

Nadia Davids

Bridling

HE doesn't lock the mask every rehearsal. There are some days I say, *I can't, not today, not for all those hours*. Attached to the mask is a rope that sways down my back and dangling from the rope is a bell that the stage manager (the "SM," we call her) will ring every ten minutes during the performance. It gives a little chime and I give a little jerk and there are moments when I'm mid-twitch that I wonder if there was any class in drama school that could have prepared me for this role.

I'm playing a seventeenth-century bad woman, or, more accurately, I'm re-enacting a drawing of a seventeenth-century woman who's been punished for "gossiping, or nagging or snapping," or just talking, I guess. I'm in full costume—stays, scratchy dress, bare feet, dirty fingernails, doleful vibe, topped off with this mask—a "scold's-bridle," it's called. It's as weird and unsettling as it sounds; all leather and steel with a wooden bit—the kind for a horse—placed in my mouth to stop my tongue and make me drool.

We haven't decided yet how my character ended up like this (it's a *process*, we agree, an *unearthing*); a sentence from a magistrate maybe, handed down after a complaint from her husband, but just as likely from a butcher or baker or candlestick-maker or a random farm boy with a grudge, or whatever a seventeenth-century incel was back then. So, when I say, *not today*, the director says he understands. He's good that way—can show how much he understands, how much he *feels* for me, for all of us, with just a tilt of his head, a hand resting lightly on the shoulder.

We've been hard at work for months now and in a week, we'll open. He's been giving interviews all morning, sitting with journalists beneath the theater's digital billboard on which the show's title, *Now Is the Time*, gleams.

Beneath it, in smaller font: “Women in Works of Art through the Ages.” I hear him tell each of them that our fast-selling show with a running time of five hours (*durational*, he calls it) places intensive demands on both audience and performer.

The main idea is this: we, a company of women performers, will stage various artworks by men (and men only) depicting women. We’ll create facsimile tableaus of the works, remaining absolutely still while audiences walk around the staging area viewing us as though we are an exhibition.

“We are *literally* Live Art,” an actor we all call Medusa said earlier during her costume fitting. The director responded that the work is, in fact, “intersectional,” which Medusa translated when he was out of earshot as “A bit of theater. A bit of museum. A bit of discomfit for everyone involved.”

She’s being glib. And that’s okay—because it’s a difficult piece, almost impossible, I think some days. Most days.

But he’s held the space—and us—with deep care from the first warm-up. On day one of rehearsals, he’d welcomed us and then asked that we remember, always, that the ground we’re on is unceded territory. He made a visible effort to correctly pronounce the resisting group’s name and nodded deeply at an actor who looked as though she might be descended from them. She didn’t nod back. “We’re making immersive theater,” he went on. “I like to think of it as the missing link between museumology and performance, a co-creation of meaning between actor and audience, a collapsing of boundaries while strictly enforcing them. A place where everything that so desperately needs to be said hinges on your absolute silence.”

Someone said that sounded contradictory, and he agreed, “Absolutely, *absolutely*,” before explaining that this was less about “putting on a show” than it was about “showing up,” “calling in while facing out,” and that if that sounded contradictory too, it was because multiplicity was always complex, and that this work was nothing if not that: it was exhibition, drama, history all in one. He spoke about how the audience would become part of the performance, how they’d thread their way through the space, and that though they’d likely come in groups—in tens, even hundreds!—the real intimacy would occur between a single audience member and a single performer—the locking of eyes, the meeting of bodies in time and space, that flare of recognition, solidarity even—a flame against the darkness. This was, he insisted—by this point almost to himself—the only effective means by which to return that

millennia-old gaze, the survey of women by men, the endless contemplation. The looking.

He paused as though struggling to find the words, his boyish face open, earnest, then said that in truth, we'd be embarking on so much more than a performance—this would be an *excavation* of historical agency, a Morse code to ghost-women, and that the end-product was nothing compared to the process, because this was, at its core, a way for us—the women in the cast—to time travel safely, to thin the mists, to listen to all those restless spirits, and that though the doing may shift in the course of the making, the animating force—the *mission* of the work, he promised—would stay the same.

I thought then, *I could listen to you for hours.*

And I would. We all would.

These are the final days of rehearsal before we move into the performance space. We'll be in the building's main theater, an old-fashioned proscenium arch with red velvet curtains and a thousand comfortable seats. Except, as I never tire of explaining to anyone who'll listen, the seats won't be used, because the audience is going to come up onto the stage, wander around, look right at us.

For now, though, we're still in that place of deep discovery before the tech sessions begin: rigging and plotting lights, mapping soundscapes, patiently working through cue to cue, scrambling to hold on to what we've found in rehearsal. Still in the safe space where we *created the work / manifested it / brought it into being / coaxed it into the world / invited it into becoming*. It's helped that this rehearsal room is so beautiful. Rafters criss-cross beneath the roof and every morning at least one pigeon swoops through, startling us—and itself—as it flies back and forth searching for an exit. The floor is sprung wood and the tall, wide windows open by sliding one half past the other. There are no curtains, so we track first the summer's light and then its shadows from the start of the day to the end.

The SM told me that she showed him seventeen rehearsal spaces (*seventeen*, she repeats), before he chose this one and that he'd dismissed all the others as having "poor bones."

"He's exacting," she said. "That's why he's so good."

We were told not to prepare anything for the audition—no monologue, no song or dance—just to dress as plainly and as comfortably as possible, that

we'd be asked to do things and those things would be very specific to him and his methods. There were hundreds of us in the waiting area. I asked the SM how many would be cast and when she answered *Twelve*, a girl close by me laughed, "Twelve? I see his Messiah complex is still in full swing," and then, preening, "But do I *want* to be a disciple?"

The SM didn't say anything, just cocked her head, and I noticed later that the girl, who'd announced to all of us that she'd "nailed" the audition, didn't even make the first cut.

A few of the others had worked with him before, but none of us knew what this new project was about. Weeks later he'd tell me that secrecy is the great unsung power of creativity, that in an era of constant disclosure there is something magical about silence.

The corridor outside the audition room was three-girls-thick. We stood straight or slouched against the wall, sat legs splayed, ear pods in, phones out, bottles of water at the ready. We laughed, fidgeted, were anxious beyond measure, confident beyond reason, insecure beyond coaching—all for just a handful of minutes in the room with him.

The SM called us in six at a time.

We entered single file, standing tight together, waiting for him to make the first move. He stayed at his desk, head down, his pale hair falling in skeins about his face, arranging then rearranging papers and pencils. He was larger than I thought he'd be, with a stomach that rolled a little over his jeans and the sleeves to his track jacket pushed up his thick forearms, revealing tattoos that crawled from wrist to shoulder.

He called the SM toward him and softly gave her instructions. She clapped her hands and announced, "Okay! You all remember that statues game you played as kids? This is that with a twist. Get ready." She put on clanging music and told us to move as wildly ("intuitively," he corrected without looking up) as we could. "When I stop the music," she continued, "the director's going to shout a word. Create a shape-response to the word and freeze. Got it?"

Got it.

On and off went the music and from the desk the words, "Flounce!" "Scream!" "Sugar!"

We flounced, screamed, sugared.

He watched, said nothing, then, "Silk!" "Find!" "Idol!"

When the music went off for the last time, he took the sheaf of papers before him and held it up above his head. The SM said to take a "beat," fetched

the papers and handed them out to us. They were color photocopies of paintings: some new, some very old, some so famous even I knew them, others I guessed were important but I'd never clapped eyes on before. All of women.

He rose from the desk and ambled toward us, smiling warmly and speaking to us directly for the first time: "Look closely at your images." And then, "You're seven / you're twenty / you're aged beyond your years. You're free / you're enslaved / you're betrothed / you're a maid / a muse / a goddess / hunted. Take a minute," he encouraged. "Really, really look."

I made a long study of my handout and asked the others if I could see theirs.

"What did you notice?"

I jumped—just a little—when I realized he was standing behind me.

His voice was low. "When you looked at the others' paintings, what did they have in common?"

I hesitated, convinced the wrong answer would be the end of me.

"Go on," he soothed. "Don't be afraid. I could tell you noticed something."

Slow at first, as though I was only just learning to speak, I said, "Well, they're different from each other—each woman, each girl," and then in a rush, "but what makes them the same is that not one of them is smiling."

He beamed then as though I'd just cracked a nuclear code. He placed his hands on my shoulders, turned me around and told me to repeat what I'd just said to everyone.

I stood a little straighter, thought *this is what being golden feels like* and I didn't care when I caught two of the other women exchanging smirks.

Next, he tasked us with what felt like the impossible: "Now. Give me the same face you see in your painting but convey three things at once: one, what the subject was feeling; two, what the artist wanted her to feel; and three, just behind those two states, an empty space within yourself, a spot on your interior canvas, so to speak"—(a chuckle at that, first from him, then quickly followed by us)—"where the person looking at you can find their own feeling."

It was a quest. Or a riddle:

Take this straw and weave it into gold.

What slew none and yet slew twelve?

I tried but couldn't manage one of those things, never mind all three. I mentally began picking up my belongings, thanking him for the oppor-

tunity, heading for the door, preparing to tell my friends how I hadn't been able to spin the straw to gold or slay the twelve, that the best I could do was to appear blank.

And that's when he said that what I was doing was "perfect."

I'd achieved, he announced with finality, the three states at once.

I knew then, before the names were called out, that I'd been cast.

And at the very first rehearsal, there we were, a dozen women, the promised twelve—mostly in our twenties, just two of us in our fifties or sixties (I was careful not to ask), tall, short, gaunt, round, heads shaven, hair streaming down our backs, ordinary, other-world pretty, breasts flat or full, limbs long or squat, constant smiles, constant frowns, skin from pale pink to fawn to obsidian. We formed, without being instructed, a semicircle around him with some moving forward very slightly, breaking ranks to be closer to him.

He looked around the circle smiling, tilting his hands toward us in prayerful thanks, stopping just once to tell one of the older women she had one of the most magnificent faces he had ever seen: lined, unapologetic, and, even when it was resting, full of fury. We younger ones laughed a little, showing him—and ourselves—that *we* were not angry. That magnificently furious face broke into a smile when he said that and then she reached up, tugged at her hairband to shake loose her hair. Released, it fanned out in a halo of black and gray curls round her head. He smiled and said, "Ah, *there* she is. Welcome, Medusa."

He'd call her Medusa from then on, and within a few days so did the rest of us.

He took a careful breath and announced (or "shared," as he described it) the piece's title.

"Now," he said, rapping his knuckles on his table, "*now* is the time. Let's upend all those stories. Let's take a deep dive into those archives. Let's retrieve, disrupt, explore."

We began each day with a long warm-up; mashups of meditation and Eastern battle-dances. We traced the outline of someone else's body with our own, we mirrored a partner's every move from eye-blink to leg-twist, we clapped in unison to provide a backbeat while one of us told a story. Once, he asked us to imagine the waters of a cold ocean in our right legs and the burning fires of a volcano in our left, that if we really focused, we'd feel the alternating *hot/*

cold/hot/cold. But Medusa, who took the lead on most of the other exercises, said that she'd sit that one out, that she already, without thinking, did that several times a day and that anyone else going through menopause would say the same. We all laughed—including him—which I thought showed how open he could be.

He'd shift between long stretches at his desk and being with us on the floor. Every once in a while, he'd unfurl his large body from a draped hunch, get up, walk over to one of us to stand close and quiet.

"It's weird but not, like, *invasive*?" I told a friend over dinner the night it first happened. "I can't explain it. It's like he's looking not just at me, but through me and around me, placing me next to others I can't see, in contexts I don't know. I think he's a genius. G.O.A.T. level."

My friend, who's a junior in the HR department at an accounting firm, just gave her usual disbelieving laugh, saying, "I don't know how you do it."

In the second week, a new exercise. He stood on top of the desk, did a little Puck-like jig and tossed into the air strips of paper that quickly floated down past his head to the ground (*into the air, into the air, into the air*, he sang as the papers swooped). Then he said, "Quick! Grab the first few you can. A fistful. Aaaaand . . . Go!"

Did he know we'd scramble for them, scuffle even? I don't think that's what he meant to happen. But we did. I snatched mine from another woman's fingers, she grabbed hers from the woman next to her. One of the newest actors, younger even than me, her first job (*green green green*) hung back, on the edge, eyes wide.

He stood on the desk, legs apart, smiling but quiet. When we each had our fistful, he raised a hand and said, "Good," and jumped down.

On those papers were short descriptions. We stood, as we were told, in a circle and read the text out on a loop.

A likely girl
A strong mother
Betrothed
A reliable seamstress
Letter-writer

The prophetess no-one believes
Old. Still useful
Weaves like a dream/dream-weaver
Veil drawn tight
Full battle-dress—sword drawn, shield up
Pregnant. Doesn't want to be
An unlikely girl
Crone in the woods
Clever/Pinched
Armless Girl
Tongueless Girl
Vengeful Girl
Seduced by a swan—gold between the thighs
Scold's-bridle
Woman in the Wall
Naked—before a mirror
Naked—eats an apple
Naked—lies in bed
Naked—nurses baby
Naked—stands in pond
Naked—on a conch shell
Naked—holds a sword
Naked—back turned, servant hovers
Three Graces

I got these:

Scold's-bridle
Naked—before a mirror
Vengeful Girl
Three Graces

Our recitation was gaining a rhythm of its own when he clapped to indicate that we should stop. Then, his hands still holding the clap like a prayer, he said, "These are the artworks you will each enact. Some are solo, some are

in groups. They're different in time and place but we all know the thread that binds them together. Thank you. Thank you."

At the end of that day as we packed up, I noticed an image left behind on the table—a woman alone on a beach at night. In a man's patched blazer and a long, comfortable patterned skirt she sat, knees tucked up, hands clasping legs, holding herself close, bare feet on the sand, face soft and strong and beautiful, chin turned up to a deep and starry sky, eyes on the planets above with a restfulness that lived, I could tell, deep in her bones. In the distance, the ocean, and if I leaned in closely enough, I could hear its faint roar and her steady breathing. There must have been a moon somewhere, shedding its light, because I could see her and she could see herself. Her toes, splayed and unlovely, squelched into the give of the cold, wet, grainy sand. I knew, immediately, how I'd make this tableau; knew the skirt I'd bring from my mother's closet, the blazer from my father's, the beach where I'd collect sand, and a memory of a night I'd tracked a moonrise that I'd draw on. I traced my fingers over the woman and was about to place her with my other picks when the SM plucked her out of my hands.

"Sorry," she said, setting her back on the table, "that one made it in by mistake. It's by a woman artist. That's not what we're working on here. We're focused on, like, returning the male gaze by *becoming* it?"

As she turned away, I made a quick decision: I took the print, hid it in my jacket, spirited her off. At home, I propped her up on my bedside table and set an offering of wildflowers before her.

It was during an afternoon enacting the "Three Graces," a painting of soft pastels and shimmering golds, of diaphanous material and soft, dimpling flesh, that I earned my name from him.

Three of us had been holding a single pose for thirty minutes, our heads tilted, my left arm raised to twine my fingers with Grace Two, my right arm lowered to touch fingers with Grace Three, one foot crossed behind the other as if at the beginning of a curtsy. It was endurance work and he'd kept faith with us through it all, through the breakout sweats and the feelings of shame at our state of undress. As we broke the pose, Grace Two gave an exaggerated little whimper of pain and Grace Three made such a show of massaging her own shoulder that he remarked consolingly that it just never stopped

astonishing him how something so beautiful could be predicated on such hurt, but that perhaps these kinds of re-enactments brought us closer to our ancestresses, and surely our bodies *held* those long-ago memories, and maybe, just maybe each image was a way back to them and that this, *this* was the work. “Don’t you agree, Grace?” he said to me.

Of the three of us, I am the only one he gifts with that name.

That night as I lay in bed, I looked up and saw that the tree outside my window was casting a shadow in the exact shape of one of my other characters, Vengeful Girl. Just before I fell asleep, my jaw seized up as if something were binding it. *Oh*, I remember thinking, *it’s starting*. When I woke the next morning, my legs and arms were in my Three Graces pose and I wondered at what point in my sleep they’d arranged me so.

The next week, there was a crack in the cast.

We were sculpting an image, mythical in origin, neoclassical in style, all triangles and power, about the rape of the cherished daughter of a goddess-queen. He started the session by explaining that the painting had been taught for the longest time as though it was just an abduction, but that really, all you had to do was look, really *look* at the daughter being wrenched from her chariot, her face wretched, the god’s ruthless triumph—to know what was going on. And that all those details—the cloth dragged to reveal her nipple, the rippling power of the horse’s body, the darkly sensuous earth-browns and gold, told us exactly what the painter felt about it all.

We were nearly there—it took all twelve of us to be daughter, god, horse, trees wild with wind, when the young actor—*green-green-green*—closer to girl than woman, broke away from being the horse’s hindlegs. With her hand still holding a length of rope for the animal’s tail, she said, “Fuck this. *No*,” and walked out of the image and spat first on the floor, then at him before she left the room.

To his credit, he didn’t flinch: he just told us to take five. He was about to go after her when Medusa stopped him, saying, “No. Not you. I’ll go.” Medusa’s hair seemed to grow round her face, and for a moment, though she’s a full head shorter, she towered over him.

I blinked and he’d grown his height again and was walking back to his desk.

From behind the door, we heard the girl shouting, “I’m done! I can’t anymore,” and Medusa’s voice, low, reassuring.

We stood about waiting and all the while the conversation outside was getting louder: “It’s just bullshit. I’m not giving *blood*. I’m just not.” And then it stopped. The door swung open. Medusa was alone. “She’s left. Not coming back.” Medusa seemed almost pleased about it.

He asked us to come together, to give thanks for the girl’s contribution, and repeated what he said the first day, that the journey would be rigorous, exacting, not for everyone. His brow furrowed. “Art is not supposed to be comfortable. When you’re uncomfortable, *that’s* when the work begins. To make great art, we must all always be a little on edge. There are no small parts in this work. We are the sum of each other. The hindlegs belonged to the horse, and the horse was what the god uses to kidnap the daughter: no horse, no kidnapping; no hindlegs, no horse. The hindlegs are everything.”

He promised to continue to check in and make sure that we were “okay”; our “okayness” was central. And he did just that. He was good that way. Attentive.

That evening I was visiting a friend, and so Medusa and I waited for the same bus; it was a long, hazy dusk of a day’s end and a drizzle kept us half in, half out of the awning. Medusa smoked one of her rollies, her hair bound in a bright twisted scarf, the small gold hoops in her ears dulled by the fading light.

“Just because they *ask* for blood doesn’t mean you have to give it.” She kept staring ahead. “You’ve got to learn how to let them think you’re all in but make sure you keep something of yourself back. That’s the part you go home to. You know how they all talk about the ‘process’?”

I nodded.

“It’s a process where you get better at telling them one thing and yourself another and they don’t know the difference. That kid who left today? She’s still working it out. She’ll get there. If she wants to keep doing this, she’ll have to. Running off shouting how she’ll make *him* see . . . What’s she going to do? TikTok her outrage? She’s got to learn. Got to. Sometimes it’s different and those are the times that take you through. *Hindlegs? Fucksake.*”

The bus arrived and though we sat next to each other, Medusa didn’t seem to want to say more. She leaned her head against the window.

For the first two weeks of rehearsal, while the mask was being made for “Scold’s-Bridle,” I wore a soft woollen balaclava—the kind pulled on cartoon

thieves or members of an anarchist group. Though we worked endlessly on locating the *feeling* of the actual thing, it wasn't until I put it on that I understood what we were really doing.

The director came over to help me fit it, easing it gently over my head, saying quietly he was going to have a go at locking it.

That's when I jolted.

I thought I was prepared. Thought I knew. I'd been dreaming about her, waking up to her whispering in my ear about the sickly sweet smell of the oiled leather, the terror of the lock rusting, the never-healing sores on her cheek.

But still, a jolt, a flinch that started in my pelvis, lurched up through my stomach and stiffened my neck.

The mask closed over my face and my skull felt as though it was closing in on my brain. The bridle locked at the base of my ear, dug at my chin. I shook my head, *No*.

"Grace? Are you okay? I can't even imagine. You must be channelling so much right now. If you're not comfortable, we can stop."

I'll be fine, I assured him. *I'll manage*.

If I could, I would smile. Beam even.

Only five of us actors remain. The girl who refused to be the hindlegs triggered a little rebellion with others leaving in various ways: tearful, attention-grabbing, others claiming they were sick or pulling out after a "quiet word" with him. One said in front of everyone that it was taking a toll on her "mental health." As always, he was forgiving, saying that not everyone could stay in the grip of the monster, stare it down, beat the path back for the ones who would come after. I don't know why that girl gave him such a hateful look—he was only saying, *I see you. It's okay*. Another actor asked if it was possible for her solo image (a woman writing a letter) to have a monologue. "I just feel that if she's *writing* she's got something to say?"

He reminded her that one of the core strengths of this piece was silence, hers individually, ours collectively, and (with a glance around the room) that "each one of you has something to say, not just the woman with a pen in her hand."

So, only we five are capable of manifesting his vision, making material his dreams. He tells us he will not replace the ones who have left, that this work has an energy of its own and that he is obedient to that force—that five we are and

five we shall remain. He is mostly full of praise for what we do but sometimes will announce in a rage that obedience is not enough, not *satisfactory*, and that in doing precisely as we're told we are ceding "personal authority."

We all agree to work harder.

But there is one session where even we five are left wondering if we can pull this off. We're getting stronger, can stand stiller for longer, remain resolutely in character (though Medusa tells us all backstage, to consider zoning out occasionally—that he'd never know anyway beneath all the makeup). But we're all suddenly worried about the audience. About them being so close, about how to handle them if they get too much in their feels and start touching us or making contact. Because they're free to walk right up to us, stand, circle, stalk, hover, look, look, lash out, and we can't move, can't do anything in response. They may laugh or weep or try to talk to us, console us, hurl abuse at us, be overcome, be indifferent, and our only task is to remain still, absolutely still, silent, absolutely silent. At most, we can make eye contact if their gaze is level with ours, but he's asked that we try not to do this, because the stiller and quieter we are, the better the audience will be able to see our torment.

We suggest to him that we do a practice run—ask him to invite colleagues in to play audience, *let them do their worst*, that this will help us prepare, develop resilience. He's amused and says this is the most "meta" thing anyone has ever suggested to him. Then he shakes his head, very serious now, and explains that this isn't the military, that we don't stage assaults to withstand them. As artists we need to remain alive, open, receptive, always. Mock-stagings would short circuit that. That's not what we're about, not at all.

Medusa starts to really chafe after that, saying that sometimes he just goes too far, that he's pushing us, that he won't *listen*, but that life has a way of making you listen whether you want to hear it or not. I wonder then if she, like me, has been hosting the women from the artworks in her home, has noticed how they're growing bolder, each one trailing the actor who plays her. I want to ask her if she's seen them standing in the wings and behind the dressing-room door, seen how they float into our costumes as we dress, drape onto us as we assume our positions, even circle him sometimes, ready to raise hell if he asks for one more thing—not that he'd notice.

Better not to mention it, I think. Better not to risk sounding crazy.

But they're busy, the women from the artworks, busy-busy, all over the theater. The only one who remains in her own world, minding her own busi-

ness, is the woman on the beach. When the final costumes are approved, I bring her back to work, and in secret, tape her to the inside of my stays.

Opening night in the dressing room: each one of us has an individual table with a mirror rimmed with bare bulbs and a built-in ashtray.

“Chorus girls’ dressing room,” says Medusa, who knows everything, as she points at the ashtrays. “Remnants from a different time. Boozy, bawdy bitches every one of them.”

She’s got a wildness to her tonight.

I’ve gone quieter, she’s fizzing.

Our tables are covered with little pots of thick makeup, brushes, kohl, wigs on white Styrofoam heads. Our costumes hang on the rails behind us.

I think about the last twenty-four hours: I’d woken up this morning to find one of the Graces pressed up against my bedroom window, her breath hot on the pane, while another Grace had transformed herself into a stream of cool air that strayed around my ankles that I can feel even now. Last night, as I fell asleep, Vengeful Girl slid into bed next to me, asking, *Will you place the coins on my eyes? Will you cross the river with me?* When I made breakfast, the bridled woman, the scold, stood close. *Let me tell you how I’ve brewed poison for my husband, casting spells into the rabbit stew, calling on every wraith in the nearby mountain to send him terrifying visions during the day and madness by night.* As I brushed my hair, Grace appeared again, this time to show off her arms, which bulged and grew muscles before my eyes. *When the theater is dark, she told me with a wink, my sisters and I break into a wild run and race into the forest.* She claimed their bodies grew stronger, more luminous with every step and that fruit and flowers sprang up in their wake. When I took a morning bath, the naked girl on the couch climbed in with me, lifting her sad eyes to say that nightly she is spied on by an old neighbor: *It’s his ritual,* she told me; *I’m his pastime.* At this, on cue, Vengeful Girl burst into the room, laughing, announcing that *her* ritual—her *pleasure* (guffawing now)—is to take her sword night after night and gouge out the peeper’s eyes.

“What do you think?”

It’s Medusa next to me, hair coiled upwards, each ending flicked with a red tongue to suggest an eruption of snakes. Her brows are drawn toward each other and a line of jagged blood circles her neck. She grins and says to me via her reflection, “May this be the last face he sees at night and the first one he sees in the morning.”

He comes backstage for a pep talk, thanks us for giving “heft” to work forged in a “cauldron of rage and possibility,” and says that in the final analysis, the process, the *meanings* we’d made in the rehearsal room, were everything, and the final product—indeed, this *night*—is just another step, nothing more, in the work’s development. He seems very happy with this little speech. The SM walks in, announcing that all invited reviewers are in attendance, and he pales a little, saying he’ll see us in the foyer after.

Final call.

We’re laser focused as we walk onto the stage, ready to take our places, assume our poses.

The stage is divided into three different sets, each exactly replicating the background of the painting we’re performing. Upstage, I stand in a cottage doorway, breathing in short gasps through my stays, my head closed in by the bridle, the rope with the bell looped around my waist. Creeping up the cottage walls behind me is pretty honeysuckle, and around my neck is a wooden placard with the word *Scold* carved into it. Every detail is true except for one small rebellion—I’ve not placed the bit in my mouth.

Downstage, draped over a chaise longue, entirely naked, a gorgeous bolt of blue silk dripping from one hand, a mirror in the other, lies one of the other Graces. She’s surrounded by a huge gilt frame and though she cannot see herself (the mirror is angled away from her) the plaque next to her bears the title *Exhibit: Vanity*. Stage left is Medusa, a wall built up in front of her with a hole in it, just her head poking through, the snake hair, eyes rolled up, bloody neckline, all form a nightmare version of old-fashioned seaside photos.

In an hour we’ll close this scene, the next two actors will come out while we change costume, and so on, until five hours have passed, and thirteen paintings have been re-enacted.

I’m still, so still, in that knowing hush between house lights down and spotlight on, the beam trained slow and bright and true onto me, the warm orange of it all spooling out onto the floor. Just behind me, carefully plotted shafts of light are alive with twirling dust and my face is hot—burning even—beneath the claggy makeup. *Here they come, here they come.* My eyes are wet and blinking as the audience moves toward us. There are so many of them, in groups, alone, old, young, she, he, they, them, clutching programs, leaning in

to read the plaques, standing just at the edge of the rope that cordons them off, some tilting ever so slightly over it to get a better look.

A group of young men hover at “Vanity,” laughing, circling close, offering the girl-actor all sorts of things, taunting her. She does not reply. An older woman, an audience member, puts herself between them.

A man stands before me and tells his teenage son, correcting the information in his program, that I’m based on a *charcoal* not a pencil sketch, while the boy looks at me, his hand moving to touch his own face, as if to assure himself that he remains unmasked.

An hour of this and just as the director predicted, some attendees begin to cry, some giggle, some recoil, some lean in too close, others turn away; some won’t leave and become very angry. The women, especially, do one of two things: walk out in protest or stay in solidarity.

Every once in a while, Medusa lets her tongue loll out and her eyes drop down. I’ll know when this happens because someone will give a small cry of surprise or a laugh of relief. It’s rule-breaking and Medusa knows it—it makes her tableau look more seaside-wall than ever, but it helps everyone to become human again.

I find myself drifting in and out, my body either floating up toward the lighting rig or traveling toward the Exit sign. I’m rarely where I am, but then an odd noise brings me back to the stage—a growl, a groan, a stuttering. Then nothing.

No, there it is again, a cough, maybe a gathering of phlegm, and a woman, saying urgently, “Do you think she needs some water?” It’s Medusa. The noise switches into another sound, song-like, then a hiss, now a rattling, and a man says, “Look, this one is actually baring her teeth. I thought they were supposed to be totally still.”

What is she *doing*? Don’t break focus, I tell myself. Find the still-point. Find it. If I’m disciplined enough, that control will radiate over to Medusa, help her get ahold of herself, rein herself in. Look, *look*, I shout my thoughts to her, a new group is coming toward us. Teenage schoolgirls, uniformed, giddy, accompanied by a young teacher whose boots and bangles and artfully messy bun put just a decade between her and them. She ushers the girls from tableau to tableau. Shoal-like, they come toward me, so many eyes trained at once, blinking, blinking. The longer they look, the longer I stare back, the tighter the

mask feels, the stronger the lock seems to grow, the sharper my flail when the bell is rung, and the girls, the girls, the longer they stay, the longer they stare, the more something seems to settle—squat even—on their shoulders so that they droop just a little, even that one, on the right, who walked in beautiful, cocky, strutting.

Now, Medusa is barking, literally *barking*, snapping if anyone comes too close, and a small crowd is gathering round her.

I shift so slightly that no one notices. I imagine the woman on the beach pressed against my breast. I summon the moon she sits beneath, remember the cold sand between her toes, feel the warmth of the blazer, the drape of her skirt, the night of stars and stillness that lie ahead for her. This is enough, I tell myself, enough. No need to growl. No need to do anything just because Medusa is. No sense in giving in to the sway and push of the art women, their clamoring and chattering.

But then, something strange; I feel my head growing larger and larger, fit to burst the leather seam, bust open the iron lock. I feel a laugh roiling up inside, and I have to clamp down my left arm to stop it from flinging back and shoving over the painted cardboard cottage-set behind me.

My shoulder blades push out and back and from them—*impossible, impossible*—I begin to grow fins, sharp wings, that slice through my costume. In my hand, in Vengeful Girl's hand, the heavy weight of a weapon is taking shape—I dare to look down, make it out, and just as I do, it catches the light—a sword's hilt, glittering, gleaming, waiting. My perfect pose broken, I'm able to see the flowers that are growing madly, unbidden, all around my feet and notice that even though the bell is being rung and rung and the rope jerked and jerked—out of the corner of my eye I see the SM, frantically pulling and pulling—but I am unmoveable. Ahead of me the girls stare and stare at the fins and flowers, at the weapon and my ever-expanding head, and as one their mouths open to sing in wonder, in wonder! And my tongue, resting so heavily behind a clamped mouth, becomes light, so light that it starts to writhe and dart like a small fish, forming even in the silence, the testimony of the art women—their spells and flowers, their mirrors and swords, their poisonous recipes, their words ready to be spoken, turned loose, raining down hell, now vomited up, *here's your Morse code, take your thinning mists, your time travel, your deep dive, your holding space*. I'll set the record *straight*, nothing to stop

me, nothing to stop them, they're all gathered now, all present, just here, in my mouth, Medusa's generous growl in the background reaching a crescendo, the once-shrinking now-singing girls swaying as one. The light is moving from spot to general, just a few beats before blackout, and everything, everything is just there, just here, in this velvet moment before the dark, on the edge of being said.