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Erratica

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**More Great Plays Available
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CHEESE

by Laurel Ollstein

3 males, 4 Females

Synopsis: Welcome to Tillamook, Oregon, "the land of cheese, trees and ocean breezes." Griffin, a cheese sculptor, struggles in his marriage to Cindy, who lives in denial over the loss of their young son. Enter, Billie, Cindy's best friend, a knocked-up, wanna-be Hollywood actress, running from her failures. The secrets they keep and lies they tell fester and spoil like the rotting cheese that surrounds them, in this twisted, modern, Kaufman and Hart-esque laughter. When the truth is revealed, the comedy is as sharp and the cheddar.

Keeping Faith

by Mark Scharf

2 Males, 2 Females

Synopsis: Ed and Jane are not about to let their 18 year old daughter Faith marry 45 year old Hartsell (Hart) Edward Thomas Williams IV – even if he does own “Hartsell’s Patio Furniture.” So, on the day before the wedding, they do what any parents would do: they kidnap Faith and drive into the wilds of Arkansas to hide out until things cool down or Faith changes her mind. With Hart and the police in pursuit and Faith refusing to play victim, Ed and Jane have their hands full in this dark comedy which is part extremely-dysfunctional-family-fun and part political commentary.

ERRATICA was given its world premiere production by Capital Stage Company in Sacramento, California, Stephanie Gularte, Artistic Director, on July 17, 2009. It was directed by Michael Stevenson.

The cast was as follows:

| | |
|---------------------|-------------------|
| Samantha Stafford | Stephanie Gularte |
| Elsbeth Lisseth | Stephanie Altholz |
| Christopher Marlowe | Danny Webber |
| Lisa Milkmin | Jamie Jones |
| Jack Hooper | Eric Wheeler |

ERRATICA was given its first full production by Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana on October 19th, 2006. It was directed by Elliott Lemberg.

The cast was as follows:

| | |
|---------------------|----------------|
| Samantha Stafford | Kate Ponzio |
| Jack Hooper | Ryan Krause |
| Elsbeth Lisseth | Meaghan Looney |
| Lisa Milkmin | Allie Miller |
| Christopher Marlowe | Tony Howell |

ERRATICA was first workshopped by Columbia University students in the Lerner Black Box, New York, NY in spring 2003.

The cast was as follows:

| | |
|---------------------|-----------------|
| Samantha Stafford | Laura Kolb |
| Elsbeth Lisseth | Roopa Vasudevan |
| Jack Hooper | Ryan Ghan |
| Lisa Milkmin | Emily Gerstell |
| Christopher Marlowe | Sloan Bradford |

ERRATICA
An Academic Farce
By Reina Hardy

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Samantha Stafford, Professor of English, 38

Elsbeth Lisseth, Trembly Co-ed

Lisa Milkmin, Publicist

Jack Hooper, Library Cowboy

Christopher Marlowe, dead poet

SCENE

A University Somewhere

ERRATICA

Dr. Samantha Stafford is at her desk, holding a poem and an apple. She reads.

DR. STAFFORD: Sonnet number zero, interesting. That is- interesting. The apple, on the other hand, is a cliché, but I'm hungry enough to allow it. So- let's see-

She holds the apple ready to bite and reads.

Teach with eyes, teach with lips...interesting... learning curves... interesting.... wisdom and wet thighs? Gracious, that alliterates. Take love out of books... spread your covers and close me in your pages. Oh my.

She puts the apple on her desk, lowers the paper and removes her reading glasses.

Mr. Fairland... Gregory, isn't it? Uh-huh. Well, Gregory. Before I go any further in my critique of this piece, I'd like to inquire if I ever actually assigned a free-form, slant-rhymed, revisionist sonnet in what seems suspiciously like my praise to my Renaissance Forms class? Really? I thought not. Though it did sound like something I might do to buck myself up for a date.

Now, Gregory. If you'd hoped to seduce me with this you're out of luck. Not to say that I don't like being praised. If someone had come along and written me Sonnet Number 53, for example, I would have jumped on him and wrapped my thighs around his neck. But, as to your poem... how to put this nicely... It's... bad. It's very, very bad. Laughable, actually. If you really wanted me, you should have come in here and played your strengths. Your ass, for instance. I noticed that it's tight, toned, well-rounded and vigorous... which is a lot more than I can say for your sonnet.

So here's my final verdict on the piece. If you want my respect, take it home, think about how you're using the meter, put a corset on those rampant double entendres and gut the third stanza. It's nothing but abstraction. If, however, you just want to get laid, get rid of the teaching references and try it out on a freshman.

She drops the paper on the far side of her desk, and retrieves her glasses.

Good day, Gregory.

Blackout.

Lights up.

Elspeth Lisseth, a trembly co-ed, waits in the hall near Dr. Stafford's office. Dr. Stafford walks back from lunch, making brisk annotations to a new edition of the sonnets. As she passes, Elspeth steps forward.

ELSPETH: Dr. Stafford?

Dr. Stafford looks up from her book and crooks her glasses down.

ELSPETH: You frigid bitch!

Elspeth slaps Dr. Stafford's face, gasps, bursts into tears and turns to run away. She trips. Dr. Stafford looks heavenward, then at the fallen girl.

STAFFORD: *(muttering)* Angels and ministers of grace defend us. *(To Elspeth)* And a good day to you too, Miss-

ELSPETH: You icy, heartless, nasty nasty bitch!

STAFFORD: You must be in my freshman survey course. I'm sorry if you're upset about that Hemingway paper- but grades are non-negotiable and in fact drop one full letter every time you slap the teacher.

ELSPETH: I don't care about letters- I'm talking about love!

STAFFORD: Good god, it's catching. Here, get up, I'll talk to you in my office... But I have to tell you that you're too young for me and anyway, I'm not inclined in that direction.

ELSPETH: No... I'm talking about Gregory.

STAFFORD: Oh yes, Mr. Fairland. Well, come in anyway. *(She opens the door.)* Have a seat. *(She does.)* And have some Kleenex too. You're all sippy.

While Elspeth composes herself, Dr. Stafford settles into her chair and extracts a notebook from her desk. She pens a few lines, then takes her glasses off and lays them in her lap.

STAFFORD: Now, what is your quarrel with me?

ELSPETH: You broke Gregory Fairland's heart.

STAFFORD: No I didn't.

ELSPETH: He spent two hours and forty eight minutes last night sobbing under the pool table in commons.

STAFFORD: How embarrassing

ELSPETH: He wouldn't come out for dinner- he just sat there and refused to eat anything but Triscuits and powdered Tang. And when he finally came out, he took his poetry notebook and boiled it in a saucepan on top of Alan Fishbein's hotplate. All those beautiful poems. If that isn't the action of a heartbroken man, what is?

STAFFORD: I don't know, perhaps he finally realized his poetry notebook deserved to be boiled.

ELSPETH: I don't understand how you could say that, how you could reject pure love and then insult the honest efforts of a very talented and very sensitive young man—?

STAFFORD: Control yourself, please. Now... just what is your name?

ELSPETH: Elspeth Lisseth.

STAFFORD: I beg your- (*Breaks into sudden laughter. Composes herself.*) I'm sorry, a speech impediment is nothing to laugh about.

ELSPETH: I don't have a speech impediment. My name is Elspeth, Elspeth Lisseth.

STAFFORD: What cruel parents you must have. At any rate, El-Elis...

ELSPETH: Elspeth.

STAFFORD: Elspeth, perhaps you consider me the cruelest she alive. In fact, I bet you think I eat men like air.

ELSPETH: You're certainly chewing on Gregory.

STAFFORD: Let me tell you a story, Elspeth. It illustrates my view on teenage poetry. At the time of this story I was a teenager myself, and inclined to believe that every love poem I read was intended specifically for me, including those written by men who died some four hundred years before my birth. Now, I was the editor of my school's literary magazine, the Trumpet Blow, a job I held opposite a particularly loathsome and pimpled young would-be James Joyce. We were both unattached.

STAFFORD (Cont'd): One Thursday, a breathless ode to an unattainable beloved crossed our submissions table. Now I was bound to review all pieces anonymously, but certain references to seal-brown eyes, dreamy thoughts, and certain expressions that crossed the pocked face of my co-editor as we read through it led me to believe that it was written by him in my honor. Well, this thrilled me to the bone, needless to say. I copied it, pasted it on my wall, fell slowly and gracefully in love with spotty boy and started a chain of events that ended with me losing my virginity in the typing room of a particularly sordid city library.

Needless to say, when the Trumpet Blow finally came out and I discovered that said poem had not been written by spotty boy at all, had in fact been written by a sophomore girl named Annie Pecker for the captain of the lacrosse team, I lost a little of my faith in literature. I went home, tore the damn thing off my wall and read it again. And as I went through it, all I could think was, "This is the worst mother-fucking poem I've ever read. I've been suckered by a piece of crap."

I decided then and there, I would never again allow my loins to cloud my critical judgment.

ELSPETH: Wow, Dr. Stafford-

STAFFORD: Oh shit, call me Sam.

ELSPETH: Wow, I never thought...

STAFFORD: Don't mention it. Really. Don't.

Dr. Stafford takes a moment and makes a few furious notations in her sonnet book. Elspeth fidgets.

ELSPETH: Sam?

STAFFORD: Call me Dr. Stafford.

ELSPETH: Sorry. Dr. Stafford? Are you going to eat that apple?

STAFFORD: No.

ELSPETH: Can I have it?

STAFFORD: No. You're smitten with this Gregory fellow, aren't you?

ELSPETH: I-

STAFFORD: Just what do you find so bewitching about him?

ELSPETH: I've... I've always liked poets, you know, the sensitive type. And he, has this really nice way of... of walking. Kind of like a - a young lion or something. And I like the way he pushes his hair back out of his eyes. And once, in dining hall he opened the door for me and did this little half-bow, and then he smiled and got this dimple that looked like a kiss halfway up his cheek.

STAFFORD: I find he has a rather nice ass, but his style is both vague and florid.

ELSPETH: I beg your pardon, Dr. Stafford?

STAFFORD: Never mind. If you like him so much... why don't you get him the hell off my back? The rest of the faculty is starting to talk.

ELSPETH: Because.... because...

STAFFORD: Spit it out.

ELSPETH: I'm not pretty enough. I mean you... look at you. You're a Ph-D and you're so beautiful. And I- I can't get construction workers to look twice at me on the street.

STAFFORD: Actually, you have a certain girlish, pre-legal beauty. You underestimate yourself.

ELSPETH: Don't lie to me. I'm man repellent.

STAFFORD: I know for a fact that every time Dr. Novin sees you his heart goes humbert-humbert-humbert.

ELSPETH: (*perking up*) Really?

STAFFORD: (*suddenly stern*) You stay away from him.

ELSPETH: All right, Dr. Stafford.

STAFFORD: (*Rising and showing Elspeth to the door.*) You just stick to your inept sonneteer, Miss Lisseth. Things will work out, I promise. But listen to me, and look me in the eye. Don't ever fool yourself. You're a smart girl and worth the world on your own. You like him for his dimples, not his verse.

ELSPETH: I don't believe that.

STAFFORD: Trust me. I've lived to thirty-eight by keeping love and literature separate. I don't like bodily fluids dripping on my books.

ELSPETH: (*giggling*) You're a very bitter woman, aren't you, Dr. Stafford?

STAFFORD: And you're a very perceptive little girl. Now, good day, and get out of my office.

Elspeth waves goodbye and leaves. Dr. Stafford retreats to her desk, and picks up her book of sonnets. She flips idly through it, sighs and runs her finger down the binding.

STAFFORD: Now here's a poet. It's a pity, Will honey, about those four centuries.

KIT: Oh, sigh no more, Professor. You've got me.

A young man of perhaps 28 has appeared by her window. He is sharply dressed- a well cut casual suit worn open with no tie perhaps, or leather pants and a cashmere turtleneck. Dr. Stafford stiffens, and very pointedly fails to look at him.

STAFFORD: Fuck.

KIT: Really now, that's not nice. Your very own kicking speaking Elizabethan prodigy, audible, tangible, visible, in *your* office, and all you can do is whine, "Oh Will! I want Will! Where's Will? *You're* not Will." Story of my afterlife.

He walks to her desk and makes himself comfortable in various intrusive ways.

STAFFORD: We've reviewed this, Kit. You're not a ghost.

KIT: Then how come it's been four hundred years since I've gotten laid?

STAFFORD: (*To the air*) You're a mere imaginative construction enabling me to interact with my ideas on Elizabethan literature, a kind of incorporated dialectic machine. (*Kit waves a hand in front of her nose*) I have a very good imagination.

KIT: Oh teacher....

STAFFORD: Go away.

KIT: If you want a proper dialectic, why didn't you conjure up immortal dead Wonder Boy here (*He gestures towards the sonnets*) and ask him about the sordid little theories in your sordid little book? He's the one you want to sleep with, after all.

STAFFORD: It's quite clear.

KIT: Elucidate.

STAFFORD: I hold William Shakespeare in a great deal of esteem. I wouldn't presume to put words in his mouth.

KIT: And me?

STAFFORD: I'm sure you don't mind what I put in your mouth.

KIT: You couldn't bear to see your precious William dragged down to mortal height, could you? It makes me laugh. You see, *I* know the man has innards. I've seen him mewling and puking on his own shoes

STAFFORD: You've seen no such thing.

KIT: London streets after moonrise. He got some on the barmaid too.

STAFFORD: I need to get back to work.

KIT: Now I'm a ghost and he's a god. He's got the world and I've got you.

STAFFORD: Please go away. You are not real.

During the following speech, he creeps behind Stafford and begins massaging her shoulders.

KIT: Take this Anna Quinnberry business. Some librarian turns up a four-hundred year-old teenager's diary, and the whole world creams its pants. Why? Because she might have gone to one of widdle wilmington's premieres. If the tart gave birth to my illegitimate child it'd barely make page six.

STAFFORD: Stop that. *(He jerks his hands upward.)*

KIT: I wasn't doing anything. I'm not real.

STAFFORD: I mean you're not a ghost.

KIT: No, I'm just a mysterious entity who walks through walls, appears whenever you're alone, and engages in intermittent poltergeist activity. *(He picks up the apple and makes it float.)* Oooooohhh floating apple.

STAFFORD: Put that down.

KIT: Wooooooooo....

Stafford grabs the apple and replaces it.

STAFFORD: If you were going to be a marginally credible ghost, shouldn't you at least speak in torrid Elizabethan slang? A little verse, perhaps? One or two poems? You haven't so much as an English accent. *(She puts her hands over her eyes)* Disappear. Disappear. *(She uncovers them)* Damn.

KIT: I think you believe in me, professor.

STAFFORD: Only that which is non-extant requires belief.

KIT: You profess to not believe in me, yet...

STAFFORD: Shut up. Logical trap-jaws are for undergraduates.

KIT: For someone talking to a facet of their own mind, you certainly enjoy getting your digs in.

STAFFORD: I'm not worried about you. The only thing that gives me a moment's pause is how little control I have over my own unconscious. Disappear. Disappear. Damn. I'm running into a block here. Perhaps I'm experiencing the fallout of some repressed childhood memory. *(She looks at Kit)* Who are you?

KIT: Your long-dead hamster. *(He makes a hamster noise.)*

STAFFORD: Who are you?

KIT: Jesus!

STAFFORD: Who are you?

KIT: I'm Christopher Marlow, for God's sake. Doesn't anybody care?

STAFFORD: You can't be an Elizabethan playwright. You don't speak correctly, you don't sit correctly. Your clothes should be four hundred years out of style, but they're only five. And you're far too clean.

KIT: *(He fingers his slacks.)* These were in the Bergdorf window last week.

STAFFORD: You can't be Marlow.

KIT: Why not?

STAFFORD: You keep hitting on me.

KIT: I only pull your pigtails to get your attention.

STAFFORD: Marlow was a notorious homosexual.

KIT: I prefer the term omnisexual. Would you like me to explain its Latin derivation?

STAFFORD: I would like to stop hallucinating minor poets.

KIT: Allow me to quote you some latin. "Quod voluisti habet, nunc abi."

STAFFORD: If you give me what I want, I'll go away?

KIT: It won't hurt a bit. In fact, due to my unique embodiment challenged state, you might not even feel it. Just think- sleep with a dead playwright, write a book-

STAFFORD: I'm writing a book.

KIT: "Transcendental Mimesis in Metanarrativistic Post-Mortem Dramatics", or "My Date with the Zombie." But no, you'd rather write "Sex, Love, and Shakespeare." Talk about beating off a dead horse.

STAFFORD: Is that what this is about? Professional jealousy? If I publish an article on one of your wretched plays, will you dissolve into little contented sparkles?

KIT: People write books about me all the time.

STAFFORD: People write books about your life. The espionage, the whoring, the rock-star pub-brawl death. I'm interested in the work.

KIT: Well that'll never sell. Have you considered bearing my illegitimate child? Your publicist would love it.

STAFFORD: *(remembering)* Oh god.

KIT: That's right. It's almost 4:30, isn't it?

Dr. Stafford begins to shuffle in her desk, opening and slamming drawers.

STAFFORD: What is this, the ides of March? How many unpleasant visits do I get before supper?

KIT: How bad can it be? *(Mirthfully. He knows exactly how bad it is.)*

STAFFORD: It's not the badness I fear so much as the mediocrity. She's an intellectual ant.

KIT: Who makes you shake in your pumps.

STAFFORD: You're right. Her beady little teeth are awe-inspiring. I think you need to go now, before she swarms in here with her Myrmidons and tries to perm my hair.

KIT: Leave? Are you ashamed of me?

STAFFORD: Quite. I need to compose myself. Just let me dig up a few bones to throw to the bitch.

There is a knock at the door. Stafford shoves her drawers shut and swears under her breath.

KIT: Why don't you toss her that tasty little piece that was in here before?

STAFFORD: Fairlands?

KIT: Wouldn't he make her drool? Hot love in the library! Really let the great public get into your...book.

STAFFORD: Nothing happened.

KIT: Does that matter? Isn't all love constructed?

Another knock

STAFFORD: Go away. (*pitched to the door*) Come in. Both to the both of you. I don't care anymore.

KIT: (*Whispering in her ear*) I would come in, lady, but your doors are rusted shut.

STAFFORD: Are you sure you even have a handle?

The door swings open and he is gone. Enter LISA MILKMIN, Stafford's publicist. She makes an especial point of smiling after each sentence she speaks.

LISA: Hello, Sam! Sorry I'm late.

STAFFORD: Hello, Ms. Milkmin.

LISA: Oh Sam, I keep telling you, you can call me Lisa. We're all friends here. I brought lattes! Kiss kiss!

STAFFORD: Please don't touch me.

Lisa sits across from Stafford, in an open, casual posture.

LISA: You look nice today, nice and clean. No time for gossip, I'm afraid. Things are really starting to happen for us, very new, very exciting. Nice of course, but that means deadlines, doesn't it? Down to brass tacks! Plekker and Pannin is really starting to see in you what I see in you, which is potential. Real potential. To bring literature back to the forefront of what people read. P and P think, with the right jacket photo, you could have the biggest success for criticism since "The Invention of the Human."

STAFFORD: I thought the university press was putting out my book.

LISA: Oh yes, yes. In a way, yes. In another way, no. Distribution, publicity, the all important B and N and B shelf placement, actual printing and binding...

STAFFORD: B and... B and.. what?

LISA: Barnes and Noble and Borders, silly! P and P are much more suited for that stuff, you can see. But your press will definitely appear on the title page, somewhere.

STAFFORD: I suppose this means P and P get to assign an editor.

LISA: We'll cross that bridge when we come to it.

STAFFORD: I don't wish to be edited at P and P.

LISA: We'll get there, Miss Eager! First, I read your manuscript for the first five chapters, and it was really stunning. Knocked me over in my seat, let me tell you.

STAFFORD: You're plotting something. I can see your mascara glint.

LISA: But there are a few things I think it's missing.

STAFFORD: Lay on Milkmin. Let fall the blow.

LISA: First of all, really, for someone talking about Shakespeare- it is a bit... cynical. We're really used to something more life-affirming, warm—.

STAFFORD: Fuzzy?

LISA: Oh yes, you know, the perfect demonstration of essential human truths: Love, honor, friendship, love. That goes over well and it makes people feel good.

STAFFORD: Good for them.

LISA: You haven't got that.

STAFFORD: Really

LISA: But I think that's good! That's a... selling point. You're edgy, you've got attitude, you're saying something different. And you've got lots and lots of sex. That's sexy, that sells. And (*a pause to savor*) You're a woman.

STAFFORD: Oh, I remember now.

LISA: That's why you can get away with it. It's empowerment. Not romantic, not afraid to stand alone and maybe show a little leg. It could be Shakespeare for the Cosmo girl. I think I could get you a spread. But there are still a few problems. Book itself- very high-brow, very clever, kind of hard to read. Funny but smart. Now, I can't ask you to get rid of smart, but we can toss something else in there to lighten the batter. What do you think?

STAFFORD: Cosmo? *Cosmopolitan*? The women's magazine?

LISA: Aiming high, I know, but that's how you get far. Anyway, here's my strategy. It's two pronged. Play up the women thing. In two ways. One of them is easy, and that's you. Because you are very pretty, you know? In a sort of Mrs. Robinson way. Make-up, spectacles, stilettos. Schoolteacher as sex object. Men will want you, women will want to be you. But they can't, so they'll buy your book.

STAFFORD: Ah.

LISA: But I don't just want them to buy it. I want them to recommend it to their friends. Fat chance if it's just a lot of rehashing Shakespeare with funny bits. No. New material is key. New *female* material is key. *Sexy* new female material. And Sam, you are going to be so proud, cause I have found you just the thing.

STAFFORD: Dare I ask what thing.

LISA: It's right here at this very institution. Your very own librarian turned it up.

STAFFORD: Dear god. The diary.

LISA: You know about it?

STAFFORD: Hooper's been bragging about it for two weeks solid.

LISA: So you know! Wouldn't it just be a perfect addition to your book?

STAFFORD: Anna Quinberry. The largely unverified shorthand journal of a merchant's daughter and rumored courtesan, who died meekly, married, in childbirth, in 1639 like thousands of others? If I paused to consider every Elizabethan slut that walked London between the Spanish Armada and the civil war, I would never get to the plays.

LISA: Jack Hooper said-

STAFFORD: Jack Hooper is a grandstanding ninny who would do well to remember that he's a librarian, not some cowboy out of a boy's own adventure leaflet.

LISA: Jack Hooper is a very marketable man who had a spread in Time last month, and..

STAFFORD: I suppose the world has run dangerously short of stubble-faced film stars.

LISA: ...he said it was a very important discovery.

STAFFORD: For chroniclers of small beers, perhaps. It isn't my field.

LISA: You haven't read it.

STAFFORD: It hasn't been translated yet. How do you know it's going to have the torrid little liaisons you're hoping for?

LISA: Translated? It's in English. I might very well have read it.

STAFFORD: If you're familiar with Wylliss II variation Mann shorthand of the 1600s, you very well might have.

LISA: Shorthand?

STAFFORD: Someone's flying in from Trinity, and he's not even sure he can handle it. Too few surviving examples. It's not exactly fuzzy bunny pictograms, you know. Don't scrunch your nose up like that. Waste of botox.

LISA: You've underestimated me again, Dr. Stafford.

STAFFORD: I wouldn't think that possible.

LISA: I am not stupid, no matter what you sit there thinking, and muttering under your breath.

STAFFORD: If I thought you were stupid, I wouldn't mutter, I would say it out loud. You. Are. Stupid. Perhaps then I would say it in Latin. Stultus es,

LISA: You know, some smart people don't have to flaunt it with long sentences and mean little quips. Some smart people are decently ashamed!

STAFFORD: Eise gala. Greek. Ti Glupaya. Russian. Anato no baka. Ja-(panese)

LISA: *(suddenly assuming a highly confrontational body posture)* Listen to me, and listen good. No more miss nice publicist. You will have your own translation of the Quinberry diaries by next week. You will read them, and you will think very hard about my ideas concerning them and your book. I have powers you don't even know about. I can find dirt on you that will ruin your career and make your own mother spit on you when she sees you in the street- I'm serious. I have plans for you, and you are not going to ruin them. *Comprende* as they say in Latin?

Dr. Stafford leans into her chair and puts her hands in her lap. Lisa suddenly smiles, turns, and walks out of the office. Outside, she squeals.

LISA: Oooh!

She enters, carrying a monstrosity in a painted plastic bucket. It should consist of quite large store bought roses, and many branches obviously broken from campus trees. One of the branches has a poem pinned to it.

LISA: Someone has left you a big lovely bouquet. *(She drops it on Stafford's desk.)* And oh look. A handwritten note. I wonder who that's from? *(She goes to the door, smiles, and waves.)* Have a nice day, Sam! Kiss-kiss.

The door shuts. Kit reappears, saunters over to the desk, plucks the poem from the branch and reads.

KIT: To teach by cruelty is your one design,
Your words, steel hawsers, swing and
I learn only how to bleed and pine,
But not how to give up...

Stafford parts the fronds of the bouquet and sticks her hand out.

STAFFORD: Give me that. (*He does.*) Oh God. She saw. It's only getting worse.

KIT: I don't know, from a critical standpoint- I think the boy is improving.

Blackout.

Humming in the dark, a man's voice. The tune, perhaps "Ring of Fire" by Johnny Cash. Some sounds as of someone searching a library stack.

HOOPER: Ahh. Gotcha.

Lights up on JACK HOOPER, library cowboy, snatching a book. He is forty, tall, in total command of his domain.

HOOPER: Students. Lazy little rats.

STAFFORD: (*offstage*) Hooper?

Hooper straightens, squints and smiles.

STAFFORD: Hooper? Are you in here? Hooper?

She enters, virtually blind in the dim light. Her hands grope at shelves. Hooper contrives to stand quietly behind her as she fumbles.

STAFFORD: Hooper?

HOOPER: Hi.

Stafford starts, realizes she has been stroking Dr. Hooper's chest, starts again, and composes herself. She respects Hooper, against her will.

STAFFORD: Evening, Dr. Hooper.

HOOPER: Professor. Good to see you. What brings you up to stack 11?

STAFFORD: The same thing that brought me to stacks one through 10- I have a favor to ask you. Why aren't you in your office?

HOOPER: This. (*Holds up the book*) Depositions of the Clay Island Fraud Trials. Wild-haired little history grad was frantic for it. Convinced her professor would turn her out in the alleys if she didn't find it for him. I wouldn't be surprised if he was the one misplaced the damn thing- back in his student days. God knows no-one else has ever read it.

STAFFORD: *(taking the book from him and examining it)* You found it here? Three floors and sixty-seven call numbers away from its rightful place?

HOOPER: Yeah. *(He shakes his head)*

STAFFORD: How?

HOOPER: I had a feeling. Look, it was only a few floors off. Not, for example, buried under a tree, or in the guts of a broken jukebox in the basement under commons. I consider it an easy find when I don't have to leave the building. On to better things. You had a favor to ask me?

STAFFORD: Yes.

HOOPER: *You?* Spectacular. I just won half a dozen bets. Well, go on. Shoot.

STAFFORD: I want a look at the diary.

HOOPER: Which diary?

STAFFORD: You know which diary. The diary.

HOOPER: You mean Quinberry? Sorry. I wasn't sure. I remember you not being impressed with my Quinberry.

STAFFORD: Circumstances have changed. I... can see the potentially revolutionary nature of the find.

HOOPER: Now, that's a little rich from you, Professor, but I'll allow it.

STAFFORD: Go on, smirk. You've got your way.

HOOPER: *(As he speaks, Stafford follows him round about the stage and audience in a way that suggests traversing the floors of the library.)* Forgive me for looking so satisfied, but for a man like me - Quinberry was my lodestar, understand. My Ultima Thule, my one true love. I looked for her for years, in five countries. Common opinion held her to be apocryphal, but I had a feeling. She was out there. And no matter what I was doing, no matter where I was, she was never far from my thoughts.

STAFFORD: Could you possibly slow down a little bit? You've got this place set up like an obstacle course.

HOOPER: You know, if you want to keep up, you shouldn't wear such devastatingly sexy shoes. Do you need help over that?

STAFFORD: No. You were saying, about the Quinberry?

HOOPER: Hardest find of my life. But lively, dangerous, funny as hell, incredibly useful as an indicator of the sociopolitical roles of middle-class women in Elizabethan times- well, from the little I've been able to piece together so far. Something that good is worth the sweat. You know, I crossed an ocean for her. Three times. Ah, there.

He pops the Depositions back into its rightful place.

You can see why the disregard of someone like yourself might grate on me. These past few weeks have been a season of glory. I can't think of any librarian more... adored, frankly. But you just sat in your office, didn't come to the talks or the presentations. "Quinberry," you said, "She's not so great." You, who I'm not ashamed to say, I respect.

STAFFORD: I had no idea.

HOOPER: Hmmph.

He turns, and starts for his office door- another suggestive journey over the stage away. She follows.

STAFFORD: But now I've come around. I want to see the book.

HOOPER: Yeah, and I should be happy- but you know? I've got a feeling.

STAFFORD: No.

HOOPER: I think your motives are ulterior.

STAFFORD: Nonsense.

HOOPER: You're a bad liar, professor- too devoted to your own notion of truth. You'd call a bride ugly at her wedding. No, Quinberry goes first to the translator.

STAFFORD: He won't get here for weeks.

HOOPER: You couldn't properly understand the shorthand anyway.

STAFFORD: I've been studying up. I want a crack.

HOOPER: You're pleading like an undergrad. That's exciting. I like it. Keep on, it's working.

STAFFORD: I could get a vague idea, I could figure out what and who we were dealing with. Please. I know I can be a little hard to deal with.

HOOPER: Ha.

He reaches his door, and begins to fiddle with the lock.

STAFFORD: But I've never said that you don't do decent work.

HOOPER: Hm.

STAFFORD: You do.... good work, Dr. Hooper.

HOOPER: *(Stops. Long, slow smile)* All right, professor. Your foot's in the door.

STAFFORD: Good. When I can have the text?

HOOPER: Ease up, I hadn't said you won. I said you had a chance. First, I want to know why you've really changed your mind, and just what you want with my baby. Second, I want more abject flattery. We'll have dinner, talk it all out. I'll pick you up at your office at half past six tomorrow.

STAFFORD: Doctor, really, you will not-

HOOPER: Friday then. It's a date.

He shuts his door on her. She stands there for a long moment. Kit appears.

KIT: Professor- Mazeltov!

Stafford wheels, and strides offstage.

Blackout.

Lights up. Stafford barrels towards her office door, which is adorned by a leaning Kit.

KIT: Hello again. Look.

He grins and points to a piece of paper taped to the door. Stafford halts, reads, and, making a loud noise of frustration, rips it down. She strides into her office, crumples the paper into a ball, drops it on the floor, and kicks it into the audience with the toe of her pump.

STAFFORD: All I want to know is, why can't he write? If he were a student, if he were a high school student, if he were a pale yellow grub, it wouldn't matter, if he were only a decent writer. A scrap of talent, a shred of restraint- why?

KIT: One. The golden age is dead. Two. Admissions at this university are frightfully lax. Three. You're not pretty enough to attract the good poets.

STAFFORD: Oh clever, Marlow. Does that extend to my ghosts?

Dr. Stafford goes to get a drink from behind her desk, spots the bouquet, snatches it, and stuffs it as best she can into the office wastebasket. The flowers and branches don't fit, and they scrape her rather badly.

STAFFORD: Owwww.... Christ church college I hate flowers.

She collapses into her chair, sucking her fingers. Kit salvages one particularly impressive rose. Stafford mixes herself a drink as she speaks.

STAFFORD: I mean, had he genius, had he potential, something strong enough to override every barrier of custom and sense, why- I could just fuck him and get it over with.

KIT: And do a great service to literature, I'm sure.

STAFFORD: As it is- it's just sordid and deplorable, and a little psychotic. It's like in my book.

KIT: Now, now. Your book may be sordid and deplorable, but psychotic is a touch harsh.

STAFFORD: Will you let me alone. I'm trying to express the daily horror of being right all the time.

KIT: I see, Mr. Fairlands is an instance of your central theory. You should include a chapter on him.

STAFFORD: He's just a little bundle of hormones and rubbable bits, and he wants to say he's in love with me. He can't be. It's impossible. If he were good- if he were only good... elevation- the manufacture of something noble out of something base (*She pauses, pen and paper, begins to scribble as she mutters.*) Alchemy. Poetry. Lead. Shit.

KIT: Have fun then. Big lecture next week. "Love, Sex and Shakespeare." Hot date tonight- love, sex and Quinberry.

STAFFORD: Mmmmmph. Yes, of course.

She writes furiously, ignoring him. He picks up the apple.

KIT: Look at me! I'm ghost fruit!

Nothing. Kit determines that Stafford is really and truly not paying attention to him anymore. He walks round to the front of the stage and addresses the audience.

KIT: It often occupies my imagination- to what extent do I exist when she's not looking at me. Absolutely? Not at all? Or in a marginal, undecided state, like those sub-atomic particles they starting talking about in the last several decades. It's pitiable I didn't know about those when I was working. They'd add a little variation to tired old love speeches.

I am before the lady an odd quark
Resolved but in the compass of her eye.

Useless now. There's only one good reason to write poetry, as we know. And had I a hand to hold a pen, I'd still have nothing to get laid with.

Indignity upon indignity. This sour old creature is my universe, my reason for existence. I haunt her, day and night, night and day. Were I speaking in metaphors, I'd be in love with her. But this is fact. I'm tied to her in the judgment of some unimaginable heaven, some prissy vengeful fate.

STAFFORD: *(suddenly looking up)* Who are you talking to?

KIT: Nobody.

STAFFORD: I will never understand your perpetual fascination with that wall.

KIT : Ladies and gentlemen, dear, sweet Samantha Stafford. Just look at her sit there writing. Furious and intent. Somehow pure. Functionally dead. Keep watching. It gets worse.

Stafford cracks her pencil on the desk and hurls the pieces into the wastebasket.

STAFFORD: This is a damn good state I'm in.

KIT: Is your publicist coming tomorrow?

STAFFORD: I think she's bringing the editress of Cosmopolitan Magazine.

KIT: How did you get a publicist anyway?

STAFFORD: All the twitter with Dr. Hooper and the Quinberry, and Time. The administration foamed at the mouth and started hiring publicists like day laborers, and then there was a great deal of palaver about “revenue streams.” I don’t know what those are, but I know they like them, and I don’t.

KIT: The accursed Novin.

STAFFORD: As soon as I get tenure, I’m going to break his toes with an unabridged dictionary. He didn’t even warn me. I just came into my office one Tuesday and she was there, showing every one of her teeth.

KIT: I think she’s a Fury. I think all publicists are Furies. They prowl the streets, sniffing the air for someone who deserves them. When they find a victim sufficiently full of sin, they pounce. Bam! You have a recording contract!

STAFFORD: Please no. She has already afflicted me with eight by ten glossies. She also seems to think I can have the Quinberry translated by next week. And she’s forced me to smile pretty at Jack Hooper.

KIT: You’ve been waiting for an excuse to smile at him for years, ever since he found you that old criticism that’d gotten misplaced in the toilets.

STAFFORD: I’ll admit he has an uncanny skill for finding books.

KIT: Academia’s own divining rod.

STAFFORD: And I respect him as a superb and useful tool. That does not mean I wish to “open my covers” to him.

KIT: And yet you bend to Lisa Milkmin’s wishes when they include dinner with said incomparable tool.

STAFFORD: Crude.

KIT: I’m sorry, I meant rod.

STAFFORD: It’s a smart move right now. It mollifies the Fury, and diverts attention from the underage poet.

KIT: You’re actually afraid of that.

STAFFORD: She can’t find out about Fairland.

KIT: But nothing happened with Fairland.

STAFFORD: Immaterial. She's a publicist. Her business is the manufacture of plausible lies.

KIT: Who cares if you bite the fresh young apple of youth? The male professors do it all the time.

STAFFORD: I care, and that is precisely why.

KIT: Ah yes. *The Review*, Fall 2001. The only sacred trust. Pollution of the teacher/student relationship with dirty dirty sexy sex. Power dynamics. A saucy little article.

STAFFORD: It named names. Well, identifying characteristics.

KIT: I see. She could make you a public hypocrite of the worst sort. And there's a dog-pack already baying for revenge.

STAFFORD: It's not even that. I believe every word of that piece. I won't betray it, and I won't have a soul think I did. If there is one worthwhile and pure intercourse, it is the transfer of knowledge. The man who betrays that, who twists the regard of an admiring student into a willingness to open her legs for a little herky-jerky release of mechanical tension is lower than anything I can think of. The heavens stop their nose at it. It's insipid. It's tragic. It's common. It disregards our obligation to be smarter than they are.

KIT: You said that, if he were a good writer, you would release his mechanical tension.

STAFFORD: Of course, that would be different. Perhaps in the world it would still be a bleak affair, two lurching animals and a good deal of sniggering. But in another place, on a page somewhere, it might be love.

KIT: *(after a pause)* Dear professor, that was almost romantic.

STAFFORD: Fairlands is getting to me.

KIT: Careful. You'll faint into the good librarian's arms. *(Stafford laughs)* I can picture it easily. He's such a rugged old cowboy. Aren't you going to do something to help your face?

STAFFORD: There's nothing wrong with it. The manuscript won't care.

A vigorous knock on the door.

STAFFORD: Oh god. Is it the boy?

HOOPER: Stafford!

KIT: No, it's the *man*. Two hours ahead of schedule.

HOOPER: Stafford, I need to speak with you. Now.

KIT: Quick to the draw isn't he?

Kit vanishes. Stafford is engaged in a compulsive attempt to tidy everything within reach.

STAFFORD: One minute.

Dr. Stafford tosses her hair back, then immediately looks ashamed and begins to make notations.

STAFFORD: Come in, Dr. Hooper.

The door rattles.

HOOPER: I can't- door's locked.

STAFFORD: Give a good wrench counter-clockwise. It's a bit sticky.

Hooper flings open the door. He is in an impressive rage.

HOOPER: Evening.

STAFFORD: You're early. I hope nothing's the matter.

HOOPER: She's gone.

STAFFORD: She?

HOOPER: The Quinberry.

STAFFORD: You lost the volume-

HOOPER: It was stolen.

STAFFORD: Are you sure?

HOOPER: I don't lose books, Professor. Forgive me...

He hefts a chair and sits across from her, elbows on the desk.

HOOPER: I'm a little on edge. Years of work have just vanished from my office. Recognition, publication, a little bit of money. My trophy, my stroke of luck. My *contribution*. Poof.

STAFFORD: I'm very sorry.

HOOPER: Do you understand? I've lost the love of my life.

STAFFORD: I understand. Is there anything you wish me to say or do to alleviate your suffering? I do have a lecture to work on.

HOOPER: That chilly little smile doesn't look good on you, Professor Stafford. And I don't feel good about it.

STAFFORD: My smile is not your problem, Hooper. If you've lost the Quinberry, alert the authorities. Or go find it yourself. You've always had a knack.

HOOPER: Funny thing that. Because my knack led me here.

STAFFORD: What are you suggesting?

HOOPER: Not a thing. I'm only stating that I smell you where the Quinberry used to be.

STAFFORD: You think I stole it. How insulting. Dinner is off.

HOOPER: Dinner is definitely off, Ms. Stafford. There is nothing to chew on, as it were. The thing you want is either lost to you or already in your grasp.

STAFFORD: I will not sit here, and be accused of theft. In some countries that's considered as serious as plagiarism.

HOOPER: I'm not accusing you. It's just a little striking, right? You come in and start wheedling me out of the blue, interested in a manuscript you'd derided days before. I play hard to get. Next thing I know, it's gone. Meanwhile, the stacks are growing sonnets. I don't know what the hell you're playing at, but it has to do with my find, and it isn't exactly above the table.

STAFFORD: Sonnets?

HOOPER: Photocopied sonnets. Blu-tak'd to every bookshelf in the library. Someone slipped a few under my door. The cleaners went mad. More importantly, I went off on an unexpected goose chase. When I came back I'd been robbed.

STAFFORD: Not painfully bad revisionist slant-rhymed sonnets, by any chance?

HOOPER: No, they're rather good. Shakespeare in fact. One through one-fifty-four.

STAFFORD: I always hated one-fifty-four.

HOOPER: They were laid out in a trail. Some compulsion made me follow to the end- like some preteen trope in a fairy tale finding prettier and prettier flowers, like a little kid following clues to get his birthday present. I just had to find the hidden end. I'm such a tool.

STAFFORD: What kind of parents hide clues to their children's presents?

HOOPER: Mine did. Why are you being so flip? Do you *want* to infuriate me?

STAFFORD: I want you to leave my office.

HOOPER: Gladly. But lady, you had better think about whatever you're doing, and think hard. Quinberry is mine. I want her back. The police have been notified. I'd advise the culprit to throw themselves on my personal mercy. Oh. And this was on your door. I think it's for you.

He takes a paper out of his belt and throws it on her desk, then exits, slamming the door. Kit reappears.

STAFFORD: (*picking up the paper*) What is your substance, wherefore are you made,
That millions of strange shadows on you tend?
Since everyone hath, every one, one shade.
And you but one can every shadow lend.

KIT: What is it?

STAFFORD: It's number fifty-three.

Blackout.

Gentle music. Lights up on Elspeth, in her dorm room (a special on a bean bag), studying.

ELSPETH: Describe Adonis, and the counterfeit
Is poorly imitated after you
On Helen's cheek all art of beauty set,
And you in Grecian tires are painted new;
Speak of the spring and foison of the year
The one doth shadow of your beauty show
The other as your -(bounty doth appear)

There is a knock on the door. The music stops. Elspeth shuts up all her books.

ELSPETH: Who is it?

LISA: It's your auntie Lisa.

ELSPETH: Oh. Come in.

Lisa enters. She is laden with enticing packages. Elspeth lights up when she sees them.

LISA: I brought snackies!

ELSPETH: Oooh- what?

LISA: Ginger cookies and cheesecake bars. Homemade. Here's a mocha for you, love. Kiss-kiss.

Elspeth takes and drinks greedily. Lisa takes off her coat, arranges her skirt, and sits on the floor next to her niece. As Lisa opens the boxes, Elspeth eats.

LISA: I just came by to see how you were doing with your work.

ELSPETH: Classes are good. The teachers are a little scary, but I'm getting used to it. And I wrote a really cool paper and got an A.

LISA: What was it about?

ELSPETH: "She's So Cold" The English *Carpe Diem* poem from Marvell to the Stones. Dr. Novin said he loved it.

LISA: Oh Elspeth. I'm so proud. But I was wondering about- you know. Our work. That little job I had for you.

ELSPETH: Oh. Yeah

Her consumption of sweets gets slower and more guarded.

ELSPETH: The translation. I've done thirty-six pages. In the three days since I, um, got it.

LISA: Is that fast?

ELSPETH: Really fast. Plus I skimmed it, so I kind of know where the good bits are. You know, the dirty ones.

LISA: Oh good girl! *(She hugs Elspeth)* Here, have some truffles. Who would have thought your little hobby would actually be useful?

ELSPETH: It got me a scholarship here.

LISA: Oh yes, and we were all proud, but I meant useful to real people. Now, it sounds like a good chunk you have done. Do you think I could have a look?