




A PLAY ON
WORDS

Octavia
Bürgel





DRAMATIS PERSONAE
(In order of appearance)

CHORUS

HOPE
A cherub, Doubt's twin

DOUBT
A cherub, Hope's twin


EYE/BLUEBEARD
*Played by the same actor, who dons a bushy, blue,
fake beard while delivering Bluebeard's lines.*

A DESK. A CHAIR.
A LIGHTBULB SUSPENDED. EVENING.

CHORUS.
Another day, another audience,
Come to see The Play.
Please grace us with your tolerance,
For the duration of your stay.

Please do not block the aisle-way,
Should you attempt to flee.
– Stay, until we say,
You've been released; you're free.

Without further ado, we present our heroine to you
The role takes two – for balance is due,
Hope and Doubt, dispensed in defense against,
the wiles and whims of the one who is Blue.





ACT I: TOTAL BEAUTY

EYE. *(Seated at a desk, scribbling in a journal. She looks up, frazzled.)*

Is it time already? Shit, ok. *Heyyy* everyone! Sorry, guys. This is so embarrassing. I'm gonna get to the intros in a second – I wanted to give everyone a chance to settle in. Take a beat, study the space you're in, check in with yourself. I just need to write *one* more thing down and then I'm all yours.

(Eye turns back to her notebook and continues scribbling. Long pause while she does this.)

HOPE. *(Crossing the stage from corner left, sidling up to Eye. Hope lingers behind Eye, reading over her right shoulder)*

Whatcha workin' on? Looks cool!

EYE. Girl, I can't answer that right now.

DOUBT. *(Crossing the stage from corner right, sidling up to Eye. Doubt lingers behind Eye, reading over her left shoulder.)*


(In a mocking tone) Oh I'm so busy, I can't talk right now.

(To Hope) She always does this when she's on a deadline – tries to shut us out. All I know is she *better* not be trying to write no type of poem! Rhyme scheme or not – they always end up mediocre. Frankly, she could use a little more of my assistance when it comes to writing...

HOPE. Can you *stop*?! You're so mean sometimes. It's all about trial and error. Anyway, whenever she follows your advice she ends up in a depressive episode and it takes days of *my* time to get her back on track.

DOUBT. *(Laughing bitterly)* Oh, and what track is that? Middle school English teacher?

HOPE. Hey! Middle school English teacher is a noble profession that deserves far more respect. Where would she be if not for *her* middle school English teacher, huh? If that's what she wants, then I'll encourage her just the sam –





DOUBT. But it's not what she wants, and you know that.

(Abruptly, Eye slams the book shut and sits back in her chair.)

EYE. I guess you already heard a little bit from my girls over there, Hope and Doubt. They're gonna help me do justice to all of *(Gesticulating at the stage)* this. Oh, and I'm EYE, the center of your visible world! Writer, lover, friend, umm... what else. Libra – any Libras in the house tonight?

(Eye stands up and does a twirl for the audience, whilst accentuating her body).

I'd offer to go around the room so you can all introduce yourselves, but it would take too long. Plus, like, no shade, but this is kind of my story.

(Eye plops down into the chair just as abruptly as she rises. Assumes an air of mystique. It's story-time.)

EYE. As a child, I watched the adults in my life achieve a kind of transcendence – atomizing themselves into worlds of their own creation.

Propped on someone's knee, the floor, the bench, the drafting table, I studied their gazes while they worked, and it looked like love.

(Eye gazes off into the distance as if frozen in time)

HOPE. It was love!

DOUBT. That's not really how I remember it, but ok.

HOPE. Well, you weren't there.

DOUBT. I was there! My vocabulary was just more limited.

HOPE. Well, whatever. This is Eye's story. She said it looked like love so I'm just saying that it looked like love to me too.

DOUBT. I'm not saying it didn't look like love – I just think Eye's not being totally honest about how she felt about it. *I* think she would have preferred if it was directed *toward* her instead of whatever the adults were doing.





HOPE. The adults were showing her what love looked like the only way they could! Bearing witness to it was kind of like it being directed toward her – I mean it wasn't *not* directed toward her. She was *in* the room...

EYE. One year when I was very small, we went to see 'The Nutcracker'. The musicians tuned their instruments, the curtain rose, the dancers took their first steps, and somewhere in the crowd of onlookers, my mouth began to pucker. The taste was mineral, like sucking on stones. A current surged within me, as if everyone – the musicians, the ballerinas, and the stagehands – had enacted a collective incantation summoning all of the love in the room to sustain their performance. I began to wail.

DOUBT. Now this part, I remember!

HOPE. You would.

DOUBT. As would you.

(Long, stony pause.)

EYE. Beauty – total beauty – had created a rupture between what I thought life was about and what I now knew it could be, and it broke my heart.





ACT II: UNCERTAINTY

EYE. There's two different anecdotes that I'm debating telling you right now. In the first one, I'm five years old eating the Body of Christ like a cookie; masticating loudly in the House of God.

(Pause)

The second one is basically the same as the first, except it was – well, it was an artwork disguised as a popsicle at a contemporary art fair.

HOPE. I'm just going to interject here because, to be honest, both of those incidents were sort of my fault.

(Sighing) Yeah, I'm not proud of it. There's no good excuse, it's just – I just thought that it was going to be like 'The Nutcracker' again. You know, we're in the Church, they're singing the songs, the altar is all gold and beautiful and shiny. I saw the cookie and I said go for it. I bet it'll be delicious. What could go wrong –


DOUBT. Oho. "What could go wrong," she says. Oh, um. I dunno – how about the realization that *GOD ISN'T REAL!?* How about that?

HOPE. Yeah, well, I didn't know that was going to be the conclusion. To be honest, I thought it would be exactly the proof she needed that God *IS* real, you know? A lot of people say so. Especially after they eat the cookie. 'Scuse me – "Partake In the Holy Sacrament."

DOUBT. Yeah, well. You thought wrong. Bigtime. And honestly, I don't know why you would *allow* her to go through that all over again with the popsicle. I mean, if God isn't real, why the hell would you let her think that art is?

HOPE. Don't put that on me! It was your job to regulate her trust in the unknown. Besides, she needed to believe in *something*.

EYE. My conclusion was the same: Art, like God, was 50% trickery, 50% faith, and guaranteed to taste like shit.



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HOPE. *Hiii*, sorry. I just need to jump in again because I think she's lying to you a little bit –

DOUBT. I think she believes what she's saying on some level.

HOPE. Yeah on *your* level, which is in the gutter.

(Satisfied) I'm talking about her genuine, core self – the one that gets masked by all the other stuff: identity, context, etc. On the level of *that* Self, I think she's lying to you a little bit.

DOUBT. Okay, and, your proof is where?

HOPE. Ugh, you're so impatient. She's trying to tell you, just wait.

ACT III: BLUEBEARD

EYE. Writing became my outlet – itself the most perfunctory subset of the class of “The Arts”. Less noise. Fewer conditions. I engaged with visual art but largely as a force of habit, invoking it only in terms of its political value – nothing of the spirit, the soul.

And then, one day, an email:

BLUEBEARD.

Dear Eye,

I was fortunate to be introduced to your work by a friend who is an editor at ■ and was kind enough to share your recent piece on ■. I was taken by that most charmingly neurotic voice that seems characteristic of your style. I oversee a range of workshops and publication opportunities for young and emerging writers at ■. We are currently accepting submissions of long-form texts, and I thought to extend a personal invitation to you to apply. I eagerly await your reply.

Sincerely,
Bluebeard

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DOUBT. Now, I don't know who this *BB* is but he's obviously doing too much. I mean, "charmingly neurotic"? Who says that?

HOPE. This is kind of a big deal, though! I mean... right?!

EYE. A few weeks went by and I still hadn't replied. I started to feel bad. Maybe he was being genuine. God, was my self-esteem so wrecked that I couldn't even accept that he might be serious? He likes my work. He *likes* my *work*!

HOPE. Girl, *Carpe Diem*! This is your moment.

DOUBT. Let's not get ahead of ourselves, okay? We don't even know who this guy is. Ok so, he sent you an email – he has probably sent lots of people lots of emails.

(Hope elbows and shoves Doubt to the right. A scuffle ensues until Doubt is off stage, behind the curtain).

HOPE. *(Straightening herself. To Eye)* Don't listen to her. She's just mad because this is a major, capitalized, bold, **WIN** for me.

DOUBT (O.S.). *(Shouting)* At least find out what the parameters are!

EYE. As the hours passed, I started to get the sensation that this was *the* opportunity that I had been waiting for; that refusing the call would cement my life's eternal stagnation. I often fall prey to the temptations of magical thinking, but this time it felt *really* real. I wrote back and asked what the parameters were.


(Pause)

And almost immediately, he replied.

BLUEBEARD.

Eye,
I'm thrilled to receive your note. We'd like for this series to reflect writing that is, for lack of a better term, evergreen. I suppose one should never make promises, but you'd have

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free reign to work on essentially any idea you'd like – as long as it responds in some form or fashion to contemporary praxis. We tend to favor criticism but we're open to hearing your thoughts. The length for any format would be at your own discretion.

Best,
BB

EYE. So I tried to think. I closed my eyes and clenched my body and willed myself to think.

HOPE. But all she could think about was the scale of the opportunity – the possibility of actualization; of being a better writer than she had been the day before by mere virtue of having been anointed with recognition.

DOUBT. (*Tiptoeing back to center stage, hovering behind Eye's left shoulder*) Suddenly I wasn't her foe anymore. She needed me – even if only so that she didn't delude herself with visions of grandeur yet unearned.


EYE. *Thiiiiiiiiiiiiink*, I thought. *Think, think, think...*

(Pause)

And when that yielded nothing I did something I shouldn't have done. I Googled myself. But it wasn't the vanity project that you're probably imagining – I wanted to read anything I had ever published. I thought that if I approached my digital profile like a stranger would, maybe I could locate what Bluebeard saw as so promising. Some of the pieces I found were actually thoughtful, surprisingly so –

DOUBT. And some of them were downright embarrassing, under-researched, dilettante garbahge.

EYE. I thought that if I could tap into that enlightened voice, or at least emulate it, maybe that would be the type of work that Bluebeard would validate. Maybe I could play right into his open hand. I found a personal essay I had written a few years back when I was pining over a particular boy, and excerpted a passage.





BLUEBEARD. (*Reading Eye's excerpt*)

"...Arlo has left now, gone back to England to continue working on his doctorate. From time to time he sends me poems and I am floored by the bigness of his mind – the PhD is just scaffolding to his ego. Today, it's a passage by Dylan Thomas,

"This book contains most of the poems I have written, and all, up to the present year, that I wish to preserve. Some of them I have revised a little, but if I went on revising everything that I now do not like in this book, I should be so busy that I would have no time to try to write new poems."¹

I really feel him on that. I really feel trapped by revision. How many perfectly good texts have I carved and spliced into drier morsels? What I like most about this invocation is the allusion to effort. Thomas writes, "to try to write new poems." It is futile in the end, could only ever be..."

1) Thomas, D. (1959). *Collected poems*, 1934-1952. New York: Dent.

(*Sighs pejoratively*)

Eye,
Thank you for sharing this passage. It's quite unlike the other work of yours that I have read. I sense an unresolved pain in your tone that I find distracting. If you could approach Thomas' work with more objectivity, I think this could be a valuable direction to develop. Looking forward to hearing more of your ideas.
Best,
Bluebeard

DOUBT. Well, so much for "free reign" –

HOPE. No, it's good. This is good. It would have been too easy to just submit some random old essay just because it references Dylan Thomas. Keep going.

EYE. *Thiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiink... think, think, think.*

(*To Hope and Doubt*) Maybe I should try writing from your perspectives. That could be an interesting exercise – like, viewing myself from a different position?





(Pause while Eye turns back to her journal and scribbles some more.)

DOUBT. See, Eye is very clever,
Though often led astray...
Her soul on an eternal endeavor,
Seeking in others what she mislays.

HOPE. 'Tis I responsible for the melee;
This scuffle of desires.
Dear Eye, the innocent Prey,
Of her own heart, always afire.

DOUBT. I must say, Hope, that I admire
Your ability to take account.
But may I further inquire,
What defense do you mount?

HOPE. If left to me, our Eye would be free,
Unburdened with you and your uncertainty.

(Pause)


DOUBT. *(Shaking herself off, as though having been possessed)*
That was weird, I didn't like it.
(Slapping Eye on the back of the head)
Don't ever try to put words in my mouth again!

HOPE. *(Shivers)*
Woah, very cool! Very few opportunities to be a vessel these days. Let's do it again! *Pleaaaaase, please, please* —

BLUEBEARD.

Eye,
Was this meant for me to read? I appreciate your candor but frankly I fear we may be veering further into the realm of subjective experience. You have some interesting ideas here but I'm not wholly convinced by their construction, and I wouldn't be the best person to edit it into shape.
Why don't we scale the prompt back? You are clearly very ambitious but perhaps we are striving for too much. I don't think you should discredit your ability to write formally. In fact,





I quite like the academic nature of the work of yours that I initially encountered. Keep going.
All best,
BB

DOUBT. Girl, what'd I tell you about that *damn* poetry? It's not your medium and that's ok. Just give 'em a little of that old term paper razzle-dazzle. Citations. References. Employ the word, "juxtaposition," or maybe, "philistine." PROVE YOUR INTELLECT!

ACT IV: REVELATIONS

EYE. That night I watched an old movie where this hot Italian chick was talking about "the solitude of modern man in contemporary theater."² It seemed like a punchline but I didn't get the joke.

(Pause)

It did get me thinking, though. Bluebeard had given me a false sense of security. He had lied. He said I had free reign. As soon as I probed the limits of that allegedly limitless boundary, the snares began to appear. I felt betrayed. I felt disobedient.

DOUBT. I told you not to trust it...

HOPE. *(Sharply to Doubt)* Let's not go there yet.

(Cooing to Eye) Maybe we can still make it work? I mean could there be a happy medium? Instead of writing *about* art, what about writing *as a work of art*?

2) *8 ½* (1963) Directed by Federico Fellini. [Feature Film]. Italy: Cineriz.





DOUBT. (*To Hope*) Dude, give it up! You're about to lead her down another one of these ridiculous queries that end up embarrassing her later on. It's the Eucharist all over again! I can't *believe* you're trying to pull off this same stunt.

(*To Eye*) Eye, baby, I love you, but you need to listen to me. I don't want to see your faith and ego shaken again because you reached for the ineffable. Let's try to stay grounded here. The transcendence you're seeking won't be determined by form, ok? Can we make that our mantra?

EYE.

The transcendence I'm seeking won't be determined by form.

The transcendence I'm seeking won't be determined by form.

The transcendence I'm seeking won't be determined by form.

CHORUS.

Hope searched the sky, indignant,
Asking what could this all reveal?
A girl so stubborn, so ignorant,
To deny such a simple appeal.

But what was it that Doubt did steal,
While Hope looked to the firmament?
A whispered, secret, shared ideal,
A plea to her, and your discernment.

Culminating with Eye's great lament –
For what is life if not an etched impression,
A mere blip, a clip; a fugitive segment,
Wherein all are owed true self-expression?

And in her way, did Doubt accidentally parlay,
The substance you read – this very Play.

