

ROAD SIGNS

By Albi Gorn

CAST OF CHARACTERS

NORM, 40s, a New York neurotic

PERRY, 40s, a Hippie

SCENE 1: THE PAINTED DESERT or A PORTRAIT OF MY LOVE

(An Arizona desert; PERRY stands at her easel, painting. Behind her is a sign leaning against a rock that says "To avoid gridlock, keep your eye on the road signs." During the scene, while she is painting, she looks off in the distance from time to time, as if looking at her subject. NORM enters)

NORM: Hello?

PERRY: *(Putting down her pallet and coming from behind easel)* Oh, hi. Welcome.

NORM: Fellow down the road sent me off this way and I'm not sure if I really followed what he said, if you follow what I said.

PERRY: You're lost.

NORM: I'm lost.

PERRY: *(Returning to her easel)* So you just stopped for directions.

NORM: Right. But I'll tell you, if I had to pick a place to get lost in, this would be it. *(Looking right at her)* Beautiful — *(and then indicating the scenery)* — around here. Great view. I'll bet you get spectacular sunsets.

PERRY: *(Looking in the direction he's looking in)* Well, they're really a lot more spectacular in the west. *(He's looking east. She indicates west to him; he turns that way)*

NORM: As you can see, I'm not too good with directions. *(Beat as he looks off)* I hope I'm not disturbing you.

PERRY: Not at all, pull up a rock.

NORM: No, I just stopped for — *(decides she might be worth getting to know)* Okay. *(Sitting)* Painting a picture, huh?

PERRY: Trying.

NORM: I'll bet the desert is a great place to paint.

PERRY: Except this one is already painted. (*He doesn't get it*)
The Painted Desert?

NORM: Got it. I've been in my car so long I guess I'm a little slow on the uptake.

PERRY: Driving can wear you down.

NORM: Actually, I like it. You sit and do nothing and still you get somewhere, which is the exact opposite of the rest of my life.

PERRY: Where're you from?

NORM: New York.

PERRY: Oh, me too.

NORM: Really? What part?

PERRY: All of me.

NORM: You're definitely from New York.

PERRY: And where're you headed?

NORM: Right now I'm looking for a place called Peripeteia.
Ever heard of it?

PERRY: Uh-huh. Your car's facing east?

NORM: (*After some figuring*) I think so.

PERRY: Well, you'll never get to Peripeteia going in that direction.

NORM: Really? I have to turn around and go back?

PERRY: You could try that, I guess. But you'll never get to Peripeteia going in that direction either.

NORM: Well, the road either goes this way or that way. Are you telling me that I can't get there from here?

PERRY: You *are* there. Here is there.

NORM: This is Peripeteia? But this isn't a place. (*PERRY makes a puzzled, slightly hurt face*) I mean it's not like a town or anything. The guy down the road said to go to Peripeteia and from there I could find the interstate.

PERRY: Why do you want the interstate?

NORM: Well, from the interstate I know where I am.

PERRY: You don't know where you are?

NORM: Not really. I mean, this is the desert, and it's Arizona.
Other than that I haven't a clue where I am.

PERRY: Welcome to Peripeteia.

NORM: This is a town?

PERRY: No. Peripeteia is the name of my business: Peripeteia Road Signs. I paint road signs.

NORM: Really. What is that, like an Indian name?

PERRY: I don't think so. Part of it is my name. Perry. (*She extends her hand*)

NORM: Norm. (*They shake*) And what about peteia?

PERRY: I don't know whose name that is.

NORM: Right. So, you really paint road signs. When you see those things you never think that anybody actually has to paint them. You work for the state?

PERRY: Nope, freelance.

NORM: How long have you been in this line?

PERRY: About a year. Since I moved down here.

NORM: From New York?

PERRY: Oh, I've lived in several places since New York. I moved here from Alaska.

NORM: What were you doing in Alaska?

PERRY: Painting; looking for a home.

NORM: (*Checks his watch*) Speaking of which, I guess you better get me to the interstate. It's getting late.

PERRY: The interstate stays open 24 hours. You in a hurry?

NORM: Not really. But I have this thing about not knowing where I am.

PERRY: Really? I'm just the opposite. When things around me start becoming familiar and routine, and homey, that's when I get uncomfortable. And when that happens, I know it's time to strap on the backpack and head for the wilderness.

NORM: Well, you sure found it.

PERRY: I suppose.

NORM: Of course, there's plenty of wilderness in Alaska. Why did you leave? Too much snow?

PERRY: Too much traffic.

NORM: You think there's too much traffic in Alaska? I can understand why you left New York.

PERRY: Our City of Perpetual Gridlock. But it wasn't the traffic that drove me out of New York. It was the obligations.

NORM: Obligations?

PERRY: (*Beat*) When I lived in New York, everything I did I did for other people. I raised two kids, buried two parents, divorced two husbands — one of whom was mine — fed and housed the homeless, attended openings, visited hospitals, coordinated programs, moved my car to the other side of the street, left messages, answered messages, waited on virtually every known species of line, and by the end of the day, I would be forced into eating a pint of Haagen Daz just to feel like I was doing something for myself. When Haagen Daz hit 3.89 a pint, I left.

NORM: To Alaska.

PERRY: Eventually.

NORM: I could see how the ice cream would be cheaper in Alaska.

PERRY: It isn't. But there are certainly a lot fewer obligations.

NORM: And so you felt freer there?

PERRY: For a while. When I first moved up, I couldn't get enough of it. I was driving all over, camping out, looking for the most unsettled places where even the natives wouldn't go. And the further out I drove, the more desolate and deserted the country became, the more excited I got, the more located I felt. I started to paint again, which I hadn't done for years. There was a me there, and a me to take care of her. (*Beat*) Then one afternoon, as I was driving along a road I felt sure no one had driven on in years, without any warning I found myself in an intersection and I got broad-sided by a beer truck. That's when I knew there was too much traffic.

NORM: One truck too many, in any event.

PERRY: It only takes one. But I can't really blame the driver. There was no road sign up.

NORM: So that's why you decided to get into this line of work?

PERRY: (*Beat; considering*) I don't think so.

NORM: Are you working on one now?

PERRY: No. This is my day off. Today I paint for myself.

NORM: Can I see what you're painting?

PERRY: Can you see what I'm painting? I doubt it. (*Looking off*) Even I can't see what I'm painting.

NORM: (*A confused beat*) Uh-huh. Well, I didn't mean to interrupt your work —

PERRY: (*Stopping him*) You're not. Actually, you're helping. Helping me see what to paint.

NORM: Really?

PERRY: Uh-huh. I haven't had this long a conversation in quite sometime.

NORM: Oh.

PERRY: Yep, and when we get to a thousand words I'm done.

NORM: (*Smiles*) I think the exchange rate has gone up a bit.

PERRY: No, that was just a joke. The thing is I get a little out of touch living out here alone.

NORM: That's the price you pay for wilderness.

PERRY: Wrong. You don't have to pay any price for wilderness. That's why I love it. But I get —

NORM: Lonely.

PERRY: No, not lonely. People stop by from time to time. But the ones that talk at all just talk about themselves or how hot and dusty they are or how quaint I am and I never have anything to say to that. So what I grow out of touch with is the sound of my own voice. And you need to hear your own voice if you're an artist. So you see, you're not interrupting at all, you're helping me paint.

NORM: Well, I'm glad to be of service, although if what you need is to hear your own voice, you could always try talking to yourself, I suppose.

PERRY: You can't imagine how frustrating that gets. Stick around, you'll see.

NORM: If that's an invitation, I accept.

PERRY: (*Beat*) How did you wind up way out here? This is a long way from the interstate, or from anything else.

NORM: I wish I knew. I don't usually get lost this way.

PERRY: You usually get lost in some other way?

NORM: (*Smiles*) No. (*Beat*) Actually, yes.

PERRY: Ah, my kind of answer.

NORM: Well, it's similar to what you said before. For me it's not the obligations themselves that overwhelm me, but the anxiety about meeting those obligations. I mean I know I'm a walking cliché, but I really believe there's a creative, spontaneous me

somewhere. And so I put together some vacation time and head off to look for him. At first it's liberating, because I think I'm getting away from it all. But the next thing you know, like all these stories you hear about people traveling halfway around the world and then meeting their next door neighbors in a game preserve in Tasmania, I'll pull into a scenic turnout and there will be all my anxieties waiting for me, chomping away on their Big Macs and taking pictures of each other.

PERRY: My anxieties are all vegetarians.

NORM: They always know just where I'm going. I'm so predictable, even my spontaneity is predictable. So anyway, when I was planning this trip, I remembered this Zen teaching story, you probably know it, about an Eskimo woman who was hired to deliver the coffin of a dead miner back to the miner's parents in San Francisco.

PERRY: Is that like the Tibetan yak herder who left the yogurt bucket on the top of the mountain?

NORM: I don't think so. This is an Eskimo woman who was hired to accompany this coffin from the Yukon to San Francisco. And after she delivered the body and was paid by the parents, she walked to the ticket booth at the train station. Now, she had never been outside of her village before and she didn't speak a word of English, so she waited until some interesting looking person got on line, she listened to him ordering a ticket for some town in the midwest somewhere, she repeated what he said to the ticket seller, took that train to that town and lived there the rest of her life. So, I wondered: If I try my own version of this, where will I wind up, what will I see? So I got out on the highway and just followed the first interesting looking car I saw until I felt like a change, and then I followed the next interesting looking car and so on.

PERRY: Great. And what did you see?

NORM: Mostly I saw the rear ends of a bunch of interesting looking cars.

PERRY: (*Slightly disapproving*) Really.

NORM: I was afraid if I looked around too much at the scenery I would lose them.

PERRY: Well, you managed to get lost anyway, which is what spontaneity always felt like to me, so take advantage of it and enjoy the view.

NORM: (*Looking at her*) I am enjoying it, very much. (*Beat*) But I suppose I should be heading back to New York, and my anxieties.

PERRY: And the traffic.

NORM: And the traffic.

PERRY: You should check out my stuff. (*She indicates sign*)

NORM: "To avoid gridlock, keep your eye on the road signs." You think I'm suffering from gridlock?

PERRY: Well, you were lost, somebody gave you directions and you wound up here. Maybe it's synchronicity.

NORM: With me it's usually idiosynchronicity. Oh, well, maybe. As long as I'm here.

PERRY: (*Excited*) Really?

NORM: Do you have like a catalogue?
(*She gets a sign that has a cactus next to an equals sign in a circle with a line through it*)

PERRY: This one seems appropriate.

NORM: Uh, I don't know —

PERRY: Do you already have one of these?

NORM: No, it's just that —

PERRY: Not your taste?

NORM: Look, this is a little embarrassing but I don't know what it means.

PERRY: Oh. It means don't analyze the scenery.

NORM: Oh, sure, now I see. (*Stares at it awhile*)

PERRY: Well, how about this one? (*She takes out a sign with several question marks above an XING*)

NORM: Ah. Yes, that's more, I mean —

PERRY: You don't know what that one means either?

NORM: Not really, no.

PERRY: It means you're entering an area where doubts occasionally cross your mind.

NORM: Oh.

PERRY: This is very discouraging. People are supposed to be helped by these signs, not confused.

NORM: Well, no, I can see it now that you've told me.

PERRY: Oh, that's great. What am I supposed to do, stand by the road explaining them to everyone who passes by?

NORM: It's probably just me. I'm real stupid about art.

PERRY: It's not you. Nobody understands them. Most people don't even know what they are. One lady thought they were Navajo hex signs.

NORM: (*Looking at a sign*) When I was a kid road signs just said things, you know, like Slow Children or Slippery When Wet. How come they stopped that?

PERRY: Not everybody speaks the same language so we use symbols that are supposed to be universal. (*Beat*) Well, I suppose these are universal. No matter what country you come from, you still can't understand them. (*Long beat*)

NORM: How much for the two of them?

PERRY: You don't have to do that.

NORM: No, really. It will be like a memento of— something, the desert, I don't know. How much?

PERRY: (*Smiling at him*) I couldn't accept that, really. Thanks anyway. (*Back to her painting*)

NORM: Well, I don't want to keep you from your work. How about getting me back to the highway.

PERRY: You're not keeping me from my work. I told you before, you're helping me. You're helping me see what it is I want to paint.

NORM: I still don't understand that. Aren't you just painting that mesa out there, or butte or whatever it is you keep staring off at?

PERRY: Why would I paint that? I can always come out here and look at it.

NORM: Well, there's nothing else out there.

PERRY: The whole world is out there. And part of it (*a flourish of brush strokes*), a very special part, is now on here. Take a look.

NORM: Time out. Just a few minutes ago you said I couldn't see what you were painting.

PERRY: You can't see what I'm painting. It isn't here. But you can see the painting of what I'm painting, if you want.

NORM: And I thought I was lost before. (*She turns easel to show him her painting, which is entirely white*)

PERRY: What do you think?

NORM: (*Uncomfortable beat*) I don't really know anything about art.

PERRY: I don't need a critique. Just tell me how you feel about it.

NORM: (*Long beat, and then tentatively*) Well, I feel that it's compelling without being overbearing. It's quite evocative, yet systemically understated. It has a quiet resonance and yet elements of it are disarmingly dissonant. But like I said before, I'm really stupid about art. Is this like representational or surrealistic or impressionistic or —

PERRY: It's a polar bear.

NORM: Oh.

PERRY: Seen very close up. (*Beat*) Very close up.

NORM: I'll say. I wouldn't think anybody could get that close to a polar bear.

PERRY: Do you like it?

NORM: It's growing on me.

PERRY: It's not confusing, like the road signs, is it?

NORM: A little.

PERRY: Shoot. (*Beat as she looks at painting dejectedly*)

NORM: (*Looks at painting, and then off in the distance*) Well, you were right about my not being able to see what you're painting. There's not a polar bear in sight. (*She doesn't respond*) Why not paint something more indigenous?

PERRY: For example?

NORM: Well, if you're looking to portray the tension of being close to something dangerous, how about a cactus?

PERRY: (*Annoyed*) How do you know what I'm trying to portray?

NORM: I don't, I'm just trying to be practical.

PERRY: I'm not. It's not terribly conducive to creativity. But as far as being practical, I stand a lot better chance of selling a painting to a polar bear than a cactus.

NORM: Not around here you don't.

PERRY: I'll ship it back with your Eskimo friend. And another thing, I don't think you understand how artists work. We don't rummage through swatches, looking for a match to the drapes. We

wait for inspiration. And I particularly resent being told what to paint by someone who can't even read a road sign. *(Beat)* Do you want to know what the painting is about? *(During the following she indicates, with rising emotion, different portions of the white canvas)* It's my entire life. The obligations and obsessions, the dreams, the nightmares, the digressions, the resourceful child, the perfunctory marriage, the loss of sense of self, the sacrifices of motherhood, the seduction of art, the yoke of sexuality, the comfort of spiritualism, the vision of worldly oppression, old friends, new strangers, home, locality, focus, inarticulateness, the ebb and flow of feelings, the tyranny of career and the liberation of bohemianism — that one sip of wine that transports us from the darkness to the warmth. That's what this is about.

NORM: *(Beat)* And that's all in that white painting.

PERRY: *(Petulantly)* I haven't finished it yet. *(Beat. She turns easel back to original position and picks up her brush and pallet, stares awhile and then puts down pallet and brush and sits on rock looking despondently at painting)*

NORM: I'm sorry.

PERRY: What are you sorry about?

NORM: I'm sorry I didn't understand your painting.

PERRY: It doesn't really bother me that much that you don't understand my painting. What bothers me is now I don't understand it. I thought I had it while we were talking before; now, I don't know. *(There is a pause)*

NORM: What do you do for sad?

PERRY: Excuse me?

NORM: What do you do for sad? Don't you remember that from school?

PERRY: I don't think so.

NORM: Sure you do. In kindergarten or nursery school, when somebody did something to somebody else, instead of letting a fight break out the teacher would say "What do you do for angry" or "What do you do for sad."

PERRY: I think we went to different schools.

NORM: I guess. But anyway, she would say that and everybody, not only the kid who was angry or sad, but the whole class would do it.

PERRY: Do what?

NORM: Angry (*he clenches his fists and makes an angry face*) or sad (*he makes a sad face and snuffles*).

PERRY: The whole class?

NORM: Well, I suppose they thought that feelings should be shared. Kinda silly, thinking back on it. But to tell you the truth, if I'm feeling sad or angry, you know, it helps. (*Makes faces again*)

PERRY: What do you do for ridiculous?

NORM: You said you raised kids. How did you teach your kids about feelings?

PERRY: I don't think feelings is something you have to teach.

NORM: Come on. Wanna give it a try?

PERRY: I'm not sad or angry.

NORM: Oh, I thought you might be.

PERRY: I just have to work on this some more. (*Resumes painting*)

NORM: Right. And I should be moving on.

(*They look at each other for awhile; he starts to step towards her*)

NORM: Look —

PERRY: The interstate is about twelve miles further on down, the way your car is pointing.

NORM: Right. Thanks. (*He starts to leave*)

PERRY: Wait. (*She takes the road sign of the question marks and gives it to him*) Here. A memento of — whatever. (*She goes back to her easel*)

NORM: (*Long beat; he looks at the road sign, then at her*) Look, in my business we occasionally recommend to clients that we enter into a joint venture.

PERRY: Joint venture?

(*NORM turns away as he starts his speech, and at a certain point, unseen to him, PERRY decides to go with him and starts packing her stuff*)

NORM: Yeah, you know, two entities with mutuality of interest. Now, what I'm envisioning here, vis a vis you and me, is an artistic collaboration, sort of. I have pretty good business sense but what I always wanted was to get involved in the arts, you know, and find that creative me I was talking about before and I'm just thinking (*looking at road sign*) this might be a great opportunity, you know,

to work with a real artist like yourself. And it might be a good opportunity for you as well because I think I can help you market your stuff. And if things worked out, maybe we can get into some sort of mixed media thing. I write — granted, mostly it's for PowerPoint — and, of course, it is an impediment that we're 2500 miles apart but we could keep in touch and what with holidays and vacation time and long weekends, I could probably make it out here a couple of times a year and if our concepts, you know, conceptualize we might — (*seeing her all packed*) what's happening?

PERRY: (*Giving him white painting and taking back road sign*)
Didn't you say we were going to New York?

NORM: We?

PERRY: Yeah. I've been thinking for a while I may have saturated the market out here. But in New York, with all the traffic problems and all the streets and all those people, I'm sure I can find someone who can understand my signs. We can rent a studio and set up shop (*She starts to exit, indicating easel and painting table*)
Could you get my stuff. If it's all right with you, instead of the interstate I can show you these incredible back roads...

(*PERRY exits*)

(*The following speech can cover the set change, or NORM can change the set himself as he talks*)

NORM: When I first started working, I worked in an old building downtown. My office was at the end of a long, narrow corridor. Because I'm always afraid my alarm won't go off, I get up a half hour early every morning as a result of which I used to get in before anybody else and the building was practically deserted. Before long I started playing this game every morning. When I reached the beginning of my corridor, I would close my eyes and start to walk. The idea was to see if I could get to the end with my eyes closed without veering off left or right. There was nothing to trip over and I was walking slowly so it wasn't dangerous or anything. But I immediately discovered that after about eight or nine steps, my eyes started to force their way open. With each step it became more intense. No matter how much I tried to keep them closed, I would reach a point where I either opened them or stopped walking. I worked in that office for five years and I

played that game every morning and I don't think I ever made it more than a third of the way down that corridor.

(Segue into Scene 2)

SCENE II: ROOM WITH A VIEW or A STATE OF MIND

(A loft. NORM looks around for a place to hang PERRY's white painting, tries several spots and finally picks one)

NORM: That looks pretty good. Of course, for all I know, it could be upside down. *(Looking from where he came in nervously)* Artists can be temperamental. She certainly seemed a bit touchy before. Maybe I should...*(removes painting and places it back on easel)* I'll wait for her. *(Waits for her)* I hope I told her the right address. *(Looks at watch)* I hope I told her the right time. *(Checks his pocket and pulls out a folded piece of paper)* Better make sure there are no typos on this. *(Reads it over)* Looks good. She is gonna love this. *(Beat)* Maybe. *(Beat)* Maybe not. Maybe she doesn't like poems. Maybe this isn't a good poem. Who am I talking to? That's all I need is to have her come in here with me talking to myself. I better stop. *(Stops)* That's better. God, why am I so nervous. I wonder if I should be standing so close to the door when she comes in. Maybe over here. *(Walks away and tries it)* No, feels awkward. Maybe by the painting, as if I were about to hang it somewhere *(walks to painting)* and with my back to the door. *(Turns back)* Oh, yes, this is great, very natural. Like I wasn't really waiting or anything, you know, just amusing myself and getting things ready until she — *(PERRY enters. She is carrying four suitcases, one under each arm and one in each hand)*

PERRY: Talking to yourself, huh? That's what you get for being early. *(She puts down the suitcases)* Sorry to keep you waiting but getting these things up the stairs took awhile.

NORM: That's all right. I was amusing myself by, um —

PERRY: Yeah. I though you looked amusing as I walked in. So, this is the place where we're going to work, huh?

NORM: I thought so. I thought it was the right kind of place, you know, for working.

PERRY: Has definite possibilities. Good clear light to see by.

NORM: Is it too warm? I can turn down —

PERRY: No, it's comfortable enough now.

NORM: It can get pretty hot in here.

PERRY: You've worked here before?

NORM: No, it's just that the heating is erratic in these converted lofts. But it's adjustable.

PERRY: I know it is. The basic adjustment is if it gets too hot, I leave. I don't like heat.

NORM: Then why were you painting on the desert?

PERRY: What, you think I should have just stood there doing nothing?

NORM: What I mean is if you don't like the heat, why did you choose the desert to paint in?

PERRY: I explained that to you before. You gotta start taking notes. (*Producing road sign*) Well, what do you think? (*It is a truck going up an incline under which is a stick figure*)

NORM: (*After long scrutiny*) Sorry. Not a clue.

PERRY: Really? I thought for sure this one. It means you'll soon be over your head.

NORM: Oh. How could I have missed it? (*They both look at it for awhile*)

PERRY: Okay, enough of that. Let's get to work.

NORM: Great. (*Beat, looking around*) You don't want to fix the place up a little, first?

PERRY: The place is broken? You rented a broken place?

NORM: No, I mean like decorate a little. We could hang your picture.

PERRY: That sounds like a good idea.

NORM: Great. (*Beat*) Where?

PERRY: Wherever you like.

NORM: Right. (*He studies it awhile, looking at her now and then and finally hangs it where he had it, upstage center*) That's wherever I like, I think.

PERRY: Good spot.

NORM: (*Excited*) Yeah? You think that's the right spot for it, I mean artistically speaking?

PERRY: I wouldn't know about that. But if that's the spot you like, it's a good spot. Now we've fixed the place up so can we get to work?

NORM: What about unpacking? You've got all those bags. I could help you unpack them.

PERRY: I don't think I'm ready for that yet. Unpacking those suckers is a big job.

NORM: Well, how about unpacking one? That's how I handle big jobs, you know, one step at a time.

PERRY: Well, I don't know. There's a lot in those suitcases.

NORM: We open one suitcase and unpack one item. Then tomorrow we can unpack another item. (*He goes to suitcases*)

PERRY: How can you know now what we're going to do tomorrow? I may not even be here tomorrow.

NORM: (*He opens suitcase and removes a wooden bowl*) What's this?

PERRY: A salad bowl.

NORM: Which reminds me, I went food shopping. It's in the kitchen.

PERRY: Good place for it. You're good at finding places. Are you hungry?

NORM: A little.

PERRY: Great. For our first collaboration we can make salad. You can chop and I'll make my father's dressing.

NORM: Your father makes good dressing?

PERRY: Oh, yes. (*As she goes through the following speech she sets up two of the suitcases on end with a third across the top of them and uses this as a table*) It's funny, he died when I was five, but I still remember his salad dressing. I would be in the living room, playing with one of my toys, and he would come in and say "Come on, let's make salad." And we would go into the kitchen and he would take out this bowl, place it on the counter in front of him (*she does so*) and then take out some smaller Japanese ceramic bowls and in each one he would carefully pour something different, salt, sugar, vinegar, oil, some other spices, and he would place them carefully in a semicircle around the salad bowl. He would then put in a large clove of garlic and with a wooden spoon (*she removes one from open suitcase*) he would carefully crush it. Then he would stand there as if looking or listening for something. And when he sensed what he wanted he would dip the wooden spoon into one of the bowls and take out some of whatever was in it and add it to the garlic and gently stir. Finally, he would have me taste it. And he would look down at me smiling and ask "What kind of dressing have we made today?" And I would say "The best

dressing in the world." And it was, when he made it — when we made it that way.

NORM: Well, you whet my appetite. Let's get to it. (*She tastes the spoon and hesitates*) Is there a problem?

PERRY: I'm missing something.

NORM: What? Salt? Vinegar? Sugar? Spices? Japanese ceramic bowls?

PERRY: My father. (*Beat*) Okay, we unpacked the wooden bowl and the wooden spoon. Now can we start to work?

NORM: Well, I guess.

PERRY: I thought you wanted to collaborate. Are you having second thoughts?

NORM: No, I passed second thoughts several thoughts ago.

PERRY: So what's your problem?

NORM: What exactly are we working on? I mean, yeah, we said we would collaborate and that sounded great, you know, and so we came back east, and I rented this space, thought we'd fix it up —

PERRY: We hung the picture.

NORM: Right, right. We definitely hung the picture. But isn't the next step to talk about what we're going to do?

PERRY: There's no way we can know that until we start working. Why do you do everything backwards?

NORM: You're the one who has things backwards. How am I supposed to know what to do before I do it?

PERRY: Exactly.

NORM: That didn't come out right. I mean how can we do anything unless we know what it is we're supposed to do?

PERRY: We're not supposed to do anything. Look, if we do it your way, you have to decide what it is you want to do, then you start working and it never comes out the way you envisioned so you get disappointed and you feel all this pressure to fix and adjust it. If you do it my way, you start working, see what it's like and then you can identify exactly what it is you're doing.

NORM: (*Thinking it over*) Well, I can't argue with that. Maybe if I understood it I could argue with it, but I don't.

PERRY: Great. That's a start. Let's get to work. (*She in turn gets the easel and sets it up, the paint box and sets it up and finally the bowl and the spoon. She holds the bowl like a pallet and the*

spoon like brush and gets ready to paint) Okay, now we're cooking. (*Beat*) Tired? Need a break?

NORM: I haven't done anything yet.

PERRY: Why not?

NORM: I don't know what to do. You're doing everything. This isn't working.

PERRY: Of course it's working. It's working for me. And if you'd just get into it and stop whining and worrying about everything maybe it would be working for you too.

NORM: Get into what? I can't paint. I can't draw. Apparently I can't even draw my own conclusions.

PERRY: Well, didn't you say you write?

NORM: A little.

PERRY: Good. Write something.

NORM: I already did. (*Produces poem*) It's a poem.

PERRY: Great. And you said this wasn't working. You already wrote a poem.

NORM: Yeah. (*Beat*) You wanna read it?

PERRY: (*Beat*) I'm a painter not a reader.

NORM: Right, I know that. But I wrote it for you...to read.

PERRY: For me? Really? (*Takes poem*) I love when people write things for me. (*She folds it and puts it in her pocket*)

NORM: Aren't you going to read it?

PERRY: Now?

NORM: I thought now.

PERRY: Okay.

I'd been traveling —

NORM: Wait, wait. You're going to read it out loud?

PERRY: Right. How else can I hear it?

I'd been traveling through the desert

And my 40 years were through

NORM: (*Over her reading*) I don't know if I'm ready for this.

PERRY: *So I pulled up to a roadside stand*

To have a beer or two

NORM: (*Over her reading*) I don't really drink beer.

PERRY: *And standing by a Joshua tree*

Barefoot in the sand

NORM: (*Over her reading*) That's like poetic license.

PERRY: *Stood an artist at an easel
With her palette in her hand*

NORM: *(Over her reading)* Which may well be revoked any second now.

PERRY: How can I hear this if you keep talking?

NORM: Sorry.

PERRY: *"I never met a painter,"
I told her with a smile
As I got two stools and another round
That we might chat awhile*

*But when I started probing
She responded to my guile
"Talk is not my medium
"Answers not my style"*

*And then I saw the picture
She'd been working on all day
And I realized this lady
Had an awful lot to say*

*Living in the desert
I had slipped into a haze
That limited my spectrum
To silvers, tans and grays*

*But blazoned on this canvas
Was a fiery resplendence
Of violet introspection
And crimson independence*

*I asked "Where is this vista
"That you've painted with such flair?"
She pointed to the very road
That I had taken there*

My eyes grew wide with disbelief

*I turned to look and then
I realized I'd never see
That road the same again*

*The dunes turned red, the mesas gold
A loom of light unraveling
And I wondered just what else I'd missed
In my myopic traveling*

*"Come with me, please," I asked of her
"And teach me how to see"
She stopped, she smiled, she softly said
"What's in it, then, for me?"*

*"A chance to live the very life
"You've captured in your art."
Her face grew dark, she sighed and said
"I haven't got the heart."*

*"I'm scared," she said, "of failure
"And that the life you see
"Captured in this painting here
"Will out there capture me."*

*I wanted to assure her
I'd protect her from life's ills
But my track record did not speak
Very highly of my skills*

*I looked once at the painting
Then at her face again
And knew I'd never reconcile
The passion and the pain*

*And just as I was leaving
She came running up to me
And handed me the painting
From the easel 'neath the tree*

*It's a wistful frame of reference
But I harbor no complaints
About a painter who is painted
By the painting that she paints.*

(*Long beat*) Is this supposed to be about you and me?

NORM: Right.

PERRY: (*Beat*) Which one is me?

NORM: (*Slightly exasperated*) The painter.

PERRY: I thought so. (*Puts poem away and resumes at the easel*)

NORM: Well, how did you like it?

PERRY: I liked it. It's a good poem. Lots of imagination.

NORM: That's all, you just liked it?

PERRY: I liked it. What else is there?

NORM: Well, before you said you loved it when people wrote for you.

PERRY: Right. I love it that you wrote for me. And I like what you wrote.

NORM: I see. (*Beat*) Do you think someday you might love it?

PERRY: Don't know. I said I liked it. Can we get back to work now? (*She does, using the bowl and spoon*)

NORM: Well, I already did mine. (*Beat*) Can I ask you something?

PERRY: Sure.

NORM: How can you paint if you have no canvas to paint on?

PERRY: How can I paint with a bowl and a spoon is a better question.

NORM: True. But how can you paint if you have no canvas to paint on might possibly elicit an answer I can understand.

PERRY: Think so? (*Beat*) Well, a lot of times a canvas will have its own ideas about what's going to be painted on it. So first I start painting and then I get out a canvas to put the painting on.

NORM: Entirely consistent with your previously enunciated work ethic, if I may use that phrase in this context.

PERRY: You could use that phrase in this context if you were in some context, but you're not. At least not until you get to work.

Then you can use that phrase all you want. (*Giving him bowl and spoon as she removes her sweater*) Hold this for a second.

NORM: My father never made salad dressing.

PERRY: What did he do?

NORM: Went fishing.

PERRY: Did he take you?

NORM: Sure. He'd wake me up at about three o'clock on a Sunday morning. This was in the spring, I guess, 'cause I remember it was the kind of cold you feel alright about 'cause you know it's going to get warmer when the sun comes up. And we'd drive up to this lake or reservoir, walk a ways until we got to the spot that he said was "the perfect spot." And he set me up with the rod. And I'd cast it out and sit and watch for the bobber to go down. That seemed to be the skill part of it, knowing when the bobber went down enough so you could pull the rod back and set the hook. If you pulled too soon you lost the fish and if you pulled too late, the hook would be down in the fish's stomach and you'd have to rip it out. And of course, there were the snarls.

PERRY: The line getting tangled.

NORM: Exactly. That happened a lot when I fished. My father usually left "the perfect spot" after awhile and I would be there alone and I would get my line all tangled somehow. It never made sense to me. I mean the line comes off the reel and through those loops and into the water and somehow it got all tangled in the middle. How can that happen if the ends are so far apart?

PERRY: Don't know.

NORM: Me neither. But when it happened I would set about trying to unsnarl it. Usually my father would come back before I figured it out and say "Snarled again?" And he would take out his pocketknife and just cut it off and rehook my line and set me up again. But sometimes...sometimes when he didn't come, I would sit there for close to an hour, untangling the snarl until I got it all straight and I could reel it in and cast it out again. For some reason that was always a lot more satisfying than catching a fish. (*She takes back bowl and spoon and stands ready to paint again at easel*) Do you still like my poem?

PERRY: I told you already I liked your poem.

NORM: I wondered if your feelings had changed any. (*Long beat as she stands at easel*) This isn't what I had in mind when I suggested we work together.

PERRY: You've said that.

NORM: Do you want to know what I had in mind?

PERRY: You've said that as well. I would prefer it if you just did what you had in mind instead of talking it to death.

NORM: Well, actually, talking it to death is one of the things I had in mind. What I had in mind was that we would come to this room, we would fix it up, we would unpack our stuff and we would decide what it is we wanted to work on and then work on it together.

PERRY: You've made that clear.

NORM: But...

PERRY: But I don't work that way.

NORM: Yes. You've made that clear. Well, then you work your way and I'll work mine.

PERRY: Sounds good to me.

NORM: Right. (*He goes to open suitcase, sits down and starts rummaging through it*)

PERRY: What are you doing? You said one thing at a time. We already unpacked one thing, two things, actually. That's plenty of unpacking for one day.

NORM: That's when I'm unpacking my own suitcases. (*Pulls out paper with drawing on it from suitcase*) Aha, what is this?

PERRY: (*Sits down next to him, taking drawing*) Just an old pastel.

NORM: Pretty. Looks like a house.

PERRY: It's a house.

NORM: In the desert.

PERRY: In the desert.

NORM: Where I found you painting?

PERRY: You didn't find me. You were the one who was lost.

NORM: Right, but is that where this is supposed to be?

PERRY: Not far from there.

NORM: It's lovely. Boy, when you see a setting this beautiful, you can understand why people are ready to chuck it all and move out there.

PERRY: Some people.

NORM: You should frame it and we could hang it.

PERRY: It's not finished.

NORM: It sure looks finished.

PERRY: That's because you can't see inside the house. If you could, you would see it's empty. It was supposed to have somebody in it, another artist, actually. But by the time I got ready to paint him in, he had painted himself out.

NORM: I'm sorry. That must have hurt.

PERRY: It happens. People leave.

NORM: And I guess that's why now when you paint you don't envision what you want to paint first, you just paint.

PERRY: That's enough unpacking I think. *(She closes suitcase)*
Back to work. *(She gets back up to easel; long beat)*

NORM: Do you still like my poem?

PERRY: I told you I did before. Why do you keep asking that?

NORM: Feelings change.

PERRY: Mine don't.

NORM: Mine do. They're very restless, my feelings, they never stay put. And after awhile the feelings I felt when you said you liked my poem start to change or dissipate and I can't remember what they were. But you could help me, if you wanted to, by telling me now and then how you feel about it, even if your feelings haven't changed.

PERRY: *(Putting down bowl and spoon)* I don't respond well to being told how to react to things. I have enough of my own reactions. When I feel like telling you how I feel about your poem, I will.

NORM: When will that be?

PERRY: *(Breaking away and towards white painting)* I don't know. Maybe only when you stop needing me to tell you. Maybe before then. Maybe never. I'm big on maybes. *(She is looking at the white painting)* Some days I think this is done, and some days I think I'll never finish it. *(Beat)* That's the problem with thinking.

NORM: And that's the beauty of a painting.

PERRY: What do you mean?

NORM: No matter what you think about it, your thoughts can't change it. And yet it's impossible to look at a painting and not be

changed by it. (*Beat*) Maybe today is one of these days. (*He turns painting upside down*) Better?

PERRY: (*After considering it a while*) Yeah, I think it is.

NORM: Good.

PERRY: Okay, enough thinking. Time to collaborate. (*She takes the white painting, puts it on the easel, takes out a brush and pallet, looks at him, puts down brush and pallet, goes to him and leads him to a place closer to her where he can pose for her and resumes her place at the easel*) Don't move.

NORM: I'm not crowding you, am I?

PERRY: Never mind about that. (*After painting awhile*) Would you write me another poem?

(*Lights change and she exits as NORM begins the following speech. Again, he either covers the set change or changes it himself as he talks*)

NORM: Not too many years after I left that first job, I started courting the woman I was to one day marry. I remember our first date. We were driving and I noticed that she was staring intently out the front windshield all the while, with her right hand gripping the passenger side door, letting go only to brace herself against the dashboard as if she expected us to crash imminently. It was difficult not to interpret this as a criticism of my driving and so I finally said something to her. She replied that in fact, I was the best driver she had ever been with, but when she was in a car and she didn't have her hands on the steering wheel or her foot on the brake, it was hard for her to relax. I suggested that her problem was that she was staring out the windshield as if she was driving, and if she could look at me or out the side or down or read or take a nap or something, she might not get so nervous. She said she had actually tried that, but found that she just couldn't do it. And then I remembered that corridor downtown. I suppose the obvious solution would have been to let her drive, but for some reason neither of us ever brought it up. Now, I don't want you to think this had anything to do with our divorce, it didn't. But I will admit that in all the things I lost when we separated, it was nice to have the joy of driving restored to me.

(Segue into Scene III)

SCENE III: THE LAST DANCE or A FRAME OF REFERENCE

(A hilltop upstate. NORM sits there looking down into the dale below with a sketch pad in one hand and a pen in the other. He is singing)

NORM: *You can dance...with the guy you dance with The guy you dance with The guy you dance...with You can dance (you can dance) With the guy you dance with The guy you dance with...*
(PERRY enters during his singing, having climbed up the hill. She listens for awhile. He stops when he becomes aware of her presence)

PERRY: *(After a beat)* There used to be a piano in that field. I wonder what happened to it. It was incredible the day I discovered it. I was just a kid then and we used to spend summers up here. I loved exploring the woods, you know, making believe I was the first person to ever see them. And one day I walked out onto this field and there was this piano just sitting in the middle of the field. It was amazing. But there was nobody there, just the piano. I waited and waited and nobody came. So I returned the next day and waited and still nobody came. I went back every day for a couple of weeks until finally I walked out of the woods and there was this guy sitting at the piano, you know, right in the middle of the field, just sitting there playing. It was so beautiful. Finally I went over and asked him why he had chosen this place to play. And he said he was a songwriter, but he couldn't write when there were other people around, you know, it was too distracting. So he brought his piano out to this field so he could work...alone. *(Beat)* Is that why you came up here, so you could work alone?

NORM: Work? Oh, you mean this sketchpad. No, not really. I hope you don't mind that I took it without asking. I got it out of one of your bags.

PERRY: Of course not. But I'm surprised. I thought you said you didn't draw.

NORM: Right, I did say that. Well, I figured it might help me to try, you know.

PERRY: Help you in what way?

NORM: Well, I was curious how an artist type, like yourself for example, sees the world. So I thought if I tried to draw, you know, holding this authentic drawing stuff, and looking out the way you do, I might see things differently.

PERRY: We artist types do very little drawing with ballpoint pens.

NORM: Right. Comes in handy for us writer types, though.

PERRY: Can I see your work?

NORM: Can you see my work? I doubt it. Even I can't see my work.

PERRY: (She smiles) Can I see the pad?

NORM: Sure, here. (*Hands her pad*)

PERRY: This is mine.

NORM: You said it was all right I borrowed it.

PERRY: No, I mean this is a pad of my sketches, things I did over the years. There are no blank pages. How can you draw on this?

NORM: I told you, I can't draw at all.

PERRY: But you said you came up here to draw.

NORM: No, actually, I said that wasn't the reason I came up here. But anyway, when I decided to try this originally I did take a blank pad and I sat here and sat here but I couldn't draw anything.

PERRY: Well, you drew a blank.

NORM: I suppose that's true. (*Beat*)

PERRY: You shouldn't get discouraged, though. It's a skill. You have to learn it.

NORM: Right. But you see, it wasn't that I didn't have the skill to draw. I never got that far. It was that I didn't have any idea what to draw. I went from one place to another but nothing made me want to draw it. I guess that's something you're born with, the ability or the sensitivity or whatever it is to know what it is that you want to paint or draw. I just don't have that. I couldn't see things the way you do. I couldn't see the things that inspire you.

PERRY: So you went back and got this pad instead?

NORM: Yeah. I figured maybe that way I could see what inspired you. No polar bears in that pad.

PERRY: No. (*Beat*)

NORM: (*Sings*) "*You can dance (you can dance) with the guy you dance with The guy you dance with The guy —*

PERRY: Aren't there any more words to that song?

NORM: Probably. I don't remember them. Maybe your friend with the piano knows.

PERRY: I don't think so. I don't think he ever wrote any songs about the guy you dance with the guy you dance with.

NORM: No, he probably wrote about trees and birds and gnats.

PERRY: Why do you say that?

NORM: Because writers are supposed to write about what they know. And if he spent all his time in the middle of a dopey field, all he could know is trees and birds and gnats.

PERRY: He didn't spend all his time there. I told you that. It was weeks until he finally showed up and then he only stayed for a while. I realized if I wanted to hear him again, I would have to come out to the field every day in the hopes that he would show up.

NORM: Couldn't you just ask him when he was going to come back?

PERRY: I don't see how he could know something like that. And I — well, I didn't.

NORM: So you were in love with this guy?

PERRY: I was a kid. He was old enough to be my father. I was in love with hearing his music on that field. And where did you get the idea that writers are supposed to write about what they know? Does that go for artists, too? Am I supposed to only paint about what I know?

NORM: I don't know. *(Beat)* Don't you?

PERRY: Yeah. But not because I'm supposed to. I hate doing what I'm supposed to. *(Beat)* If you didn't come up here to paint, why did you come up here?

NORM: To think. *(Beat)* To write.

PERRY: To think? What did you think about?

NORM: Color War and Carolyn Marcus. *(Beat)* See, for three years, when I was a teenager, I went to summer camp in the mountains, an area a little like this. And all the time I was in love with a camper named Carolyn Marcus. But I never said anything because I didn't think she would be interested in me because to look at me I don't think I'm all that interesting. But anyway, I thought if she knew me better she might be interested, but I didn't know how to get her to know me better. And then I got my chance during Color War.

PERRY: What is Color War?

NORM: That's when they divide the camp into two teams, Blue and White, and the teams compete in softball and volleyball and swimming and they get points for winning, and then there's a Sing on the final night and you get points for that too and then they decide the winner.

PERRY: They should fight all wars that way.

NORM: And my third year at this camp I was chosen as one of the generals of my Color War team and Carolyn was on my team. Now, as general I was supposed to write the songs for the Sing, and I had never written a song in my life, but all of a sudden ideas came to me, flooded my mind. This was my chance, see, to show Carolyn how special I was. And so it came down to the Sing and the judges loved my songs and we won hands down and there was pandemonium and all the campers and counselors were milling around and finally I saw Carolyn, pushing her way through the crowd towards me. And she hugged me and kissed me and congratulated me and told me how terrific I was and I felt — well, you can imagine how I felt.

PERRY: Uh-huh. That's a nice memory.

NORM: It is. But that wasn't the memory I was remembering. I was just giving you some background. What I was remembering is what motivated me to write those songs. See, I don't find any inspiration from sitting in a field or from polar bears like real artists do. The only time I can write is when I want to get somebody to like me.

PERRY: Well, you did get her to like you. There's an art to that.

NORM: Tell me about it. (*She doesn't make the connection*) But I didn't really. The day after Color War, building on the confidence I had from winning, I asked Carolyn to go with me to the End-Of-Summer Dance. But she had already accepted an invitation from Jake Hart.

PERRY: Who's Jake Hart?

NORM: The general of the other team. The guy who wrote the losing songs. That was my last summer at that camp. (*Beat*)

PERRY: So you didn't go to the End-Of-Summer Dance?

NORM: Yeah, I went. I went with Isobel who wanted to go with Frank who went with Doreen who actually wanted to go with Bernie. It was stupid anyway. You dance to stupid Johnny Mathis

songs and walk down to the stupid lake and put stupid candles on stupid pieces of stupid Styrofoam. And in a couple of days you're back home and all the rest of the campers are back home and you never see them again. *(Beat)* Unless you go back. *(Beat)* Which I didn't.

PERRY: That sounds very romantic, the candles floating on the water, one of those August nights where time has slowed down —

NORM: *(Angry)* And you never see them again! What's the point if you don't see them again.

PERRY: *(Beat)* So, are you upset because you never saw Carolyn Marcus again or are you upset because you're not a "real" artist, whatever that means.

NORM: Neither one. Forget it, all right.

PERRY: *(Beat)* Well, you said you came up here to think and to write. Did you write anything?

NORM: Yeah. This *(Removing worn paper from pocket and giving it to her)*.

PERRY: This is my poem, the one you wrote me when we moved into the loft.

NORM: Right. I found it in my sock drawer.

PERRY: Well, you wrote this a long time ago. I meant did you write anything this afternoon up here? *(Takes poem from her and turns it over)* Oh, you wrote on the back. *(Reads)* This is the same poem. You wrote the same poem again.

NORM: I did? I thought it sounded familiar.

PERRY: "...a painter who is painted
"By the painting that she paints."

I love that.

NORM: You do?

PERRY: Why did you write the same poem again?

NORM: Back it up a second. Did you say you loved it?

PERRY: Yeah.

NORM: "Yeah?" As in: Of course, how come I didn't know that?

PERRY: Yeah. Why did you write the same poem again?

NORM: I was trying to get it right.

PERRY: Why did you think it wasn't right?

NORM: Because I didn't know that you thought I knew that you loved it.

PERRY: I have no idea what you just said.

NORM: Welcome to the club. *(Beat)* "You can dance (you can dance) with the guy you dance with, the guy you dance with —

PERRY: I've only been dancing a few times in my life. I didn't like it much. It's hard. The music would be playing and I would feel my body start swaying one way and then my partner would hold me and his body would start swaying another way, and occasionally we'd move together. But mostly either I would have to move his way or he would have to move mine.

NORM: You have to learn the steps. *(Looks at her)* Look who I'm talking to. Forget I said that.

PERRY: So, what did you think of these? *(Indicating her pad; he darkens)*

NORM: Very good. Who are they, anyway, your dance partners?

PERRY: No, silly. These are sketches I did. Mostly my kids.

NORM: Your kids? Let me see that. *(Looks at pad, a look of recognition come over him)* Yes. This is Sam.

PERRY: Sophie, actually. Her Sinead O'Connor phase.

NORM: Oh. What's she holding?

PERRY: A guitar, silly. Or, wait a minute, is that one of the cats?

NORM: This is Sam.

PERRY: Nope, that's me, a self-portrait. Wait, I'll find one of Sam. *(Looks through pad)* Here's one of his foot. *(More looking through pad)* Ah, here.

NORM: Oh, yeah. Good old Sam. *(He keeps looking through pictures)*

PERRY: Are you coming back down to the house?

NORM: Of course. *(Looking up)* Did you think I wasn't coming back?

PERRY: Well, when I came home and saw you sitting on the bed, you looked pretty angry. Then you left. And when I came up here and saw you sitting on that rock, you looked pretty sad.

NORM: That's me, all right, sitting pretty between a rock and a hard place. "The perfect spot."

PERRY: (Beat) So, I'm glad you're coming back.

NORM: Great. Maybe you'll even be there when I do. I thought we were supposed to be living together.

PERRY: Working together was what I said.

NORM: Then what's all this about pianos in fields. You're away enough as it is even when you're there. Now I suppose you'll be traipsing about the countryside, looking for places to paint in and I'll never see you. I thought talking to me helped you see what you wanted to paint.

PERRY: It does. But you say so many things, I need some time alone to catch up. I'm still working on things you said when we first met.

NORM: Well, that's great. You know what that leaves me to write about? An empty house.

PERRY: If I can paint an empty house, you can write about one.

NORM: No, I can't. And you know I can't. (*Pointing to poem*) I told you how I get inspired.

PERRY: How?

NORM: By love. By you.

PERRY: You love me?

NORM: Of course. How could you not know that? Can't you see that in this poem?

PERRY: Not my medium, I guess.

NORM: And if you're not available to me, if you're always off somewhere, then what am I going to write about?

PERRY: And that's what got you angry?

NORM: No.

PERRY: Oh. (Beat) Is that what got you sad?

NORM: No.

PERRY: (*Beat*) Rats. I was hoping by talking we could clear up a few things, but it's not working.

NORM: Doesn't seem to be.

PERRY: I had great hopes about talk when we first met. You seemed so good at it, filling in the dead spots. I've never been too good at it. It's like when someone says something to me, I have to translate it into a different language, and then translate my answer back into their language. And it takes so long that whomever I'm

talking to gets fed up waiting for an answer and pretty soon they just stop trying.

NORM: Maybe you should paint them a picture. Look, I don't mind waiting for an answer, but sometimes I ask you questions and you just don't answer them at all. Why is that? (*She doesn't answer him at all*) I waive simultaneous translation. You can answer me in your native tongue.

PERRY: Is that what made you —

NORM: All right. When you came up here I was sad because I was looking at those paintings and I didn't know who they were but they were painted with a lot of love and passion and I got jealous and that made me sad.

PERRY: So you feel better now, because you know they're my kids?

NORM: No. I'm still jealous. But now I get the benefit of feeling like an idiot along with feeling jealous.

PERRY: You shouldn't feel jealous.

NORM: Right. That's why I feel like an idiot. Because I shouldn't but I do. I'm jealous of the love you feel for your kids and for the guy at the piano and your father and your former dancing partners and the polar bear and the house on the desert, and worst of all, I am jealous of the love you feel for your art.

PERRY: Oh. That could be a problem.

NORM: And compounding all of this is the insecurity I feel about how you have to separate from me to do your art.

PERRY: But I thought we were working together.

NORM: I never felt so distant from anyone in my life as I do from you when we're working together. But you know, I could live with all that, I probably wouldn't even feel these feelings, if I felt that... (*Beat*)

PERRY: So that's what made you angry.

NORM: No. That's what made me sad.

PERRY: What made you angry?

NORM: What was my poem doing in the sock drawer? (*She looks at him confused*)

PERRY: It goes in the underwear drawer?

NORM: No, no drawer. You're supposed to cherish it and put it someplace special, not just dump it anywhere.

PERRY: That's why you left the house?

NORM: Yes. That poem is my art. It's not the kind of art that most people would be interested in, but it's the way I communicate. It was a gift to you. You ask me about your paintings all the time, what I think. But you never say anything about my writing. I need to hear how you feel about it, I need to hear how you feel about me, and I need to hear that not just once, but again and again until the sound of your voice would fill the dead spots in my head and there wouldn't be any room for stupid jealousies. (*Beat*) Do you think you can do that?

PERRY: I don't know. (*Beat*) This is the worst dance I ever danced. We're like dancing to totally different songs.

NORM: No. Same song, different steps. This is a slow dance. We're supposed to dance close.

PERRY: I'm still trying to figure out how your poem got in the sock drawer. The last place I remember seeing it was on the kitchen counter and it may have gotten stuck to the Haagen-Daz container I took out of the freezer and possibly it fell off in the bathroom where I was eating the Haagen-Daz and I suppose when I stepped out of the shower I might have stepped on it and conceivably it could have stuck to my foot and then came off when I got into bed and when I took off the sheets and brought them to the laundry it must have gone in with the wash and come out with the rest of the laundry — and the socks. I mean, that's just a guess but maybe that's what happened.

NORM: My poem has been through the wash?

PERRY: Yeah. Still scans pretty well.

NORM: I'm missing something. How can you be so cavalier about this? Can you imagine my treating one of your paintings that way?

PERRY: (*An outburst*) My paintings aren't about people leaving other people. They're about a moment in time that I see and put on a canvas so it can last...forever.

NORM: Well, poems are more ephemeral. But that doesn't —

PERRY: Don't talk to me about poems. You think this is the first poem I ever got?

NORM: No, I can imagine you —

PERRY: You answer my questions for a change. Why did you write that? Why did you have him leave her?

NORM: Why didn't she go with him?

PERRY: How should I know? I didn't write it, you did.

NORM: (*Looking at poem*) Oh, yeah. (*Beat*) Why did I have him leave her? Hmm. Give me a second. I used to know this.

PERRY: I'll tell you why. Because an artist should write about what he knows. Looks like you're an artist in spite of yourself.

NORM: Well, it's a steep price to pay for art.

PERRY: And if this is supposed to be about you and me, in real life I did go with you. (*He stares at her*) You don't feel like I did, do you? And that's what's bothering you.

NORM: I don't know. I guess it's more like we both go our own way and occasionally we run into each other.

PERRY: What's wrong with that?

NORM: It's not —

PERRY: — what you had in mind.

NORM: No. It's not a relationship. It's not a collaboration. It's not sharing.

PERRY: (*Beat*) There are some things I just can't share with you.

NORM: Like what?

PERRY: Like telling you what I can't share with you.

NORM: Why?

PERRY: Because telling you would be sharing it with you. And I can't do that. I'm afraid you're just going to cut the line. And this is a snarl I need to untangle, knot by knot, by myself.

NORM: (*Beat*) I can't live with that.

PERRY: I know. Even I have a problem living with it. That's why when you first approached me on the desert I couldn't respond to you. But when you suggested working together, I thought: That I could handle. Look, if you can't live with it, can you at least try to work with it?

NORM: You want me to work with you on something but you don't know what it is you want me to do and if you did know you probably couldn't share it with me anyway and in any event since we don't speak the same language even if you did know and would share it with me I still couldn't understand it. Is that what you're suggesting?

PERRY: (*Makes fists and tries the angry gesture, gives up*) What do you do for lost?

NORM: You look for the road signs. Look, when I met you on that desert, I was plenty lost. But what I saw in you was an oasis of possibilities. And the most intriguing of all the possibilities was the notion that I might have finally stumbled upon the inspiration to sit down and start unraveling my own snarls. You know, the art involved in untangling this mess is nothing compared to the art involved in having created it in the first place, a kind of emotional macramé. If we tied these knots, I'm sure we're artists enough to untie them, particularly if we work at it together. Look at it as a deconstructionist collaboration. (*Beat*) What do you say?

PERRY: I don't know. (*Beat*) I'm afraid.

NORM: (*Indicating poem*) I understand that. It's a risk. People do leave. It is scary. But trust me, that fear is nothing compared to bureauphobia.

PERRY: Bureauphobia?

NORM: The fear of opening one's sock drawer. (*She smiles, looks at him, and then she takes the poem from him and puts it in her pocket*)

PERRY: One more time. (*She takes out a road sign of the word STOP in a circle with a line through it*)

NORM: Don't worry, I won't. (*The Drifters singing Darling, Save the Last Dance For Me starts to play*)

PERRY: Now, what was that you said about learning the steps? (*She extends her hand to him and they start dancing*)

(*The End*)