

“The Walkover (Act One)”

An epic in Thirteen Acts, as Dionysus bridges the river Styx.

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(abridged by editor James K Beach)

PART I - DIGRESSION

Core Characters

Gareth Rothschild	Dead from the start, then resurrected throughout. A young British man from Cambridge, dealing with posh problems of dysthymia in a blanket of stoicism: <i>how man would like to be man</i> . <u>Character note</u> : What’s in a name? Conjured. Nothing. In his case; it is in the name. Or else, nothing.
Leon Blackwell	The side kick-protagonist, the work’s narrative point-of-view, the bromance duo of the above. Emotionally charged, unsuspecting, loyally unfaithful, with the very best of intentions failing: flawed: <i>the modern man</i> . <u>Character note</u> : football, Food: a fling; of fornication, fuddled- fouled. See? Typical. The f- vowel. The last laugh.
Fehmin Ashton	The protagonist-side kick, the one for whom there is no absolute clarity of her point-of-view. Too quiet for the lead of a play, but too vocal a presence to be extruded from core. Mysterious, vivacious, perspicacious, and sangfroid: <i>how a woman wants to be perceived infinitum</i> . <u>Character note</u> : an academic conundrum; but everything and nothing is.
Karen Dashwood	Alive from the start, in the beginning, and then killed throughout. A young posh-girl in Cambridge; dealing with posh problems of men around her dead or missing; puffed eyes and estranged unavailability with tears held back over love that was never held back: <i>how a woman is usually perceived infinitum</i> . <u>Character note</u> : In the beginning there was the end, written. And at the end there is no beginning.

ACT ONE - Dreams

(Motif: oracles at Delphi; reunion)

Disembodied oration:

Dreams work the same way as ellipses in a prose, written.
They allow the bizarre to be comprehended without saying.
They let it remain vague, out there somewhere, within reach.
They deceive the reader into thinking he has understood
... And the writer into thinking he has conveyed.
They are a saving grace, saving... Words.
They even correct for Grammatik that since Shakespeare has prevailed.
They allow an escape route engineered for the reader, for the writer; or both.
As the dreamer longs to escape the agonies of the bizarre, all escape...
Within several breaths... That pass... That pause.
They are a forever punctuation of exeunt all and, continue.
And hence a terrible punctuation at the end of a final Act
... Confusing for the actor: to exit or to linger? Continue?
However, there are two types of continue: to continue, as in, linger?
Or, exit and... Continue? Which brings to mind the other extreme!
And amongst several suggestions to the conundrum; nothing starts, really.

Curtains rise.

ACT ONE - Scene 1

There is fog on stage: thick and billowing. Above, a giant cinema screen tilted toward the audience flickers to life... previously-recorded split-seconds of scenes crash together, a poetic explosion on screen, a beacon in the darkness and fog. The dim lighting grows brighter. Various camera angles of the set replace the pre-recorded montage in real-time on the cinema screen.

The set is a grey graveyard, with a rusty gate bent failingly on its creaky hinges. A crippled Magda statue standing sentinel at one side of the gate, beaten down by centuries of rain, is looking skyward. The leaves of her little hollow bower beyond the listless gates move not. Her companion stone sentinel flagging the other side of the swinging iron gate, whoever it was, is in flight. Only a pair of feet remain. It is silent and eerie, absorbed in the lilt of its own wordless requiem. Slowly from amidst the virtual clearing and the even more thickly settling fog: a scene takes form on the cinema screen and centre-stage:

LEON BLACKWELL stands at the edge of a freshly dug grave, the earth upturned, a spade in hand, in the act of burying. GARETH ROTHSCHILD lies inside the grave, his eyes closed,

enshrouded, but perhaps not embalmed for Leon cringes, as if from the smell. He throws a few spade-full of earth into the grave.

Gareth:

“Don’t bury me”.

Leon falters but resumes the dictum of shovelling earth over the dead more marked now in haste though not progress.

Leon:

“It is the only way”.

The iron gate of the cemetery swings on its rusty hinges and the centuries of rust debris sing. An APOTHECARY enters and stands at the graveyard entrance, her back to the spying eyes of the audience behind, herself a spectator to the cinema screen above - she watches herself for a moment then ambles on. She is dressed in mourning black which is not quite like a funeral black, only just, her hair trussed into a haggard knot behind her head.

Leon looks up from his grave digging; he is far away in the fog.

Leon:

“Hello. Who is there”?

The Apothecary is silent and framed by the graveyard entrance, a companion now for the weeping Magda.

Leon:

“Anybody there”?

She moves into the graveyard and towards Leon; she comes to stand behind him. She has Fehmin Ashton’s face. She spares a moment to stare at the Iron Gate, which is shrouded in fog, where a SHADOW OF THE APOTHECARY enters, perhaps wearing white, and poses on the feet of the departed sentinel, as if pretending to be the companion of the Magda.

Apothecary:

“He has been dead in my shop for three days”.

Leon looks at her and then reflexively back at the Iron Gate.

In that moment when he is turned to look at the Apothecary behind, the Apothecary's Shadow exits the stage: Magda’s companion once again in flight.

Apothecary:

“Nobody would move him. I’m afraid, once the flies settle the rot would set in”.

Leon:

“What are - who are you”?

Apothecary:

“I am the Apothecary. My name is immaterial. You must move him out of my shop”.

Leon gapes at her. She closes her eyes and breaks into a sombre, insanely melodic chant, perhaps “Eowyn’s Lament,” by J.R.R. Tolkien. As she is chanting the eerie notes, two candles alight themselves by the grave. Leon’s eyes alight on them in horror and wonder.

Leon:

“How? How did you do that?”

Apothecary:

“The dead should light their own candles, don’t you think?”

Leon:

“But” -

Apothecary:

“My shop is easy to find. Ask anyone and they will tell you the way. In case they don’t it is the seventh door to your right once the street is swept by night”.

Leon:

“But” -

The Apothecary turns abruptly and walks back; the restless fog embraces her and within it she slowly disappears. Her chant lingers on and Leon watches in her wake, her flickering candles teased by some non-existent breeze - by the fog? And behind Leon the Shadow of the Apothecary reappears: an ephemeral sentinel once again.

The fog rolls on: the scene on the cinema screen metamorphoses: day to night?

And in a mad pirouette the Apothecary’s Shadow exits the stage, just as the iron gate and its stony appendages forming the graveyard entrance dissolve... And in one defining snap, like the flick of a finger, the fog dissipates.

The set morphs into a small shabby room, a cross between a gipsy tent and a dingy pub, illuminated to view by a single guttering candle set on some high shelf made of rotting wood. Perhaps once sturdy wood now gone bad: rotten. Rows of shelves line one wall of the room almost completely: lined with dusty glass vials of the foreboding physik-gypsy. Old dried blood and river mud and the sing-song water of the ammerdale. A broken wooden counter lies in front of the shelves like an old garden fence now breeched, still used to bar way, although more useless than used.

The rest of the room save the small area reserved as the threshold to the barred door is filled with small, round, rickety tables covered in grubby, tasselled cloth.

There is a knock at the door.

Another knock, harsher now, almost impatient which gives way to a tirade of continuous measured knocking before the door is pushed open with an expectant creak.

A black hooded figure steps over the threshold just as The Apothecary with Fehmin’s face appears from behind the counter. She has heavily lidded eyes and rough, uncombed hair much tousled and piled on top of the head with almost zero aesthetic effort.

Apothecary:

“Shut the door. It is a rough night”.

The hooded figure shuts the door.

Apothecary:

“There is no one here tonight, if you haven’t come for me, that is”.

The hooded figure turns and walks towards the tables and removes the hood. It is Leon’s face that appears in the meagre glare of the candlelight.

The Apothecary relaxes a little at this.

Apothecary:

“A traveller told me a strange tale today. He said he saw him die on a heath”.

Leon:

“What are you talking about”?

Apothecary:

“That man you were burying. He was looking dreadful when he came to my shop”.

She turns her gaze to the table in a far corner where a figure is seen hunched, decked in the faded regalia of the spidery light. Leon follows her gaze.

GARETH ROTHSCHILD is slumped on this rotting table, much rotted his own self, skin white and clammy, eyes closed in the stupor, a spider freely crawling over his hand curled around the handle of a brass pewter in rigor mortis.

Apothecary:

“How did he die”?

Leon:

“I - don’t remember”.

Leon takes a seat at one of the rickety tables, a frank distance from the dead Gareth, kissing the broken counter, almost. The Apothecary bends by his ear and whispers.

Apothecary:

“Hemlock, was it? Conium maculatum” ...

She takes a small bottle off a dust strewn shelf and puts it on Leon’s table, the liquid enshrouded in dirt, like a grave, to some irony.

“Two drops... Perhaps more” ...

Leon unable to bear anymore stands up with force, pushing the table ever slight, the bottles chink and tumble.

Leon:

“Why are you telling me this”?

Apothecary:

“To save you, Leon. To save you.

Leon” -

In a blinding flash, the spilled solutions on the table mix into an explosion, and the stage goes momentarily dark. The scene metamorphoses once more....

Vacillating between day and night, settling on twilight, much to the pleasure of the day, perhaps, not the night. It is the sea, crowned in the glory of its jagged cliffs.

The Apothecary hangs by the edge of a rocky cliff, buffeted by the strong winds like a ragdoll in weak wind, her hair streaming, black dress billowing.

Apothecary:

“Leon. Save me”!

Leon is bending over the fringing bushes at the cliff's edge, his hands outstretched.

Leon:

“Give me your hand”.

Apothecary:

“The elixir, Leon. The elixir is in your pocket” -

He is confused, and hence he insists, stretching ever more precariously across the cliff edge:

Leon:

“Give me your hand, please” -

Apothecary:

“Leon - save me”.

The last words screech in the wind as she loses her grip on the rock and plunges beneath. A roaring silence permeates before the blackout. Though, just before everything snaps into darkness, the Shadow of the Apothecary is espied standing behind Leon... its robe billowing, betrayed by wind, mirroring Leon.

Curtains fall.

ACT ONE - Scene 2

Curtains rise. Real-time video on the cinema screen shows the action on stage from various angles, from a handful of live-feed cameras obvious to the set.

A wet grey morning: like a corpse that is old but with some effort kept fresh, thawing nonetheless now, with light drizzle and equally grey clouds obscuring the sun.

A courtroom entrance is in its routine bustle: a car stops outside the flight of bleached white steps and GARETH ROTHSCHILD steps out of the car, donned in a suit of formal black. A YOUNG MAN who looks out of place in the setting, clad in a rough medieval attire of a monk's brown truss, hurries down the steps to meet him.

As Gareth is climbing up and this man urgently rushing down, they meet: on the third step - third from the top and third from the bottom. They clasp hands but it is not quite a handshake - their hands make contact, out of necessity of relay runners and the urgency of departing lovers.

Young Man: *(rather morosely)*

“He is in courtroom number thirty-three”.

A sad sigh hedges free.

“And nobody is on his side”.

Gareth:

“Then why don’t you go”?

Young Man:

“I am not a judge”.

Gareth:

“And I am no jury”.

They both look at one another with perfect understanding.

Young Man:

“Would no one help a widow’s son, Gareth? Even you”?

Gareth falters at being played a card he did not expect to trump - perhaps floored. He runs past the young man, quickly now, mimicking his earlier urgency. Then on an afterthought he pauses and then turns around to address him again, the young man.

Gareth:

“I think I know you. What is your” -

The Young Man is nowhere in sight. Gareth scrutinizes the courtyard and his parked car, perplexed.

The Young Man reappears behind him, paradoxically on the top of the stairs, his features subtly altered to render him horrific: there is a leer lingering on his thin red lip precipitating into maroon eyes. He is now carrying a crude staff fashioned in the shape of a cross, herding a small black goat.

He grins in amusement as Gareth keeps standing on his stoop, battling against the obvious to procure any other explanation that fits the little paradox. The Young Man vanishes.

Gareth climbs the remaining stairs and runs the length of a bleached white courtyard towards a second entrance at the other end which is narrow and grubby in contrast to the grandness of the entrance flanking the flight of stairs he has left behind as he covers the length of this grubby corridor.

At the threshold of this courtroom entrance Gareth suddenly loses his balance and trips - what he has tripped over is a crude staff fashioned in the shape of a cross, wedged cleanly at the foot of the door.

A security cam perched at the top of this shabby door stirs to life at this and looks down to film Gareth’s fallen form, and then deciding to preserve this in memory clicks three times in

succession to capture in broken sequence Gareth shuffling to resume his upright pose, as reflected on the cinema screen.

Gareth barely has time to notice this for at that precise moment as the camera is clicking thrice, a horn blows three notes and Gareth spills out on stage through a door that reads "Courtroom 33".

Lights come on stage, the door disappears and the screen momentarily blacks out in the background.

The set morphs and is now the centre of a courtroom, one high table for the judge, two witness boxes on either sides, with jury box in place and chairs and tables for the two parties to sit with their lawyers, albeit, facing the audience in this setup.

The courtroom scene faces the audience, who also form the scripted audience for this courtroom. The actors playing the parts of the courtroom audience are seated amongst the actual audience of the play, in the first nine rungs or rows or lower box or pit.

The people are busy talking amongst themselves, some laughing a mutual horselaugh, some predictably pointing at the witness box and whispering in each other's ears.

The courtroom is a clash of the modern with the medieval, of past and present and not future things. Some of the audience on the tiers are dressed in modern clothes, and are flashing modern gadgets and other merchandise of the year or of the future. Others are throwbacks to the times of armoured knights and damsels in hats.

Upstage, a group of DRUG SMOKERS swoon and share a pipe, shaped like a cornucopia, just like their real life counterparts in the audience.

In the dead space between the stage and the first row of the audience seat is a narrow bench where are seated a curious pair: a MAN IN BLACK and a WOMAN IN WHITE, her exaggerated garment-dress tossed about everywhere around her, a careless white next to the man's prudent black. They have a backgammon board, and are in the middle of a game-

People from both the virtual audience of the screen and real-life audience are busy following this game as Gareth, who has just been spitted out on stage gets up, looking around and going largely unnoticed at this point.

The Woman in White tosses the dice, it rolls before it comes to settle with finality: she throws back her head and laughs: a ringing laugh. The Man in Black wipes sweat off his brow and plays his turn- the woman's laughter pierces the air once more.

Their game, amongst others, is being watched on by ELEVEN BLACK HOODED FIGURES seated at the topmost tier of the court; mirroring real life eleven hooded counterparts in the audience, in particular the FIGURE SEATED IN THE EXACT MIDDLE. It is an eerie sight. Each figure is identical and yet a different identity of its own. One may argue that beneath the hoods they could be silently watching anything.

Gareth's eyes travel to these singular eleven, coming to rest on the prominent figure in the middle, not distinguished in stature or built or the material of the cloth and yet too prominent to be missed: with five flanking it on either sides giving some berth between the centre figure and themselves. Gareth's eyes rest on the centre figure.

The Woman in White throws back her head to resound the echoing laughter. There is a very sinister feel in her winning the game or perhaps the innate distrust to the temerity of the victor at hand.

FOUR DRUNK BOYS enter the courtroom amidst the audience and also amongst the virtual audience; unsteady on their feet and decked in the regalia of football fans in a match: face paint, banners, scarves and stray funfetti-confetti-sweaty-apoplexy all lingering in their person. The virtual counterparts look to their real life counterparts for direction, pointing at their real-life counterparts and telling each other:

“Oh, that’s me, bruv”.

“Yeah, I can see thee, mate”.

“What the fuck are you doing in there”?

“What the fuck are you”?

And all four of them break in a guffaw slapping each other on the backs as if this has been the funniest joke ever.

The *DRUNK DRESSED IN YELLOW AND BLACK STRIPES* lets out a loud cheer.

Drunk in Yellow and Black Stripes:

“Yo, bruv. It’s on now, you geezers. The Champions”!

The last two words are said in the official FIFA Champions league song tune.

TWO GUARDS (BAILIFFS?) stand sentinel at each of the courtroom entrances on either side of the tier where the backgammon game between the man and the woman is played. One holds a flaming torch in hand, the other a flashlight.

THE BAILIFF WITH THE FLASHLIGHT decides to intervene.

Bailiff with a Flashlight:

“Excuse me there? Do you mind, mate? Can I see your ID”?

Two of the Drunk Boys break into a wave of laughter, slapping each other on the back. The fourth boy, dressed in blue, is visibly ill.

Blue-dressed Boy:

“Oh bruv, I think I am about to get sick”...

And he arches over and vomits copiously in front of the audience, most of which lands on the Man in Black.

The Woman in White who had thus far been eyeing this new entry to the proceedings with disdain breaks into the cruellest of laughs, slapping her thigh, gasping for breath and quite uncontrollable. The Man in Black fishes a handkerchief from his pocket and attempts to wipe away the vomit.

Bailiff with Flashlight: (to Blue-dressed Boy)

“This isn’t match night, mate. This is” –

At this the centre black hooded figure of both real and virtual audience stands up, perhaps by accident, to arrange its cloak. The bailiffs look at this - perturbed and apprehensive.

Bailiff with Flaming Torch:

“Sit down, mate. Find somewhere and sit down”.

The Drunk Boys look around with bleary eyes before finally collapsing in chairs, snug in forbidden debauchery, decidedly drunk and periodically vociferous, like clockwork. They fondle themselves or each other in jest.

Below the drunks, A WIZENED LADY sits cradled in voluminous locks of iron grey hair in the likeness of coalesced tarantula webs, stitching rubies closely spaced on her hand to fashion it in the form of a jewelled glove. Her arthritic fingers gnarl around a ruby, holding it in place as she readies her needle to stitch it in skin; but amidst the osteoporotic tremor it clatters to the floor and the entire hallway rings.

The Bailiff nearly ignites her with his torch.

She picks another ruby from the supply cradled in her lap between her thighs in frayed tartan: her knotty fingers drop it again, as it crashes to the floor: clattering for some time in octave; fulfilling a drum roll.

And at this point Gareth's attention is arrested by a bizarre sight: the bailiff holding the torch behind the judge's desk is replaced with a LIFE-SIZE GARGOYLE in a heartbeat of a moment, so sudden that the transformation is almost the trick of the eye. The burning torch is fixed in the hollow space of the clenched fist of the stone gargoyle: a gargoyle which on one close look is revealed to have the face of Karen Dashwood - a character to appear in the next scene.

Gareth, stunned, moves towards it: the bowed head and closed eyes, the hands knotted together with the head resting on them, one knee bent, the torch raising above form this poise: a trophy upheld?

She stands up with towering majesty and overturns the board, throwing it at the man's face. Then she turns and looks glorified ahead at the stage. Gareth follows her gaze and his eyes widen in horror. Seated at the jury table in the dead centre of the two witness boxes juxtaposed is the same Young Man in monk's attire that he met outside at the courtroom stair.

The Young Man looks at him; malignant amusement dancing in his eye as he broadly smiles in a gesture of welcome.

Young Man:

"Welcome, Gareth. You are perhaps the only one on his side".

Gareth follows the jury's gaze to the witness box on the right. There, crumpled in chains lies a PRISONER who Gareth goes round and drags to the middle of the stage for the audience, and himself, to view. The spotlight shines on this chained figure and both Gareth and the audience realize together that it is an emaciated and wasted version of Gareth himself. The prisoner inadvertently lets slip a single whisper... "No"...

Gareth:

"What have you done to him? What have you done to me"?

As is apparent on the cinema screen, a single tear rolls down the gargoyle's closed eyes, falls missed and disappears, leaving a track on the stone cheek, a tell-tale.

Gareth stands up from where he was bent by the side of the prisoner and storms towards the gaming table. He puts the overturned table back in its place and pushes the Man in Black, who lost to the Woman in White, out of his chair, un-resisted.

Gareth:

“I will play for his life”.

Woman in White: *(A thunderous roar)*

“I have already played and I have won”.

Her eyes smoulder in rage. Gareth grabs her by her arm and brings her face close to his, both in different strengths quite matched.

Gareth:

“You will play again with me”.

He pushes the woman back on the narrow bench and she hisses curses in anger or fear.

A few Drug Smokers ceremoniously carry the cornucopia pipe into the action, offering their smoke to the scufflers. Gareth declines. Woman in White accepts a few tokens.

Then: some inexplicable commotion amongst the people sitting on the tiers, save the eleven hooded and robed, who merely observe the courtroom drug-smoking. The Centre Hooded Figure slides an iron pentagram out of its sleeve and clasps it firmly in the hand.

The Drug Smokers reconvene in a huddle before finding chairs in all areas of the courtroom.

Gareth:

“Play”.

Woman in White:

“Not this. No.

You really want to play? Then you will play this with me”.

She takes out a tablet from below the bench and pushes the button, switching it on to a screen showing a deck of overturned cards, reading “Tap to shuffle the deck”. This app appears also on the cinema screen.

Gareth looks at the cards in despair.

Suddenly the lights flicker threateningly and all of them go out in a flash, followed by a single flickering bulb on stage.

Woman in White:

“PLAY TAROT WITH ME, ROTHSCHILD”!

Gareth:

“I do not know how to play”.

The woman starts laughing at this, a sickeningly evil laugh and most of the audience taking up the cue laugh too, blowing raspberries at Gareth’s comment.

She taps on the tablet screen and the cards start to shuffle in manic frenzy.

Woman in White: *(in a sing-song voice)*

“I am picking my card, Gareth”.

Gareth:

“Don’t” -

Woman in White:

“Yes. This one” –

She taps on the screen to stop the shuffle.

Gareth:

“No” -

Woman in White:

“Oh. Would you look at that?

(A good hardy laugh that echoes)

IT’S THE HANGED MAN”!

She brandishes the tablet at Gareth. It shows a man hanging by the neck, lightning struck at the top of his head.

At this instant DOCTOR FANGORN appears from behind the witness box, as if just after examining an ill or dying, clad in the age-old symbol of white coat and a swinging stethoscope, he takes off his spectacles and predictably wipes them as he says...

Doctor Fangorn:

“I am so sorry, Gareth. He is already dead”.

At these words, the centre black hooded figure slips the iron pentagram back inside and the black hooded row stand up in muted silence and file out of the courtroom slowly: the ones seated in the audience. But the virtual ones seated in the projection behind the judge’s desk remain seated.

The Woman in White bows at the audience and exits.

Gareth is distracted, looks around, here there and everywhere.

Even though the Woman in White has exited, her laughter continues to echo from everywhere.

The debauched Drunk Boys in the virtual audience jump down from their tier and drop next to the Wizen Lady. After some initial misdirected attempts to finger her hand and her rubies, which she is able to deflect, one of them throws an arm around her shoulder and smothers her in lewd kisses which make the other Drunk Boys hoot. She screeches and twisting away from him gets up abruptly, and a whole cascade of rubies, in an almighty din, slaver on the floor in red surf.

She disappears.

The drunken boys seated in the virtual audience break into a slurred chorus:

“And in the darkness strike that chord

That all the booty laid to feast

That all the booty laid to feast

The booty of thy feast”.

At this their real life counterparts seated amongst the audience also get up and join on cue, elbowing each other and sniggering at the real life counterpart of the hag seated below them:

“And in her belly seed that pod
That duty all be crushed to least
That duty all be crushed to least
The duty of all thy least”!

Behind Gareth, exactly where Doctor Fangorn stood, now stands the Young Man, holding aloft the tablet showing the Hanged Man. He is ever redundant in his amusement at Gareth’s confusion as Gareth tries to grope around for his bearings.

The one bulb illuminating this also goes out now as Gareth screams.

Curtains fall.

ACT ONE - Scene 3

Curtains rise on the courtroom steps, the cinema screen flickering. This is a rewind or a fast-forward, perhaps a skip of the scene before on the screen?

A grey evening, riddled with pregnant clouds in the sky. GARETH ROTHSCHILD stands by his car, the door to the passenger seat expectantly opened for him. An unnecessary detail of the CHAUFFEUR is sitting ready in the driver’s seat.

Three people occupy the backseat: LEON BLACKWELL, MARK DASHWOOD and KAREN DASHWOOD. Karen sits immediately behind the passenger seat, staring resolutely ahead refusing to make the invited eye contact with Gareth. Perhaps lost in thought... A gargoyle of stone, as her persona: A stone gargoyle in real. It is only righteous anger at him and a tantrum for all the rest. The overall mood is ambiguous: Leon and Mark are busy in a whispered, sniggering exchange, heads crammed together at something on Leon’s phone which is only visible courtesy to the reflection in Mark’s shiny black shades.

Leon addresses Gareth:

Leon:

“Well, you can get in, you know. So we can be off. I think we are past the fashionably late time” -

Mark:

“We’re dreadfully late”.

Leon:

“Exactly my point”.

Gareth spares a glance at Karen, and then looks at Mark or rather at Mark's dark glasses for a long period of time.

Leon:

"Gareth, I don't understand. Why are you not getting in"?

On the courtroom steps behind Gareth THREE MUDDY CHILDREN trundle down, chasing each other down the steps, barefooted, dressed in historical tunic rags, holding twisted tree branches for their fight-play, one holds a curious kite-like contraption: ox hide stretched across a cruciform lattice; perhaps heavier than all the three of them put together, thudding on the magnificent vestibule. They argue amongst one another.

Gareth ruefully scans the horizon, at the pregnant clouds, the mouldy grey of the damp of a fiscal air condoning already.

Gareth:

"There is thunder in the air. There is a storm coming. A storm that would destroy everything".

Karen:

"So you should get in".

Gareth:

"A storm that would destroy everything... even us".

Karen:

"We'll put on some music so we hear nothing of it".

Gareth:

"That will not stop anything".

Karen:

"Yes. But we won't get to know about it".

Karen flips on loud techno music on the car stereo.

Thunder flashes on stage. Gareth sits in the passenger seat and is about to swing the car door shut behind him when Leon halts him -

Leon:

"Gareth, wait... What about the children flying a kite in the rain"?

Gareth, confused, looks between Leon and the Muddy Children.

Gareth:

"It's the storm".

Leon:

"The children, Gareth."

Mark:

"One of them is the storm".

Gareth swings the door shut. Rain infiltrates into the cinema screen as well and everything, virtual and real begins to get lost in the rain.

The Chauffer drives off slowly, with Karen's techno music blaring yet barely audible below claps of thunder.

The screen flickers once in malfunction, as it gets wet in the stage-rain. Or in its own virtual rain. From inside and outside. Thunder on stage crackles within the screen. The Muddy Children huddle beneath the courthouse roof as one of them flies a kite into the storm.

The car has sped off by now. And there is a crisp sound of electrical stuff sizzling before the screen blacks out.

Curtains fall.

ACT ONE - Scene 4

Curtains rise.

A courtyard of stone, bathed in yellow light, the edges fading into darkness. It is an unknown hour of the night, with too much lightening but no rain or thunder. On the cinema screen are real-time stills of the festivity unfolding, providing close-ups of details throughout the scene.

A narrow wooden table is in the dead centre of the stage, laden with ample wine and fruit and bread, a cornucopia as centrepiece. THIRTEEN GUESTS are seated, where only one side of the table is occupied, and all the diners face the audience: There is scarce talk between the guests and much eating: all thirteen guests, no hosts - that part is obvious... obvious to guess. There is a doleful and yet cheerful air that prevails, like the funeral of a person much hated or the relieved deathbed of someone in pain.

A man raises his glass in the air to toast, the wine catching the complimenting light: it is LEON BLACKWELL, in the centre of the row of guests, sporting a cruel goatee and three-piece suit with tails, like some fairy-tale Count. FEHMIN ASHTON sits to his right, crowned in a circle of roses as red as blood, twisted together with the green rose leaves and dotted with shimmering stones: diamonds? They glimmer like small droplets of dew; they trickle down strands of her ebony hair. Her dress is merely the coarse peasant tunic, secured at her waist by a thick lynching rope. MARK DASHWOOD sits to Leon Blackwell's left, dressed a fine shade of white- refined salt-like. His customary dark glasses are in place. He quaffs from an old ornate cup: the vestal virgins in a circle, holding hands, arms raised around the brim. Among the TEN OTHER MASKED GUESTS, who all wear grotesque headpieces, are: a woman with a necklace of jade, a man with a crown of pearls.

A band of people enter the courtyard, their portal of entry in an enclosed courtyard of stone unexplained and silent, completely unnoticed by the guests. The band is dressed in Goth black, their faces painted cult-like. GARETH ROTHSCHILD leads this curious band of six: himself, KAREN DASHWOOD and four others - JEHOVAH, MOODY, ROOKEWOOD, TITAN. All in sombre black, collars of their coats pulled up against identification.

Gareth scans the proceedings of the courtyard. Karen follows his gaze and as they alight on the feasting table (paradoxical for the feasting table being the only thing in the courtyard and hence the only object to behold), her eyes round in recognition and she utters a small "oh". She looks at Gareth whose face is all hardened lines, little amusement.

Gareth:

"Always the innocent for the game... This place reeks of death... Can you smell it at all? But then, I suppose one needs to know the scent of death in the first place".

Jehovah flexes his muscled arm uneasily, scanning the courtyard with tangible fear. Perhaps it mixes with his wine, in the air, and Gareth Rothschild turns, looking at Jehovah askance. Their eyes meet.

Jehovah:

"It is a necropolis, Gareth".

Gareth:

"Would you believe me if I told you I would rather walk a necropolis"?

Jehovah looks at him in clear disbelief, blinking.

Karen:

"It is an altar... the ancient altar... These people do not know on what they are feasting".

She turns to face Jehovah, tears in her gothic black eyes. In the background, at the feasting table, Mark Dashwood slumps in a drugged stupor... dead? - Possibly. The ornate goblet arcs out of his hand and landing at the edge of the table facing the audience, spills to their faces. The sheer white tablecloth pissed vermillion.

The goat from scene 2 races across stage, as if freed. A Masked Guest follows, with machete drawn.

Gareth:

"We need to get inside and reveal ourselves later. There is much to explain"...

Although his gaze is fixed at Leon, it is Fehmin who listens from her place at the table. She gets up and approaches Gareth - halfway there she becomes woozy, and unties her lynching-rope belt to catch her breath. She sighs, steadies herself, and staggers over to the rear wall of the courtyard. In her wake, Titan, Rookewood and Moody pick up the rope and encircle her, like fishermen with a net.

Ignoring the men with the rope, Fehmin glares at Gareth and says with forced whisper:

Fehmin:

"Gareth... I've got my eyes on you".

Gareth turns away in shame or fear, then turns to face her a moment later. As if well again, Fehmin is standing upright - she places her hands over her eyes. She sneers at him,

peeking through her fingers as blood spurts and dribbles down her hands, then sways yet again and falls, quite dead. Gareth shudders. Jehovah rounds on him, catching up, shivering with fright.

Jehovah:

“You will reveal yourself, won’t you? Won’t you?”

Gareth” -

He forcibly turns Gareth around.

“Answer me, man” -

Jehovah is wrenched away from Gareth by Moody and Rookewood who encircle him with the rope and shove him against the rear wall. Jehovah collides with the wall and gasps in pain.

Jehovah:

“What the” -

Rookewood:

“We are in on this together or you go sit at the table to feast the dead”.

Jehovah:

“We are walking into a trap. Gareth knows this. They will kill us. With sharpened knives on the altar.

Unless Gareth reveals himself” -

Karen:

“Gareth we are all afraid. But to let that fear drive us -

Please. Don’t hide.

Speak to me... Gareth” -

There is a distant goat cry, before Gareth turns to her.

Gareth:

“Alright. Paint my eyes”.

He goes down to his knees, in front of her. She is taken aback, clearly.

“Before they know - paint my eyes” -

Karen and Moody exchange a look and then Karen obliges. Gareth’s transformation is rapid but hardly visible as immediately after, in quick motion, he climbs the wall and jumps to the other side. The quickness is unexpected but even so, Jehovah has undone the rope binding him. The five of them exchange a glance before following Gareth over the wall but as they jump to the other side, the solid brick like a cardboard prop totters and falls.

The Masked Guest with the machete returns, holding aloft a plate carrying the sacrificed goat. He sets it reverently on the table, overturning the cornucopia. Most of the Guests eat pieces of the raw meat.

The cinema screen plays fractals, the sole source of light on the stage.

Gareth is nowhere in sight at the other side of the toppled wall. Karen calls his name as Moody and Jehovah wander offstage into the aisles of the audience while Rookewood attempts to comfort Karen but is rejected.

The stage lights black out -

Then, like a 1920s film, this pre-recorded scene plays in noir on the cinema screen:

A dark deserted corridor of a derelict mansion given up long in hopes to let. The only light source: a full moon. The corridor leads to locked doors on either side: grim locks and bolts caked in cobwebs. The doors are cracked and loose. Beyond them, nothing much to hide. The corridor is riddled with an assortment of furniture pushed against the walls and in front of the doors, draped in sheets of white. Parchment yellow now, those sheets of white, and ridden in places with brown and grey cobwebs and clumped dust.

A footstep -

A gasp of breath: Gareth's.

Here the cinema screen merges with actual action on stage, as Gareth enters. On first impression it is a room no less in disarray as the corridor itself: a collection of tables burdened with an assortment of tools, files coming apart at the spine, and reams of faded, age old papers. Everything is scattered and in disarray. The tools on the tables are caked with dust and grime. The knives and shrapnel have their own patina of dark and dried crust. There are two large glass tanks filled with what might have once been water or some clear liquid, murky now with small grotesque eerily suspended flotsam. The reams and reams of bent and scribbled scraps of papers on the tables are feverishly whisked in odd directions, as if someone has gone through them in frenzy, looking for something. And as a result of this search pages stick out from piles at odd angles like dislocated bones. There is one computer set next to the murky water tank, gazing with glassy light on screen saver mode. The room bears an air of a laboratory abandoned in the middle of some experiment. Its first impression of a room no less in disarray than the corridor itself an illusion, for here; clearly, there is a method to all the disarray.

Gareth picks up a paper lying on the top of a twisted bunch and squints at the scrawny scribble in the meagre light. Unable to render it legible he brings it close to the illuminated computer screen for better view. And at once the gadget seems to come to life. A camera perched at the top scans the page with a red laser beam, before a mechanical voice issuing from the computer churns out the words: "Day 3480, forgotten age".

Below this heading is a grid of numbers till one hundred and one. Some of the numbers are circled and the author of this document has added notes on the side for his own advantage. Gareth scans it haphazardly. And the camera-eye at the top of the computer scans equally frantically with its red laser gaze, churning out broken bits of what it has managed to scan, trying to keep up with Gareth's pace: "Number 81: Dead... Number 57: Dead... Number 83: Dead"...

On the cinema screen, a lone scrawl in one of the bottom margins reads: "the void of this place has no life".

The eerie machine continues, "...Number 2: Dead... Number 8: Dead"...

Another note, boxed by the author to highlight its importance: "And yet today did not squander as its previous comrades, now long gone, for -" An arrow connects this box to a number on the grid.

"...Number 7: alive and ready to use" -

Gareth throws these papers away and brings himself at the level of the camera-eye and glares at it, getting closer and closer and trying to make sense. The camera scans his eye with the same indifferent red laser before it churns: "Subject unidentified... Please insert subject"...

There is a scuffle behind Gareth that makes him jump with the sense of not being alone. Another scuffle, a little louder now -

He turns as everything comes to light, a cheap parody of a theatrical epiphany; he wonders why he had not seen it immediately as he entered: a cage. It is life size, from the ceiling to the floor, covering one half of the room, or more. Rusted iron bars bent here and there in places in accordance to a dance move. In the light there is, they are almost dancing. Shapes. Dark shapes barely discernible beyond these dancing bars are very still: unmoving. Gareth moves towards them.

Inside the cage are TEN SHADOWY FIGURES, shackled from the ceiling, the walls, the bars of the cage - everywhere, out of someone's sadistic fear that they will escape. They are dead now, dead in their captivity, their dead forms hanging limply like broken puppets still clinging to their strings, chains.

In the middle of the cage, the real drama takes centre stage, slowly given the spotlight: a chair. Old but by no means relenting, designed for torture and entertainment alike. The chair bears the capsized form of a man shackled from the arms of the chair, his head bowed and only the top of his matted hair are visible. His figure is wasted and much skeletonised, the green veins on the hand and arm pulsating, snaking, entwining. Gareth presses his face to the bars to look at this slouching man, more drawn in kinship to him than the dead figures.

Gareth:

"No.

Leon...

Go feast at the table. Leon, you were feasting at the table, remember"?

The slouching figure does not respond. And Gareth looks beyond, breaking the fourth wall, at the audience, imploring assistance with his eyes. Getting none, he returns his gaze to Leon.

"Leon... Leon, please. Look at me, Leon. It's me. Gareth.

I agreed to reveal myself so you might not recognise me at first- but it's me, Gareth" -

The slouching figure starts to faintly whimper, in pain or remorse or grief: an unsettling emotion.

Then Leon begins to speak in a faraway voice, as if he is standing down below calling to Gareth who stands on top of a cliff. Quite faraway, an effort to speak:

Leon:

"Not one of them is living, Gareth".

Gareth's eyes are inadvertently drawn to the limp, incarcerated figures.

"And yet I can hear them, as plainly as I can hear you... Gareth"...

Gareth:

"This is not real. No. You are at the table and you are eating bread and drinking wine. And Fehmin is there with you.

Leon, Fehmin is there" -

The slouching figure lets out a sob this time.

Leon:

“She died, Gareth. Didn’t you see? She died and I came here. I had no choice, you must understand this”...

Gareth:

“And now you can go back. Go back, Leon”.

Leon:

“I can’t... now, Gareth”.

The slouching figure raises his head and catches sudden light. Gareth backs away in horror - profane. Leon’s eyes are closed and stitched at the margins of the lids and two black irises are painted atop the closed eyelids.

Then, a red laser beam frantically going round the room lands on the painted irises of the stitched eyes, and the machine starts humming, almost in pleasure, before cooing: “Subject identified. Subject is ready for use”.

Gareth, momentarily distracted by the macabre machine, turns back to look at Leon in horror.

Leon:

“That’s right, Gareth.
And now, I have got my eyes on you”.

Curtains fall.

End of Act One.