

The Chair

(Part II of the trilogy *Miriam*, for instrumental performance artist and piano.)

By William Osborne (1987)

Miriam is in an asylum. She is wearing a dirty worn white sleeveless night gown extending past the knees. She is unkempt. She sits in a large heavy austere wooden chair. Her lap and legs are covered with a white blanket.

Attached to the stage right side of the chair is a dowel holding a trombone (or other instrument). on each arm rest is a spring loaded lock triggerable to lock her wrists in position. Swiveled on the right arm is a small table currently positioned in front of her, covered with small objects, and rotatable to the side of the chair. A thick dowel with a cross piece at the top rises about forty centimeters from the center back of the chair. A heavy hemp rope is twined about the cross piece with one end looped over the stage left of the chair back. A white gauze veil is draped over the dowel and rope. Two rests extend from the lower front legs of the chair to support her feet. Stage left of the chair is a wastebasket.

She holds before her face a white plaster mask extending from the hair line to the bottom of the nose. It has a short white handle on the left side, the eyes are cut to give the appearance of weeping and rimmed with thin black lines. Under its left eye is a long thin black needle shaped triangle, over it a black stylized arch of a brow. Her right cheek is stylized with a curved black line rounding the bottom and rising to the lower third of the nose. All has something of a skull like appearance.

Light rises slowly on the mask, and then the chair, as she begins to sing. All else is darkness. Murmured:

singing to herself
no
river flow on
deep water
the flood at last
singing to the river
child of night
flowing on
let her go

Pause. She lays the mask down, takes a pencil, and writes in the manuscript before ' her, lifts the manuscript and looks at It, resumes, turns and holds the manuscript over the wastebasket: Nothing but empty words--she turns back front-- all useless--flits the pages, sets it down. Just try to keep singing--flits to the correct page-- just scribble a few more lines, a few more empty lines--looks at the pencil still in her hand-- it just won't be stopped--writes, inspects the manuscript--cannot be stopped.

She rips out, wads, and tosses a page over her shoulder, ditto, ditto, takes up the manuscript and looks at it. No text, no music, no scene, no theme--she rips another page out, contemptuously: all dust--wads and tosses it-- nothing I can write--takes the mask holding it parallel to the floor-- not long until I begin--and brings it before her face:

singing to herself
no
river flow on
deep water

She suddenly sets the mask down, contemptuously: Dead end!

She takes the pencil-- Nothing but empty words--writes, stops, looks up-- not a whimper--ditto-- of truth--puts the pencil in the sharpener, grasps handle-- no text, nothing--cranks, and examines the point:

Can't be long now--*she puts the pencil back in the sharpener--* until they arrive--*cranks--* they stand there wordlessly--*cranks--* looking at me. *She examines the point and lays the pencil down--* No not long now--*takes the mask as before--* not long until I begin--*brings it before her face:*

child of night
f lowing on
let her go

She breaks off and lays the mask down: Gibberish!

Pause. She suddenly thinks of another theme, and plays into a small mirror standing on the table: Woman running amok--mimics an insane face—mother losing it all--ditto, breaks off angrily: Rubbish!

She inspects her face in the mirror, takes a powder brush, powders her nose, and clasps her hands in prayer: Save me, oh Lord--she suddenly breaks off to powder her nose, clasps her hands again in prayer-- for the waters--*ditto--* are come unto my soul--*she sets the brush down, contemptuously: Bah! All useless. She takes the pencil--* Nothing but empty words--*puts it in the sharpener, cranks, stops, looks in the mirror--* in search of a usable text --*cranks while looking in the mirror, pauses cranking—*a tireless and hopeless attempt to vocalize singable words--*and then cranks mercilessly as she looks in the mirror, thus considerably shortening the pencil.*

She suddenly breaks off, looks at the pencil without removing it from the sharpener, takes the manuscript, and turns holding it over the wastebasket: Can't be long now until they arrive--she turns back front, lays the manuscript down, contemptuously: But never mind.

She takes a dark make-up pencil--Nothing to sing at all--looks in the mirror, and begins to paint an eyebrow over her left eye like that on the mask--not a word to sing--she inspects her make-up in the mirror, sets the make-up down-- garrulous prattling words--*takes the mask--* but nothing at all--*looks at it and remains fixed, long pause--* to sing--*puts it before her face:*

singing to herself
no
river flow on
deep water
the flood at last
singing to the river

She breaks off, removes the mask, pauses, looks at it: A drought is upon the waters... graven images...mad...idols...

She resumes her make-up, sets down the liner. She looks at herself in the mirror and pushes her fingers through her hair, then takes the manuscript and holds it before her—They'll stand there wordlessly, looking at me--sets it down and in one grasp rips out several pages, wads them, and throws them in the wastebasket. Contemptuously: Theatre!

She turns back front: No music, no text, no scene, no theme. She looks in the mirror and tries to put her hair in order.

She takes the pencil and writes vigorously in her manuscript, throws the pencil down, takes a small dictionary, leaves the pages, and reads: gondolum- gondolier- gondolet- gone: having passed the mark; absorbed. gone-by- gonecium- gone goose- gone-ness: a state of exhaustion, FAINTNESS. Pause. She is about to close the dictionary but looks at it with a questioning double take: Gone goose? She reads again: A person in a hopeless predicament; someone doomed. Pause.

She takes the pencil and writes, sets it down, takes the mask and make up pencil, and using the mirror, makes a figure under her eye like that on the mask, pauses: As in waters-- resumes, pauses: face answereth unto face--resumes, pauses: so the heart of man to

man--with a contemptuous gesture: Bah! She resumes her make-up-- Rubbish!--resumes, examines her face in the mirror: Empty words. Ditto: Plaster mask. She sets clown the mask and make-up, takes the pencil and writes, slows to a halt, lays it down, takes the make-up pencil and using the mirror, puts a mark on her cheek like that on the mask, sets the make-up down, takes the pencil and writes, puts the pencil down, and brings the mask before her face:

singing to herself
no
river flow on
deep water

She lays the mask down, takes the powder brush, powders, lays the brush down, puts the pencil in the sharpener, cranks vigorously, stops, leaves the pencil in the sharpener, takes the liner and lines her eyes, takes the mask, and brings it before her face:

the flood at last
singing to the river
rose of night
She removes the mask while still singing:
flowing on
let her go

She lays the mask down, sharpens the pencil in three short furious bursts, takes the manuscript in her right hand, the mask in the left, puts the mask before her face and begins to sing, but in frustration throws the manuscript into the air, arms held high in a rain of papers. She lowers her arms.

She contemplates the strewn papers. Long pause. Throughout the following section, she arranges the things on her desk.

These tedious broken words, will never make the stage. Not that they would like to hear me speak, but all these frenzied words, these empty frenzied words, doesn't their patter help them to brighten up, I mean lighten the lull that bothers them when I'm mute?

But this is not what I ought to sing. It's clear that they would prefer that I stick to my role, that I warble some dead tune into the ground, not a thought of who I am, hardly a moment to be myself, just the twittering of a happy woman.

So shall I pour out a river of words, that will flood over them with their wit? I mean something that titillates, not a thought with connotations, not a thought that has a bite, but a word to entertain.

Certainly prattling amuses, even when forbidden to speak, so warble away on a row of cheery tones, nothing offensive to ears polite, with a cascando of happy notes—*she smiles*--and your cordially smiling face. *Smile off.*

But there are days when hardly a word appears, barely a tone, nothing at all, nothing to set me free--not even a sigh to help me to breathe, just a stubborn hush.

But what if I sing anything that comes into my head, prattling on just to keep up the rhythmical flow? While they rummage about in their cultured souls, pondering what it means.

Then maybe they'll shatter the silence with gracious applause, probably thinking your stuttering babble was clever.

They'll leave imagining you are alive--*she touches her breasts*--to say nothing of your fascinating body.

Imagine that! All those imagined intellectuals. All those imagined artists. You know, all those imagined moments, when a woman, gnaws off...gnaws off...her...tongue.

Pause. She rotates the table to the side. She takes the trombone, points it upward, and extends its slide, returns it to first position, and lowers the instrument (or similar actions for other instruments.)

Maybe a melodrama... *All very rhetorical:* She was once a mother, but then came that day. *She plays the trombone. Loud and agitated:* Father gone away. Mother left to care for all. She was buried in her song. *She plays.* Then the neighbor came and knocked, knocked at the door, but she played on to the end. *She plays.* He says, you have left the water running, running through the floor. *She plays.* But she couldn't stop. The music held her fast. *She plays.* She kept on playing louder with the neighbors there, neighbors running through the door, water running through the floor. *She plays.* Is Anna coming? Where's her Anna? Flashing lights packing singing her away. ANNA! Where IS Anna?

She plays, breaks off with a scream, and returns the trombone to its dowel. She tries to remove a hair from her mouth. She spits once. She takes the mask as a model and continues with her make-up:

Ah, I've had better nights. But when it's possible to sing all your words ... you need say nothing. Oh, one sentence might have a point, but silence is the best. *Pause.* But still, if the day comes, you say a few words that seem like your own, will they be a bit...*she searches for the word...fake? Pause.* Can it be true that you have some words, good words, singable words, played out to all of those looking at you, a woman and her voice in wasted effort, a mask playing to masks?

She sets the mask down. Pause. She takes a pen, looks for paper, but finding none, writes with obsession on her left hand, then breaks off:

One cannot believe there are so many words. *She writes on her right hand.* If I don't write, I can only sit here and look at my bindings. *She writes on her left hand.* Yes, that's what I always say, but then what isn't always said? *She writes on her right hand.* I must keep my pencil dull or my skin is cut away to the flesh! *She writes on her left hand.* More words and more words, but not a song to sing.

She breaks off. Her palms are bleeding. She slowly lays them flat on the arm rests of the chair, gaze forward. Long pause. Suddenly the wrists locks snap shut with a horrendous snap. Her gaze does not break at all. Long pause. Gaze unaltered:

Sometimes it's horrifying being solid. And yet it's difficult to think of... (pause)... of not being here at all. So I stay in my chair. Probably women feel themselves to be clamped in. But it should be very relaxing to be locked in my chair with all my things here. They say, you're in your own place.

Pause.

Will they listen if I tell my story? A common story? *Pause.* The birth. The caesarian birth in the clinic. *Pause.* The abdomen cut, the birth cord cut, the first embrace, and the stilling breast. *Silence.* The squeaks of the gum sole shoes when they wheel in someone new, the clinks of the apparatus. *Silence.* The double steel doors, the hysterectomy. Then they took her home. *Silence.* The older children had hardly departed when she rose, started the water...slipped...slipped off her night gown, started the water for a long bath...let the water flood the floor below, heard the doorbell ringing...huddled...huddled naked ...naked on the floor.

Long silence.

The night is getting late. And there's a strange danger here. Too much fantasy. That's the obvious danger. But what if she's not imagined? I mean, not imagining herself to be? And what if she were real? *Pause.* Why then, she should just close her eyes, and keep on singing.

Pause.

It's so cold in this place I shiver constantly. *She vocalizes.* The weekend is here, and my voice is dead! *Ditto.* And this time I get a visit. *Ditto.* I'll ask them for some thermal

underwear...ditto...if I can speak at all. *Ditto.* I try to keep myself in voice. *Ditto.* I'm ready for them! *Ditto.* And if I can't speak, if I can't speak a word? *Ditto.* I'll start aping things. *Ditto.* Just like this. *She hysterically mimics singing.* I won't sound like a...*ditto...* like a mad woman. *Ditto.* *With increasing intensity:* No, stay in your chair, as silent as possible. *Ditto. Hysterically:* I can't say how happy I am. I tell them how happy. I tell them how I feel. I say, I love you. *She mouths screaming, "I love You!"* I force them to listen!

She presses her lips shut in a cold angry glare. Insanely angry she mouths screaming "I love you!" She pauses with a cold angry glare, lips pressed shut. Then completely lost she mouths screaming, "I love you I love you I love you!" She is suddenly still. Long pause. In a quiet monotone:

Suddenly the door flew open and they all ran in and up she jumped and up screaming ANNIE! and asking and asking ANNIE! ANNIE! while they all ran about looking for the spigot, the police in all their paraphernalia, the super, Mister Clemens, all running about for the spigot, Mathew and Mary, and old lady Hestand, all running about watching her naked, poisoned ...*pause...*poisoned.

Pause. The left wrist lock raises. The right wrist lock raises. She takes her trombone and plays. She puts it back on the dowel. Long pause.

The night. The light house. The swelling sea. The arched back. The conception. *Pause.* No. Only night. *Pause.* The moon upon the sand. *Pause.* Only sand.

Long silence. She takes the mask. The light begins slowly fading to only her face.

Sing. Sing angry cries. I'll find the words. I'll find something. *Pause.* Words.

All is dark except her face. She brings the mask before her face but can only be silent. Long pause. She slowly removes the mask and looks at it. Long pause. She brings it back before her face. Slow fade to black.