

Joyelle McSweeney

Acts I, II and IV *from* Pierrot le Feu an Epithalamium

ACT ONE

SETTING:

The phonograph trees.

Moonlight on the phonographtrees. Their ruffed blowsy metal mid-bloom in their stillness. No need then for an elaborate off stage wind contraption modeled on the bladders of geese, or to hire a goose chorus, or to trap one goose in a padded clamber to study its digestion to watch ice and breadlumps flee down its gullet to shelter in its ruinous liver. To cut apart the limb of bread and spread its ripped organs. No rich-rich communion on or off the stage. RITUAL DIRECTIONS: no ritual. No need to climb to the top of the jade pyramidal icesculpture, don white tie, wait for the peons to escape catastrophe and ring our goosy necks, which we've wrapped in white as if to beg the sacrifice. We're not that guilty yet. Just silent. No need to prepare the photographic plate. For a thunder appartaud tucked into the rafters as in the tarp of an upsidedown junk moving down the stilly river. Like its own still moonlit reflection. The current like black snakes. Beside the canisters of light. Or real snakes. No puppy to be killed by the costumed soldiers out of their right minds. BOMB DIRECTION: no sound. STORM DIRECTION: no storm. SOUND DIRECTION: A hem of noise as from an offstage sea or factory. The audience worries about their role in this, aware of their derivation. Of their extraction from all they could possibly hear. Pulse here as if seated between their own ears. Lite hum from an desert-side factory employing the unluckiest women. They are the lady matadors of death, their only protections their breasts and soft bodies. And hold piteously small needles. And make a wristing motion that contains a whole sea. DESERT DIRECTION: a flat bed walled with two-by-fours as in a hayride. Sprinkled with rosy quarters and rose quartz, but it should open like a folio: hinged. A treasurebox, it may be stored closed. Off stage, for now. As in NOW DIRECTION: now. DEVIL DIRECTION: no devil. PHONOGRAPH TREES: a gilded matte fluorescence. All shell. You could crack one and thereon the light would flow. At the top of eight foot poles, four or five horns like manmade marigolds. Like swollen trumpets. LENGTHS: of medical tubing snake like vines from their utmost. BECAUSE: these are outmoded, defunct trees which grow only on our special aisle. DEMONS: There is a prescriptive strumpet-demon called Lamia not mentioned in this play. She's a slander on the gender and the race. GENDER DIRECTIVE: what is the gender of this play. There is honeydew which is the cross-bred food of paradise. It is fruit and milk, and it may have sprung up from the sprocketing phosphorescence. The glowweed maps its migration, how it floated here and miscegenated the set. Sex by moonlight, old rub off the genet lamp. The food of paradise is mixed up all ready. It's predisgested and glistens in the bag which is a

HONEYMOON:

two yellowjackets nose on and noise violently. They dip and twirl in a beautiful symmetry and coil off like unspooling thread Bit off the needle of the maquiladora. Black striped maquillage. These figures represent Plague, Fate's Closure, the closing of the Evening Bag, and the conspiring of circumstance. Invisible on the stage except for the long stiff plastic threads they swing stiffly from. These may glint. However, their whine may be heard now near now far by those seated in the gallery, by exertion of the small speakers with which each person is fitted in exchange for a ticket: a bland cardboard box on a noose around the neck.

THE HONEYMOON'S OVER:

Harumph. Caboose after a few final flicks of the needle the thread is torn away. The audience returns attention to the stage to see the limits of a surf-length train just pulling out of sight and into the curtain. Applause. This again echoes the surf. The audience begins to wonder: Are we under the surf ourselves? Do we play the seabed? As this thought simultaneously courses through every soul in the seat, a wave begins. Member after member turns his palms up into it, but this wave is silent. This is only the representation of the sound. Lowering his arms, his palms find each other and clap again. This the sound. This number continues until it exhausts itself. The wave stills. Now a murmur is born among the audience. This murmur becomes a chatter.

END OF ACT ONE:

The audience files out like the tide from an inlet, shaking their heads like hairs on the head of a god. As he shakes foam from his mustashio, the whitecaps flex. They flood the lobby. At the flash of lights and a crack of thunder in the lobby (for here is where the special effects shall be mounted) they file back in. Back in the seacave, the first tide of an empty hem of plastic cups where the first layer of liquor has been drunk. It drapes a cherry sea. The mirror behind the bar multiplies the predicament. The barmaid in her awkward vest stands in the seam of two oceans, unlucky nymph. She sighs and brings up a platter round as the emptiness of fate. She begins knocking the empty cups away. In the silent lobby. Track lit with globe after globe of light.

BACK IN THE THEATER:

The audience back in their seats, turn to the stage expectantly. The tide of their hairpieces and rolling eyes. Their monocles. Their cat lenses. Their feathertrimmed sleeves and capes. Their dead stoles. Their shoes which are a tide of leathers. Their cows. Their mythic herds under the seas. A tide of mice let in to bounce against the arches and insteps run about the laces. Knees scissor up in aghastment. Tide of screams. Between two gramophone trees, a moon of cheese is precipitously lowered til it hangs two feet from the ground. A yellow moon-beam manque gangplank dribbles over the stage, jumps the stagelip and lowers into the audience. The mice run up this and make a leap for the milky galleon. There is a rush like lost breath towards the attention point of

the moon as all of the mice are removed to it. The weight of the mice sinks the cheese into a groove in the floor which hastily seals over.

EXEUNT MICE:

Watching all their air run out through the puncture point of the moon, the audience has been holding its breath. Now when the moon drops they gasp and find the gallery fat with oxygen. They breathe in through their noses at once then breathe out in a phhht. A merest hint of pink surfaces on the backdrop of the theatre. They suck in and breathe out again. The margin spreads. It is as if they are inflating a daytime. Applause. Pink lights up.

ENTER GIRLA:

Girla is skinny. Her hair is skinny and black flat. She wears flats. Her skin is pale Chicana. She is from Chicaga where she keeps a flat. Where she keeps a tide of schoolbooks stacked flat, their frank binding. Though she has long since left school She wears a little shimmy skirt and a turtle neck. And she wears an audience-speaker on a lariat around her neck.

GIRLA: (purring, with eyes closed, to audience). Put your hand herrrrre (she touches hand to her lariat)

(audience members put a hands to their necks)

GIRLA: Rrrrip it off! (she rips off her speakerbox and throws it to the floor).

(audience members rip off their cardboard boxes and throw them to the floor. All lights out; the theater is now a perfect black, the perfect still back of an hunting animal listening in the woods)

GIRLA's VOICE from above and from the shoal of speakerboxes now stippling the floor: (Beat) Now we can begin-in-in

ACT TWO: Full stage lights up.

Before the phonograph trees. Settee from 'The Importance of being Earnest'. Firecarriage from Medea. Writing desk. Madhatter's teatable. Carpenter vest. Nun's habit. Fisherlady's socks. Portrait of General Gabler. Writing tablet. Incriminating letters. Due bills. Hoopoe costume. Ophelia bouquet. Mask of the red death. Everything heaped on the furniture; the furniture on wheels and has been wheeled on.

GIRLA: (from the heap of stuff. dully.) What are you doing?

Writing a letter to whom?

What are you telling him?

I don't like you to write about me.

Once it's in writing, it's so final.

Your may feel another way tomorrow.

Sweep me off from Chicago and call me a bitch!

I hate you. I wish I'd never come! (she gnashes her teeth. Gnashing and muttering, pushes all the stuff off stage. Empty stage with Phonograph Trees).

MALE VOICE (from phonographs; a red light goes on that says 'recording') (softly but firmly): Girla.

(She places her hands over her ears).

MALE VOICE: Girla!

GIRLA: What?

MALE VOICE: Why do you think I've translated you to this aisle of Phonograph Trees? with only what you had in your hands?

GIRLA: I have only what I held in my hands. Hunts crushed tomatoes in water and a carton of luckies. Long since smoked.

MALE VOICE: and what you carried on your back

GIRLA: i.e. the clothes on my back. And the can of hunts tomatoes I had no way of opening. Clichés of bedragglements. I keep it high on a shelf a totem of my good old days.

MALE VOICE: why do you think

GIRLA: I don't know

MALE VOICE: You know!

GIRLA: I am Girla, foreman of the factory. I stamp my feet and the girders shaken. I am the forelady and the thought aforethought I am the factory plans. Materials are shipped in or are grown locally. Are shipped off as product. Propitiance must be made. I am Girla to whome propitiance must be made. I hold a garlandy girdle which can be turned inside out (one appears in her hands). Fill this with what offering you may make. The god will tell me whether it is sufficient.

MV: There is no ritual in this play

GIRLA: There is no suffering in this play. Anything of labor drained off long ago between the grotting of the factory floor. The cracks envining the walls, the walls invining. The inviting moisture finding a place to collect and go mordant. The lungs inflowering at it. Hunched at the whirring machines became organic a matter of flounce or flight. The factory chamber wide and empty as a thought bubble. Could hold and mix it all like a bag under the water. Like hands pushing down the translated fragment. Like holding a bag of cats! (red light goes off)

JOSH: (rolls on, chained to a rock) You knew me in life

GIRLA: This is life, Josh. Nothing worse than a neurotic hippie.

JOSH: you knew me in life we had a farm together we had a firm together. We were girls together and splashed our silver in the silvery inlets. Our jokes were as good as gold and we got rich off it, typing them into our internet site. Someone melted us down for a platter. (platters appear in a halo around the rock). Harrows, harrows. I am old as the barrows where Plecthra threw down her rocks. That's a made up story. It was the one god all along. (he strikes the rock with his bound fist. a tide of mice runs out and appears to run right for the audience. the audience screams or sighs. as they reach the lip of the stage, the mice come up against a plexiglas lip. Thud, thud, wave after wave of mice hits the lip and they pile up. Another lip comes from behind and seals them in. A belt conveys them off as if by sushi robot.) Nothing worse than an apologetic drunk.

GIRLA: I'm sorry (swiggs at the bottle three exes on it. stage lights go dim. a screen unilevers from the flies).

ACT TWO: Screenshow. Screen reads: 'Flora and Fauna of the Island'.

GIRLA kicks over a bucket before a small TV. She sits down on its flat bottom and switches on the screen as a viscous pale lake spreads from the downturned mouth of the bucket to the holes of a hidden drain. The perfectly round face of a casual suburban gangster, Buddy Slew, fills up nearly the whole screen with its playdough pockets. He is heavily caked in white, the moon as a man made up for vaudeville. If a crater were a magnifying glass, it would expose a gently curving continent of hunched towns of lending libraries. Countless autodidacts scurry home under thick books stacked in columns that swerve perilously as stacks of genes, their sweated spines crook'd like the houses folding and spindling the hills. Their glasses coke bottled. For vaudeville is a studied form, without naturals. What you take for inspiration is learned, learned, learned. All Buddy Slew's reactions have the cognitive delay of early movies or mime, as if the middle term had been dropped out and the thought had to swing from frame to frame on a ropeswing or vine. His eyebrows are as heavily exerted as apostrophes or a rescue squad, and may be thought's landing sites.

Into the screen waves the neck and mouthpiece of a clarinet; he waggles his thick eyebrows, purses his mincy mouth, and tootles it; beat; and then the patter of gunshots like gravel hitting the street. He wands it away with a wink. Next the heel of a well-stacked hoagie drifts on. He makes a delighted bathtub in the center of his face, then takes a big bite. Sound of fists landing in steak. He drains the bathtub to a pin and raises his eyebrows to the edges of his vista— now grins and it drops away. He chews like a train. He lifts up a fat cigar already smoking; a waved-on match 'lights' it; he puffs; the 'ugh' of someone grabbing his shot-up gut and slumping butt first to the curb. Finally, a cardboard bullet swings into the frame and hits him in the eye; a siren; he yanks it out; the siren drives by. He sighs and smiles, wags his eyebrows as if to reassure a party full of anxious children: all fine! A polkadot hanky mopes his brow. He composes himself. He looks over GIRLA's shoulder at the audience, mimes gurgling and popping like a baby or a spring. A slender stream of fake gunshots like a bundle of mimosa runs till it runs out. The image shrinks to a coin-sized disk that rings his right eye. The screen winks off.

GIRLA: (drumming her fingers like a smoker on her thigh.) I love that Buddy Slew. Does every fucking thing the animals do, and thinks better. It starts and ends with him, he's the limit. He's totally complete. His own microcosm and the same everyweek. The same network. That test pattern of him checking all his ports and drives like you run your hands over your last leg looking for the bite. Where's the bite, where's the bite, where's the itching coming from. This swelling did I have it yesterday. If this swelling changes to its inverse and the entire limb decays, will he love me anyway. How could he be expected to desire me when I don't even want myself. Well, everyman loves a throwaway. If you're so non-sustainable, use it up yourself. (This whole speech is thought). OK? (She says aloud like the chief just briefed the gang. She picks herself up, goes to the edge of the stage, grabs a plain metal folding chair from the wings, and unfolds it back on stage, facing the audience but canted towards the center. She crosses her legs and her arms.) OK.

SOUND DIRECTION: The tickertackering of a reel-to-reel projector. SCREEN DIRECTION: The flickering of the screen. LEGEND: THE FLORA AND FAUNA OF THE ISLAND: SUBLEGEND: The Sweetheart Ginnie Springs

DITTY: (from the phonograph trees)

She's fresh as an ice lolly and everybody's pal
Soft as a cloth dolly and clean as a canal
She's everybody's sparrow and everybody's pet
She'll sniff around your lunchpail and eat your cassoulet
She'll have you in her tangles for the rest of your life
Dreaming o' her teethies like a pearlhandled knife
Doing the prison laundry and writing to your wife
But just before you audit all Death's victory and stings,
You'll wake up just a-swinging from the good old apron strings
Thanking God in heaven, thanking God in heaven,
Thanking God in heaven for The Sweetheart Ginnie Springs!

(JOSH: Groans from the boulder. A bright font of viscera spontaneously springs from his gut.)

GINNIE: (stepping on stage. A fullgrown poppet in wonderland/ragdoll drag. Ringlets, hairbow, pinafore, petticoats, anklesox, black, black maryjanes. Skin, clothes and hair the same is a shade of paint pink except those shoes and her red mouth) (In a trilling Irish brogue) (of Josh). Sure he's a great one for a saint.

(tundrous laughter from the rafters, doorjamb, walls.)

T'at's men for you. Don't they go carrying on like they brought fire to the earth.

(the whole stage set shakes with laughter and the entire proscenium bursts into flame for an instant—blots out)

Now folks, you've heard a me? I'm The Sweetheart Ginnie Springs. I don't know why everyone makes such a fuss over me. I'm same as any woman. Only got what I brung with me (rimshot from a drum. She bends and looks under her own skirt). Whoops! (Cuts her eyes at GIRLA who has turned back to the TV. But GIRLA's own face appears on the TV set. She watches herself watching GINNIE blankly over her own shoulder) And a nice gentleman gave that to me. Still I have a few tricks up my... sleeve. I'll just need an audience assistant.

JOSH: Groans.

(tundrous laughter)

GINNIE: Not you, you're helpless. All caught out up in your own romance.

(JOSH groans. GINNIE goes over and dabs a finger in some red material oozing from the corner of his mouth. She rubs it between her fingers, thinking. Then she retightens her grip. She 'pulls and pulls and pulls'. To a drumroll, a line of brightly colored T-shirts pulls from Josh's mouth. tied at the arms. When she has a goodly number she turns and raises her hands in victory, spreading the chain of shirts for the audience to see.)

Ta-Da!

(tundrous)

(GIRLA: giggles)

GINNIE: Looks like the cat that swallowed the canasta

(rim shot)

Looks like evidence of some hey-hey-hey-nous crime!

(AUDIO DIRECTION: laughter and the joyful shout of guns at a wedding. The buzzsaw of helicopters and the wailing villagers. GIRLA and GINNIE twirl around in a circle with the tee-shirt banner between them. They fasten this cloth-viscera like a lawn of laundry across the stage from far trunks of the phonograph trees. The cloth should look wet and strange. A camera in the knot whole of each tree tapes the women as they do this and feeds the images at random to the FLORA AND FAUNA SCREEN. The effect should be dizzying and nauseating)

applause.

at the end of this action, dizzy, happy GINNIE and GIRLA collapse in a fit of laughter and doze off girlishly in each others arms.

JOSH (lifts his head, looks around.)

END OF ACT TWO.

ACT FOUR:

The YOUNG WOMEN lock their arms to each others' shoulders and face the audience. They don a stretchy grey garment which fits their arms and chests but has no neckhole—their material stretches and covers their head. The material is opaque but becomes translucent depending how the Women's bodies are contorted or outstretched. SOUNDTRACK: They perform the following dances to an amplified recording of women talking in a continuous stream with no breaths or consonants, as if they are mouthing speech. The speed races or slows down as a needle in a treadle sewing machine. The titles appear on the FLORA Y FAUNA screen

A Revision of the Firmament: Ichthyosauri

(The stretchy material pulls into a Long Bony Beak before each girl's face)

The Bonequeens of the Desert Need no Water

(They nod with smarmy dignity at the Grounds Before them)

It's like a Dinosaur Burial Grounds

(They turn their beaks upwards which split into a flower and bloom like a moonflower maturing into moonlight on its big night)

Alright then Lead Your Horse There

(They start to stink like moonflower. They toss down their swollen skulls, whinny, and stamp their hoofs)

I deem him Luckier than the Gods Who

(With their stamping hoofs they flip themselves up into the air like a line of Russian Dancers and land on their opposite feet)

I am a Fieldstone a Milstone a Flat Tire, I

(They stand)

Rainfall in Juarez

(Quiet. They look around and Stand)

What do you think Not as a Memorandum but Speaking as You in Your Capacity

(They hold a hand in front of them as if looking in a compact mirror)

I am Not Going to Issue or Otherwise Discuss Hypotheticals

(The heads bulge as if looking in a convex mirror)

I Leave That to the Academics

(Their bulged heads form a shield that they shimmy down the garments)

I Leave that to the Americans

(The bent shields settle at their stomachs like pregnancies)

For Fun and Profit, Quote

(They pat their bellies)

I Left Home to Better Myself and You Resented Me For It

(They rub their bellies fiercely)

Who is this 'You' When the real 'You' isn't Here on the Island

(They knead at their bellies like dough)

There is No Island

(They make as if to pull material from their bellies; in fact it is absorbed into the sleeves stretching up their arms)

Alright in Front of the Gringas

(They shake the matter from their hands and glare at the audience)

The Stage Mestizas

(They cross themselves stone facedly)
Look the Facts are These
(They lower two empty hands)
We were Found as Fragments in the Desert
We Add Up to a Pattern but Not yet a Whole
We Add Up to a Whole but Not yet a Story
Our Number Flexes Like a Mirage on a Highway
Where I was Waiting for the Bus
Where I was Locked Outside the Gates
Where I was Walking Home From Work
When I decided to Strangle Myself with my Pursestrap
When I Raped Myself
And Tied My Own Hands With My Shoestrings
I was Always One for Symbolism
It Just Doesn't Get Sadder
It Wouldn't Be Crasser if You Had Left Me On the Cricket Pitch
Instead of the Waste or Sports Field
But to Bury Me next to my Brief Place of Work
In the Lots of the Industrial Zone
Impiety! In a Grave Just Deep Enough to Hide Your Own Sin
Just Miles Across the Border from El Paso
A Shallow Grave Mocks Decency by Mocking the Funeral Rite
Why Did You Take My Skin Off Me Without Asking My Mother
Don't Ask My Mother to Know Me By My Bones
Any Money at All Was Too Good To Be True
The Horse in the Bed is an Offer I Can't Refuse
Just Don't Look it in the Mouth
Where Did you Put My Missing Fingers
In What Small Bag
What Voice Do I Have to Talk In For You to Hear
How Did I Scatter My Own Ripped Out Hair
Bite My Own Breast
Tear Out My Baby's Eyes
It seems I Had All Ingenuity Except for Staying Alive
Why Does My Baby Appear and Disappear from the Record Like Dirty Money
Why Do You Love Me in Pieces
You Who Want to Comb Your Hair with a Jawbone
Look Piously at Your Reflection in my Polished Sternum
Take Your Hard On Pill and Comb Your Restored Hair
It is an Impiety unto Heaven that You Don't Care

Joyelle McSweeney is the author of *The Red Bird* and *The Commandrine and Other Poems*, both from Fence. She is the co-founder of Action Books, a press for poetry and translation, and Action, Yes, a web-quarterly for international writing and hybrid forms. She recently joined the MFA faculty at Notre Dame. She is currently at work on a translation of the *Aeneid*, the first portion of which will appear in chapbook form from Burning Chair Books this summer.

Working Note:

This verse play had its genesis in the Amnesty International report on the ongoing murder of hundreds of maquiladora workers in Juarez, which has been allowed by Mexican and US authorities to continue for decades. The deaths of these women and their children are revolting and enraging; equally enraging is the frustration of efforts by their survivors to bring visibility to the crimes and put an end to the culture of indifference and corruption that permits this tide of death to flow nearly unchallenged. That US corporations are able to profit off the local and national ‘infrastructures’ of sexism, racism, and class-contempt amplifies my outrage.

In *Pierrot Le Feu, an Epithalamium*, disgust, sympathy, cruelty, luridity, degradation and violence hold forth, clash, meld, and subside to create dismaying tableaux. The play harnesses techniques borrowed from an array of poets and playwrights to create a spectacle that is terrible but also unpredictable, slick and alluring. This is a spectacle for the mind’s eye, however; in the theater of the mind, the reader is forced to feel her interest, sympathies, allegiances, and disgusts piqued and dashed in turn. Against all the mayhem, the dead maquiladora workers who appear in Act Three have the sanest, most human voices, and the reader, in feeling identification with them, must internalize and search out a response to the outrage of their deaths.

The multiple status of the piece as poem, play, song, dance, film, visual event and performance is strategic. It seeks to make a troubled, unstable space in which the reader must react. The reader must be married to this subject matter; hence the epithalamium. But unlike the phantoms in the play, the reader is a real person; feeling his or her realness against these figures’ insubstantiality should prompt the reader to take real action in the real world.