

THE SPIRIT OF GUAN YU

THESIS

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By

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Sources of Inspiration:

I think the first source for this play, whether I was actually conscious of it or not, was the opening scene to Peter Shaffer's *Equus*. The overall feel of the first thirty seconds of that show is thrilling and mysterious. The show opens with the rumbling of hoof-beats and, with no lines, seems to invoke an experience not unlike Artaud's theatre of cruelty. I wanted to begin a mystery play just like that. Only in the place of horse hooves, I wanted a man pounding from underneath the floor and pleading for freedom.

Specifically, I wanted Amontillado. Edgar Allen Poe's short stories provide the exact feel I wanted for this play, or at least my original conception of it. In *The Cask of Amontillado* the narrator has been wronged by this arrogant clown, Amontillado, and exacts his revenge. He gets the man drunk, leads him down into catacombs, and on that great night of no consequences, walls him in. Amontillado doesn't sober up until it is too late and the final loam is being set. Though this story is very dour in nature, the execution of it is darkly comic. This was the mood I wanted for the play, I think. Whether or not it held true from conception to completion, I don't really know.

Originally, I wanted Poe in my play. The character, eventually embodied by Guan Yu, was to be impish in nature (given that Poe was often called the 'imp of the perverse'), **very** flexible, and often seeming more like an owl than a person. This character, (I planned to name him Edgar), would find the most unlikely positions in which to 'roost,' would never speak, and could only be seen by the protagonist.

The problem I had with Shaffer's *Equus* was that it was too tightly resolved by its conclusion. In the first act, we learn that the estranged boy has discovered a god none before him had worshiped. Dr. Dysard is envious of him because, despite his apparent

lack of sanity, he has something to believe in that is wondrous and unexplained. Up to this point, Dysard was a man who believed everything can be explained by psychology and yet no answers could resolve this boy's dilemma. Dysard as well as the audience is enthralled by the possibilities. However, the second act cleanly explains everything through psychology, and Dysard, who we have discovered to be quite interesting when he faces the unknown, is sort of expected to simply regress back to his previous unchallenged position for which he was deeply depressed.

I didn't want to wrap everything up so neatly in my play. Again I called upon those Romantic authors I enjoy. I took a close look at Poe again, specifically *The Masque of the Red Death* and *The Telltale Heart*, and then Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown*. All three of these stories portrayed situations that, to me, were fairly similar to the first act of *Equus*. Mysterious circumstances were brought to the forefront and then left there for readers to ponder. However, in contrast to the Poe and Hawthorne stories, Shaffer only allows the audience to ponder his circumstances through the intermission. Then he puts all the pieces of the puzzle together for them. The audience is left with the experience of the show and a 'settled' circumstance. They can remember how great the show was to see, but do the spectators go back and think about what it might mean for them?

I believe that every dramatic situation has the capacity to make the audience question or wonder. That is, make them think about the show after it is done. After completing the movie *Seven*, director David Fincher said something to this affect: I'm not interested in making movies that entertain, I'm interested in making movies that scar. Take a clean slate, a *tabula rasa*, and inflict upon it circumstances that can be learned

from if the spectator chooses to do so. It is not a theatre of morals. Indeed, for every moral standard in culture A, somewhere between cultures B-Z, each and every standard will be contradicted by its exact opposite. Therefore, a theatre of morals cannot be universally accepted.

However, theatre can still be didactic by exploring life or something like it. Every play should put forth some sort of dramatic conflict. People see it to be entertained, but more than that, they should be made to think.

In and of themselves the aforementioned stories may or may not have some sort of message to imply. The Red Death seemed like some sort of plague in a fog, completely unexplained. The telltale heart, though dead, beat louder and louder, bidding its tale be told. Young Goodman Brown left the sanctuary of his home in town and found the demons of the forest. Romantics embraced the unknown. They worshiped nature, graveyards, and the occult, but for what reason? They wanted to ponder the questions behind the shadows.

Many of these questions posited by Romantic literature are still pertinent today and I believe audiences desire such thought provoking work. Richard Matheson's book and consequential movie, *Stir of Echoes*, inspired me to a great extent with this play. In it a girl is raped and essentially walled into a rental house where her spirit eventually haunts the protagonist until he unravels her mystery. This plot is, in essence, exactly the same as the *Tell Tale Heart*. The central theme seems to suggest that there is some consequence for wrong doers that cannot be explained. This was the same theme I wanted to spill through in my play. Furthermore, I wanted people to think about and perhaps learn from it.

Ultimately, from this train of thought, I developed my snapshot conceptual summary. I wanted two roommates in a house where a mysterious wraith would haunt them, and consequently for whose presence they were responsible. A girl would step into their lives and help to uncover all that lay in the shadows.

Unfortunately, it all seemed pretty thin at the time. No matter how I imagined the outcome, it always seemed a little too dark and a little too short for a full-length play. It was turning into a drawn out Edgar Allen Poe story and, as one might note if one chose to pick up an anthology of Poe's work, none of his short stories exceeded twenty pages. With this conclusion in mind, I abandoned the idea.

Kung fu and the *Three Kingdoms*

I've always had an interest in the Oriental world. Maybe it was all the Godzilla movies I saw as a child, I don't know. The first movie that really peeked my interest in eastern culture was John Carpenter's *Big Trouble in Little China*. After that, I began what would become a lifelong passion: kung fu.

Of course, I don't mean to inundate anyone by explaining all I've done with the martial arts, but it does have quite a bit to do with how I wrote this play. Yes, I've practiced martial arts since I was twelve. I've watched martial arts movies since I was fifteen, and I've played martial arts video games since about the same time. It wasn't long ago when I started reading kung fu novels. It was then that I came across Guan Yu in Luo Guanzhong's *Three Kingdoms*.

The *Three Kingdoms* book is fifteen hundred pages long and it reads rather like a soap opera. There are easily more than a thousand characters in the book. I've always likened the experience of reading the book to checking the box scores on the sports pages of newspapers. I would read perhaps a chapter or two per night to be updated on what my favorite characters might have done.

Written during the Ming Dynasty somewhere around 1500, the book covers an era more than a thousand years removed. Although the book was really popular at the time, it's function was more political. It served to slander the previous dynasty (the Qing Dynasty, I believe) and it served to show how internal unrest could lead to traumatic, unpeaceful times. Luo Guanzhong wrote the novel from the poetic Sanguo Zhi text (the SGZ for short), that was written or perhaps performed in the fourth century much like Homer's *Iliad* or Virgil's *Aeneid*. Unfortunately, this text has never been translated to

English, but some have created character bios based on it like the one at the end of this section.

In many of my more ambitious day dreams as a writer, I've wanted to write a twenty-first century interpretation of this opus. But after reasoning that the first twelve page chapter could easily be a full length novel in and of itself, I quickly sobered up. However, what if I could write a book about some of the characters of this story. This idea formulated into a novel I've been working on for a year now (interestingly enough Guan Yu isn't slated for an appearance).

While working on this novel, I came across some notes on my desk about a play I had dropped several months before. (They were notes taken on the sources of the previous section.) The story that had all but died in my head before then, was now resurrected and so was Guan Yu.

The following section is a character bio based on the SGZ, taken from a website called kongming.net. The actors usually visited this site for their information on character.

Guan Yu, going by the characters Yunchang, who's originally called Changsheng, was a Xie native from Hedong, and was once a fugitive on the run in the Zhuo commandery. Liu Bei was recruiting people in the village and Guan Yu and Zhang Fei then assisted him to fight against invasions. Liu Bei became the Chancellor of Pingyuan and Guan Yu and Zhang Fei majors to help govern the district. Liu Bei and the two of them shared the same bed and they were like brothers to one another. Guan Yu's devotion to Liu Bei could be seen through many actions like when many were sitting, he would be standing close to Liu Bei to assist him, etc. and he would faithfully follow Liu Bei through all the dangers and not escaping the difficulties. When Liu Bei killed Che Zhou, the governor of Xuzhou, he commanded Guan Yu to take care of the governing matters of Xiapi City, whilst he himself resided in Xiaopei.

In the fifth year of JianAn (A.D. 200), Cao Cao attacked eastwards and Liu Bei sought refuge at Yuan Shao's governance. Cao Cao captured Guan Yu and kept him in his ranks and appointed him as Pian Jiangjun (Lieutenant General) and treated him with great honour. Yuan Shao sent his general Yan Liang to attack the governor of the eastern commandery Liu Yan at Baima, and Cao Cao retaliated by sending Zhang Liao as vanguard. Guan Yu upon seeing Yan Liang's commander's canopy, charged his horse forward and killed Yan Liang in the mass of soldiers and returned with the decapitated head of Yan Liang; whilst the rest of the Yuan generals who could not withstand the battle ceased to surround the Baima area. Cao Cao promptly awarded Guan Yu with the rank of Hanshou Tinghou (Marquis of Hanshou). At the beginning, Cao Cao was pleased with Guan Yu but later began to realize the latter's reluctance to stay on, thus ordered Zhang Liao, "Go and speak with him and probe about his feelings." Thus, when Zhang Liao spoke with Guan Yu, the latter sighed and said, "I am in full knowledge of the honour and privilege Cao Cao has showered me, however, General Liu (Liu Bei) had treated me well also, hence I swore to die with him and I will never betray him. I will not be staying here forever, but I will contribute a (sizable) exploit to repay Cao Cao's favour first before I take my leave". Zhang Liao related his words to Cao Cao, and the latter was impressed by his honourable attitude. Seeing Guan Yu had killed Yan Liang, Cao Cao knew that he would surely take his leave soon, and hence further showered him with rewards [to keep him on]. Guan Yu did not accept any of the gifts and sealed all of them (a sign of rejection); he also proceeded with writing a letter to tender his resignation before leaving for Yuan Shao's land where Liu Bei was situated. Some of Cao Cao's subordinates wanted to chase after him but Cao Cao replied, "each for his own master; hence do not give chase".

Soon after, Liu Bei was with Liu Biao. When Liu Biao passed away, Cao Cao pacified Jingzhou, whereas Liu Bei was forced to escape southwards via crossing a river. Liu Bei specially ordered Guan Yu to take several hundreds of ships to meet him at Jiangling. Cao Cao gave chase till Changban at Dangyang. Liu Bei thereby crossed over to Hanjin and met Guan Yu's fleet and together they moved to Xiakou. Sun Quan sent troops to assist Liu Bei to defend against Cao Cao, and Cao Cao led his troops to retreat. Liu Bei eventually pacified the various commanderies in the Jiangnan area; he then held a ceremony to honour the martyrs and appointed Guan Yu as the governor of Xiangyang and also the rank of Dangkou Jiangjun (General Who Terrifies Criminals) and stationed him to guard at the north of the river. When Liu Bei pacified Yizhou, he appointed Guan Yu to take care of all the affairs in Jingzhou. Guan Yu got news of Ma Chao's surrender and since they were never acquaintances in the past, he wrote a letter to Zhuge Liang asking, "Who can rival against Ma Chao in terms of ability?" Zhuge Liang had to take into account Guan

Yu's feelings, and replied him, "Ma Chao is well versed in both literal and military affairs, more courageous and powerful than most men, a hero who can rival Qing or Peng and can be a worthy rival of Yide (Zhang Fei) but he is not someone who can rival the Beautiful Bearded One." Guan Yu had a beautiful beard; hence Zhuge Liang addressed him thus. Upon receiving the letter, Guan Yu was overjoyed and showed the letter to the guests present.

Guan Yu was once hit by a stray arrow on his left arm and although the wound had healed, the bone would still hurt badly especially during a rainy day. The doctor told him that, "The arrow tip had poison on it, and the poison had entered the bone. The remedy would be to open the arm and scrape away the poison, lest it becomes too problematic in the future." Guan Yu promptly stretched out his arm and bid the doctor to cure his arm. During the surgery, Guan Yu was eating and drinking with his fellow officers whilst the blood flowed from his arm into a basin below. Throughout the process of treatment, Guan Yu drank wine and conversed and laughed as usual.

During the twenty fourth year of JianAn (A.D. 219), Liu Bei became the Prince of Hanzhong and he appointed Guan Yu as Qian Jiangjun (General of the Front). In the same year, Guan Yu led his army to attack Cao Ren at Fan. Cao Cao sent Yu Jin to assist Cao Ren. It was autumn then and there was heavy downpour leading to the overflowing of River Han. As a result, the seven armies commanded by Yu Jin all drowned. Yu Jin surrendered to Guan Yu, and Guan Yu executed General Pang De. The bandits of Liang, Jia and Lu were called to action by Guan Yu and assisted in the battle, thus Guan Yu's name spread throughout China. Cao Cao was discussing whether to move the capital to Xudu to avoid any encounters with Guan Yu's strong forces. Sima Yi petitioned that Sun Quan would not be willing to allow Guan Yu to gain further victories, hence they could send an emissary to Sun Quan, requesting him to flank Guan Yu's rear and Jiangnan would then be awarded to Sun Quan as spoils of war and also that the forces at Fan would then be dissolved. Cao Cao accepted his proposal. At first, Sun Quan sent an emissary to Guan Yu relating his wish for a marriage to be arranged between his own son and Guan Yu's daughter. Guan Yu insulted the emissary and rejected the marriage proposal. Sun Quan was furious. Besides this, Mi Fang, the governor of Nanjun at Jiangling and General Fu Shi Ren, who was serving at Gong'an, felt that Guan Yu looked down on them. Ever since Guan Yu sent out his troops to war, Mi Fang and Fu Shi Ren were in charge of army supplies, but they did not assist in the battle. Guan Yu's reply was to mete out the respective punishments once he returned. Upon hearing such words, Mi Fang and Fu Shi Ren were fearful. Sun Quan chanced upon their shaken loyalty and enticed them to surrender, of which they did and allowed the Wu army to enter the land. Cao Cao sent Xu Huang to assist Cao Ren;

Guan Yu was unsuccessful in this conquest and called for a retreat, but Sun Quan's troops had already taken over Jiangling and held hostage the wives and children of Guan Yu's army, leading to the dispersion of Guan Yu's troops. Sun Quan sent out his generals to capture Guan Yu and later executed him and his son Guan Ping at Lingju.

Guan Yu was given a posthumous title of Zhuangchou Hou (Marquis of Zhuangchou). His son Guan Xing succeeded him. Guan Xing, characters Anguo, was one who seldom questioned commands, was very well favoured by the Lieutenant Chancellor Zhuge Liang. Guan Xing was appointed as Shizhong (Palace Attendant) and Zhongjianjun (Superintendent of the Central Army) when his health failed. A few years later, he passed away. His son Guan Tong succeeded him and had a post of Huben Zhonglang Jiang (General of the Tiger Swiftness) and he died without a son. (Sonken http://kongming.net/novel/sgz/guan_yu.html)

The Wrongfully Dead's Beast of Burden:

Luo Guanzhong was very true to the SGZ. Indeed, most everything seen in the previous excerpt is included in his novel. However, Luo did make several additions that, for the purposes of my play, helped me very much. Most of this assistance came after Guan's death in the book.

The novel parts with the SGZ after Sun Quan's general Lu Meng captures Guan Yu and ultimately beheads him. While the celebration of triumph is in full swing and the general is congratulated by Sun Quan, Guan manifests himself in spirit form and takes the life of Lu Meng. Not a day after that, Guan's wraith meets the Buddhist monk on Jade Springs Hill to discuss Guan's desire for revenge, how essentially unfair and absurd it is, and that vengeance is for fate's doing. Later, he haunts Lord Cao Cao when his head is delivered to him. Lastly, three times does he manifest himself in spirit form to save his biological sons, Xing and Suo, each when they were about to be overwhelmed by superior forces.

Luo Guanzhong's novel states that Guan Yu was deified in the name of warfare. Indeed, the history books mention more. According to one, he was deified as the god of war, of merchants, or literature, and (here's the kicker) of bean curd sellers. However, I do not know if it was because of history, the *Three Kingdoms* novel, or the original SGZ.

Nevertheless, the seed had been planted. Guan Yu was going to manifest himself in spirit form in my play. It seemed like a really great idea, but honestly I didn't have any idea why he would be there and to what end. When the first draft was completed, the character of Lew had immersed himself so much into the novel that when he saw Karl's ghost, he perceived him as Guan Yu.

It was then I ran into another Romantic author who would really help the play along. The headless horseman from Washington Irving's short story was to combine with Guan Yu and become a character in the play. Guan suddenly had a purpose to right wrongs. Eventually, I wrote a new scene with the character of Pujing. Initially, the scene was an imitation of the third century meeting on Jade Springs Hill, but it soon changed. Pujing became an enlightened spirit who could step from world to world with ease. He decides to visit his old friend Guan, a similar spirit who has the capacity to do all that Pujing can do. However, Guan Yu decided to make a deal with fate. He swore if he were allowed to take his revenge on Lu Meng, then he would take revenge on every wronged soul to the end of time.

This bitter undertaking isn't too much of a stretch from the book. When Guan asks Pujing why shouldn't he take revenge on all those who've wronged him, the monk asked him who would pay his victims their revenge. Had Guan not understood the futility of such a plight, he might have sworn to do their vengeance as well, accepting such a charge of righting wrongs.

Ultimately, Guan does become the wrongfully dead's beast of burden in the play.

Agoraphobia:

The character of Lew, between draft upon draft, bounced back and forth from sanity to insanity. He witnessed one of his best friends commit a horrible murder and then helped to hide the body. I had a lot of trouble deciding how he might have reacted to that.

Initially, Lew was insane. He was psychologically withdrawn, distant from any other character. His one confidant seemed to be a ghost. He lacked any sort of direction. Indeed, he seemed more like the character of Bert than the manifestation of Lew he would ultimately become.

One of the toughest things I dealt with was giving Lew direction. What did he do? Why was he insane? How did his insanity manifest itself in his actions? These were all questions that were answered in seemingly completely different ways, every time a new draft was completed.

When the *Three Kingdoms* book was thrown in and Guan Yu came to play his role in the show, Lew regained some of his sanity. He passed on his social withdrawal and lack of direction to Bert, and became more of a normal person. Still, he needed some sort of psychological ailment.

At first, I imagined he would be extremely claustrophobic. Perhaps, he would imagine or dream that Karl was somehow still alive under the floor of the house, scratching at the walls and hollering out for help. However, there seemed to be very little chance for Lew to show this fear through the phobia of enclosed spaces. I realized more and more I wanted to lock him up. And if he were claustrophobic and hearing voices under the floor, why wouldn't he be insane and incurable?

That was where he became agoraphobic. I didn't really think that it would make sense when I tried it, and perhaps it never really did until we actually staged the play and Karl's body moved from under the floor to under the door. Nevertheless, I reasoned that Lew had seen the horror of which humanity, in this case a great friend, was capable. And for that, subconsciously he bade himself never to leave the house.

At the point where we meet him, Lew has but one interest and that is the *Three Kingdoms* book. He has immersed himself in it, embraced the characters within for their chivalric nobility. He longs for those more honest days.

Shortly, into the play, of course, he finds a new interest in Carol.

Until I began writing I never knew how interested in Carol Lew would get and vice versa, but as time went on, I knew he had to love her.

O, She Doth Teach those Torches:

Very little can be said of Carol given that her character changed very little through the drafting process.

She was meant to be strong willed, yet would succumb to that horrible trait every attractive woman seems to go through at some point in her life. That being, she would try and change a bad man into a good man. However, Blain is unchangeable.

But this seemed to be all the motivation I needed in terms of bringing her back to Lew after their first confrontation. Carol has found a person she honestly believes needs her help and rightly so.

She is very energetic and highly inquisitive. Lew intrigues her immediately, much more than Blain ever did. His problem is mysterious to her and worth exploring. Furthermore, Lew seems to be perhaps the most honest man she has ever met.

At one point, early on in the drafting process, Carol actually took on the role of the protagonist. In the end, she thwarted Blain and bade Guan Yu, (yes, she saw him), to give Lew back his sanity. Ultimately, this had to change because I felt that Carol had little to lose and her capacity for change from the beginning of the play to the end wasn't as great as Lew's. Still, without her it would be safe to assume that Lew would be thoroughly lost and suffering through life.

The Smart Grouch:

Believe it or not, Blain was once a good guy. Before Guan Yu actually took part in the show, I might have meant for Blain to save the day. One very early premise to this show was that Lew might create an imaginary menace to disrupt his life. That menace would eventually take physical form: the owlish, imp known as Edgar perhaps. Blain would stumble onto the scene, (he wasn't supposed to be very bright), and save the day.

But Blain had to go and become a grouch.

I took the name Blain from Stephen King's *Dark Tower Series* after a talking train that malevolently challenges the protagonists to death in a game of riddles. One of the characters spouted often that "Blain is a pain." Indeed.

Blain's biggest leap in the drafting process was gauged by his intelligence. He had the mental capacity of a throw rug in the initial draft. Bert picked on him for working at Pizza Hut. He was a drunk who happened to be blessed with the body of an athlete. Lew and eventually Bert seemed to keep the secret of Karl's murder more out of pity than anything else.

This clearly didn't work, because Blain was not only stupid but cruel as an antagonist. Eventually, I reasoned his roommates would rat him out without much guilt. He was just too much of a putz.

Overtime, he became smarter and I started to believe that he could control both Lew and to a greater extent Bert. He seemed to take on this precise duality. On the one hand, he is the cool, ex-athlete who lives like a playboy. On the other, he is an overbearing, intimidating man with a secret to be maintained at all cost. Perhaps he is more psychologically unstable than any of the roommates. Indeed, at some point in the

drafting process, he seemed almost to have multiple personalities. His own goal of 'keeping it secret' has engulfed him and Lew and Bert have ultimately become the bane of his existence because they know. He has been so successful at keeping his secret and still living the life he has always lived that he has actually become proud of it.

Lew and Bert eventually become obstacles to him. Lew's agoraphobia makes him less of a threat, but Bert still goes out at night, and not just to work. He occasionally gets high on marijuana.

It wasn't until the very last of the drafts that I realized Blain wants to kill again. His character has been very secretive up to the last scene. He's very controlling, but he has gotten that way very gradually. In essence, Lew and Bert are the frogs in the pot of warm water placed over a Bunsen burner. By the time they realize the water is boiling, it'll be too late for them. Blain has tasted the proverbial fruit by killing someone, and it is only a matter of time before he tries to do it again.

Having realized this about Blain, I chose to make him calm, conniving, and maniacal. By this time, he is smart enough to not get caught and smart enough to know what must be done for him to get away with perhaps another murder.

The Comic:

As far as I'm concerned, Bert was the saving grace in terms of writing this play. Whenever I had a problem in figuring out how I was going to express something in the play, whenever I didn't quite know what was going to happen next, I called upon him to tell some jokes.

Initially, one of the reasons this idea for a play never really got out of my head and onto paper was that it was too dark. There was nothing funny about it. I'm of the opinion that every play should have its lighter sides as well as its dark. (Although I stumbled across David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* well after the play was completed and can therefore not use it as a good source, he did sort of affirm this understanding.) My play is not a tragedy, but it is clearly a drama, not a comedy. I had a lot of trouble justifying all the laughs, yet I kept writing them. *Othello* is perhaps my favorite tragedy, yet as I've seen it done right, I know that it has a lot of laughs within the text that make it fun at times.

Anyway, as I alluded to in my conceptual snapshot summary, Bert was not an original character in this story. But as I wrote on, I realized I needed a confidant for Lew. Carol couldn't be there all the time. And as long as my spirit was Guan Yu, I didn't want Lew talking to him. So Bert had to move in.

Originally, he was just someone with whom Lew and Blain could bounce lines. He was at one point more formidable. He protected Lew from Blain, the same way Lew ultimately ended up protecting Bert. This role reversal was pivotal in establishing Lew as a stronger protagonist.

Bert experienced the murder just as Lew had. He didn't really take part in the deed, but he did help to conceal the evidence. In his mind, he is just as responsible as Blain. I soon realized that it was essential for Bert to have a similar problem to those of Lew and Blain. Lew had his agoraphobia, Blain had this enlarging duality, but what would Bert have?

This is where another source invaded the script like some foul-mouthed plague. I had been listening to Bill Hicks all week long when I began writing a rough draft. Sure enough he stormed the play like the soldiers at Normandy.

Bert became somewhat mean. If you've ever watched Bill Hicks, he occasionally takes out some of his aggressions on his audience. Bert started to test very ethical questions like euthanasia, legalizing drugs, homosexuality in the military, and etc. Occasionally, though I wrote him, he really got on my nerves.

I began to tone him down. I cracked my vault of comics. George Carlin, Jeff Foxworthy, Bill Cosby, Bill Engvall, Steven Wright, Robin Williams all had the dust brushed off of them. Finally, I settled on Dennis Miller.

Despite his very cool and flat delivery, I imagined him as somewhat capable of being subdued. He seems like the kind of guy who had been kicked around so many times at the playground, that he took on this extremely cynical view of the world. If this type of characterization was exhibited in Bert, I'd have another method for making Blain appear evil and someone who would seem weaker than Lew, thus strengthening my protagonist.

Bert's comic routine was actually a routine I had written outside of the play. Because of my great interest in stand-up comedy, I've vowed to someday give it a try.

The piece was written about the sex drive of pregnant women. To make it relevant to the play, I decided to write more about birth and babies and then conclude with death. Since the play is, in some sense, about death, it didn't seem to be a great stretch.

Bert's death was hard to write. I hate seeing characters I like die in movies or plays. Yet it happens all the time. Bert had to die in my play. There was no way around it. The fact was I had to show Guan's power in the modern-day world, otherwise the audience would not fear for what might happen to Lew.

The scene in which Bert does his standup routine and dies (Act 2, scene 2) was my favorite scene to have written and to see staged.

Production (Nov. 1st, 2nd):

Production is what it's all about, right? I mean what's the point of writing a play if no one's going to see it.

As simple as this seems, I had forgotten that at some point. I've always been writing for myself, and I'd keep writing even if there was no one to read the things I've written. I use writing to escape and to experience. This world is a little too grounded for me. Occasionally, it's a little too ugly. In the last ten years, I've had a grandfather succumb to cancer, an uncle die of mysterious causes, and a cousin raped and murdered. Consequently, among other things, I've written about finding cures for cancer, detective stories, and darker pieces where I savagely tear sex offenders to pieces.

Really, I am an okay guy. But I've learned that through writing, I can experience anything I've ever wanted to do and many things I'd never do. I've been burned alive, I've watched as the major artery in my right thigh was torn open and I bled to death in a graveyard, and I've woken up in another, beautiful world that it is my duty to save. I've been perhaps the greatest warrior in Chinese history. I've danced with exotic beauties. I've explored realms no one else has ever seen even from a distance.

This is what writing does for me.

Playwriting is different, though, I must admit. It's easily the hardest style of writing I've ever done, because it is no longer for just me. I have an audience with which I must contend. I have to cut my darlings.

Still, this doesn't mean that every character I write isn't just a manifestation of me. One thing that really puzzles me is when someone, most often an actor, comes up to me and asks, 'why did you do this and not this?' Of course I'm open to suggestions about

what they have to say, but if I can't see myself doing whatever it is they're suggesting then there's no reason to change it. If I sound at all egotistical in all this I must apologize. I don't mean to. It's just that I am the only person I'll ever be able to remotely understand. So even if I take Guan Yu or Dennis Miller and shove them into my play, it's still going to be me making their decisions as I would mine.

Let's move on to production, shall we?

Brock Rush was an excellent choice to direct this play for many reasons. When I first met him, he came off as being very enthusiastic about the play. We spoke for two hours over different elements of the show and after I got home that day I was enlivened with a new vigor. I completed another draft that night and the whole second act was revised. Lew regained his sanity for the final scene, Pujing stepped out of history and into Lew's house, and Guan became tormented by the wrongfully dead.

Brock spent a full week in table talks and read throughs. The actors were all required to research their characters and write their own character biographies. Wrinkles were ironed out. Lines were changed, sometimes to my approval and sometimes to my distaste.

In the second week of rehearsals Danny Lutman and Kristi Turner were all ready off book. Jason Reed and Skip Johnson were not far behind.

I began training the actors for the choreography. Ben Shaw, Colin Green, and Peter Guzman accepted my vigorous training program more wholeheartedly than any student I've ever had the privilege to teach. We worked Sunday through Thursday, three hours a day, for that whole first week on conditioning. Then we began the choreography. We used kung fu instructional video tapes from Green Dragon Studios for both Ben's and

Colin's form, modifying both whenever we felt it necessary. Peter had the added challenge of using weapons I've never seen used on this side of the world, (my own frustrating idea), and we completely made up his form.

After three weeks of training, I added in a line for Cao Cao, played by Chris Immonen, and Brock told me he wanted him to do a form as well. (He also told me at one point about two weeks before the show, he wanted a four piece orchestra... This choreography, at least, I thought was doable whereas the orchestra was not. These are the kind of thoughts that make directors seem slightly not one with a logical way of the world.) Chris was three weeks behind the other three guys and I basically had to work him harder than the others. Luckily, Ben, Peter, and Colin had for the most part completed their forms and could practice on their own. Nevertheless, it wasn't easy. Up until one week prior to the show Chris' form looked terrible. We took a four hour day, slowing his form down, making it resemble an internal tai chi form rather than an external fighting form. By the end of the week and performance, Chris looked terrific, and in many cases, though unfortunately no one would have noticed given that it had been slowed down, Chris was outshining the other three.

I've worked as a fight choreographer in three plays and two films. This was the only result of the three play productions of which I was truly proud.

Unfortunately, given that I was working so often with the Chinese actors, the first rehearsal I was able to sit through in its entirety was a full run through one week before the show. I noticed a few things I never intended. One of the Chinese sequences in Act 2, Scene 1 had been completely misinterpreted. Part of it was due to a faulty stage direction on my part and part of it was due to the director not reading the stage direction.

The character of Blain was certainly interpreted different from how I wrote him. Skip Johnson played a very good crazy man, (seemingly straight out of Brad Pitt's performance in the *Twelve Monkeys*, utterly crazy). However, I always felt Blain would be played better if he were a cold, calculating menace (say Anthony Hopkins as Hannibal Lector). Danny Lutman, as Lew, never quite portrayed his agoraphobic fear to its capacity. And Jason Reed seemed only to feel comfortable with Bert's comic routine on the final performance. Indeed, when we cast the play, I had called Danny Lutman in personally, telling him I had the perfect role for him... That role was Bert. We took what we could get, however. Danny Lutman was the strongest actor fit for the role of Lew, hence we cast him there.

Ultimately, there will always be criticisms like those aforementioned with any show. The process with which we put on the two performances and the two performances themselves, were very successful.

This play got more laughs than I think I intended. Brock brought in a nice touch when he had Pujing come in, break the fourth wall, and make a slapstick fool of himself. It certainly wasn't expected, but I think it seemed to work.

The play also seemed to chomp on some emotions. I thought I heard some sniffing in the crowd at Bert's death, but I admit it might only have been allergies.

Personally, having written the blasted show and having, at some point, completely grown tired of it, I wish now that I could see it again. I think that's a good sign. I've had a lot of people tell me good things and some of them seemed heartfelt. But more importantly, to me at least, the players seemed to enjoy being in it. Whatever mistakes

they might have made, they took on the show with a lot of heart and the performances reflected that. They were damn good in my opinion.

Ultimately, I can honestly say I haven't had this much fun with a performance.

The Spirit Of Guan Yu
By Brandon Lackorn

Cast:

Lew
Carol
Bert
Blain

Chinese Soldiers:

Guan Yu
Cao Cao
Xiahou Dun
Lu Meng
Sun Quan
Zhou Cang
Guan Ping
Pujing

Act 1, Scene I

Three men sit at stage center, ZHOU CANG, GUAN YU, and GUAN PING. The year is 219 A.D.

GUAN YU:

Sons, when the battle cries sound, we will fall.

PING:

No father. We must fight on, and make it to Lord Liu Bei. There we will be reinforced and we will crush Sun Quan's army.

GUAN YU:

Ping, blind yourself not by optimism. Cao Cao's troops have us blocked by the northern and western routes, Sun Quan by the eastern and southern. There is little hope.

CANG:

Lord, you once spared Cao Cao's life after the battle at Red Cliffs. Don't you think he would show you the same respect in this our time of need?

GUAN YU:

I owed Lord Cao Cao my own life when I spared him, now he owes me nothing.

PING:

Sun Quan offered you his daughter in marriage. He might show us mercy.

GUAN YU:

(maddened)

He offered his wench to sew an alliance with Emperor Liu Bei. But Sun Quan would only ally himself with Liu Bei long enough to defeat Cao Cao. After that, he would turn on Liu Bei. If I were married to Quan's daughter, I would be forced to fight against the man I swore to die for, Liu Bei. This I could not do. (growing more enraged) Sun Quan has the audacity to call himself emperor. There cannot be two emperors in this land. I would rather die now.

Suddenly, the calls of battle begin. The two men around GUAN YU draw their swords and GUAN takes up the weapon he was known to carry, the kwan dao, a long pole arm with a single-edged broadsword at its end.

CANG:

Sun Quan attacks!

PING:

Father! Your orders!

GUAN YU:

Zhou Cang, fight your way back to the town of Mai and hole up there. Wait for reinforcements from Emperor Liu. Guan Ping, lead our forces west to the Riverlands. (they sink upstage and begin fighting) I love you, my sons.

GUAN begins to battle. Eventually, GUAN will be surrounded and taken. He will act as though being tied up and moved to center-stage, where he will again sit cross-legged. Enter Sun QUAN, the self proclaimed emperor of Wu, and Lu MENG, the general/warrior responsible for taking GUAN.

SUN QUAN:

Of all the generals that have fought for my father and me, Lu Meng, you are greatest. (gesturing to GUAN) Thank you for this. Thank you. (to GUAN) The infamous Lord Guan now sits in front of me like a broken sword. I've never wanted to fight you. I even offered you my daughter's hand to bind you dearly to our cause--

GUAN YU:

Your cause to defeat my lord, the true emperor, Liu Bei.

QUAN:

Perhaps in time, but Cao Cao must be taken first, of course. His land's are far more vast, his armies great, and he defends the falling Han empire.

GUAN YU:

My lord defends the Han empire. Cao Cao has simply imprisoned the child emperor, using him like some pawn to gain him wealth and power. He doesn't defend the Han. My lord Liu Bei is the boy's imperial kinsman and his thoughts are bent on rescuing him.

QUAN:

And yet he's crowned himself emperor?

GUAN YU:

So have you!

QUAN:

Indeed, so have I. Wu has always been under the Han's reign, but by title only. We've been at peace for hundreds of years governing ourselves. There's been no need for the Han to interfere with us. Now the Han reign is over and while Cao Cao and Liu Bei fight for possession of the imperial title, we will remain at peace under my reign.

GUAN YU:

Only long enough for the forces of Liu Bei and Cao Cao to tire, and then you'll make your move to envelop them all.

QUAN:

Perhaps.

GUAN scoffs, looks ahead over the audience, and ignores them.

QUAN:

General Lu Meng, Lord Guan is known as one of the fiercest warriors of our time. What would it take for us to coax him to our side?

MENG:

Lord Cao Cao has already tried that. He threw banquets, extravagant celebrations for him every third and fifth day. Gave him gold, offered him women, and bestowed upon him the champion steed--Red Hair--for his loyalty. But nothing could buy his loyalty from Liu Bei.

QUAN:

Yes, but what could we do?

MENG:

Nothing. Loyalty is like beauty. It cannot be tainted nor turned. It's too hardheaded.

QUAN:

So what shall be done to him?

MENG:

He should be killed immediately, much as I might regret such a loss.

QUAN:

(back to Lord Guan)

And what do you say of that, Lord Guan?

GUAN:

I've said my peace. My duty is to my lord and my friend Liu Bei. I'll die here with one regret and that is that I might not continue to serve him in death.

QUAN:

(angrily)

Well, if the prospect of death won't turn you, then death should agree with you. Take him away!

GUAN is taken off stage and beheaded. The time shifts to the present day and the set becomes a basic living room area. Somewhere on the set is a platform that will be broken open later, (because it is directly involved with LEW's condition, a good suggestion would be to place the platform underneath the door to the outside). The character of LEW shifts in his

sleep on the couch. The spectators hear a rumbling that seems to come from underneath the floor. He wakes up suddenly as if from a terrible nightmare and the rumbling stops. The audience begins to hear evocative foreplay between a man and woman off stage. Another character, BERT, comes on.

BERT:

What? Has he opened up the Ron Jeremy vault again? (he mimics the stereotypical disco associated with porn movies) Sure sounds real.

LEW:

(after listening a moment)

I think it is.

BERT:

Dammit! That jerk goes balls deep in someone new every week, and I haven't been laid in three years. It's not right! (to Lew) What are you doing up?

LEW:

I just dreamed I was fighting alongside Guan Yu.

BERT:

Michele Kwan Who?

LEW:

He's a character from that book I've been reading. His name was Guan Yu.

BERT:

Woah, hey man, literacy is important, but if you're dreaming of certain characters you've read about, you might be taking it too far. What happened?

LEW:

Sun Quan's forces overran us. I was Zhou Cang. He fought alongside Guan Yu in battle.

BERT:

What happened to him? That guy you were, I mean.

LEW:

After Lord Guan was beheaded, he slit his own throat knowing he too would be killed.

BERT:

(shaking his head)

Stop reading that shit, will you? Dreams can be bad omens, man. You keep having nightmares like that, you're going to find yourself in a situation you are just not meant

for, like the women's uneven parallel bars in the Olympics. Your little gerbil isn't built for that stunt, you know what I mean?

LEW:

Shut up and go back to sleep, Bert.

BERT:

Okay, don't say I didn't warn you.

BERT turns and heads back for his door. The moaning, now both parties, comes to a climax. BERT turns back to LEW.

BERT:

Least he was short, well quick, or whatever... Well, I guess both apply.

BERT exits. LEW lies down on the couch again to try to sleep. Before he nods off, CAROL enters.

CAROL:

I'll be right back, I just want some water.

She exits the room and comes down the stairs. LEW awkwardly sits up to greet her. She sees him with a start.

CAROL:
(startled)

I didn't know anyone else was here.

LEW:

I'm sorry.

CAROL:
(settling down again)

Did I wake you?

LEW:

No, I was already up. Bad dreams.

CAROL:

Ah, you must get that a lot in this place--

LEW:
(almost worried)

Why do you say that?

CAROL:

I don't know. It feels ...weird here, doesn't it?

LEW:

(not hearing it for the first time)

We seem to get that a lot.

CAROL:

Really?

LEW:

Yeah.

CAROL:

Maybe this place is haunted?

LEW:

Oh? Do you believe in hauntings?

CAROL:

No.

He looks at her curiously and then they both laugh quietly.

CAROL:

Had you thinking about it, didn't I?

LEW:

No you didn't.

CAROL:

Yes, I did.

LEW:

Maybe just a little.

CAROL:

I'm Carol, by the way.

LEW:

Nice to meet you. I'm Lew ...(purposely awkward) by the way.

CAROL:

Where can a girl get some water around here?

LEW points and looks after her as she gets her drink. He seems to be genuinely interested in her. She sits down on the couch next to him.

CAROL:

Okay, know that I am as curious as a cat, so talk. Who are you?

LEW:

(whispering nervously)

What about Blain?

CAROL:

What about him?

LEW:

He's probably not going to like it that I'm talking to you, after you both just...

CAROL:

(finishing for him)

Had sex? (assuring) Believe me he's like any man once he's done. He sleeps. Me on the other hand, I'm ready to do the dishes, mow the lawn, and pave the driveway, so ...just talk. It's his fault for not telling me anyone else lived here.

LEW:

Well as long as you're offering, I think the house does need painting.

CAROL:

(she gives him a wry look)

I didn't want to say anything in front of Blain, but I would do something about that smell in here.

LEW:

(slightly nervous)

Oh, that... Yeah, I'm sorry. I wish I could tell you it was just Blain's shower shoes, but we sort of had an accident here. Ah, our neighbors dog got stuck up underneath the house and he refuses to have anything done about it. And frankly none of us wants to crawl under there and dig out a dead dog. Usually, with a lot of candles and air freshener, it's not that bad.

He gets up and selects a candle from the night stand and lights it.

LEW:

That better?

CAROL:

(pleased)

Oh, that smells nice. Much nicer than Blain's shower shoes, I'll guess. (he looks at her surprised by the joke) Well, tell me about yourself. Are you a student?

LEW:

No. Not anymore.

CAROL:

Meaning? (pause, no answer) Come on, spill!

LEW:

Okay, okay. I would have graduated in the fall last year, if I had kept at it.

CAROL:

What happened? Did you fail?

LEW:

No, I actually had a three-six gpa.

CAROL:

What? Why'd you quit? What was your major?

LEW:

I was an English major and I quit because I developed my ...condition.

CAROL:

Your condition?

LEW:

(tentatively)

I'm agoraphobic. (slight beat) I'm afraid to leave the house to go outside.

CAROL:

What?

LEW:

I'm Homebound, as I call it.

CAROL:

No way. That sounds ridiculous.

LEW:

(a little hurt)

It's for real.

CAROL:

No, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you really. I just meant it was... Oh jeez, Open mouth, insert foot, I'm really sorry.

LEW:

It's all right. I'm used to it with the guys I live with.

CAROL:

So what's it like? How do you get around?

LEW:

I don't get around. I stay here, read, watch television, and do a bit of writing here and there.

CAROL:

That's all?

LEW:

Well, I wish I could tell you I play sports and visit the theater often. I wish I could tell you that but I can't. Believe me I've tried.

Unbelieving, she gets up, walks over to the door, and opens it.

CAROL:

Why don't we give it a shot?

LEW:

What?

CAROL:

(taking his hand)

Come on, let's try it.

LEW:

This isn't going to work.

CAROL:

(pulling him toward the open door and he begins to stiffen)

You'll never know before you try.

LEW:

(trying to hide his growing fear with some sarcasm)

Do you abuse people in wheel chairs, too?

CAROL:

Come on, the door is ajar. Let's go.

LEW:
(freezing in place)

What did you say?

CAROL:
(unrelenting)

Let's go!

LEW:

No, before that!

CAROL:
(sincerely)

Are you all right?

LEW:
(accusing)

Did Blain put you up to this?!?

CAROL:

No--

LEW:
(pleading)

Shut the door, please.

He sinks back toward the couch never taking his eyes off the door. She shuts it.

CAROL:
(tentatively as though she's hurt him dearly)
What are you afraid of out there?

LEW:
(trying to slow his breathing, calm himself)
You said the door is ajar.

CAROL:
(confused)
Yeah, I did...

LEW:

That's what Bert always tells me, whenever we ...whenever we try... (he gestures with his hands as if to say 'whenever we try to go out there') It just surprised me, I guess.

CAROL:

What is it out there that frightens you so much?

LEW:

I don't know... Anything? I can look you straight in the eye and say there is nothing out there to get me... No boogie men, no goblins, no hit men, and the million accidents that happen each day will have nothing to do with me, but once I take a step toward that door, I'll freeze. I'll get faint and nauseated. And I'll believe that everything that could possibly happen to hurt me, will happen. That's just how it works.

CAROL:

I'm sorry. I really am. I guess I didn't believe you. (an awkward moment of silence)
How do you survive? I mean, money-wise.

LEW:

Well, at first I was just bumming off of Blain and Bert, he's the other guy that lives here. Then I called a professor at school and explained to her my condition. She set me up with a job writing directions for certain products. House wares and stuff like that. I write the dos and don'ts to these things and they pay me for it, essentially.

CAROL:

Does that pay the bills?

LEW:

Not at first, but the jobs started adding up. I actually live fairly comfortably now ...especially since I don't get out. Saves on expenses.

CAROL:

How do you find the jobs?

LEW:

Online. They send me the info and sometimes the product itself and then I relay their directions. Sometimes, I just edit what they've already written, sometimes I use the product and write them myself.

CAROL:

Hmm. So who's Bert?

LEW:

(he gestures)

Bert lives in that room over there. He used to be a business major before he dropped out as a sophomore. Now he sort of, bounces between jobs and thinks of himself as a comedian.

CAROL:

What do you mean?

LEW:

Standup comedy.

CAROL:

Really?

LEW:

He talks incessantly about it, but I don't think he has the guts. He may surprise me yet. He's changed so much; he used to be so serious. I mean, in grade school he would always sell his lunch to Blain everyday just so he could afford his subscription to *The Wall Street Journal*. There wasn't a funny bone in his body. But he just changed one day. Lost all ambition. Gained an unbelievable load of cynicism.

CAROL:

That's weird. Have any idea what caused that?

LEW:

(seemingly in jest)

Yeah same thing that happened to make me agoraphobic... Would you believe it? I just don't know how to explain it yet.

CAROL:

Wait, are you serious? What happened?

LEW:

(he looks around, exaggeratedly)

I took an oath never to tell... (then serious) Besides I don't know you that well. Tell me about yourself. And then tell me what you think of Blain.

CAROL:

What do you want to know?

LEW:

Why are you with him is the first question that comes to mind... But let's just start with you.

CAROL:

Well, I'm a sophomore Communications major. I'm on scholarship for the school newspaper as a journalist. I also write a little poetry, which is actually how I met Blain.

LEW:

Wait a second... You just said poetry and Blain in the same sentence. I'm pretty sure that's never happened before. And you say you've met him through this paradoxical link?

CAROL:

Yeah, the English department has been putting on this coffee shop deal where people read short stories and poetry.

LEW:

That sounds fun.

CAROL:

Anyway, I've gone several times in the last few months and every time Blain has been there to hit on me.

LEW:

(shocked)

No, get out of here.

CAROL:

It's true.

LEW:

I mean, I know he'd do something like that to ...well, pick up girls, but going to a poetry reading? ...I'm sorry, I may have said too much just then.

CAROL:

No you didn't. I actually don't think he's remembered me from one coffee shop to the next really. I'm not really serious about him. It's just, every time I see him there he's, like, the life of the party. The girls seem to swoon, the cool guys all hang out with him. I mean, I don't want to sound shallow, but when he hit on me, everyone -- all my friends -- just watched me expectantly. My best friend nudged me in my arm as if to say 'Go with him'--

LEW:

(with an abrupt laugh)

Huh! Friends... Sometimes they'll see you off to a shallow grave with a big bright smile.

CAROL:

Yeah, really. And now after everything that has happened, I feel kind of stupid. (more to herself than to him) I'm not like this, I've never gone off with some guy I've never met. Damn it! I know he played me and I fell for it.

LEW:

Don't look at it that way. Maybe you played him.

CAROL:

(thinks about it)

Yeah... Maybe I just needed a dick.

LEW:

(laughing)

Well, you succeeded in that ...in more ways than one.

CAROL:

Is he that bad?

LEW:

Well ...(thinking about it) yeah.

CAROL:

(frustrated)

Damn it. (again to herself) I really made a mistake here, didn't I? (to Lew) I don't want to seem like some tramp--

LEW:

(assuring)

Stop it. I'm the last person you could possibly offend. I'm just happy to have company around here. And Blain wasn't always that bad. I think he's just under a lot of stress lately.

CAROL:

How's that?

LEW:

Well, he used to be a quarterback in college, you know. But ever since he stopped playing, I think he's really missed having people to play smear the queer with if you know what I mean. (wondering if he's said too much) Ah... That's why I think he takes it out on us.

CAROL:

(quietly laughing)

Well, enough about him then. What about your dream? Wait a minute... Do you always sleep here?

LEW:

(breathing in deeply)

Ever since I became homebound I decided I'd sleep out here, because I found myself wanting to lock myself into my room. Even this living room was starting to bother me. I had to fight it. I mean, homebound sounds so much better than 'room bound.' I just started sleeping out here and now it doesn't bother me.

CAROL:

(awkward)

I'm sorry.

LEW:

(dismissive)

Oh, don't be. I'm all right. I like it here.

CAROL:

Well, then... What about your dream?

LEW:

My dream?

CAROL:

Yeah, the one that's kept you up tonight.

LEW:

Oh, okay. What about it?

CAROL:

Well, what caused it?

LEW:

(thinking, then grabbing the book from the night stand)

I've been reading this book called *Three Kingdoms*. It's about the aftermath of the fall of the Han dynasty in second and third century China. It's really fascinating.

CAROL:

Go on.

LEW:

China has been divided into three kingdoms, the Shu led by Liu Bei, the Wu led by Sun Quan, and the Wei led by Cao Cao. Liu Bei has two oath brothers and the three of them start out as no more than commoners, so it's sort of a rags to riches story so far. Liu Bei has just crowned himself emperor.

CAROL:

Sounds more like a fairy tale than a nightmare.

LEW:

Well, I just read about the death of one of Liu Bei's oath brothers, Guan Yu--

From upstairs Blain's voice interrupts them. He is calling her by name, but occasionally, instead of Carol, the audience hears Karl.

CAROL:

(laughing)

It's Carol, not Karl... (Lew looks momentarily aghast, she accepts it as homophobia) I should probably get upstairs. I want to hear more about it later, okay?

LEW:

Sure.

She leans in and kisses him on the forehead.

CAROL:

Sleep well.

LEW:

(surprised and flattered)

What is that? A kiss? Like 'take two of these and call me in the morning' ...that sort of thing?

CAROL:

(ascending the stairs)

Sure.

LEW:

Well, I need another Doc. The prescription said two.

CAROL:

(at the door, in a whisper)

Good night.

LEW:

(lying down on the couch again)

Oh, she doth teach the torches to burn bright.

LEW goes back to sleep. MENG and QUAN reenter. They are celebrating, dinking and laughing about their latest victory. Seriously, QUAN holds out his arm in a praising gesture to MENG. GUAN enters. He is ghostly made up in white.

QUAN:

I've known many warriors over the past several years as King of Wu. But I must admit, Lu Meng, today you've out shined them all for we've taken the head of Lord Guan Yu.

The spirit of GUAN steps directly behind MENG, unseen. MENG suddenly senses his presence, turns, and sees his own death in horror. GUAN's spirit or ghost inhabits MENG's body, and MENG looks to QUAN.

GUAN/MENG:

Have you forgotten me? Have you forgotten me? Green-eyed scamp! Yellow whiskered rodent! Have you forgotten me!?! (then out to the audience or Wu's soldiers) I will haunt you. I will haunt you all! I will not cease until I find my head.

MENG falls to his knees and then to his chest, dead. GUAN turns away and ascends the stairs slowly and deliberately. QUAN lowers to his own knees in startlement. He feels for his warrior's pulse and finds none. He stoops low in sorrow.

Act 1, Scene II

BERT sits on the couch with his breakfast. BLAIN comes down the stairs, spots him there, and grimaces.

BLAIN:

(gesturing to the table)

This is the table. Could you act like any other normal person and eat at the table?

BERT:

(in timid protest)

Well, I guess that would make everything normal now, wouldn't it?

The two of them stare at each other. Finally, BERT submits and moves himself to the table.

BERT:

(uncomfortable)

I want you to know I feel a little uncomfortable about eating over here. (BLAIN coldly stares back at him again and BERT covers for himself with:) I can't put my legs underneath it, you know what I'm saying? I'm feeling a little clusterphobic, or whatever the word is.

BLAIN:

(suddenly serious)

We've got a problem.

BERT:

You're not still hung up on that gays in the military issue, because it's becoming an obsession. Anyone dumb enough to be in the military, should be allowed in.

BLAIN:

Shut up and get serious.

BERT:

Okay, *estoy serio*so.

BLAIN:

Carol came to me last night--

BERT:

(almost as an aside)

Yeah, I heard. Thanks for keeping it short--

BLAIN:

Listen to me!

BERT:

Sure, boss. Whatever.

BLAIN:

She talked with our friend Lew about his little condition.

BERT:

So what? You can't expect that not to come out.

BLAIN:

(gripping the back of BERT's neck)

Yes, but then she asked **me** how he got it. And I **know** how he got it, so do you, and so does he. If he talks--

BERT:

He won't talk, he's sworn not to, and you know how he is about his word. We grew up together. None of us would betray the other two.

BLAIN squeezes BERT's neck harder eliciting several ouches from him.

BLAIN:

I don't trust him anymore.

BERT:

He won't talk. We're all responsible and if he were to talk he'd be in just as much trouble as any of us.

LEW enters and BLAIN lets go of BERT's neck and has a seat.

LEW:

(suspiciously)

Morning, guys. What's going on?

BLAIN:

Nothin'.

BERT:

Yeah, Blain just disagrees with me a little about this plan I have for the terminally ill.

LEW:

And what idea is that?

BERT:

Well, it involves old folks' homes. Say your Grammy is really old and is going to die because of some really unpleasant disease. Usually, we put these poor souls into a home, right?

LEW:

Yeah.

BERT:

Well, don't you think that's a terrible way to go? (dramatically) I say put her in the movies. (LEW looks at him doubtfully) No, hear me out. Would you want your Grammy to spend her last days in an old folks' home ...or would you want her to have a chance to meet Arnold Schwarzenegger. They could dress her up as a mugger, put a little fake mustache on her, and push her out toward some damsel in distress. Arnold could rush out onto the scene, pick her up, and snap her in half. Her death is relatively quick, if not easy. And she gets to meet one of the greatest stars in Hollywood as well as become immortalized in said star's latest blockbuster.

BLAIN:

(sighing as he stands)

Shut up, Bert.

LEW:

(laughing softly and sits down)

That's pretty good, Bert.

BLAIN suddenly grabs LEW by his hair and violently pulls him off his seat. In the racket, none of them realized that CAROL had just stepped out of BLAIN's room after a morning shower.

BLAIN:

I heard you had a sweet little talk with that bitch, last night.

LEW:

(wincing in pain)

Her name--? Do you know it?

BLAIN:

Listen to me! If you say--

CAROL clears her throat. BLAIN lets go and LEW falls to the floor.

BLAIN:

Carol... Uh...

CAROL:

I think it's time you take me home.

BLAIN:

Uh... I...

CAROL:

Now.

Finding no words to excuse himself, BLAIN leads her out the door. After they've gone, BERT reaches down to help LEW up, but LEW declines the offer with a gesture.

LEW:

No thanks. I've been in this house for two years, and I don't think I've ever looked at it from this angle before.

BERT:

Did you see that, man?

LEW:

See what?

BERT:

Her!

LEW:

She's special, isn't she?

BERT:

Special? Let me tell you something! The devil has been in Hell all these years crackin' his whip over lawyers' backs, settin' coals on Hitler's crouch, and subjectin' all his slaves to stumbling, purple dinosaurs and Michael Flatley dance shows for eons. But if he were to come here to our world and deal with that flesh and blood woman, he would have to carry out the trash like the rest of us.

LEW:

(laughing and now taking BERT's hand, rising)

When are you going to start doing stand-up, Bert?

BERT:
(looking his friend in the eyes, serious)
As soon as Blain decides to let me.

At that moment, LEW understands BERT's misery.

LEW:
I've lost my freedom to a sickness. You've lost yours to Blain.

BERT:
Well, I'm still one up on you. I can go outside.

LEW:
(distracted)
Yeah...

BERT:
Seriously, dude. Did you see the way she seemed to snap her little fingers and took total control over that goat?

LEW:
Neat, wasn't it? I just hope she'll be all right with him.

BERT:
Just goes to show a woman can pussy whoop the devil.

LEW:
Yeah, do you think she could whoop agoraphobia?

BERT:
Sure she-- Woah, wait a minute. Are you taken with her?

LEW:
Well, I wouldn't call it that, I--

BERT:
You are, aren't you. Hey man, that's pretty cool. I'm happy for you. Of course... When Blain finds out, he is going to take a hammer to each of your digits and maybe more tender parts of your anatomy.

LEW:
He'll never find out.

BERT:
You sure of that?

LEW:

Do you think after what she just saw--possibly heard between us, she's ever coming back here?

BERT:

You never know. Blain can be more persuasive than most of his kind. By his kind, of course, I mean that little known beast in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* known as the hoglit.

LEW:

(laughing as BERT jumps around like this imaginary fiend)
She could take on even the strongest of hoglits.

BERT:

What makes you say that?

LEW:

Well, I talked to her. Unlike most of the girls he brings home, I distinctly detected a brain up there.

BERT:

Polysyllabic words, huh? She mustn't be a natural blonde. Well, listen, man. I'd love to stay and chat about your new love life, and consequential doom, but I've got to get to work.

BERT heads for the door and then stops.

BERT:

If she did cure you of your disease--problem, no challenge... There's the word.

LEW:

Please don't treat me like a gimp. I can handle whatever euphemism you use as long as it's just one.

BERT:

No, I know. I'm sorry. Seriously, though ...would you leave me here?

LEW:

Not with him, Bert. I wouldn't leave you here with him.

BERT:

(he opens the door)

Thanks.

LEW sits on the couch, takes up his book, and reads on

Act 1, Scene 3

Lights fade on, but not completely. The ghost, GUAN, enters and walks around the room purposefully as if trying to study the house's inhabitants and how they live. Finally, he seats himself on the platform in front of the stairs. The lights brighten, and LEW enters carrying his new Kwan dao. He jumps to centerstage dramatically and demonstrates how little he knows how to use the weapon. BERT enters.

BERT:

(sarcastically)

Hey, what's with the oversized scalpel, Dr. Lector? I think I saw old Maria Antoinette outside in the waiting room for her checkup. I don't know, should I send her in? Kowing her history, you might just scare her with a knife that size.

LEW:

(embarrassed)

Hey, Bert. How was work?

BERT:

Good. Now would you mind explaining that thing before I ask what's for dinner. I don't want to walk into the kitchen and see the giant lobster you're planning on killing with that thing.

LEW:

It's a kwan dao.

BERT:

A what?

LEW:

It's the same kind of weapon Guan Yu was known for carrying.

BERT:

Wait a minute... That's not the same book you've been reading here lately, is it? (he nods) Man, you're reading too much. I know high school teachers always tell you that's not possible, but I think you exceeded the posted reading limit. I mean, if you're impulsively buying signature items inspired by characters you've read about, you've gone too far.

LEW:

(feigning disgust)

Oh, please, let's not forget about your own herbally inspired impulse purchases.

BERT:

What are you talking about?

LEW:

Every time you get high and watch a movie, you go out and buy it, because you thought it was the funniest movie ever made. Then, sober, you watch it again and kick yourself for buying it. Huh, Austin Powers? Or should I call you Zoolander?

BERT:

You weren't complaining when I picked up *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*.

LEW:

That's because you don't have to get high to watch them, they do it for you.

Bert laughs and walks up to the kwan dao. He picks it up.

BERT:

Damn. How in the hell did they fight with this thing?

LEW:

Well, most of the time they fought on horseback, I believe. And that is a replica. Lord Guan's weapon was supposed to be close to forty pounds. That one is just thirteen.

BERT:

Damn... I can't imagine some little Chinese guy whirling this thing around. (he stands it up on end) It must be ...seven feet long?

LEW:

Seven and a half. But Guan wasn't that small, either. He was supposed to be nine spans tall.

BERT:

Nine spans? What is that, like, the Chinese term for cubit?

LEW:

I don't know, but he supposedly towered above the rest.

BERT:

(skeptically)

Okay, okay, maybe he is the one third century Chinese guy who could have ridden the ferris wheel at the July 4th carnival.

There is a knock the door and BERT moves to get it until LEW stops him. LEW gestures to the weapon in BERT's hands. BERT smiles,

embarrassed, and sets it down. He answers the door, revealing CAROL who holds a small tree.

BERT:

Right. Ah, he's not here right now.

CAROL:
(confused)

Who isn't?

BERT:

Blain... That's who you're here to see, isn't it?

CAROL:

That's okay. (stepping in through the door) I'm here to see Lew. (Bert looks at her, a little confused) He is taking visitors at this hour, isn't he?

BERT:
(not getting the joke)

Yeah... Yes, of course. He's right over there.

Carol sees him and smiles pleasantly. She crosses to him.

LEW:
(smiling, happily surprised to see her)

Hey, Carol. How are you?

CAROL:

Fine. (she holds out the small tree) This is for you. I figured because you couldn't go outside, I'd bring something of the outside to you.

LEW:
(sincerely affected)

Wow. That was very nice and thoughtful of you.

An awkward moment of silence passes. Bert energetically decides to join the conversation.

BERT:
(hamming)

So, most of the time, when a girl gives a guy a plant, she is trying to find out if the guy might be capable of taking care, nurturing, and ensuring the survival of the species...the plant, I mean, not humans --

LEW:
(embarrassed)

Cuthbert...

BERT:
(continuing)

You know, she's making sure the guy will care enough about the relationship between him and the plant, before she decides to become intimately involved in a relationship with the guy.

LEW:
(now scolding)

Cuthbert!

BERT:
I'm just trying to make sense of her actions.

CAROL:
Wait a minute. Did you just call him 'Cuthbert'?

LEW:
Yeah, it's something he insisted on since we were little. Now, I just do it when he's mad, insensitive, or *immature*.

CAROL:
(to Bert)
Where'd you get that?

BERT:
I picked it up from a Stephen King book.

CAROL:
The Dark Tower series, right?

BERT:
Right. You read it?

CAROL:
It's an awesome series, isn't it?

BERT:
(nodding enthusiastically)
You bet.

CAROL:

Well, *Sai* Cuthbert, for your information, no I am not testing your roommate's ability in the Botanical. However, if you're asking me if I am interested in Lew, then I'll just tell you. Yes, I am.

BERT:

(somewhat taken aback)

Wow... Ah, thank you... *Sai*.

CAROL:

You're welcome.

BERT:

I'm going to go to my room now.

LEW:

(in good humor)

Good.

BERT:

(never missing an opportunity to get a last word in)

But before I go, I'll tell you that he has an impressive green thumb.

He exits.

LEW:

Just ignore him.

CAROL:

No, it's all right. He's fun.

LEW:

Yeah, a little too fun.

CAROL:

I don't have a lot of time, but I thought I'd stop by. (focusing her attention on the kwan dao) What's with this thing?

LEW:

Isn't it cool?

CAROL:

Yeah, I guess so.

LEW:

It's Lord Guan Yu's weapon.

CAROL:

Oh?

LEW:

You know from the novel I was telling you about.

CAROL:

Right. Wow, it sure looks ...ferocious.

LEW:

Yeah, I guess it does.

CAROL:

(sitting down with him)

Okay, so tell me about him. You told me China was divided into three dynasties... Which one was he involved in again?

LEW:

Liu Bei's kingdom. The three of them, Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and a Goliath of a man called Zhang Fei, made an oath binding them to the conquest of China. However, when Liu Bei and Zhang Fei took a chunk of land in western China, Guan Yu was cut off from joining them. He holed up in Jingzhou province. Their enemies surrounded his forces, but Guan held out for more than ten years. Finally, a general of the south Lu Meng took him captive and Sun Quan, emperor of the Southland, had him beheaded.

CAROL:

Sounds pretty intense.

LEW:

After his death, he took on a divine presence. He was deified in the name of justice.

CAROL:

Wow. Sounds like a really interesting character.

LEW:

Oh, he certainly is.

CAROL:

(sincerely)

Well I'd love to stay and hear more, but I got to go meet some friends... I wish I could ask you to come along.

LEW:
(tentatively)

I wish I could go. (a pause) Well, you'd better get going. We wouldn't want Blain to catch you here with me.

An awkward moment of silence, both of them searching for the next thing to say.

CAROL:

Do you like your tree?

LEW:

I really do. It was very nice of you.

CAROL:

Good. You're welcome.

LEW:

Could you ...come back some time?

CAROL:

When would be a good time?

LEW:

Anytime... You understand my schedule.

CAROL:

I will.

LEW:

I'd really like that.

CAROL:

Would you?

LEW:

Yes, I would.

The two of them look at each other for an elongated moment, confused, but pleasantly confused.

CAROL:

Are you always this awkward with your good-byes?

LEW:

Only when I don't want to see someone leave.

CAROL:

(slightly blushing)

I'm sorry. I'd rather stay too, but I promised them I'd go.

LEW:

Okay, well... I want you to come back then. Anytime, okay?

CAROL:

All right. Until next time then.

LEW:

Next time.

She exits. BERT comes out of his room.

BERT:

How did it go?

LEW:

Okay, I guess.

BERT:

Will she be back?

LEW:

I hope so.

BERT:

Good... 'Cause if things don't work out between you and her, I want a tree.

LEW:

(laughing with him)

Shut up.

BERT:

I need your help with Blain.

LEW:

Okay.

BERT:

Next Wednesday night I want to go out.

LEW:

And?

BERT:

I don't want to tell you yet in case I get too nervous.

LEW:

(questioningly)

Oh?... Why don't you just go? You don't need to tell him.

BERT:

You know how he gets.

LEW:

Yeah, but sometimes he doesn't even notice you're gone.

BERT:

Well, I just don't want any distractions. What I'm going to do is ...really important to me, I guess.

BLAIN enters. They both look at him awkwardly as if they were kids caught with hands in the cookie jar. He gazes upon the kwan dao.

BLAIN:

What the hell is that thing?

BERT:

(nervously)

Uh, Blain... I wanted to ask you if I could--

BLAIN:

(ignoring him)

What is it?

LEW:

It's a kwan dao.

BLAIN:

Huh, I kinda like it... (he starts for the stairs, but stops and eyes Lew coldly) I guess you guys thought it was pretty funny what happened yesterday morning when Carol walked in us, huh Lew?

BERT:

No, not at all... (Blain ignores, still staring at Lew) Listen, Blain I wanted to ask you if I might--

BLAIN:

(to Bert)

Cool it. (to Lew) So, did you laugh?

LEW:

A little. Did you have any trouble taking your girlfriend home, Blain?

BLAIN:

She's not my girlfriend. Bitch wouldn't even talk to me on the drive. But I got what I wanted out of her.

LEW:

You bastard!

LEW scoffs. BLAIN turns on him, but BERT stops him with the question he's been trying to ask.

BERT:

(nervous, timid)

Blain... next Wednesday night... There's something I've been wanting to do for a while and I'd like to try it then.

LEW:

You're a grown man. You don't need his permission.

BLAIN:

(looking first hatefully to Lew, and then to Bert mocking concern)

And just where is it you'd like to go next Wednesday night?

LEW:

You don't have to tell him that.

BERT:

I'd like to keep it a surprise.

BLAIN:

(moving toward him)

Tssk, tssk, Bert-boy. I don't like surprises.

BERT:
(nervously)

Well, it's just something I'm a little nervous about doing...

LEW:

Blain--

BLAIN:
(sucker punching Bert in the gut)

I'm not letting you go anywhere.

LEW rushes over to protect the smaller BERT, but BLAIN swats him across the face. Then he picks up the kwan dao. BERT slides to the floor in front of him.

BLAIN:
Do you wonder what it was like for those old Chinamen who fought with these things? Do you think there was an art form to it? Like in those ridiculous Bruce Lee or Jackie Chan movies? I don't think so. I think they just went mad. They swung these things around like baseball players, mad at that little ball. Only that little ball was actually flesh, and when this thing hit home... It might have cut someone clean in half. Can you imagine that, Bert? Can you imagine reaching with your hands through your own blood and entrails? Maybe you'd live long enough to see them throw you into that hole with all the other bodies. You might scream as they start throwing the dirt over you. You might feel the bugs crawl all over your body as you suffocate, choking on dirt. Nice image? Can you see it? Well, that's how it's going to be if you leave this place for anything but work. You talk and you'll die.

LEW:

Blain!!!

BLAIN:

You keep a low profile.

LEW:

He's a human being.

BLAIN:
(pointing the kwan dao at Lew)

You had better quit encouraging him.

BERT gets to his feet. He's embarrassed because of his apparent fear, and he runs to his room.

LEW:

You son of a bitch!

BLAIN:

You shouldn't talk to me that way. (he looks at the weapon again and nods) I like it. We'll set it up right here.

He places by the door and then makes his way up the stairs. LEW backs into the couch, almost dazed, rubbing his face where he'd been slapped, and staring at weapon of which he might still have been proud if not for BLAIN's acceptance of it.

END OF ACT ONE

Act 2, Scene 1

CAROL and LEW sit down stage right discussing the novel in which LEW is involved. In the dark, the other side of the stage, three Chinese soldiers, GUAN YU, LIU BEI, and ZHANG FEI, sit in a semi-circle.

CAROL:

How did this oath between the three Chinese soldiers begin?

LEW:

After distinguishing themselves in battle against an uprising known as the Yellow Turban Rebellion, the three young men pledged an oath of friendship in a peach garden.

A warm light fades in on the three brothers and GUAN in the center stands and raises his kwan dao.

GUAN:

From now on, let us be friends. Pledge with me here and now that, should one of us ever fall in battle, let the other two honor him by dying with him as heroes.

The other two men lift their own weapons in agreement and the lights fade out on them and back up on LEW and CAROL. The Chinese soldiers exit.

CAROL:

I don't understand. Why would they all agree to die at the same time?

LEW:

They were only boys. Liu was nineteen, Guan seventeen, and Zhang was only fifteen. They were young soldiers. (thinking about it a moment) Have you ever read *All Quiet On The Western Front*? (she shakes her head) Well, after reading that one, I would swear to the same thing. If I were to die in war, I hope I'd go first so I wouldn't have to watch my friends die, or I would hope we would die all together in the same fight.

CAROL:

Remind me not to go to war with you. But if you put it that way, I guess it makes sense.

LEW:

Of course it makes sense. Haven't you ever made an oath like that? I don't know, maybe with one of your high school girlfriends?

CAROL:

(sarcastically)

What? Like 'Oh, we'll be friends forever! (laughing) No, there is too much temptation to break it. I mean, I once swore to my friend Jenny never to tell anyone she kissed her

cousin. It didn't last and boy, did she ever hate me. (Lew gives her a patronizing look) Don't look at me like that! How could I keep it a secret? Her cousin's name was Amy!

LEW:
(laughing)

Are you serious?

CAROL:
Oh, yeah. But you see, promises like that are too easy to break.

LEW:
(getting back to his story)
Well, Guan never broke his oath even when Cao Cao captured him and forced him to fight for him in 200 A.D.

CAROL:
(confused)
Forced him to fight for him? Were his oath-brothers still alive?

LEW:
Yes, of course.

CAROL:
Well, wasn't he breaking his oath to fight for someone else?

LEW:
The three oath-brothers had been separated in battle and lost to one another. Guan agreed to fight for Cao Cao if and only if Liu Bei was dead. Cao Cao had no proof that Liu Bei or Zhang Fei had been killed, so he agreed that if ever they were found, Guan could return to his former lord unharmed. Sure enough, Liu Bei was found in 201 A.D.

The lights fade out on LEW and CAROL and fade in on Cao CAO and Xiahou DUN. CAO is considered by many historians to be the hero of the age, the man responsible for unifying China in the time of 'Disunification.' However, many authors and Chinese playwrights have chosen to make him out to be a villain. Xiahou DUN is CAO's cousin, a fierce warrior. He wears a patch over his left eye where an arrow once struck him. After being struck with the arrow, motivated to keep the morale of his troops high and also by some perverse need to keep what was given to him by his parents within himself, he plucked the eyeball from his wounded face and ate it. DUN approaches CAO to deliver a message.

CAO:
Ah, cousin Dun... What's the news of the front in the North?

DUN:

The news won't please you, my lord. General Guan's former patron Liu Bei has been spotted and is believed to be fighting for our enemies.

CAO:

Liu Bei? Lord Guan's oath brother... Hmmmm... Are you coming to the festivities, tonight?

DUN:

Another celebration? Every third night you hold a banquet for this Lord Guan Yu. Every fifth night you praise him with an even bigger event, giving him great gifts and groveling praise. You haven't even sent him into battle.

CAO:

And what of it, cousin?

DUN:

Your more *loyal* generals are getting jealous.

CAO:

Jealous generals are not loyal. Were I Guan Yu's patron, he would not get jealous if I courted another ally. My so-called loyal generals would do well to remember that.

DUN:

(scowling)

When Guan hears his former lord lives he will try to escape--

CAO:

He will not escape, he will be released from my care. I gave him my word. He pledged to serve me until death or until he found his oath brother, Liu Bei, his first patron. His loyalty is strong and shall not be punished.

DUN:

If he is as strong as they say, we should kill him lest he become our future enemy after he leaves.

CAO:

(suddenly enraged, slapping his cousin)

I gave him my word. Loyalty, cousin Dun, is the most admirable of qualities between patrons and their generals.

DUN:

(insulted, pausing to swallow his rage, then at last)

All right, I have another solution. Now that we know Liu Bei does live and is, in fact, fighting for our enemy, why don't we put Lord Guan in the vanguard as he has requested

of your highness. If he defects and one of our generals kills him, then we'll hold that general for execution. If one of their generals kills him, Liu Bei may defect to our side. Either way, your majesty may sleep with a clear conscience that you never broke your word, and we would be free of a potentially powerful enemy.

CAO:

I think I would rather shelter him from the knowledge that his brother lives. If he never finds out, he'll never leave--

GUAN enters. His gait is deliberate, his demeanor purposeful. He prostrates himself in front of Lord Cao Cao.

GUAN YU:

Lord Cao Cao, Lord Xiahou Dun... I have heard my master still draws breath. I wish to return to him immediately.

DUN:

(sneering)

Your master fights for the north. The northerners are our enemies... You speak of treason.

GUAN YU:

I have heard my brother has only sought refuge with the north. I give you my word, your majesty, that when I see him I will dissuade him from taking up arms against you.

DUN:

Scoundrel! You will do no such thing.

CAO:

Cousin Dun...

GUAN YU:

Lord Cao Cao, I have not forgotten the many kindnesses you've shown me. Two generals, Yan Liang and Wen Chou, have repeatedly turned away your attempts to relieve the siege to the north. I will ride out alone and taunt and challenge them into duels. Their heads pay the debt I owe.

DUN:

Liar! You'll run for your life and we'll hunt you down like that fox you are!

CAO:

Cousin Dun, quiet!

GUAN YU:

You hold my brother's wife and servants in the capital. When the two generals are dead, I will return for them. Until then, they will be ransom. How could I ever look Liu Bei in the eye again, if I abandoned his wife in the hands of a rival?

CAO:

Generals Yan Liang and Wen Chou are strong warriors. You will need men to accompany you.

GUAN YU:

I won't need any and you've none to spare. Lord Cao Cao, the city that feeds your army, is far from here. The morale of your men is low. What you need is a decisive victory and I can give it to you.

CAO:

Lord Guan, you are strong but I assure you, you'll need help.

GUAN YU:

No help, please.

DUN:

Our armies have been turned back by Yan Liang's force several times. You don't stand a chance. It is suicide.

GUAN YU:

I will not be dissuaded.

CAO:

I wish I could say no. I wish you would stay here and fight in my service. But I gave you my word and I will let you go. Though you refuse my bodyguards, I insist you take my best steed. Xiahou Dun, have them bring me Red Hair.

DUN looks at him puzzled and then leaves, sneering. Red Hair, the horse, is known across the land. It will become a fabled icon of GUAN for the years to come, much the same way his Kwan Dao has become. GUAN prostrates himself again, and this time he cries.

CAO:

I have given you many things this past year, Lord Guan, and you've never been so moved as this... Why do you act this way?

GUAN YU:

(affectionately)

With such a magnificent horse, I'll be able to make it to my oath brother all the more expediently.

GUAN leaves. Cao Cao looks out over the audience to the sky.

CAO:

All this time I've hoped ...believed I could win him over to my company. Now, I see how great he is. His unwavering loyalty is admirable and ...baffling at the same time. But my cousin Dun is right, he could be a dangerous enemy. My kingdom will gain from this marvelous act of suicide. But I will likely lose an honorable friend.... I hope he defects.

CAO exits. Again the lighting transition fades out on stage left and in on stage right. CAROL and LEW continue their conversation.

LEW:

After that, Lord Guan rode off on the fastest steed in all China, Red Hair, and met up with Liu Bei.

CAROL:

Did he kill the generals he vowed to kill?

LEW:

Presented their heads to Cao Cao.

CAROL:

(disgusted by the thought)

Gross. All these beheadings. What happened to Dun's eye anyway? You said he wore a patch over it.

LEW:

You probably don't want to know.

CAROL:

I told you I was inquisitive. What happened?

LEW:

Xiahou Dun was leading an army in a losing effort when he was struck in the eye by an arrow. He plucked it out and held the arrow out in front of him, skewed eyeball and all. Then he turned back to his troops and said something like, "Essence of my father, blood of mother, I shall not waste this." He proceeds to... (mimes biting off the eyeball and chewing it) The act of eating his own eyeball inspired the morale of his troops and they overcame the superior force bearing down on them.

CAROL:

Nasty. I can't believe you just told me that.

LEW:

Hey you asked, Ms. Inquisitive. Anyway, that's apparently the way things went back then. But despite all the beheadings and eyeball kabobs, it's pretty admirable, don't you think? (Carol questions him with a gesture) The chivalry, I mean. Today people break their promises all the time. Sometimes I wish I were part of a more noble time and place.

CAROL:

I prefer indoor plumbing any day.

LEW:

Indoor plumbing over honesty, huh?

CAROL:

That's not what I meant. (silence) Okay, I got one for you. Do you know how dogs drag their rear ends over the grass? (LEW gives her a blank look) You know, to clean them?

LEW:

No, I've just seen them lick there for days on end.

CAROL:

You're not a dog fan, are you?

LEW:

Dogs ...have an equal opportunity chance with me.

CAROL:

Well, anyway. I had this friend who was several years older than me. We met through work. She had this little shitzhu dog--you know, one of those puffy little rat dogs that bark a whole hell of lot and pee everywhere.

LEW:

(pulling out an imaginary list)

Scratch "shitzhu" dog off my equal opportunity list for dogs.

CAROL:

Listen to me, this is my oath ...and it's funny.

LEW:

Okay.

CAROL:

(snapping her finger at him, mocking an authoritative gesture)

You see, this dog decided to do that on their bed.

LEW:

Their bed?

CAROL:

She was married.

LEW:

Gotcha.

CAROL:

To be more specific, this little dog was doing that on her pillow.

LEW:

(disgusted)

Gross.

CAROL:

She tried to scold it and that didn't work. Finally, when she realized this little dog just had something for that specific pillow, she ...switched it with her husband's pillow and never said a word.

LEW:

(more disgusted)

Ohhh, that's terrible. So it was her oath?

CAROL:

Mine too. She told me about it and her husband was our boss at work. I don't think I could ever look at him after that and still keep a straight face.

They both laugh for a moment and then Carol's expression gradually becomes very dour.

LEW:

Carol, what's wrong?

CAROL:

I just thought of something more serious.

LEW:

What do you mean?

CAROL:

An oath. A terrible one. My neighbor, a boy a couple years older than me, was shot when I was a senior in high school.

LEW:

What happened to him?

CAROL:

He was a bartender, or so we were told--I don't know what part of the story was real. He was competing for a bartending job with another person. The other guy had several years of experience on him, but Charely, his name was Charley, just had a greater presence. And that part of the story was certainly true. Charley was special. He had a demeanor about him that could make anyone smile. Anyway, Charley beat him for the job, and so this guy started stalking him. He called the cops and made complaints. But he was never taken seriously. The guy in question had never actually done anything in several months time to provoke the law, so it was ignored. Then, one night, Charley pulled into his garage after a long night at the bar and ...he was in there with him. The guy shot him six times with a twenty-two pistol.

LEW:

Oh my god.

CAROL:

But that wasn't the truth. I visited Charley one day at the hospital. It's been two years and he's still there at that hospital, sucking his food through a straw. He couldn't tell me what I had already guessed from something my mother had told me when we were kids. You see, a boy that good looking and charismatic can't escape the interest of a thirteen year old girl. I once told my mother I was going to marry Charley. She laughed and said, "Charley's never going to love someone like you, Carol." Of course, I didn't understand until I got older. After it happened, it didn't take much to find out the truth through some archived newspaper. It read something like, "Local man mangled by ex-lover." It was sickening. But Charley's parents were so incensed by his sexual preference, they couldn't tell the truth about him. It remains a secret even now. They don't even visit him anymore at that hospital.

LEW:

Jesus. I wouldn't call that a very noble oath.

CAROL:

(sardonically)

Yeah well, at least the family's name is still intact. (then serious) It's sick, I tell you. Downright perverse. Something like that happens and all you've got is that person's memory. Why pervert it like that?

LEW:

(uneasy, looking for something to say)

Well ...Guan Yu never broke his oath in any way. Neither to Liu Bei or Cao Cao.

CAROL:

(going along with it)

Yeah, it seems to me that it might be difficult for Guan Yu to fight Cao Cao after being in his service for so long.

LEW:

It was after the battle at Red Cliffs in the year 208. Liu Bei's prime minister had come up with a foolproof trap that would kill Cao Cao and his forces. Only Guan Yu wasn't invited to participate for that very reason. Still, Lord Guan insisted until Liu Bei's prime minister swore that he would be put to death if he showed Cao Cao mercy. And Guan got his way.

CAROL:

Why would Guan insist on fighting the man that had treated him so well?

LEW:

I'm not sure. I guess that Guan was a warrior that couldn't be away from battle. If there was one to be fought and it involved Liu Bei's army, he would be there to fight it.

CAROL:

But could he bring himself to kill Cao Cao in the end?

The lights fade down on stage right and up on stage left. GUAN Yu stands at stage center facing off stage left and Cao CAO and Xiahou DUN approach him crouched to the ground and out of ear shot.

CAO:

It is the last battle then. And we must fight it against an old friend.

DUN:

Even if the men will fight, their horses lack the strength. We cannot fight again. Your excellency, you know I've never liked this man before us, but now, I'm afraid we must rely on him. We know he disdains the high and mighty and that he can strike down the strongest or the quickest warriors with ease. Yet we also know that he never persecutes the weak. If we appear so, he might remember times past when you showed him great kindness and, on your personal appeal to him, we might be spared.

CAO CAO nods and approaches Lord GUAN. GUAN's back is to him as he approaches and CAO, thinking he has gotten the drop on him, pulls out a small knife. Suddenly GUAN speaks and CAO quickly puts the knife away.

GUAN YU:

You have been well, I trust, General, since we parted? (he turns) I bear orders from the prime minister of Liu Bei's army and have been awaiting Your Excellency for some time.

CAO:

My army is defeated and my situation is critical. At this point, I have no way out. But I trust, General, that you will give due weight to our old friendship--

GUAN YU:

I fulfilled my debt when I destroyed two enemy generals and relieved the siege at Baima. In the present situation I cannot set aside public duty for personal considerations.

CAO:

I see. I guess it is time for you to kill me then, old friend.

GUAN steps forward to slay CAO CAO, but halts amid stride. He cannot bring himself to do it. He turns his back to him, and Cao Cao looks back to his fellow generals.

CAO:

Spread out on all sides. Go around him.

The generals pass. Suddenly, Lord GUAN roars in frustration and Xiahou DUN meets him at stage center.

DUN:

Leave now, my Lord! I will defend!

DUN attacks, but the exchange is quick. GUAN parries his weapon aside and brings the kwan dao down, but holding back just before beheading him.

GUAN YU:

Go now, withered warriors of Wei! My life for yours! Cao Cao, we now stand even. The next time we meet, if I live, I won't spare you.

GUAN, who by letting Cao CAO go has thus failed his state and put himself to death by the hands of BEI's prime minister, hangs his head sorrowfully. Lights fade out on them and up on Lew and Carol again.

CAROL:

So was he put to death by Liu Bei's prime minister?

LEW:

No. The prime minister knew of the oath between Guan, Liu, and Zhang and reasoned that if he killed one of the three men, the others would soon follow.

CAROL:

But that's hardly possible.

LEW:

Don't think so? (she shook her head) I admit, it doesn't seem like it could happen, but that's pretty much how it did. Guan was beheaded in 219 by Sun Quan's general Lu Meng. Not long after that, Zhang Fei was assassinated by his own troops for beating some of his officers for some petty offense against Guan's name. Liu Bei died of depression over the losses of both his dear friends.

CAROL:

So, the oath became some kind of self-fulfilling prophesy?

LEW:

Yeah, I guess so.

CAROL:

So it's kind of like some sort of warning against oaths like that?

LEW:

What like a moral? No, it just happened that way.

CAROL:

How do you know that?

LEW:

They were different. They had honor.

CAROL:

(tentatively)

Lew, I need to ask you something, okay. I like you a lot and want you to be honest with me.

LEW:

Okay.

CAROL:

You seem to take this oath thing pretty seriously.

LEW:

Yeah.

CAROL:

Well, ...have you ... Have you ever made some kind of oath or pact like this?

LEW:
(uneasy)

Ah... Well, if I had ...how could I in good conscience tell you about it? (faking a laugh)
It wouldn't be some 'step on a crack, break your mother's back' or 'cross your heart, hope to die' sort of thing. It would be some black act that you would never think could come from such shining, honest people. Let sleeping dogs lie if you catch my drift.

CAROL:

Is that how it is then? I thought you yearned for more honest days.

LEW:

Carol, I'm not hiding anything from you, okay?

CAROL:

Why do I get the distinct impression that you are? You were a good student and then you develop your homebound problem. Bert has a great future in business, then he loses his drive. What happened?

LEW:
(defensive)

Nothing happened. It's just the way things turned out.

CAROL:

Would Blain know?

LEW:
(serious, suddenly offensive)

Don't ask Blain. My God, Carol, please never ask him.

CAROL:

There has to be something, then, for you to come off like that about Blain. Tell me, Lew. I want to help but you've got to open up to me. Does Blain have something to do with it?

LEW:
(angry, regretful of his words)

Who in the world ever told you I wanted your help!?!

CAROL:
(pointedly)

You did. (he glares at her, confused) You've been calling out for help ever since I got here. No, you haven't come out and asked, but the subtext is all there.

LEW:
(appalled, shouting)

Subtext!?!

His countenance freezes her and she realizes she has come off perhaps too strong and perhaps too fast.

CAROL:

I'm ...I'm sorry. Listen, I only did this because I like you and I feel like you're hurting inside. That's all. (he doesn't respond) I'm worried about you. I really am. And if there's something you'd like to talk about, something bad that you can't normally ...bring up--

LEW:

Carol--

CAROL:

I mean it. I want you to be honest here. (he doesn't answer) Okay... I see. I ...uh... Well, I wish I could stay. I wish I could get you to tell me ...But I guess I understand now. (she gets up and heads for the door, pausing to look back at him again before opening it) Good bye then, Lew.

She exits. LEW sits there for a moment gazing at the floor. Abruptly, he stands and heads deliberately for the door. As the throes of his disorder grip him, Bert comes on from his room.

BERT:

Lew, what's going on, man?

LEW

(out of breath, frightened)

Get Carol! Bring her back.

BERT rushes out the door to flag her down. LEW tries another feeble attempt to escape the confines of his home to no avail. He falls back to the floor and kicks the door shut.

LEW:

Why in the hell can't I tell her?

BERT comes back through the door and LEW flinches, seeing the outside again.

BERT:

I'm sorry. I couldn't catch her. What was this all about?

LEW:

I wanted to tell her ...more than anything ...exactly what happened to us. What we hide. I wanted to tell her about Karl.

BERT:

(frightened)

Oh my god! You didn't, did you?!?

LEW:

No, I couldn't.

BERT:

(relieved)

You'd better be damned happy you didn't! Blain would kill us; you know that, right?!
No matter what happens, we can't ever tell. You got that, Lew?!? We can't ever tell.

Act 2, Scene 2

LEW is asleep// with the *Three Kingdoms* book nearby. From the other side of the set, an ancient Chinese, PUJING, man enters. He is a blind Buddhist monk. Slowly, he guides himself with a cane to centerstage.

PUJING:

(Sniffing the air)

Something foul has happened here. Someone has died. Hmmm... Could that mean an old friend is soon to visit?

GUAN enters.

GUAN:

Return my head.

PUJING:

Lord Guan, why do you insist on making such a statement. You may have been beheaded, but clearly you can speak. I cannot tell for sure for my eyes ended their task a long time ago, but I can hear you speak through that wonderful beard, so I know there must be a head up there.

GUAN:

(amused)

Old monk, you think you are funny, do you? (holding a hand up to his head) I have never liked this thing. Sure it looks like my old one, but it seems hollow as if only a shell of what was once there.

PUJING:

(almost patronizing)

You do not have to do any of this, you know. You would not have to be tortured the way you have been so many years, had you only decided that vengeance was for the work of fate. Why do you not end this terrible curse you have bestowed upon yourself and move on to that next place?

GUAN:

I insisted on taking my revenge on Lu Meng. So many do not have that chance and it is not fair that I was able to do so. That is why I stay. Tortured souls cry out for retribution and I help them get it.

PUJING:

(intuiting)

So ...you know why you are here... What lies beneath?

GUAN:

One unrelenting wraith insisting I take revenge for him.

PUJING:

But does he ask for too much? I sense there is some good in this house along with the bad.

GUAN:

I am not sure yet. I have been watching them for some time. I know one of them is pure evil. The others ...I cannot be sure. He is bent on punishing them all, though.

PUJING:

(sympathetic)

Lord Guan, the task you have chosen is too grand even for you. You have already been deified by the mortals you've left behind.

GUAN:

My task is not done.

PUJING:

I sense even now in this household, hundreds of years later, one of the living is still awed by you.

GUAN:

(quietly laughing)

Yes. He is sitting behind you with that cursed book.

PUJING:

That cursed book? You should give the author a little bit more credit. He has made your era in history immortal, even if he did get it wrong in a few spots. So many other ages have been completely lost or misconstrued.

GUAN:

This one is a little more tightly wrapped into my history than most. I think he is forgetting to live in the time he has been given.

PUJING:

(shaking his head)

So many live in the past... I will leave you to him then.

GUAN waits while PUJING exits. Then he raises his kwan dao a few inches off the ground and then lets it fall. The sound startles LEW from his reading and for the first time he sees and recognizes GUAN.

LEW:
(seeing Guan Yu)

Lord Guan? I ...I must be dreaming.

GUAN YU:
Peasant, you do not dream.

LEW:
(awkward)
I ...I was just reading about you.

GUAN:
And what was the drivel you read?

LEW:
You just met the monk on Jade Springs Hill. You were looking for your head, but you were talking... (confused) How did you manage that?

GUAN:
Because he wrote it does not mean it happened.

LEW:
Yes. It was said that you frequently manifested yourself in the divine presence on that hill, thereafter. You offered protection to the common people. They built temples there to show their gratitude. You were deified. I memorized a poem they wrote about you, it said: "Behind the ruddy face, a ruby heart--/Lord Guan astride Red Hair outrode the wind. /But far as he rode, he served the Fire King. /By oil lamp light he studied history; /In war he trusted to his dragon sword. /His inmost thought would welcome light of day." It moved me, I guess.

GUAN YU:
Poets. How they romanticize.

LEW:
What? Was that not the way of it?

GUAN YU:
No, I wanted revenge. The spirits of those people I had killed in my life wanted their vengeance. And as I got mine, they got theirs.

LEW:
You were deified. Even now, they still talk about you. It was as though you were made a saint serving justice.

GUAN YU:
(suddenly angry)

A saint serving justice? Is that what you think it is?

LEW:

Well, I don't...

GUAN YU:

I'll give you an idea of what it is really like. Imagine being locked in an enclosed space with a soul who, as the living need to breath, this soul needs to scream for the injustices it was served in life. I alone have to listen to that excruciating need of the dead. I am not some angel of death, I am the wrongfully dead's beast of burden. All because I wanted my own revenge after my death.

LEW:
(nervous)

How do you avenge them?

The door opens and in comes BLAIN. GUAN's spirit disappears and Lew searches for him intently.

BLAIN:

What are you up to?

LEW:

I couldn't sleep.

BLAIN:

You look pale. (accusing) Has something happened?

LEW:
(defensive)

Has something happened? You tell me.

BLAIN:

God damn that Bert. He's been going out on his so-called walks a lot more often these nights.

LEW:

So what?

BLAIN:

So what!?!

LEW:

Yeah, so what?

BLAIN:

You know what he does, Lew. He gets high, that's what he does. And every time he gets high, he puts us at risk. One of these days, he's going to slip and tell some junkie what we've got in here and that junkie is going to collect a reward for telling!

LEW:

He wouldn't do that.

BLAIN:

He's a drugged up junkie, Lew! He's going to talk eventually if we keep letting him go out at night.

LEW:

And what about you, Blain!?! You get drunk every weekend and pick up college girls. What if you slip up some day trying to impress some woman and say, 'Hey, I killed a guy once!'

BLAIN turns and slaps LEW hard across his brow.

LEW:

(resigned)

All right, Blain. I see it now. I understand your role. You're going to keep us locked up in here forever, while you try and live a normal life.

BLAIN:

What's it to you? You can't go anywhere, anyway.

LEW:

(sarcastically)

Yeah, and you don't think the image of you with Karl's blood on your hands has anything to do with that, huh?

BLAIN:

You can't blame me for your phobia, Lew.

LEW:

And I suppose I can't blame you for Bert's drug problem and lack of direction, either?

BLAIN:

Where do you get off? That's his problem, not mine.

LEW:

He used to be driven, dammit! He used to have goals! Not to mention a future! Let him out for God's sake! Let him go for his walks, maybe he'll find himself again.

BLAIN:

He'll stay in! He'll go to work at that shit job of his and when he gets off, he stays in. We were all here that night, we all had a hand in it. I may have done the deed, but we all took part in it. Don't blame me for your condition or Bert's garbage life, because you were here too. (changing to a softer direction) We took an oath. It's just like ...when we were kids, you know? We looked after each other. We kept one another out of trouble.

LEW:

You think this is as simple as, 'Hey, don't tell mom that Blain's had his hand in the cookie jar again,' because it's not. You hear me?

BLAIN:

We took an oath. We made a pact. We swore we wouldn't tell anyone.

LEW:

I don't think I care about that anymore, Blain. If I've got to go down with you, I can live with that. I can keep a secret. But if you don't give us some space to live out our lives, I'll tell. To hell with the repercussions. I will tell.

BLAIN:

(manhandling him to the floor)

Now you listen up, you little maggot. I may not be able to intimidate you like I do him, but if you do something I don't like, I'll hurt him. I'll hurt him bad. And let's not forget what they do to people like him in prison.

LEW:

You unimaginable asshole.

BLAIN:

Yeah, yeah, yeah...

He exits. LEW backs into the couch. BLAIN has found his weakness. Suddenly, BERT enters the scene in a jovial mood.

BERT:

Lew! I did it, Lew!

LEW:

Shhhh... Bert, Blain just had one of his rampages.

BERT:
(quieting considerably)
Oh, okay. Lew I did it...

LEW:
Did what?

BERT:
(noticing Lew's demeanor)
Are you okay?

LEW:
I'm fine.

BERT:
I did it, Lew.

LEW:
(trying to hide his dour mood)
I think I heard that part, bud. Go on.

BERT:
I went to the comedy club tonight!

LEW:
Really? Who'd you see?

BERT:
No, Lew. It was open mike night. I saw an audience. I performed.

LEW:
What!?!
I performed on stage!

LEW:
Your stand up routines? When did you--

BERT:
I've been writing a lot lately. Anyway, I did it. I got up there. I never thought I could but I did.

LEW:
(genuinely)

That's great! How did you do?

BERT:
I got laughs. I brought the house down. I think the manager wants me back!

LEW:
How do you know that?

BERT:
He took down my name and phone number. He said I did a pretty good job up there.

LEW:
That's great! What did you do? I mean, what routine.

BERT:
Well, I got up there and I... Well, I sort of... Wait a second. (he steps out toward the audience as if on-stage) I wanted to say something that I don't think any comedian has ever really said to catch their attention. "Hi, my name is Bert and ...I'm over sexed," I don't know if it worked the way I wanted to or not because I got this cold, resentment from the men in the room. I think the women were just yawning. I said, "My wife has just entered her eighth month of pregnancy."

LEW:
You're not married.

BERT:
Shush. "She anxiously anticipates a wonderful little bundle of joy. I, on the other hand, reluctantly await an outrageous bundle of sleepless nights, diaper changes, and the overwhelming and unceasing scent of urine on my clothes. She expects a cute little baby with an alluring smell and a special mind. I expect a little creature that oddly looks like my grandfather: bald, forgetful, content to do little else but whine, loaded with an assortment of uncensored bodily noises that make you want to leave the room, and complete with a collection of filth and foul, foul and filth four letter words that oddly sound like baby talk coming from a drooling, toothless mouth. In other words, I expect a small, hairless Clive from that Clint Eastwood movie, Any Which Way But Loose." And at this point, I was getting a few laughs, but nothing to gloat over. I think I was going too fast.

"But anyway, as I said when I started, I am over sexed. My wife's sex drive at this point in her pregnancy has taken me by surprise. A Thailand king was not having this much sex, sixty wives or not. And I have to admit, I'm a little nervous around this new belly of hers. I don't like to be on top, because I imagine I might pop something. My wife is tough, she can beat any man at a twinkie eating contest in her present state, ('except for

you, sir'), but I just don't know how strong that balloon is inside her belly. And plus, aren't I going to be

(thumps his head with an imaginary microphone)

...hammering the little guy in there. She says, 'Doctors say it's healthy for her and the baby to have sex at this point.' I just can't imagine that. Am I giving him a comforting head massage? What if he likes it? Will I be breeding a homosexual? Or if, God forbid, he should come out backward, is he going to have extremely happy feet? Maybe a future high school track star. "Thanks Dad, I had such a wonderful treadmill in my youth." I can only imagine the first words my son utters will be, "Stop poking me!!!!!"

By this time, I've got 'em warmed to me. It was working. "And the next step after birth is death. You know that right? We're all just a glint in the earth's timeline. A five second orgasm... Believe me, I've been over sexed lately, remember.

(to prove his point, he slaps his behind, cries like a baby, goes through a serious of orgasmic 'Oh's, climaxes, and then throws his head to his shoulder in death, Lew laughs)

It's nothing more. Death comes to us all. Deal with it, be done with it. I don't fear death nearly as much as the funeral. When did we take the 'fun' out of funerals? Huh? Did anybody get a fax on this? The first three letters of funeral spell fun. Why aren't we having fun at funerals anymore? I would have had a ball at Hitler's. I'm Jewish, but that doesn't matter. Let's face it, y'all, they could be fun. We've already got that cool irony, where in your coffin in the hearse in the funeral procession, we get to run every red light we've been stopping for all our lives.

(looking at his watch)

Oh, wow, I'm dead, but I'm early. I say let's go one further... Let's race through that funeral procession. Let's get four or five hearses together, put on the open road, and call it, The Nascar Hearse Challenge. The NHC, brought to you by, Johnston & Johnston's formaldehyde, nothing holds them together better. The Indy Five-Hundred Riders in Black race--

(copying the Rolling Stones tune "Fade to Black")

'I see a red car and I want it painted black'-- brought to you by the Highway To Heaven Kiln, the oven that gives your loved ones the finest ashes." I have 'em in stitches at this point. It's great! "And if that's going a little too far for you, why not do this. Grief is such a terrible thing. Often it feels like, the person checking out is the lucky one in the family circle. So I suggest that the Hearse hold just deceased Mary's poor husband, Bob, and ...the Swedish bikini team. 'Gosh, I'm really sad that my wife just died. But you girls sure do have some great tah-tahs. May I rub my face in them.' Or if it's Bob in the

casket, Mary's local Chip 'N Dales dance club will offer the finest young hunks to keep her riding happy on that long fateful drive..." Then I stop. I change directions. I nail them with a sincere moment. "Yeah ...Two steps, ladies and gentleman. Birth and death, that's all it is. Not a lot of time in between. Not in the grand scheme of things, no. But does it matter?

(a long dramatic pause)

Hell, yeah it does. It does, because we--

GUAN suddenly puts a hand on BERT's shoulder much like he did earlier with MENG.

BERT:

(faltering, trying to continue)

Because we...

LEW:

(sensing something is wrong)

Bert?

BERT:

Lew? (he falls to his knees) I can't feel my legs.

LEW:

(running up to hold him up)

Bert! What's wrong?

BERT:

I don't know. Something hit me like a ...wave passing through me.

LEW:

(as if to tell to stop talking like that)

Bert!

BERT:

Really, Lew. I can't feel ...anything.

LEW:

Blain!!! Come out here, Blain!

BERT lifts his arm points to GUAN. He sees him, but to him it is not GUAN.

BERT:
(surprised, but resigned)

I see...

LEW:

Blain!

BLAIN:
(opening his door)

What!?!

LEW:

There's something wrong.

BERT:

Karl...

LEW:

Call 911.

BLAIN:

Is he overdosing?

LEW:
No, he's sober! (Blain turns and goes back into his room) Call someone!!!

BERT:

It's Karl!

LEW:

Blain?!? Call them!

BERT:

He's come to get me.

LEW:

Bert, I've got to get to the phone.

BERT:
(the wraith disappears)

Wait. Where'd he go?

LEW:

I don't think Blain's going to call them.

BERT:
No, don't leave me.

LEW:
I've got to get to the phone!

BERT:
Lew, there's no time. I've got to tell you what I saw.

LEW:
(frustrated, tearing)
But Bert.

BERT:
(through labored breathing)
Hold me. Keep me ...here. I've got ...to tell you...

LEW:
Okay... I will Bert.

BERT:
I saw ...Karl. I saw his ...ghost.

LEW:
Karl?!?

BERT:
I can't see ...anymore ...Lew. I'm cold.

LEW:
(now crying)
I love you, Bert. Don't you go anywhere.

BERT:
...Got to... Love you...

LEW:
No, Bert. Don't go!

BERT:
I made ...them ...:laugh ...Lew.

His eyes stare blankly off into space. He dies. LEW seems to break. He cries and yells BERT's name. After a moment of relative silence, BLAIN comes out of his room as he puts on his coat.

BLAIN:

Is he dead?

Lew doesn't answer him in his pain. BLAIN moves down the stairs and crosses over to the phone. He unplugs the line and pockets the phone.

LEW:

What are doing?

BLAIN:

He didn't die in here.

LEW:

What!?!

BLAIN:

(grabbing Bert's body)

If he dies here, they'll search this place. They might do it anyway, but we won't invite them.

LEW:

(through his tears)

No!

BLAIN backhands LEW in the face and takes control of BERT's corpse. He puts him on his shoulder and heads for the door. LEW is stunned.

LEW:

(coming to, worried, voice cracking)

No, I won't let you take him Blain.

He heads for the door, but BLAIN is all ready gone. LEW stops in his tracks. His greatest fear is beyond that door and the door is open. It is anything, but inviting.

LEW:

Come on... The door is ajar.

He chants this line as a mantra as he pushes himself to leave, but ultimately he collapses and shuts the door. His breathing is heavy. The audience must see the validity of his phobia here. His fear dissolves to anger, which in turn resolves to sadness.

LEW:

Not him! Why him?

LEW suddenly sees GUAN again.

LEW:

You? You did this? He said he saw Karl.

GUAN:

They always see those they're responsible for killing.

LEW:

No. He didn't kill him, damn it! It was an accident. (GUAN disappears from LEW's vision) Wait! Come back! Lord Guan?!?

Act 2, Scene 3

Lew enters with his book in hand.

LEW:

(thumbing threw the pages like a madman)

Come on. Come on. Come on! Why can't I find it?

CAROL knocks at the front door. LEW ignores at first but finally relents.
He tentatively lets her in.

CAROL:

I came as soon as I heard.

LEW:

(leafing through the book)

You shouldn't be here.

CAROL:

(not really hearing him)

I'm so sorry... I saw his name in the paper. They had his ...picture.

LEW:

You should go. It's not safe here.

CAROL:

(confused)

What are you talking about?

LEW:

Blain could arrive at any time.

CAROL:

What does that matter? I came to console you.

LEW:

(frustrated)

I don't need to be consoled. I need to be saved.

CAROL:

What?

LEW:

I need to figure out what I need to do to get rid of him.

CAROL:
Blain?

LEW:
No, it's Blain and me I'm trying to save.

CAROL:
What are you talking about?

LEW:
You wouldn't believe me if I told you.

CAROL:
I'll be the judge of that. (waiting) Tell me.

LEW:
I saw Guan Yu.

CAROL:
What?

LEW:
I think he killed Bert.

CAROL:
How?

LEW:
He is going to kill Blain and me if I don't find out how to stop him.

He continues to frantically leaf through the pages of his book and CAROL slowly comes to the realization, whether true or false, that LEW has lost part of his sanity.

CAROL:
Lew, have you any idea how crazy that sounds?

LEW:
Call it crazy if you want to, but it's true. I've seen him and I know why he's here.

CAROL:
It doesn't make any sense. That story is centuries old.

LEW:
(perhaps to himself)

He's some kind of ...exacting wraith of vengeance ...maybe even justice.

CAROL:
Wraith of justice?!? That's completely foolish! (she snatches the paperback from him)
It's a book, damn it!

LEW:
Give that back!

CAROL:
No. Lew, I'm really sorry about Bert, but you can't deal with his death by burying yourself in this (holding up the book).

LEW:
Guan is going to kill me and Blain if I don't figure out how to stop him.

CAROL:
Why? Why would some ghost of ancient China come back to haunt you?

LEW:
Because we did something that disturbed his sleep, if he ever gets to sleep. I'm sure we're not the only ones who've done something so wrong.

CAROL:
Done what? What did you do? What?!?

LEW:
It's better that you don't know.

CAROL:
Better that I don't know!?! (waits for more) Fine! (throws the book back at him) This is ridiculous. You want to go insane about some history book, be my guest. (she starts to walk out, then turns) You know what!?! I really liked you.

BLAIN enters to overhear.

CAROL:
I respected you for your problem and your eccentricities. I think I was even falling in love with you. I came here to apologize for Bert and for walking out on you the other night. I thought I was wrong, that there are some secrets that shouldn't be broken and that maybe yours was just one of those. But I've changed my mind. I think you've got problems, Lew. You need to get help.

She turns for the door again, but BLAIN blocks her at the door.

CAROL:

Excuse me--

BLAIN:

Well, well, well. What do we have here? (not remembering) Carol, isn't it?

CAROL:

(resolutely)

I'm leaving.

BLAIN:

Oh, no you're not, little lady.

LEW:

Blain, it's not what--

BLAIN:

Not what? What I think? I think it is.

LEW:

Blain, she doesn't know anything. I didn't tell her.

BLAIN:

Oh, but she wants to know, so I hear. After all, she thinks she's falling in love with you. (he grabs her and turns her toward LEW cupping her mouth with his palm) I should have known after you left my bedroom for a little post coital chat with my roommate.

LEW:

(taking a step toward them)

Blain, let her go! You're hurting her!

BLAIN:

(retreating a step)

And I'll do so much more to her, Lew, if you so much as take one more step toward me. You of all people know not to test me. (to Carol) It's time for a little Q and A. Nod once for yes, more than once for no, all right? (she nods once) Do you think you love Lew? (tentatively, she nods) Good, good, good. Honesty is the best policy with me, Carol. Has he told anything about our past, specifically something that happened around two years ago? (she nods twice) Hmm... Has he mentioned anything about why he became agoraphobic? (she nods twice)

LEW:

I didn't tell her anything.

BLAIN:

I don't think I believe the two of you, I'm afraid. (to Carol) Has he said anything about a guy named Karl? (she nods fervently) Has he said anything about how I held him just as I am holding you now? Has he told you how I snapped his neck? Or how we buried him? (taking his hand away from her mouth and gesturing to the spot) We buried him right here, Carol.

CAROL:

(pleading)

Please, I don't want to hear anymore.

BLAIN:

Shhh. (whispering) Quiet or you'll miss the best part. Only his body couldn't quite fit the hole we'd made for him. We had to cut off his head. Of course we made up this stupid story about some dog getting caught up underneath the house and dying there for anyone who asked. But few did.

LEW:

Blain, we're in trouble--

BLAIN:

(nodding, getting closer to them)

You are in trouble. (he playfully fondles her hair) You let her come back here and now, she knows too much.

LEW:

He is coming for us--

BLAIN:

(excited; laughing)

Who's coming for us?

CAROL:

We called the cops. They'll be here any minute.

BLAIN:

Bullshit! I took the only phone out of this house the night Bert died. Besides, the cops have already been here and they don't even suspect us. It was a brain aneurysm -- how unfortunate.

LEW:

That wasn't it, Blain! I'm trying to tell you--

BLAIN:

Shut up!

LEW:

We don't have much time--

CAROL:

You can't kill us. You won't get away with it!

BLAIN:

But that is where you're wrong, Carol. I can. You see, all I'll have to say is that I walked in on my agoraphobic roommate as he was strangling his girlfriend to death. (sullenly, as if explaining to the authorities) He just wasn't the same after the death of his best friend and roommate. I came in at just the right time and he tried kill me to. I had to defend myself.

CAROL:

There still is a body under the floor.

BLAIN:

There certainly is. There is also a dead dog underneath the house as well. I made sure of that. I figure it's still quite a chance I'm taking, but ...I'll just have to wait and see. Which brings me to something, I've been meaning to tell you, Lew.

GUAN closes in behind BLAIN.

LEW:

Blain, he's right behind you.

BLAIN:

Shut up! (he shoves CAROL into LEW and quickly grabs the kwan dao before either can advance on him) Karl was an accident. I didn't mean to kill him, I just wanted to scare him. You see, I couldn't let my reputation spoil at the hands of some little queer. I was scared, you see. I couldn't let word get out that I... Well, you know, we've been over this point many times. I grabbed him to tell him 'never tell anyone about what we've done.' But this brings to what I've never told you, Lew. I've wanted so many times, but I just ...never had the strength. I **yearn** to feel that exhilaration again. (with a growing, demonic smile) Karl squirmed in my grasp... I felt the crack of his neck... He ...squealed. (a relieved laugh) You see Lew, I can't sleep anymore without dreaming of it. They aren't ...nightmares. I didn't even do it on purpose. But I've promised myself that next time, I'll do it and I'll enjoy it. (suddenly caught up in his own enthusiasm, stepping slowly toward them) Next time... I'll enjoy--

CAROL:
(retreating)

You can't do this.

BLAIN:

I can, Carol. And you know what? There is some risk in what I'm going to do to you. But I don't think I really, care about that anymore.

LEW:

Blain!!!

LEW tries to shove BLAIN out of the way as if he'd never heard what BLAIN had been saying. GUAN had slowly drawn up his arm as if to point at the back of BLAIN's neck and then with a quick, seizing gesture, GUAN takes control of BLAIN, much the same way he had taken control of MENG earlier.

BLAIN and GUAN:

Have you forgotten me? Have you forgotten me? Green-eyed scamp! Yellow whiskered rodent! Have you forgotten me?! I will haunt you. I will haunt you all! I will not cease until I find my head!!!

BLAIN utters one last choking word... "Karl" ...before falling dead. LEW sinks to his knees staring at the body.

LEW:

I'm sorry I failed to save you, you son of a bitch.

CAROL:
(shocked)

What just happened?

LEW:

(now staring into the eyes of GUAN)

Guan killed him. I'm afraid I'm next.

Without doubting him a bit, CAROL steps in front of him to offer protection.

LEW:

Carol, get out of his way!

CAROL:

No, I'm not going to let him take you, too. Where is he?

GUAN suddenly reaches out to CAROL taking control of her the way he had before with BLAIN. She is held out into place.

LEW:

No! Let go of her!

GUAN:

I'm not supposed to kill you, Lew. I'm supposed to make your life as miserable as I'm able. What better way than to kill her?

LEW:

No, don't!

GUAN:

Karl is screaming in my ears ...in my mind. He wants you to suffer and live having known what happened to him. To go to bed every night with him on your conscience. Most of all, he wants you to hide from the world in a hole of regret, shame, and loss--

LEW:

Karl!!!

LEW grabs the great kwan dao and slams the rear end of it into the place where Karl's body was buried. His body is revealed. GUAN releases CAROL.

LEW:

(whispering)

Carol?

CAROL looks back at him. LEW grabs her and pulls her toward him to protect her if the wraith got vicious again.

GUAN:

(thoughtfully, raising his hands to his temples)

The screaming has finally stopped.

LEW:

(to CAROL)

Are you okay?

CAROL:

Yes. Where is he?

LEW:

In front of us.

GUAN:

Karl is gone. You've no more to fear from him or me.

LEW:

You won't hurt us?

GUAN:

No.

LEW:

Why wasn't I killed?

GUAN:

He instructed me not to. Apparently, he feels you will punish yourself far more than death might. He never blamed you nor Bert.

LEW:

Then why did he kill him?

GUAN:

For keeping it secret. He was angry to be lost to his family and friends.

CAROL tried to speak, but LEW shushes her.

LEW:

What about Carol? Why did you threaten her?

GUAN:

I did that on my own.

LEW:

Why?

GUAN:

I've been watching you three for some time. You have a good heart, Lew. A terrible thing has happened in your life and you've hidden yourself away from it. You've locked yourself up in the past. I threatened her to show you the importance of immediacy. I think you feel for her as she might for you. You need to see that. Karl's spirit wants you to hurt from now on and perhaps you will. But I believe you are strong enough to move on and live for the future.

GUAN exits. LEW and CAROL are frozen into position.

CAROL:
What's happening?

LEW:
He's gone.

CAROL:
What are we going to do now?

LEW:
I don't know. What do you think?

CAROL:
We've got to call the cops.

LEW:
No good, unless you've got a cell phone. Blain took ours away.

CAROL:
Well, I don't want to leave you here.

LEW:
Let's go to the police. (he looks at the door) Both of us.

CAROL:
Can you ...make it?

LEW:
(nodding)
With your help...

CAROL:
Really?

LEW:
The door is ajar.

The lights go down with LEW pondering his future and whether or not he can make it outside, but he does not seem afraid.