

## TRY! TRY!, *a Noh play*

### *Notes on the Noh Play relevant to TRY! TRY!:*

The Noh plays are ancient ritual one-act plays of Japan. The audience once dressed for them as if for a religious service in elaborate ceremonial robes. The interest is in suggested action or tensions, and in the lyrics, dances and formalized gestures. The decor is symbolical. The musicians—traditionally three drums, and a flute—appeared on stage. The actors stamped their feet at the conclusion of their speeches. The movement is photographic rather than dramatic. The audience is supposed to know all the plays by heart.

Presented by the Poets' Theatre, Cambridge, Massachusetts, February 26, 1951. Directed by V.R. Lang, with lighting by Nancy Ryan and Charles E. Eisitt, sets and costumes by Edward St. John Gorey and Alison Bishop, with Hugh Amory as stage manager and the following cast:

VIOLET	V. R. Lang
JOHN, a friend of the Poet's	John Ashbery
JACK, Violet's husband	Jack Rogers

*Scene: A kitchen. There is a window rear center above the sink, but no furnishings other than an ironing board and a small table with an old-fashioned gramophone on it. As the scene opens Violet is leaning on the ironing board and John is playing a recording of a slow waltz.*



Time: After any war.

Persons: VIOLET and JACK, husband and wife reunited after the war; and JOHN, a friend of the poet. VIOLET is dressed in a shabby, prewar pink party dress, JOHN in a dark suit, JACK in uniform. JOHN should stop the gramophone for his own speeches but sometimes play appropriate music during the others'. The gestures should be extremely stylized throughout, and the lighting should help to emphasize this formality, perhaps, for instance, by a center light over the ironing board into the ring of which the characters would have to step to be seen during their speeches. It might be nice to have JOHN follow the other two characters' lines with a copy of the script, dropping the pages ostentatiously to the floor as the play went on, one by one.

VIOLET:  
(alone)

My name is Violet. It's not a pretty name. It's not a name that any beauty ever had. I, hearing it called through bars or playgrounds or hospitals, am not reminded of the flower. I avoid my name whenever I can, as a matter of fact, with any other name. Oh dear, I'm sick of the color and the smell that ever since childhood everyone's taken great delight in rubbing in. Even the most ridiculous diminutives are pleasanter to my ears. But if only he'd return what blessed boredom it would be to hear my name pronounced with the right degree of propriety.

(JOHN has been standing in a listening attitude, half in and half out of the light. He removes the record from the phonograph and steps towards VIOLET.)

JOHN:

I'm afraid the girl will not be entirely satisfactory. When the poet talked with me the Violet we knew was not like this. Her wit seems to have been dried or dulled. We look for abundance of feeling, to counteract the sterility of war. She is a woman after all. My girl, you cannot simply stand and wait. When he comes home your Jack will have enough to bear without this black fatigue you seem to be in all the time.

VIOLET:

I know. Perhaps if I thought deliberately of time before the war?

JOHN:

Yes, that might help.

VIOLET:

Then everything seemed younger somehow and the world dressed up too much.

I always favored a party dress, always in those days, with net stockings, and a bright

bangle in my slick straight hair. I never used to lie, either. I was a real joke among

my friends for being so anxiously stupid about the truth. Life went by so fast then!

There was a great deal of laughter, and you didn't dare to lie because the next moment was

upon you! with a fast and confounding surprise. That's why I had so many dresses: everything

was a special event, and the most unusual  
found me eager and waiting. Oh, I used to

go through all my dresses every night before  
dinner, so that Jack could hardly tell whether

dish or Violet were the greater surprise. I used to  
sing annoyingly in his ear all the time.

Because I invariably felt stark naked.

JOHN:

My dear!

I hadn't meant you to go on so. Please  
don't feel bad.

VIOLET:

That's all right. I don't know  
how I feel. Except that I'm never naked

any more. You know how it is when the music's  
over? I spent the war dancing. I'm just tired.

JOHN:

Oh Violet, at no time has the poet  
or myself touched or questioned your  
generosity or need. How could I  
have presumed to criticize you?  
I remember you in the bars and the  
cafes with your dirty face and  
shabby hose, smiling and singing  
so cleverly, just as if you were happy.  
And I know you didn't always get  
the biggest sailor in the fleet.

VIOLET:

Don't go on. It's not fun  
to be understood when you didn't know  
you had to be. How

else could I make myself feel real  
in that dazzled time?

I only tried to be felicitous.

When the lights are up

I've got to shout and kick or go blind.

I'm afraid I'm the sort

of girl that sings in the movies, along

with the heroine. Or

disappears altogether until intermission.

JOHN:

It's not easy to be  
spectator or audience.

Always overruled by

someone else's plan

of what you really want.

Violet, you're never asked

what news you want to see

in the paper. When will

he, Jack, come home?

VIOLET:

As if waiting for someone besides me  
to ask that question had delayed him,  
now he appears, limping up the walk.

And after all these years of sorting  
my feelings and piling them about  
the kitchen, ready, classified and

clean, I don't know what I feel. I  
wish I had more time to decide. Oh  
why did I say that? I'm crying.

JOHN:

Jack created this emptiness  
by his departure. You cannot, fill,

Violet, the cupboard  
where the colander

hung dry, the plane  
of linoleum a stove  
once stabilized,  
the empty shelves  
and racks for cloths  
and pots and dishes,  
the windows void  
even of a view  
not with the most appropriate sentiments.  
Does Jack know what he had done here?

VIOLET:  
Oh I don't know I  
don't know! Be still.

*(But they cease their agitation when JACK appears. JACK and VIOLET freeze into odd wooden positions staring at each other. The lighting increases. JOHN moves with a tentative dignity to a position between VIOLET and JACK.)*

JOHN:  
In this moment of silence the expected lyricism begins. As when the subway stops just before reaching a station, they breathe heavily for a minute, all of a minute, though very sure of the time, his hand on her lips; her eyes stirring. They allow the world this minute to speak before taking up their love again, and softly as a gift the world tells them what images they make, how it spies upon them every night, what their death will be, and how magical they are.

VIOLET:  
Oh Jack! my Jackson!  
why did you leave me?  
Since you left I've had  
to sell the flute and the  
bath-tub. And my voice  
is broken. I'll never

again sing you "Trail  
of the Lonesome Pines."  
And Jackson, I'm glad  
you're back. Just don't  
look at my fingernails.

*(The light dims again. VIOLET slumps over the ironing board, holding her arms out stiffly in front, and JACK ceremoniously removes his cap and jacket and hangs them over her clasped hands. JOHN has moved back to the gramophone and has put on a rather dissonant record. JACK moves stage front for his speech and only the last two lines of it are addressed to VIOLET specifically as he turns from the audience to her.)*

JACK:  
I've come a long way for your sake,  
my back all decorated like this  
and my feet covered with mold. Do  
you know why they had to put fire  
under my lids?

When we first went  
riding, how like dashing Cossacks!  
it was easy then to dress in scarlet.  
I sat my mount prettily and hacked  
babies and old women with a song  
on my breath—I even let my eyebrows  
grow! and with the gold braid and all  
I frightened myself.

There were sweet  
times, and we weren't too drunk to  
appreciate them. Lovely ladies loved  
us, like useful flowers. And as I say,  
my color was good. I had a beautiful  
horse.

Why, I thought of myself as  
Eric's son, Lief, going towards  
the moon with a world behind me  
and a lot of blood to get off my  
chest. I wanted to bellow the green

and black waves flat and then  
 cleave my way like an iceberg! I was  
 good, and I knew it. I hadn't laid  
 them all low for nothing: women  
 and villages, coasts of islands  
 twice as big as Iceland. And didn't  
 they all squat when I frowned, even  
 my bad old father? But something  
 went wrong. One minute I was lord of  
 all I surveyed, and the next I knew  
 that I'd be beaten—that I'd better  
 go back to my easy throne, and leave  
 this virgin land I'd first laid  
 heavy hands upon. That was a  
 retreat! how I cried to shove off  
 from that rich tough land, my  
 kind of country, and go home!  
 What was it that beat me? the  
 land, the air, the sun, all  
 bigger than the gods intended  
 me to own? I yearned after it,  
 and it grew like a spiral as I  
 thought through the years of  
 my Vinland the Good.

Or I was the  
 Admiral, bossing a bothersome  
 crew and pretending a good deal  
 of confidence, when suddenly there  
 was a hint of glory! I didn't  
 believe it, just because the  
 seaweed looked like fresh grass;  
 I knew I might be feverish and I  
 didn't plan to be taken in, but  
 there was something in the air—  
 a sweetness like finding a ruby  
 when you were looking for a baseball—  
 and at the same time I was scared  
 at not knowing, it was mine and I  
 hadn't planned for it, I wasn't

strong enough, and anyone could  
 knock me down, all those others  
 who wanted everything as much as  
 I did.

So I spent most of my time  
 wondering when bullets, mortars and  
 bombs were going to find out where  
 my courage ended and this cowardice—  
 oh intuition, I'm not on trial, am I?—  
 began. Finally a sniper in a tree  
 on the edge of the Pacific's  
 exciting waters—an oriental with  
 lots of time for meditation—  
 saw me clearly. At the right moment.  
 It was time, you see, not  
 topographical, like Achilles' heel.  
 I was thinking of myself as heir  
 to the Mississippi. My thoughts moved  
 to De Soto—whose wouldn't? And  
 that was when I was spotted, naked  
 as the beach, caught within a few feet  
 of safety. Have you ever thought  
 about men like him,—who could  
 have been emperors? I fell like a  
 sail, relaxed, with no surprise.  
 Had the war started for me to kill  
 or be killed? I don't know. I did  
 feel that something had been completed.  
 You think you know what that means?  
 Perhaps you do! I think I do!

*(The lights have come up slowly during the last of the speech. At  
 JACK's last words VIOLET straightens up seriously, dropping his  
 clothes to the floor, and JOHN yanks the gramophone silent.)*

JOHN:  
 For god's sake, Jack! this  
 is no way to talk! she's had  
 her own visitors. Trying to

drive the blues away. Ladies  
compulsive and never friendly,  
willing Violet nothing but  
their shoes. Your wife, after all!

*(VIOLET withdraws to center rear in a light against the window.  
JOHN turns back to his machine and puts on a melancholy record.)*

VIOLET:  
Children wade on the receding shingle  
gaunt in their practiced grace. Mature,  
they ape their elders and cavort like  
pogo sticks in the advancing foam.

Where well-mannered aeroplanes and autos  
serenely sail, on the yellow sand, children  
ignore their own innocence. They've taken it all  
in, and know how they want their backs broken.

*(JOHN stops the music and looks at VIOLET. She seems not to hear  
JACK when he speaks.)*

JACK:  
So that's it. Well.  
Why didn't you do something about it  
while I was away?  
Surely you weren't  
just thinking of  
my idea of Columbus.  
To make sleep real.

VIOLET:  
I would like to fill a jungle  
with elephants and gorillas and  
boa constrictors. I would like  
to fill the trees and waterfalls  
with the blackness in me, so I  
might be a bird of paradise.

It would be fun to break a bottle  
of wine and have it turn to  
water. Or shoot a clay pigeon  
and have it go honk! honk! and  
lay an egg in the marshes. I'd  
rather not be a wedding guest.

If I were the Sphinx I could lie  
in the sun and stare at myself  
with pure white eyes. When I smiled  
airplanes would go off their courses.  
I'd hold down the dark and  
say sweet nothings to the palms.

*(The lighting becomes again central and as VIOLET moves back  
into the group JOHN leaves the gramophone.)*

JOHN:  
Oh that's what we'd all do  
Violet! But we never have the  
chance! Oh did the poet know  
this would happen when he dragged  
us into this? A friend of mine!

JACK:  
Stop it! It's not the poet's  
fault. I'm the one who went  
away. Then I had Violet's love.  
Always, at first, like a charm.  
But you can't carry memory  
everywhere. It's heavy. It hurts.  
Violet, I left your love in  
barracks and hotels as well  
as battlefields. I'm sorry.

VIOLET:  
Your anger beats out  
even in your most reposed

moments: and my bitterness  
varies every I love you.

We go together like a  
hand-organ and monkey  
or diadem and bull-head.  
And fear each other's death.

Oh Jack! this is when married  
people try to be beautiful!  
it's not enough that you're back  
if nothing is changed!

*(VIOLET and JACK take a step away from each other and freeze,  
staring elsewhere. JOHN takes up his position between VIOLET and  
JACK.)*

JOHN:  
Now I remember how the poet feels about knowing,  
that it is better, and in itself an end.

Violet, you'll keep on grubbing in the laundry  
hoping for something lovely and disturbing

like a crystal hand emerging with a sparkler.  
And Jack, you'll make her weep because you

both are too familiar, and she's already used to  
dancing in the dark while you're asleep

or not around; and your heroes really are all dead.  
We all know that this goes on and on and on.

But Violet, remember how moved we've been,  
and forget that the kitchen's full of knives.

(CURTAIN)

AN EPILOGUE: to the Players of *Try! Try!*

I John Ashbery

If I get sick you'll fly  
to me, John, and not eat dinner  
on the plane for sheer worry.

If it's night the red lights  
will affright you of my blood letting,  
and your verse will flood

with memories of all those  
choral compositions on prison themes  
we both have so enjoyed.

Indeed, my health will fail  
in apprehension for your nerves, then  
rally to greet you strongly.

The words I write for your voice  
will always, I hope, resound as your own  
lilting and agate love of ears.

2 Jack Rogers

Not lissome and not  
gruntingly wholesome, your

humor's a Rasputin of emphasis,  
Jack, a charade in front of

Mother Superior, the sub-  
stantial unwillingness to

charm that frightens our  
giggles into eager screeches!

Your grin across a room  
makes me draw a sabre to

charge my nearest and  
dearest friend for the fun

of it! And your voice in  
my typewriter attempts to

tease the wit out of serious  
situations, so we won't be

wrong goosing psychiatrists  
for the sake of our guts.

3 Violet Lang

Image of all felinities  
and Grand Lady of the  
turnpikes, in decadent verse  
you'd be a giantess but I,  
in good health, exclaim you  
mine! and speak familiarly.

Dancer always, to me, and  
tea room's despaired-of *voyou*,  
you are my Bunny and other  
people's Violet, a saint of  
circumstance and the dangerous  
Birthday Party. I quote you  
back to yourself in all women  
and love you as if *Symposium*  
had not been writ in jest.

Kiss me. We'll never again fight  
in a cafeteria of friends. I want  
your voice in my ear so the sun  
will be hotter, and as Bermudas  
make us dizzy we'll clamber over  
mountains as red and yellow as  
clowns, shouting to John and Jack:  
"hurry up! Poo, poo! Tra la!"

## TRY! TRY!

*To Anne Meacham*

[Note: This is the second play of this title and with these characters. The present play is not a second version, but an almost completely new play written for the New York cast and for the decor of Larry Rivers.]

Presented by the Artists' Theatre, New York City, February 1953. Directed by Herbert Machiz, with a setting designed by Larry Rivers, music by John LaTouche, lighting by Mildred Jackson, and the following cast:

JOHN	Jack Cannon
VIOLET	Anne Meacham
JACK	Louis Edmonds

Place: *A studio.*

Scene: *A room. A war has ended. The two are sitting on an old wicker sofa, listening to a phonograph record.*

JOHN:  
I like songs about hat-check girls,  
elevators, bunions, syphilis, all the  
old sentimental things. It's not enough  
to be thoughtful, is it?

VIOLET:  
Aren't you acting terribly prewar?

JOHN:  
My dear, I want you to work hard at reinstating that wifely melancholy that made you such a distinctive asset to anyone "marching off" as they say. You used to mourn for him like a model house. Now the neighbors are all saying you've gone down the drain. All I can say is what a drain! I prefer to think you were always a little too nice. "If anyone cries in the world. . . .

VIOLET:  
. . . it has to be me." Please stop trying to cheer me up. Jesus. You're as relaxing as a pin. I was a sweet, eager, pretty, and energetic girl. As he remembers me, so shall he find me. What ever made me take you on as an added complication! You fill the house. Or maybe it's me. I do burn a little cork every time the smell of apple blossoms drifts in the window. I haven't been burning any lately though.

JOHN:  
I could move out. I could just move out.

VIOLET:  
Oh no. I want you here for evidence that I've gone bad. I think you'll do the trick. Do you hear a radio in the distance?

JOHN:  
Don't change the subject. Why don't you wash a few clothes before he gets back? I think cerise would be a nice color for eventide.

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Shall we mop the skylight?

VIOLET:  
What's the sense? With all these miserable distances and the praying mantises the only people who ever look in. It isn't as if we had to fear snoops or try to please them. It's our own little place, for the time being.

JOHN:  
I'm afraid Jack will see us before we see him. And then out I'd go like a cloud, lonely for my temporarily own disgusted little flower and playmate, the best on the beach .

VIOLET:  
You like to think you're involved with me emotionally but what you're involved with really is my lack of suitable clothes to make an impression on the narrow world of your narrow forehead. Some girls would say you're stupid, but I'm not that patriotic. No, you really are very sweet. Or at least you have been. On occasion.

JOHN:  
That was V day and the flags were out.

VIOLET:  
I know you love me. (*They kiss.*) I didn't know you loved me so much. What a magnificent gesture. I feel like a tube of hot cement. What a lover, it's just like the old days when the crows were in the corn field and the rain was in the sky. You do make me happy.

JOHN:  
But it upsets me that you're never happy

for long. You know, Vi, I had big plans for us. I thought we'd start a pet shop, a little world of our own full of fondling and loyalty and all the tiny things we've missed, like ripples on a brook.

VIOLET:

You haven't talked this way since that afternoon in Arlington Cemetery when the football game was being broadcast over the car radio. Come off it, you're no gangster of the sheets. When I was little I promised myself not to fall in love with anyone but the best polo pony in the western world. Polo is a very interesting sport, second only to duck fighting in polls of national taste. What kind of lipstick did I have on?

JOHN:

Raspberry. Right?

VIOLET:

I knew you didn't love me.

JOHN:

You never knew. You don't know now. You'll never be able to guess I don't and I'll never give you any security on that score. What do you want from life anyway? If you weren't so elegant in all the intimate areas where a man needs a lilting simplicity we might have flamed like a rubber tire.

VIOLET:

You're cute as a pumpkin. I wonder what Jack will look like. Do you think he'll still love me? I hope so. If not, I may have been premature in certain plans I've laid for your so sustaining mouth.

JOHN:

You know it isn't very warm in here.

VIOLET:

I'd like to think about that remark but inattention has become such a habit—it's interesting and what you say is not. Isn't that blue I see, poking its nose over the picture frame falling down the side of the moonlit mountain to the east of the capitol? A screaming as of brakes. I hope it's a train, I mean a boat, coming in. Maybe Jack will swim down its gangplank into my absent arms like he used to at parties. He was the living proof that all women are members of the same sex.

JOHN:

So is everybody else.

VIOLET:

Well, I guess some men are just more alive than others.

JOHN:

I didn't know you were so fond of this male war bride. You never muttered his name by mistake in my palpitating arms at certain moments when the news of the world was noisily grunting through its telescope.

VIOLET:

Not by mistake, I didn't. Like everyone conceited, you are not without cause. You are by popular consent the best lay within these four walls, and that acclaim shall never be denied you by tender me.

JOHN:

My own!

VIOLET:  
Dearest of all forgotten ones! *(They kiss.)*

JOHN:  
Just think! Twice in one day. Our infatuation is rearriving. What trouble it will arrange to stir up in the next ten minutes between two oh-so-troubled-and-disenchanted hearts!

VIOLET:  
Yes. Yes. The trouble I long for. The trouble that keeps me, and shall continue to keep me, from realizing what trouble is. Dear John.  
*(They embrace.)*

JOHN:  
Hey. What's this nasty piece of wood stuck in your boobs?

VIOLET:  
Uh oh.

JOHN:  
Well?

VIOLET:  
It's a letter, a letter from Jack.

JOHN:  
Well what are you carrying it around for? Haven't you read it yet?

VIOLET:  
Uh! *(She slaps him.)*

JOHN:  
How come you never showed me this?

VIOLET:  
You were never married to him.

JOHN:  
When I think of the two of us, frail in our affections, stranded on this planet of incessant communication like gophers in their sweet-nosed paralysis, or more similar to lovers who are very, very sunburned! I marvel that we ever found it possible or desirable to raise our lazy heads from opposite ends of a gray fountain's intersection with the regimented air in order to just say "Are you having fun?" to the dear person for whom we are preparing, with passionately efficient distraction, the deepest hurt, the one we did the sweetly sweaty and individual push-ups and cold creamings for, through the years. Doesn't it make you marvel at human ambition? Is that a tear?

VIOLET:  
Not on your life, you silly ass.  
You can read the letter, don't carry on. No, maybe you better not. It is my favorite letter.

JOHN:  
Because, like all sentimental women past their real gift-to-the-world days, you're in love with your husband.  
*(She dives for him. He grabs and pinions her.)*

JOHN:  
You want to toss me for who'll beat up whom?

VIOLET:  
Oh read the damned thing!  
*(She breaks away from him and goes to the sculpture. During the letter-reading she drapes herself on it as if it represented the absent Jack to her.)*

JOHN:  
I don't know if I'm well dressed enough. Where did I put that rhinestone lavallière I stole from the fairy at the ballet opening? Sit down, you silly

slut. You're not grappling with a stranger. One bite out of you and Jack won't know you from an ancient Kabuki.

VIOLET:

My hero! You're right out of a Noh play, aren't you? Prince Jasmine Jock, himself.

JOHN:

Oh boy, this is great. (*Reads:*)

*Don't ever expect me to forget that moment of brilliance when your blue eyes lit the train station like a camera shutter. Your smile was like pink crinoline going though a ringer. Seventeen trains seemed to arrive and to bruisingly depart before I caught my breath sufficiently to ask you for a match. And then your perfume hit me like Niagara Falls.*

Asked you for a match? What a relationship! Did he darn your aprons, too? Get this. (*Reads:*)

*The pressure of being away from you is sometimes more than even the scenery can bear, and it is alarmingly brazen in piling snow over leaves and dark trunks lying across roads where the push of centuries is like a cymbal crashing in the roots of your hair. But I keep on dreaming of you whether awake or asleep as they say in songs, an azure dream. When I wake up, and I wake up every time I think of you, my prick presses against my belly like a log of foreboding, and I'm afraid that I'll die before I feel that thing that you are that nobody else is to my body, like a trembling insight into myself and the world I can't have. A train just went by covered with icy fir trees. The sky is white. I cry at night sometimes with my prick tangled in the sheets—wishing it would go away and find you and leave me alone in my, in this lousy southern country where it's colder in the winter than it ever is in the cold*

*countries. But all I do is bitch and what I mean is I love you.*

He has a funny style, doesn't he? It seems like a pose but it must be that he isn't used to writing. He wasn't a journalist or anything, was he? They're sometimes very awkward. I see now; you were hiding it from embarrassment!

VIOLET:

I know it's enough for you that you amuse yourself, so I won't complain of my own feelings. I do think I despise you, but not as much as you would wish, or I would wish. It's impossible that I could have lived in precisely this airy derangement for this time if any irony of yours could touch me deeply. It's not that I love Jack! I hate my life.

JOHN:

Princess Lonelyhearts.

VIOLET:

Well let's not stop camping. We haven't seen the last of each other, not us, not Little-Dimity-Head-Felt and Bouncing-Broad-Britches. There's a tear left in this magnificent vista yet. Just don't rust the pipes, darling, and don't bump yourself tripping over the arbutus. It's that green stuff with the velvet smile that whines.

JOHN:

Dear god, I think that iron gate I put up as a weather vane is creaking. An angel must be arriving. Who do you suppose it could be?

VIOLET:

Well, one thing we have in common: we're both  
(*primping*)  
beautiful people.

JOHN:  
Yes, like a couple of cesspools.

VIOLET:  
One season you're tan, you're happy, you're lying  
beside an ocean, the hedges are shrinking with an  
opium specific,

JOHN:  
the next you're losing weight, you're cold, you're  
getting bald, the floors are sealed against the  
grovelling handclasp you extend into the bedrooms,  
underneath the mezzanine.

VIOLET:  
And when lust tries to make itself tangible but ends  
up as the plot of your favorite silent movie over rye  
and water under a slippery overhead mist, you want  
that stranger you always awaited to hurry up, the  
one you told everybody was an old friend who'd be  
along in a minute.

JOHN:  
A merchandise man from Chicago?

VIOLET:  
No,  
maybe an opera star who's retired for love.

*(They retire offstage amorously . JACK enters and stands silently  
looking around. VIOLET and JOHN re-enter with a certain post-  
coitus detachment from each other. After a pause:)*

JOHN:  
Are you going to introduce me to the gentleman?

VIOLET:  
Oh Jack! My Jackson!  
why did you leave me?

Since you left I've had  
to sell the flute and the  
bathtub. And my voice  
just froze. I'll never again  
sing the popular songs  
you composed while you were  
on. Don't look at my fingernails.

JACK:  
I've come along way for your sake,  
my back all decorated like this  
and my feet covered with mold. Do  
you know why they had to put fire  
under my lids?

JOHN:  
He is like his letters!

VIOLET:  
Shut up.

JACK:  
When we first went  
riding, how like dashing Cossacks!  
It was easy then to dress in scarlet.  
I sat my mount prettily and hacked  
babies and old women with a song  
on my breast—I even let my eyebrows  
grow! and with the gold braid and all  
I frightened myself. There were sweet  
times and we weren't too drunk to  
appreciate them. Lovely ladies loved  
us, like useful flowers. And as I say  
my color was good. I had a beautiful horse.  
Why, I thought of myself as  
Eric's son, Lief, going towards  
the moon with a world behind me  
and a lot of blood to get off my  
chest. I wanted to bellow the green

and black waves flat and then  
cleave my way like an iceberg! I was  
good and I knew it. I hadn't laid  
them all low for nothing: women  
and villages, coasts of islands  
twice as big as Iceland. And didn't  
they all squat when I frowned, even  
my bad old father? But something  
went wrong. One minute I was lord of  
all I surveyed, and the next I knew  
that I'd be beaten—that I'd better  
go back to my easy throne, and leave  
this virgin land I'd first laid  
heavy hands upon. That was a  
retreat! how I cried to shove off  
from that rich tough land, my  
kind of country! and go home.  
What was it that beat me? The land,  
the air, the sun, all bigger than the  
gods intended me to own? I yearned after it,  
and it grew like a spiral as I thought  
through the years of my Vinland the Good.

(VIOLET *claps her hand over JOHN's mouth.*)

Or if I was the  
Admiral, bossing a bothersome crew  
and pretending a good deal of confidence,  
when suddenly there was a hint of glory!  
I didn't believe it, just because the  
seaweed looked like fresh grass; I knew  
I might be feverish and I didn't want to  
be taken in, but there was something in the  
air—a sweetness like finding a ruby when  
you were looking for a baseball—and at  
the same time I was scared at not knowing,  
it was mine and I hadn't planned for it,  
I wasn't strong enough, and anyone could  
knock me down, all those others who wanted  
everything as much as I did.

JOHN:  
Do I wake or sleep?

VIOLET:  
I don't know.  
I'm beginning to think I'm the one who's  
been away all along. And still am.

JACK:  
So I spent most of my time  
wondering when bullets, mortars, and  
bombs were going to find out where  
my courage ended and this cowardice—  
oh intuition, I'm not on trial am I?—  
began. Finally a sniper in a tree  
on the edge of the Pacific's  
exciting waters—an oriental with  
lots of time for meditation—  
saw me clearly. At the right moment.  
It was time, you see, not  
topographical like Achilles' heel.  
I was thinking of myself as heir  
to the Mississippi. My thoughts moved  
to De Soto—whose wouldn't? And  
that was when I was spotted, naked  
as the beach, caught within a few feet  
of safety. Have you ever thought  
about men like him—who could  
have been emperors? I fell like a  
sail, relaxed, with no surprise.  
And here I am.

VIOLET:  
By default, you mean.

JOHN:  
Pardon me, I've got to take a terrific shit.

VIOLET:

You may as well put your pants on  
before you come back.

(JOHN goes rear and dresses.)

JACK:

Oh Violet!

VIOLET:

Now don't say anything you don't mean.  
Just go on with the news bulletin. We're all  
terribly interested in the outside world here.

JACK:

Well, if that's the way you feel. Who is  
that anyway?

VIOLET:

A jazz musician named Lenny.

JACK:

He's billed as John under the buzzer in the hall.  
Or is that another one?

VIOLET:

He's the boarder.

JACK:

The boarder?

VIOLET:

A boarder. You're looking handsome.

JACK:

Bunny!

(They kiss fondly).

What's he doing? Who is he?

(She pulls away, withdrawing from him.)

VIOLET:

Children wade on the receding shingle

(staring off)

gaunt in their practiced grace. Mature,  
they ape their elders and cavort like  
pogo sticks in the advancing foam.

Where well-mannered aeroplanes and autos  
serenely sail, on the yellow sand, children  
ignore their own innocence. They've taken it all  
in, and know how they want their backs broken.  
(Then she faces him bitterly.)

JACK:

I know all about the attractive distances and  
the distraction that's more elegant than a knife.

VIOLET:

Never mind the rabbits and tears. You're  
just as ruthless as anyone else.

JACK:

I thought  
I'd want to play cards all night when I got home.  
Listen, I know I'm stupid, I think for weeks  
about things other people read in the newspaper.

VIOLET:

You may be dumb, but it makes you clever  
because you know it.

JACK:

But I've been away.

VIOLET:

All those letters, so beautiful . . .

JACK:

I've been away,  
that's all, I've just been away.

VIOLET:  
. . . designed to upset  
me sufficiently that I wouldn't be able to stop  
whining about your absence until I heard the hoot  
of the steamer bringing you back.

JACK:  
It's still my life . . . .

VIOLET:  
Fortunately I've always had a very strong sense  
of responsibility for the happiness of others.

JACK:  
You're still in it.

VIOLET:  
I'm a veritable Florence  
Nightingale of the heart, or as one of your old friends  
once remarked, "She has a bit of the good-hearted ma-  
dam  
in her." You see, you haven't asked me the right  
questions.

JACK:  
Am I looking handsome?

VIOLET:  
Why don't you ask  
me if my slip fits?

JACK:  
Has he been staying here?

VIOLET:  
Or if the steam-fitters union still meets for  
its annual picnic in Lewisohn Stadium?  
(JOHN enters clothed.)

JOHN:  
Well, has my little Cio-Cio San told  
the nasty Naval officer to scam?

JACK:  
I'd like to have a word with you.

JOHN:  
Let's have lunch together after you've found  
yourself a job. I'm writing a novel your firm  
may find itself interested in.  
(VIOLET turns to JOHN).

VIOLET:  
I wish you'd  
go away and stay away. All you've done is kept me  
looking out windows, wondering what things were  
really like. Get out!  
(But she throws herself into JOHN's arms and cries.)

JOHN:  
There, there.  
(He looks over her head at JACK.)  
What have you done to my poor baby to confuse her?  
Why didn't you send us a telegram to expect you?  
It was quite a shock to see you. I never saw you before,  
so you can imagine how it's tested my equanimity.

JACK:  
Shock! I come home to find you both in your  
underwear in this place that looks like the  
landscape outside a bottle factory, and you ask  
me why I'm not more considerate of the woman who's  
been eating my brain for years in the salt mines  
of the heart, its panic? That's where all the wars  
rage, you know. That's where all the despatches  
come from. It's never a matter of killing, it's  
a matter of suffering, it starts blowing up.

I want her, that's all, I want her breasts  
leaning into my armpit against shop windows on  
Sundays, I want the empty smell of her flesh  
in the morning when she's gotten up to go to  
the bathroom, I want her whole open valley  
breathing noisily when we're drunk in the wet  
mist of dawn as the pennants begin to stripe  
themselves and the wind whines towards the  
suburbs. You can't have her.

JOHN:  
You're wrong.  
She wants me, because she's interested enough  
to hurt me. Life went to the trouble of putting  
me here in these old but well-worn clothes  
that've seen better days and better hers  
and never even wanted to go away and get fixed up.  
You've got a claim on it, but I've got it.  
These things don't happen temporarily.

VIOLET:  
I love you.  
(Against his neck.)

JACK:  
What did I do wrong? What's happened to me? It's  
like coming onto the stage, sitting down at the piano,  
and finding no orchestra there! Why feel guilty, if  
what I've done doesn't mean anything, if what I've said  
doesn't move you? I held you in my heart, like a charm—

JOHN:  
I suppose I'm the snake-in-the-grass but  
I can't say I'm sorry. Someone has to smile  
at her as she comes back from the bathroom.  
Do you think everything can stay the same,  
like a photograph? What for?  
(JACK starts to exit slowly.)

VIOLET:

I would like to fill a jungle  
with elephants and gorillas and  
boa constrictors. I would like  
to fill the trees and waterfalls  
with the blackness in me, so I  
might be a bird of paradise.

It would be fun to break a bottle  
of wine and have it turn to water.  
Or shoot a clay pigeon and have it  
go honk! honk! and lay an egg in  
the marshes. I'd rather not be  
a wedding guest.

If I were the sphinx I could lie  
in the sun and stare at myself  
with pure white eyes. When I smiled  
airplanes would go off their courses.  
I'd hold down the dark and say  
sweet nothings to the palms.  
(He takes her in his arms.)

JOHN:  
Honey, I designed that costume for you.  
You always look that way to me.  
That's why I'm so mean.

(CURTAIN)