

Guil Like a mute in a monologue.

Ros Like a nightingale at a Roman feast.

Guil Your diction will go to pieces.

Ros Your lines will be cut.

Guil To dumbshows.

Ros And dramatic pauses.

Guil You'll never *find* your tongue.

Ros Lick your lips.

Guil Taste your tears.

Ros Your breakfast.

Guil You won't know the difference.

Ros There won't be any.

Guil We'll take the very words out of your mouth.

Ros So you've caught on.

Guil So you've caught up.

Player (*tops*) Not yet! (*bitterly*) You left us.

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Guil Ah! I'd forgotten – you performed a dramatic spectacle on the way. Yes, I'm sorry we had to miss it.

Player (*bursts out*) We can't look each other in the face! (*Pause, more in control.*) You don't understand the humiliation of it – to be tricked out of the single assumption which makes our existence viable – that somebody is *watching* . . . The plot was two corpses gone before we caught sight of ourselves, stripped naked in the middle of nowhere and pouring ourselves down a bottomless well.

Ros Is *that* thirty-eight?

Player (*lost*) There we were – demented children mincing about in clothes that no one ever wore, speaking as no man ever spoke, swearing love in wigs and rhymed couplets, killing each other with wooden swords, hollow protestations of faith hurled after empty promises of vengeance – and every gesture, every pose, vanishing into the thin unpopulated air. We ransomed our dignity to the clouds, and the uncomprehending birds listened. (*He rounds on them.*) Don't you see?! We're *actors* – we're the opposite of people!

They recoil nonplussed, his voice calms.

Think, in your head, *now*, think of the most . . . *private* . . . *secret* . . . *intimate* thing you have ever done secure in the knowledge of its privacy . . .

He gives them – and the audience – a good pause. Ros takes on a shifty look.

Are you thinking of it? (*He strikes with his voice and his head.*) Well, I saw you do it!

Ros leaps up, dissembling madly.

Ros You never! It's a lie! (*He catches himself with a giggle in a vacuum and sits down again.*)

Player We're actors . . . We pledged our identities, secure in the conventions of our trade; that someone would be watching. And then, gradually, no one was. We were caught, high and dry. It was not until the murderer's long soliloquy that we were able to look around; frozen as we were in profile, our eyes searched you out, first confidently, then hesitantly, then desperately as each patch of turf, each log, every exposed corner in every direction proved uninhabited, and all the while the murderous King addressed the horizon with his dreary interminable guilt . . . Our heads began to move, wary as lizards, the corpse

STOP

of unsullied Rosalinda peeped through his fingers, and the King faltered. Even then, habit and a stubborn trust that our audience spied upon us from behind the nearest bush, forced our bodies to blunder on long after they had emptied of meaning, until like runaway carts they dragged to a halt. No one came forward. No one shouted at us. The silence was unbreakable, it imposed itself upon us; it was obscene. We took off our crowns and swords and cloth of gold and moved silent on the road to Elsinore.

Silence. Then Guil claps solo with slow measured irony.

Guil Brilliantly re-created – if these eyes could weep! . . . Rather strong on metaphor, mind you. No criticism – only a matter of taste. And so here you are – with a vengeance. That’s a figure of speech . . . isn’t it? Well let’s say we’ve made up for it, for you may have no doubt whom to thank for your performance at the court.

Ros We are counting on you to take him out of himself. You are the pleasures which we draw him on to – (*He escapes a fractional giggle but recovers immediately.*) and by that I don’t mean your usual filth; you can’t treat royalty like people with normal perverted desires. They know nothing of that and you know nothing of them, to your mutual survival. So give him a good clean show suitable for all the family, or you can rest assured you’ll be playing the tavern tonight.

Guil Or the night after.

Ros Or not.

Player We already have an entry here. And always have had.

Guil You’ve played for him before?

Player Yes, sir.

Ros And what's *his* bent?

Player Classical.

Ros Saucy!

Guil What will you play?

Player 'The Murder of Gonzago'.

Guil Full of fine cadence and corpses.

Player Pirated from the Italian . . .

Ros What is it about?

Player It's about a King and Queen . . .

Guil Escapism! What else?

Player Blood –

Guil – Love and rhetoric.

Player Yes. (*Going.*)

Guil Where are you going?

Player I can come and go as I please.

Guil You're evidently a man who knows his way around.

Player I've been here before.

Guil We're still finding our feet.

Player I should concentrate on not losing your heads.

Guil Do you speak from knowledge?

Player Precedent.

Guil You've been here before.

Player And I know which way the wind is blowing.

Guil Operating on two levels, are we?! How clever! I