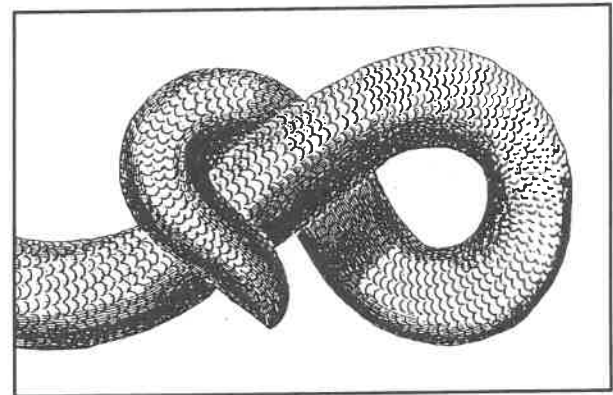


THE DARKER FACE  
OF THE EARTH

A PLAY  
BY RITA DOVE



THIRD EDITION

STORY LINE PRESS

Ashland, Oregon

## CAST

### Female slaves:

PHEBE

PSYCHE, in her mid teens

SCYLLA, pronounced "Skilla"

TICEY, a house slave

DIANA, a young girl about 12 years old

SLAVE WOMAN/NARRATOR

### Male slaves:

HECTOR, an African

ALEXANDER

SCIPIO, pronounced "Sippio"

AUGUSTUS NEWCASTLE, a mulatto

### The whites:

AMALIA JENNINGS LAFARGE

LOUIS LAFARGE, Amalia's husband

DOCTOR, in his fifties

JONES, the overseer, in his thirties

### The black conspirators:

LEADER

BENJAMIN SKEENE

HENRY BLAKE

### Other slaves and conspirators

## PROLOGUE

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*Lights rise on the big house, revealing the porch, AMALIA's bedroom, LOUIS' study and the hallway.*

*HECTOR, a slave in his early twenties, is standing on the porch, looking up at a second-story window. PHEBE, a slave girl in her early teens, runs onstage; she is coming from the basement kitchen. Skinny and electric, she is chuckling to herself.*

PHEBE                      What some people won't do  
for attention! Shore,  
he's alright-looking—  
but that ain't qualification enough  
for the big white bed  
in the big white house!

*Laughs at her own wit; then, skipping in a circle,  
sings.*

Stepped on a pin, the pin bent,  
and that's the way the story went!

PSYCHE                      (*Offstage.*)

Phebe! Phebe! You up there?

PHEBE                      Here I am, Psyche!

*PSYCHE enters. She is petite, shy; though not  
much older than PHEBE, she treats her like a  
little sister.*

PSYCHE                      You shouldn't go running off  
by yourself, chile.

PHEBE Look: Hector on the porch.  
*She giggles and points to HECTOR.*

PSYCHE Leave him be, poor soul.

PHEBE Aw, Psyche! Anybody crazy enough to be standing there, thinking he—

PSYCHE Shush now, chile!

PHEBE *PHEBE shrugs, hums and skips again. The other SLAVES straggle in, tired from the day's work, whispering among themselves, a suppressed excitement in their manner.*

PHEBE What took you all so long?  
Slower than a pack of lame turtles.

ALEXANDER (*A dignified man in his forties.*)  
We all ain't quite  
so spry as you, gal.

PHEBE Shh!  
*Everyone freezes.*  
I thought I heard something.

PSYCHE Aw, girl—

SCYLLA (*A tall dark woman in her twenties.*)  
Must be a hard birthin'.

PSYCHE I sure hope she makes it. Her mama—

SCYLLA Her mama was the weakest excuse for a woman ever dropped on this earth. But this one—  
*With a significant look to the window.*  
this one got her daddy in her.

ALEXANDER Nothing but trouble, I tell you.  
Nothing but trouble.

*Lights up on AMALIA's bedroom. AMALIA JENNINGS LAFARGE lies in a canopy bed, a thickly swaddled babe in her arms. She is an attractive white woman, close to 20 years old, who exhibits more intelligence and backbone than is generally credited to a Southern belle. The DOCTOR, an older whiskered gentleman, is pacing the floor. AMALIA, though exhausted, appears amused.*

AMALIA Well, Doctor, isn't he beautiful?

DOCTOR This is serious, Amalia!  
If the niggers get wind of this—  
*AMALIA begins humming a lullaby to the baby.*

AMALIA Don't get melodramatic, Doctor;  
you'll frighten my son. See?  
*Baby raises a cry; AMALIA continues to hum while the DOCTOR keeps pacing. Among the SLAVES, SCYLLA stands up, clutching her stomach.*

SCYLLA Oh! Oh!

OTHERS What is it, Scylla? What is it?

SCYLLA It's out in the world.

*The SLAVES look at her in fear.*

ALEXANDER

Lord have mercy.

*The SLAVES gather around SCYLLA as she tries to straighten up but cannot. HECTOR's gaze is still fixed on the window. AMALIA's husband rushes into the bedroom. LOUISLAFARGE is a handsome man in his twenties. The DOCTOR holds him back.*

LOUIS

Doctor—

DOCTOR

Everything's fine. Just go on back outside.

LOUIS

Can't a man see his own child?

*Tears himself free and rushes over to the bed.*

AMALIA

What, Louis—struck dumb?

LOUIS

My God!

AMALIA

Isn't he a fine strapping boy?

DOCTOR

This is unnatural.

LOUIS

Who did this to you?  
I'll have him whipped to a pulp—

AMALIA

*(Hissing.)*

So it's alright for you  
to stroll out by the cabins  
any fine night you please? Ha—  
the Big White Hunter with his scrawny whip!

LOUIS

That tears it!

DOCTOR

Quiet! They might hear.

LOUIS

I'll kill her!

*LOUIS lunges at AMALIA; the DOCTOR restrains him.*

DOCTOR

Hold it, sir! Calm yourself!

AMALIA

*(To the DOCTOR.)*

Daddy tried to keep me from  
marrying him—but I was in love  
with riding boots and the smell  
of shaving cream and bourbon.  
I was in love with a cavalryman  
and nothing could stop me,  
not even Daddy!

*To LOUIS, who is being forced into an armchair  
by the DOCTOR.*

But not even Daddy  
suspected where you would seek  
your satisfaction.  
It was your right  
to pull on those riding boots  
and stalk little slave girls.  
God knows what you do to them  
in the name of ownership.

*Depleted from the bravado she has mustered,  
AMALIA bends over the baby so they won't see  
her exhaustion. LOUIS, still sitting in the arm-  
chair, grabs the DOCTOR by the shirt and pulls  
him down to his level.*

LOUIS                   Get rid of it! Destroy the bastard!

DOCTOR                My charge is to preserve life,  
Mr LaFarge, not to destroy it.

LOUIS                   What's the matter? Aren't you a man?

DOCTOR                *(Scatbingly; a fierce whisper.)*  
  
My manhood isn't the question here.  
Do you want your business  
smeared across the whole county?  
Think for a minute: What have we got  
here? A fresh slave. New property.  
And you're in need of a little spare change,  
aren't you? I understand the cards  
haven't been much in your favor lately.

LOUIS                   What are you trying to say, Doctor?

AMALIA                Stop your whispering, gentlemen.  
No one's going to touch this baby!

LOUIS                   You can be sure I'll never  
touch you again!

AMALIA                That's one blessing.

DOCTOR                Is this baby worth destroying your life?  
  
*Pulling LOUIS aside.*  
  
Give me a minute alone with her.  
I'll make her see reason. Go on, now.  
  
*He shoves the reluctant LOUIS out of the door, then  
moves quickly to the window to peek out on the  
slaves below. Among the SLAVES, excitement  
reigns as SCYLLA hobbles over to HECTOR,  
whose eyes are still fixed on the bedroom window.*

PHEBE                   *(To PSYCHE.)*  
  
Scylla gonna be alright?

PSYCHE                *(Sees the curtains move.)*  
  
Hush chile!  
  
*Pointing to the window.*  
  
Something's stirring.  
  
*The SLAVES look up to the window and freeze. The DOC  
TOR returns to AMALIA, who is singing to the baby.*

DOCTOR                You can cease your motherly blandishments,  
Amalia. He's gone.

AMALIA                I knew you were good for something besides  
tonics and botched surgeries, Doctor!

DOCTOR                Oh, you're mighty clever, Miss Jennings—  
no wonder your marriage is a disappointment.  
Hell, your daddy saw it coming;  
he worried about you. How many times  
did he have to haul you back from the fields,  
kicking and scratching like a she-cat?

AMALIA                And just who was I supposed to  
play with—the pigs and the chickens?  
Daddy could run a plantation  
but he didn't know the first thing  
about raising a daughter. All morning  
he'd teach me to calculate inventory,  
but he expected his slippers darned come evening!  
And when I refused, off I went—  
to finishing school and the Charleston society ball  
  
*Lights up on LOUIS, sitting on the bed in his room, be-  
in hands.*

LOUIS

Spare change. Spare change!  
How they all smirk! I know what they're thinking.  
"Louis sure slipped into a silk-lined purse!"

*Takes a swig from a flask in his jacket.*

Damn his blasted Hippocratic oath!

*Paces, agitated; then stops, an idea dawning.*

That's it! Of course.  
Doctor, I'll save you the trouble.

*He rummages in drawers; lights up on AMALIA's room.*

AMALIA

When I came home from Charleston  
with my brand new dashing husband,  
Daddy had the slaves line the path  
from the gate to the front porch;  
and as we walked through the ranks  
each one stepped up with  
the nose-gays they had picked—  
awkward bunches of wildflowers.  
I was laughing, gathering up bouquets  
and tossing them to Louis.

We were almost to the porch  
when suddenly there appeared this...  
this rose. One red rose,  
thrust right into the path so we had to stop.  
I recognised him right away.  
We hadn't seen each other  
since Daddy sent him to the fields.  
We used to sneak out to Mama's  
old cutting garden; it was overgrown  
and the roses had run particularly wild!

*Softly, remembering.*

One day he covered me in rose petals,  
then blew them off, one by one.  
He'd never seen anything like them  
back in Africa.

*In wonder.*

And there he stood, all grown up,  
with one red rose held out  
like it was a piece of him  
growing straight from his fist.  
"What a lovely tribute to the bride!" I said—

*Shaking off the spell of the memory.*

then passed it to Louis to tuck in with the rest.

DOCTOR

I suppose there's no sense in talking about  
your duty to the institution of marriage.

AMALIA

I made one mistake—Louis.  
I don't have to go on living it.

DOCTOR

Oh, there's where you're wrong.  
Amalia Jennings. Some mistakes  
don't right themselves that easy.  
Some mistakes you live with until you die.

*Lights up on LOUIS in his bedroom as he emerges  
from the back of the wardrobe with a pair of spurs,  
still trailing red ribbons.*

LOUIS

*(Sneering.)*

There they are!  
Amalia's Christmas present—

fancy new riding spurs!  
Won't they make a special  
"christening" present  
for the little bitty baby  
to tuck in with its blanket!

*LOUIS chuckles as he pockets the spurs and leaves  
the room. Lights up on SLAVES. HECTOR  
stretches his hand toward the window and speaks,  
as if trying to remember.*

HECTOR

Eshu Elewa...

PHEBE

What's he saying?

PSYCHE

Something surely gone wrong.

*Lights up on AMALIA and DOCTOR.*

DOCTOR

How long do you think it will take  
before your slaves begin to speak back?  
To botch the work and fall ill  
with mysterious ailments? Then  
who will help you—Louis?  
An overseer who knows his mistress  
is tainted with slave funk? In a bad year,  
how much will you have to beg  
to get a tab at the store?  
Who will you invite to tea, Amalia—  
your dashing blackamoor?

AMALIA

What a convenient morality, Doctor.

DOCTOR

I'm just trying to save  
your daddy's good name.  
As for your precious little bundle—

how long do you think he'll last  
with Louis feeling as he does?  
How long before your child  
accidentally drowns  
or stumbles under a horse's hooves?  
You can't keep him, Amalia;  
if you truly love him,  
you cannot keep him.

*AMALIA buries her face in the pillow and begins  
to weep.*

DOCTOR

I know a family who handles  
these... delicate matters.  
They'll raise him and arrange for sale  
when it's time.

*AMALIA clutches the baby to her.*

He'll be treated well. I'll make sure of that.

*Silence. AMALIA stares at the baby.*

AMALIA

Give me a little more time!

DOCTOR

You had nine months.

*The baby makes a noise; she lays him on her breast.*

AMALIA

There's no way back, is there?

*HECTOR falls to his knee and cries out;  
SCYLLA tries to restrain him.*

HECTOR

Eshu Elewa ogo gbogbo!



SCYLLA No, Hector.

ALEXANDER Lord help him.

PSYCHE Lord help us all.

*Lights up on AMALIA's bedroom; there's a knock at the door.*

DOCTOR There he is. Now:  
I'll take the baby to Charleston tonight.  
You must play the wronged wife.  
No matter the truth—whatever the truth—  
this affair was an act of revenge,  
your retaliation to Louis' philandering.  
But you won't keep the child  
to taunt him, oh, no! Instead,  
you'll forgive and forget...and show him  
how to turn a profit besides.

*AMALIA stares at the DOCTOR with disgust.  
The DOCTOR opens the door.*

Come in, sir.

*LOUIS enters, glaring.*

This is a damned tricky situation,  
but I think I've sorted it out.

*Warming up to his role as the arbiter of responsibility and morality; pacing self-importantly.*

Out of rage and sorrow over  
your philandering behaviour, Louis,  
Amalia has responded in kind.  
An extreme vindication, true,  
and utterly reprehensible—unless  
we remember what prompted it

in the first place. Are we agreed?

*Both LOUIS and AMALIA are silent.*

As for the bastard child...

*Pauses for effect.*

Amalia has agreed to let it go.  
I have a friend in Charleston  
who likes raising slaves  
from the ground up. He's familiar  
with the story of the distraught wife  
confronted with the evidence  
of a husband's wandering lust.

LOUIS No! I won't take the blame!

DOCTOR No one need know it's come  
from the Jennings Plantation.

LOUIS What about the niggers? They're out  
on the lawn, waiting for news.

DOCTOR We'll say the poor soul expired  
directly after birth, took one breath  
and died. I've taken the body away.

LOUIS No funeral? Niggers love funerals.

DOCTOR No—Amalia didn't want a funeral.  
They'll believe it. They have no choice.

*To AMALIA.*

You better make sure the father  
keeps his mouth shut.

AMALIA *(Haunted.)*

Who would believe him?

LOUIS I must say, your ingenuity is impressive, Doctor. It's what I'd call a "master" plan.

*Pointing to the sideboard where AMALIA keeps an oblong wicker sewing basket, trimmed with red velvet rosettes and lined in blue silk.*

That basket—surely you'd donate your sewing basket to the cause, Amalia? It would fit so nicely behind the good doctor's saddle.

DOCTOR *(Examines the basket.)*

Yes, that will do.

*LOUIS places the basket next to the bed.*

AMALIA Go tell them.  
Spread the sad tidings.

*She says this with difficulty. DOCTOR and LOUIS exit as AMALIA carefully unwraps the baby and inspects him, top to toe. Lights up on the DOCTOR and LOUIS in the hall; TICEY, a house slave in her forties, approaches them.*

TICEY How's Miss Jennings, suh?  
The baby sure sounds like a big one!

DOCTOR *(Harshly.)*

The baby's dead.

TICEY Dead? But I heard it cry!

DOCTOR He cried out once. Poor little thing had no more breath left.

TICEY Now, if that ain't the strangest thing...

LOUIS *(Sharply.)*

What's so strange about it?  
The baby just up and died.  
Happens all the time.

DOCTOR Look at you, standing here arguing like a fool hen, while your mistress is in there crying her eyes out!

*Shaking his head.*

Now go on out to those niggers—I know you got them waiting by the porch. Tell them there'll be no wailing and moaning, no singing or mighty sorry, Ma'am. Miss Jennings wants no funeral. Miss Jennings wants to forget. Go on now, scat!

TICEY Yassuh. Sorry suh.

*TICEY exits. During the following scene she approaches PSYCHE, takes her aside, whispering. At PSYCHE's shocked reaction, the SLAVES, except for HECTOR and SCYLLA, crowd around. TICEY retreats back into the house while the other SLAVES lower their heads, softly humming in a frozen tableau. HECTOR falls to his knees; SCYLLA stands over him, severely bent.*

*In the bedroom, AMALIA embraces the baby one last time.*

AMALIA This basket will be your cradle now.  
Blue silk for my prince, and a canopy of roses!  
Don't be afraid: it's warm inside.

AMALIA (con't.) *Places first a small blanket, then the baby inside, takes one last look, nearly breaking down.*

I dreamed you before you came;  
now I must remember you before you go.

*Collects herself as she wraps the blanket around the baby and closes the lid.*

DOCTOR Let's get this over with.

LOUIS Go ahead. Doctor, I—I'll wait here.

*The DOCTOR enters the bedroom.*

DOCTOR Ready?

*AMALIA averts her head, thrusts the basket at him.*

I wasn't sure you had it in you,  
but I'll say one thing, Amalia Jennings—  
you are your father's daughter.

*DOCTOR exits with the basket. AMALIA buries her face in the pillows.*

DOCTOR I best be on my way.

LOUIS You have a hard ride ahead of you, Doctor.  
Would you care for a bit of bourbon  
to warm your way?

DOCTOR *(Slightly surprised.)*

Why yes, that would do nicely.  
Just put it with my things.

*As the DOCTOR turns to get his coat and hat, LOUIS slips the spurs in the sewing basket, under the blanket, then puts the flask into the DOCTOR's bag.*

LOUIS There, you're all set—  
best medicine made by man!

DOCTOR It's over, Louis. Nothing left but to forget.

LOUIS Have a pleasant journey, Doctor.

DOCTOR I will try.

*Lights go out as the DOCTOR exits. The SLAVE WOMAN/NARRATOR steps forward. During the NARRATOR's speech, the SLAVES go about their tasks, humming as the lights slowly warm to sunrise and the stage begins to transmogrify, simulating the passing of 20 years: a tree growing, the big house being enlarged, etc.*

NARRATOR Take a little seed,  
put it in the ground;  
the seed takes root,  
sends its tendrils down

till the sapling shoots  
its branches high—  
roots piercing ground,  
limbs touching sky.

Now the mighty tree  
is twenty years tall;  
seed become king,  
and the king takes all.

## ACT ONE

---

### Scene I

*The cotton fields. DIANA, a slave girl, collapses. SCIPIO, a young slave working nearby, hesitates.*

SCIPIO                    Move it gal, or  
   you'll feel it later!

PHEBE                    *(Helping her up.)*

Lift in your knees, Diana;  
try not to think about your blood.  
Tomorrow's Sunday—  
tomorrow you can rest.

DIANA                    *(Derisively.)*

Blessed be the Sabbath!

PHEBE                    The child's too young to tote that sack.  
She should be helping in the kitchen,  
like we was raised.

ALEXANDER                You was raised with Massa Jennings,  
Phebe—and he been gone these twenty-some years.  
You know his daughter got other ideas.

PHEBE                    She grow eviller year for year.

ALEXANDER                Ain't right, a woman  
running a plantation like that.

SCIPPIO            Woman? She's more man than woman.

PHEBE             And more devil than man.

ALEXANDER        Ever since she lost that child.

PHEBE             Oh, Alexander!

ALEXANDER        White folks feel a loss  
as much as we do—  
it's just that they ain't  
used to losing. I tell you,  
Miss Amalia went crazy in the head  
the day she lost that baby boy.

SCYLLA            That's not the way Ticey told it.

*SCYLLA is severely bent over and walks with a  
limp. Her gaze is fearful.*

ALEXANDER        *(To DIANA.)*

                      Nowadays old Ticey don't tell us  
field niggers nothing. But that night  
she come from the Big House  
and say to Psyche...

PHEBE             That's enough, Alexander.

DIANA             Phebe, what was my mama like?

PHEBE             Chile, you heard that story  
a hundred times. Ain't no different now,  
just 'cause you turned to a woman yourself.

DIANA             Please, Phebe.

PHEBE             *(Tenderly, as she resumes picking cotton.)*

                      Psyche was the sister I never had.  
Why, she pulled me offa trouble  
so many times, I thought her hand  
had growed to my shoulder!

DIANA             *(Begins to cry.)*

                      I wish I'd a known her.

PHEBE             Childbirth can kill the strongest woman.

ALEXANDER        Or kill the child.

SCYLLA            You still believe the white folks?  
That baby weren't born dead.  
Ticey heard it cry. I seen the doctor  
carry it off in a basket, but  
it weren't dead. I felt it kick.

DIANA             *(Wiping her tears.)*

                      The baby kicked?

ALEXANDER        Scylla got her powers that night.

SCYLLA            *(Staring at DIANA, who shrinks back.)*

                      The child was born alive!  
I know. I felt it.

PHEBE             Scylla...

SCYLLA            The veil was snatched from my eyes—  
and over the hill I saw

SCYLLA (con't.) bad times a-coming. Bad times coming over the hill on mighty horses, horses snorting as they galloped through slave cabin and pillared mansion, horses whinnying as they trampled everything in their path. Like a thin black net the curse settled over the land.

DIANA What curse?

PHEBE Don't pay her no mind.

SCYLLA The curse touched four people.

DIANA *(Getting scared.)*  
Who were they?  
Who were the four people?

SLAVES Black woman, black man,  
white woman, white man.

SCYLLA When the curse came I stood up to meet it, and it knocked me to the ground.

SLAVES Black woman.

SCYLLA My womb dried up,  
but the power churned in me.

PHEBE We best get back to pickin'.  
No tellin' where Jones got off to—

SCIPPIO Same place he always "gets off to"  
—that clump of timothy at the spring  
where he's tucked his whiskey!

*SCYLLA appears to be in a trance; SLAVES accompany her in a syncopated whisper.*

SCYLLA Hector, son of Africa—  
stolen from his father's hut,  
sold on the auction block!

SLAVES Black man.

SCYLLA Hector was a slave in the fields until Miss Amalia took him up to the house. He followed her like her own right shoe. When she felt faint, he brought her iced lemon water; when she started to show, he helped her up the stairs; when the baby kicked, he soothed her. But when her time came he had to stand out by the porch like the rest of us. And when Ticey brought the news Hector fell to his knees and ate dirt like a worm. Now he lives alone and catches snakes in the swamp.

SLAVES Black woman, black man—  
both were twisted  
when the curse came over the hill.

SCYLLA While the slave turned to grief,  
the master turned to business.  
Miss Amalia hiked up her skirts  
and pulled on man's boots.

SLAVES            White woman.

SCYLLA            And Massa Louis... Massa Louis  
took off his riding breeches—

SLAVES            White man.

SCYLLA            — and shut himself upstairs.  
Some nights you can see him out  
on the balcony, staring at the sky:  
he has machines to measure the stars.

SLAVES            Black woman, black man;  
white woman, white man!

SCYLLA            Four people touched by the curse:  
but the curse is not complete.

DIANA            I'm scared.

PHEBE            *(In spite of herself.)*  
  
Did you have to tell her so much,  
Scylla? She's just a child.

SCYLLA            She's old enough to know,  
and you're old enough to know better.

PHEBE            I was there, too. I didn't see  
no horses comin' over the hill.  
You just crumpled up like a leaf.

*AMALIA enters unseen in riding clothes, whip  
in hand.*

SCYLLA            I can strike you down like lightning,  
Phebe. I can send demons mightier—

AMALIA            What's this?

PHEBE            How—how de do, Miss Amalia!  
We was just trying to figure out  
what to do with Diana here.

AMALIA            She seems healthy enough to me—  
good stock, young and fresh.

PHEBE            *(Motioning for DIANA to look sicker.)*  
  
She fell out something awful.  
It don't look like she feel too good—

AMALIA            You aren't here to play doctor, Phebe.  
Where is that Jones? Jones!

*JONES is nowhere to be seen. Impatient,  
AMALIA prods DIANA with the whip stock.*

                      Lazy pack! I swear I've seen cows  
smarter than you! Jones!

JONES            *(Rushes in, wiping his mouth with his sleeve.)*  
  
Yes, Miss Jennings?

AMALIA            Get these niggers in line!  
Drink on your own time.

JONES            Yes'm.

AMALIA            I'll see you this evening  
up at the house.

JONES            Yes, Ma'am. I'll be there, Ma'am!

*She strides off; JONES mops his brow with a  
huge handkerchief.*

JONES (con't.)

Goddamn niggers, gotta watch you every second! Get that gal back on her feet!

*Cracking his whip.*

Keep your mouths shut and your hands picking or you'll feel my lash, sick or not!

*Watches them resume work; then exits.*

SCYLLA

I believe it's about time for you to pay me a little visit, Phebe. Tomorrow evening—after the moon's set.

PHEBE

Aw, Scylla, I didn't mean nothing—

SCYLLA

It'll be pitch dark. Take care you don't trip on the way.

*Blackout.*

## Scene 2

*The big house, the parlor and LOUIS' study.*

*LOUIS is visible at the window of his study, peering through a telescope at the stars; he occasionally takes notes or sips his brandy.*

*AMALIA sits at the desk in the parlor; JONES stands in front of her.*

JONES

Sorry about this afternoon, Ma'am. That little gal seemed real sick, you know.

AMALIA

Mr. Jones, I am aware you come fresh from the well-groomed slave holdings of Dawson's Plantation. And I was not so naïve, upon hiring you, to believe Dawson's high-minded economic philosophy had not rubbed off on you. But that's not what I called you for. I bought a new buck yesterday: here are his papers.

JONES

*(Glancing through the documents.)*

Miss Jennings! You can't be serious!

AMALIA

Something wrong, Jones?

JONES

Augustus Newcastle? That slave's the most talked-about nigger along the Southern seaboard!

AMALIA

Good! We'll be famous.



JONES  
Story goes he belonged to a British sea captain  
who treated him like his own son,  
and promised him his freedom when he died.  
But the brother who executed the estate  
sold the boy to pay off the debts.  
After that, the nigger went wild.  
They lost count of how many times he ran off,  
how many times they caught him—

*Frantically leafs through the papers.*

here it is: "Twenty-two  
acts of aggression and rebellion."  
Twenty-two separate acts!

AMALIA  
That's why I got him so cheaply.

JONES  
But Miss Jennings! They say  
his back's so laced with scars  
it's as rutted as a country road.  
Rumor has it he can read and write.  
If you don't mind my saying so,  
Ma'am, an educated nigger  
brings nothing but trouble.  
Sure as I'm standing here,  
he'll stir up the others.

AMALIA  
I wonder just how smart he is.

JONES  
It's a miracle no one ever killed him.

AMALIA  
*(Sharply.)*

I own Augustus Newcastle,  
and I'll make him serve up.  
Any objections?

JONES  
No, Ma'am. Sorry, Ma'am.

AMALIA  
They're bringing him over tonight;  
put him in the barn and chain him down.  
You can show him around tomorrow.  
If he's as smart as they say,  
he could help you oversee the ginning.  
You may go.

*This last is a jab at JONES, who looks at her  
for a moment, then turns on his heel and exits.*

*Blackout.*

### Scene 3

*In the fields.*

*Sunday. The slaves have been "let out in the fields" to occupy themselves as they please. They have settled into two groups—some joke, tell stories, and dance, while others are quieter, chanting and praying. As the lights come up, the groups are rivaling each other in melody, the quieter ones humming in a minor key while the others counterpoint in a jauntier tune.*

SCIPIO           Have you seen the new man?  
                      Mister Jones been showing him around.

ALEXANDER       I saw 'em down  
                      by the gin house.  
                      That's one wild nigger.

PHEBE            He spent last night  
                      chained in the barn.  
                      Chained!

SCIPIO            Must be mighty tough.  
                      Heard tell he's sailed the seas!

DIANA            Did he sail the seas to Canada?

*Shocked silence; everybody looks at her.*

ALEXANDER       Gal, don't let nobody  
                      hear you say that word;  
                      Miss Amalia'll have your head on a stick.  
                      As far as you concerned  
                      there's nothing in this world  
                      but South Carolina and this here plantation.

*AUGUSTUS enters in leg chains, followed by a watchful JONES. AUGUSTUS is a tall, handsome young man with caramel-toned skin and piercing eyes. His righteous anger is thinly concealed behind his slave mannerisms. JONES bluffs his way with a squeaky bravado.*

JONES            Here's the new buck you all  
                      been whispering about!

*Removes the leg chains; then, to AUGUSTUS.*

You're lucky it's Sunday. Tomorrow  
you'll get a taste of how things run  
around here. First horn at day-clean!

*JONES exits. There is a moment's awkward silence as AUGUSTUS rubs his ankles where the chains have chafed. He looks up, calmly surveying the two groups.*

SCIPIO            Welcome, stranger, welcome.  
                      They call me Scipio.  
                      What do you go by?

AUGUSTUS        Augustus.

SCIPIO            *(Stretching the name out, trying to make it fit his tongue.)*

Au-gus-tus?  
Ain't never heard that one before.  
What kind of name is that?

AUGUSTUS        The name of a king.

*Uneasy silence.*

PHEBE Don't pay Scipio no mind.  
He's always joking.  
I'm Phebe. And this is Alexander.

*ALEXANDER nods, warily.*

Alexander been here longer than anyone, I reckon.

ALEXANDER How do.

*SCYLLA enters with a water gourd and watches the introductions with a hard eye. PHEBE rushes to introduce them.*

PHEBE And this here's Scylla. Scylla,  
he's the new one, go by the name of—

AUGUSTUS Augustus Newcastle.

SCYLLA Newcastle. Is that your captain's name?

AUGUSTUS Scylla was the rock,  
Charybdis the whirlpool,  
that pulled the sailors down.

*General astonishment.*

PHEBE Now this little girl—

*Pushes DIANA over to AUGUSTUS.*

was born and raised  
right here on this plantation.

AUGUSTUS What's your name, child?

DIANA *(Shyly.)*  
Diana.

AUGUSTUS My, my. The sun and the moon  
all in one morning!

*The SLAVES look bewildered. He laughs softly.*

Don't mind me. I'm just glad to meet you all.

*Some SLAVES take up their chant again. AUGUSTUS walks upstage and stands looking into the distance. Although they are curious, the other SLAVES let him be. Only DIANA stares after him.*

PHEBE Come on, Scipio, give us a story.

SCIPIO You always wanting a story!  
How many stories you think I got?

PHEBE I think you grow them in your sleep.

SCIPIO Well, I ain't got a story this time.

PHEBE Aw, Scipio! You dog!

SCIPIO But I got a song:

*Accompanies himself on a handmade string instrument while his friends clap, pat their bodies, etc.*

The possum said, don't hurt me,  
I'm harmless if you please!  
The nigger said, I'm harmless, too,  
And got down on his knees.

SCIPIO (con't.)

The possum cocked his little head  
And contemplated long;  
You're running just like me, he said  
And joined into the song.

Old Mr. Coon just happened by  
Where the two sang merrily;  
I don't trust you, cried Mr. Coon,  
Why, you just as black as me!

You're just as black as me, Coon said,  
but your tail ain't quite so long!  
The Mr Coon ran in the woods  
And wouldn't join their song.

*Laughter. DIANA walks over to AUGUSTUS.*

DIANA

What you looking at?

AUGUSTUS

Just looking.

DIANA

Ain't nothing out there but the swamp.

AUGUSTUS

Do you know what's beyond that swamp?

DIANA

What?

AUGUSTUS

The world.

PHEBE

*(To SCIPIO.)*

Is that all?

SCIPIO

No, there's more:

*Singing.*

The nigger wrapped his fingers  
Around the possum's throat.  
The possum didn't have the time  
To sing another note.

That night the nigger had himself  
A pot of possum stew.  
That harmless meat is just the thing  
To warm your innards through!

DIANA

What did you mean by  
the sun and the moon?

AUGUSTUS

Beg pardon?

DIANA

The sun and the moon—you asked  
my name and then you said you had  
the sun and the moon all in one day.

AUGUSTUS

You're a curious one, aren't you?

DIANA

Uh-huh.

AUGUSTUS

Well—a long time ago there were  
gods to look after the earth and the sky.  
Phoebus was the god of the sun;  
your friend's name is Phebe.  
And your name stood for the moon.  
People wrote poems to Diana,  
goddess of the moon.

DIANA

What's poems?

AUGUSTUS

A poem is...

*Looking over at SCIPIO.*

AUGUSTUS (con't.) ...a song without music.  
*Looks off towards the swamp.*  
Who's that old man?

DIANA Phebe, Hector's coming up from the swamp!

PHEBE Don't fret, chile.  
Hector talk kind of crazy sometimes,  
but he don't hurt nobody.

AUGUSTUS His name is Hector?

PHEBE Yeah. Massa Jennings give it to him  
straight off the boat. He used to talk  
African—but he forgot most of it.

AUGUSTUS What does he do in the swamp?

PHEBE *(Catching a warning look from SCYLLA.)*  
He lives there.

AUGUSTUS Hector, mighty warrior,  
abandoned by the gods.

DIANA You know a lot of things.

AUGUSTUS Nothing you couldn't learn  
if you had the chance.

*Enter HECTOR, now middle-aged, dressed in  
muddy rags. He carries a dead snake in a net and  
looks around with wild, piercing eyes, then wanders  
up to DIANA.*

HECTOR *(Tenderly.)*  
Eshu Elewa ogo gbogbo!  
*DIANA shrinks back: HECTOR taps AUGUSTUS  
on the shoulder, holding out the net.*  
I catch snakes: big ones, little ones.  
I'm going to catch all the snakes in the swamp.

AUGUSTUS I don't know much about snakes,  
my friend.

HECTOR I'm gonna catch all the snakes in the swamp!  
They grow and grow, so many of them.  
But I'll kill them! I'll kill them all!

SCYLLA Shh, Hector!  
Don't let the snakes hear!  
*She puts her arm around HECTOR and pats him gen-  
tly on the back, all the while staring at AUGUSTUS,  
as the lights dim and go out.*

## Scene 4

*SCYLLA's cabin and the area outside of the slave cabins.*

*Night. SCYLLA sits in her cabin behind a crude table strewn with an assortment of bones, twisted roots, beads, and dried corncobs. Three candles light up her face from below. AUGUSTUS, in ankle chains, squats outside the slave cabins. In the distance can be heard the rhythmic ecstasy of the Sunday night "shout". PHEBE at the door with a small cloth bundle. She looks behind her.*

SCYLLA            Come in, child. Sit.

*PHEBE sits.*

I know your heart, Phebe.  
You have made the spirits angry!

PHEBE            I never meant no harm—

SCYLLA            Shh!

*Picks out a forked branch and arranges the candles in a half-circle around the branch.*

The body moves through the world.

*Places a round white stone in the fork of the branch.*

The mind rests in the body.

*Sprinkles green powder from a vial onto branch and stone.*

The soul is bright  
as a jewel, lighter than air.

*Blows the powder away; the candles flare, PHEBE coughs.*

There is a curse on the land.  
The net draws closer.  
What have you brought?

PHEBE

Here!

*Shoves her bundle across the table. SCYLLA pulls out a pink ribbon and drapes it over the branch.*

SCYLLA

"Eshu Elewa ogo gbogbo...

*Sprinkling powder on the first candle.*

...oki kosi eyo!"

*The candle flares and goes out.*

You have tried to make the earth  
give up her dead.

PHEBE

Oh!

SCYLLA

*(Pulling out a shell necklace, draping it over the branch.)*

"Kosi eyo,  
kosi iku...

*Sprinkling powder on the second candle.*

...kosi ano!"

*The second candle goes out.*

PHEBE Have mercy...

SCYLLA You have tried to snatch words  
back from the air. The wind is angry.  
It will take more than these—

*Indicating PHEBE's offerings.*

to satisfy him.

PHEBE *(Pulls a white handkerchief out of her pocket.)*

Here's...a hankie from my mama.  
There's a little lace on it—see?

*SCYLLA snatches the handkerchief, places it on  
the branch and repeats the procedure with pow-  
der and incantation.*

SCYLLA “Ni oru ko mi gbogbo  
omonile fu kuikuo  
modupue—  
baba mi Elewa!”

*The third candle flickers but stays lit.*

Ah!

PHEBE What is it?

SCYLLA Are you prepared to hear  
what the spirits have to say?

PHEBE *(Gathering courage.)*

If there's something I need to know,  
I want to know it.

SCYLLA

I give you two warnings.  
One: guard your footsteps;  
they are your mark on the earth.  
If a sharp stone or piece of glass  
falls into the path you have walked,  
you will go lame.  
Two: guard your breath;  
do not throw with words.  
Whenever the wind blows,  
if your mouth is open,  
your soul could be snatched away.  
That is all.

PHEBE Scylla...

SCYLLA Go now!

*SCYLLA mutters over the candles as PHEBE hur-  
ries off, shuffling her feet to blur her footprints as she  
flees. On the way she passes AUGUSTUS. In the dis-  
tance the SLAVES can be heard humming during the  
“shout”.*

AUGUSTUS Evening.

PHEBE *(Caught in the act of obliterating her steps; embar-  
rassed.)*

Evening.

AUGUSTUS Back from the shout?

PHEBE *(Trying not to speak.)*

Uh-uh.

AUGUSTUS What's your hurry? Why don't  
you keep me company for a spell?  
Unless you're scared of me, that is.

PHEBE Scared of you? Why should I be scared of you?

AUGUSTUS I can't think of a reason in the world. Come on, rest yourself.

*PHEBE sits down beside him carefully.*

AUGUSTUS Sure is a fine night.

*PHEBE nods.*

You're trembling.

PHEBE I am?

*Claps her hand over her mouth.*

AUGUSTUS And I don't believe it's entirely my doing.

*He says this in a mildly flirtatious manner, then looks off, unaware of the effect this has on PHEBE, who has stopped thinking about SCYLLA and is now acutely aware of AUGUSTUS as a man. AUGUSTUS continues speaking, preoccupied once again with his hatred.*

Fear! Fear eats out the heart.  
It'll cause kings and field niggers alike to crawl in their own piss. Listen to them sing!  
What kind of god preaches such misery?

*Gesturing in the direction of the "shout".*

White-fearing niggers.  
Death-fearing slaves.

PHEBE Ain't you ever scared?

AUGUSTUS Of what? White folks? They're more afraid of me. Pain? Every whipping's got to come to an end.

PHEBE I heard you've been whipped so many times, they lost count.

AUGUSTUS They think they can beat me to my senses. Then they look into my eyes and see I'm not afraid.

PHEBE It'd be something, not to be afraid.

AUGUSTUS You have to have a purpose. Something bigger than anything they can do to you.

PHEBE *(Suppressing a shudder.)*

And ain't nobody ever tried to kill you?

AUGUSTUS Oh, yes. First time, I was hardly alive. They ripped me from my mother the night I was born and threw me out like trash. I didn't walk until I was three.

PHEBE Lord have mercy.

AUGUSTUS Mercy had nothing to do with it! Missy couldn't stand the sight of me. Just look at me! It's an old story.

You've stopped trembling. Now why don't you tell me what made you quake that way in the first place?



*PHEBE shakes her head.*

Conjuration, I imagine?  
Mumble-jumble from that hateful woman.

PHEBE Her name's Scylla.

AUGUSTUS Women like her, hah!  
They get a chill one morning,  
hear an owl or two, and snap!—  
they've received their "powers"!  
Then they collect a few old bones,  
dry some herbs, and they're in business.

PHEBE She told me to watch my footsteps—

AUGUSTUS —or you'd fall lame.

PHEBE And to keep my mouth shut  
when the wind blowed—

AUGUSTUS —or else the wind spirit  
would steal your soul.

PHEBE How'd you know?

AUGUSTUS You think she's the only conjure-woman  
in the world? Why, your Scylla's a baby  
compared to the voodoo chiefs in the islands.  
They can kill you with a puff of smoke  
from their pipes—if you believe in them.  
Take me: I've been cursed enough times  
to bring down a whole fleet of ships  
around me—but here I sit, high and dry.  
So I guess they must be saving me  
for something special.

*PHEBE looks at AUGUSTUS in wonder; the  
lights dim as the other SLAVES slowly come on  
stage, singing as they take their places in the fields.  
The song sung during the "shout" has modulated  
into a percussive piece with no words—clapping,  
sighs, whispered exclamations and grunts punctuate  
what becomes a work song.*

SLAVES No way out, gotta keep on—  
No way but to see it through.

NARRATOR Don't sass, don't fight!  
Lay low, grin bright!

NARRATOR/  
SLAVES No way but to see it through.

Scene 5

*The cotton fields. The light brightens: high noon. JONES enters, looks at the sun and cracks his whip as he calls out.*

JONES                      Noon!

*He exits, wiping his brow with a huge handkerchief. The SLAVES groan and sigh as they settle down with their provisions—cornpone and salt pork and gourds of water.*

ALEXANDER            *(Making sure that JONES is out of earshot.)*

I swear on all my years  
there's nothing I hate so much as cotton.  
Picking, toting, weighing, tramping:  
the work keeps coming.

SCIPIO                      No end in sight, and that's the truth!

*Leans back, hands under head.*

Now what I'd fancy is a life at sea.  
Sun and sky and blue water,  
with just a sip of rum  
every once in a while.  
You been to sea, Augustus.  
What's it like?

AUGUSTUS              It ain't the easy life.

SCIPIO                      But what's it like, man?  
The closest I been to the sea  
was when the cotton gin came in

to Charleston port. All those fine  
flapping sails and tall masts,  
cotton bales stacked to heaven.  
Did you visit lots of strange places?

AUGUSTUS              We sailed the West Indies route.  
Stocked up rum, tobacco, beads—

SCYLLA                      *(Scathingly.)*

—and traded them for slaves.  
Did you have to ride cargo?

AUGUSTUS              *(With a sharp look, sarcastically.)*

Cap'n Newcastle was a generous master.

*Resuming his story.*

But those ports! Sand so white,  
from far off it looked like  
spilled cream. Palm trees taller  
than our masts, loaded with coconuts.

DIANA                      What's a coconut?

AUGUSTUS              It's a big brown gourd  
with hair on it like a dog,  
and when you break it open  
sweet milk pours out.

DIANA                      What does it taste like?

AUGUSTUS              It tastes like...  
just coconut. There's nothing like it.

SCYLLA                      Your stories stir up trouble,  
young man.

*PHEBE moves as if to stop him; he motions her back.*

AUGUSTUS

Seems you're the only one  
who's riled up, Scylla.

SCYLLA

You're what we call an uppity nigger.  
And uppity niggers always trip themselves up.

AUGUSTUS

Are you going to put a curse on me, too,  
Scylla? Cross your eyes  
and wave a few roots in the air  
until I fall on my knees?

SCYLLA

No need to curse you;  
you have been cursed already.

AUGUSTUS

You feed on ignorance  
and call it magic. What kind of prophet  
works against her own people?

*The SLAVES murmur. SCYLLA stands up.*

SCYLLA

Oh, you may dance now,  
but you will fall.  
The evil inside you  
will cut you down to your knees,  
and you will crawl—crawl in front of us all!

*Lights dim, then grow mottled and swamp-green as  
all exit.*

## Scene 6

*The swamp. Lights remain mottled and swamp-green. Night sounds filter in  
as HECTOR enters.*

HECTOR

Easy, easy: don't tell the cook  
the meat's gone bad.

*Slashes at the underbrush.*

We got to cut it out.  
Ya! Ya!

*Hacks in rhythm for a moment.*

I can smell it. Pah!

*Sniffs, then peers.*

But there's a rose in the gravy, oh yes—  
a rose shining through the mists, a red smell.  
Red and mean.

But how sweet she smelled!  
Cottons and flowers.  
And lemons that bite back  
when you touch them to the tongue.

Shh! Don't tell the cook.  
Black folks fiddle, the white folks stare.

*There is a bird call; HECTOR conceals himself.  
AUGUSTUS enters; he appears to be following the  
sound. He gives out a matching call, then bursts into  
a clearing in the swamp where a group of black men  
sit in a circle around a small fire, chanting softly. The  
LEADER of the group rises.*

LEADER            There you are!  
                      We've called two nights.

AUGUSTUS        Who are you?

LEADER            Patience, Augustus Newcastle.  
                      Oh yes, we know all about you.

AUGUSTUS        What do you want?

LEADER            Your courage has been a beacon—

CONSPIRATORS   Amen! Selah!

*The CONSPIRATORS surround the LEADER; they react to his words in a call-and-response fashion; their movements are vaguely ritualistic and creepy, as if they were under a spell; this effect can be enhanced with dance and pantomime. AUGUSTUS stands still as the CONSPIRATORS swarm around him, occasionally trying to pull him among them.*

LEADER            — and we need men willing to fight  
                      for freedom! Tell me, Augustus Newcastle:  
                      are you prepared to sign your name  
                      with the revolutionary forces?

AUGUSTUS        First tell me who you are.

LEADER            So cautious? We expected a bit more daring  
                      from someone of your reputation.

AUGUSTUS        I am many things, but I'm not a fool.

LEADER            *(Laughs.)*

                      Shall we show him, brothers?

CONSPIRATORS   Selah!

LEADER            Each of us has been called forth  
                      as a warrior of righteousness.  
                      Each wandered in darkness  
                      until he found the light of brotherhood!  
                      Take young Benjamin Skeene:

*BENJAMIN squares his shoulders as he steps forward; he is a trim young man who, judging from his clothes, must be either a house slave or a free-man.*

                      As a skilled carpenter, he enjoys  
                      a fair amount of freedom.

BENJAMIN        The boss man's glad  
                      I can make his deliveries.

LEADER            So we've arranged a few  
                      deposits of our own.  
                      Benjamin, can you find a way  
                      to fasten this blade to a pole?

BENJAMIN        Easy.

LEADER            Every man who can wield a stick  
                      shall have a bayonet!

CONSPIRATORS   Selah!

LEADER            A few were more reluctant...  
                      or shall I say cautious?  
                      Henry Blake, for instance:

*HENRY, a dark, middle-aged man, steps forward hesitantly.*

LEADER (con't.) Fear had made him grateful  
for every crumb his master dropped him.

*The two act out the following exchange.*

HENRY I don't want no part of this!

LEADER You followed the sign;  
you have been called!

HENRY Any fool knows a mockingbird  
when he hears one—and that  
weren't no mockingbird!

LEADER *(Threatening.)*

Are you prepared to slay  
our oppressors, male and female,  
when it is deemed time, according  
to the plans of insurrection drawn up  
and approved by members present?

HENRY I'm against the white man  
much as all of you—but murder?  
“Thou shalt not kill,” saith the  
Commandments.

LEADER Who made your master?

HENRY God.

LEADER And who made you?

HENRY God.

LEADER Then aren't you as good as your master  
if God made you both?

HENRY I'm not a vengeful man.

LEADER But our Lord is a vengeful God.  
“Whoever steals a man,” He says,  
“whether he sells him or  
is found in possession of him,  
shall be put to death.”

Who is not with us  
is against us.  
You answered the call.  
If you turn back now..

*HENRY slowly lifts his head, squares his shoulders,  
and remains frozen in the spotlight while the  
LEADER speaks to AUGUSTUS.*

LEADER He was brought to reason.

CONSPIRATORS Selah.

LEADER So the one becomes many  
and the many, one.  
Hence our password:  
“May Fate be with you—

CONSPIRATORS And with us all!”

AUGUSTUS Now I see who you are.

LEADER Augustus Newcastle: are you prepared  
to slay our oppressors,  
male and female,  
when it is deemed time, according  
to the plans of insurrection  
drawn up and approved by members present?

AUGUSTUS I am.

LEADER Enter your name in the Book of Redemption!

*AUGUSTUS signs the book.*

CONSPIRATORS Selah! Selah!

AUGUSTUS Tell me what to do.

LEADER You'll need a second-in-command.  
Report your choice to us;  
we will send out the sign.

*Turning to the group.*

My brothers, it is time to be free!  
Maps are being prepared  
of the city and its surroundings  
along with the chief points of attack.  
Bullets wait in kegs under the dock.  
Destiny calls!

CONSPIRATORS Amen!

LEADER There are barrels of gun powder  
stacked in a cave outside Dawson's Plantation.  
Our Toby has been busy—

*CONSPIRATORS nod and laugh in consent.*

but he cannot risk further expeditions.  
Henry Blake!

*HENRY steps forward.*

Your owner praised you in the marketplace  
as the most trustworthy nigger

he ever had the fortune of owning.  
Now it is up to you  
to put your master's trust to the test.

*HENRY bows his head in assent, steps back into the group.*

Destiny calls us! The reckoning is nigh!  
But remember: trust no-one.  
All those who are not with us  
are against us, blacks as well  
as whites. Oh, do not falter!  
Bolster your heart with the memory  
of the atrocities committed upon your mothers.  
Gird your loins with vengeance,  
strap on the shining sword of freedom!

CONSPIRATORS Selah!

LEADER Brothers, are you with me?

CONSPIRATORS Right behind you!

LEADER Then nothing can stop us now!

AUGUSTUS *(Blurting out.)*

My orders! What are my orders?

LEADER *(A little taken aback, but decides on the role of the amused patriarch.)*

Patience, my son! Patience and cunning.  
Sow discontent among your brethren,  
inspire them to fury.

AUGUSTUS I can do more. Read maps, write passes—

LEADER

That is all for now.  
Is that clear?

*Strained silence; the LEADER speaks reassuringly.*

You will recognize the signal.

*The CONSPIRATORS begin humming "Steal Away".*

LEADER

Go to your people and test their minds;  
so when the fires of redemption  
lick the skies of Charleston,  
they will rise up, up—  
a mighty army  
marching into battle!

CONSPIRATORS

Steal away, steal away,  
Steal away to Jesus!  
Steal away, steal away home,  
I ain't got long to stay here.

*The CONSPIRATORS continue singing as they exchange farewells and slip off. HECTOR appears at the edge of the undergrowth, a dead snake in his outstretched arms.*

*Blackout.*

## Scene 7

*The cotton fields.*

NARRATOR

A sniff of freedom's all it takes  
to feel history's sting;  
there's danger by-and-by  
when the slaves won't sing.

*JONES supervises the picking, which transpires without singing; the silence is eerie. JONES' appearance is slovenly, as if he's already been drinking.*

JONES

Move it, nigger! Faster!  
What you glaring at? Faster!

*The SLAVES continue picking at the same rate. JONES looks at the sun, then cracks his whip.*

Aw, the hell with ya! Noon!

*He stumbles offstage. The SLAVES divide into two groups: some hum spirituals while the others gather around AUGUSTUS.*

SCIPIO

Come on, Augustus, what else?

AUGUSTUS

Did you know there are slaves  
who have set themselves free?

SCIPIO

*(Almost afraid to ask.)*

How'd they do that?

AUGUSTUS Santo Domingo, San Domingue, Hispaniola—  
three names for an island  
rising like a fortress  
from the waters of the Caribbean.  
An island of sun and forest,  
wild fruit and mosquitoës—  
and slaves, many slaves—half a million.  
Slaves to chop sugar, slaves  
to pick coffee beans, slaves to do  
their French masters' every bidding.

Then one summer, news came  
from the old country: Revolution!  
Plantation owners broke into a sweat;  
their slaves served cool drinks  
while the masters rocked on their verandas,  
discussing each outrage:  
people marching against the king,  
crowds pouring into the streets,  
shouting three words:  
*Liberté!*

SLAVES We shall be free!

AUGUSTUS *Égalité!*

SLAVES Master and slave.

AUGUSTUS *Fraternité!*

SLAVES Brothers and sisters!

AUGUSTUS *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*—three words  
were all the island masters talked about  
that summer, while their slaves  
served carefully and listened.

SLAVES *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité!*

*During the following speech, a smouldering growl  
among the SLAVES grows louder and louder, until  
it explodes in a shout.*

AUGUSTUS Black men meeting in the forest:  
Eight days, they whispered,  
and we'll be free. For eight days  
bonfires flashed in the hills:  
Equality. For eight days  
tom-toms spoke in the mountains:  
Liberty. For eight days  
the tom-toms sang: Brothers and sisters.  
And on the eighth day, swift as lightning,  
the slaves attacked.

SLAVES Yah!

*AMALIA enters, unseen, and stands listening.*

AUGUSTUS They came down the mountains  
to the sound of tambourines and conch shells.  
With torches they swept onto the plantations,  
with the long harvest knives  
they chopped white men down  
like sugar cane. For three weeks  
the flames raged; then the sun  
broke through the smoke and shone  
upon a new nation, a black nation—  
Haiti!

SLAVES Haiti!

AUGUSTUS *(Looking intently at the faces around him.)*

Now do you see  
why they've kept this from us,  
brothers and sisters?



AMALIA

A lovely speech.

*The SLAVES are horrified. AUGUSTUS stands impassive.*

I see you're a poet  
as well as a rebel.

*JONES rushes in.*

JONES

Anything wrong, Miss Jennings?

AMALIA

Not a thing, Jones. Just passing  
the time of day with my happy flock—  
which is more than I see you doing.

JONES

But it's noon, Miss Jennings!  
They need nourishment  
if we're going to get this crop in.

AMALIA

It appears they've been getting  
a different sort of sustenance.

JONES

*(Uncomprehending.)*

Beg pardon, Ma'am?

AMALIA

*(Impatient with JONES.)*

See that they work an extra hour tonight.  
I don't care if they have to pick by moonlight!

*To AUGUSTUS.*

As for you: I'll see you  
up at the house. Come at sunset—  
the view over the fields  
is most enchanting then.

*She strides off. Blackout.*

## Scene 8

*The big house, LOUIS' study and the parlor.*

*Twilight filters through the curtains; the frogs have started up in the swamp.*

*LOUIS paces back and forth in his room, holding a chart; he stops to stare at it for a moment, then waves it in disgust and paces once more.*

LOUIS

Something's out there: I can feel it!  
What a discovery it would be.  
But no—

*Grabs his brandy.*

No new coin shines  
for Louis LaFarge  
among the stars!

*He stops at the window and stares out.*

*AMALIA sits in the parlor reading, a decanter of sherry and a tea service on the table next to the sofa. The evening song of the SLAVES floats in from the fields—a plaintive air with a compelling affirmation of life, a strange melody with no distinct beat or tune. TICEY, the old house slave, enters.*

TICEY

Miss Amalia?

AMALIA

*(Without turning.)*

Yes?

TICEY

That new slave, Ma'am—  
he's standing at the front porch!

AMALIA *(Amused.)*  
The front porch? Well, show him in, Ticey!

*TICEY exits; AMALIA rises and goes to the window. She is looking out toward the fields when AUGUSTUS appears in the doorway. Although she knows he is there, she does not turn around.*

AMALIA What are they singing?

AUGUSTUS No words you'd understand.  
No tune you'd recognise.

AMALIA And how is it they all sing together?

AUGUSTUS It's the sorrow songs.  
They don't need a psalm book.

AMALIA *(Resumes her imperious manner.)*  
"Personal servant to Captain Newcastle  
of the schooner Victoria. Ports of call:  
St Thomas, Tobago, St Croix,  
Martinique"—in other words,  
a slave ship.

AUGUSTUS Yes.

AMALIA And what did you learn  
under your captain's tutelage?

AUGUSTUS Reading. Writing. Figures.

AMALIA What did you read?

AUGUSTUS Milton. The Bible.  
And the Tales of the Greeks.

AMALIA *(Thrusting the book she's been reading at him.)*

See the blue ribbon sticking out?  
You may start there.

*AUGUSTUS turns the book over to read the title,  
then looks at her for a moment before returning it.  
She snatches the book.*

AMALIA Too difficult? No doubt you'd do better  
with the Greek original—

*Slyly.*

but we are not that cultured a household.

*Circling him.*

I wondered could there be a nigger alive  
smart as this one's claimed to be?  
Of course, if there were, he might  
be smart enough to pretend  
he wasn't smart at all.

AUGUSTUS No pretense. I've read that one already.  
In my opinion, the Greeks  
were a bit too predictable.

AMALIA A slave has no opinion!

*Regaining her composure.*

I could have you flogged to your bones  
for what you did today.

AUGUSTUS Why didn't you?

*The SLAVES stop singing.*

AMALIA       Daddy said a master knows his slaves  
better than they know themselves.  
And he never flogged a slave—  
he said it was a poor businessman  
who damaged his own merchandise.

AUGUSTUS    *(Sarcastically.)*  
  
An enlightened man, your father.

AMALIA       He let me run wild until  
it was time to put on crinolines.  
My playmates were sent to the fields,  
and I was sent to the parlor with needlework—  
a scented, dutiful daughter.

AUGUSTUS    Most men find intelligence troubling  
in a woman—even fathers.

AMALIA       Then, off I went to finishing school: Miss Peeters'  
Academy for Elocution and Deportment!  
“The art of conversation,” she used to say—  
please, sit down!—“is to make  
the passing of time agreeable.”

*Arranging her dress as she sits on the sofa.*

“suitable subjects are—”  
Sit down, I said!

*Softer, but with an edge.*

One does not conduct conversation  
while standing.

*She indicates a chair, upholstered in champagne-colored  
tufted damask. AUGUSTUS moves toward it but swiftly  
and gracefully drops cross-legged to the floor, daringly close  
to AMALIA's slippered feet. She starts to pull away—  
then slowly extends her feet again.*

“Suitable subjects for  
genteel conversation are:

*Ticking them off on her fingers.*

“Nature. Travel. History.  
And above all, culture—  
painting, music, and books.”

We'll, we're done with books!  
Tell me, Mr Newcastle—  
was the weather in the Indies  
very different from here?

AUGUSTUS    Warmer.

AMALIA       Is that all?

AUGUSTUS    There was always a breeze.

AMALIA       And an abundance of exotic  
foods, I'm sure.

AUGUSTUS    We had our share of papaya.

*The SLAVES start up a new song, more  
African in rhythm and harmonies.*

AMALIA       Imagine that. Subject number two:  
Travel. So many ports!

*Shaking her head charmingly.*

Did Captain Newcastle  
allow you to go ashore  
at St Thomas, Tobago, Martinique?

AUGUSTUS    *(On guard.)*

No.

AMALIA

Charleston has welcomed a fair share  
of immigrants to her shores.

*Laughs delicately.*

There was that Haiti business around the time  
I was born. Over five hundred French plantation owners  
fled here. The whole city was in panic.  
Why, my dear husband—hear him pacing  
up there, wearing out the floorboards?—  
little Louis showed up in Charleston harbor  
that year, with his blue blood *maman* and *papá*.  
*Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité!*

*Looking directly at AUGUSTUS.*

It was a brilliant revolution.  
I've often wondered why our niggers  
don't revolt. I've said to myself:  
"Amalia, if you had been a slave,  
you most certainly would have plotted  
an insurrection by now."

*Turns away from AUGUSTUS.*

But we say all sorts of things  
to ourselves, don't we?  
There's no telling what we'd do  
if the moment were there for the taking.

*Lights up on LOUIS, still staring out the window.*

LOUIS

You can't hide forever.  
There's a hole in the heavens,  
and you're throbbing right behind it.

*Whispers.*

I can feel you.

AMALIA

Have you ever heard of the *Amistad*?

AUGUSTUS

Why?

AMALIA

The *Amistad*: a slave ship.  
Three days off the port of Principe  
the Africans freed themselves  
and attacked with machetes and harpoons.  
Cinque, their leader, spared two sailors  
to steer them back to Africa.  
But Cinque was unfamiliar with the stars  
in our hemisphere. Each morning  
he set course east by the sun;  
each night the sailors turned the ship  
and steered west—until they managed  
to land on our coast and deliver  
Cinque and his followers to execution.

AUGUSTUS

A bit of a storybook ending, isn't it?

AMALIA

What's that supposed to mean?

AUGUSTUS

It's just so perfect a lesson.

AMALIA

You don't believe me?  
It was in the newspapers.

*Significantly.*

You followed your precious captain  
everywhere; you were there when  
he loaded slave cargo into the hold  
or plotted a new course.  
What an admirable science, navigation!  
It must be terribly complicated,  
even for you.

AUGUSTUS

*(Getting up from the floor.)*

Now I have a story for you.  
Once there was a preacher slave  
went by the name of Isaac.  
When God called him  
he was a boy, out hunting rice birds.  
Killing rice birds is easy—  
just pinch off their heads.

*Indicating the sherry.*

May I?

*AMALIA flinches, nods. He pours the sherry expertly.*

But one day, halfway up the tree  
where a nest of babies chirped,  
a voice called out: "Don't do it, Isaac."  
It was an angel, shining  
in the crook of a branch.  
Massa let him preach.  
What harm could it do?

*Sitting down in the damask chair.*

Then a slave uprising in Virginia  
had all the white folks  
watching their own niggers  
for signs of treachery.  
No more prayer meetings, Isaac!  
But God would not wait,  
so Isaac kept on preaching  
at night, in the woods.

Of course he was caught.  
Three of his congregation  
were shot on the spot, three others branded

and their feet pierced.  
But what to do about Isaac,  
gentle Isaac who had turned traitor?

AMALIA

Is there a point to this?

AUGUSTUS

I'm just passing the time of evening  
with...conversation.

*Upstairs, LOUIS positions his telescope at the  
window and searches the heavens.*

LOUIS

There it is...no, wait!  
Gone.

*Shakes his head in despair.*

Sometimes I catch  
a glimmer, a hot blue flash—  
then it disappears.  
Show yourself, demon!

*In the parlor, AUGUSTUS takes a sip of sherry  
and continues.*

AUGUSTUS:

First they flogged him. Then  
they pickled the wounds with salt water,  
and when they were nearly healed,  
he was flogged again, and the wounds  
pickled again, and on and on for weeks  
while Massa sold off Isaac's children  
one by one. They took him to see  
his wife on the auction block,  
baby at her breast.  
A week later it was his turn.  
His back had finally healed;  
but as his new owner led him  
from the auction block,  
Isaac dropped down dead.

AUGUSTUS (con't.) *Pause; more to himself than to AMALIA.*

They couldn't break his spirit,  
so they broke his heart.

*They stare at each other for a moment; then  
AMALIA rises and walks to the window. It has  
gotten dark outside.*

AMALIA They're still singing.  
How can they have songs left?

AUGUSTUS *(Joining her at the window.)*

As many songs as sorrows.

AMALIA And you, Augustus? Were you ever happy?

AUGUSTUS Happy? No.

AMALIA Never? Not even on the ship  
with the whole sea around you?

AUGUSTUS I was a boy. I felt lucky, not happy.

AMALIA I was happy once.  
I traded it for luck.

AUGUSTUS Luck's a dangerous master.

AMALIA Half my life I spent dreaming,  
the other half burying dreams.

*Bitter laugh, turns to AUGUSTUS.*

Funny, isn't it?

AUGUSTUS *(Turns away from her with difficulty, stares out the  
window.)*

One soft spring night  
when the pear blossoms  
cast their pale faces  
on the darker face of the earth,  
Massa stood up from the porch swing  
and said to himself, "I think  
I'll make me another bright-eyed pickaninny."  
Then he stretched and headed  
for my mother's cabin. And now—  
that pickaninny, who started out  
no more than the twinkle in a white man's eye  
and the shame between his mama's legs—  
now he stands in the parlor of  
another massa, entertaining the pretty mistress  
with stories of whippings and heartbreak.

AMALIA *(Half to herself.)*

Pretty? Am I pretty?

AUGUSTUS *(Answers in spite of himself.)*

You can put a rose in a vase  
with a bunch of other flowers;  
but when you walk into the room  
the rose is the only thing you see.

*AMALIA touches his wrist, then traces the vein up  
his arm, as if remembering.*

AMALIA Imagine! A life without even  
a smidgen of happiness...

AUGUSTUS *(Wrestling with desire.)*

I'm not one of your dreams.

AMALIA

No? Perhaps not. What a pity.

*She touches his cheek; he holds her hand there. They lean towards each other slowly, as the SLAVES' sorrow song surges—but before their lips touch, there is a blackout.*

## ACT TWO

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### Scene I

*Dream sequence.*

*Dimly lit, the light rather blue. Each group is in its appointed "place" on stage—AMALIA in her parlour with TICEY standing impassively in the background; LOUIS above, in his study; most SLAVES going about their chores; SCYLLA isolated, with her herbs and potions. In the swamp, HECTOR searches for snakes; the CONSPIRATORS huddle, occasionally lifting a fist into the circle. AUGUSTUS stands front and centre, back to the audience, gazing at AMALIA. Mostly silhouettes are seen, except when a single voice rises out of the chanting, which will grow to cacophony at the end of the sequence.*

SLAVES	They have bowed our heads, they have bent our backs. Mercy, mercy, Lord above, mercy.
AMALIA	I slept, but my heart was awake. How beautiful he is!
SLAVES	Lord have mercy. They have bowed our heads...
SCYLLA	There's a curse on the land. The net draws closer.
HECTOR	Under rocks, 'twixt reeds and roots...
SLAVES	They have bent our backs, they have snatched our songs...

AUGUSTUS           *(Singing.)*  
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child...

SLAVES               *(Joining in.)*  
A motherless child, a motherless child,  
sometimes I feel like a motherless child—  
  
*Continue humming through most of the scene.*

LOUIS               *(In a scientific voice, detached, as if reciting.)*  
Every night at the same hour, each star appears  
slightly to the west of its previous position.  
Scientists calculate that the 12 houses of the zodiac  
have shifted so radically since ancient times,  
their relation to each other  
may now signify completely different portents.

HECTOR             So many, so many.

SLAVES               *(Singing.)*  
A long way from home.

AUGUSTUS           One soft night, Massa stood up—

CONSPIRATORS     Selah.

AUGUSTUS           — and laughed to himself.

CONSPIRATORS     It is time.

SCYLLA              The net draws tighter.

CONSPIRATORS     Selah!

AUGUSTUS           One darkening evening, I stood up—  
  
*SLAVES humming, CONSPIRATORS  
chanting "Selah" in a barely audible whisper.*

— and she was mine,  
mine all night, until  
the day breathed fire  
and the shadows fled.

AMALIA              Look, how beautiful he is!

CONSPIRATORS     Rise up!

SLAVES               *(Simultaneously.)*  
  
Mercy, mercy.

AMALIA              His eyes, his brow, his cheeks—

CONSPIRATORS     Rise up!

AMALIA              — his lips...

AUGUSTUS           ...until the day breathed fire...

HECTOR              Eshu Elewa...ogo...gbogbo.

SLAVES               They have bowed our heads,  
they have bent our backs.

SCYLLA               Closer...  
  
*PHEBE dashes to center-stage, hands out-  
stretched as if to hold back a flood.*

PHEBE               Stop it! Stop!!!  
  
*Everyone freezes.*



Scene 2

*The tableau remains.*

*PHEBE drops her arms and moves slightly stage-left. AUGUSTUS, with his back still to the audience, backs downstage, towards the slave cabins, looking alternately at AMALIA and the CONSPIRATORS until the tableau disintegrates. PHEBE taps him on the shoulder, and he whirls around.*

PHEBE           Evenin'.

AUGUSTUS       Oh! Phebe. Evening.

PHEBE           You're trembling.

AUGUSTUS       I am?

*Laughs.*

Cold spell coming on, I imagine.

PHEBE           No, that's what you said to me!

*AUGUSTUS looks at her, uncomprehending.*

That time I was coming back from Scylla's, scared to open my mouth, you said: "What's your hurry?" And then you said, "You're trembling," and I said, "I am?" —just like you did now.

AUGUSTUS       Oh.

PHEBE           What's your hurry?  
Heading up to the House again?

AUGUSTUS       I got a moment.

PHEBE           Sit yourself down, then.  
Rest a spell.

*They sit side by side; PHEBE embarrassed, AUGUSTUS nervous.*

PHEBE           You sure be up there a long time.  
At the Big House, I mean.

AUGUSTUS       *(Tersely.)*

Missy's orders.

PHEBE           What else she have you doing?

AUGUSTUS       We practice the fine art of conversation.

PHEBE           Quit fooling!

AUGUSTUS       Oh, yes, we talk about everything—  
weather and the science of navigation,  
recent history and ancient literature.

PHEBE           What's that she-fox up to now?

AUGUSTUS       It's simple: she wants to tame me.  
And if I get better treatment  
than the rest of you,  
all my talk about Haiti  
won't hold much water.

PHEBE           So she think she can get us  
to fighting amongst ourselves!

AUGUSTUS       Seems plenty folks want things  
just the way they are.  
Alexander keeps his distance, lately.

PHEBE Alexander's seen his share of sorrow.  
He just wants to live in peace.

AUGUSTUS And die in peace?

PHEBE *(Not catching his drift.)*

I 'spect so. Who doesn't?  
Oh, that's right—  
you and Death gonna walk outta here  
hand and hand!

*PHEBE laughs; AUGUSTUS is spooked.*

Alexander don't mean you no spite.  
And Scipio—Scipio say  
you his man, any time, any place!  
You shoulda seen him the other day,  
putting voodoo spells on the chickens!  
Then he pick up the milk bucket  
and pranced around, serving up  
revolution lemonade! Now there's  
a body need of some occupation!

AUGUSTUS *(Aside.)*

Maybe I can help him find it.

PHEBE 'Course, you got Diana's heart.  
She thinks the sun and the moon  
set in your face.

AUGUSTUS Then there's Scylla.

PHEBE Hmmpf! Woman had me nearly crazy,  
clamping my mouth and wiping my  
footsteps  
so I ended up getting nowhere.

As far as I'm concerned,  
Scylla can roll her eye and talk conjuration  
till the summer go cold and the cotton pick itself!

AUGUSTUS Now, that's the fire I saw!

PHEBE Huh?

AUGUSTUS The first time I saw you,  
I thought to myself:  
"That's not the spirit of a slave.  
That's a pure flame."

*PHEBE tucks her head.*

PHEBE *(Flattered.)*

Go on.

AUGUSTUS Tell me—how did you land  
on the Jennings Plantation?

PHEBE I didn't land at all. I was borned here.

AUGUSTUS So this is your home.

PHEBE Much as any of us got  
a home on this earth.

AUGUSTUS And your folks?

PHEBE My father was sold before I was borned.  
Mama...it's a long story.

AUGUSTUS I got time.

*PHEBE stares down at the ground as if she's conjuring  
the memory out of the dust; then she begins.*

PHEBE

Mama worked in the kitchen until  
I was about five; that's when  
fever broke out in the quarters.  
She used to set table scraps out  
for the field hands, and I  
stuck wildflowers in the baskets  
to pretty 'em up. Mama said  
you never know what a flower can mean  
to somebody in misery.

That fever tore through the cabins like wildfire.  
Massa Jennings said the field hands  
spread contamination and forbid them  
to come up to the house, but  
Mama couldn't stand watching them  
just wasting away—so she started  
sneaking food to the quarters at night.

Then the fever caught her too.  
She couldn't hide it long.  
And Massa Jennings found out.

*Gulps a deep breath for strength, reliving the scene.*

Mama started wailing right there at the stove.  
Hadn't she been a good servant?  
Who stayed up three nights straight  
to keep Massa's baby girl among the living  
when her own mother done left this world?  
Who did he call when the fire  
needed lighting? Who mended the pinafores  
Miss Amalia was forever snagging on bushes?

Mama dropped to her knees  
and stretched out her arms along the floor.  
She didn't have nowheres to go;  
she'd always been at the Big House.  
"Where am I gonna lay  
my poor sick head?" she asked.

He stood there, staring  
like she was a rut in the road,  
and he was trying to figure out  
how to get round it.

Then he straightened his waistcoat  
and said: "You have put me and my child  
in the path of mortal danger,  
and you dare ask me what to do  
with your nappy black head?"  
He didn't even look at her—  
just spoke off into the air  
like she was already a ghost.

*Woodenly.*

She died soon after.

*AUGUSTUS takes PHEBE into his arms.*

AUGUSTUS

*(A bit helplessly.)*

Lord have mercy.

PHEBE

Mercy had nothing to do with it.  
Ain't that what you said?

AUGUSTUS

Phebe, how far would you go  
to avenge your mother's death?

PHEBE

There you go again  
with your revolution talk.

AUGUSTUS

How far?

PHEBE

We ain't got no tom-toms  
like them slaves in Haiti!

AUGUSTUS

You don't need tom-toms.  
Just a bird call.

*PHEBE looks at him, uncomprehending. AUGUSTUS stares off.*

*Stage dims to black: a single spot on the NARRATOR.*

NARRATOR

What is it about him, girl—  
the book-learning, his acquaintance with  
the world?

He can stand up to a glare,  
but he doesn't know his heart.  
Look around you, child: It's growing dark.

### Scene 3

*The cotton house.*

*Almost sundown: JONES is in the field supervising the bringing in of the cotton, which has been weighed and now must be tramped down in order to be stored. There is the steady beat of stomping feet throughout the scene. PHEBE and AUGUSTUS are outside the cotton house.*

PHEBE                      Any news?

AUGUSTUS                I expect another signal  
any day now. Then I'll know more.

PHEBE                      What are they waiting for?  
You reckon something's gone wrong—

AUGUSTUS                (*Calming her.*)

Shh. They have their reasons.  
Patience.

*PHEBE catches him looking at the sky.*

PHEBE                      (*With a mixture of jealousy and trepidation.*)

You better get on up there—  
sun's almost touching.

*PHEBE scoots inside the cotton house. AUGUSTUS studies the horizon, his expression inexplicable, then exits as JONES enters from the fields, urging along the next group bearing cotton. The SLAVES are sweaty and tired. JONES looks after AUGUSTUS; it's clear he's been told not to interfere.*

JONES  
Keep it moving!  
Don't be looking at the sun;  
you got a whole long while  
before your day is over!

*JONES exits. The scene opens to the inside of the cotton house; SCIPIO dumps the sacks of cotton onto the floor while the other SLAVES tramp it down. The dull thud of stomping feet punctuates the dialogue; changes in pace and rhythm signal changes in mood and tension. On his way for the next sack of cotton, SCIPIO looks out the one small window.*

SCIPIO  
There he goes.

ALEXANDER  
Every evening, same time.

SCYLLA  
It's the devil's work afoot, for sure.

SCIPIO  
It *is* peculiar! I wonder—

PHEBE  
It ain't your task to wonder.

SCIPIO  
What's the matter with you, gal?  
Most times you're the one speculating  
about other folks' doings.  
Maybe you're sweet on him.

*General laughter.*

PHEBE  
If you ain't finding fault with someone,  
you all laughing at them! We all been  
called up to the house one time or another.  
Ain't nothing special in that.

SCYLLA  
For weeks on end? As soon as  
the sun eases into the sycamores,  
there ain't a hair of his to be seen  
till daylight.

*Significant pause.*

Except maybe on his lady's pillow.

PHEBE  
What are you trying to say, Scylla?

SCYLLA  
I ain't *trying* to say nothing.

ALEXANDER  
He's certainly the boldest nigger  
I've ever seen.

SCIPIO  
*(Shaking his head in admiration.)*

That's the truth there!  
The way he handles Massa Jones—  
no bowing or scraping for him.  
That eye of his could cut  
through stone. Jones don't know  
what to do with that nigger!  
He's plain scared, and that's a fact.

PHEBE  
Maybe they're just talking.

DIANA  
Augustus is nice.

ALEXANDER  
Nice as the devil was to Eve.

SCYLLA  
A slave and his missus  
ain't got nothing to talk about.  
Oh, he might have bold ideas,  
but he'll never put them to work.  
She'll see to that.

PHEBE           What do you mean?

SCYLLA           That first master of his kept him in style.  
That's why he ran away so much afterwards—  
he ain't used to being treated like a regular slave.  
A whip can't make him behave:  
Miss Amalia knows that.  
So she's trying another way—  
and it appears to be working.

SCIPIO           Well, I'll be.

DIANA           What 'pears to be working?

SCYLLA           What's the only thing  
white folks think  
a nigger buck's good for?  
It wouldn't be the first time.

ALEXANDER       *(Slowly.)*  
  
If that's what he's doing,  
he's headed for big trouble.

PHEBE           I don't believe it!  
And even if it's true, it's 'cause  
he ain't got no choice!

SCYLLA           You been mighty contrary lately, Phebe.

PHEBE           I ain't afraid of every shadow!

SCIPIO           *(Trying to avert disaster.)*  
  
Scylla, don't mind her.  
She's feeling the weather.

SCYLLA           I'm warning you, Phebe.

PHEBE           I already got a pack of curses  
on my head. A few more won't hurt.

ALEXANDER       Phebe! Don't talk to Scylla like that!

PHEBE           Should have done it a long time ago.  
Woman had me nearly crazy!  
If anyone around here's putting  
sharp stones in my path,  
it ain't no earth spirit.  
If there's a curse here,  
Scylla, it's you.  
  
*Everyone stops stamping.*

DIANA           Phebe...

PHEBE           Yes, Scylla, you're the curse—  
with all your roots and potions.  
Tell me: How come you never put a spell  
on Miss Amalia? Why didn't you  
sprinkle some powder over a candle  
to make her house go up in flames  
one night? That would have been some magic.  
  
*Timid murmurs from the others.*

SCYLLA           I do what the spirits tell me.

PHEBE           Then those slaves in Haiti  
must have known some better spirits.

SCYLLA           Some nigger comes in here with  
a few pretty stories,  
and you think he's the Savior!

ALEXANDER       Dear Lord!

PHEBE  
The Savior was never  
to your liking, Scylla.  
He took too much attention  
away from you.

ALEXANDER  
Have mercy!

SCYLLA  
*(Drawing herself into her full "conjurer" posture.)*

There's a vine in the woods  
with a leaf like a saw blade.  
One side of the leaf is shiny dark  
and pocked like skin;  
the other side is dusty gray.  
Touch the gray side to a wound,  
the sore will shut and heal.  
But touch it with the shiny side,  
and the wound will boil up  
and burst open.

PHEBE  
Always talking in riddles!  
Why don't you come right out and  
say what you mean for a change?

*Agreeing murmurs; SCYLLA looks darkly  
around until everyone grows silent.*

SCYLLA  
Alright, I'll tell you direct.  
Your Augustus is pretty clever—  
been lots of places and knows  
the meanings of words and things like that.  
But something's foul in his blood,  
and what's festering inside him  
nothing this side of the living  
can heal. A body hurting that bad  
will do anything to get relief—anything.

*Looking around at all of them.*

So keep talking about Haiti  
and sharpening your sticks!  
But know one thing:  
that nigger's headed for destruction,  
and you're all headed there with him.

*They stare at her as the lights dim to blackout.*

## Scene 4

*The swamp.*

*Night: mottled light. Strangely twisted branches, replete with Spanish moss and vines; huge gnarled roots slick with wet. The whole resembles abstract gargoyles in a gothic cathedral. There's a gigantic tree trunk. At some remove—in front of the proscenium, or silhouetted against the backdrop—the SLAVES pantomime the motions of evening chores: mending tools, shelling beans, stirring the stew.*

*When the lights come up, HECTOR is pattering around the perimeter of the swamp, muttering to himself; he finds a snake and lifts it up triumphantly before whacking off the head.*

HECTOR           Hah! So many—under rocks, 'twixt reeds,  
they lie and breed, breed, breed.  
The wicked never rest.

*Stops, listens.*

What's that? Someone coming!

*He scrambles for cover as HENRY and AUGUSTUS enter, stop, and shake hands.*

HENRY            Good night, friend.  
We will be victorious.

AUGUSTUS        May Fate be with us, brother.

HENRY            Oh she is, brother, she is.  
It was a golden day  
when Fate brought you to us.

*They exchange the secret handshake; HENRY exits. AUGUSTUS looks after him; then, as soon as he thinks he's alone, he sinks down on a fallen log, burying his face in his hands. HECTOR—well hidden from AUGUSTUS but visible to the audience—looks on with keen interest; he recognizes this kind of despair. AUGUSTUS's soliloquy is more an agitated outpouring than a reflective speech.*

AUGUSTUS/      Compass and sextant. Ropes thick as my wrist,  
coiled like greased snakes. A cutlass.  
The rough caress of the anchor line slithering  
between my boy palms. The hourglass tipped,  
surrendering sand in a thin stream of sighs.  
Clouded belly of the oil lamp dangling from a chain.  
And everything rocking, rocking.

*Hums a lullaby.*

Dark green pillows, salve for my wounds.  
"Who did this to you, boy?"  
"It was the sun, Father; see its spokes?"  
"Child of midnight, the sun can't hurt you!"

*Sings softly.*

"Jesus Savior pilot me  
over life's tempestuous sea..."

*Speaks.*

And when she looks at me—  
such a cool sweet look—  
each scar weeps like an open wound.

*Softer.*

If fear eats out the heart,  
what does love do?



*HECTOR springs out of hiding; AUGUSTUS jumps up.*

HECTOR You! I've seen you before.

AUGUSTUS *(Relieved.)*

That you have, my friend.  
I'm from the Jennings Plantation, like you.

HECTOR *(Stares at him suspiciously.)*

Like me? Like me you say?  
We'll see about that.

*Circles him, inspecting.*

What are you doing in my swamp?

AUGUSTUS Taking a walk. Breathing the night air.

HECTOR Wrong! You were with someone.  
I saw you!

AUGUSTUS Just a friend, Hector. Don't you have friends?

HECTOR I saw you. I heard you!  
How do you know my name?

AUGUSTUS We met before, don't you remember?  
I'm the new slave on the Jennings Plantation.

HECTOR You're the one who came in leg irons,  
along the road—

*Circling him very closely, so that AUGUSTUS must back up.*

I never heard of leg irons on this plantation before.

*Crowds AUGUSTUS, who trips on a root and falls.*

You must be dangerous.

AUGUSTUS I was sold in chains and spent my first night  
in the barn. The overseer  
didn't have enough sense to take them off  
until Amalia gave the order—

HECTOR Amalia? Amalia!  
You are plotting some evil.

AUGUSTUS You've got swamp fever, old man.  
I plan no evil.

HECTOR I heard you!  
Men come and go in wagons.  
They whisper and shake hands.  
They come out at night  
when the innocent sleep.

AUGUSTUS These men—what do they look like?

HECTOR They have the devil's eye.

AUGUSTUS Are they black men, or white?

HECTOR You are one of them!

AUGUSTUS If they are black, black like  
me and you, how can they be evil?

HECTOR *(Vehemently.)*

No, no—the world's not right, don't you see?  
I took the curse as far away as I could.

AUGUSTUS There is no curse!

HECTOR *(Draping moss and vines over the tree trunk to make a "throne".)*

Ah, but the little mother's gone,  
And I came here where evil  
bubbles out of the ground.  
Once I didn't watch out;  
I got lost in the smell of a rose  
and snap!—the snake bit down.  
Little mother was mother no more.

AUGUSTUS I'm no snake, Hector.

HECTOR Evil isn't the snake, little man.  
Evil is what grows the snake.

*Gazing into the distance.*

Such a cool sweet look...

*Cuts a piercing glance at AUGUSTUS, who recognizes his own words and is on guard—though against what, he's not sure.*

AUGUSTUS You *are* crazy.

HECTOR Once we had a garden to hide in,  
but we were children.

*Taking his seat on the throne; with a full sweep of his arm.*

This is my home now.  
I am king here.

*Regarding him suspiciously.*

Every man has his place.

AUGUSTUS And you are fortunate to have found yours.  
They've left you in peace.  
But what of your brothers and sisters?  
They cry out in their bondage.  
They have no place in this world  
to lay their heads.

HECTOR *(In a low growl.)*

You are planning a great evil.  
You come out at night  
when the innocent sleep—

*Raising his voice.*

but I won't let you harm her!

AUGUSTUS Shh! Someone might hear.

HECTOR I won't let you harm her!

*Screaming.*

Danger! Wake up, children!

*The SLAVES wake up and stumble out of their cabins, in a bewildered pantomime. The CONSPIRATORS also appear and consult each other.*

AUGUSTUS *(Grabbing HECTOR to silence him.)*

Quiet! Do you want to bring  
the whole pack down on us?

HECTOR *(Hits AUGUSTUS in the chest; crazed.)*

Wake up! Wake up!  
Mother, Father!  
They're coming for us!

*HECTOR tries to run out of the swamp.  
AUGUSTUS tackles him from behind.*

AUGUSTUS

Crazy fool! You'll spoil everything!  
I've...come...to...save you!

*A fierce struggle ensues.*

HECTOR

*(In a vision from his childhood in Africa.)*

Fire! Fire!  
The huts...the boats...  
blood in the water.  
Run, children, run!

*AUGUSTUS gains control and kneels over HECTOR, choking him; HECTOR gasps and is finally still. When AUGUSTUS realizes HECTOR is dead, he collapses on the lifeless body.*

AUGUSTUS

Damn you, old man! I came to save you.

*After a moment, he collects himself and stands up, his voice breaking, more pitiful than angry.*

Who is not with us, is against us.

HENRY

Selah.

*The SLAVES begin humming as AUGUSTUS kneels and wraps the body in vines, then rolls it under a clump of moss and exposed roots.*

AUGUSTUS

Let these vines be your shroud,  
this moss a pillow for your head.  
These roots will be your coffin,  
this dark water your grave.

SLAVES

Selah.

AUGUSTUS

Sleep, Hector. Sleep and be free.

*The SLAVES look at SCYLLA, who lifts her hand slowly.*

SCYLLA

Eshu Elewa ogo gbogbo.

*Blackout.*

## Scene 5

*Lights rise on the NARRATOR.*

NARRATOR Sweet whispers can leave a bitter taste  
when a body's supposed to be freedom bound.  
Every day as the sun comes easing down,  
our man climbs the stairs to sherry and lace.

*Lights rise on the big house, LOUIS' study and the parlour.  
Early evening. LOUIS sits hunched over his charts. He is excited.*

LOUIS Nothing in the books.  
Empty sky in all the charts.  
And yet I've seen it, with my own eyes!  
Last night it was the brightest.

*Draws a few lines with his compass, looks up wistfully.*

What once was a void  
fills with feverish matter.

*LOUIS continues to fiddle with his papers throughout the  
scene, occasionally jumping up to peer through the tele-  
scope.*

*AMALIA stands by the fireplace, reading aloud from a  
book.*

AMALIA The princess said to her father, "Bring me  
strawberries, I am hungry for strawberries."

*She shuts the book.*

He came back with a husband instead.

*Kneels before the fireplace, trying to start it.*

"I'm getting too old to tend the garden,"  
the king said. "Here is a husband for you—  
he will fetch your strawberries."  
The princess stomped her foot and replied  
if she must have a husband,  
she would rather marry the fox,  
who at least knew where the sweetest berries grew.

And so she ran out of the palace  
and into the woods, on and on  
until a pebble in her shoe forced her to stop.  
But it was not a pebble at all—  
it was the king's head, shrunk to the size  
of a pea.  
"Put me in your pocket,"  
the king pleaded, "and take me away with you."  
Horrified, the princess threw the king's head down  
and ran on. But she had not gone far  
before she had to stop again,  
and this time when she shook out her shoe,  
it was the head of her husband that said:  
"Please put me in your pocket  
so that I may love you wherever you go."  
The princess threw his head down, too,  
and ran faster; but before long her shoe stopped her  
for the third time. And this time  
it was her own head she held in her hands.

*She burns her hand, curses softly. There is a knock at the door.  
An agitated JONES steps into the room, leaving the door  
open.*

JONES Beg pardon for the disturbance, Ma'am,  
but the matter's urgent.

*AMALIA rises, pulling her shawl tighter in  
exasperation, and takes a seat behind the desk,  
glaring.*

AMALIA Since you've barged in, Mr. Jones,  
the least you can do is close the door.  
There's a chill; I believe I've caught it.

JONES *(Closes the door, steps up to the desk.)*

Just what I wanted to talk to you about;  
Miss Jennings. This cold spell—  
it'll kill the last of the crops  
if we don't get them in soon.

*AMALIA doesn't respond.*

Ma'am, you let the niggers  
leave the fields early.

AMALIA I thought you'd be happy, Mr. Jones.  
Aren't such measures part of  
your economic philosophy?

JONES Not when there's cotton to be picked.

AMALIA An hour more or less can hardly matter.  
Now—this cold spell is unusual,  
but not as threatening  
as you make it out to be.

JONES Well, the niggers sure are spooked.  
They're just sitting around or looking off  
in the sky. Matter of fact, they ain't even  
been tending their own gardens.

AMALIA This late in the season  
I don't imagine there's much left to tend.

JONES And that crazy slave, the one's  
got the shack out in the swamp—

AMALIA Hector?

JONES Yes'm, that's the one I mean.  
No one's seen hide nor hair of him.

AMALIA Hector's in the habit of appearing  
whenever he has snakes to parade.

JONES But it's been three days, Ma'am!

AMALIA Cold weather makes the snakes scarce.  
Is that all, Jones?

JONES Yes, Ma'am, as you please.  
Good evening, Miss Jennings.

*JONES exits, closing the door behind him.  
AMALIA shakes herself once, briskly, as if try-  
ing to restore some measure of reason or calm.*

AMALIA He's just waiting till the cold clears.  
He'll be alright.

*Starts toward the window, stops to look in the  
mirror.*

She looked down at her own head,  
cradling it in her cupped palms,  
and cried and cried herself to sleep  
beneath a giant oak tree.  
No one heard her. No one came.

AMALIA (con't.)      And so she perished,  
and her body was never found,  
even to this day.

*Listening.*

Augustus?

*AUGUSTUS enters, looking worn and pre-occupied. AMALIA runs to embrace him.*

AMALIA              So you've come after all!

*Reaching out to stroke his chest.*

You look tired.

AUGUSTUS          (*Uncomfortable.*)

I nearly collided with Jones,  
barrelling full steam across the porch.

AMALIA              Did he see you?

AUGUSTUS          Shadows are kind to niggers.

AMALIA              You're not a nigger!

AUGUSTUS          (*Catching her hand by the wrist.*)

Yes I am, Amalia.  
Best not forget that.

AMALIA              (*Leading him to the fire.*)

Come and get warm.

AUGUSTUS          (*Hanging back.*)

What did Jones want?

AMALIA              Oh, he was complaining about the weather.

AUGUSTUS          The cold's hard on the crops.  
They should be picked fast.

AMALIA              (*Lightly.*)

Scylla says the weather will break tomorrow.

AUGUSTUS          Since when have you taken to consulting Scylla?

AMALIA              I didn't "consult" her.  
She came up today and said,  
"If it please the Mistress,  
the cold has run its course.  
Morn will break warm, no worry."

AUGUSTUS          Why should you risk your profit  
on Scylla's words?

AMALIA              Look at us, squabbling about agriculture!  
Forget about the weather!  
Who cares what happens out there?

AUGUSTUS          Someone's got to care, Missy.

AMALIA              Don't call me that.

AUGUSTUS          That's what you are. And I'm your slave.  
Nothing has changed that.

AMALIA              (*Putting her hand to his mouth; AUGUSTUS with-  
draws, but only slightly.*)

Shh! If this is all the world they've left us,  
then it's ours to make over.  
From time to time we can step out  
to show ourselves to the people  
so they will have someone to blame.

AUGUSTUS

It's too late.

AMALIA

Don't you think I see the suffering?  
Don't you think I know I'm the cause?

*With sarcasm and self-loathing.*

But a master cannot allow himself  
the privilege of sorrow. A master  
must rule, or die.

AUGUSTUS

*(Pained, thinking of HECTOR.)*

Dying used to be such  
a simple business. Easy—

*Caresses her neck.*

as long as there was  
nothing to live for.

*Tightening his grip; AMALIA shows no fear.*

And murder simply a matter of being  
on the right side of the knife.

AMALIA

*(Caressing him, pulling his shirt up.)*

Have you ever used a knife?  
Have you ever killed someone?

AUGUSTUS

*(Haunted, evasive.)*

Now where would I get a knife?

*Turns abruptly away; from outside, barely audible,  
come the opening strains of "Steal Away".*

AMALIA

*(Touching each scar on his back as she talks.)*

Your back is like a book  
no-one can bear to read to the end—  
each angry gash, each proud welt...  
But these scars on your side are different.

*Touching them gently.*

They couldn't have come from a whipping.  
They're more like—more like  
markings that turn up in fairy tales  
of princes and paupers exchanged at birth.

AUGUSTUS

I've had them since birth.

AMALIA

*(Caressing him.)*

So they are magical!

AUGUSTUS

Hardly—unless the art of survival  
is in your magician's bag of tricks.

*AUGUSTUS begins to return AMALIA's  
attentions.*

AMALIA

They even look like crowns.  
Or suns—exploding suns!  
How did you come by them?

AUGUSTUS

*(Abrupt.)*

No more stories.

AMALIA

Please?

AUGUSTUS

Another time.  
There's enough sorrow on earth tonight.

AUGUSTUS (con't.) *Embracing her.*

And what's the harm in borrowing  
a little happiness?

AMALIA Take this, then—

*Kisses him.*

and this—

*He pulls her down on the sofa as the strains of "Steal  
Away" grow ever more urgent. AUGUSTUS  
appears not to hear. He and AMALIA embrace pas-  
sionately as the light dims.*

## Scene 6

*In the slave cemetery.*

*HECTOR's funeral. HECTOR's body is lying in state on a crude platform,  
covered with a rough blanket. The SLAVES march around the bier as they  
sing. After a little while JONES enters and stands uncertainly in the back-  
ground; AMALIA watches from her bedroom window.*

*LOUIS sits at his window but has turned his back. He stares into nothing-  
ness, brandy glass in hand.*

SLAVES Oh Deat' him is a little man,  
And him goes from do' to do',  
Him kill some souls and him cripple up,  
And him lef' some souls to pray.

Do Lord, remember me,  
Do Lord, remember me.  
I cry to the Lord as de year roll 'aroun',  
Lord, remember me.

ALEXANDER No children, and his kinfolk  
scattered around this world.

PHEBE We were all his friends, Alexander.

ALEXANDER But his youngest child's  
got to pass over and under!  
Who's going to do it?

PHEBE Every child on this plantation  
was like his child, Alexander.  
Don't you worry.



ALEXANDER     *(Breaking down.)*  
To die like that, swoll up  
and burst open like a—

PHEBE           He's at rest now. He don't feel it.  
  
*The SLAVES stop marching to prepare for the ritual  
of the "passing." In this rite, the youngest child of the  
deceased is passed under and over the coffin to signify  
the continuity of life.*

SLAVES          My fader's done wid de trouble o' de world,  
Wid de trouble o' de world,  
Wid de trouble o' de world,  
My fader's done wid de trouble o' de world,  
Outshine de sun.  
  
*AUGUSTUS appears and he stands at a distance;  
PHEBE goes over to him.*

ALEXANDER      Her he come, stopping by  
when he's good and ready.  
Too busy to pay proper respect to the dead.

SCIPPIO         Each soul grieves in its own way.

PHEBE           Where were you?

AUGUSTUS        I came as soon as I heard—

PHEBE           *(Secretive.)*  
  
Not here, man. There.  
  
*Gestures toward the swamp.*

They were calling for you last night.  
Didn't you hear that "Steal Away?"  
They sang till I thought the dead  
would rise out of their graves and follow!  
I was crazy with worry.  
Finally I went and told them  
you couldn't get away.

*AUGUSTUS glances up at the house, locks gazes  
with AMALIA.*

On the way back I tripped  
over what I thought was an old root,  
and there he was—

AUGUSTUS        You found him?

PHEBE           Under the crook of a mangrove,  
wrapped in vines. Poor Hector!  
All those years folks thought  
he was crazy—

*Looking up at AMALIA's window.*

when he was just sick at heart.

ALEXANDER      Hector took a liking to you,  
Diana. You should be the one.

*PHEBE joins the mourners as ALEXANDER  
and SCIPPIO pass DIANA under and over the  
coffin.*

SLAVES          Lift him high, Lord,  
Take him by the arm.  
Wrap him in glory,  
Dip him in balm.

*AUGUSTUS kneels wearily. SCYLLA, ravaged with grief and more stooped than ever, approaches.*

SCYLLA He thought evil could be caught.

AUGUSTUS Yes.

SCYLLA But evil breeds inside, in the dark.  
I can smell its sour breath.

AUGUSTUS Don't come around me, then.

SCYLLA You believe you can cure the spirit  
just by riling it. What will  
these people do with your hate  
after you free them—as you promise?

AUGUSTUS I got better things to do  
than argue with you, Scylla.

SCYLLA Oh yes, you're a busy man;  
you got to watch for people waiting  
to trip you up; you think  
danger's on the outside.  
But do you know what's inside  
you, Augustus Newcastle?  
The seeds of the future; they'll have their way.  
You can't escape.  
You are in your skin wherever you go.

*Turns to the mourners, who have just completed the ritual of the passing, and calls out.*

Eshu Elewa ogo gbogbo!

ALEXANDER He's gone over. He's flown on the wind.

SCYLLA He came with no mother to soothe him.  
He came with no father to teach him.  
He came with no names for his gods.

PHEBE No way but to see it through.

SCYLLA Who can I talk to about his journey?  
He stood tall, so they bent his back.  
He found love, so they ate his heart.  
Eshu Elewa ogo gbogbo!

SCIPIO This is what a man comes to.

SCYLLA Who will remember him,  
without a father, without a mother?

PHEBE Poor people, you've lost your wings.

SCYLLA Eshu Elewa ogo gbogbo!  
Where are the old words now?  
Scattered by the wind.

ALEXANDER The body a feather, the spirit a flame.

SCYLLA And now the sun  
has come out to warm him.

SCIPIO Too late! He's flown.

SCYLLA But the wind won't carry me!

*The SLAVES hum and chant as they disperse, their song becoming gradually less mournful and more urgent as we segue into the next scene.*

NARRATOR Sunday evening;  
New moon, skies clear.  
The wheel's stopped turning:  
Redemption's here.

## Scene 7

*Near the slave cabins.*

*Early evening, shortly before sunset: PHEBE and AUGUSTUS come from the shadows. In the background the SLAVES go about evening chores while singing, a mixture of militant spirituals and African chants, with whispered phrases such as "Rise up!" or "Mean to be free!" occasionally audible.*

AUGUSTUS            Everything's ready.

PHEBE                Yes.

AUGUSTUS            We've been careful.

PHEBE                Oh, yes.

AUGUSTUS            (*Pacing.*)  
Any day now. Any time!

PHEBE                It's been three days, Augustus—  
three days since you heard the call  
and didn't answer.

AUGUSTUS            Tonight's new moon; skies are clear.  
Destiny calls!

PHEBE                Are you sure it's not just your destiny?

AUGUSTUS            What do you mean?

PHEBE                Every time you talk about  
victory and vengeance,  
it's as if you're saying

my victory, my vengeance.  
As if you didn't care about  
anyone's pain but yours.

AUGUSTUS

Are you with us, or against us?

PHEBE

Ain't nothing wrong with feelings,  
Augustus—just where they lead you.  
Now when it comes to hating,  
you and Miss Amalia are a lot alike.

*AUGUSTUS whirls, but she stands her ground.*

She used to be different—high-minded,  
but always ready to laugh.  
When she married Massa Louis  
she began to sour.  
Seemed like disappointment killed her.

*Hesitates, then hurries through.*

And now you've brought her back to life.  
No wonder you're mixed up!

AUGUSTUS

Why are you telling me this?

PHEBE

Because I care what happens to you  
more than revolution or freedom.  
Those may be traitor's words, but  
I don't care. 'Cause maybe—  
maybe if you hadn't let hate  
take over your life, you might have  
had some love left over for me.

*She runs off. AUGUSTUS slowly sits down, as if a new and treacherous path had opened before him. BENJAMIN and HENRY enter unseen. AUGUSTUS buries his face in his hands.*

BENJAMIN *(Whispering.)*

There he is. Don't look  
so fearful now, does he?

*Makes a bird call.*

AUGUSTUS Who's there?

*He leaps to his feet; the CONSPIRATORS approach.*

BENJAMIN May Fate be with you.

AUGUSTUS You've brought news?

BENJAMIN Most of the news is old, brother.

AUGUSTUS It couldn't be helped;  
I was under constant guard.

BENJAMIN Constant guard? Constant companionship  
would be closer to the truth.

AUGUSTUS Talk straight!

BENJAMIN Straight as a bullet, brother.  
You sent word that you were "being watched"—  
naturally, we sent someone to see about  
your difficulties. What a surprise  
to find out who your guard was  
and how tenderly  
she watched over you!

AUGUSTUS Missy needed a buck—what of it?

BENJAMIN Sound mighty proud, buck.

AUGUSTUS Just the facts, brother, just the facts.  
Should I knock her hand away  
to prove my loyalty to the cause?  
Why not charm her instead?

BENJAMIN That never used to be your style.

AUGUSTUS I've never been so close to freedom.

BENJAMIN All the more reason to see  
you don't spoil it.

*Looks skyward.*

The night's perfect:  
clear skies, new moon.

AUGUSTUS Tonight? I knew it!  
I'll assemble my forces.

BENJAMIN Hold on. You'll be coming with us.

AUGUSTUS But—

BENJAMIN You told us what you wanted us to believe.  
We've got orders to bring you to headquarters.  
They'll decide what's to be done.

AUGUSTUS I can't leave. My people need me!

BENJAMIN This is death's business, brother.  
Even a nigger as famous as you  
can't be given the benefit of the doubt!  
Your second-in-command—

AUGUSTUS Phebe?

BENJAMIN

—will organize things here.

*Takes AUGUSTUS by the arm.*

Henry will deliver her orders.  
We'll wait in the wagon. Come on!

*All exit; blackout. The chanting of the SLAVES grows louder, with snatches of spirituals in high descant, but the lyrics of the spirituals are volatile. The percussive, more African-based chants prevail, with key phrases like "Freedom, children, freedom!" emerging ever stronger through the next scene.*

## Scene 8

*The big house: AMALIA's bedroom, LOUIS' study and the hallway.*

*Evening: LOUIS stands at the open window of his study, looking through the telescope, alternately at the night sky and down over the plantation grounds.*

*AMALIA sits on the window seat in her bedroom. PHEBE enters.*

PHEBE                    You wanted me, Ma'am?

AMALIA                    Good evening, Phebe!  
I was sitting at the window,  
catching the last rays of sunlight,  
when I happened to see you  
darting from group to group,  
talking to this slave and that,  
and I said to myself: "Perhaps  
Phebe would like to talk to me, too."

PHEBE                    *(On her guard.)*

I'm pleased to talk conversation  
whenever you like, Miss Amalia.

AMALIA                    *(Slightly sarcastic.)*

It seems you're mighty pleased  
with other people's conversations  
these days.

PHEBE                    I don't follow your meaning, Ma'am.

AMALIA Oh, really? I notice  
you and Augustus have no problem  
following each other's meaning.

PHEBE Augustus ain't nothing  
but a friend, Ma'am.  
I don't recollect talking to him  
any more than anyone else.

*Laughs nervously.*

Me and my big mouth always be  
yakking at somebody or another.

AMALIA Don't talk yourself  
into trouble, Phebe.

PHEBE Beg pardon, Ma'am.  
I didn't mean nothing by it.

AMALIA Everyone can see  
you're making a fool of yourself  
over him! Have you spoken  
to Augustus today?

PHEBE I can't rightly say, Ma'am.

*At a warning look from AMALIA.*

That is—I talked to a lot of people  
and he was amongst them, but  
we didn't say more than a how-de-do.

AMALIA Tell Augustus I want to see him.

PHEBE *(Thrown into panic.)*

I don't know—I mean—

AMALIA What's the matter, Phebe?

PHEBE Nothing, Ma'am.  
It might take a while, is all.

AMALIA *(Sarcastic.)*

And why is that?

PHEBE It's just—well, Augustus been keeping  
to himself lately. I seen him  
going off in the direction of the swamp;  
he's got some crazy idea  
about fixing up Hector's shack.

AMALIA *(Haunted.)*

Oh.  
When he returns, send him up.

PHEBE Yes, Ma'am.

*PHEBE exits. In the hallway she runs into  
AUGUSTUS. He is very agitated.*

PHEBE *(Whispering.)*

You! Here?

AUGUSTUS Yes. They sent me back.

PHEBE I thought for sure they was going to do  
something awful to you.

AUGUSTUS The sun travels its appointed track,  
a knot of fire, day in day out—  
what could be more awful?

PHEBE Augustus, what is it?  
Can I help?

AUGUSTUS This job I do alone.

PHEBE But surely you can take a minute  
to go in there and smooth  
that she-hawk's feathers down  
so's the rest of us can—

*AMALIA steps out and peers into the dim hall.  
AUGUSTUS shrinks into the shadows.*

AMALIA Is that you, Phebe?

PHEBE Yes'm. I was just on my way downstairs.

AMALIA I heard voices.

PHEBE That was me, Ma'am.  
I twisted my foot in the dark—  
guess I was talking to it.

*Laughs nervously.*

My mama used to say it helps  
to talk the hurt out.

AMALIA Well, do your talking  
elsewhere. Go on!

*PHEBE hesitates, then exits. AMALIA stands look-  
ing into the darkness for a moment, then goes back into  
her room. AUGUSTUS steps out of hiding, holding a  
knife. The CONSPIRATORS can be heard in the  
background.*

LEADER Prove you haven't betrayed the cause!

BENJAMIN Kill them both—

HENRY — your mistress  
and her foolish husband.

AUGUSTUS That's fate for you, Amalia.

*Looks at the knife.*

That white throat, bared for kisses...  
one quick pass, and it will flow  
redder than a thousand roses.

Everything was so simple before!  
Hate and be hated.  
But this—love or freedom—  
is the devil's choice.

*Steeling himself, he heads for LOUIS' room. Lights up on  
LOUIS, who is sitting with his right hand tucked nervously  
in the lap of his dressing gown. His back is to AUGUSTUS,  
who enters stealthily.*

LOUIS *(Startling AUGUSTUS, who stops in his tracks.)*

No-one has come through that door  
for years. You're the new one, aren't you?

*Unseen by AUGUSTUS, he pulls a pistol out of his lap.*

A wild nigger, I hear. Amalia's latest indulgence.

AUGUSTUS So this is the great white master,  
trembling in his dressing gown!

LOUIS            Beware of the Moon in the house of Mars!

*Stands up and turns, hiding the pistol as he and AUGUSTUS face off.*

The stars can tell you everything—  
war and pestilence, love and betrayal.

AUGUSTUS      War? Yes, this is war. Say your prayers,  
Massa—you have a hard ride ahead of you.

LOUIS            A hard ride, me? I don't think so.

*Aims his pistol at AUGUSTUS.*

A man should be able to kill  
when he has to, don't you agree?

*Startled by this unexpected turn of events, AUGUSTUS freezes. LOUIS reaches for the bottle on the table with his other hand.*

Perhaps you'd care for a bit of bourbon  
to warm your way?

AUGUSTUS      *(Trying to compose himself)*

You can't stop what's coming  
over the hill.

LOUIS            *(Shakes his pistol at AUGUSTUS, shouting.)*

This time I won't leave things up to chance!

*Muttering.*

What a fool I was!  
I should have smothered the bastard  
right there in the basket.  
That's the man's way.

AUGUSTUS      Basket? What basket?

LOUIS            Amalia's of course. Amalia's basket.  
It was—

*Slight pause; distracted.*

The doctor refused to kill it.  
What else was there to do?

*AUGUSTUS lunges, knocking the gun from LOUIS' hand and overpowering him.*

AUGUSTUS      There goes your last chance, fool!

*Drags LOUIS by the collar toward center-stage.*

This basket—what did it look like?

LOUIS            What do you care?

AUGUSTUS      *(Holds the knife to LOUIS' throat.)*

Enough to slit your throat.

LOUIS            *(Whimpering.)*

Oh, it was beautiful! White wicker,  
lined in blue satin, tiny red rosettes  
marching along the rim...

AUGUSTUS      *(Slowly lets go of LOUIS' collar.)*

And your spurs slipped right inside.

LOUIS            Amalia's Christmas present.  
Oh, was the good doctor relieved!  
"It's a miracle," he said,  
"but the child's still alive!"



AUGUSTUS      And still lives to this day.  
Spurs bite into a horse's belly—  
think what they can do  
to a newborn child!

*Rips open his shirt.*

LOUIS            You?

AUGUSTUS      All my life I tried to imagine  
what you would look like.  
Would you be tall or stooped over?  
Blue eyes, or brown?  
Would you dress in white linen  
or dash around in a dusty greatcoat?  
to think that your blood flows  
through my veins—

*Advances on LOUIS, who staggers back into the chair.*

LOUIS            My blood?

AUGUSTUS      When I think of you forcing  
your wretched seed into my mother,  
I want to rip you—

LOUIS            Me, your father?  
You think I'm your father?

AUGUSTUS      I heard it from your own lips.

LOUIS            *(Bursts into laughter.)*

Of course! Of course!  
The stars said it all:  
who is born into violence

shall live to fulfill it.  
Who shuns violence  
will die by the sword.

AUGUSTUS      *(Pulls LOUIS from the chair, knife at this throat.)*

What happened to my mother?  
What did you do to her?

LOUIS            *(In a crafty voice.)*

I haven't touched her since.  
Ask Amalia—  
she runs this plantation.  
She knows your mother better than anyone!

AUGUSTUS      Amalia? Of course!  
Missy wanted the bastard child dead.  
Now I understand: It's an old story.

LOUIS            You understand nothing.

*A sudden shout outside; the revolt has begun. Both men freeze, listening.*

AUGUSTUS      It's time!

*Stabs LOUIS as the sounds of the revolt grow.*

LOUIS            You were there... all along...

AUGUSTUS      *(Letting LOUIS' body drop.)*

So, Amalia—and to think  
I tried to bargain for your life!

SLAVES           Freedom! Freedom! Selah! Selah!

*AUGUSTUS heads for AMALIA's room; lights come up on AMALIA, who has stepped into the hall.*

AMALIA Augustus, there you are! What's happening?  
I called Ticey, but she won't come!

AUGUSTUS *(Backing her into the room.)*

I thought you didn't care  
what happened out there.

AMALIA Why are they shouting?  
Why doesn't Jones make them stop?

AUGUSTUS I reckon the dead don't make good overseers.  
Your slaves are rebelling, Missy.  
*Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité!*

AMALIA *(Stares at him uncomprehendingly, then runs to the window.)*

Rebelling? My slaves?  
Augustus, make them stop!  
They'll listen to you!

AUGUSTUS Like I listened to you?  
You led me into your parlour  
like a dog on a leash. Sit, dog!  
Heel! Care for a sherry? A fairy tale?

AMALIA No, you were different!  
You were—

AUGUSTUS *(Grabs her.)*

No more conversation!  
Where is my mother?

AMALIA Your mother? How would I know a thing like that?

AUGUSTUS Your husband confessed.

AMALIA *(Aware of danger on all sides, seeking escape.)*

What could Louis have to confess?

AUGUSTUS A shrewd piece of planning,  
to destroy him with his own son  
after you had failed to destroy  
the son himself!  
But you had to be patient.  
Twenty years you had to wait  
before you could buy me back.

AMALIA Louis, your father? You must be joking!

AUGUSTUS Shall I help you remember?  
You supplied the basket yourself—

AMALIA Basket?

AUGUSTUS — lined in blue satin, trimmed with rosettes—

AMALIA *Red* rosettes?

AUGUSTUS Monsieur LaFarge agreed  
to sell his own baby—but that wasn't enough,  
was it? You wanted the child dead.  
So you slipped a pair of riding spurs  
into the sewing basket.  
And you know the kind of scars  
spurs leave, Missy. Like crowns...  
or exploding suns.

AMALIA My God.

AUGUSTUS The woman who patched me up  
kept that basket as a reminder.

AMALIA No...

AUGUSTUS (*Shakes her.*)

What did you do with my mother?  
Who is she?

*Slaps her.*

Tell me!

AMALIA (*Wrenches free to face him; her voice trembling.*)

So you want to know who your mother is?  
You think, if I tell you,  
the sad tale of your life  
will find its storybook ending?  
Well then, this will be my last story—  
and when I have finished,  
you will wish you had never  
stroked my hair or kissed my mouth.  
You will wish you had no eyes to see  
or ears to hear. You will wish  
you had never been born.

AUGUSTUS I've heard grown men scream,  
watched as the branding iron  
sank into their flesh. I've seen  
pregnant women slit open like melon,  
runaways staked to the ground  
and whipped until  
they floated in their own blood and piss.  
Don't think you can frighten me, Missy:  
Nothing your lips can tell  
can be worse than what  
these eyes have seen.

AMALIA Bravo! What a speech!  
But you've seen nothing.

*Backs up to appraise him, smiling, slightly delirious.*

That same expression! How could I forget?  
My lover then stood as tall as you now.

AUGUSTUS Your lover?

*PHEBE bursts in.*

PHEBE They're coming, Augustus!  
They're coming to see if you did  
what you were told! Oh, Augustus—  
you were supposed to kill her!

AUGUSTUS (*Shaking himself into action, threatening AMALIA.*)

My mother, who is my mother?  
Out with it!

AMALIA Phebe, you tell him.  
You were there.  
Everyone was there—  
under my window,  
waiting for news...

PHEBE That... was the night  
we all came to wait out the birth.

AUGUSTUS What birth?

AMALIA Hector on the porch.

AUGUSTUS What about Hector?

*More shouts outside; compelled by the urgency of the  
growing revolution, PHEBE tries to distract AUG-  
USTUS.*

PHEBE            There's no time!

AUGUSTUS        (*Grabs AMALIA as if to slit her throat.*)

                    What about Hector?

AMALIA            Chick in a basket, going to market!  
                    They said you died, poor thing.  
                    That's why Hector went to the swamp.

*AUGUSTUS stares desperately at her. PHEBE  
                    turns, thunderstruck.*

AUGUSTUS        Hector?

AMALIA            But you didn't die. You're here...

*Reaches for him; he draws back.*

PHEBE            (*Looks from AMALIA to AUGUSTUS, horror  
                    growing, recites tonelessly.*)

                    Stepped on a pin, the pin bent,  
                    and that's the way the story went.

AMALIA            (*Sadly, in a small voice.*)

                    Silk for my prince, and a canopy of roses!  
                    You were so tiny—so sweet and tiny.  
                    I didn't know about the spurs.

PHEBE            You sold your own child.  
                    Hector's child.

AUGUSTUS        Hector...

*The knife slips from his fingers.*

AMALIA            I was trying to save you!

AUGUSTUS        Save me?

AMALIA            (*Extremely agitated.*)

                    I felt like they had hacked out my heart.  
                    But I wouldn't let them see me cry.

AUGUSTUS        (*Wrestling with the horror.*)

                    You? My mother?

AMALIA            (*Clutching herself.*)

                    It was like missing an arm or a leg  
                    that pains and throbs, even though  
                    you can look right where it was  
                    and see there's nothing left.

*She stops abruptly.*

AUGUSTUS        My own mother gave me away.  
                    But I found my way back...  
                    a worm crawling into its hole.

AMALIA            For weeks afterwards  
                    my breasts ached with milk.

AUGUSTUS        (*Sinking to his knees.*)

                    Better I had bled to death in that basket.

*A great shout goes up as the insurrectionists gain en-  
                    try to the main house. AMALIA takes advantage  
                    of the ensuing distraction to pick up the knife.*

PHEBE            Augustus!

AUGUSTUS      *(Passive.)*  
  
The Day of Redemption is here.

PHEBE      They'll kill you, Augustus!

AUGUSTUS      Time to be free.

AMALIA      Poor baby! I thought  
I could keep you from harm—  
and here you are,  
right in harm's way.

*PHEBE gasps; AMALIA stabs herself as AUGUSTUS, alerted by PHEBE's gasp, jumps up, too late to stop her. The room turns red as the out-buildings go up in flames.*

AUGUSTUS      Amalia!  
  
*Catching her as she falls.*

No...  
  
*Calling out in anguish.*

Eshu Elewa ogo gbogbo!  
  
*The chanting of the rebelling SLAVES grows louder.*

PHEBE      Oh, Augustus...

AUGUSTUS      *(Lays AMALIA's body down, gently.)*  
  
I had the sun and the moon  
once. And the stars

with their cool gaze.  
Now it's dark.

PHEBE      It's alright. You'll be alright now.

AUGUSTUS      *(Staring as if trying to make out something in the distance.)*

Who's there? How she stares,  
like a cat at midnight!

PHEBE      Nobody's there, Augustus.

AUGUSTUS      Don't you see her?

*PHEBE shakes her head, terrified.*

Look, she's hidden behind a tree.

PHEBE      Oh, Augus—

AUGUSTUS      Shh! You'll frighten her. There's another one—  
he's been flogged and pickled in brine.  
That skinny boy ate dirt; that's why he staggers.  
So many of them, limping, with brands  
on their cheeks! Oh, I can't bear it!

PHEBE      Come along, now.

AUGUSTUS      *(Calling out to the "ghosts".)*

I came to save you!

*The SLAVES burst in, brandishing bayonets and torches.*

BENJAMIN      He did it.

SLAVES

Selah! We're free!

*The SLAVES lift AUGUSTUS onto their shoulders. The SLAVE WOMAN/NARRATOR stands at the door, holding a torch, taking in the scene.*

SLAVES

Freedom, freedom, freedom...

*The "Freedom!" chant grows louder and more persistent as the SLAVES parade out of the room, AUGUSTUS on their shoulders; PHEBE follows them, sobbing. SCYLLA takes the torch from the SLAVE WOMAN/NARRATOR and sets fire to the window's billowing curtains as she slowly straightens up to her full height.*

*Blackout.*

*The End.*