

The Bard of Frogtown (One Act)

SETTING:

One bedroom apartment in downtown St. Paul, Minnesota.

CHARACTERS:

MELVIN, 19, a part-time poet/ part-time window washer. He is wiry in build with mid-length dreads.

DEBRA, 25, homemaker/songwriter. She is slightly heavy set with unruly artist's hair. This part requires singing and some guitar playing.

RICE STREET MAN, 22, looks haggard and worn. He has been dead for eight years, therefore, he is a ghost figure, functioning more for the audience than to interact with the cast.

(Curtain rises with MELVIN scratching away in a notebook. A kitchen table serving as his desk. He goes through a series of scribbling and scratch outs.)

MELVIN

(sitting at his desk)

Like most writers, I am full of shit. Sometimes I look at the piles and piles of half started prose and think, "Got a match?" And then, I think, I'll write a poem. Poems save paper. So, all of a sudden, I am a poet. Yet, I still have nothing to say.

(Looking up at the ceiling for inspiration)

Write, writer, write! Goddamn it, write you fucking idiot. Asshole, hole in the ass. Craphead. Son of a bitch! Hey!

(look left)

What?

(look right)

Don't get personal.

(look left again)

By the by, my real father, yes, the one I have never seen in my life, is a goddamn poet. My mother still gets an occasional sestina through the mail from his as yet to be published chapbook entitled, The Part of Me that No One Knows... Tell me about it.

(Getting up, pacing)

MELVIN

Yet as a poet, I just don't feel like I am any good. When I was younger I used to read my stuff with a sense of accomplishment. Now, I just cringe. After work I come home and try to get busy on something good and it turns out to be trite, banal, and unkempt.

(Sitting down musing)

Children are natural artists then they get old and they dry up. I am 19 now. And, as I keep saying I have nothing to say.

(DEBRA walks on stage. DEBRA is in broken-in jeans, a teal tee shirt and a fawn colored leather jacket. She wears all of this indoors because they have limited heat. The walls are frost-covered .)

I've lived with Debra for the past four years.

(DEBRA nods.)

When I left home it was like a funeral except no one had died. I was so sad. I cried once I hit the main drag. Big tears, buckets of them. I was fifteen, when Debra and I found our own place. We moved within the city. From West to East while still staying North. We live in the rough and tumble Frogtown. In Frogtown, us people sell crafts, we line the drags with our handmanufactured baskets, pottery, metal works, and textiles. Debra is a little bit older than me and helped me out a great deal. Not just with the security deposit but she listens to me hash out about my childhood. Long nights we spent therapeutically bottle and blunt passing till I got it all out, the words.

DEBRA

Oh, yeah, Baby.

MELVIN

I realized now that not only do I hate my stepfather, but I also resent my younger brother, and that my mother is a continual source of frustration. With all that memesized and catharsisized, I should crack open like an egg. I should have plenty to write about. I should look at a blank piece of paper and fill it. But I can't.... I wash Northwest airplanes for a living. Somebody has to. I wake up at five in the AM and go down to the airport and scrub the thick plastic windows with a long handled brush. I have always loved planes, always dreamed of floating above things. Tempting God with man-made angel wings.

(MELVIN walks about the one room apartment.)

DEBRA is a diligent writer. She does songs.

(DEBRA walks in front of him now and she is holding the guitar pick between her teeth as she scribbles notes on a page. She flicks her head back and winks at him.)

She is a winker. Always winking, an I think just who in the Hell wears the pants in this relationship.

DEBRA

I do.

MELVIN

(walking about)

Debra loves bits of clutter: Books and papers and hankies that she blew her nose on. I can't stand it. Often, I just want to tidy up but dare I take liberties with her, her, her --

DEBRA

Genius is as good a word as any.

MELVIN

But perhaps it's still not the right one...A few months ago, Debra sold one of her songs to a big deal downtown company. She got 500 dollars outright. We had steak for a week. That's the problem with being a black and dealing with whites, everything you sell is sold outright and hasn't us blacks had to give enough away. They have stolen our labor, our women, our music.

DEBRA

(Singing and strumming her guitar)

Tangled in the sheets of a flophouse bed ...

MELVIN

And when Debra sang it felt real. It was textual and lilting yet bodacious as preachers. She used steel strings instead of the white twinkling of a piano. I heard the pop version on the radio and I almost kept passing the dial. It was a totally different song, and a corny one at that.

DEBRA

(Singing louder)

I'm at a job that never pays. I'm afraid to ask for a raise...

MELVIN

Oh, Debra... You are the sanctuary from my problems. I forget you have so many of your own. Like any other black with a family tree that tangles at the root. I could never get it straight but I knew you were the half sister of the dead Rice Street Man.

(DEBRA stops singing, puts her guitar down.)

MELVIN

The Rice Street Man. The Rice Street Man and his dog. The Rice Street Man that smelled worse than his dog. And as if that weren't bad enough, quite a few of Debra's short on dollar bills, long-in-the-tooth relatives used to stay over temporarily for months and months. And poor little Deb, you were treated like you were invisible. You were forced into disappearing to create room.

DEBRA

I used to have to give up my bedroom and sleep on the couch. It was then that I learned to play that funky old guitar that I'd found in a dumpster. At night while all the live-ins were raising Hell I'd mouth the words, practice fingering, playing without sound.

MELVIN

I like to use your life in my writing even more than I like to use my life in my writing.

DEBRA

Use me; don't use him, Melvin, promise. Don't use the Rice Street Man.

MELVIN

Rice Street is the shopping district, it runs clear to the state capital. The Rice Street man walks around asking people for a hand out.

(The Rice Street Man appears. MELVIN appears unaffected by this. Only DEBRA can see him.)

DEBRA

Roland!

RICE STREET MAN

Spare some change...

MELVIN

He's one of those bums. He's one of the guys who stands out looking for a hand out. A chump. A dreg. I hate those damned nomads who make my town look like a shanty.

DEBRA

But he ain't like the other vegs. He stays solo. He don't share his sleeping bag or his wine bottle.

MELVIN

Jobless, idle, filthy, filthy.

DEBRA

Filthy. Yes, filthy.

RICE STREET MAN

Spare some change...

DEBRA

Steam grate for warmth, stuck to the sidewalk like old gum. I hear his stomach growl.

RICE STREET MAN

Spare some change...

DEBRA

Change. That's what I asked you to do, change. Why can't you change? Change? Get your act together.

RICE STREET MAN

Spare some change...

MELVIN & DEBRA

I was there when he died. I stepped back as that cough rose in his throat. The Rice Street Man. Who has health insurance? Suppose it spreads.

RICE STREET MAN

Spare some change...

MELVIN & DEBRA

He jerked and grimaced and staggered a few paces backwards and forwards. Rolling in the slush like a worm on a hook.

RICE STREET MAN

Spare some change...

DEBRA

But the homeless don't die, they live forever. They have special powers.

RICE STREET MAN

Spare some change...

DEBRA

The Rice Street man will never die.

MELVIN

Special powers?

DEBRA

Special powers.

RICE STREET MAN

Spare some change... How do you get on the street? How does it come to be real? How does the bottom totally fall out? Was it like you go out on the drag, for a week , for a month and all the while you tell yourself. "Self this is only for the day, for a week, for a month." And before you know it, you're staying there a lifetime, but all the while it feels so all of a sudden. And you litter the streets and you drink and you drink and you drink from paper bags and you disappear around corners. It still seems weird to you to be a true dreg, such a displaced person. The disenfranchised of the disenfranchised. And everybody knows you, and everybody watches you, yet everybody ignores you. You sleep on the bus bench or staple yourself to a grate. And everybody hates you because you give us a bad name. You cough, spit and smell bad. You don't have a decent place to pee so you pee in trash bins.

DEBRA

(Singing)

If you see me walking down the street....walk on by...

MELVIN

(To the Rice Street Man. Pointing at him.)

Get a job. Get a funk hole job. What makes you so special that you can't haul your ass to a stupid funk hole job like everyone else.

RICE STREET MAN

Spare some change...Spare some change...

DEBRA

Why do you haunt me? I would have done anything for you. You had a family. We would have taken you in.

RICE STREET MAN

Spare some change...

DEBRA

Change, damn it. Roland, you don't want money. You can't use it now. You couldn't use it then.

RICE STREET MAN

Spare some change...

DEBRA

I don't know what you want. I never knew then and I don't know now.

MELVIN

I want to write a poem.

RICE STREET MAN

Spare some change...

DEBRA

Memories are like coins....

(To Melvin)

Writers are the worst type of people God ever put on this earth. They note the way the dirt falls on a casket of a dear friend because they know they can use it later.

RICE STREET MAN

Spare some change...

DEBRA

It is always writing. My writing, my writing.

(Turning to MELVIN)

It's your writing, your writing, your writing. The whole fucking world revolves around our writing.

MELVIN

I want to write a poem.

RICE STREET MAN

(Faintly)

Spare some change...

(The Rice Street Man disappears.)

DEBRA

Roland. Roland.

MELVIN

(Walking over to the desk)

Lovers make the worst critics, so why do I always ask you, Debra?

(He shows her what he has been writing.)

DEBRA

(Reading over it)

I don't know. It sort of sticks in my throat.

(MELVIN snatches the paper back from her.)

MELVIN

You are supposed to fucking read it not fucking eat it.

(She throws her head back and laughs at him.)

DEBRA

Speaking of eating. Let me get supper together.

(DEBRA confines herself to the kitchenette. She is seen and heard fiddling with pots and pans.)

MELVIN

(Uncrumbling his writings.)

Salt without bread./Thorns on a cactus./ Otis Redding, I miss you. /Why didn't you go Greyhound?

(He smiles, puffs his chest out, and struts across the stage.)

MELVIN

Sure, it needs some revision, but it's not all bad. The images are clear and concrete. The sound and rhythm may need some spit and polish. All right, it sucks. It bites the big wiener. But at least it has punctuation and it does not employ the lowercase "I". I want to be Langston Hughes.

DEBRA

(calling from the other room)

I want to be Tracy Chapman.

MELVIN

Enough of these meditations. These scream fests on the mysteries of freedom, love, and hate. I want to be remembered. I know I am not a great writer, I am only a great rewriter. Half the time there is nothing pithy in the first draft. Half the time I don't know where it's going or how to improve it. I don't have a style or tone that I wish to affect. I feel like screaming at myself. Where is my theme? Where is my message? Why am I writing this poem in the first place? I will switch back to prose.

(to the audience)

Inside every fiction writer there is a failed poet. Metaphors, like my heart is dry like a big red balloon, are inflated but then I think all right so where do I go from there. Where do I go from there?

(DEBRA sets the table right in front of MELVIN.)

MELVIN

Alas, I break for supper.

DEBRA

(heckling him)

My ass, I break for supper.

MELVIN

What do you got?

DEBRA

I heated up yesterday's leftovers pizza pie with shrooms.

(They down a few pizza slices and drop the crust.)

MELVIN

You know, you wouldn't be such a bad cook if you measured. Do not guesstimate so much.

DEBRA

Yes sir.

MELVIN

Was that a rude thing for me to say?

DEBRA

(winking)

No, it was just you.

MELVIN

(teasing her)

You have a great smile, nothing but teeth. Big horse teeth and squinty eyes.

DEBRA

All right. All right.

(She rises and goes to the freezer and produces a tub of ice cream. She scoops out two platefuls.)

DEBRA

How are the planes?

MELVIN

(He shrugs)

Recently, they had entrusted me with an unbelievable amount of keys.

DEBRA

How many is too many to believe?

MELVIN

37.

DEBRA

Unbelievable... Now don't fly off with the place.

(Melvin stands and she makes a grab for his butt, playfully. He then retires to the bedroom portion of the room.)

DEBRA

(Calling after him)

Off to do more writing?

MELVIN

That's a good question.

(to the audience)

In this next expanse of time, I had done everything to write. I drew a bath, drank some murk, splashed cold water in my ears. I dance.

(He dances the bop, the bump, the butterfly, the electric slide, the four corners, the icky shuffle, the mashed potato, the shingling, the worm.)

I read that dancing is good for the creative side of your brain in The Artist's Way. I feel refreshed, but still no words.

(He rolls a joint).

MELVIN

So I light up and dream.

(Closing his eyes)

I am dreaming that I am making love to Debra only she has thick white hair and the wind blows and exposes her black roots. Her eyeliner ran down her cheeks like fast graffiti. Those long full breasts have shrunk to teacups. I dream of white food. Rice pudding and glazed doughnuts. SPACE. Time and space. Time sitting, smoking in the numb silence, watching the snow, as if it were doing something wild, like disappearing instead of the same old same old. I press my face against the pane and gaze at the wide, white city below. Winter. Heavy snowstorms at the floodgates bring up a whirlpool of memories. Snowing as marvelous as sugar -- pink and white candy coated Christmas. A fairy tale of cabbage and rye toast. Toy soldiers. I shout a rendition of "White Christmas".

DEBRA

(standing by the doorway)

Are you going to share or is a contact high all that I can hope for?

MELVIN

(He rolls a herb her way.)

Sometimes it's better to distill in the hope of further cross fertilization.

DEBRA

(Smoking)

Oh, yeah, Baby.

MELVIN

See, we do have freedom in America because we can fucking cuss and call it poetry.

DEBRA

We can buy things. Delicious things.

MELVIN

Shiny purple cars.

DEBRA

Complicated calculators.

MELVIN

Pasta makers.

DEBRA

We can get ourselves some education.

(She inhales deeply)

THE RICE STREET MAN

(Reappearing)

We can put our beautiful-one-time-only-self on the street and nobody cares... They walk by you... They don't see you... Winter or Summer. Day or night... They just leave you to yourself.

MELVIN

There's a poem in that.

DEBRA

There's a song in that.

MELVIN & DEBRA

I have a beginning of something: Snow like sweat/ or smoke, like mercury,/rising above itself /in a cloud.

(Curtain falls.)

SYNOPSIS

The Bard Of Frogtown is a play about two low rent artists in a constant search for source material. Melvin and Debra believe in using everything. However, when Debra's dead brother materializes in their living room, both question the artist's responsibility to humanity.

