



PURITY

by

Germaine Shames

"Mine is the whole majestic past;
and mine is the shining future."

Mary Antin

In the aftermath of The Calamities, a tiny remnant of survivors takes refuge in the ruins of an old convent. Their mission: to restore the Mother Tongue to pristine purity and perpetuate the writings of three 19th century writers: Mary Shelley, Mary Seacole, and Mary Antin – known hereafter as The Marys, a matriarchal Trinity with the wisdom to re-make a ravaged world. When a lone scrounger plants herself on the convent's doorstep, the survivors' rigid beliefs and way of life are thrown into chaos.

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Cast of Characters

Apple: a low-caste scrounger turned independent thinker; late teens to twenties; female

Luna: a big-hearted disciple protective of those she loves; thirty-ish (middle-aged in the epilogue); female or nonbinary

Man: a brawny overworked servant kept in ignorance; twenties; male

The Seer: a clairvoyant spiritual leader who wears a patch over one eye; middle-aged or older; female

Leaping Water: a disciple with deep emotional scars and anger issues; middle aged; female or nonbinary

Adam: Apple and the Man's eloquent son; late teens; male

A note on doubling: the roles of Man and Adam may be doubled. Cast size need not exceed five.

Scene

The ruins of an old convent in a world devastated by natural disasters. Set pieces and costumes are makeshift combinations of salvaged odds-and-ends from different eras.

Time

Murky. Sometime in the future.

ACT ONE OF ONE

PROLOGUE

*A montage of images
chronicling Earth's passage
from the Before Times through
The Calamities into the After
Times.*

ADAM (V.O.)

According to my mother, one exceedingly wise woman, first, there were the Before Times – times unimaginable to those of us alive now, who know only salvage. A half-toppled tombstone. A snippet of melody. A gorge where a few wildflowers bloom for a fortnight before armies of pack rats sniff them out. History has a name for the era in whose ruins we now wander: The Calamities. Three calamities in succession, beginning with The Fires, followed by The Floods, and finally, just as the prophets and soothsayers went mute from sheer terror, The Quakes. My mother survived the last of these. Starved, orphaned and alone, she bellied out from the rubble into a fractured world, where men fed on one another and the earth moaned and cracked open like a cosmic egg.

SCENE ONE

*The crude convent kitchen,
pieced together from cast-offs
of different eras. Luna,
Leaping Water and the Seer
busy themselves at mundane
tasks – meal preparation,
laundry, cleaning. Outside,
the cry of a raptor. A few
hard RAPS at the door bring
all activity to an abrupt
halt. Luna peers out through a
peephole.*

LUNA

A scrounger.

SEER

A scrounger? But how did it breach the wall? Has it not heard the stories?

LUNA

(without opening the door, repeats the question to the unwanted visitor)

Have you not heard the stories?

APPLE (O.S.)

Nah, wha'?

LEAPING WATER

A scrounger AND an abbreviator.

APPLE (O.S.)

Food.

SEER

We are duty-bound by the Marys to sate the creature's hunger. Feed it and send it on its way.

LEAPING WATER

(lowers her voice)

Pardon, Seer, but does experience not teach us that a scrounger, once sated, has a tendency to continue... scrounging?

SEER

(lowers her voice)

For that, we have the stories. The Marys do not suffer parasites. Feed it, sister Luna - and see that it does not dawdle.

The Seer and Leaping Water return to their chores. Luna takes a blackened pot from the stove and partially opens the door. Apple extends a dented metal mess bowl toward Luna, who scantily ladles soup into it. Apple, ravenous, begins to slurp it up.

LUNA

Stop! One must first praise the Marys. Hunger is no excuse for poor manners.

APPLE

The Marys?

LUNA

Our Trinity. Mary Shelley. Mary Seacole. Mary Antin. Writers of books. I don't suppose you know what a book is?

Apple shakes her head "no" and begins again to slurp.

LUNA

Hunger is a terrible affliction, indeed, not only of the body but the soul. Repeat after me: "Praise the Marys."

APPLE

(pauses only long
enough to hurriedly
parrot the words)

Praise the Marys.

LUNA

If only I could get through to you...

APPLE

Writers of books?

LUNA

Long before The Floods, The Fires, The Quakes our Marys looked out at the world with wonder, and possessing a wizard-like command of the Mother Tongue, set in words the revelations gleaned in their three extraordinary lives — each startlingly different from the others, and yet, in aggregate, a compendium of all the wisdom we survivors need to remake the world.

Apple, laser-focused on the bowl of soup, slurps the bowl dry.

LUNA

I don't suppose you've understood a word I've said. Nor do you lament your ignorance.

APPLE
 (holds out the empty
 bowl)

More.

LUNA
 (partially refills
 the bowl)

I am now duty-bound to tell you "the stories." Did you not know that this convent is haunted by a creature with the jaws of a whale and the claws of a jaguar? A creature so blood-thirsty and merciless that, even after he drains the blood from a mortal's veins, then proceeds to mince your eyeballs, pickle your entrails, and chop you into little pieces with a dull axe.

APPLE

Barf.

LUNA
Maleducada! As I was saying... to this day, the creature preys on foolish young women like you, who ignoring "the stories," show up to beg on the convent's doorstep. My advice to you is, leave without delay and never look back. You have neither the constitution nor the sensibility for this accursed place.

APPLE

You lie.

LUNA
 The cheek! I might, occasionally, exaggerate, but lie outright? Well, perhaps just a bit — but only when the Seer commands me to. I can't very well refuse.
 (miffed)

Finish up!

APPLE

More.

LUNA
 (grudgingly ladles a
 little more)

I don't suppose you have a name?

APPLE

Apple.

LUNA

Demanding, aren't you? The harvest was sorely wanting this year.

APPLE

My name.

(thumb to chest)

Apple.

LUNA

Ah. I am called Luna, a name given to me by my ancestors when life was ordered according to the phases of the moon — when to sow and when to reap, when to hibernate and when to wander.

APPLE

(slurps)

More?

LUNA

Enough! The Seer does not suffer gluttons. Since The Quakes, we have but one cow and one goat. The milpa burned to ash in The Fires. The tubers rotted in The Floods. Does it not occur to you that we, too, endure hunger? The Seer has lately had a dream, a dream in which every plant, every tree, every last green bud withered away to a lifeless gray nothingness. We are on half rations. To discharge our daily toils with a half-full belly can feel like no life at all. If it weren't for the Marys... heaven help us, you might have come upon three cadavers rather than three living disciples with scruples enough to offer you sustenance.

APPLE

Sucks.

LUNA

Language! We speak in full sentences here and observe proper grammar. Our reverence for the Mother Tongue is exceeded only by our devotion to the Marys.

APPLE

(parrots)

Mary Shelley. Mary Seacole. Mary Antin.

LUNA
 (eyebrows raised, she
 pours a scant few
 drops of soup into
 Apple's bowl)

Here, have a bit more.

APPLE
 More words... I want. Like you.

LUNA
 So, your hunger extends beyond your bottomless belly.

APPLE
 The Marys... word bitches.

LUNA
 Language!

*Apple, confused, gestures an
 apology.*

LUNA
 I believe the word you're looking for is "women." The Marys
 were three remarkable women of a bygone era whose history
 might otherwise have been lost to us, but for The Miracle.

APPLE
 Miracle?

LUNA
 A life-altering stroke of good fortune. Picture it:

*As Luna recounts the miracle,
 the three Sisters reenact it.
 RUMBLE and ROAR of an
 earthquake. The sisters jockey
 for a foothold, then crouch
 low to the ground with their
 arms shielding their heads.*

LUNA
 For what seemed an eternity, the ground shook, toppling what
 remained of our plaster saints.

Leaping Water screams.

SEER

Fear not, Sisters! Let the old idols fall that new ones may emerge! Let this quake cleanse us of false notions born of ignorance and the worship of self. Let the world be made new!

LEAPING WATER

(points with a
quaking hand)

The chancel!

The women warily get to their feet and approach the cracked-open chancel. The Seer retrieves a wrapped bundle and unties the crude lanyard that holds it together.

SEER

Tomes! Three of them, as prophesied. Our holy Trinity.

(raises her arms to
the heavens in
gratitude)

Gezundheit!

APPLE

Gezundheit?

LUNA

A blessing of the highest order – or so we gather. The particular tomes dedicated to precisely defining each and every utterance known to humankind vanished aeons ago. The Seer aspires to craft such a tome herself one day. For now, we make due with approximations.

APPLE

So many.

LUNA

Barely enough. How else to know the Marys? From their stories, we deduce that people lived in, what were called, "families," and might travel abroad or even migrate when it suited them, employing various forms of transport, such as carriages, trains, steamships...

APPLE

Yeet.

LUNA

Yes, well. If you like, I could speak to the Seer of your uncommon hankering to know the Marys. But I warn you: Discipleship is not a commitment to be taken lightly. Mastery of the Mother Tongue requires the utmost application – years of it – followed by painstaking study of the tomes. I myself, having dedicated all my days and all my nights to the Marys for these past seven years, only now begin to fathom the depth and breadth of their wisdom.

APPLE

Apple want. Mary Shelley. Mary Seacole. Mary Antin. Like you.

LUNA

You poor starving creature! Blessed Marys, are we not called to lift this wretch out of the abyss of ignorance in which she has wallowed through no fault of her own? Despair not, Sister Apple. The Seer, in her mercy, will surely consider your plea.

Apple, visibly moved, kneels and embraces Luna around the knees – clings to her in this position until Luna, vaguely embarrassed, disengages. Apple fades into the shadows. Luna turns to her Sisters to plead on Apple's behalf.

LUNA

The scrounger hungers for knowledge and has earnestly asked to join us in our study of the Marys.

SEER

You told her of the Marys?! A scrounger?

LUNA

I began with the stories, naturally, but she did not evince the slightest fear. Indeed, my fabrications seemed to amuse her.

SEER

The creature lingers?

LUNA

At the wall, Seer. These past six hours.

SEER

The obstinacy! Feed her a second time, I shall not. I do not suffer those without use.

LUNA

So I told her.

SEER

I sense disharmony.

LEAPING WATER

As I have not been invited to opine on the subject...

SEER

Unburden yourself, Sister Leaping Water.

LEAPING WATER

May I remind you that to study the Marys is a vocation of the highest order. What makes the creature worthy? Can we trust it?

SEER

Sister Luna?

LUNA

As we spent only a short time together, and as her vocabulary consists solely of monosyllables and expletives, I cannot claim to know her mind, but her... essence; her essence did not strike me as dark or malign, but rather... unformed. Who better than the Marys to shape and perfect a malleable soul?

LEAPING WATER

But is it *worthy*? Has it the slightest comprehension of what the Marys embodied in their mortal lives – truth, service to others, self-betterment...

LUNA

I cannot say with certainty, and yet I sense a spark of... spiritual yearning. Though a scrounger, she is more than viscera and dark urgings. Look at her. Is that the face of a pillaging beast?

LEAPING WATER

If you don't mind my saying so, Sister... You, being of soft heart, are easy prey for such as it. Whereas I, who have moved among its like in the After Times, know only too well what such fallen beings are capable of.

SEER

Do tell.

LEAPING WATER

Since you insist... As I prepared my poor grandmother's body for the funeral pyre, as was our custom, a band of scroungers swept in and stripped the cadaver bare. I speak not only of her shroud, but of her flesh – leaving for last the marrow of her bones.

LUNA

The horror!

LEAPING WATER

The indignity.

SEER

And yet the Marys urge us toward compassion. How desperate must those scroungers have been to sink to the level of jackals! Are they not to be pitied?

LEAPING WATER

Pitied? Perhaps. Given shelter? At your peril.

LUNA

I cannot but think of Mary Shelley's monster... how the poor creature was driven to unspeakable acts by the crushing isolation that was his lot. Will we now inflict the same suffering on a lone wanderer who hasn't tongue enough to plead her case? A girl, orphaned most likely, who's not known a crumb of kindness in all her wretched existence. And so I say again: Look at her. The rags on her back. The hollow of despair in her tired eyes.

LEAPING WATER

What I see, ALL I see, is a scrounger.

BLACKOUT

SCENE TWO

The sisters, assembled in the kitchen, stand appraising Apple. The Seer palpates Apple's face and shoulders. Apple, confused but compliant, submits.

SEER

The Sisters have agreed... unanimously –
 (Leaping Water grits
 her teeth)

To impart to you the greatest gift ever conceived by the human mind and soul: our holy Trinity of tomes. Our blessed Marys. Do you even begin to realize the immensity of this gift? Most likely not, but one day you will, and when that day comes, you will remember this moment, these faces, and drop to your knees in awe.

*The man enters carrying an
 armload of chopped wood. Apple
 eyes him with curiosity.*

SEER

(points)

Leave it there.

*The man does as he is told and
 exits.*

SEER

As I was saying, Sister Apple –

LEAPING WATER

You waste your breath. Clearly, the creature understands nothing. One has only to see the vapid expression on its coarse countenance.

APPLE

I understand. The Marys... lights in the sky, only with words.

LUNA

She understands. In her way.

LEAPING WATER

(under her breath)

I'd sooner train a dog.

SEER

Let us proceed. The blackboard, Sister Luna.

*Luna either carries or wheels
 in a battered old blackboard.*

*On it, the Seer writes,
"Purity of the Mother Tongue."*

SEER

You see here the three tomes, each a treasure trove of enlightenment and inspiration. The Marys, Earth angels who lived in the Before Times, had a preternatural command of the English language and knew its power. Did Mary Antin herself not say in this declaration of love –

(finds the passage in
Promised Land and
reads aloud with
great solemnity)

"I am glad that the Americans began by being Englishmen, for thus did I come to inherit this beautiful language in which I think. It seems to me that in any other language happiness is not so sweet, logic is not so clear. I am not sure that I could believe in my neighbors as I do if I thought about them in un-English words. I could almost say that my conviction of immortality is bound up with the English of its promise."

APPLE

English good.

LUNA

Yes, Apple, English good. Or rather, English IS good.

SEER

More broadly, language exalts the receptive intelligence.

LEAPING WATER

What supreme idiocy! Can you not see what a futile exercise you undertake? You may seek to elevate it, but already it reduces us to its level. *English good. Illiteracy bad.* Soon we will crawl on all-fours back to the cave.

*Leaping Water throws up her
hands and storms out.*

LUNA

You mustn't mind Sister Leaping Water.

SEER

Patience has never been her virtue.

APPLE

Mean bitch.

LUNA

Language!

(to the the Seer in a
tone of entreaty)

She means nothing by it. It's simply a pair of words she
heard somewhere.

SEER

Perhaps Sister Leaping Water was right. Perhaps the task is
too mammoth, the student too feeble.

APPLE

I learn. I have a use.

SEER

Very well, Apple, we will endeavor to teach you – for one
month. If, in that time, you master fifty words of the
Mother Tongue, you may count on our diligent tutelage for
however long it takes to make a model disciple of you.

APPLE

Praise the Marys.

LUNA

Praise Gutenberg.

*The Seer writes on the
blackboard, "Life as Service."*

SEER

Let us begin with the life of Mary Seacole, our Creole
Sister of the wonderful adventures in many lands –

(opens to page one
and recites aloud)

"I was born in the town of Kingston, on the island of
Jamaica, some time in the present century. As a female, and
a widow, I may be well excused giving the precise date of
this important event. But I do not mind confessing that the
century and myself were both young together, and that we
have grown side by side into age and consequence..."

*The Seer fades into the
shadows. A brief musical
interludes suggests a time
lapse.*

LUNA

How are you coming along with your fifty words?

APPLE

My numbers stop at ten.

LUNA

Oh dear, I hadn't thought of that. Fifty is five times ten.

Demonstrates fifty with her two hands, curling and uncurling her fingers five times.

APPLE

That is many words.

LUNA

It may seem so at first, but they accumulate, and before long are rolling off your tongue in the hundreds, or even thousands.

APPLE

I know one: consequence.

LUNA

Such a weighty word! Do you know what it means?

Apple sheepishly shakes her head. The man enters, carrying two buckets brimming with water. The exertion this costs him is visible/audible.

LUNA

(to the man, without making eye contact)

We're running low on honey.

The man vaguely acknowledges the remark and exits. Apple gazes after him.

LUNA

As for your words... best to select them with care where the Seer is concerned and be prepared to define them.

Consequence has too many meanings to concern yourself with
(MORE)

LUNA (cont'd)

so early in your study of the Mother Tongue. Better to begin with small, pinned-down words, like bowl or nose.

APPLE

I like big words. I want to speak like you.

LUNA

If that is your wish. Memorize this passage by our Semitic Mary and you will have your fifty words: "We are not born all at once, but by bits. The body first, and the spirit later; and the birth and growth of the spirit, in those who are attentive to their own inner life, are slow and exceedingly painful. Our mothers are racked with the pains of our physical birth; we ourselves suffer the longer pains of our spiritual growth."

APPLE

Body, birth, growth, spirit... I like. More.

LUNA

Mother. Sister. Friend. Memorize a few each day and you will have your fifty and be one of us. Forever.

APPLE

"We are not born all at once, but by bits. The body first" -

LUNA

"And the spirit later."

APPLE

I think, Luna, I have always a spirit, but did not know what to call it.

*As Luna mulls Apple's words,
Apple fades into the shadows.
The Seer appears.*

LUNA

She says the most extraordinary things - and in so few words. She might be a mystic.

SEER

Since The Quakes, everyone is a mystic. What we need is a vessel. Summon the child. I must speak with her most urgently.

LUNA

Has she done something wrong, Seer, shirked the Marys, heaven forbid, or regressed to her savage origins?

SEER

To the contrary. Her hunger for the Marys is exceeded only by her prodigious capacity for learning. Her vocabulary grows apace. Moreover, she is of an obedient nature and neither questions nor resists our tutelage. So far has she come, in fact, that time is ripe to ask of her a... *special* service.

LUNA

Oh?

SEER

Language, Sister. You will kindly complete the sentence.

LUNA

Oh... I'll be interested to learn more about this "special service" – whenever the Seer deems fit to impart such knowledge.

SEER

Said service being of a personal nature, I must first discuss the matter with our newest disciple.

LUNA

As is right and proper, Seer. I shall not mention it again.

SEER

Praise the Marys, and may their words resonate for the ages. Gezundheit.

LUNA

Gezundheit.

SCENE THREE

A stable stall cushioned with hay and a woven blanket. The man sits with his legs outstretched and back braced against a crate, playing an old recorder or harmonica. Apple, surveying the stall and the man with thinly veiled

fascination, approaches. He stops playing.

APPLE

So, this is where you sleep?

MAN

I must mind the cow.

APPLE

Of course, the cow, the field, the walls... I've seen how they work you from dawn to star-rise.

(takes his hands in hers and examines their callouses)

Your hands!

(takes a small bottle from her apron pocket and applies ointment to his hands)

A few drops of this healing ointment... My mother was a healer – or so I've heard told.

MAN

A witch?

APPLE

Hold your tongue, pray. If the Sisters were to hear you...

MAN

You change. They teach you.

APPLE

Yes, praise the Marys. Under their tutelage, I have become a living repository of beauty and wisdom – wisdom bequeathed to us by our sacred Trinity of goddesses.

MAN

The Marys?

APPLE

Yes. But you mustn't speak their names in the presence of the others. You're their man, after all, and not meant to know such things.

*The Man queries her with a
glance.*

APPLE

As the tomes make manifest, men must be kept in ignorance,
lest they create monsters.

MAN

Why me create monster?

APPLE

It's just what men do. Perhaps they don't mean to, but — one
need only consider Dr. Frankenstein, the malevolence he
loosed on total innocents, on even a helpless child —

MAN

Too many words.

APPLE

Words are necessary. One could never have too many of them.

MAN

(lumbers to his feet)

Something you need?

APPLE

No — well, yes.

MAN

Which?

APPLE

Something quite beyond your mundane tasks. You see...
For the sake of the Marys, insomuch as their teachings
elevate humankind, the Seer has sent me to receive your
seed. There is a consensus among the disciples... clearly
the right and proper thing to do is procreate, therefore I
humbly request that you inseminate me.

MAN

Too many words.

APPLE

Must you make this so hard?!

MAN

Just say.

APPLE

Will you lie with me, sir?

(lifts her skirt)

Even had the Seer not ordered me here... I daresay you cut a handsome figure with your broad shoulders, your chiseled jawline... I can find little fault in you, as you have always conducted yourself like a gentleman and practiced passable personal hygiene.

(steadily losing her
nerve, awaits his
response - nothing)

Does my body not awaken the beast in you? Do you find me in some way unsuitable for carnal indulgence?

(lowers her skirt)

Alas, I've been sent on a fool's errand. Your cruel indifference turns ice whatever womanly ardor I might have felt for you - for any man. I expire from shame.

MAN

TOO MANY WORDS.

APPLE

You truly don't understand. In what dark cave have they kept you?

MAN

(points between her
legs)

Show me again.

APPLE

You DO like me, then?

The man bundles Apple into his arms and lays her gently on the blanket.

BLACKOUT

BRIEF MUSICAL
INTERLUDE

When the lights come up, Apple is in the kitchen doing chores with the rest of the Sisters. There is a subtle change in her, as if in the space of

*weeks she has passed from
adolescence into womanhood.*

LEAPING WATER

Pardon my asking, Apple, but how is it that you stay so plump on half-rations? Could it be — not to cast aspersions — that our Man shows you special favor?

LUNA

Leaping Water! Kindness.

LEAPING WATER

I merely observed that Apple bears a certain resemblance to her edible namesake, as regards her contours.

SEER

Apple, come hither.

*Apple complies. The Seer
palpates Apple's belly and
then extends her hands upward
like two antennae.*

SEER

Blessed Marys, our sister disciple is with child!

LUNA

But how?

SEER

I sent her to our man with explicit instructions — the details of which are better kept between Sister Apple and myself. Suffice it to say that our man responded as men do.

LUNA

Felicitations, Apple, on having served your purpose. The mortification you had to have endured!

APPLE

(stifles a smile)

You'll not hear me complain.

LUNA

Of course not, a pure soul bears her travails in silence.

LEAPING WATER

And the child, Seer? Are we to be blessed with a girl?

SEER

The child's sex cannot yet be divined. That is to be revealed at the next full moon. On that night, the Marys will send me a vision, and we shall either feast or atone.

APPLE

But is not *any* child a blessing?

SEER

A male child too, may have his uses. As the discipleship grows, we will require more wood, more water. A man might poach a sheep –

LEAPING WATER

Wool!

SEER

Or dig a well. Surely, we would all benefit from such service.

APPLE

And *this* child – were he to be born male?

SEER

The teachings, Sister Apple, are clear: Men have their use, and women theirs. Full stop. And now, as the night of revelation approaches, let us pray most fervently for the blessing of a girl child, that she may be a pure and steadfast vessel for the Marys when we first disciples are long gone.

LUNA

To new life!

LEAPING WATER

Praise the Marys.

SEER

Thank you, Apple. You have done well, and for the duration of your parturiency, will partake of full rations. Any objection, Sisters?

Leaping Water purses her lips and holds her tongue. Luna places a protective hand on Apple's shoulder.

The Sisters FREEZE. Apple crosses the stage to the Man's stall and finds him napping. Gently, she shakes him awake.

APPLE

I bring news, sir.

MAN

News? Good or bad?

APPLE

I suppose that depends on one's aspirations. I, who never aspired to motherhood, find myself quite at a loss to say.

MAN

My seed grows in you?

APPLE

(nods)

Does this... *development* please you?

MAN

(moved to tears)

A father — *me*.

APPLE

Well, since you seem to be taking it well... I feared that you might be cross with me.

MAN

Never.

APPLE

I suppose, now that we've served our use, we need not continue to — you know.

MAN

Why not? If you like.

APPLE

I *do* like, though I'm not meant to — at least, that's the impression I've gotten from the Sisters.

MAN

Fuck the Sisters.

APPLE

Language!

MAN

The Sisters – what do *they* know? Dried-up old hags.

APPLE

Kindness.

MAN

You've seen how they treat me. Is *that* kindness?

APPLE

I no longer know, so full to bursting am I with other people's words.

MAN

Inside these walls, there is only we two. I want you. Day and night. *Now.*

The man reaches for Apple. She resists at first, but soon presses into his embrace.

APPLE

It won't hurt the baby?

The man gestures a "no."

MAN

Not everything the Marys teach. Some things the body already knows.

Apple lowers herself onto the blanket.

APPLE

It will be our secret.

BLACKOUT

BRIEF MUSICAL
INTERLUDE

Luna enters the kitchen carrying a hula hoop.

LEAPING WATER

Whatever are you dragging in now?

LUNA

I haven't the slightest idea. A wheel of some sort? Our man may have a use for it.

LEAPING WATER

Apple's with him, you know, your darling little scrounger. In that pestilent stall with him – at all hours.

LUNA

Why must you malign her so? Has she interfered with you in some way? Provoked you?

LEAPING WATER

Its very existence is a provocation. The presence of such as it at our table.

LUNA

She earns her place the same as the rest of us.

LEAPING WATER

By spreading its legs for a filthy ruffian? I rue the day it conceives. Is it not enough that I tolerate Apple's coarseness and lax tongue? Must I now endure the scrounging whore's spawn?

LUNA

Kindness!

LEAPING WATER

Kindness be damned! I couldn't care less if your beloved Apple pitches headfirst down a well. And if you're thinking of ratting me out to the Seer, I warn you –

The Seer enters.

SEER

Raised voices? I sense disharmony.

LEAPING WATER

Not at all, Seer. Sister Luna and I were just remarking on the new crop of radishes.

LUNA

Yes, Seer, the radishes, how plump and flavorful they are.

SEER

Have you nothing better about which to discourse? Food, once ingested, may nourish the body, but does nothing to elevate the spirit. A relative, in fact, long dead now, once called gluttony a mortal sin.

LEAPING WATER

I once heard greed called such.

SEER

But we digress. I suggest, sisters, that you resolve your differences – where radishes are concerned – and adopt a more civil tone. If you'll excuse me...

The Seer exits. No sooner is she out of earshot than Leaping Water resumes her diatribe.

LEAPING WATER

I meant what I said. Holier-than-thou ignoramus.

LUNA

Cold-blooded, insufferable shrew.

LEAPING WATER

What did you call me?

LUNA

You heard me. If you were ever to harm Apple –

LEAPING WATER

What? Take its side and you, too, may find yourself down a well. Yes, I'd like that, the two of you mottled and bloated like the bottom-feeders you are.

LUNA

Stay away from her. You don't know what I'm capable of.

LEAPING WATER

(mockingly laughing)

You?

LUNA

Your fortress of dogma can't protect you. There IS such a thing as justice.

*Leaping Water laughs harder.
Heaving with laughter, she
walks off.*

SCENE FOUR

ADAM (V.O.)

My mother's future was decided on a full moon night. As the Seer palpated her steadily swelling belly, where I nestled, ignorant of the trials that awaited me in a world gone wrong, the heavens opened and rained down hailstones the size of clenched fists – or so my mother remembers it.

*SOUND of hail pummeling a tin
roof. The WHOOSH of wind.
APPLE reclines on the kitchen
table. The Seer lays hands on
Apple's stomach and begins to
babble in tongues. Luna and
Leaping Water steady her as
she sways on her feet.*

APPLE

What is she saying? Is the dear child all right?

LEAPING WATER

Hush.

*The seer continues speaking in
tongues, the words coming more
quickly. Her upper body
violently spasms. The
hailstorm stops. The Seer
comes to herself with a jolt.*

SEER

I have seen the child. Two arms, two legs, all the usual body parts.

APPLE

Then she's all right?

SEER

Not she, *he*.

LUNA

No!

SEER

A most unfortunate trick of fate, but take courage, Apple. You are still young and have many years of service yet to render.

Apple cradles her belly and looks from one face to another.

APPLE

I don't understand. Why would the Marys torment me thus?

SEER

It is not the Marys that inflict this hardship upon you, but some trickster demon set loose by the storm. The Marys do only good. Let them be your comfort.

LUNA

The Seer is right. Did Mary Antin not say, "Such creatures of accident are we, liable to a thousand deaths before we are born. But once we are here, we may create our own world, if we choose."

APPLE

You and I may choose, but a male child — what choice has *he*? How long until you reduce him to the level of an ox and work him to death?

LUNA

Apple!

SEER

Leave her be. She is stricken to the heart. We all are.

LEAPING WATER

Now that we know, I think we can all agree that Apple receive the same ration as the rest of us.

LUNA

Boy or girl, she is still with child and requires extra nourishment.

LEAPING WATER

What for? She carries a creature with the brain of a pack animal. Our cow does perfectly well on hay, and it, at least, gives milk.

LUNA

You compare our sister to a cow? What of the mother's welfare?

APPLE

Are you certain, Seer? The child is yet unformed. In my dreams, she answers to the name of Adaline. And how gently she swims within my womb. I barely feel her.

SEER

There's a girl child in your future, but this lump of flesh has a fifth appendage. You must stay strong, Sister, carry to term, and try again.

LEAPING WATER

What of her ration?

SEER

Are we not more than our entrails and appetites?!

(composes herself and
goes on)

Given this crushing turn of events, we will all, from this day forward, return to full rations. Now, let us read from the Marys, that we may put all pettiness and rancor behind us and get on with our duties. Sister Apple?

*The Seer hands Apple a book
and points to a passage.*

APPLE

(strains to read)

"How mutable are our feelings, and how strange is that clinging love we have of life even in the excess of misery" -

(chokes up)

I can't.

Apple hurriedly exits.

LIGHTS DOWN

*When the lights come up, Apple
is at the Man's stall,
watching him sleep. He awakens
and stretches.*

MAN

Why you didn't wake me?

APPLE

A man needs his rest.

MAN

You cry?

APPLE

(waves the question
away)

You have a son, sir. A healthy son.

MAN

A healthy child – that is good, no?

APPLE

(unconvinced)

Yes, of course.

MAN

Just say.

APPLE

The Sisters – what's to stop them from treating our son as they do you? Shall I rejoice at bringing into the world their next beast-of-burden?

MAN

Not *our* son! If those old battle-axes think they can tame him...

APPLE

I love you.

*The Man, not understanding,
shoots her a quizzical look.*

APPLE

I don't suppose you know what "love" means. I'm not certain that I do myself. A thousand times I have read the word, puzzling over its meaning and wondering why the Marys thought, so often, to employ it. And then I came to know YOU.

*The man can only upturn a
palm.*

APPLE

What we feel when we are together – that is love. You are love. Our son is love.

MAN

And what we *do*?

APPLE

When you touch me, I become one roiling sea of flesh.

MAN

But is there a word?

APPLE

I think not. If there were, surely it would be whispered in some secluded place, not set in ink for public consumption.

MAN

I think there was a word once. When I was boy size. Not a big word.

APPLE

Speak it, do.

MAN

Scrup.

APPLE

I don't know... It has a rather rustic ring to it.

MAN

(reaches for her)

Scrup.

APPLE

Well, if you like it, I suppose it is as good a word as any other.

The CREAK of a stable door opening.

LUNA (O.S.)

Sister Apple? It is I, Luna. Might we speak?

APPLE
 (in a whisper to the
 Man)

Hush. She mustn't know I'm here.

LUNA (O.S.)
 Sister Apple, *please*. The matter is of some urgency.

Apple motions for the man to remain silent, and then walks reluctantly to the stable's threshold to join Luna.

APPLE
 You won't tell the others?

LUNA
 Rest assured, Sister, that I have only the tenderest feelings for you and do not presume to judge you. But there is one who does not share my esteem, one who, on any pretext, might... I could not live with myself were any harm to come to you.

APPLE
 Sister Leaping Water.

LUNA
 The Calamities have poisoned her heart. Half her tribe incinerated, the rest devoured before her eyes. Like Mary Shelley's monster, she fumes and rages and cannot find peace. She has made threats against your person – murderous threats too ghastly to repeat.

APPLE
 Fear not, Sister. Leaping Water is naught but a bilious bully.

LUNA
 Please, promise me you won't go near the well. Allow me to escort you to and from the stables. It's best that you not be alone.

APPLE
 (cups her belly)
 I am not alone. I have a son now.

SCENE FIVE

The following morning. Luna and Leaping Water, avoiding contact, move about the convent kitchen completing routine tasks. The Seer enters with her usual air of propriety.

SEER

Another fine day, Sisters, to re-dedicate ourselves to the Marys.

LUNA

Praise the Marys.

LEAPING WATER

Praise the Marys.

SEER

Let us now break our fast.

LUNA

I beg pardon, Seer, but the gruel is not quite ready.

LEAPING WATER

Morning gruel was last assigned to Sister Apple, if I'm not mistaken?

SEER

And where IS Apple?

LUNA

Indisposed, when last I checked. Impending motherhood exacts a terrible toll on the poor girl.

LEAPING WATER

Tosh. She shirks her responsibilities, skulks about like a bloated coyote...

SEER

Be still! Given this morning's... *irregularities*, we shall skip breakfast and proceed with today's reading of the Marys. Sister Luna, bring Apple hither at once. Sister Leaping Water, would you be so kind as to fetch the *Dr. Frankenstein*?

The two disciples, chastened, hurriedly exit. The man

*enters, carrying a SLOSHING
pail full of milk.*

SEER

The cow gives generously.

MAN

That is its nature.

SEER

You may go.

MAN

A man does not need permission to put one foot in front of
the other.

SEER

(like a knife)

I beg your pardon? Since when can you string two words
together?

*Leaping Water, panicked,
enters running.*

LEAPING WATER

Gone! All three tomes. Our precious Marys, gone.

SEER

That cannot be.

*Luna, tearing her hair, storms
into the room.*

LUNA

Sister Apple has vanished. I've looked everywhere.

MAN

Apple gone?

*The man, stricken, races from
the room, calling Apple's
name.*

LEAPING WATER

Filthy, conniving scrounger.

LUNA

Kindness!

LEAPING WATER

We've nothing now. Did I not warn you?

LUNA

If we have nothing, the lack is in ourselves.

Luna exits, calling Apple's name. The Seer babbles in tongues.

LEAPING WATER

(arms outstretched,
as if confronting a
gigantic void)

Matriarchs of the ages, without whom I can not live... What now?

BLACKOUT

EPILOGUE

Seventeen years later. Adam, his face covered by a ski mask or bandanna, stealthily enters the convent carrying a wrapped bundle. At a makeshift altar, he unwraps the bundle, taking from it three books, which he lovingly places, one by one, on its rough-hewn surface.

LUNA (O.S.)

Is someone there?

The deed done, Adam hastily exits.

LUNA

The tomes! Miracle of miracles!

(throws open the door
and calls out)

Young sir! Wait! Sir, would you make an old woman chase after you?

Adam removes his mask, hesitates, and finally returns to the convent to face the elderly Luna.

LUNA

Come closer, that I may read the facets of your eyes – such familiar eyes. The reappearance of these tomes...

ADAM

A miracle, Sister, as you said.

LUNA

In life, things lost, lost remain. It was you who placed them back on the altar, was it not? But how might they have come into your possession?

Adam shrugs and remains silent.

LUNA

I suppose you've read them?

ADAM

What if I have?

LUNA

But you're a man.

ADAM

Is it wrong to thirst after knowledge? In that way, I am no different from you.

LUNA

I suppose not, given that we are all born of a mother. One fine rebel, yours had to have been.

ADAM

I'll tell her you said so.

LUNA

(cannot dissemble her elation)

Then she lives?

ADAM

I'd swear she is more alive each day.

LUNA

The other Sisters... gone now.

ADAM

You must be Luna.

LUNA

Much reduced, but still walking the path set out for us by our blessed Trinity.

ADAM

The self-same path that brings me to you.

LUNA

What she did, your mother... tore the beating heart right out of us. Our Marys, our precious Marys, carried off in the night. In vain we sought to reconstruct the tomes – from memory, as not a single written word remained to us. But memory fades. In her twilight years, Sister Leaping Water spoke only in grunts. The Seer spoke not at all. Without the Marys, we, their sole living repository, one by one fell mute.

ADAM

A fourth calamity. You've every reason to despise us.

LUNA

But oh, how I've missed her! The others never found the grace to forgive the culprit for it. I, who knew her absolute purity, forgave her long ago. What mother would willingly deny her child the gift of language? You'll tell her?

Adam, visibly moved, assents.

LUNA

And tell her, do, that there is another whose hair has turned white from long yearning. One who, to this day, roams these hills searching. The man – he lives.

ADAM

My father?

LUNA

Dear, dear boy. Come back to us one day.

ADAM

How can we after - ?

LUNA

(clucks her tongue)

Life daily re-knits itself, even from the most frayed of skeins. Do the tomes not teach us that we are but a single stitch in the infinite tapestry of life, each sustaining the other, forming in our union intricate patterns of consummate beauty?

(drops to her knees
in gratitude)

Praise Gutenberg! The words have returned to my failing tongue!

ADAM

Praise the Marys!

LUNA

Gezundheit!

ADAM

Gezundheit!

BLACKOUT

BRIEF MUSICAL
INTERLUDE

END OF PLAY