we both start pumpin' five, like we was twins or somethin', talkin' away while we're pullin'. Turns out she's just lost her hubby, poor dear, and is livin' on the welfare and all...sad story. Anyway, all of a sudden, all hell breaks loose, with bells and sirens and blinkin' lights, and granny's cryin' "What did I do? What did I do?" 'Course, what she did was hit the fookin' jackpot...half a million American dollars! On her, what, *first* machine? Not that she couldn't use it, but you see what I mean? Anything can happen. To anybody. Gotta love America!

ANDREW

Like Christmas mornin', eh?

CLAIRE

Well, that's a Christmas mornin' I'd sure like to see!

ANDREW

A little magic everywhere there, is it?

Claire rises, picks up the
linens.

CLAIRE

Oh, well, now, you want to talk magic! Ran myself into a magician works weekends at the Luxor last time I was up there. Older fella, fancy clothes and all, knows how to treat a lady. Hit it off, we did. Wouldn't mind seein' *him* again, I'll tell ya. Talented hands, if you know what I mean.

ANDREW

Well, maybe you'll get the chance now.

CLAIRE

Maybe. Be sorry to see the Mister leave, though. He and the Missus been good to me. But if it's time to go, it's time to go.

ANDREW

That it is.

CLAIRE

(rising)

Yup. If the machine ain't payin' off, better movin' to a new one's what I always say.

(moves to hallway,
stops)

When will you be leavin', then?

ANDREW

Tomorrow afternoon, if he's up to it.

Catherine enters from the SL
hallway.

CATHERINE

(to Claire)

There you are. My father was asking for you. He wants to get dressed.

CLAIRE

All right, Missy.

(to Andrew)

Nice talkin' to you. See Vegas if you can, now. You never know...

Claire yanks her arm like she's pulling a slot handle. Andrew waves his hand, smiling. Claire exits.

CATHERINE

What was that? Vegas?

ANDREW

Nothin'. Christmas and magic. Connie alright, is he?

CATHERINE

Yes. He's feeling better. Getting dressed for dinner.

ANDREW

More likely he's comin' out for a bit a' barleycorn before, if I know my brother.

CATHERINE

(smiling)

Probably. You want one?

ANDREW

I'll wait for Connie.

Catherine walks to the picture window, looks out.

CATHERINE

Did you know? About his wanting to leave?

ANDREW

Not until he called. I was looking forward to the party and a few days off, tell you true.

CATHERINE

How does he look to you?

ANDREW

(a sad smile)

Shall I lie to you, too?

CATHERINE

No.

(beat)

I really don't see how he's going to handle moving back to England.

ANDREW

Don't think he's plannin' on havin' to handle it long.

CATHERINE

I don't like thinking about that.

Andrew joins Catherine at the window.

ANDREW

His decidin' to leave it all go doesn't mean he has any less love for you, you know.

CATHERINE

I know that, Andy, but I also know that if he leaves, he's not coming back. When I say goodbye to him tomorrow, I'm saying *goodbye*, you know? How do I do that?

Andrew holds up his Burns.

ANDREW

Like Robbie says, "Each life's a river." It takes us when and where it will. Your father's in the current, Cate. You need to let him go, if that's what he wants.

CATHERINE

(pointing at his
book)

You've had that book all my life. I remember sitting on your lap and you reading it to me. I think I was five or six.

ANDREW

Read Robbie to ya a lot. You remember your favorite?

CATHERINE

I liked most of them.

ANDREW

Yeah, but this one...

Andrew thumbs through the book,
finds the page.

ANDREW

"Is there for honest poverty
That hings his head an'a'that?
The coward slave, we pass him by
We dare be poor for a'that."

Catherine is smiling now. She
remembers. She joins in.

ANDREW AND CATHERINE

For a'that an'a'that,
Their tinsel show an'a'that:
The honest man, though e'er sae poor,
Is king o' men, for a'that."

They end up laughing together.

CATHERINE

God, I'd make you read that until you were sick of it.

ANDREW

That you did. And you laughed like this every time. Nice to hear it again.

(beat)

You know, he was like your dad, Robbie Burns was, in his time. A rock star. The women loved him. Died young, though. Only thirty-seven.

CATHERINE

You think Dad's doing the right thing, then?

ANDREW

He thinks it's right for him.

CATHERINE

He'll die there.

ANDREW

He's dyin' here, darlin', and he knows it. So he's just choosin' where he goes, is all. Closin' the books the way he wants.

CATHERINE

There's so much more he can do, Andy. As Poet Laureate, his work can continue, he can influence a new generation. Mom says--

ANDREW

Your mother's lookin' through different eyes, breathin' her own air. She's grippin' tight to somethin' she doesn't want to let go of.

CATHERINE

I know how she feels.

ANDREW

Connie mentioned there was trouble back home.

(off her nod)

You love him still?

CATHERINE

I loved who he was...but he's not the same man I married.

ANDREW

None of us is set in stone, Cate. Neither is love. It's got to molt and renew all the time, just like everythin' else.

CATHERINE

I can deal with change. I'm smart, I'm flexible. But there's nothing coming back anymore.

ANDREW

Well, sometimes men have to find their own way, darlin'.
Nothin' you can do but let 'em.

CATHERINE

(sits on couch)

Holding on, walking away...I lose either way.

ANDREW

I had a dog once. A mutt, but a fine one. Loyal, close...the kind of being you wish all *men* would be to ya. And one day, this dog saw a rabbit sittin' in the middle of the field out back a' my house, and bein' the great hunter he thought himself to be, he took off after that rabbit, chasin' him all over, up and back, until that bunny finally found a hole in the ground to squeeze himself into. Now that dog, he just sat there, waitin', not movin' a muscle, nose to the hole. I called him in to supper at the end of the day, but he didn't move. Just rested his head on his paws, nose to that hole, waitin' for that rabbit to pop his head out. The next mornin', I see him layin' there still, rolled over on his side. I wandered over to where he was layin', still not movin', despite me callin' to him. And when I get there, I see he's not breathin', and the mornin' frost is silver on his fur. I bend down to him -- upset, as you might imagine -- and there's no missin' the fact that he's gone. It's then I notice his nose -- swollen and discolored. And in the grass, still covered in frost like my mutt's coat, I see the curly-cue trail of what was surely a rather large snake, which, bein' that they're plentiful in those parts, and given the condition my doggie was in, I'm assumin' was an adder of some sort. Quick and deadly. There was no sign a' that rabbit. Never saw him again. The snake either. But I'll tell ya this: if that dog a' mine hadn't held on so hard to the thought a' catchin' that rabbit, he'd still be runnin' in that field.

Andrew reaches out, touches
Catherine's knee.

ANDREW

Sometimes, love, we have to put things on the scale, see where the balance lies, and in seeing, we may find the only course is to open our hands. Like your father is.

CATHERINE

I don't want to lose my dad.

ANDREW

You'll never lose him, dear.
(touches her heart)
You'll always have his love here.

(MORE)

ANDREW (CONT'D)

(touches her head)

And here, in his poems. Same as you will with that fella of yours, if it don't work out. You keep the good, let the rest of it go.

CATHERINE

It's not the letting go, Andy. It's the starting over that scares me.

ANDREW

(holds up the book)

Just a new page, darlin'...a new stanza.

Delia wheels Connie in from the SL hallway. He's back on the cannula and oxygen.

DELIA

(with spleen)

What stanza would that be, Andrew?

Catherine and Andrew stand.

ANDREW

(to Delia)

Just readin' some Robbie Burns to your daughter is all.

(to Connie)

You're lookin' better, brother.

CONNIE

Your lying's not getting any better, Andrew. Wish you'd all stop fawning over me. 'Less the fawning includes joining me in a coupl'a fingers.

ANDREW

I think I could manage that.

DELIA

Do you two ever stop?

CONNIE

That's what I'm tryin' to do, Delia. Stop.

ANDREW

Catherine? Delia?

CATHERINE

Sure.

Delia shakes her head with a snap.

DELIA

I don't want to hear this, Conrad. I've made myself quite clear--

CONNIE

That you have, yes. Exceedingly. You should listen with the same clarity.

DELIA

Listen to what? To a man essentially telling me he wants to commit suicide?

CATHERINE

Mom, please...not tonight.

DELIA

(to Catherine)

Why not tonight? Is there a better time?

(to Connie)

Honestly. What am I supposed to do? Just say, oh, sure, pass up the highest honor offered a poet? Just leave it on the table and go suffocate in Devon?

CONNIE

You come with me, Deely. We make it work, like we've done all our lives.

DELIA

And where will that leave me? A widow in goddamned Britain. At least here I've got connections, possibilities.

CONNIE

I really don't want to go without you. You're my anchor.

DELIA

And *I* don't want you to go. We've fought too hard, Connie. Ride out the string, man.

CONNIE

I've already told you--

DELIA

And I've heard you. You want to quit and you want me to quit with you.

(to Andrew)

On second thought, I'd better have one of those.

(to Connie)

How can you do this to me?

CONNIE

I'm not doing anything *to* you. I'm trying to do something *with* you.

DELIA

No. You want to give up and I don't understand why--

CONNIE

What's so hard to understand?! It's time.

DELIA

There's never a time to toss it all. You hold on for all you're worth, period. To do otherwise shows a *weakness* that I'll not...!

(catching herself)

I can't listen to any more of this. Catherine, help me get dinner on the table.

Catherine moves to her father,
touches his arm.

CATHERINE

I'll be there in a minute.

Connie pats her hand.

CONNIE

Go help your mother, Cate. We'll have plenty of time later.

CATHERINE

I'll hold you to that.

Catherine kisses Connie's head,
and exits.

A few beats of silence, then
Connie shakes his head, downs
his drink, and holds the glass
up to Andrew, who makes him
another.

CONNIE

I may not make it to tomorrow, Andy. She may kill me in my sleep tonight just to make sure I don't leave with you in the mornin'.

ANDREW

She's filled herself with you all her life, Connie...filled herself so full that there's no space for herself. And she'll not let go because she's afraid that without you, there's nothin' left to define *her*.

CONNIE

That's ridiculous. She's stronger than that.

ANDREW

Is she?

(MORE)

ANDREW (CONT'D)

Her hands will be as empty as yours tomorrow if she don't leave with us. You're lettin' go for both of you, old son. You need to know that.

CONNIE

Never understood why she held on so tight. I certainly didn't deserve it.

ANDREW

You didn't make it easy for her, that's God's truth. Followin' your *muse*, you were.

CONNIE

(a small laugh)

There are no muses, Andrew. Just connections. The tendrils of life, reaching in all directions, attaching, detaching, like nerve cells in our brain, making connections that result in a thought, an insight, an emotion, a hope, a dream, a masterpiece. If we do not allow those connections to be made, who knows WHAT we will have lost forever?

Andrew delivers Connie's drink,
sits with his own.

ANDREW

(with a chuckle)

That what you been doin' all these years? Connectin'?

CONNIE

Maybe.

(beat, they drink)

The seeming randomness of it all is what astounds me now...that I may have met someone by the merest chance...a left turn instead of a right one, and because of that, our paths crossed. And what we did with that unanticipated gift led us to other turns, to other connections, that would never have been made without that first turn left. *Every* connection we are gifted with is priceless because within that solitary moment are contained the seeds of the next, and the next after that, and the next after that. And it's impossible to judge the importance of that moment in the instant it occurs.

ANDREW

That it is.

CONNIE

So I took to honoring *every* connection I made, because who is to say that very connection wasn't the spark of a new work, something unimagined. Those connections were my Muses, Andy. Without them, there would have been no words. Not a single one.

ANDREW

Those muses took you some tough places. Cost ya a lot sometimes.

CONNIE

Gave me a lot too. But it's time to thank 'em and let 'em go, I'm thinking. Had to come sometime. The trick is to know when.

ANDREW

You sure about this? Sure there aren't any more left turns out there, waitin' on ya?

CONNIE

The world's passed us by, Andrew. We poets. Oh, occasionally a voice will ascend -- an Angelou or a Collins -- but overall, we have dimmed, hard to hear anymore in a culture where a Marty Robbins or the next big rapper is considered a poet. No, there will be no more Robert Burns's. No more Connie Middletons.

ANDREW

More's the pity, my brother. 'Tis the world's loss.

CONNIE

Ever think maybe it's the world letting us go, Andrew, instead of the other way around?

Blackout. During the scene transition:

CONNIE (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.
And there's no quiet like middle of the night 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."*

ACT 2, Scene 2

LIGHTS UP.

Next afternoon.

Michael sits on the couch.
Delia stands near the chair.

MICHAEL

It's his choice to accept or not. It's not a binding appointment.

DELIA

Can he simply accept the Laureate in name only?

MICHAEL

Not really. There are obligations that go with the designation. He must, above all, write, of course. He'll be expected to produce at least one new volume. There are readings, seminars, hosting of symposia in Washington for new poets. It's an ambitious schedule.

DELIA

Yes. I thought it would be, but I thought perhaps we could massage it a bit.

MICHAEL

Well, then there are the ancillary contingencies we've already spoken of -- the publishing, recordings, appearances, and such.

Delia smiles weakly, an acceptance of the reality.
Then...

DELIA

What of that other matter I mentioned to you?

Michael pauses. His tone becomes more hushed.

MICHAEL

That's a, uh...that's a, as you Brits say, a "sticky wicket". It's not impossible, under the circumstances, but it will not be easy...and it will not be pleasant.

(beat)

You'd have to go to court.

DELIA

Is that necessary?

Andrew enters unseen from SL hallway, overhears:

MICHAEL

I'm afraid so. You must have him declared incompetent, you see. It would most likely require a professional's evaluation of mental incapacity...

Andrew comes to CS.

ANDREW
Whoa, now. What are you talkin' about here?

MICHAEL
...You would then need to petition the court for guardianship...

ANDREW
Delia?

MICHAEL
...and once that's granted -- not easy, as I said, but doable -- you would then have full discretionary control of the estate...

ANDREW
(to Michael)
Hold on a minute, there...

MICHAEL
...as well as stewardship of him physically...

ANDREW
Hold on!

MICHAEL
...meaning, *where* he stays or goes...

ANDREW
(to Michael)
I SAID SHUT UP!

MICHAEL
I beg your pardon?! I was speaking to Delia--

ANDREW
(to Michael)
I know what you were doin'!
(to Delia)
What are you thinkin', Delia!? You're not serious here, are ya?

DELIA
This is not your concern, Andrew--

ANDREW
How is this not my concern!? He's my brother!

Catherine enters from SR hallway.

CATHERINE
Mom? Is everything all right? Why is everyone shouting?

DELIA

It's fine, we're just--

ANDREW

No, it's not. It's not fine. It's obscene.

MICHAEL

Now, I wouldn't characterize this as obsce--

CATHERINE

What are you talking about?

(to Delia)

Mom?

ANDREW

Tell her, Delia. Tell your daughter what you're thinkin' of doin' to her father.

CATHERINE

Dad? What?

DELIA

I'm just exploring--

CATHERINE

What? Exploring what?

DELIA

We can't let him leave, Catherine. You know that.

CATHERINE

Exploring *what*?

MICHAEL

Your mother was inquiring about guardianship.

CATHERINE

Meaning...?

ANDREW

Meaning declaring Connie mentally incompetent.

CATHERINE

(stunned, to Delia)

You're not serious.

DELIA

He's not well, Catherine. You know that. We need to protect--

ANDREW

What? Protect what, exactly?

MICHAEL

Well, the man, first. After that, his legacy.

ANDREW

How much of that legacy is your twenty percent?

MICHAEL

I resent that--!

ANDREW

Resent all you want! Add in my contempt while you're at it.
(to Delia)
You can't do this, Delia.

DELIA

I can. He's *my* husband. I will do what *I* think is best for him. And if that means--

ANDREW

You've been holdin' on too tight, Delia. Now you'll be squeezin' the stone.

CATHERINE

Mom. Andy's right. Think what this would do to Dad. If he were incapacitated, or demented, maybe, but he's as lucid as you or I.

DELIA

We need to protect--

CATHERINE

This would destroy him, mother, not protect him! He's already losing his body. This would kill his spirit.

DELIA

It would save his life!

CATHERINE

For what?! To do what?!

DELIA

To write! To create! Despite what he thinks about his talent, he's still Conrad Middleton.

ANDREW

This is insane, Delia. You can't force the man to write!

DELIA

I can provide the opportunity! Like I've done for the past forty-five years!

CATHERINE

You can't do this. It will be a sad footnote that colors every word he ever wrote.

DELIA

You're over-reacting.

CATHERINE

Am I? Trust me...image is my business. Even *I* couldn't spin *this*.

DELIA

He's not thinking straight, Catherine!

CATHERINE

You sure it's *him*? Jesus, mother! I wouldn't even do this to Mark, and he's...

Andrew stops her with a touch to the shoulder.

ANDREW

(tenderly to Delia)

You can't will things to be what they aren't, Delia. Just like your father couldn't.

This hits Delia hard. She begins to retort, but it catches in her throat. She stares at Andrew several beats as tears come to her eyes, then her body seems to collapse into itself. She sinks to the couch.

DELIA

Oh, God! What am I to do?!?

Beat.

CONNIE

You let go, my darling. You take my hand. We go home.

Everyone turns to see Connie, standing in the SL hallway.

Blackout. During the scene transition:

CONNIE (V.O.)

*"Your presence.
Like a whisper.
Not there one moment,
Then unmistakably in the room.
Brushing the hairs on my neck,
Ever so slightly touching my shoulder,
As I caressed her nipple with my lips,
Ran my hand across her temptation,
Slid myself into her fire.
That whisper of you,
Reminding me of my sin."*

ACT 2, Scene 3

LIGHTS UP.

Late that night.

Connie sits on the window seat, looking out at the desert night. He holds the yellow legal tablet and a pen on his lap. A glass of whiskey and a pack of cigarettes sit next to him.

Delia enters from the SL hallway.

DELIA

Connie?

Connie doesn't bother to hide the cigarettes.

CONNIE

Over here.

DELIA

I woke. You weren't there. I got worried.

CONNIE

Couldn't sleep is all. Anticipation, maybe.

They stare at each other a moment.

DELIA

Connie. Please.

Connie looks out at the moonlit desert.

CONNIE

I never much liked this place. I suppose I saw it as a purgatory -- my sins and bad habits comin' home, demandin' retribution.

(looks at her, smiles)

Another *Reckoning*, maybe. But tonight there's a clarity to it. Empty, endless, uncomplicated. Life at its most basic -- scratching up from the sand, touched for a bit by the sun and the moon, then withering back to dust, blown somewhere else by the wind.

Connie taps a cigarette out of a pack.

DELIA

You shouldn't be doing that.

CONNIE

Does it really matter at this point, love?

DELIA

It's all *always* mattered, Conrad.

(beat)

It *still* matters to me.

Connie puts the cigarette back
in the pack.

CONNIE

I know.

DELIA

Then, goddamn it, why doesn't it matter to you? I thought
we were in this together.

CONNIE

I did too.

DELIA

Then, why? Why just give up? It scares me, Connie. I'm
frightened. Not of you dying -- I know that's inevitable
one of these days. But I'm so afraid that I'll hate you for
allowing it to come to you so willingly.

Connie takes her hand, smiles
lovingly at her.

CONNIE

I hope not.

(nods to desert)

I see the beauty in it all tonight. The desert, life.
Becoming, unbecoming, becoming again. I didn't let myself
really look before...I was too busy being the "Lion of the
Haight", I suppose.

Delia rises, moves to the couch.

DELIA

You ARE the Lion of the Haight.

CONNIE

No. I'm just Connie Middleton, from Ottery St. Mary, Devon.

DELIA

One and the same.

Connie takes a slug of whiskey,
picks up the pad, and walks to
Delia, sits by her.

CONNIE

Maybe at one time, but no longer. See, Deely, I realized tonight that, at some point, we become our own history. We no longer have a present, and we are not allowed a future, because when anyone looks at us, they only see that history. Their perspective cages us, denies us whatever destiny we may have left. And because we don't want to disappoint them, we acquiesce. We step into the cage willingly and allow it to define us. The only way out of that cage is to let the history go. Just open our hands and release it. That's all I want to do, my darling.

(he spreads his
arms, opens his
hands)

I just want to open my hands, that's all.

DELIA

But *I* can't! My hands are clenched tight. Frozen shut.

CONNIE

They don't have to be.

Connie kisses her hands, then turns her face to his, kisses her tenderly. He puts his arm around her.

Catherine emerges from the SL hallway, notices Connie and Delia on the couch. She smiles at seeing them like that, and lingers, leaning into the shadow of the hallway, unnoticed.

Delia points to the yellow tablet laying near Connie.

DELIA

What's that?

CONNIE

One of my Muses came calling tonight. Saying goodbye, I'm guessing.

Beat.

DELIA

Read it to me?

Connie looks at her and smiles.

CONNIE

Like the old days, eh?

DELIA

(smiling)

Yes.

CONNIE

All right.

Connie puts his glasses on,
clears his throat.

CONNIE

*"We are sometimes lovers,
Full-time partners in a scheme to fool the world;
But no one 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've been."*

Connie pauses.

DELIA

Is there more?

CONNIE

Yes.
*"Now with aging soul in tatters
And remaining days too few,
I'd like to take you further,
But you don't know if you want to,
Because you don't know where I've been.*

*And where I've been,
Is a season from where I am.*

Connie sets the tablet down,
smiles at Delia, recites the
rest from memory.

CONNIE

*"But our differences in living
Need not damp the fires of loving;
And being sometimes lovers
Need not find those fires cooling
If we don't know where we've been.*

*'Cause where we've been,
Is a season from where we are."*

Long beat as Delia wipes her moist eyes.

DELIA

That's beautiful. What's it called?

Connie hands the tablet to Delia. She squints at it, then looks up at Connie.

DELIA

"To Delia".

(beat)

Aw, Connie.

She lets her head fall to his chest. After a moment:

CONNIE

I know you think holding on to something no matter what you're faced with shows strength. That to let go -- for whatever reason -- implies failure and weakness. But I would disagree with you, my darling. You see, I've come to understand that holding on so tightly is only the signature of fear, that doing so beyond all reason simply makes the penmanship clearer and sharper. The only way to erase that signature is to...just...let it go. Blow its dust from the page and let it turn.

Delia rises quickly, her back to Connie, her arms wrapped around herself.

DELIA

Oh, God, Connie. I can't lose you. Any of you. Daddy, Catherine, you...I can't. I simply can't. If I let you all go, I disappear.

Connie rises, comes behind her.

CONNIE

I think it's the opposite, my love. I think that for the first time in your life, you will appear. When you look in a mirror, you will not see the ghost of your father or the burden of me. You will see the remarkable light we have all needed to find *our* ways. You will see what we have seen -- that the light is pouring from within you, just reflecting off of us.

DELIA

That's not a vision I want to see, light or no.

Why not?
CONNIE

Delia turns, looks up into
Connie's face.

DELIA
Because it will be a lonely woman I'll see staring back at
me. Alone. You understand that? You letting go forces *me*
to, Connie. You may be ready, but *I* am not.

Delia turns from him.

Connie touches her shoulders,
turns her back to him. He
smiles and nods. She falls
into him...they wrap their
arms tightly around one another.

I am not at all ready.
DELIA

They stand embracing for several
moments.

Catherine takes a last long
look at them, then exits up
the hallway.

CONNIE
I'm tired, love. Goin' back to bed. Coming?

Delia nods, but does not smile.

DELIA
In a moment.

Connie exits. Delia slowly
sits, looking around the
darkened space of their home.
She notices the yellow tablet.

Delia reads over the poem,
then looks up, deep in thought.
She turns then, and looks toward
the hallway where Connie just
disappeared. She wraps her
arms around herself, begins to
weep silently.

Blackout. During the scene
transition:

CONNIE (V.O.)

*"I looked to you,
And you did not back down.
You kept the light in your eye,
And replaced the shine in mine.
You came to me with no shame
And reassured my own reachings.
You shared your soul
And in the passing,
Gave me mine again.
You held me warmly,
And passed me securely
On to the next day."*

ACT 2, Scene 4

LIGHTS UP.

Next morning.

Andrew enters from SL hallway, carrying his satchel. He sets the bag near the front door, then exits to the SR hallway.

A moment later, he returns, carrying a pot of coffee. He takes a mug from the bar, pours equal amounts of coffee and whiskey, then stands at the bar and sips it as he reads his Robert Burns.

A few beats later, Claire enters from the hallway, pulling a carry-on. She sets it near the front door.

ANDREW

You leavin' this paradise too, are ya?

CLAIRE

Me? No. Well, yes, but that bag's the Missy's.

ANDREW

Catherine?

CLAIRE

Leavin' this mornin', she says.

ANDREW

I didn't know. You'll not be joinin' us yourself, then.

CLAIRE

Oh, no. Won't get me goin' back across that ocean. Not that I don't have a soft spot for my birthplace. I just find life more interestin' here is all.

ANDREW

Staying in Phoenix, then?

CLAIRE

Lord, no. I didn't mean "here" here. Nothin' for me here now the Mister's leavin'. I meant America. Going to Las Vegas, I am.

ANDREW

Ah, yes. The lights and bells. What did you call it? "Bling".

CLAIRE

(laughs)

Well, sure, there's that. Kinda partial to it. That and...
(a smile)
...other things.

ANDREW

The magician.

CLAIRE

Maybe. We left things open.

ANDREW

Nothing wrong with a little magic.

CLAIRE

No, sir. Especially the way he does it.

ANDREW

Mm-hmm.

CLAIRE

Might find that Christmas mornin' I been lookin' for, you know?

ANDREW

That you might.

Claire and Andrew smile at each other a moment.

CLAIRE

I'd best get the Mister ready.

ANDREW

No hurry. We've got some time.

CLAIRE
All the same.

Claire stops at the hallway,
turns.

CLAIRE
I'll miss him, you know. Underneath it all, he's a sweetheart,
now, isn't he?

She exits. Andrew smiles,
chuckles to himself, then sips
his coffee, goes back to his
Robert Burns.

A moment later, Catherine enters
from US hallway, cell phone
wedged to her ear. She's
digging through her purse as
she talks.

CATHERINE
Yes...tonight...I don't know exactly. I'll let you know
when I get the ticket...I'm leaving for the airport in a few
minutes...What?

She sees Andrew, holding his
coffee. She points to it and
makes a begging motion. He
takes a mug and pours. She
goes to the closet for her
coat.

CATHERINE
Yes, and I you, you know that...And Mark...we're going to
talk about some things if I'm going to...

Andrew holds up the whiskey
bottle. Catherine hesitates,
then opens her arms and nods.
He pours.

CATHERINE
We'll talk about it when I get home...
(firmly)
No. We're going to *talk*, Mark...We'll work it out
together...Yes...Yes. Me too.

She puts the phone in her purse,
drops it and the coat across
her suitcase. She takes the
mug Andrew offers, sits on the
couch.

CATHERINE
God, thank you. I need this.

ANDREW
Back to New York?

CATHERINE
Yes.

ANDREW
Things worked out, then?

CATHERINE
Not yet. They may not. I don't know. But...I need to go back.

ANDREW
You sure?

CATHERINE
I can't let him go. Not just yet, anyway. Am I crazy?

ANDREW
Nothin' crazy about it. We do what we feel we must, don't we?

(beat)
A word of advice?

(off her nod)
If in the end you're going to leave, don't hesitate. Walk away clean. Don't worry about the mist you're heading into or mourn the hours you're leavin' behind. Every moment behind you, and every second before you will ultimately have the same significance: they will be moments you simply lived through, good or bad, happy or sad. Let what's in front of you be enough for now. And if you feel it's time to let it all go, open your hands fearlessly and with great excitement. For something else will surely fall into them.

Catherine hugs him.

CATHERINE
You should have been a poet too, Uncle Andy.

Connie appears in the SL hallway, walking with a cane, a small oxygen tank with cannula over his shoulder. He's dressed for travel.

CONNIE
Just what the boozers need...a barman pourin' rhymes instead of Black and Tans.

ANDREW
(holding up his
book)

I read 'em a bit of Robbie now and again, Conrad. Don't hear any complaints. I even recite 'em a few of your stanzas.

CATHERINE
You look terrific, Dad.

CONNIE
Never underestimate the power of oxygen and codeine, darlin'. You notice he didn't mention "no complaints" on my verses.

ANDREW
You'll be readin' 'em yourself soon enough. Take it up with the bellies at the bar.

CONNIE
(to Andrew)
I shall. There wouldn't be a bit of Irish in that coffee, now would there?

ANDREW
There could be.

CONNIE
Good man. Don't want to be flyin' completely unmedicated, now do we?
(sits with Catherine)
The Irish demon said you were going back to New York.

CATHERINE
Be nice, Dad. You'll miss her and you know it. No one to bitch at.

CONNIE
I'll have your uncle.

ANDREW
Oh, will you now?

CONNIE
(to Catherine)
Things work out up north, did they?

CATHERINE
We'll see. I thought I might try to talk Mark into getting out of the city for a while. Change of environment might do him -- and us --some good.

CONNIE
Oh?

CATHERINE

Yeah. My London office is opening soon. I'm thinking the English countryside. Maybe somewhere in Devon?

CONNIE

Are you, now?

CATHERINE

Mm-hmm. Depends on if I can find a place for us to stay a while.

CONNIE

Well, I might know a place where you can lay your heads.

CATHERINE

Thought you might.

(they hug)

Where's mom?

CONNIE

Settlin' up with Claire, I believe.

CATHERINE

What's she going to do? Did you convince her to--

CONNIE

Your mother's got her own mind, darlin'. I'll not be convincin' her of anything.

ANDREW

Never been able to, if memory serves.

CONNIE

(to Andrew)

Amazed I was able to talk her into marryin'.

(to Catherine)

No, darlin'...she'll follow her own mind.

CATHERINE

She's not said anything?

CONNIE

Hasn't uttered a word to me since last night.

CATHERINE

So I guess we should take it that she's not...

Delia strides into the room.

DELIA

Not what?

She's dressed quite stylishly.

She looks through a couple of credenza drawers SL.

DELIA

Conrad, have you seen the extra house key? I need it.

CONNIE

I haven't. You misplace yours?

DELIA

No...mine's still hanging where it always is. I want to leave one for Michael. He may need to get in for something.

Connie, Catherine, and Andrew exchange glances.

CATHERINE

Mom...you're going with Dad?!

DELIA

(smiles a beat)

Do you think I'd let those two roam the English countryside without supervision?

CATHERINE

But what about the Laureateship? Never giving up? Holding on no matter what?

Connie, Andrew, and Catherine look at Delia, who stares back at them, her hands in fists in front of her. Then she slowly spreads her arms wide and opens her hands, holds the pose a beat or two, smiles at Connie. She need say nothing more.

Then she points at Connie.

DELIA

But!...that doesn't mean Buckingham Palace won't be hearing from me!

CONNIE

Oh, Lord!

ANDREW

A bit of coffee before we go, Deely?

DELIA

Only if there's Irish in it, Andrew.

CONNIE

(smiling at her)

My God, I love you, you know that?

She joins Connie on the couch.
They kiss. She reaches up and
touches his cheek, smiles back.
It's a momentary loving but
melancholy look, then it's
gone and the control is back.

DELIA

Read us some Robbie Burns, will you, Andrew? Something
hopeful and uplifting.

ANDREW

With pleasure.

Andrew thumbs through his book,
finds a page, begins to read.

ANDREW

*"There's nane that's blest of human kind,
But the cheerful and the gay, man!
Here's a bottle and an honest friend!
What wad ye wish for mair, man?
Wha kens, before his life may end,
What his share may be o' care, man.
Then catch the moments as they fly,
And use them as ye ought, man.*

*(music up and under
as lights slowly
fade)*

*Believe me, happiness is shy,
And comes not aye when sought, man."*

Blackout.

END OF PLAY