

Aletheia

(version February 19, 2017)

Aletheia is in a tall, iron cage that conforms closely to her body like a sarcophagus. (See the photos and diagram.) It stands on a black pedestal about one foot high. The cage is taller than her, the shoulders narrow above her head. The facial area of the cage is a large oval-shaped iron ring whose sides are about an inch wide. The lower two thirds of the oval are covered by a white theater mask. The cage is designed with minimal obstruction of her face. Two steel mesh baskets hang at her sides on the outside of the cage at waste level and hold a few objects. A small, round mirror on a steel arm about six inches long is attached to the cage at waste level, front center, so she can look in it and lower it when not needed. She is wearing a black concert gown and a long, glittering necklace.

Light slowly rises on Aletheia as she plays her instrument like a soft and distant fanfare. When finished, she places the instrument on a rack on the stage right side of the cage.

She looks at the audience with energetic, excited anticipation: This will of course be a party to remember. She turns and gestures to an unseen window to her right: The courtyard below will be teeming with guests. And I still can't believe—without pausing she exuberantly extends her arms straight out to her sides-- they've asked me to sing for the patrons tonight.

She looks toward an unseen window to her right, then sings while variously looking at it and the audience: From my window I see that the lanterns are lit. The cut crystal punch bowl blazes with lighting from bright colored orbs. Tangerine and blunt yellow afloat in the night.

She rummages in the basket on her left by extending her left arm through the bars, lifting things to look under them, pulls out an eye-liner, and "spikes" it into position in front of her on the last note of the "rummaging" phrase. She turns to the right basket, rummages with her right arm extended through the bars, takes another eye-liner and spikes it in front of her in a similar manner on the last note of the phrase. She reads the label on both pencils: Laura Mercier? Or Maybelline Fire? She contemplates the two pencils, then holds one up higher: This one should do it. She extends her left arm fully through the bars, and on the first note of the flourish tosses the second liner in the left basket. In one gesture she takes the cap off the second liner and fully extends her arm through the bars, then tosses it in the left basket.

Tonight is my night to bedazzle. Highlights her brow. I'll put on my very best things. She exuberantly extends her arms through the bars: And my singing will shine like a radiant star. She resumes touch ups. But what will I sing for the patrons tonight? She examines her face in the mirror, sudden consternation: E-gad! Looks closer. She jerks her head back shocked: A pimple! She extends her left arm through her left bars, freezes a moment, then tosses the liner in the basket on the first note of the flourish.

She rummages in basket on her left side with her left arm as before. She turns, rummages on the other side with her right arm, and finds a bottle of covering cream. She lifts it with a flourish and spikes it into position in front of her, unscrews the lid, fully extends her arm through the bars on her left, and tosses the lid in the basket on the first not of the flourish. She turns back front and sings using the cream on the pimple during the interludes. Like putty I use certain words on my face. Applies cream to pimple. Like ageless. Cream. Like winsome. Cream. To fill in the fissures that

define the lines of years. *She quickly wipes her fingers with a beige hanky from her right basket, turns to the left basket and searches for the cell phone which is set on speaker mode.*

She extends her arm with it through the bars, and holds it in front of her in a reverie. Jeremy, are you there? She waits for a response and reveals a sense of abandonment. Slightly frustrated: Check your computer my dear. Pause as she waits again. She brings the phone inside the cage, closes it, turns and extends her arm through the bars on her left side, and tosses the phone into the basket on the first note of the flourish. Oh well. She exuberantly extends her arms through the bars on both sides: My songs will enchant them tonight.

She rummages in the basket on her left and finds a container of facial powder, spiking it into position on the last note of the phrase. She turns to the basket on her right, rummages with her right arm, lifting two or three objects before she finds a powder brush and spikes it in front of her on the last note of the phrase. She studies the label on the container: L’Oreal Dazzeling Sunlight. She looks closer to read the fine print: Micronized titanium dioxide? She looks up at the audience: Just what I need. She raises the brush like a conductor’s baton, and sings, lightly conducting with the brush: Tell me the words that will make me forever young. She powders between the words: Like lovely. Powders. Like goddess. Powders. My sweet love.

With the brush in one hand and the powder in the other, she extends both arms through the bars on each side, and tosses the brush and powder into the baskets on the second to last note of the phrase.

Pause. She reaches up and touches the mask. She sings to the mask while continuing to touch it: Follow me my light as I walk the ways of blood. As she sings, a small light slowly illuminates the front of the mask, and then a small light behind the mask causes its eyes to be ringed with light. The effect should make the mask seem as if it is coming to life. She lowers her arm from the mask and faces forward. (This effect can be used at various points in the work.)

She takes some opera glasses from her right basket and observes the gala attendees through the window. When she sings, she turns toward the stage front, but during the interludes she turns to the window and uses the glasses to observe the party. They’re already standing around waiting for me, chatting at tables with bottles of wine, and carefully selected hor d’oeurves. They could be cows quietly mooing, moving toward bales at the fence, but satin and gabardine cover their torsos, and the hungry have hidden their horns. Everywhere echoes frivolous banter, pleasantries timidly filling the air.

She returns the glasses to the right basket, rummages in the basket on her left, slowly and reflectively takes her cell phone from it near the end of the phrase, and holds it in front of her with her arm extended in front of her through the bars. She looks at the phone reflectively, waits for an answer. When none comes, she asks: Jeremy, are you there yet? She again watches and listens with a slight sense of abandonment when Jeremy does not answer. She speaks to the unanswered phone: Tonight will be a night to remember. Let my breasts rise in your hands again. She pauses a moment in reflection, snaps the phone shut, extends her left arm through the bars, and tosses the phone in the basket.

She takes a hair brush from her left tray with her right hand, holds it slightly above her head like a conductor’s baton, and begins lightly conducting with it as she sings: It’s my words that will keep me

forever young. *She brushes her hair during the interludes between words:* Like healing mud. Brushes. Like cucumbers. Brushes. Like mayonnaise.

She returns the brush to the basket, briefly pauses in thought, reaches up and touches the mask as if she were entering another world, and sings to it while continuing to touch it: Illumine my face for the kiss, or the slap of the glove. *The mask goes through the same stages of lighting as before.*

She lowers her arms, briefly looks for the panty hose in her right basket, and finds them draped across the horizontal brace behind it. She whips the panty hose around in front of her, examines them, sees a huge hole in the seat, sticks her hand through it, turns to her right and raises them above her head, and tosses them away.

She turns back front. She notices the wind from the window, turns toward it, and touches her face with both hands as she feels the breeze upon it. She sings toward the window: Gentle breeze swirling from the window. Carry my words in your peaceful arms. Raise my voice to the sky. *She raises her arms through the bars and sways in the breeze.*

She turns front, puts her hands on the bars, pauses in thought. She rummages in her left basket with one hand as before, and takes a small bottle of mouthwash, removes the lid, puts it in the left basket, swigs off last amount, vigorously swishes, throws her head back and gargles loudly, swishes vigorously again, turns to her left, and spits. She then turns front, looks at the empty bottle, turns to the right side of her cage, raises the bottle above her head, aims, and tosses it over the top brace.

She turns back front and contemplates her bars while touching them with her hands. She takes her phone from her left basket and holds it in front of her with her arm extended and resting on the cross brace. She pauses reflectively looking at the phone. She addresses the phone: Jeremy? Then again, more insistently: Jeremy? *She sings in a quiet, confidential tone as if speaking to Jeremy:* Yesterday a lady complained about tonight's benefit. Realizing he is not there, she gradually closes the phone, but continues singing the story in a quiet, confidential tone anyway: She was concerned about the la-ti-da guest list. As if revealing inside information: It's a party for mostly—almost whispered--you know, really rich people.

Pause. She returns the phone to her left basket, rummages in it, brings out a bottle of perfume and spikes it into position in front of her. She turns to her right basket, rummages, and brings out another bottle of perfume. She looks at both, returns the bottle in her left hand to the left basket, turns and takes the hanky from her right basket, vigorously rubs the label clean on the remaining bottle, returns the hanky to her right basket, takes the other bottle back out of her left basket, and examines each, first the one in her left hand, then the one in her right. Which one is me? Ghost Mist or Angel Innocent? She pauses a moment in thought while looking at the bottles, turns to her left basket, extends her arm through the bars, tosses the bottle in her left hand back in the left basket, and turns back front. She sprays the perfume in the air with an upward sweeping gesture, and lets it cascade down on her. Pause. Ah perfume, how it sweetens the wind—she sniffs the bottle—the vibrant breath of song, awakener of dreams. Put it with words and music, and maybe they'll make me young again.

She takes the opera glasses, variously looking through them out the window and turning front to sing to the public: What will they think when I sing for them? Will they turn from their friends and listen to me? Or is this merely a social event? Their mouths smeared scarlet or lined with manicured hair,

open and shut like fishes sped up in a film. *She briefly becomes more reflective, then resumes:* It's time to go down to the courtyard and sing for the patrons, to brighten their night with some music. *She becomes clearly doubtful:* So why am I having this problem with going? *She exchanges glances between the public and the courtyard while gesturing as if holding a knife:* Shall I arrive with a grandiose entrance and dance with the man with the knife? *She continues exchanging glances between the public and the window:* Tomorrow over coffee, hands propping overstuffed heads, will they even remember if I were not there. *She contemplates her bars, lightly touching them with her hands.*

She takes an artist's small drawing mannequin from her left basket and holds it in her left hand. She reaches up and touches the mask with her right hand: Our ballads dream us into being--she reaches upward through the front bars with her right arm to an imaginary scene before her eyes--each word etching a scene. *She raises one arm of the puppet to match the position she had when reaching to her imaginary scene:* And then I fall out of a dream--she raises the mannequin with her right arm into the imaginary scene--and into another. *She puts the mannequin in her left hand, touches the mask.* Deep in water a gash tooth shark--with her right arm she makes a slow gesture as if tearing open her chest--rips my muscled body in two--with her right arm she raises the mannequin into the imaginary scene, gently moving it as if it were an actor in it--as I watch fading into death, liquid smoke of my own screams, rusty red, garlanding all around me. I see each word, sticky and reddish, hemoglobin grammar.

She puts the mannequin back in the left basket, and examines her bars as before: So what is the problem here? I mean really. The people? The music? My lack of courage? *She continues to lightly test the bars.* I've drawn my face for the party, but my eyes, and my words, refuse to remain in their almandine boundaries. *She continues to examine the bars as before. Pause. Looking at the public, but also glancing toward the window:* Music it seems has become a bit hard of hearing, it shuffles around like a ghost in an old opera house. *She returns to testing her bars.*

She takes her instrument, looks it over, silently tests it, then plays it. Yes indeed, this could be something for opulent patrons with nothing ambiguous in their lives. Except of course, their financial transactions. *She plays another passage, then becomes quiet and reflective:* And then I fall out of a dream. *She returns to her upbeat tone:* Now isn't that interesting? I hope they'll catch the meaning of that. We're weary of meaningless blather, but what can we say in a world so completely unhinged? *Plays.* But any resistance is strictly verboten. We classical singers and players rarely do that. *Plays.* So I'll continue with something abstract, with nary a word of protest, or they'll take our funding away. *She plays a more extended solo, then returns the instrument to its rack.*

Facing the public but glancing toward the window, she comments on her musical effort: Here downtown in the opera house, paid for by the patricians of rot, the patrons of neglect. *She turns her focus to her front.* I will rise up again. Free to wipe the sweat from my face. I will open my mouth and sing unscripted truths. *She extends her arms to her sides:* I will hallow this very room with my song.

She gently tests her bars. Pause. Cantabile e misteriso: When I arrived in Detroit, I went out and looked for this old ghost of an opera house. I enquired with a ragged old baroness languishing on the curb. The shabby old woman just looked at me then started to laugh and said--*extends her right arm to point to the imaginary scene:* There it is the ruin where people used to sing. *She partially lowers*

her arm. As she beheld the urbane carcass of our old opera house—mimics the shaking motions of the giant-- it seemed like a giant had picked it up to see what treasure might fall out, then replaced it in the dump of mid Detroit to look for better booty. She hears a soft, distant memory of opera, looks up and touches the mask. She slowly lowers her arm and face about halfway through the opera excerpt. Again extending her arm to point to the imaginary opera house: Stage planks rotten, plaster fallen, in the corner lies a crippled chandelier. Petrified with decades of dust, a bombed church of hopes. And then the old lady sang—she again points to the opera house in her mind's eye: "How will my heart live? My voice is full of dust." She lowers her arm, looks forward, and hears the dying music of a badly broken piano.

She takes the mannequin and holds it in her left hand, then extends her right arm upward to the imaginary scene: I see satin shapes unbolting in languid skies. She lowers her arm, and shapes the mannequin into a dance-like pose, then lifts it into the imaginary scene and lightly sways it as if it were dancing: Take your afternoon kipper and tea with Leonardo. Admire his red gold hair. Leonardo. She lowers her arm. Hand him a banjo and hear how he cavorts on the strings. Innocent and yet grave: With you he will sing: Is there a serum against the flower crushers? Can you dance a jig in a flack jacket? Can you disarm the grammar? The grammar of the grim rapers?

Pause. She takes the phone and holds it before her as before. Quietly: And you Jeremy? Have you vanished too? She sings to the phone, but her focus gradually shifts away from it:

Into the splashless pool
of silent losses,
your fine hands.

Soundlessly singing,
Beating heart-strung gestures.
Keyboard howls.

She looks toward the window. A chorus softly answers:

"The choir left and so I sing alone.
How could I not have noticed?
They must have grabbed their coats.
How did I miss their shuffles toward the gate?"

Pause as she looks forward into the distance. She then sings to the phone: We'll be in the lime-light beyond this world.

She looks up, touches the mask, and sings to it: Singing is transcendence. As she slowly lowers her arm and looks forward: What will save us if not song.

Distant choral voices:

"You are the expanse,
The star of life in the heart of sky."

She looks to the window: Why do my feet refuse to move?

She turns back front, sings to the phone:

Living like condors,

Snow leopards,
In beauty bound.

She looks toward the window and gestures to it: The party is lost to me now.

She turns back front, sings to the phone: Talk to me.

She looks to the front. Choral voices:

"Wind, sand and water flow over me,
Unmoving in a desert place."

She turns to the window and sings: The night is getting late.

She looks forward. Choral voices:

"You will sing without your robe,
No way to shut your eyes,
A glistening body in the night,
A glistening body in the light."

She sings to the phone: Talk to me. Talk to me. *She brings both her hands together while still holding the phone:* Talk to me.

Pause. She puts the phone away. Cantabile e misterioso: That night I dreamt I heard voices that conjured hand worked lace, and fat bespatted tycoons, and tightly cinched whale bone corsets.

She again hears the distant memories of opera, looks toward the mask, and passionately mimics singing the soprano's voice.

She extends her right arm to gesture to the imaginary scene: On its side in a pile of rubble an old wreck of a grand piano plays, a beached whale with broken teeth, twitching out the sad aria of our last night on earth.

She lowers her arm and listens to the broken piano.

When I awoke, the faint smell of coal smoke and honey suckle lingered in the gone echo—as she raises her arm to the imaginary scene--of the soprano's high C.

Long pause. She tentatively looks at the mannequin, then takes it. Pause.

She looks up and touches the mask:

Follow me my light---holding the mannequin by its base and with it facing the public, she slowly adjusts it into various positions as if planning her own choreography--
As I walk the ways of blood.
Illumine my face for the kiss
Or the slap of the glove.

She gestures to the room, extending both arms through the bars: I will hallow this room with my song.

With the mannequin facing the public, she extends its right arm upward.

Time to inhale the fetid air and sing.

She raises her right arm into a position similar to the mannequin's.

Time to gesture my love for those in the cheapest seats.

She looks up and touches the mask.

Follow me my light--she lowers her arm and choreographs the mannequin, leaving it again with the right arm raised--

As I sing the air of being. She extends her arm through the bars and gestures to the imaginary scene:

Lead my feet beyond

That which I am seeing.

She turns to the window. The night is getting late. Soon they'll all be gone.

She turns back front, raises her right arm to match the positioning of the mannequin.

Time to bear my breast to eternity

All around carried by my voice.

She brings her arm back inside the cage, but continues looking at the imaginary scene:

Follow me my light

As I walk the ways of blood

She touches her face:

Illumine my face

For the last scene's kiss of love.

During the long drone, she touches the mask, then alternates between testing her bars and looking at the mannequin in her left hand.

She turns to the window and sings, imitating a man slashing with a knife using a slow motion, horizontal sweeping gesture: I'll dance with the man with the knife. She turns to the front and sings: I'll sing a song they'll remember.

She extends her right arm through the bars and gestures to the imaginary scene. The mannequin in her left hand should have the same pose.

Born in the follow spot

That illuminates only innocence

Only uncrushable love.

A lost war with no shots fired

Here downtown in the opera house

Paid for by the patricians of rot

The patrons of neglect.

She slowly lowers her arm. She returns the mannequin to her left basket, takes her instrument and plays.

She returns the instrument to its rack. Long pause. Sing. Sing away the rusting cities. Fill them with song's edgeless dreams. Rise on this gentle breeze.

She sings with responses from a pre-recorded antiphonal choir (the underlined text.)

Breeze blow fool of my soul,
blow fool breeze,
my cold blown soul.

Bear my song into blue,
Migrant restive skin of earth.
Move me with your edgeless force,
Play me as your cloudless horn,
Pull me, sweep me into flight.

Breeze blow fool of my soul,
blow fool breeze,
my cold blown soul.

House my heart in your thrall
Float me on your unseen back
Clear my eyes with your streams
Fill me with your soft powers
Blow my arms into wings.

Pause.

Breeze blow fool of my soul.
Blow over me.
Raise me in the wind.

The light slowly fades to black on Aletheia but remains on the mask. During the wind sound the light on the mask fades to black.