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Call Me Manora: Diary of a Kinnari

Call Me Manora is a contemporary drama based on the *Kinnari Jataka*, a well-known story in Southeast Asia. The 547 *jatakas*, known as “Buddhist rebirth stories,” are a fusion of Hindu tales and local animist myths that were incorporated into the Buddhist canon, with one of the main characters representing the Siddhartha Gautama before he became The Buddha. The *kinnari* are bird-women deities that consequently appear in the region’s literature, theatrical presentation, and temple decorations. The original story of the *kinnari* princess, Manora, tells of her love with Prince Suthon, who is portrayed as The Buddha’s precursor and the key dance figure in the Manora, or Nora dance in Thailand, Cambodia, and Malaysia. This **KETEP** adaptation revisits their romance with emphasis on Manora’s adventures. The inability of human and nonhuman to cohabit is a parable about Southeast Asia’s environmental destruction, and in particular, the region’s role in the Avian Flu epidemic.

The play, though written as a spoken drama, can include the music and dance of the region. “Interior voices” allow the actor/dancer to perform while character’s thoughts are expressed by an offstage voice—using the traditional separation of narrator and dancer in Southeast Asian classical dance-drama. Actors in **Act I** can reappear as new characters in **Act II** and **Act III** and the entire play can be done with seven women and seven men. Only Manora appears in all three acts.

Dramatis Personae

Act I

Woman/Manora, *the youngest kinnari princess*
 Girl/Kop, *her eldest daughter*
 Bird/Pok, *her youngest daughter*
 Suwanee, *eldest kinnari princess*
 Thappani, *second kinnari princess*
 Chandra, *third kinnari princess*
 Thep, *a Buddhist hermit*
 Bun, *a hunter*
 King Thao Pathum, *Kinnari King of Suvannakon on Mt. Krilat*
 Queen, *Kinnari Queen*

King Atityawong, *King of Pancala, Suthon’s father*
 Phra Suthon, *Prince of Pancala*
 King Sucandrima, *evil king of neighboring kingdom*
 Priest
 Atityawong’s Queen, *Suthon’s mother*
 Atityawong’s Priest
 Prime Minister
 Gatekeeper, *attending the gate to kinnari capital, Suvannakon*

Act II

Peacock/Namrona, *a peacock-woman in the folklore of the Tai people in China*
 Tennin, *female feathered spirit of the mists who dances in the Noh drama, Hagaromo*

Lady White Snake, *a Chinese nature deity that becomes a human female, a source of many dramas and dances*

Ho Nguyet Co, *Lady-Moon-in-the-Lake, a fox who becomes a Vietnamese woman, appears in tuong dance-drama*

Samodiva, *a Turkish swan-woman*

Sirena, *one of three Greek winged female deities who lured sailors to their death by singing*
Green Snake, *the younger sister of White Snake*

Act III

Ted Kaczynski, *the "Unabomber," who sent letter bombs, protesting the destruction of the environment*

Thich Quang Duc, *a Vietnamese Buddhist monk who set himself on fire, protesting Catholic oppression and the American War*

Jan Palach, *a Czech student who set himself on fire, protesting Russian occupation of Prague.*

Act I

Scene One

Spotlight downstage left, a winged kinnari dancer stands in a flight pose, still as a statue, then slowly begins to dance move in lakon nai style, elegant and controlled. She stops suddenly in the middle of a pose, convulses, grabs her abdomen, and begins groaning as if in labor. Black Out.

Stage center, a giant egg rolls around on the floor bumping into chairs and a table in a kitchen. A woman in a plain modern dress runs first toward it and then away, and then finally she catches it in her arms. The egg shakes as what is inside struggles to get out.

MANORA AS WOMAN

Use your beak, that's what it's for. Peck, for God's sake, peck!

The egg continues to tremble. She thinks of something terrible and covers her face with her hands. Then she begins looking for something. She picks up a knife, and then puts it down. She gets a large spoon and begins gently hacking off the top of the egg. It breaks open, out tumbles a girl and a bird.

GIRL

Finally! You took your time! 'Use your beak!/' What beak?

MANORA AS WOMAN

So did you./ You were inside me nine months and then what did I give birth to? A little egg that I cared for another 2 months till it grew monstrous. How would I know what is going on in there? I thought it might explode.

GIRL

I thought so, too.

MANORA AS WOMAN

I should have known. Twins! *(they both look at the bird)*

GIRL
Is our father...?

MANORA AS WOMAN
No, I am.

GIRL
You?

MANORA AS WOMAN
I'm not what I now appear.

GIRL
Which is?
Black Out

Scene Two

The woman puts on her wings and talks directly to the audience.

MANORA
Call me Manora. Like all good stories, mine begins long ago and far away—in a place once real that belongs only to the imagination now, when all that we know of the mountains and forests threatens to become a distant dream. I feel the urgency to speak before what I speak of can no longer even be imagined. (*lights come up on stage and we realize she is talking to the girl and the bird*)

I look at your shining eyes, so similar, in faces so different. The two parts of me looking back; a single four-eyed creature, the yin and yang of siblinghood.

As she talks, behind a scrim, the kinnari come out dancing, and flying.

We were daughters of King Thao Pathum, living in Suvannakon, City of Gold, on Mt. Krilat in the Himalaya. We were free to roam everywhere in the world, except Lake Bokkharani. But one moonlit night on our way back home, we flew above its silvery waters and felt the powerful tug of the forbidden. (*the scrim comes up*)

SUWANEE
You know as well as I do what's happening. I'm going down, alone, if I have to.

THAPPANI
You can't go alone.

SUWANEE
Then come. Manora and Chandra, remember, not a word.

CHANDRA
(*to Thappani*) You're out of breath.

THAPPANI

I've started molting; it always exhausts me.

MANORA

Oh, look how lovely the lake is. So inviting! Why has it been forbidden?

SUWANEE

I'll circle it one more time to make sure no one is here. Thappani, you go in first and make sure there are no crocodiles.

THAPPANI

(swims) Come on in. The water's like liquid silk.

CHANDRA

Cool and warm at the same time!

MANORA

Dark, yet clear...delicious. Beat you over to the other side.

Black Out

Scene Three

Several months later. Two men hide in the bushes, watching the kinnari swim. Bun, a hunter, and Thep, a hermit, are clowns and wear half masks.

THEP

There they are! Just as I told you.

BUN

No, they're more luscious, like plump ducks. But...perhaps you've just conjured a vision to deceive me.

THEP

My powers aren't so great.

BUN

They come every month?

THEP

For almost a year now. They play and swim for about two hours, then put on their wings and fly away. I can see from the glint in your eye you want to catch one.

BUN

I do indeed. But how?

THEP

I promised you only a look. You're nothing but a lowly hunter. The kinnari are too delicate for the likes of you. They'd melt in your hands.

BUN

(he puts his hands around the hermit's throat) But you won't. Quickly, tell me how I may catch one.

THEP

Didn't you tell me you once saved the Naga King's life?

BUN

Yes, but it was long ago. He won't remember.

THEP

The snake ruler never forgets a debt. Listen, he has a magic noose. Ask for it and he'll be obliged to give it to you. The next time the kinnari bathe, hide the wings of the one you fancy, then throw the noose around her and it will bind her fast.

BUN

Good. You want me to get one for you, too?

THEP

Me? I've given up the feast of the flesh.

BUN

Hah! Your eyes were feasting as much as mine! You'll need an extra year of penance. I'm off to get the noose, and don't you go scaring off the kinnari.

Black Out

The kinnari assemble, taking off their wings and hanging them up, getting ready to swim.

CHANDRA

I don't know why other birds don't come to swim here.

THAPPANI

The water isn't salty but it buoys us up. It must come from an underground spring

SUWANEE

You still haven't figured it out? These are the Waters of Eternal Youth. As long as we bathe here, we'll never grow old. That's why we feel so good afterwards, and why it must be kept a secret. If Mother and Father find out, they'll lock us up, or worse.

BUN

(he laughs, looking at the pairs of wings) Now, which one to choose? It doesn't matter; I can't tell them apart. *(sounds of shouting and splashing as the kinnari approach, and he takes Manora's wings)*

SUWANEE

Out everybody! We've stayed longer than usual. I can see the first rays of dawn.

THAPPANI

Just a little longer.

SUWANEE

Stop you two, or I'll leave without you. Where's Manora?

CHANDRA

At the far end.

SUWANEE

Why is she always last? Go fetch her, Chandra. I swear, one day I'll just leave without her.

CHANDRA

Manora, hurry up.

MANORA

Coming. (*Manora comes in dripping wet*) I was diving and couldn't hear you. I wanted to see how deep the moon's reflection went. (*she looks around for her wings*) Alright! Very funny! Who hid my wings?

CHANDRA

What?

MANORA

I hung them here on this branch as always. (*the sisters stare at the empty branch*)

THAPPANI

None of us touched them.

SUWANEE

Everyone, quickly look around.

CHANDRA

Look, a few feathers. Are these yours?

MANORA

They don't have my name on them, do they? Perhaps the wind blew my wings. They can't be far.

SUWANEE

It's getting lighter. We have to go back.

MANORA

I can't!

SUWANEE

The three of us will fly together and carry you on our backs.

THAPPANI

We'll never make it carrying her all the way.

SUWANEE

We have no other choice. Come, we haven't time to lose.

Bun steps forward and swings noose. The birds scream and take off. Manora screams and runs after them. The noose catches her neck.

MANORA

Stop! Come back! Save me!

CHANDRA

We can't leave her. What can we do?

SUWANEE

Peck out his eyes.

CHANDRA

I can't, I'd faint.

SUWANEE

Useless! Thappani, you go for one eye, I'll go for the other. Chandra, peck his hand holding the noose. Now circle, and when I call out, dive.

CHANDRA

We can't. We've never attacked anything before. It's against our nature.

SUWANEE

Make it your nature! Do you want to survive? Adapt! Now circle.

CHANDRA AND THAPPANI

We can't!

SUWANEE

Dive!
They continue circling, hesitating

CHANDRA

He's lifting his bow. He'll kill us all.

SUWANEE

Dive!

Bun shoots, misses but scatters them. Only Suwanee dives and strikes his eye. He writhes on the ground.

SUWANEE

He's down. Get Manora.

THAPPANI

Chandra flew away. We can't save Manora without her.

SUWANEE

Grab his bow and drop it in the water. I'll try to loosen the noose. *(They fly down again. Suwanee is unable to free Manora.)* It's magic. I can't untie it. We have to go. We'll get others to come back and rescue you.

THAPPANI

(She drops the bow in the water) Be brave, Manora. Don't give up. *(they fly off)*

BUN

(He clutches his eye) You'll pay for this.

THEP

(He rushes in) You caught one!

BUN

Hah, there you are! Don't just stand there gawking. Use your herbs and save my eye.

THEP

(He makes a poultice for Bun's eye, and black patch) I don't know if this will save your sight, but it'll take away the pain. You violated their trust.

BUN

Shut up! You're just as guilty, and you've made me a rich man.

THEP

Indeed! Few men are lucky enough to be married to a kinnari!

BUN

Fool! There's a large reward for this creature. King Sucandrima ordered a grand sacrifice of all living things and he wants a Kinnari to be its crowning jewel.

THEP

Eh? You want to kill her? I thought love was your motive.

BUN

You hermits are really out of touch.

THEP

She's already weak without her wings. She'll die before you get to the capital.

BUN

(He puts her wings in a bag, and throws Manora over his shoulder) I'll keep her alive, and if she does die, she'll make tender meat. Goodbye, old fool. *(Bun leaves)*

Black Out

Scene Four

Back in court, the sisters kneel in a line with heads down; the Queen weeps, the King rages.

KING THAO PATHUM

You deliberately disobeyed. Suwanee, you're the most sensible, you didn't stop this?

THAPPANI

It was her idea in the first place. We all wanted to go, but we didn't dare until she insisted.

SUWANEE

I said I would go alone.

CHANDRA

We never had any problem.

KING THAO PATHUM

What! You went more than once?

CHANDRA

Every month. I wanted to tell you...

QUEEN

Every month! It was precisely because you kept going that it became dangerous. Any time or place you're expected, hunters lie in wait.

KING THAO PATHUM

You foolish children. Not only have you sacrificed your sister, you've undermined my rule. Will others trust and obey me if my own children don't? You've threatened the security of the whole kingdom. Traitors!

CHANDRA AND THAPPANI

Nooo!

KING THAO PATHUM

You didn't just go once, out of curiosity. That I might have been able to forgive. But you went again and again, tempting fate and defying me. You will never again leave the palace, and none of you will marry till Manora returns.

SUWANEE

But father, can't you send an army? Dispatch one quickly while she's only guarded by the hunter. Alone, I managed to blind him in one eye.

THAPPANI

And I disposed of his bow.

SUWANEE

If we strike now, we have the best chance. If you allow me, I'll lead the attack.

KING THAO PATHUM

I respect your courage, but your attempts to save her have also done lasting damage. Violence transgresses our nature.

QUEEN

You are kinnari, not birds of prey, killing and eating meat. You are holy, and like the sadhus, eat only grain and fruit, and harm no sentient being. We cannot use violence. We have to find another way.

KING THAO PATHUM

Have you any idea what the hunter intends to do with her?

THAPPANI

He's taking her to King Sucandrima who is holding a grand sacrifice of all living creatures.

QUEEN

What barbarity! Only humans could imagine that gods would want dead flesh.

KING THAO PATHUM

Their capacity for self-deception is indeed boundless. But it may be the very thing we can use against them. Sucandrima is a proud superstitious man. He likes to peer into our entrails to tell the future. *(he laughs coldly)* Nothing beats the idiocy of humans. They mock our 'small brains' but expect to find the truth in our guts!

Black Out

Scene Five

In the Kingdom of Pancala; in the palace, Prince Suthon and King Atityawong discuss the coming sacrifice of their neighboring enemy, King Sucandrima.

SUTHON

No, I don't trust Sucandrima.

KING ATITYAWONG

But you must go. I'll send a secret backup guard. He dares not do anything to start a war. It's his fear of us attacking him that he invites you in the first place.

SUTHON

What kind of reasoning is that?

KING ATITYAWONG

His kind. He's a bully motivated by fear. His priest told him that an owl hooted your name all night long. This he interpreted as an insistence on your presence.

SUTHON

Surely I'm not to be subjected to such hocus-pocus. Besides, it's going to be a bloodbath. The thought of such carnage just to satisfy his pride turns my stomach.

KING ATITYAWONG

I don't dispute the man is disgusting, but he's also powerful. We can't recklessly insult him. Go and study him, and if you like, consider it the first step in destroying him.

SUTHON

Very well. If he believes in the hoot of an owl, he'll believe anything.

KING ATITYAWONG

Quite. But don't confuse the truths that nature tells us with the egoism that insists that all its portents must lead to ourselves.

SUTHON

And how do we tell the difference, father? Are either religion or science capable of discerning truth from deception, or are they too, infected by human will that sees only what it wants?

KING ATITYAWONG

True, both suffer from human egoism; only humility and respect for life can sustain us.

SUTHON

Are you suggesting I rescue the sacrificial victims?

KING ATITYAWONG

Let's say I won't stop you from undermining the solemnities, as long as you don't leave footprints leading to my court.

SUTHON

I accept that challenge with pleasure.

Black out

Scene Six

At King Sucandrima's parade ground with pyre, priests and altar.

KING SUCANDRIMA

Welcome, most welcome, Prince Suthon. We are honored by your presence on this most auspicious occasion.

SUTHON

Gracious king, I am honored to be included.

KING SUCANDRIMA

Everything is well in hand. I am about to begin a new world. Noah was commanded by God to take two of every animal, clean and unclean into the ark, but I have selected only one of every existing species.

SUTHON

Didn't Noah take the animals on board to save them from the flood?

KING SUCANDRIMA

(he laughs) No! God saved them for Noah to eat! After the rainbow appeared, God released Noah from his diet of plants, allowing him to eat the flesh of animals. All the creatures gathered here are to be sacrificed to the gods and eaten by men—such is their destiny. *(gazes out at audience)* Look, they are lined up as far as the eye can see.

SUTHON

Yes, the array is...impressive. Many strange creatures I've never seen before. But if my eyes don't deceive me, there's a woman among them. Surely you're not killing her as well.

KING SUCANDRIMA

It's not a woman but a kinnari. She has the place of honor and will be killed last.

SUTHON

But where are her wings?

KING SUCANDRIMA

Taken away for safe keeping.

SUTHON

An apt precaution. But would it not be possible to display them so that her uniqueness can be fully appreciated?

KING SUCANDRIMA

You're right. Her glory is only in her wings. I'll have them brought out here to glisten in the sun. I intend to have a robe made of them. Such feathers must have magic properties. *(he exits)*

(A rat runs by Manora and she shrieks. Suthon puts his finger to his lips to silence her, while the wings are put on display by servants. Sucandrima re-enters.)

KING SUCANDRIMA

Now let the ceremony begin.

PRIEST

Let the King of the Mountains, Queen of the Waters,
 Dewi Seri goddess of rice
 be moved by our offerings and prayers
 and accept our great sacrifice
 of the millions that die for the good of mankind.
 The rats in the labs, the monkeys in cages
 tormented for the good of mankind;
 the horses and donkeys in battle, city and farm,
 pulling and carrying till they drop,
 rough ridden in races, films and then shot;
 for the dogs and sheep supplying the living flesh
 to test the effects of the weapons of boys,
 the smart bombs, chemical and ballistic toys;
 the tigers, snakes, sharks, and swifts
 powdered, salted, dried, and caked
 for curing impotence and other such aches,
 all for the good of mankind.
 The kids at Eid, the piglets at Easter
 the Nativity turkeys and geese,
 and chickens any old day of the week;
 the pelts of rabbits, mink and otter
 the oil of penguins and whales slaughtered
 all for the good of mankind.
 The cows whose milk feeds our babes
 then are ground up as beef the teenager craves.

Such compliant plentiful creatures
 that fed the excrement of others grow fat.
 We execute them to relish their exquisite protein,
 stretch their skins and guts to please our ears and eyes.
 Animals living without consciousness of life,
 guided alone by instinct rote and blind,
 ignorant of death, they feel no pain.
 Such organisms are too cheap not to waste
 and process as we wish for our greater gain.
 We submit their willing flesh and feeble brains
 and with this magnificent ritual celebrate
 the diverse kingdom over which we reign.
 Offered with our own show of humility
 all for the eternal good of mankind.

Each creature has been assigned a soldier, blessed with holy water
 so that no guilt falls upon him for his act of slaughter.

A gun shot/fire cracker explosion to mark the beginning. A sudden uproar, as creatures roar and shriek, a black cloud of crows from above, and rats run through the crowd. Everyone runs in different directions, including through the audience. Suthon grabs Manora in one hand and her wings in the other.

MANORA
 Give me my wings.

SUTHON
 No.

MANORA
 You're not freeing me?

SUTHON
 No, I'm rescuing you.
Black out.

Scene Seven

Calm music after the previous chaos. Suthon and Manora lie together on brocade cushions.

SUTHON
 You still want to fly away?

MANORA
 Not just this minute.

SUTHON
(he kisses her) Now?

MANORA
 Not quite yet.

SUTHON

Tomorrow probably.

MANORA

Perhaps...tomorrow's tomorrow.

SUTHON

Are you glad it was me who rescued you?

MANORA

What a lot of questions you ask. My turn. Did you actually plan anything, or did it just happen?

SUTHON

I had my men let loose the rats to create panic and gnaw the ropes. The crows, already waiting in the trees to feast, were startled by the shot and rose, blackening out the sun, terrifying the soldiers.

MANORA

I felt the rats nibbling my fingers, but then I realized they were chewing the ropes. I'm as grateful to them as to you.

SUTHON

Much obliged. Perhaps you'd rather marry a rat then?

MANORA

Marry? Who said anything about marrying?

SUTHON

I am, now. You're the woman I want to marry.

MANORA

I'm not a woman.

SUTHON

You're enough of one to satisfy me. I'm going to ask my father today. Will you fly away when I leave the room?

MANORA

You know I can't. You've hidden my wings.

SUTHON

Tonight you'll have to decide. Stay and marry me, or if not, I'll give you your wings and never see you again.

MANORA

Bit of a rush, isn't it?

SUTHON

I'm afraid my impulse to save you has put us on a war footing with Sucandrima. If I have to face his forces, I want to know what I'm fighting for. (*he exits*)

MANORA

(*to herself*) Fair enough. I must choose, love or freedom. If I go home, I don't know what reception I'll get. Did my parents even try to rescue me? If I knew they wanted me, I'd steal the wings and be on my way, but I have premonition that the bond between us has been broken. I'm almost at the age when they'd marry me off, and if that's my fate, I'd rather stay with Suthon.

OWL

(*he calls outside window*) Su Su Su.

MANORA

Dear old owl, you overheard me? Go tell my parents I'm alive, living among the humans. Take this ring and give it to my mother.

Black out

BUN

(*he staggers in drunk*) King Sucandrima is beside himself. Not only was his grand sacrifice ruined, but he was shamed in front of all the foreign dignitaries. In his rage, he tore to pieces every animal he could catch, and all of their attendant soldiers, too. He even sent some thugs to rough me up and take back the money for the kinnari. I should have stood guard over her myself. Now he's threatening war with Suthon. But he's afraid. He keeps asking the soothsayers to give him an auspicious sign to attack, but they're afraid too. After seeing him massacre his own soldiers, the generals aren't too keen on war either. I'm no sibyl, but I tell you, he'll go to war anyway.

Black out.

Scene Eight

In the Pancala palace.

KING ATITYAWONG

I grant you she's pretty and under other circumstances, I would agree, but you stole her from under the nose of Sucandrima. He's demanded her back.

SUTHON

So he can kill her? Would you give her back even if I didn't love her?

KING ATITYAWONG

To save my country from war? In a flash. She's not one of our own.

SUTHON

I'm about to make her mine.

KING ATITYAWONG

Yes, that's the complication, and I'm sure you want to lead the defense.

SUTHON

I'd rather strike first. Sucandrima is weak fool; his own people loathe him. The bungled sacrifice utterly discredited him.

KING ATITYAWONG

They grumble now, but if attacked, they'll band together against you. Just because they hate him doesn't mean they'll welcome you.

SUTHON

But if we put his popular cousin on the throne they might. You give the word and I'll get my battalion ready.

KING ATITYAWONG

No, however tempting, I'll not make a pre-emptive strike.

SUTHON

He's dithering. Don't let us dither too. He's just waiting for the right omen!

KING ATITYAWONG

Which many never come.

SUTHON

He'll make up one himself if he has to. He's been looking for an excuse to attack us for the past three years ever since his last failed attempt. If we go now, we'll keep him far from the capital.

KING ATITYAWONG

True. But I don't want to be embroiled in a risky war for the sake of...a woman who is not even a woman.

SUTHON

She's only his pretext.

KING ATITYAWONG

And yours as well? You, who did not want to see the shedding of animals' blood, are now all too hot to spill the blood of our men. If she were a real princess, her own people would be compelled to support us. There's no possibility of that, is there?

SUTHON

No, they're not warlike, and too far away. You knew my going to the sacrifice was the first step toward this confrontation.

KING ATITYAWONG

So you're waiting to hear my 'yes' and then another 'yes?'

SUTHON

Yes.

KING ATITYAWONG

So be it. May your desire to get back to your bride spur you to a quick victory. For if this war lasts too long, the people will not stomach it.

Black out

Scene Nine

In King Sucandrima's palace. The Priest comes running to King Sucandrima.

PRIEST

The omen has come! I've examined the entrails of 12 birds and conferred with 12 priests; they all say the same thing.

KING SUCANDRIMA

What, safety in dozens?

PRIEST

He who possesses the kinnari rules the world.

KING SUCANDRIMA

She was ours. We have the right to take her back. But what do the entrails say of my victory?

PRIEST

It's assured because, as you say, you are the rightful possessor.

KING SUCANDRIMA

You'll be the first to go down if I fail. Tell that hunter Bun I'll double his reward if he can catch her again with his magic noose. If he distracts Suthon, my generals stand a chance of overtaking the rest of their army. Call them in. We're going to war.

Black out.

Scene Ten

In Pancala palace.

SUTHON

Well, my love, what have you decided? Don't tell me. Your look says everything. I need such assurance because tomorrow I go to fight for you.

MANORA

Take me with you. I can fly high and see the enemy's movements.

SUTHON

No, you'll be safe here with my family. Besides, Sucandrima will do everything in his power to steal you back. It's best for you to remain hidden so that he can't find you even if I'm killed.

MANORA

But you won't be. If you won't accept my assistance on the field, then we'll plan together now. We could use decoys as to my whereabouts to distract him, pretend that you have hidden me somewhere outside the capital. His attention will thus be divided. And if that devil Bun is with him, make him to cast his noose at a statue or something unmoving thing so he

can't get it loose. As to the troops...*(they continue to confer, but then push the maps aside as they begin to kiss)*

Black Out

In Pancala palace.

KING ATITYAWONG

(on the throne with the Queen) I blame myself.

QUEEN

Don't.

KING ATITYAWONG

I forced him to go. How could I have known that among the hordes of beasts would be a woman who'd catch his eye?

QUEEN

Even a cold-blooded monk would have been moved to rescue her.

KING ATITYAWONG

Rescue her is one thing, but keeping her is another. He should return her to her own people.

QUEEN

But he's in love.

KING ATITYAWONG

It's a wasted alliance. She brings nothing...but trouble.

QUEEN

She offers a good excuse to rid ourselves of a dangerous foe. Until now Suthon refused an unprovoked attack, now he's provoked. You should be glad you two are finally agreed.

KING ATITYAWONG

Oh, I'm confident we'll win. It's afterwards that worries me. My dear, she's not human. Their children...what kind of monsters will they breed?

QUEEN

I don't think we need to worry. Suthon has given me the care of her wings. They're locked away, and only I have the key. Without them, she's quite normal. It's only the question of her feet and they can be hidden in slippers. And truth be told, many a beautiful woman has ugly feet.

KING ATITYAWONG

Let's pray that her humanity wins out. I have a premonition that her dual nature will be a wedge driven between Suthon and me. The unholy mixing of human and animal only brings disaster. *(Queen exits)* *(He speaks to a guard)* Guard the kinnari! Don't let her out of her room.

Black out

In Pancala palace. Atityawong's Prime Minister and Priest secretly confer.

PRIME MINISTER

The king's in despair. He hasn't heard a word from his son.

PRIEST

He can't sleep. He has bad dreams.

PRIME MINISTER

The queen is at a loss to comfort him.

PRIEST

What have you heard from the front?

PRIME MINISTER

Suthon is routing them.

PRIEST

But the king's heard nothing? Are you certain you've intercepted all messengers?

PRIME MINISTER

Not one has made it to the city gates.

PRIEST

Then we must act before Suthon returns.

(An anguished cry from the king.) KING ATITYAWONG

(he enters) My counselors, as you know our prince has been away for two weeks and we've had no word of his progress. This fills me with ominous thoughts. But this morning, after a sleepless night, my eyes closed only to fill me with new horror. I dreamed I was captured by Sucandrima and was bound hand and foot on the ground before him. He plunges his sword into my belly and pulls forth my intestines. He pulls and pulls and winds my gut around the city three times.

PRIEST

A portentous dream! One can't contradict its obvious meaning.

PRIME MINISTER

Sire, we have just had word that Prince Suthon has been captured and Sucandrima is marching on the capital.

KING ATITYAWONG

What! Where is the messenger?

PRIME MINISTER

He was so distraught with the bad news that he slew himself.

KING ATITYAWONG

Why didn't he come straight to me?

PRIME MINISTER

When the Queen told us you had only just fallen asleep, we thought it best to hear him and bring you the news when you awoke.

KING ATITYAWONG

Truly, he did come to me...in my evil dream. The two reports confirm the worst. I have only myself to blame. Is Prince Suthon is still alive?

PRIME MINISTER

As far as we know.

KING ATITYAWONG

We must prepare the city. Barricade all gates. All remaining troops on high alert.

PRIME MINISTER

Such preparations have already been taken, but they will be for naught while we continue to harbor a witch.

KING ATITYAWONG

What? The kinnari?

PRIEST

The cause of all this trouble. The whole country faces the wrath of Sucandrima, and her spell debilitates us. Do you doubt that she sent you that dream? You saw her influence on Suthon. If she is sacrificed, the city stands a chance. If not, Sucandrima will tear down every brick to get her.

KING ATITYAWONG

If I hurt her, Suthon will kill me.

PRIEST

Suthon's life is already forfeit.

PRIME MINISTER

You must think of the safety of your people and your person.

KING ATITYAWONG

Ask the Queen to come. *(they exit)* I don't trust them. But there's no one I can trust anymore. Would the kinnari's death change anything? I doubt it. But if Suthon is captured, all those two have to do is call for her death among the public and I'll be forced to give her up. *(Queen enters)* You've heard the news?

QUEEN

I've heard only rumors. Secretly send a trusted messenger to find out if we have really lost.

KING ATITYAWONG

And allow the kinnari's sacrifice?

QUEEN

No...not yet.

KING ATITYAWONG

Yet?

QUEEN

If the messenger returns with the news that our son is captured or dead, kill her.

Black out.

Scene Twelve

Prime Minister enters Manora's rooms with guards.

PRIME MINISTER

(to the guards) Bind her! Take off those slippers so that everyone can see the feet of the demon.

MANORA

The birds of the air report that Suthon has won and is already marching back. Don't touch me. Suthon will kill you when he returns.

PRIME MINISTER

Suthon is captive. The king is in despair and the people hate you.

MANORA

What do you hope to gain by this deception? Whatever you do to me, you'll still have to deal with him.

PRIME MINISTER

Arrangements have been made.

KING ATITYAWONG

(she is brought bound to the King and Queen) Manora, you've thrown our world into chaos.

MANORA

Your Majesty knows I've done nothing wrong.

KING ATITYAWONG

It's not what you've done, but what you are. The barrier between us is too great. This miscegenation confounds morality. Our kingdom is doomed and you are the cause.

MANORA

I'm weak and completely in your power, but if you kill me, it will doom you.

KING ATITYAWONG

Enough! I can't bear to look at you. Beside you stands the ghost of my son.

MANORA

Oh queen, heed my last request and let me perform my sacred dance, known to me alone. It has saved cities from the plague, and may save you.

QUEEN

Surely we may let her dance one last time. I'm curious to see it.

KING ATITYAWONG

Then dance, Manora, your last dance.

MANORA

But Your Majesties, I need my wings.

QUEEN

(she quietly takes out the key and gives it to a servant) Bring them.
Manora puts on the wings; drums beat as she begins to dance. The Priest and Prime Minister come rushing in.

PRIEST

Light the torches.

PRIME MINISTER

What have you done? Take the wings from her, quickly.
Soldiers scramble to catch Manora, but she ascends and flies away.

MANORA

(from above) Oh king, beware. Suthon lives! Your son approaches.
The sound of different drumming as Suthon arrives with army. Prime Minister and Priest exit.

SUTHON

(he rushes in) Father, where's the joyful welcome for victorious army? Why didn't you meet us at the gate?

QUEEN

My son, thank god you're safe.

KING ATITYAWONG

How did you escape?

SUTHON

Escape? I was never caught. Ours was a steady route from the beginning.

KING ATITYAWONG

We heard only reports of your defeat and capture.

SUTHON

Then someone was hoping to benefit by them. Where's Manora?

KING ATITYAWONG

She's gone. She took advantage of your absence and returned to her people.

SUTHON

I don't believe you. Did you kill her?

QUEEN

Truly she's left, flown away on her own wings. But we're not guiltless...we thought you were dead, and Sucandrima marching on the city, and the kinnari, the cause of all our grief.

SUTHON

But I sent you messengers every day telling you of our progress.

KING ATITYAWONG

None of them reached us.

SUTHON

What did you do?

KING ATITYAWONG

In my fear and ignorance, I ordered her death. But your mother was wiser and allowed her to escape.

SUTHON

I don't blame you. You were deceived and once I've weeded out the traitors, I'm going to find her. Since all I know is that her kingdom is far away and difficult to reach, you may truly have lost a son this day. I won't return till I've found her.

MANORA

(her Interior voice speaks as she dances her flight) But the king is right. We can't mix our different beings. Love blinded us, but eventually we'd realize it wasn't possible in this world. We had our adventure and now it's over. What will my family say when they see me? When they hear I'm pregnant? I tire more easily and can't fly as far as I used to. It will take me weeks to get home. But ah, my heart is glad, my mind is free for the first time since I was captured. Love is a glorious but terrifying master—I'm glad to be free of it.
Manora grows weaker in her dance, and knocks feebly on a gate.

GATEKEEPER

Turn back! No one is allowed to enter.

MANORA

I'm Manora, King Thao Pathum's daughter.

GATEKEEPER

I know who you are and you, especially, are not allowed. The whole kingdom has been suffering a new plague ever since you left. Everyone here is quarantined, and no one allowed in, especially those who've been in contact with humans.

MANORA

But I'm healthy, only tired. I'll take any test to prove it.

GATEKEEPER

No, the law stands. You will not be allowed in till 7 years, 7 months, and 7 days have passed. Then you must undertake the rites to wash away the taint of humanity.

MANORA

The taint of humanity?

GATEKEEPER

A very bad stink. I can smell it from here.

MANORA

What absurdity. If I smell of anything, it's honest sweat. But tell me, how are my parents? My sisters?

GATEKEEPER

They're alive.

MANORA

Tell them I'm alive. And tell them also...no...Tell them I will return when the period of penance is over.

Black out

Act II

Scene One

In a middle-class living room, with two card tables, chairs, a sofa; it could be anywhere, but some of the decorations, or a house shrine, should suggest it is in a modern Asian capital. Manora and Peacock are preparing for a party.

PEACOCK

(bringing out food and putting it on a buffet table) Will we have enough for two tables?

MANORA

(also bringing in food and drink) I think so. No one said she wasn't coming. Let's put the tables together to eat first.

PEACOCK

I haven't seen Tennin in ages. Doing well is she?

MANORA

Yes, but she says global warming is wreaking havoc with the mists—she doesn't know whether she's coming or going. And then she was really angry with the Americans crashing their space junk on the moon to see if it has water. She says, 'Of course, the moon is watery. Everyone knows that.' She has no patience with Americans.

PEACOCK

But none are coming right?

MANORA

No, just the old crowd. I did invite one new guest, Samodiva.

PEACOCK

Diva? Hope she's competition for our diva. Can she play?

MANORA

I don't know. But she was eager to come and seems to catch on fast.

PEACOCK

Well, just don't put her at my table. This...is quite a burden for you, having to cater to everyone's different tastes.

MANORA

I enjoy it...once in a while.

PEACOCK

It's five to two, shall we...?

MANORA

You never let a chance go by, do you?

PEACOCK

I say Tennin is first and Sirena is last; she has to make a stagy entrance.

MANORA

(she laughs) I can't bet. I agree with you.

PEACOCK

(disgustedly) Ack, we're all too predictable.

TENNIN

(she enters on a sound of wind that blows the door open) Konichiwa

PEACOCK/ MANORA

Konichiwa, welcome.

TENNIN

(slips off her shoes) If you don't mind, I'll keep my feathers on. I never take them off anymore.

MANORA

I know. One bad experience is enough to make you paranoid for life. What a wonderful scent you always bring—a whiff of pine tinged with sea salt.

PEACOCK

Yes, very refreshing, but not very...refined.

TENNIN

Up to your old rivalries. Well, I won't rise to the bait. I'll let you be as superior as you want for the next few hours. We're all so marginalized these days, we really shouldn't quibble amongst ourselves/ Wasabi peanuts, my favorite.

MANORA

Exactly/. Help yourself. Keep the competitive instincts restricted to the game.

SNAKE

(the sound of claws scratching on the door; White Snake and Fox Lady come together) Hello. We met at the metro stop.

PEACOCK

They let you on the metro?

MANORA

Bite your tongue.

FOX

We pay.

SNAKE

We don't fit the terrorist profile.

MANORA

Don't mind her. She's just practicing for Sirena.

FOX

Spring rolls, my favorite. Manora always knows what I like.

PEACOCK

That's because you never change.

FOX

When you've undergone one life-changing transformation, you cherish stability. I've learned to accept who I am.

MANORA

Sorry, everything is vegetarian...do you mind?

SNAKE

Not at all. Tender bamboo shoots are a rare treat. Tennin, so good to see you in this civilized manner, instead of bumping into you in the sky as we so often do.

TENNIN

Yes, the last time, though, we made a lovely rainbow.

SNAKE

A double rainbow! Glorious, wasn't it?

TENNIN

Spectacular! Moving all the way from Hokkaido to Mongolia.

SNAKE

Our reach is getting further. Storms are stronger and churning up the sea too. My naga cousins were all excited with that first big tsunami in 2005, but now they're wondering if they're going to be so busy all the time.

TENNIN

Sea, air, constantly getting whipped up, the seasons getting blurred.

PEACOCK

And don't forget the earthquakes. I feel them coming, and then the aftershocks make me a nervous wreck for days.

(doorbell rings)

MANORA

That must be Samodiva. *(she answers the door)* Come in.

SAMODIVA

Hello, hope I'm not too late.

MANORA

No, just on time.

SAMODIVA

These are for you. *(she hands Manora bouquet of marsh grasses and grain stalks)*

MANORA

So lovely, thank you. Let me introduce you.

SAMODIVA

Do you mind if I...*(she gestures to her wings)*

MANORA

We're all wearing them inside. Samodiva, this Lady White Snake, originally infamous in China, but now holidays in Thailand.

SNAKE

Samodiva, what a pretty name. Where are you from?

SAMODIVA

Turkey, but like most swans, I migrate. I'm getting a little tired of all the travel, but haven't found the right place to settle. On one trip you see the perfect meadow and stream, and on the way back, it's already a housing development or mono crop.

PEACOCK

An empty housing development these days.

SAMODIVA

Yes, but the brook and meadow are gone. It's just getting harder to find livable real estate.

MANORA

Some say with global warming, you won't have to migrate at all. This is Ho Nguyet Co, Lady Moon-in-the-Lake from Vietnam, but we just call her Foxy Lady, which she pretends to disdain but secretly loves. Tennin, next to her is the angel from the Japanese *Hagamoro*.

SAMODIVA

Your feathers are lovely...like downy mist.

TENNIN

Exactly right, thank you.

MANORA

And the bitchy beauty in the corner is Peacock Maiden, Namarona.

FOX

She's that way because all her wit went into her tail.

SAMODIVA

I thought only male peacocks...

SEVERAL

Oh no! Don't get her started!

PEACOCK

Don't mind them. Inside this spectacular exterior, I'm really very sweet.

SNAKE

No room for false modesty.

PEACOCK

Why bother?

SAMODIVA

I feel quite the peasant in such illustrious company. I'm really just a housewife.

SNAKE

We've all been there. In fact, I'd happily still be there if I had just been left alone with my husband and child, and that damned monk hadn't interfered.

SAMODIVA

What...?

MANORA

Have some baklava. You'll hear all the stories eventually. It's the first time I've made it, especially for you.

FOX

Oh, let me try some too. Of course, I like Vietnamese *pho* best, but I have to admit when it comes to sweets, the West has got the East beat.

SAMODIVA

We love sweets. I think ours are the best in the world. This is very good, Manora, but next time, I'll teach you a few secrets. Do you know, we eat it with sweetened cream on top?

FOX

Oh, too sinful! I'd faint.

PEACOCK

Speaking of West, I wonder where...?

MANORA

Even later than usual.

SIRENA

(operatic singing voice off stage) Here she is.

MANORA

Speak of the dev...she must have just been waiting for her cue.

SIRENA

(she trills as she flings the door open) Hello everyone. Hope you haven't eaten all the delicacies.

PEACOCK

Alas, you're too late. But we saved the skin and bones for you.

SIRENA

Thanks, but I'm no harpy.

PEACOCK

Fooled me.

MANORA

Sirena, you know everyone except our new guest, Samodiva

SIRENA

Oh swan, are you? Make a bit of a honk?

SAMODIVA

Not very musical, I admit.

TENNIN

But the sound of the migrating swans tugs at the heart strings.

MANORA

I've saved the mushroom paté for you—you liked it so much last time. And this honey grapefruit pudding—so good for the throat. Put your lyre down in the corner.
Manora brings out a plate of cut fruit and a silver pitcher with water.

FOX

I recently saw a new performance of my dance. It just gets worse and worse. These socialist actresses are hopeless. Since they can't perfect the demands of tradition, they cover up their laziness and ignorance by saying they're "experimenting," or concentrating on process rather than product, or being postmodern, using every excuse under the sun for bad art.

MANORA

It's a downward spiral. They perform badly, people lose interest so the performer tries tacky novelties to attract attention.

FOX

Since they can't do it properly, they exaggerate the wrong things, like clawing their fingers, as if a fox had curved claws like a tiger. *She clenches her hands.*

SNAKE

The poor things, they just don't know how to be a fox—their imaginations aren't up to it.

FOX

It took me a thousand years of meditation to become a human, and now these human dancers think they can turn into a fox in a matter of minutes.

MANORA

All of our dances have been abbreviated beyond recognition; people don't have the patience to watch anymore. They squirm after thirty minutes, imagining they have better things to do. What better things? Twittering their twaddle on the internet.

FOX

And they try to introduce realism. What a disaster! The dance has to be stylized. How do you realistically show a woman becoming a fox? The idea is absurd. They scrunch up their noses like cats.

PEACOCK

They should imitate a dog instead.

FOX

No, never a dog, please! A dog has no dignity. It's not even an animal but the lowest form of human. I would be made a laughing stock. Lady moon-in-the-lake becomes a dog! What a travesty! (*she agitatedly stirs her Vietnamese coffee, clinking the spoon in the glass*) I'm a tragic figure. The audience is supposed to pity me, not die laughing.

PEACOCK

I find nothing pitiful about it. You were tricked by that disgusting Dinh Tiet Giao. I could never understand how you could marry him after you had soundly beaten him in combat!

FOX

It was fate! My tutelary goddess said I had to marry a red-faced man.

SNAKE

We were doubly tricked. (*she sips her warm milk with the tip of her tongue between her lips*) By fate, and our own trusting loving natures.

MANORA

I wasn't. I was abducted twice, first by a hunter, then by a prince.

SAMODIVA

At least your prince loved and respected you. I was held hostage by a hunter. No human woman would live in such a remote place or put up with his brutish ways. He just kidnapped me and put me to work.

TENNIN

You don't have a dance, do you?

SAMODIVA

Well, *Swan Lake* is sort of our generic representation. Ballet was never my forte, but I picked up the Tarantella in Italy. *He* thought I was a good dancer.

TENNIN

At first I was really insulted and angry when Hakuryo, a mere fisherman, insisted I dance for him. But as I danced, I realized my attitude was wrong. Nobody respects me better than the fishermen. They know how to read the mists and the waves. They are still guided by the moon. In fact, no one was more worthy of my dance.

FOX

But do they keep it up, that's what I want to know?

TENNIN

Yes, my performers are perfectionists—all men. They won't change one feather of the sacred dance. Even if no human is present, they know I am watching. Hakuryo did not want me, the woman, you know; he wanted the feather cloak. Really, no sex involved. Perhaps that has preserved the purity of my dance.

MANORA

Your Noh dancers might not have changed techniques, but your fishermen have!

FOX

You're lucky. What about you, Namarona—they still dancing your tune, or do you have to re-teach every new generation how to do it right?

PEACOCK

Oh, I'm more easy going. The rules aren't so strict. I let each dancer interpret it as she likes. Don't be so uptight, Foxy Lady, let people just enjoy it. Like Manora, I was first seen swimming in a lake. Afterwards, we put on our feathers and danced—it was my dancing that captured Prince Chaushutun's heart.

SIRENA

(she studies her fingernails) That one was too easy. As soon as she saw the cute prince, she forgot her feathers. Not a squirm of a struggle.

PEACOCK

Hush!

SIRENA

“People of different worlds cannot live together. Were it otherwise, my humble, poor self would gladly be a handmaid and wash dishes and feed swine for a lonely man.” Do I quote you aright?

MANORA

(aghast) You said that!

PEACOCK

I was young.

SIRENA

You had already given him your heart. Once you exchanged rings, he gave you back your wings. You didn't escape but flew to his home. You became the perfect subservient daughter-in-law.

PEACOCK

I had to. My every move was scrutinized. Whenever trouble came, I was the first to be blamed. My humanity didn't save me, my wings did. I had to dance to get them back and escape.

SNAKE

But in the end, you went back to your prince, didn't you?

PEACOCK

After he had taken all those years and effort to find me? Yes, but first, my father required some tasks. Made him move a boulder that was blocking our water supply. Once he managed that, he had to choose me among my sisters.

SNAKE

Like Manora?

PEACOCK

No, the room was dark and each one of us poked a single finger through a hole in the wall. He had to choose the right finger.

SNAKE

Impossible!

PEACOCK

Quite! But a firefly settled on mine. He saw its glowing light and chose me.

SAMODIVA

I heard differently. He felt each hand and chose the one that was rough from housework.

PEACOCK

Not me! I've never done a stitch of housework in my life. Manora had to sit facing her prince lined up with her sisters and endure a fly settling on her head, like she was a pile of ...well, I never!

MANORA

You always have to have the most refined version. But what is your daring prince now? He's so bloated by his appetites you can't stand to be in his presence.

PEACOCK

Are you suggesting it's my fault?

FOX

Are you the only one among us still married, then? What about you, Samodiva?

SAMODIVA

I endured what I had to. He had hidden my wings. When he was drunk, celebrating the birth of our son, he asked me to dance. I said I would but only with my wings. The fool, thinking to impress his friends, gave them to me. I leapt into the air, telling him I was no housewife and flew off, never looking back.

SNAKE

You left your son?

SAMODIVA

He was all human and none of me. All of us swans pine for our own home and the freedom of the air. We can never adjust to a woman's life.

SIRENA

You're so right. I don't understand how females like White Snake can be so duped by love. But you Manora, you're a wife and mother too. Isn't your story the same as Namarona's?

MANORA

Almost the same...Like hers, my prince spent seven years pursuing me, enduring all kinds of dangers and adventures. Suthon arrived just as I was undergoing the rite of purification. He dropped his ring in the water. I was amazed. I didn't think he'd manage to find me. But after enduring so much to rejoin my kinnari family, do you think I'd just turn around and go with him?

SNAKE

What did you do?

MANORA

The recognition test did not turn out quite as Namarona reported. We sisters were all lined up in front of him, but he couldn't tell us apart. He kept waiting for a sign from me to help him. I was furious. If he couldn't tell, I didn't want him. The golden fly came buzzing along and landed on...my eldest sister, Suwanee. He heaved a sigh and chose her. She and I exchanged a glance and said nothing. She'd always been jealous of me, and my father had prevented all of them from marrying until I returned, so she was desperate for a husband.

TENNIN

But your parents...your sisters...they all knew?

MANORA

Yes, but all kept mum. If he and she were satisfied, and I didn't mind, who were they to oppose?

SNAKE

But you were married!

MANORA

No, the wedding that was supposed to take place after Suthon's victory never occurred, and I had already undergone the purification ceremony that washed away all my relations with humans. Nothing of our troth remained.

PEACOCK

So, you're saying your husband is living somewhere with your sister, thinking she's you?

MANORA

They're happy as far as I know. They have a son. I'm happier without him.

SAMODIVA

I would have done the same.

TENNIN

But your daughters?

MANORA

They were born after we had separated. He knows nothing about them and they know nothing of him. And now, I'm about to tell them. That's why I invited you today.

PEACOCK

I knew it wasn't just for fun.

MANORA

Which story do I tell them? Mine or the one they're likely to hear from others? I'll be teaching them *my* Manora dance. It's been completely co-opted by the male dancer representing Suthon. Nowadays the Kinnari chorus is just a bunch of unskilled girls, so bored they barely go through the motions. The "Manora dance" now has no Manora. It's been perverted into a male adventure story. Do you think I needed him to come to my home on Mt. Krilat when I could easily have flown to his palace? No, he needed me as a goal to demonstrate his derring-do. I've been the pretext for his heroism; my own adventures all but erased. For who knows what I did during those 7 years, 7 months, and 7 days?

SAMODIVA

Epics aren't written about single women raising children.

MANORA

We have to do something. Not only have our dances been distorted beyond all recognition, we ourselves have been relegated to the brink of the imagination, and now we're being pushed over into the abyss.

SNAKE

But what can we do if we're imaginary creatures? Aren't we completely in their power?

MANORA

Strange that you should say that, Lady of typhoons, tsunamis, hurricanes, and torrents. No, we must insist in our own existence and rightful place. We're the bridge between human and nonhuman. Though we suffer from their fickleness—sometimes they see the creature, other times the human—we cannot be their victims.

SIRENA

It's a little late in the day. We're no longer even memories, just manmade fossils.

MANORA

Strange that you should say that since you've been resurrected in computer games.

SIRENA

In name only. I'm an "avatar." Our power and our stories are gone.

MANORA

Franz Kafka gave you another chance...in the power of your silence. It's time to use it. Humans are beginning to recognize the boomerang effect of their techno hubris. It is time to return. Go on strike, boycott, refuse to produce and give; it's time to fight back.

FOX

I'm only in tourist shows. Only when the government wants to exhibit "traditional culture" am I trotted out. My status as a cultural representative grows in inverse proportion to my actual importance in society.

SNAKE

Most of my audience has never seen a real snake...

MANORA

Precisely, our numbers have declined. All of us here have escaped them, but we've never retaliated. Sirena is the only one who used her voice to overcome them. How did she do it?

SIRENA

By its unearthly beauty?

MANORA

With the exception of Odysseus, no one lived to tell the tale, or the sound, did they?

SIRENA

Homer got the word out.

MANORA

Was Odysseus any the wiser from hearing you? No, it was the temptation of secret knowledge, the same the serpent used to tempt Eve. To possess the knowledge of God. The beckoning of the universe's secrets, whether splitting the atom, or unraveling the genome—humans are still lured to know and possess the mystery of life.

TENNIN

Secret knowledge, secret power! Hagymoto wanted my cloak of feathers to hang on his wall to impress the neighbors. But it's only alive when I wear it. The dancers impersonate that mystery, but they never possess it.

PEACOCK

As deities of nature, we are the bearers of nature's wisdom. All the legends are about possessing us.

MANORA

Exactly!

SNAKE

But my husband rejected my snake identity.

FOX

Who knows if he really did? Remember how hard the monk had to work to persuade him that your marriage was unholy? Even when your husband saw you were a snake, he didn't want to give you up. The monk was jealous of your power—he was threatened by you.

SNAKE

But was he jealous of the woman or the snake?

FOX

Miserable self-righteous puritan! Both!

TENNIN

Manora, you aren't talking about merely recuperating our dances. Are you trying to resurrect the respect that created them?

MANORA

It's too late for that. Humans never respect what they've had power over.

FOX

Ironic, isn't it, that when my husband said he was ill and the only thing that could cure him was my Gem of Humanity, I gave it to him without hesitation, proving not only my humanity but my female nature. But he lied, and I was turned back into a fox. Which of us was the more human, or should I say, humane? When he saw me suffer, he made no move to help me.

SIRENA

So, you are saying we must regain our power?

MANORA

Yes.

PEACOCK

But how?

MANORA

The only way they understand, fear.

SNAKE

No, they already too easily demonize us. We're always the scapegoats.

MANORA

What do they fear most?

TENNIN

No more tuna for sushi.

SNAKE

Erectile disfunction.

SIRENA

Shipping piracy.

FOX

A CIA report said that animal rights groups were the Number One threat to internal security...

PEACOCK

Oh, I suppose weapons of mass destruction

MANORA

Such as...

PEACOCK

Atom bombs, chemical weapons, but what has that to do with us?

MANORA

Go on, what else?

PEACOCK

I give up!

MANORA

Biological weapons?

FOX

What's that?

MANORA

Viruses. SARS, Ebola...

SAMODIVA

Swine flu, bird flu. A world wide epidemic. Manora, what are you thinking?

MANORA

Our secret, not-so-secret, weapon. They've used it against us, now we must unite to use it on them. We're flying fire bombs! If the virus resided in me, I'd (*she opens her mouth wide and exhales*) Ha!

PEACOCK

And infect us all! Don't joke, Manora. That's not funny.

TENNIN

I don't think I can be...a *fire* bomb.

SAMODIVA

You want us to carry it with us on our travels, even though it means killing ourselves and those around us?

MANORA

And humans...

PEACOCK

They'll exterminate us all first. That's what they did the last time. Millions and millions of innocent birds. Only few people died from bird flu but the panic was devastating for us. It's a very inefficient strategy, if you ask me.

MANORA

But now that swine flu has combined with it, the situation becomes more promising.

FOX

I'll have nothing to do with pigs.

MANORA

It'll help our virus jump from us to them, and then they will infect each other.

SIRENA

They have vaccines. They'll find ways to overcome it.

MANORA

Not if we strike all over the globe at the same time. Countries will hoard vaccines, and then they'll run out. During the medieval plague, people first helped each other, but as it worsened, they shunned everyone, afraid to breathe the same air. We've already seen it—they panic. Order breaks down, fear rules. The organism is terrified of itself.

FOX

It's a very interesting...theory...but I don't see how I can possibly be involved. We foxes have been exterminated as being rabies carriers, hydrophobia victims, but we're not really...birds...

MANORA

The virus you get can be passed to and from domestic dogs.

FOX

Oh dogs again! Pigs and dogs! Could I be further insulted? Dogs are always easily rounded up and killed, beloved pets notwithstanding. They just don't learn not to trust humans. They have inferior genes.

PEACOCK

Manora, are you, perchance, already infected? Did you call us here to sentence us to death?

MANORA

No, I'm not, but I'm telling you that we're at war, and you will die shortly. The only choice you have is how. Now, you have the time to think and decide. Later it will be decided for you.

TENNIN

I'm not afraid to die. I have danced suicide.

SNAKE

I was under the impression that as a deity I was...well...immortal.

MANORA

We're all immortal, but only as long as nature is—and all of nature is under attack. The inconceivable is happening: Nature is dying.

FOX

Oooh, too sad to even contemplate.

PEACOCK

And I just wanted a pleasant afternoon of mahjong. It's really too cruel of you to spring this on us. It's a lose-lose proposition.

MANORA

I know. I also know you'll do nothing.

SIRENA

Then, would it really be too vile to suggest that we have one last game? For old time's sake?

PEACOCK

It couldn't hurt. Manora?

MANORA

I could never deprive Namarona the pleasure of taking your money. But I urge her to spend it quickly.

PEACOCK

Oh, I always do.

MANORA

Samodiva, you sit with me and Foxy Lady. The other table is for the cutthroats. Oh, dear, I'm short one—how did I do that?

SNAKE

Thinking of other things, obviously. Don't worry. I called my sister Green Snake and she should be here any minute. What are the stakes?

SIRENA

I only play for all or nothing.
(the doorbell rings)

SNAKE

That's probably her now.

BUN

(he is dressed as a delivery man, wears the same eye patch. he and Manora double take)
 Two gourmet spinach and ricotta pizzas.

MANORA

Oh, yes, I completely forgot that, too.

FOX

Pizza? You're encouraging gormandizing.

PEACOCK

It's her way of tempting us to sacrifice ourselves. I'm offended by such cheap tactics.

MANORA

You're easily offended. What would persuade you?

PEACOCK

Humm, I think a constellation named after me would be appropriate. Every time humans gazed into the sky, they'd think of me. What do you think, Diva?

SAMODIVA

I don't have such grandiose ambitions.

PEACOCK

Sorry, I meant Sirena.

SAMODIVA

Oh sorry.

SIRENA

Yes, I've always craved a constellation. Who was Cassiopeia that she should get such a famous one? I say, let's all leave earth, ascend the heavens and become stars.

SNAKE

A guarantee of immortality.

BUN

Two more dollars, please. *(Manora pays him)* No tip, Ma'm?

MANORA

You must be joking. *(she slams the door. a moment later the doorbell rings. Manora thinks it's the delivery man again)* What...?

GREEN SNAKE

(she enters) Expecting me? Hope you still have some goodies left. I'm famished. *(opens a pizza box)* Yumm, I love spinach. So, green!

MANORA

(her interior voice speaks as she serves the pizza and watches the others sit down to play mahjong) You've lived your dual natures too long, belonging neither to one nor the other, responsible to none, comfortable only with other hybrids. And if not content to become just pretty stories, you still aren't willing to do anything to stop the war. You turned a deaf ear at the first gunshot of the battle—the impossible extinction of 6 billion passenger pigeons. With that for an overture, what did you expect would follow? The pesticides that destroy your eggs and deform your young, the farm machinery that chews up your nests, the chainsaws that fell your trees and leave you homeless, the desertification of your meadows and lakes. How much more will you take before you say 'enough'? Poisoned, trapped, shot, skinned, debeaked, defeathered, your guts exploding from ingesting plastic. Imprisoned, cramped, burned, boiled alive, stuffed, fried, roasted, force-fed. Ladies, are you going to just continue to twiddle your talons?

Black out

ACT III

Scene One

MANORA

As she dances of flying with her two daughters to Mt. Krilat; her interior voice speaks.
As soon as I asked my daughters if they wanted to go to Mt. Krilat nothing would deter them. It was hard journey, but I knew that if Suthon could do it, his daughters could too. On the way, we slept in temples beneath the frescos of my own story, my statue stood in the courtyards, but nobody noticed us, invisible refugees from another time. We made offerings to our ancestors. Our hearts, if not our wings and feet, were light, but when we reached the familiar gate, my heart stopped.

GATEKEEPER

No entry. Go back.

MANORA

Don't you recognize me? I know you, old man. Your eyes have dimmed.

GATEKEEPER

I know you, Manora. Go away. All of our troubles began with you.

MANORA

You can't keep me out this time. I've been cleansed. I've come with my children—they have a right to see their grandparents. Open up.

GATEKEEPER

Open up yourself. The walls will crumble at your touch. (*he suddenly collapses. Manora rushes to him and holds up his head.*) H5N1! H5N1! I'll shout the forbidden words before I die. Flee, Manora, death has entered us all.

MANORA

But how did it get here?

GATEKEEPER

Wild geese migrating from Russia and Turkey stopped Chinghai Lake. Hundreds of poultry farms are crammed next to fish farms. Fish are fed bird feces, and dead fish are mixed into bird feed, a perfect system for making profit and disease. The wild geese got infected, but being strong, they flew off, spreading it before they too succumbed. So the migrants are blamed, not the wretched factory birds. It's a war with no name. I shout it with my last breath. Avenge us, Manora. (*he dies*)

KOP

Not an auspicious beginning

MANORA

He was ancient. There has to be someone still alive inside. You two, go back to the other side of the river and stay hidden among the pines. Give me till nightfall. If I don't come or send some signal, go home.

KOP

But we can't leave you.

MANORA

You can if I'm dead. If not, I'll find my way back. I don't want you infected, but I must find my parents. Go.

MANORA

(*her interior voice speaks as she dances*) City of Gold, now City of Death, carcasses everywhere, stretched out with red cracked skin, broken wings, cramped in positions of agony, shriveled heads, all in stinking decay. I hurry toward the palace. My parents lie, fallen from their royal perches, my father's wing open over my mother's body; the wind loosens their feathers one by one, exposing patches of pink gray skin. Chandra lies belly up with her feet in the air. I push them down into a more dignified position. Nothing stirs. The ponds, cesspits of piled corpses, the ground squelches beneath me soaked in putrefying blood. The gatekeeper's words haunt me—am I responsible for this? (*she cries out in her stage voice*) Is no one left?

SUTHON

Help! Is someone there? Help! (*Manora finds Suthon lying on the ground*)

MANORA

Suthon!

SUTHON

Help me up. Something to drink...but nothing from here.

MANORA
I've brought water. You're burning.

SUTHON
I'm dying. Am I the last one?

MANORA
As far as I can tell.

SUTHON
Get away quickly.

MANORA
Why are you here?

SUTHON
I brought Suwanee. She wanted to take care of your parents when they became ill. I was planning to pay my respects and go back to Pancala, but she got ill and died before them. They urged me to go, but I thought the virus attacked only birds and wouldn't harm me. I stayed to look after them, but the virus spread like fire; every migrant either already had it, or caught it here. When the last of your sisters died, I realized I had it, too.

MANORA
Humans always think they are exempt from animal karma.

SUTHON
Manora, it's not the time or place for recriminations.

MANORA
How do you know I am me?

SUTHON
(he laughs) I knew immediately the one I had chosen wasn't you. Your eyes were unmistakable, shooting darts that hit my heart with their rejection. You left me, suffered penance to escape me; I had lost you. The eyes of your sister burned with the opposite message; "Take me!" I hesitated.

MANORA
I remember.

SUTHON
Not because I didn't recognize you, but I didn't know what to do. I loved you, but you didn't want me. I couldn't return to my kingdom empty-handed. Not after a seven-year absence.

MANORA
And remain a hero.

SUTHON
It's not my fault people were more fascinated with my story than yours.

MANORA

Of course not. They're people.

SUTHON

Enough sarcasm. I haven't time for it.

MANORA

No. And I owe you an apology.

SUTHON

For not loving me?

MANORA

No, for thinking you didn't love me enough to know me.

SUTHON

(he laughs) I lived with your sister for twelve years and never had a night that matched the one we spent together. You think I could ever mistake that? Just because others thought of me as a mythological hero given to magical adventures and amorous dalliances, didn't mean that was who I really was. Didn't you never imagine me being different?

MANORA

No.

SUTHON

And now?

MANORA

What? You want me to tell you, now, that I always loved you?

SUTHON

No...but perhaps to know that I was not mistaken, that during that night alone you loved me.

MANORA

You were not mistaken.

SUTHON

Good. Then it was all worth it. *(he closes his eyes)*

MANORA

Yes, especially for what it brought me.

SUTHON

(his eyes shoot open) What? Was there a child? You never thought to tell me?

MANORA

I've only just told them. That's why we've come.

G SUTHON
Them? Where are...they? Oh, Manora, let me see them!

MANORA
I've sent them out of the city.

SUTHON
Yes, yes, of course, good...What are they?

MANORA
Female...two...

SUTHON
Like you?

MANORA
Not exactly.

SUTHON
Like me?

MANORA
Not quite.

SUTHON
Ah...I want to see them.

MANORA
Suwanee had children?

SUTHON
A boy...more or less like me. He has two small bumps on his shoulders and his toenails have to be clipped every week, but otherwise, in every way...

MANORA
Normal.

SUTHON
Yes. But I want to see my daughters.

MANORA
I don't think now....

SUTHON
You have no right to deny me. Come, help me stand. I can make it. (*she helps him up and they pass out of the gates, and puts him down under a cluster of pines*)

MANORA
I'll go find them; they should be nearby.

POK

(flying above, on an upper ramp) Noi, are you all right?

MANORA

Yes, come down. Where's Kop?

POK

She's sleeping. I'll wake her. *(the two daughters stop short when they see Suthon)*

MANORA

You know who this is? *(daughters slowly nod)*

KOP

Where did he come from?

MANORA

He came with his wife, my sister, to look after our parents. He got ill. I told him about you and...

SUTHON

...he had to see you. Don't come close, dear daughters. The last thing I want is to infect you with this cursed virus. But I had to see you, and for you to see me, so you could have some idea of who and what your father was.

POK

(rushing up to him) Oh Pak. How often I've wondered about you. I've read about you and seen paintings of you, but I knew you would be different.

SUTHON

Daughter...what's your name? I beg you stay away. My breath is polluted. Manora, keep them away.

POK

I'm Pok and she's Kop.

SUTHON

You both look like your mother, and your own unique selves. You will do great things, won't they, Manora? I smell the pine, my nostrils tingle with the cooling scent but the rest of my body is on fire.

MANORA

Go get water from the river. *(the daughters leave)*

SUTHON

We're such weak and foolish creatures, but together, you and I are a great story, Manora. You know, I've never seen your dance. Dance for me now. Take my lighter-than-air soul with you. Dance my farewell in your soft soft wings.

MANORA

You're a good man. *(she kisses him, she dances and he dies)* **Black out**

MANORA

(her interior voice speaks) We prayed for two days and nights, and then burned the silk-wrapped body with fragrant pine needles. I removed his rings to return them to his son, but I kept the one I had given him when he had gone off to war. His rites finished, I re-entered the city. Heaps of feathers were blown into corners and whipped by the wind into angry cyclones. My mind did the same, my sorrow spinning until I was dizzy with rage. I set the palace alight; the withered bushes and grasses bristled with flame. The torched trees lit up the sky warning birds for miles around that this would never again be paradise. Finally, I spread my wings, and buoyed by the hot air, I shot up, a dazzling phoenix, powered by love and hate, the seeds of revenge inside me ready to burst. *(she flies back to her daughters)* *(in her stage voice)* Hurry, the ashes are falling.

KOP

Will it explode?

MANORA

I will explode. Let's go.

POK

The forest has caught fire, too.

MANORA

Kop, get on my back. Hold tight. *(her interior voice speaks)* Miles away, we stop and look back at the end of the world.

POK

Where do we go now?

MANORA

I don't know.

KOP

What do we do?

MANORA

Eat. Sleep.

Black out

Scene Two

All three are sleeping; each one suddenly wakes up, looks around as if she doesn't remember what she is doing there.

MANORA

I had a dream

KOP

I dreamed...

POK

I, too, dreamt. Is it possible we all had the same dream?

MANORA

I dreamt about a mathematician named Ted.

KOP

I dreamt about a monk named Duc.

POK

I dreamt about a student named Jan.

TED

(there's laughter above them) Ted on upper level is behind bars; he looks up from his writing.) I was the math department's youngest and brightest, yet when I said what they didn't like, they called me a kook. When I quit, all they could say, "Such a pity, he could have become a top member of the faculty." As if that was what I ever wanted. Manora, I send you my spirit.

MANORA

Why?

TED

You're still free to act.

MANORA

I'm just one...half-person, what can I do?

TED

The powers ranged against you seem omnipotent, but they'll prove feeble in the end, built on ever-weakening structures of self-deception, when pushed to the brink, they'll crumble. It was not my physical limitations that defeated me, but my spiritual despair at seeing what I had come to love as an extension of my own being hacked, burned, maimed.

That day in 1983, I took my favorite two-day hike to a plateau where like a sage of old, I would sit beside a waterfall and contemplate life. But when I got there, I discovered a road had been built right through the middle of the plateau as if my own gut had been slashed. From that moment, I knew I could do nothing but fight. You don't just stand by and watch what you love being killed; you do something.

MANORA

But how could you imagine that by sending letter bombs you could change people's minds or the system?

TED

Computer engineers and geneticists were the vanguard of the technology revolution that was destroying the wilderness. They were symbolic targets.

MANORA

Your little explosives were absurd, foolish even from a terrorist perspective. You didn't spearhead a movement. You drove the public against you. People sympathized with your victims.

TED

I held the country hostage for almost twenty years, not a mean feat.

MANORA

They called you coward.

TED

That was only after I was caught.

MANORA

Why didn't you die for what you believed? What you loved?

TED

I was ready to, but not to be executed, not by them. Once I managed to get a life term, I was satisfied. I would watch the destruction that I foretold come to pass. And it is.

MANORA

And your brother? Didn't you think of him?

TED

The Buddhist? He suffers from his guilt at turning me in. I suffer for every ruined inch of life-giving earth. But I won't compare our sufferings; each being suffers in its own way. He, like me, pays too much.

MANORA

And now? Would you have done anything differently?

TED

I naively thought if I published my manifesto, people would see that I wasn't against individuals, but the system that imprisoned us all. The problem with being "brilliant" is that what was so obvious to me was incomprehensible to others, then. Now they are catching on, but not fast enough.

MANORA

You're remembered as a villain and a madman, not a Greta Thunberg.

TED

What good is a "Greta," if none follow? What good is understanding, if none dare to lead? Anything that rocks the status quo is an aberration... would you believe it...of nature.

MANORA

I am an aberration of nature.

TED

You're tailor-made for the task.

MANORA

Me? Destruction from a deity of harmony? I am the expression of desire for human-nonhuman co-existence.

TED

Hah! Set up a website. Hire an agent to patent your image. Become a fashion statement; the original Green Girl. Use their techniques. See how far you get. *(he laughs and goes back to his writing)*

KOP

(she screams out in sleep) No, stop! Someone stop him. Why does no one do anything?

THICH DUC

(he sits in lotus position in a flame) They say the human body burns with astonishing speed. To me, it felt like an eternity, being extinguished cell by cell.

KOP

If I'd been there, I'd have saved you. I don't understand people who just stand by, watch and do nothing.

DUC

They respected my decision.

KOP

They were afraid.

DUC

When one has decided, it's not right for others to interfere.

KOP

The Buddha condemns all killing. You broke your vows.

DUC

The Buddha understood. Everything was done in pure faith.

KOP

No, done in revenge, for the killing of Buddhist monks just one month before.

DUC

It was an act of last recourse...against an evil power.

KOP

Despair and hopelessness. True believers aren't supposed to have such feelings.

DUC

I made the ultimate sacrifice.

KOP

Sloughing off the body is no sacrifice for a true Buddhist. You made a political act, condemning the corrupt Catholic elite, the coming of the French missionaries and the American soldiers. Why else would you do it in the middle of a busy downtown intersection? How did the photographer get there so fast to take the famous picture that ended up on President Kennedy's desk?

DUC

Don't question my intentions. Look at the efficacy of my actions. An individual's sacrifice can effect change.

KOP

But did it bring about the change you wanted? You galvanized the Buddhist clergy, and mobilized the people to follow. You helped to bring down the Diem government, the enemy of your faith; but its downfall led to communist victory that repressed Buddhism far more than the Catholics ever did. What did you achieve?

DUC

I lit the flame for neither Buddhism nor Vietnam, but against human evil. I was a seventy-three-year old man who had lived through a lifetime of war. I didn't fear death, but I wanted to do something with my dying that I'd been unable to do in life. My time was running out. Let my body be the burning beacon against all inhumanity! Don't you understand? I was poor and old. I had nothing else to give.

KOP

A protest against being human?

DUC

I had come up against the wall of my humanity and could not climb over or go around. Don't let either your life...or your death be in vain.

KOP

We never know. That's decided by others.

DUC

The Buddha knew. He kept my heart from the flames. Here. *(he gives her a black stone)*

KOP

What should I do with it?

DUC

Wear it. It'll protect you...from whatever kind of flames you encounter. For my penance, I continue to burn in hell till that last lingering desire for revenge and the last mote of despair have turned to cinder. At that time, my heart will return to me. *(the flames roar, the monk burns in silence)*

KOP

(stretching as if waking from a dream) Noi, I feel so hot. Please give me some water.

MANORA

(she gives her water and touches the black stone) What's this?

KOP

Just...just a black stone.

MANORA

It's hot. Take it off.

KOP

No...not now.

MANORA

The little one is still sleeping. When she wakes, we'll go.

JAN

He picks up flowers from his memorial in downtown Prague and gives them to Pok. They sit together at the edge of the stage. She picks the petals, and tosses them at him, then rests in his lap. He sings a lullaby 'Sleep, sleep in peace without fearing the midnight knock.' They said, 'such a nice intelligent man, only twenty years old, with his whole life ahead of him.' But I wondered, "What life?" Our Prague Spring had been quashed five months earlier and already I saw everyone slipping back into numbness, muttering, "It's hopeless, hopeless." I was sick of it. All our ideals had been betrayed.

POK

What ideals?

JAN

It sounds silly now, but I believed in socialism with a human face. I'd read all the great Russian novels and was inspired by their vision of an egalitarian society. Ironic, huh? That's what hurt so much, to have such fine ideas usurped by thugs. There was nothing left to believe in. Then, for a brief moment, when I lit the match, I felt redeemed. I was the spark that would light the soul of the nation; every Czech and Slovak burned with me.

POK

But three days later you were dead, and they went back to dumb misery.

JAN

A martyr always endures...symbolically.

POK

Symbolic of what? Socialism was dead in the water.

JAN

That life, freedom, truth are all worth dying for...and occasionally demand human sacrifice to remind people.

POK

I don't think anything is worth dying for. Life is all there is.

JAN

Even if it's a miserable life? Isn't it better to die standing than living on your knees?

POK

Most people live on their knees without even knowing it. But no life is completely miserable. Your ideals were too lofty and you, too impatient.

JAN

To have no ideals is sadder.

POK

Life is my ideal, life, real life.

JAN

How can you have real life without liberty and truth?

POK

Those nobody gives and nobody takes away. They're in your perception of things.

JAN

That sounds too Buddhist for me.

POK

You've been Buddhist. Self-immolation is passive protest.

JAN

Sure, I could have died throwing a grenade at a Russian tank, but then I would have been guilty of violence. Lighting the match was an act of pure devotion, not an impulsive gesture that endangered others. We needed uncompromised acts like mine. So what if Czechs and Slovaks had to wait another thirty years for the Berlin Wall to fall. I inspired others to keep striving.

POK

Czech kids today don't even know you existed. They take their freedom for granted.

JAN

And so they should. I don't expect gratitude, but they should be aware that when there's any threat to freedom, they must act immediately and decisively. I worry they won't recognize the threat when it comes again in a different form.

POK

So, it will come again?

JAN

It already has.

POK

And still, you don't think you died in vain?

JAN

No. But would I do it again? No...probably not. Now curiosity would get the better of me. I'd want to stick around and see how things turn out.

POK

Not humane socialism.

JAN

No, just cutthroat capitalism.

POK
Was that worth dying for?

JAN
No.

JAN/DUC/TED
(together they ask the Kinnari) So what will you do, now that your family is dead, your city destroyed and your kind threatened with extinction? *(all three men fade out)*
Black out

Scene Three

POK
Noi, let's go to Lake Bokkharani.

MANORA
No, it's too full of bad memories.

KOP
It might be the only safe place now.

MANORA
No, it has a curse on it.

KOP
But remember the hermit Thep? He didn't mean to betray you. Surely he owes you sanctuary now. We can stay with him.

MANORA
There you have a point.

POK
Noi, let's go, and if you sense any danger, we'll leave.

MANORA
All right, but I'm full of misgivings.

Thep is outside working in a garden. He has a little hut and the trees around him are tied with the yellow cloth of Buddhist monks.

THEP
(he looks up) A soft blowing, not winds, nor an ordinary flock, but the wings of the kinnari stirring the air. I never thought I would hear that sound again. Kinnari! Stop and rest with me. You'll be safe here. *(the three enter)* I don't believe it! Princess Manora?

MANORA
That's what I was in happier times.

THEP
(he falls to the ground) Forgive me!

MANORA

I never blamed you. You only had...what, curiosity?

THEP

No, loneliness. Alone, I delighted in the Kinnari's beauty and playfulness, but I wanted to share my pleasure with another human, to hear joyous laughter like my own. It was my evil luck that Bun came along just when my need was strongest. I've never craved another thing, except your forgiveness.

MANORA

Perhaps then, we can stay with you. I crave peace.

THEP

And the young ones?

MANORA

My daughters, Kop and Pok.

THEP

Welcome.

POK

Uncle Thep, why have you dressed the trees in monk's robes? Does it make you feel less lonely?

THEP

(he laughs) Perhaps, but the initial reason is more unfortunate. The forest is under attack. The fine old trees are being cut down, replaced by eucalyptus that grow fast and supply the paper mills. This is my strategy to protect these old fellows. It's respected by local people, but not by the loggers brought in from elsewhere. Only a few trees are left and I vow to protect them with my life. What else can I do?

KOP

Everywhere is under threat? Nothing is spared?

THEP

Economic crises are our blessings. For the time being, the trees are safe. Rest and eat.

MANORA

(her interior voice speaks) And so we stayed and lived in harmony with all around us. We knew it was only temporary. Thep was going blind, and he relied on us more and more. He knew the woods well enough to get around without his eyes, but we knew we could never leave him. *(Thep is meditating, girls tending vegetable garden and picking fruits)*

I took my daughters to swim in Lake Bokkharani, but the sight of them frolicking in the silvery waters made my tears stream without stopping. I hugged my wings about me and sobbed. Then the rainy season came, and to entertain ourselves, I began to teach them my Manora dance.... *(Thep plays the flute, and Manora taps the drum)*

One day, when I was about your age, I flew to Pulau Kacang.

KOP

Peanut Island?

MANORA

Yes. I met a girl there, actually she was very old, but she looked young and...she had a pair of wings. She was beating a drum and dancing. I asked her to teach me, but she said I had to be purified and go into trance. Breathing in the incense, I became drowsy, and felt no longer myself.

POK

What did you feel like?

MANORA

(she dances) A human dreaming of being a bird. Of trying to *imagine* flight and the freedom of the air. My body began to move, slowly, heavily. The drumming pounded an unknown rhythm into my bones. I danced until I fell down and slept a long time.

When I awoke, she told me she was called Mesi Mala and that she had once had a band of sixteen drumming girls, but they had been banished from their home and lived on Pulau Kacang. Fifteen years later, their homeland was attacked by a plague, and a sage told the king that only that dance could save his people. The king invited the dancing drummers, not knowing that the leader was his own daughter. They danced, and after 7 months and 7 days, people stopped dying. Mesi Mala stayed there, but when she knew she was dying, she returned alone to Pulau Kacang. She told me the dance that had saved the kingdom was called Manora, and then she died. I am the only one who knows the dance, and now it will be yours too.

MANORA

(Pok and Kop begin dancing) That's it, Kop. Lift the knee higher. Hold up your elbows. Keep going, Pok. You're a lazy poke today, always behind the beat. What's wrong?

POK

I don't know.

MANORA

Are you sure it's not just because you find this rhythm difficult?

KOP

Noi, she's wheezing. Let her rest.

MANORA

Sorry. Are you really unwell? *(she feels her forehead and frowns)* Lie down. Drink some coconut water and sleep. Kop, watch over her for awhile. *(she takes Thep out of hearing of the girls)* Thep, I'm worried. You know all the medicinal plants; please find something for her fever.

THEP

Let Kop come and be my eyes.

MANORA

Kop, go with Thep. Ah, little Pok, don't tremble. Relax, think of sailing on a soft cool cloud, of floating on the cool waters of Lake Bokkharani.

POK

Noi, when I close my eyes I see Pak. How happy he was to see us. How heavy his hand felt on my head. How hot and sour was the breath of his parting kiss. Oh Noi, I'm frightened.

MANORA

(rigid with terror, to herself) He tried to keep you away, but you wanted to cuddle and kiss him. What does this mean? A human can give a bird the virus? Oh Pok, you've got antibodies from me, be strong. If you overcome this, you'll be...superbird.

POK

If I recover, I'll have to stay away from all other birds. I'll be contaminated for life. I'd rather die now than infect another. Noi, stay away.

MANORA

You can't harm me. Rest, little Pok. Dream happy dreams.

POK

When I close my eyes, Jan comes and holds my hand.

JAN

(he stands behind Manora with Duc and Ted) I know what it feels like to burn. Horrible, horrible.

DUC

I meditated and went into a trance, but I can still hear the screams of my flesh.

TED

When the mind is in torment, the body feels nothing.

JAN

(He drops flowers on her) Someone left these roses on my monument. The sweetest flowers grow from the graves of martyrs.

POK.

(She struggles up) I want to fly up into the cool air. This warm rain seeps into my brain like hot oil.

MANORA

Get on my back. I'll take you above the clouds into the pure air. Come, let it fill your lungs and cool the fever. We'll fly away from this corrupted land forever, little Pok.

POK

But Kop, Kop!

MANORA

I'll come back and get her. Don't worry now, just breathe as deep as you can.

POK

(she cries weakly) Kop!

MANORA

(she puts Pok on her back and flies) After you get well, we'll take a trip. Where shall we go? Lake Victoria or Lake Titicaca? The Black Sea or Tahiti, or someplace exotic, like...like Lake Michigan? Where have you dreamed of going, Pok? Pok? Pok!
As Manora lands with her small but heavy load, Thep stumbles in carrying the body of Kop.

THEP

I couldn't save her. She started to stumble after we crossed the stream. She coughed and couldn't breathe. I gave her my breath; I made a poultice; I comforted her with my sad little jokes; I prayed and prayed. Oh Manora, what plague is this they carry inside?

MANORA

It's ravaging us like wildfire. I thought I had the antibodies, but now, I begin to feel the heat inside me.

THEP

(buzzing of chainsaws in the distance) Am I going crazy or is the buzzing growing louder?

MANORA

It's louder.

THEP

Manora, all pain and sorrow comes from attachment. Release your sorrow and save your soul.

MANORA

My soul is irrelevant.

THEP

Don't say that. The girls were holy beings; their souls are going to a better place.

MANORA

Nice to think so. Where is that? Is it better than our Mr. Krilat? Is it a place completely empty of sorrow and joy, just a swirling void? My girls are not ready for that.

THEP

They'll only go to such a place when they're ready.

MANORA

In the old plays, a deity would come down and reward us for our goodness by restoring them to life. But here, there's no more life. What could they be restored to?

THEP

Come, sit with me. Close your eyes and concentrate on the image of The Buddha. Listen to your breathing, to your heart beat, and then, let go.

MANORA

(She tries to meditate and stops) No, I won't give up my beautiful body, my strong wings; I won't separate my being into parts. I live and die whole.

THEP

Chant after me. Some things we overcome, some things we forgive, some things we forget, some things we outlive.

MANORA

But other things we must fight for.

THEP

No!

MANORA

Die for.

THEP

No!

MANORA

Yes, even kill for.

THEP

No!

MANORA

I pray only to know the difference between them. *(the buzzing grows louder)* They've come for your trees.

THEP

(he leaps up) No! *(he tries to protect the trees with his body)* These are holy; they are your mother and father. Don't cut them. You cut your own life strings. No, not these! *(he falls with the trees)* Pray for me, Manora.

MANORA

Pray? In the 547 *jataka* stories of The Buddha's rebirths, The Buddha appears in many human and animal bodies, but never as a woman. Even in my *kinnari jataka*, he becomes Suthon, not me. But Pok and Kop? Where are they in the hierarchy of incarnations? How can they become more perfect and innocent than they were?

(Her interior voice speaks as Manora dances) Call me Manora, the bird-woman born out of desires for flight and beauty. What are my chances of survival when other species go extinct with the blink of an eye? But I will not fade away with a whimper. Oh, no, a double fire burns within me, a virus rides upon the wings of my revenge. I will fly, mingle, and infect every place you meet. I will cavort among you at *carnival de la mort*, Death in a feathered costume. With fiery radiance, I'll dance Mesi Mala's healing moves and bring the plague back. *(the sound of flapping wings and heavy exhalations)* I will fly, fly until my rage consumes me...and all of you.

The shadow of Manora's wings grows larger as the sound of wings flapping crescendos.
Black Out

The End