

Anna St. Hesias Dreams

A One-Woman One Act

By Drew Petriello

Contact:
Drew Petriello
(425) 530-6011
dpetriello@comcast.net

CHARACTERS

ANNA ST. HESIA: Female, 20s. Any ethnicity. Grounded, sensitive, and jokey, she's quick to be vulnerable and quick to smother it over with a joke.

SUSAN: A stage manager who don't give a fuuuuuuuuuck. So sleepy. Her lines are entirely voiceover.

ETHER: He's a young dreamweaver who is very unsure of his skills. A truly artistic soul.

PHENE: Ether's wife. Practically minded and sure-footed.

NEUR: She's a junior dreamweaver. Eager to please and much too bubbly.

CALLOSUM: Gender non-binary. They're a prominent dreamweaver. Stern, exacting, and poetic. Mentor to Ether and Neur.

CORTEX: She's an elderly dreamweaver. A smooth-talking con artist looking to make a quick buck.

BELLUM: Ether's father. Just wants the best for his son.

THE BUGLE: A veiny, grotesque, purple-black spire with eyes all over it. Represents the forces of nightmare. Its voice is distorted.

PAT I. ENCE: Anna's boyfriend. His lines are done in voiceover and played by someone else.

A NOTE ON FORMATTING

The actor playing Anna will embody all of the characters listed above throughout the show. Whenever a stage direction or line indicates a particular character doing/saying something, the actor playing Anna does/says whatever is written *as that character*.

Whenever Anna describes an action a character does, if I haven't stated in a stage direction whether or not she acts it out, I leave it up to the discretion of the actor as to whether or not she does.

PRESHOW

Anna sits in a small bed and draws. She wears a hospital gown. There is a pile of props at the foot of the bed. It looks like a total mess, but it makes sense to Anna, so what's it matter?

She draws with an ink pen. By the time the show starts, she will have completed a sketch of Ether.

There is a radio standing on a pedestal. Occasionally, she looks up from her drawing and stares longingly at the radio, as though willing sound to come out of it.

When it is time, Anna gives a brief curtain speech.

0: THE EIGHTEENTH ATTEMPT

The house lights stay up through 0.

PAT

(voiceover from the radio)

It's okay Anna. I'll be waiting outside the whole time.

I know you're scared. But you've got to go through with the operation.

I love you, Anna. Please make it back.

(distorting more with every repetition
until it's garbled static)

Please make it back. Please make it back. Please make it back. Please make it back.

Anna stares at the radio.

SUSAN

Shit Anna. I'm so sorry. So sorry, Ms. St. Hesia. Whoa, what a weird dumb name.

(big yawn)

Sorry. I'm just so sleepy...

I must've hit the wrong button and played that old recording of Pat from before the operation. Although it's not really old, if you think about it. It's like, a couple minutes old but -

ANNA

Susan? Shut the fuck up.

SUSAN

Stop calling me that. You know my real name is -
(yawn)

ANNA

No. *Susan*.

(gently strokes the radio)
(whispering)

Light brush of a touch...

SUSAN

Anna St. Hesias. Tell Ether's story and get it over with. Please. I want to sleep. I haven't slept in... how many times have you failed to get through his story?

ANNA

...seventeen.

SUSAN

Oh god... I haven't slept in seventeen days. You're torturing me, Anna. Torturing me. These knobs in the booth are starting to look like tiny pillows. Tell Ether's story. Get it over with quick. It'll be like drowning a sack of kittens.

ANNA

Not a real phrase, Susan. Nobody says that.

SUSAN

I came from somewhere in *your* brain.

ANNA

You're not real.

(to audience)

You're not real. How does that make you feel? I hate to break it to you like this, but I feel like you deserve the truth.

SUSAN

Hey, come on. You're just supposed to tell Ether's story.

ANNA

I'll tell it, but I'll tell it my way tonight, *Susan*. Folks, not only are you not real, but you are trapped in a bizarro time paradox! Let's hear it for time paradoxes!

(beat)

Susan, could I get a sound effect? Like some party blower things?

A single limp party blower sound.

ANNA

Useless, Susan. Useless.

Lights dim to nothing.

ANNA

Oh. Oh is that how it's going to be, Susan? This is how it's going to...

(she sighs)

This is my dream. All of you are apart of it. Moments ago, I was put under anesthesia. As we speak, there is a scalpel moving towards my scalp. There is a tumor on my brain that must be cut out.

Must it?

Time is suspended. We have been operating in a pocket of frozen time for seventeen days, when not a second has passed in the -

(with venom)

- "real world."

We are gathered here in my brain so I can tell you Ether's story. And once I finally get through his story, I can wake up. Or I could just... not. I could sleep forever. Stay here. In my dreams. I quite like my dreams...

(beat)

Hey, Susan? Can we do this another night. I mean, you've already turned off the lights...

Lights up.

SUSAN

I don't want to be an alarmist, but time could start back up at any time. Whoa. What a shit sentence. Wait, and it will all be over soon, Anna. Whether you choose it or not. Which do you value more, Anna St. Hesias? Reality or fantasy?

ANNA

You're starting to sound like the Bugle.

SUSAN

Am I though? Or am I just speaking sleepy truth to power?

ANNA

What's so great about reality anyway? It's just loneliness and one opportunity - this still isn't a phrase, Susan, but it's a better use case - one opportunity drowned like a sack of kittens one after the other. Mm. All I do is sleep all day anyway.

PAT

(over the radio)

I love you, Anna. Please make it back.

ANNA

Pat...

SUSAN

Whoops. I must've hit the wrong button by accident. Falling asleep *is* the draining of attention, after all, and all these knobs look so much like tiny pillows...

ANNA

Fuck you, Susan.

(beat)

(singing)

You close your eyes in September

Open them in May of next year...

(beat)

You'll be able to sleep tonight, Susan. I'll tell Ether's story. Easy. Just like drowning a sack of... mm. Not a phrase, Susan. Not a real phrase. I owe it to Ether to... to tell his story. After all he's done for me.

SUSAN

Anna, he's not -

Anna silences Susan with a sharp look.

SUSAN

Ether's story begins... now.

ANNA

Dumbass stage manager.

I: THE DAY THE DREAMSPACE COLLAPSED

House lights down.

ANNA

Let me tell you about the day the Dreamspace collapsed.

(holding up her drawing of Ether)

It's all because of this guy, Ether. I've had to do a little bit of guess work - I've only seen like, half of his face, but I'm pretty sure this is accurate.

It starts with Ether and a sleeping dragon. The great dragon Ekaw. She's been asleep since before Ether's people could write. Surrounding her while she sleeps, is the Dreamspace. Ekaw is the great dreamer. Her dream is externalized from her mind for all to explore.

Ether is in the Dreamspace one day and creating tourist destinations like a good dreamweaver. Sorry, Ether would kill me for saying "tourist destination" - he's a very artistic soul. He creates "features."

(she looks at the audience and raises a knowing eyebrow)

Dreamweavers like Ether create features - tourist destinations. Dreamweavers mould the Dreamspace into the most wondrous creations. Ether told me once about a waterfall made of crystal shards that flowed upwards and into the mouth of a stone giant, whose eyes were rubies the size of elephant skulls, and when they blazed brightly, it meant that the stone giant was awake and could tell fortunes...

Well *I* think it's cool.

One day, Ether starts to create this one tourist destination - feature. He picks up his handheld dreamweaver's and begins to weave it out of patches of Dreamspace.

Raw Dreamspace looks as though an infinity of differently colored neon signs have burst apart. The colors hang, vaporlike, in the air. They drift, collide, enmesh, split - such colors the likes of which the human mind can't help but try to force into comprehension. It's like seeing shapes in clouds.

No, that cloud isn't your grandma's bowl of hard candy, your brain just tricked you. Brains make associations that don't really exist. Silly brains.

Out of this vaporous color vomit, Ether is able to create.

Ether puts his hand on his chest. Beneath his tunic, he feels his father's mareshell necklace. The mere touch of it fills him with importance and impotence.

BELLUM

(ill, laying on the bed)

Ether... don't sit so far away from me, my boy. Come, come.

He beckons, then places a hand on Ether's. He smiles weakly, doing his best to make a look of reassurance.

With great effort, he reaches under his shirt collar and produces the mareshell necklace. He tries to get it over his head, but can't.

BELLUM

Ether, could you...?

ETHER

(hesitatingly reaching for it)

Um... why do you want me to... take the mareshell?

BELLUM

(still struggling to get it off himself)

Isn't it obvious? The mareshell necklace is your inheritance.

ETHER

(fully retracting his hands)

Father... no. I can't. I don't deserve it. I'm not ready.

BELLUM

(still working on that necklace)

You will grow into it, my son. As I grew into it when my mother passed it down to me, her mother before her, her father before her...

(clutches his stomach, hisses in pain)

(grunting and groaning through the pain,
he removes the necklace and holds it out
for Ether)

Goddamn. When you do the art, Ether, bring the mareshell to your ear. And listen. It will counsel you.

ETHER
(looking at it, a little freaked)

It's alive?

BELLUM

Metaphorically, Ether. The mareshell was alive once. It is the fossilized remain of a nightmare beast called the Bugle. According to legend, the Bugle woke up other nightmare beasts and commanded them in battle. But it's long dead now. All the nightmare beasts. Dead or in a forever sleep...

(another stab of pain in his stomach)

Hng - listen to the shell. It will counsel you well. But you must never, ever, let the mareshell come into contact with a feature.

ETHER

Why?

BELLUM

It is not known. A word of warning passed down our family line. Don't do it.

ANNA

Ether rubs the mareshell necklace through his tunic. Ready as he'll ever be to create a masterpiece, he weilds his handheld loom with purpose. Today, he will create a masterpiece. He will. He will.

The thread reaches out cuts away colors, wraps around...

Earlier that day, he spoke with Master Callosum, his dreamweaving mentor. Their words echo around his mind.

CALLOSUM
(weaving with their loom, working on a
feature)

Your father was an excellent dreamweaver, may he weave forever in all our dreams. I imagine his shadow weighs heavily on you.

ETHER

(dejected)

I don't know, Master Callosum. After his passing I just... I've never made anything meaningful. I want to make something that will move people, but I can't even move myself. Everything I've made just feels... blegh.

CALLOSUM

A dreamweaver must sacrifice to make art. Ether, your work is... safe. Without risk.

ETHER

But Master Callosum, my last feature, Stringsnap Cliff - that was risky. I took a risk and someone... someone...

CALLOSUM

Stringsnap Cliff was a safety hazard. That's a different kind of risk. Does this look like a mushroom to you? I thought it might have been a large clam at first, but it keeps wanting to be a mushroom. Interesting. Shame about the woman who fell from Stringsnap Cliff. What was her name? Axon, right? I hope the surgeon was able to fix her legs...

ETHER

Please don't talk about that.

CALLOSUM

You brought it up. It must be bothering you.

(beat)

(they stop working on their feature and address Ether directly)

I've hit it. I don't mean physically unsafe when I talk about risk. I mean risky as in vulnerability. Showing sides of yourself you don't want others to see of you. Sacrifice something. If it were easy, everyone would be a dreamweaver. For example, you know my seminal work, the Dangling Undulates of Yeast? The reason tourists will pay thousands of sparks to blugh-da-blah-duh-blahgah-blwuh -

ANNA

We'll just ignore Callosum bragging about how much money - sparks - they make. Back to Ether and the feature he's working on now. Master Callosum's words won't leave him.

ETHER

(spinning the loom)

Sacrifice something. If it were easy... everyone would be a dreamweaver.

ANNA

Out of the Dreamspace, form comes. Right now, it's a large boulder, but red and fleshy. Think: inside-out hippopotamus. He lashes out with the thread, bringing out more definition.

Sacrifice something... what the hell did Callosum mean by that? Show a side of him he doesn't want others to see...

Well, there's what happened to Axon. He and his wife, Phene, discussed it over breakfast that morning.

PHENE

(with a mouthful of food)

Ether, all I'm saying - mm, Ethie, these eggs you made? Mm - is that it would mean the world to Axon if you visited.

ETHER

(about to take a bite, puts it down)

I'm not interested in being screamed at, thank you, Phene.

PHENE

(still chewing)

Axon isn't that sort of person. I've done a couple gigs for her. Mm, these eggs. Axon is very understanding.

ETHER

I can't. She broke her legs while visiting Stringsnap Cliff. God, I thought I was being so clever... how am I supposed to face someone after that, Phene? How?

PHENE

Ether...

(beat)

Did you at least send her family sympathy sparks?

Ether is silent.

Phene sighs. She gently strokes Ether's hand.

ANNA

A light brush of a touch before they part. Incidentally, Ether never told me exactly what Stringsnap Cliff was and how exactly Axon broke her legs.

Ether has his sacrifice. Out of the top of the fleshy blob, a stump starts to sprout. He intends it to be a leg, the pure symbol of his shame over what his carelessness did to Axon, but... a fear overcomes him. He abruptly snips the thread from his loom, leaving what was going to be a leg, a stump. It becomes a neck instead.

ETHER
(despairing)

Goddammit!

Ether pants. He bashes his forehead with his palms.

Anna covers her head with her gown and becomes the feature. She makes throaty gurgling noises.

ETHER
Ah! Oh god... oh god, what have I done? You're disgusting.

More gurgling.

Ether stands. He observes his creation.

ETHER
Oh man... oh man...

ANNA
The feature is a gigantic lump of flesh with a neck sticking out of it. And the neck gurgles. It's...

(gags)

The name of this feature is apparent to Ether. Gurgles. This... thing. This vile crime against god, man, nature, and the very notion of decency. Its name is Gurgles.

(she becomes Gurgles for a second)

(she giggles)

Oh man. Ether would kill me for spending so much time on Gurgles.

As Ether stares at Gurgles, he sulks. Is this the best he can do? This is far from the beautiful masterpiece he'd imagined in his head. He just wants to make something that others will be moved by. Is that so hard?

NEUR
(skipping, humming, twirling)

Heya, Ether!

ANNA
Interrupting his self-flagellation, is Neur. A fellow junior dreamweaver.

NEUR
You won't believe it - I came across the most beautiful, robust, gorgeous, scintillating, pert, gorgeous, voluptuous, pretty, gorgeous purple clouds -

ETHER
(trying and failing not to appear
misanthropic)

That's great, Neur.

NEUR
I hope Master Callosum loves what I weave out of it.

ETHER
Master Callosum usually likes your work.

NEUR
I want them to *love* it.

ETHER
Okay.

NEUR
Oh gosh, I'm shaking! Do you think Ekaw, the sleeping dragon, knows what we're doing in her dreamspace? Do you think she's proud? I had such a vivid dream last night about being strapped to the underbelly of a cat and I think it'll make great fuel for -

ETHER
Do you mind? I'm trying to...
(makes a gesture indicating "focus")

NEUR
(skipping away)
I'm so inspired!

ANNA

Neur disappears into the Dreamspace. Ether...

Ether glares in the direction of Neur. He shakes with impotent jealousy.

ANNA

He's gotta come up with something... something to save this hideous... gurgling thing. No tourist is going to want to come see... *this*. He'll be ostracized, especially after what Stringsnap Cliff did to poor Axon... Pertinent flashback, ooh!

BELLUM

When you do the art, Ether, bring the mareshell to your ear. And listen. It will counsel you.

Anna glances at the audience.

Ether takes out the mareshell necklace. He holds it up to his ear.

VOICE

Place me on Gurgles.

ETHER

(taking it away from is ear)

Ah!

(several surprised pants)

Metaphorical my ass. Long dead my ass.

(beat)

(brings it up to his ear)

VOICE

Place me on Gurgles.

BELLUM

You must never, ever, let the mareshell come into contact with a feature.

VOICE

Place me on Gurgles.

ETHER

Um...

VOICE

I can complete your masterpiece.

Ether looks at the mareshell. Looks at Gurgles.
He takes the necklace off and goes to put it
around Gurgles -

Gurgling sound.

Ether grunts with disapproval. He holds the
necklace just above the neck.

Suddenly, paranoid, he looks around.

He steadies himself with deep breaths.

Slowly, he lowers the necklace closer -

ANNA

(breaking away)

By the way, what would you say the opposite of “dream” is?

I propose to you that nightmare is the opposite of dream. Follow with me here - is it possible for a thing to contain its own opposite? Some might say it is impossible for it to be otherwise, for if we consider a thing to be both a sum total of what it includes and what it excludes, therefore the equation of creation contains the opposite.

I propose to you that nightmare is the opposite of dream. And for our purposes, I don't mean “nightmare” in the conventional sense, not in that “nightmare” is merely a bad dream.

For our purposes, lets separate the two, although we can never fully do that given, as I said, a thing contains its own opposite. Dream is chaotic and creative and destructive at the same time, but most importantly, dream *gives*. Always, dream is a form of giving. Nightmare takes. It drains. It consumes, giving nothing, never satiated.

Why'd I bring that up? No reason in particular.

Slowly, Ether lowers the necklace onto Gurgles.

As soon as touches, the lights fade and there is the sound of electronics shutting down.

Lights up in the audience. Anna is among them.

ANNA

The Dreamspace collapses. Think of the news footage when whole city blocks were demolished in the Haitian earthquake. Or when bombs leveled swaths of Aleppo.

The Dreamspace collapse is a lot like that. That only means one thing: Ekaw, the dragon who's been asleep for who knows how many thousands of years, has just woken up.

All thanks to Ether putting the mareshell necklace on Gurgles. Well done, Ether. Should've listened to your dying father.

Gurgles lets out a ghastly gurgle that spikes high into the atmosphere. A deep purple ichor shoots out and beams up, up, up to the tip top of the Dreamspace.

The sun eats holes in it. Vast chunks of Dreamspace slough off. As they meet with the ground, they compress, flatten, and are absorbed into the Earth. Like gargantuan globs of maple syrup.

Ether lunges for the mareshell. It has burrowed into Gurgles' flesh. Desperately, he claws with his nails to pry it out.

The Dreamspace flops apart around him. There is a great gust of wind that sends Ether sprawling, followed by a roar. The flap of a dragon wing. A dragon roar.

Ether screams.

And then - he's out.

The going out - it is not unlike falling under anesthesia.

One minute, I'm awake. I become aware that things are fading. Just a little. But I'm still lucid. There are black specks around my vision. I'm making idiotic wisecracks with the nurse. I'm not tired at all. Then darkness reaches over my face like a skeletal hand and whoosh - I'm out. A skeletal hand that snatches time.

It's so hard to tell when you're about to go completely under. When falling asleep, you can never be conscious enough to discern the moment you fall asleep. It's an impossibility. Falling asleep is the draining of attention. The harder you work to pay attention to the moment of sleep, the less likely it is to come. However, with anesthesia the moment comes regardless of how much attention you're paying. Wait, and it will all be over soon. Whether you want it to be or not. A skeletal hand that snatches time.

I don't want to go under. If I go under, I might never make it back. This tumor on my brain has ruined my life. But if I don't go under, then I know I'm still alive. Funny, since I spend all my time sleeping anyway. I cling to consciousness all the same, but no matter what, the anesthesia wins. That final moment. It's... it's a surge of fear. I won't feel what's coming next. I might never feel anything again.

Pat is there... "Please make it back," he says. "Please make it back."

Fading, fading, fading, clinging - then all at once - skeletal hand grabbing my skull from behind. Out - snuffed.

(lights out)

That's what it's like for those inside the Dreamspace in its final moments.

The end. Show's over.

Lights come up on stage.

ANNA

I'm kidding. Geez. Obviously there's more to it. I'm just not sure I'm up for telling it right now.

(singing at the radio)

You close your eyes in September

Open them in May of next year

Next year

You close your eyes, open on New Year's

New Year's

You close your eyes

You don't recall much of what happened

In between your moments of lucidity

Lucidity

SUSAN

Hey. Anna? You've copped out at this point on eleven of the nights. Eleven out of eighteen. Didn't even make it this far on four of them. I'm proud of you or whatever. Keep going. Like drowning a sack of kittens.

ANNA

(beat)

That song was a poem I wrote. I don't usually write poetry. Pat put it into music.

Patrick Ence. His parents were cruel like mine. Pat I. Ence is his name. Pat I. Ence and Anna. St. Hesias. Patience and Anesthesia...

(beat)

Fine. I'll go on, but only so you can go to sleep, *Susan*.
And for Pat. Ether too.

II: PATIENCE, BUGLE

Ether is asleep on the ground. He stirs.

ANNA

Ether wakes up.

(getting up)

He had a harrowing dream. I'd tell you about it, but he won't tell me. So suck it.

Ether looks around.

ANNA

Mounds and mounds of gray abound around for miles. There are vague, lumpy shapes - something that could be a mountain in that direction, that there could be a tree, but it's all so formless and blobby, only suggestive of a more real shape.

The sky is less dull. The sky... it appears to be a sky view of a forest.

Suddenly, the image swivels around. Ether feels a jerky sensation in his stomach.

A blue sky. Scaly wings flap.

The sky is a projection of what Ekaw, the dragon, is seeing right now. Deducing further, this means he is inside the mind of Ekaw. The Dreamspace collapsed. Now he - and everyone who was inside the Dreamspace at the time - are inside Ekaw's brain.

At this point, he screams. I'm not going to reenact it. It's your usual scream begot of horror-comprehension sort of dealio.

He still has his dreamweaver's loom. He clutches it to his chest like it's a life vest.

Pertinent flashback time! Once, Ether and Neur were pestering Callosum:

NEUR

Master Callosum? What happens when Ekaw wakes up?

CALLOSUM

(examining a feature they're working on)

Do you think this looks more like a stalactite or a crow's wing?

ETHER

Hey, um, not to intrude, Master Callosum, but Neur and I were wondering -

CALLOSUM

I'm working.

ETHER

Oh. Okay, we'll come back later.

NEUR

Oh please tell us, Master Callosum. Pleaaaaase!

CALLOSUM

(they think about it for a second, then
sigh)

No one knows what happens. Ekaw having been asleep for thousands of years, long before the written word, all we have is theory. Lots of it. In fact -

ANNA

Okay, so Callosum goes on this big lecture all while creating a gorgeous cave with color-changing stalactites, so I'm going to skip ahead to the theory that turns out to be right.

CALLOSUM

When Ekaw wakes, the Dreamspace, which is now external, goes internal. The Dreamspace doesn't go away, it goes on inside the mind of Ekaw. It becomes the Awakened Dreamspace.

ANNA

The Awakened Dreamspace. Is dull. It's really, really dull.

Ether is seized by a panic. He is inside a dragon brain. Somehow - he doesn't know how - he has got to escape from inside Ekaw's brain. Get back to the real world. Get back to Phene. He weaves frantically with his dreamweaver's loom. The thread lashes out and splits a gray mound apart, creating a rift.

On the other side of the rift: A whole city of blaring lights and angry voices. Strange machines go by with quad legs. There is a man dangling a gecko, which appears to be for sale. A whole world through the rift.

Ether has a perfectly normal reaction to all this. He freaks out and runs away from the rift.

Then, a low droning sound slices into the monotony. Like a trumpet note slowed way, way down. It's coming from a pit not too far away.

Ether descends the pit.

Inside is this: A dark purple - almost black - spire sticks out from the center. It's alive. Thick, hose-like veins pulse. Suction tubes grow out of it and are embedded in the gray ground. The ground around the suction cups is purple and mushy with rot. Eyes of varying sizes litter the spire at random. Out of what could charitably be called its forehead is a horn. Not a rhino horn, a musical horn.

This... is nightmare. A nightmare beast.

It's then that Ether notices Gurgles beneath the nightmare beast. The spire's base is draped over Gurgles like the roots of a tree.

Sick to his stomach, Ether still finds himself walking towards it.

THE BUGLE

(on bed, speaking through a voice
distorter)

I AM THE BUGLE.

WAIT. AND IT WILL ALL BE OVER SOON.

ETHER

No... this wasn't supposed to happen.

THE BUGLE

I AM THE BUGLE.
YOU COULD BE RID OF ME NOW.
BUT YOU WON'T DO IT.

ANNA

What, Bugle? That sounds familiar... oh yeah, Ether's father said this:

BELLUM

According to legend, the Bugle woke up other nightmare beasts and commanded them in battle.

ANNA

So yeah. That's not great.

ETHER

I will get rid of you. No one will even know that I made you, that you came out of my father's mareshell.

THE BUGLE

THEN DO IT NOW.

ANNA

Ether weaves with his loom, opening a rift in the side of the pit. Another world on the other side. This one volcanic and ashen.

Ether stares at the Bugle.

THE BUGLE

STEP ONE. GOOD BOY.
STEP TWO. JUST DO IT.

ANNA

Ether steels himself. He gets close. All he has to do is take the Bugle through the rift. But...

Ether gets closer to the Bugle. He holds out a hand to touch it. He is afraid to do so.

THE BUGLE

YES. TOUCH ME.
 TAKE ME THROUGH THE RIFT.
 TOUCH ME.
 I PROMISE NOTHING BAD WILL HAPPEN IF YOU TOUCH ME.

Ether holds out a trembling hand.

THE BUGLE

TOUCH ME.
 YOU WON'T DO IT.
 YOU WON'T MAKE THE SACRIFICE.
 HA HA. HA HA.
 YOU WON'T DO IT.

Ether's hand is shaking terribly. He brings it just a little bit closer to the Bugle -

He snatches it away. He curls up fetal.

ETHER

I can't... I can't do it...

THE BUGLE

THAT'S RIGHT.
 SO WAIT. AND IT WILL ALL BE OVER SOON.

ANNA

Ether runs away from the Bugle and its widening circle of nightmare rot. He disappears into the mounds of gray.

Alright, so then there's a bunch of inconsequential bullshit that happens. Ether gets lost in gray for a while, he comes across some of his old features and feels sad about the fleeting nature of art, blah blah blah. Thematically it's relevant, but ultimately it doesn't matter.

SUSAN

Anna! You're skipping like, thirty pages of crucial introspection -

ANNA

Crucial? You're fucking with me. It's just thirty pages of Ether being sad and mopey and filled with existential angst. Nothing of consequence happens. He doesn't actually change in any way.

SUSAN

But, but, what about when he finds the other dreamweavers and tourists? Neur is all weepy and sad over losing all her features -

ANNA

Unimportant! Besides, that's the part where I stopped last night and I just... I can't.

So cut to some time later, when all of those who were in the Dreamspace at the time of its collapse - all the dreamweavers and tourists - are gathered in debate. They are in a hollowed out clearing of the gray - god, it's so dull. Just... blugh. Chewed up newspaper dull. Makes your mind glaze over and want to go to sleep forever. Yeah, sleep forever. Mmm, sleeeep. How does that sound, *Susan*.

SUSAN

Go fuck yourself.

ANNA

Oooh, sleep. Sleeeep. Doesn't sleep sound so good, Susan?

PAT

(through radio)

I love you, Anna. Please make it back.

SUSAN

Whoops. So sleepy, must have accidentally bumped that button again... they do so much look like tiny pillows...

ANNA

(no trace of humor)

Fuck you, Susan! Just... just fuck you! That was mean. That was...

(beat)

Right, so: The dreamweavers and tourists are assembled together. The tourists are holding each other and tittering anxiously. These people are an overfilled balloon of hysteria, ready to pop at the slightest brush with a sharp object. The dreamweavers are not doing much better. The two most revered dreamweavers, Callosum and Cortex, bicker in front of everyone.

I haven't mentioned Cortex yet. There is Ether and Neur, junior dreamweavers under the tutelage of Callosum. Cortex is also a dreamweaver and I haven't talked about her because she sucks and I hate her. She is the sharp object brushing too close to the overfilled balloon.

CORTEX

If you admit that you don't know -

CALLOSUM

I will admit that I do not know how to get home from the Awakened Dreamspace, how could I -?

CORTEX

Ah-ha! Why bother, eh? No reason to stick around this muck-land -

CALLOSUM

There is no written record of Ekaw's last waking, there is no -

CORTEX

It is simple, Callosum. We cut through the gray and escape in the rifts created therein.

ANNA

Murmurs of assent from the fearful tourists.

CALLOSUM

And abandon our homeland? And abandon our dragon? I think not.

CORTEX

Who knows when Ekaw will sleep again? It could be ten thousand years. I do not want to live out the rest of my days in this monotonous spit-world. Do you?

ANNA

More fervent murmurs of assent from the tourists.

CALLOSUM

There could be a way out. There could not.

CORTEX

There is a way out.

CALLOSUM

Not a way back home. When we cleave the gray with our looms, are you aware of what is on the other side? Dreams. Other people's dreams. Ekaw is the great dreamer, and here, in her Awakened Dreamspace, is a hub to the dreams of peoples from our world and worlds beyond. But the reverse is not the same. There is only one great dreamer. Going through means never coming back.

ANNA

Fearful titters.

CORTEX

Callosum thinks you're all stupid. Listen to how much they hate you! They'll make a rift for themselves and leave you to die. Not me! Come on, I'll send you through. Salvation for a handful of sparks! Please deposit them in this pouch please -

CALLOSUM

(veins popping out of her head)

You commercial sellout! You never knew the value of real art, you geriatric leech! You are a disgrace to dreamweavers, you desecrate all we hold sacred and flaunt every code of proper conduct -

CORTEX

You see! They'll silence anyone who tells the truth!

NEUR

Every one - everyone!

ANNA

Neur cuts in between Callosum and Cortex.

NEUR

Listen to Callosum. If you go through a rift, it's permanent - you'll never get home!

CORTEX

We might not have any time at all! Only two sparks per passenger, come on, it's a steal...

NEUR

We have nothing but time now. We can't let fear rule us. Don't let Cortex's lies steer you into doing something stupid. Pardon my language, but that's what it would be to do what she says. Stupid! Listen to Callosum, they know what they're talking about.

CORTEX

(blustering)

How dare you malign my good name - listen to them! Such hateful, elitist, demagogues!

ANNA

But the crowd is on Callosum's side. For the moment.

CALLOSUM

Thank you, Neur.

NEUR

Of course, Master.

ANNA

And then something happens that only Ether has the proper line of sight to see.

Callosum and Neur stand shoulder to shoulder. Neur raises a hand and lightly strokes it down Callosum's spine. There are many ways to caress someone. We underestimate, I think, the power of human contact.

I live in Chicago. I have roommates. I think they think I don't exist, that I'm a legend passed down to the rotating door of tenants in the unit. I don't leave my room and when I do, I wait until there is no one in the shared area.

I might not get to touch anyone ever again.

The caress Neur gives Callosum is tender. The light brushing of fingertips on their back, just barely, barely touching. There's something about the lightness that makes one hone in. So little of it, you have to pay attention.

I remember being touched like that. Touching like that.

I could get lost in that light brush of a touch for hours.

Why didn't I stay in it for years? I should've stayed in it for years.

Ether hones in on this because it's a sort of touch he's familiar with. He touches Phene, his wife, like that. She touches him like that.

Light brush of a touch.

(beat)

Right. So cooler heads have prevailed in this very moment.

The next moment, all that hard work to make those heads so cool was completely undone by a metaphorical jet of flame to the face.

In the sky, a city comes into Ekaw's view.

All present feel a chill of recognition. This city is their home.

The vision lurches and blurs - something has struck Ekaw and taken her out of the sky.

A creature is latched onto Ekaw. It is coated in thick, dark purple slime. Long lanky limbs with suction cups spin around its body and embed themselves in Ekaw. Droopy eyes are all over it in a random pattern. Suckers and proboscuses stick out.

It is a nightmare beast, just like the Bugle.

Ekaw blasts the nightmare beast with a breath of fire, blows it away. But there are more nightmare beasts floating in the distance.

They descend on the city.

Looking up at this vision in the sky, tourists scream. They scream for their homes. They scream for their families.

Ekaw charges towards the city and sinks massive claws into the flank of a beast and rips it in two.

CORTEX

There is no hope at all! Ekaw will be slain soon - her death is our death! If we wait, it will all be over soon whether we want it to or not! We must escape from her mind and into another dream, pronto!

ANNA

Cortex spins her loom and opens a rift in the gray. It shows a beach where the ocean is still, but the sand moves in rolling waves.

CORTEX

Ooh, basking in the sun for eternity! How's that for endtimes? I remind you, two sparks each -

ANNA

Tourists shove each other aside, fighting to get to the tiny opening. It's not long before Cortex is pushed away, cursing and demanding payment for their way through.

BELLUM

According to legend, the Bugle woke up other nightmare beasts and commanded them in battle.

ANNA

Pertinent flashback, aw yeeuh.

ETHER

Um, Callosum, Neur... um, you guys? I need to show you something.

CALLOSUM

All hope is lost...

NEUR

What is it, Ether?

ETHER

Just... come with me you guys. Come on.

ANNA

You know who notices the three of them slink away? A bitter, beaten Cortex does.

Smash cut to: the Bugle's pit!

CALLOSUM

Why didn't you mention this earlier?!

ETHER

(meekly)

I didn't think it was... relevant...

CALLOSUM

This nightmare beast rotting is Ekaw's brain from the inside! You didn't think to - rrggh! Okay. Alright. Neur... Ether - we must think of this nightmare beast like a tumor.

We must excise it like one. This is what caused the other nightmare beasts to wake up. This is siphoning our dragon's life away. If we get rid of it, the nightmare beasts will go back to sleep. Ekaw will live. Our city will live.

THE BUGLE

WAIT. AND IT WILL ALL BE OVER SOON.

NEUR

How do we get it out?

CALLOSUM

Neur, Ether: we're going to cut a hole in the ground large enough for that thing to fall through.

ANNA

Callosum weaves with their loom and carves away at the gray ground surrounding the Bugle. Ether and Neur join, weaving and running in a wide arc around the Bugle, aiding in a swift completion of the circle.

When finished, a rift is opened up to someone else's dream, as planned. However, the Bugle doesn't fall into it. Here's the problem: so they made a circle around the Bugle, right? Say that the radio is the Bugle and the pedestal is the circle they made. It's not circular, but bear with me. The rift goes from the edge of the pedestal to the edge of the bugle. It does not continue under the Bugle. It's a donut shaped rift around the Bugle. The rot of this thing is strong. The rift, being so unstable, seals back up and becomes gray once more.

THE BUGLE

WAIT. AND IT WILL ALL BE OVER SOON.

NEUR

What do we try next?

CALLOSUM

I... I don't know.

NEUR

Hey, I that looks familiar!

ANNA

Neur points at the base of the Bugle. Recall: Gurgles is underneath the Bugle. And Neur recognizes Gurgles.

CALLOSUM

What is it?

ETHER

(lying and uncomfortable about it)

I mean, I think that's just what that nightmare thing looks like.

NEUR

Ether... isn't that the feature you were weaving earlier today?

ETHER

What? Oh wow. It sure looks like the feature I was weaving earlier. What a coincidence.

CALLOSUM

Ether.

ETHER

(shrinking)

Yes, master?

CALLOSUM

(the kind of angry that is eerily still and quiet)

Your father gave you a certain heirloom before he passed. Is that correct?

ETHER

You'll, uh, have to be more specific.

CALLOSUM

The mareshell necklace. Which was a *fossilized nightmare beast*.

ETHER

HM. Is that... is that what that was?

CALLOSUM

Where is your father's mareshell necklace?

ETHER

Um... I didn't... put it on. I wasn't wearing it today.

CALLOSUM

Cease your spineless lies. Take som responsibility.

ANNA

Let's take a look at the sky for a second. Things are not looking well for our dragon. Ekaw lopes around the city square, buildings ripped apart, nightmare beasts trundling through everything. Her belly is split open from a gaping wound. Her intestines coil in a bloody heap on the ground. Still, she fights the nightmare beasts. Still, she suffers more blows.

All this is Ether's fault. He knows this.

This is his responsibility.

ETHER

Please don't be mad with me.

CALLOSUM

You are such a small boy.

ETHER

(long silence)

(then quietly)

This is my fault. I take responsibility.

Callosum punches Ether. He collapses.

NEUR

(pulling them away)

Callosum!

CALLOSUM

Useless. More than useless. I told your father you couldn't do it, I told him, but he was insistent that I give his boy a chance, he was insistent that...

Callosum slumps to the ground. All their energy is drained. They glare hollowly at Ether.

CALLOSUM

And look what comes of it.

NEUR

Ether just made an honest mistake, Master Callosum.

CALLOSUM

Mistakes and carelessness are no excuse. For anything. "Honest mistakes" are to blame for so much suffering...

(looking up)

The end of the world.

(beat)

Would you look at that?

NEUR

What, Master?

CALLOSUM

She's dying.

ANNA

A nightmare beast whips Ekaw across the head. She loses consciousness.

All is black.

ANNA

And regains it.

Lights up.

ANNA

Neur embraces Callosum. They let it happen. Neur kisses Callosum on the lips. They kiss back.

A thread wraps around Callosum's throat and pulls tight, yanking them away, strangling them.

Cortex stands at the top of the pit, weaving with her loom, a band of frenzied tourists surrounding her.

CORTEX

Degenerates! You say I flaunt the codes of dreamweaver conduct? Look at you, master and student canoodling while the rest of us die! This is all your fault!

Callosum chokes.

Neur grabs the thread and snaps it.

Callosum gasps.

ANNA

Cortex slices open a rift in the side of the pit. On the other side: lava floes hanging over a sulfuric earth.

Tourists nab onto Ether, Neur, and Callosum and drag them towards the rift.

As Ether is dragged towards the lava, his mind works. This is all his fault. Just like Axon shattering her legs at Stringsnap Cliff. He didn't take responsibility for any of that, did nothing to help her, sacrificed nothing for her.

Not again. The Bugle is his responsibility. He's going to deal with it. By sacrificing.. everything.

Ether struggles against the tourists, then wriggles free.

ANNA

Ether gets a hold of his loom. He splits a tall rift in the side of the pit. On the other side is a naked woman on a stage. She's talking about trombones for some godforsaken reason. And the audience is just rolling with laughter.

Ether tries to run through the rot surrounding the base of the Bugle. The ground is sticky and every step is a great effort to tear himself free.

THE BUGLE

WAIT. AND IT WILL ALL BE OVER SOON.

ANNA

The Bugle lashes out with a noodley appendage. Ether dives forward to avoid it, faceplanting in the ichor.

(whispering, while Ether is face-first on
the ground, struggling to tear himself
free)

Give up. You won't do it, you selfish nothing-man. You're a little boy. You won't do it. You're pathetic. You've lost already. This world belongs to nightmare now. This world belongs to nightmare now.

With a yell, Ether breaks free.

Ether leaps onto the bed, grabbing onto the
Bugle.

ETHER

I've done it you bastard! AAAH!

High pitched screeching. The lights fritz.

The Bugle wraps itself around Ether.

The lights strobe, then cut out.

The lights flicker back on. The Bugle has fused
with Ether.

ETHER

(speaking with the voice distorter)

It's fine, guys. I'm fa-fa-fa-fine. It's me. E-e-e-ether.

(raises an appendage)

Leave Callosum and Neur alone.

(listens to Cortex)

Ha-have you tried being qu-qu-quiet for once, Corte-e-e-ex?

Ether lashes with his appendage.

ETHER

I'm sorry... I didn't... I didn't mean...

T H E B L O O D

Ether goes to the rift. He stands before it.
Howling wind.

Silhouette of Phene, reaching out for Ether.

ETHER

(reaching out)

Phene! My-m-m-m-my d-darling! I'll find a w-w-way back for you. I sw-sw-swear...

(Phene strokes his cheek/Ether strokes
his own cheek)

Light brush of a t-t-touch...

(closes eyes)

(opens - realizes Phene was never there)

Callosum. Neur. If you ever get out of here... please find Ph-ph-ph-phene. Tell my wife what happened. Tell her I love her. Tell her I will - I will- I will - I will never rest until I see her again.

Ether stands before the rift.

Ether stands before the rift.

Ether stands before the rift.

SUSAN

Anna. I know this isn't for dramatic tension. You were so close last night. This is the farthest you've ever gone. Finish it, Anna. I have it written in my script: "Ether steps through the rift."

ANNA

This is the farthest I've ever gone...

SUSAN

Ether steps through the rift.

ANNA

There's so little left... I can't... I can't...

SUSAN

Ether steps through the rift.

ANNA

(soft singing)

You close your eyes...

(she does)

Open them...

(she does)

Ether stands before the rift.

Ether steps through the rift.

III: THE ENIGMA OF SURRENDER

ANNA

The dream Ether stepped into was mine. I was having an anxiety dream about... okay, don't judge me, but I started taking improv classes at Second City in Chicago to impress a guy and... that didn't pan out.

I'm glad. I met Pat shortly after that.

Ether told me all about his world and how he got into my dreams. Told me what Phene is like. How he searches all the time for a way back to her. And he's created the most wonderful features in my dreams. I help him. Helped.

It was freaky, seeing him in every one of my dreams at first.

I started sleeping more, just so I could talk and dreamweave with Ether. If being awake ever became bearable again, I was thinking about putting my graphic design degree to good use and turning his story into a comic book or bringing his and my - mostly his - features to life through a series of paintings. My head started to hurt. I spent twenty hours a day in bed.

(singing)

You close your eyes in September
Open them in May of next year...

When Pat finally dragged my ass into the doctor's office, they told me I had a tumor chilling in my brain cavity.

The Bugle is that tumor. And the Bugle cannot be separated from Ether. Having the tumor removed means losing them both.

I need you to understand something about all this. Okay? I don't know where the causality is. Cause and effect is fucked. Did my tumor cause Ether to exist in my dreams? Like, is he just a hallucination?

Or is he real, as real as the scalpel which about to gouge into my scalp? Is Bugle *actually* the tumor? Did Ether's bringing the Bugle here cause the tumor in my brain?

I didn't want the operation. I wanted my escape into another world. I wanted my friend. Reality wasn't worth being in when fantasy was so much better.

(she sits on the bed, holding her drawing of Ether, closes her eyes)

Ether? Are you there?

ETHER

(playing him with eyes closed, speaking through voice distorter)

Of course I am.

ANNA

Oh thank god.

(beat)

You know what's great about dreaming?

ETHER

So many things. The vividness. The un-un-unexpected. The -

ANNA

I was posing the question so I could answer it, Ether.

ETHER

Oh.

ANNA

The best part is not being awake. Simply that. Not being in pain from all these goddamn headaches all the goddamn time.

ETHER

Callosum once made a feature about headaches.

ANNA

(excited)

Oh? Tell me about it. Please.

ETHER

Sure. They called it the Enigma of Surrender. It was a maze with iron walls. Being inside, there was a constant high pitched sound vibrating, reverberating off the iron walls. Caused headaches. There was no way out of the maze. Unless you gave up. If you touched one of the iron walls for a whole minute, a series of them would all topple over, leading to the center. In the center was a single flower. If you brought it to your face to smell it, the petals would clamp down on your nose, like a dog's bite.

ANNA

Wow... Callosum sounds like an asshole.

ETHER

A brilliant ass-ass-asshole.

ANNA

(beat)

Could you weave me another feature?

ETHER

What's the theme?

ANNA

Headaches. Do one better than Callosum.

Anna leans back in silence, eyes still closed. She reacts to Ether creating the feature.

ANNA

(reverent)

Wow.

(beat)

I don't get it. What's a black box theatre got to do with a headache?

(beat)

Oh. I never would have thought of that. Amazing.

(beat)

Who's that? There in the back?

(beat)

Well, I'm calling her Susan. She looks like a Susan.

(beat)

A whole audience. For me, Ether? You shouldn't have.

(silence)

They put me under anesthesia, Ether. I don't want this to be goodbye.

ETHER

You know this is for the best.

ANNA

I don't want you to go. Please, one more feature.

ETHER

Time is frozen. Can't you feel it?

ANNA

Frozen?

(moving her limbs)

I don't understand.

ETHER

In the world outside. The scalpel is positioned just above your scalp. And it will stay like that. For a while.

(beat)

Release me, Anna. Step into that black box theatre. Tell my story.

ETHER

If you don't do it, you will never wake up again.

ANNA

But you'll be here. We can weave dreams together. Forever.

ETHER

But it will only ever be dreams.

ANNA

What's so great about reality, huh? The last letter came just before the surgery. None of the grad schools I applied to accepted me. All I do is sleep anyway. All I have is headaches. And failure. And failure. And more failure. And divorcing parents. And a opiate-addicted brother. And -

ETHER

And a feeling of solidity. Dreams are soft. I feel soft, Anna. Lucid as I am, I am still in a dream, and I feel soft. And there is Pat.

Anna sits in silence.

ANNA

(singing)

You close your eyes, opened on New Year's

(with a breath, she opens her eyes)

In "reality," I felt like I had so little to live for. But I know that was the Bugle's - no, the tumor. There was only ever a tumor. The Bugle isn't real. Ether isn't... The tumor influenced my psyche. Pressing on the parts of my mind that would drag me deeper and deeper into a depression.

Until I wake up, Ether is still alive. When I say "The End," he dies.

(she searches for answers in her drawing)

What if I made up an ending, you know? What if I made up a totally improbable ending that could never possibly happen. But I can convince myself that he's... fine.

PAT

I love you, Anna. Please make it back.

SUSAN

I pressed that button on purpose.

ANNA

(staring at her drawing)

(clearly just making this up)

As the tumor is separated from Anna's brain, Ether is separated from the Bugle. The slicing combined with the anesthesia does something strange to Anna's brain. The neurons go haywire, and for a moment, Anna's Dreamspace becomes connected to all other dreams. For a moment, she is the great dreamer, like Ekaw. Ether seizes his one opportunity and cuts a rift into Anna's Dreamspace. Phene's dream is on the other side. His wife is dreaming about a field of poppies. She sits amongst them. Waiting for Ether. He crosses through. The rift seals up. He lives in her dreams now, not mine - Anna's. They may not be able to be physically together, but in dreams they are forever linked. They love each other into a happily ever after. The End.

Goodbye, Ether.

Anna rips the drawing into little pieces.

She is a mess.

SUSAN

Finally. Was that so hard, Anna?

ANNA

I hope you drown like a sack of dicks, Susan.

(beat)

I've done it. That's all there is. That's all...

(climbing into bed)

I'm making it back, Pat.

Light brush of a touch.

I can't wait to see you.

I'm making it back.

I'm making it back.

I'm making it...

Light swells. She gasps.

Black.

THE END