

Shorn
a play
by Nora Douglass

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a play in fifteen scenes
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Lena begrudgingly takes in Claire, a young woman ostracized from her village for fraternizing with the enemy who is unceremoniously dumped on the edge of her arid fields, land which straddles long-contested boundaries. Disrupter Claire soon has her eye on Lena's handsome boy, August who is sent out to work for the women in town who have lost their men to war. As hidden motives reign, and survival tactics held long after their benefits have expired, the two women vie for the soul of the young man whose own secrets and ambitions are forced into relief and ultimately call for action.

Characters: LENA, a woman of indeterminate age, burnt and old from too much sun and toil. A deep reservoir of stubborn strength and a survivor's sense of humor – wily, irascible and capricious – accompany her.

CLAIRE, twenties, recently ostracized from her township for fraternizing with the enemy. Divides the events of her life into two categories, lucky and unlucky; takes what comes.

AUGUST, late teens to early twenties, a boy caught between youth and manhood. Large, muscular and handsome. In contrast to rawboned LENA, he looks amazingly well-nourished for his mean circumstances.

The Scene: An arid field in a country torn by war of some longstanding. A dilapidated house, a rake, a bucket.

Time: The feeling of a recent past or near future. Late harvest.

Scene Breakdown:	<u>Scene One:</u>	Early morning.
	<u>Scene Two:</u>	The next day, mid-morning.
	<u>Scene Three:</u>	The next day, the same.
	<u>Scene Four:</u>	The next day, early morning.
	<u>Scene Five:</u>	The same day, early evening.
	<u>Scene Six:</u>	The next day, late afternoon.
	<u>Scene Seven:</u>	The next day, evening.
	<u>Scene Eight:</u>	The next day, early evening.

Scene Breakdown (continued).

Scene Nine: A few days later, morning.

Scene Ten: The next night.

Scene Eleven: A few days later, just dawn.

Scene Twelve: Two days later, near dusk.

Scene Thirteen: Later, that same evening.

Scene Fourteen: The next morning.

Scene Fifteen: The next day, early morning.

A note on transitions:

To support the flow of this play, unless a blackout is specified, scenes will transition in a ghost-light. The actors, remaining in character, will continue the action and make the prop and blocking changes necessary for the next scene, thus, advancing time and giving the impression of a continuous life.

Playing note:

This play may be performed without an intermission, or an act break can come between Scene Ten and Scene Eleven.

SCENE ONE:

At Rise:

Flashes of light and distant sounds canon and artillery fire are replaced by the rhythmic humming of cicadas, pre-dawn sounds of a late summer day. Lights up reveal CLAIRE, stripped of shoes and stockings, her thin clothes torn and hair shorn, face down in the dirt. A small bundle wrapped in a dirty piece of clothing lies nearby. LENA comes out of the house, takes in the scene, and then un-ceremoniously dumps a bed pan onto the dusty earth, effectively silencing the cicadas. She takes up a long-handled wooden rake, approaches the heap that is CLAIRE and gingerly pokes her with the tip of the rake. CLAIRE does not move. LENA waits for a moment, and then takes up the bundle, opens the packet and examines the clothes. She inspects a dress; there are no buttons. She seems to find some satisfaction in this. LENA closes the bundle and replaces it beside CLAIRE. After a moment, AUGUST bursts through the door. LENA places herself between AUGUST and CLAIRE and tries unsuccessfully to obstruct his view).

LENA

No, now – Now, no! We can't take in every stray wanders by here.

(She follows on his heels).

I don't have enough to feed you.

(He calls her on this by his look).

Well, we have to save – She might already be gone, you know. Boy!...

(AUGUST continues; LENA hisses at him to stop. He does for a moment, and then, in open defiance, moves closer toward CLAIRE's still form. LENA retrieves the wooden bucket and holds it out to AUGUST).

LENA

We need water.

(AUGUST returns, obediently takes the bucket and exits. He returns momentarily with a full bucket and heads for CLAIRE).

LENA

Boy. Over here.

(LENA takes the bucket and ladles herself a cup of water. She drinks slowly and deliberately. After a moment, AUGUST crosses to the bucket, and while LENA glares at him, dips in the ladle, and then carefully crosses the dry field. He squats down, awkwardly holding the water out to CLAIRE. AUGUST looks back at LENA for help. She turns away. He moves closer and gently touches CLAIRE'S head. CLAIRE begins to stir; slowly raises her head and momentarily meets AUGUST'S gaze. Soothed and exhausted, she lowers her head. Helplessly, AUGUST looks over to LENA).

LENA

She's your pet.

(LENA watches AUGUST struggle until she can stand it no longer. She propels herself up from her chair and into the shack. A few slam-bangs from within, and she returns with a basin and some clean rags, grabs the bucket, stomps off the porch and approaches AUGUST and his charge).

LENA (continued).

Fetch my box.

(AUGUST relinquishes his patient and returns to the shack. LENA pours a surprisingly generous amount of water into the basin and with efficient expertise begins to dress CLAIRE'S wounds. AUGUST returns with a battered black tin box. He hands the box to LENA and stands off. CLAIRE'S gaze is split evenly between LENA and AUGUST. AUGUST studies CLAIRE and

LENA. LENA concentrates on her patient. Another moment passes before the lights fade).

SCENE TWO:

Time: The next day, mid-morning.

At Rise: AUGUST and LENA work in the field. CLAIRE, head wrapped in a bandana and dress closed with safety pins and a rope belt, sits in front of the house. AUGUST and LENA, when the other's not looking, take turns watching CLAIRE. She in turn, seems to be enjoying the scene as she sizes up her temporary home.

SCENE THREE:

Time: The next day, the same.

At Rise: In an exact reversal of the previous scene, CLAIRE, Works alongside AUGUST in the field. LENA sits cutting up scrawny vegetables. CLAIRE leads AUGUST to the far end of the field.

CLAIRE

This?

(AUGUST looks and nods; he starts back to his place).

CLAIRE (continued)

What's your name? She just calls you boy – It's all right. You don't have to talk to me. I'm used to that. You don't mind if I talk to you, do you?

(AUGUST moves down the row. CLAIRE follows.
LENA scowls at them from the porch).

CLAIRE

You haven't asked me my name. I'm Claire. I've seen you in town. You do all the heavy work for the women – Listen, I'm not after you, if that's what you think. I'm not trying to make love to you – Or, maybe, you'd like me to.

(AUGUST crosses away. LENA gets up and goes into the house).

CLAIRE

(follows AUGUST)

You were kind to me. I'd just like to thank you, that's all.

(LENA returns with a dangerous-looking shot gun, a rusty relic from a past war).

CLAIRE

You were kind. Can't I thank you?

(LENA aims, and shoots right over CLAIRE'S head. There is a lot of smoke and a terrible recoil from the old rifle, but LENA recovers quickly).

LENA

Crow. For supper. Missed.

(LENA rests the gun up against the house and sits. AUGUST and CLAIRE move apart in the field).

SCENE FOUR:

Time: The next day, early morning.

At Rise: AUGUST explodes out of the shack. He immediately un-buttons the top button of his shirt. LENA follows on his heels.

LENA

Now, you don't want to be late.

(automatically re-buttons his shirt).

Give those hypocrites any reason to find fault. What do you do with your hair? Comb it with a stick? Let me see your hands. All right. You got a clean handkerchief?

(AUGUST pulls a crumpled bandana from his back pocket).

LENA (continued).

Now, it's things like that. They look at that and they check it off that list they always got going inside their heads: "See? What'd I tell you; dirty rags to blow their noses."

(She pulls a clean, neatly folded handkerchief from her pocket; gives it to AUGUST).

Now, you don't give them any reason to look down their sharp little noses at you. Here's your breakfast.

(He tries to give the breakfast back to her).

You want to faint on their doorstep? You show them you want for nothing out here. You show them, Lena takes care of her boy. Yes, sir. You make them envy our charming life out here in this beautiful countryside. Your respectable ladies. Maybe they feel a little jealous of our elegant country living. Now, you work hard, and you smile your sweet smile, and you give them no peace. They need you now their men's away, and don't you forget that. Now, get going.

(She re-buttons his shirt).

(AUGUST peers into the shack as he un-buttons the top button of his shirt).

LENA (continued).

She's fine. She'll still be here when you get back – I promise. Now, give Lena a kiss.

(As he bends down to kiss LENA, she buttons his top button one more time. She seems reluctant to let him go. He is aware of this and lingers).

LENA (continued).

What are you standing there for? You want to be late? Those pious janes are just waiting for something to make themselves feel better about what they done. Now, get going. Don't you let Lena down.

(AUGUST, relieved he's finally been released, bounds away, unbuttoning his shirt as he goes. LENA watches him go, and then settles into her chair to sew. She retrieves a tablecloth of fine tatted lace from a covered wooden box. LENA'S face softens as she looks at it and caresses the delicate work. Her reverie is broken by movement from within. LENA hastily puts the lace away and retrieves her mending. CLAIRE comes out of the house carrying a kitchen chair and nursing a cup of something hot. LENA and CLAIRE sit together in an unquiet peace for a few moments).

CLAIRE

(finally).

Where is your boy?

(LENA is silent).

It was kind of him to give up his bed.

(tries again).

He does a lot of work in town, doesn't he? The heavy work, for the women. They say he's good with the big animals.

LENA

(abrupt)

Did you love him?

CLAIRE

Sure.

LENA

You're not the first. Don't think you're the first. There have been others. Plenty of others. They think we're the city dump out here.

CLAIRE

Look, I don't...

LENA

You might say I run sort of a home for wayward girls.

CLAIRE

And is it your mission to reform these wayward girls?

LENA

I nurse their bones and send them on their way.

CLAIRE

No motherly advice?

LENA

Stay away from my boy.

CLAIRE

The moment they notice him they're declared fit for travel, is that it?

LENA

Good a measure as any. He's a fine-looking boy.

CLAIRE

He is.

LENA

Handsome.

CLAIRE

Very.

LENA

Let me look at that dressing.

CLAIRE

Time to give me my walking papers?

LENA

No. You're still very sick.

(she holds CLAIRE'S head firmly).

But rules.

CLAIRE

Owww!...

LENA

The boy is off limits.

CLAIRE

For your information, I'm not interested in your boy. You're hurting me.

(LENA releases CLAIRE).

LENA

So, what was it with you? Piece of bread? Cup of coffee?

CLAIRE

It wasn't like that.

LENA

A morsel of dried meat.

CLAIRE

Sure.

LENA

Tell me. Tell me what it was. A tin of fish. Or was it caviar?

CLAIRE

A bar of soap!

LENA

French milled, no doubt.

CLAIRE

Lavender. Satisfied?

LENA

Yes. Thank you.

CLAIRE

Why didn't you just leave me out there? You wanted to.

LENA

I'm not like those Sunday Christians who put you here. You're to stay as long as you've a need.

CLAIRE

Believe me, I am not planning to stay.

LENA

Well, I'm not asking you to go.

CLAIRE

As soon as I decide which direction.

LENA

Stay. For now.

CLAIRE

Why?

LENA

The boy likes you – He'd blame me.

CLAIRE

What's his name? You just call him boy.

(LENA looks at CLAIRE, but says nothing).

CLAIRE (continued).

Why do you hate me? It's not because of what I did. I know that kind of hate. I can feel that right off.

LENA

August. His name is August.

CLAIRE

That's a nice name.

(LENA peers at her with suspicion. CLAIRE reaches down into LENA's mending basket for a garment).

LENA

What are you doing?

CLAIRE

I just thought – I'm feeling better...

LENA

I take care of my own.

CLAIRE

Well, do you mind if I mend mine?

(LENA shrugs; CLAIRE disappears into the house; returns with a thin cotton button-less dress. LENA waits for her to settle).

LENA

I have only two needles.

CLAIRE

One for you, and...

LENA

One for me when this one breaks. Which it will, soon, I warrant. Or, I might lose it. I'm always losing things.

CLAIRE

I see.

(CLAIRE gets up and starts into the house).

LENA

Where are you going??

CLAIRE

Back to bed. If I can't do anything...

LENA

Not good for you to go back to bed. Best to keep busy – There are needles in that box.

(CLAIRE retrieves a small wooden cylinder, possibly a re-purposed shell case; opens it).

CLAIRE

There must be twenty needles in here!
(She takes a needle).

LENA

That one's my favorite.

(CLAIRE starts to put it back).

LENA (continued).

Use it. It's the best. Nice and sharp. And short enough to be useful.

CLAIRE

Thank you.

LENA

No buttons, though – In that little tin under the flannel. None that match. Maybe a couple of shirt buttons.

CLAIRE

Thank you. You're very kind.

LENA

I am not.

CLAIRE

I only meant...

LENA

I know, polite. Still polite after what you've been through. Can't wonder if it was worth it though. I watched 'em march through – that rag tag lot that's set up camp across the river. A sorrier looking bunch I have never seen.

(the injured fine lady).
Trampled my prize-winning roses.

CLAIRE

(looks out; a beat).
You never had any roses.

LENA

(laughs).
If I had, they would have trampled 'em. Not a brain among them. But that probably didn't matter much to you, did it?

(During the following, we become aware once again, of distant sounds of battle. CLAIRE seems more disturbed by this than LENA).

LENA

Oh, they may trample my land, but they don't trample me. I'm just a poor old woman trying to eke out a life here. And as long as they don't get wind of my boy –

CLAIRE

You're safe. But he goes into town. I've seen him.

LENA

He knows how to go, and when; what to watch out for. He's grown up out here. I've trained him. I've kept him safe.

CLAIRE

But surely word gets around.

LENA

Not unless you have plans.

CLAIRE

I don't wish that life on anybody.

LENA

No.

CLAIRE

No.

LENA

What's your name, anyway? Mine's Lena. Old Lena. Ugly Lena.

CLAIRE

I'm Claire. Whore Claire. Forbidden Claire.

(studies LENA).

I think I'll call you Nurse Angel Lena.

LENA

All Right. And I'll call you Saint Claire.

CLAIRE

How about Virgin Claire?

LENA

If you call me Gentle Mother – And as long as you leave the boy alone.

CLAIRE

He is handsome.

(LENA smiles. CLAIRE returns her smile).

LENA

Not to be crossed Lena.

CLAIRE

Not to be intimidated Claire.

LENA

You're just passing through.

CLAIRE

Aunt Lena's reform school.

LENA

No. Every one of them, incorrigible.

CLAIRE

I bet that act had all of them running.

LENA

Most of them.

CLAIRE

You don't scare me.

LENA

You're a hard case.

CLAIRE

And you're a fake.

LENA

Good. We understand each other.

CLAIRE

What time did you say he'd be home?

(The women look at each other as the lights fade and shift into evening).

SCENE FIVE:

Time: The same day, early evening.

At Rise: As dusk settles, there is a distant explosion and flash of light, a last volley of artillery fire, and then it is quiet. LENA comes out onto the porch; sits, and begins to darn a pair of men's socks. After a moment, we hear another sound, a pebble hitting and rolling along the uneven the flagstones. A second pebble is tossed and AUGUST appears from around the house. LENA feigns surprise.

LENA

Boy! You frightened me. You leave your virtuous ladies with a little bit of guilt?

(AUGUST goes to the door and peers in).

LENA (continued).

She's all right. She's sleeping.

(AUGUST makes a move to go into the shack).

LENA (continued).

You can see her in the morning. She's fine. She eats like a horse. You must be hungry.

(AUGUST shakes his head, No. He sits and begins to take off his shoes).

LENA (continued)

Well, we have a choice to make, Boy.

(she pulls the egg which she's been using to darn out of the sock).

The last egg.

(she puts it to her nose).

Still good. Do we eat? Or do you want a beautifully darned sock? I know how you like to impress your pious ladies.

(AUGUST smiles, and shakes the toe of the sock).

LENA

Vain, like all men-folks. Okay, we eat tomorrow.

(AUGUST lifts his foot and displays a bigger hole in this sock. He grins, already knowing her response).

LENA

What do you do? Carry that old mule on your back up and down her field?

(AUGUST shows LENA the hole in the bottom of his shoe).

LENA

What happened to that card I gave you? You can't keep it two days? Ace of spades; the best luck you'll ever have. Didn't you glue it down? All right, go get the deck; what's left of it.

(as he goes).

Though I don't know as there's any luck left in those old cards! Can't you get one of your Christian martyrs to give you a pair of her man's boots?

(AUGUST returns with a small pot of homemade glue and what's left of an old deck of cards. LENA fans out the deck).

LENA

Okay, choose.

(AUGUST studies the deck for a long time before finally choosing a card).

What is it?

(shows her).

Eight of clubs.

(gives AUGUST a vague tarot reading).

"Little progress. A cursed harvest."

(peers at AUGUST).

"Or an ungrateful child." Choose again.

(AUGUST takes another card).

Jack of hearts. Mmm. You planning on leaving your old Lena? Put them both in.

(pulls a scrap of cloth from her pocket).

Here, put this between. And glue them down good this time!

(AUGUST begins mending his shoe with the glue and playing cards).

LENA

Sure you don't want to eat? I can cook this egg.

(AUGUST smiles and like a magician, produces two more eggs from his pockets).

LENA

You're hopeless. You know where they go – Wait! Give me one of those. We'll eat this one first.

(LENA replaces the egg with which she's been mending with the new one; hands AUGUST the old egg. He disappears into the house).

LENA

Okay. Go on, now.

(AUGUST returns; stands next to LENA; taps her toe).

LENA

What?? What's the matter with you tonight? You're like a great slobbering pup. Oh! You brought me something else? What's is it? What did you bring me? Come on, Give.

(AUGUST pulls a tin from his trouser pocket. It has no label).

LENA

Ooh, a tin! Aren't *we* somebody's favorite! What's in it?

(She examines it; shakes it).

Oh, a mystery! I do like a mystery.

(In a familiar routine, LENA makes a great show of making sure no one is watching. She goes to the wood box, moves a few pieces of stove wood and then carefully lifts a loose board and places the tin under the false bottom. She returns the board and then the disguising firewood).

LENA

We'll find out some day, won't we? Christmas is coming. This year, I promise. Every tin. We'll have a feast! Does she want you to come back tomorrow? Of course, she does. I just hope you're not getting too cozy. I know you like going into town. I remember going into town. And they need you right now, 'cause their men are gone. And they like your silence.

LENA (continued).

But don't go getting any fancy ideas like you're anything special. They're not giving you their last bit of bacon 'cause they like you, Boy. You're what they can get. And don't think they like you any better than before all their men was took, or before you grew up as handsome as you done. Your muscles are way up ahead of your brains, boy. And you just remember that. Okay, one more day. We got our own harvest to worry about, sorry as it is. So, tomorrow, and then you come back, help me finish up.

(LENA returns to her sewing. AUGUST pulls another can from his pocket; hands her his knife).

LENA

What's gotten into you? Now, no. We have to save these – I ate. I did. And so did your pet. And don't look at me like that. We had plenty. I finally shot that smug crow out of his too blue sky. No, I didn't. Well, we've grown fond of each other. He's become my best enemy, now you've charmed all those women in town. We had onion soup. All right, no onion – Well, I just don't have much of an appetite these days. Now, don't you pull that long face. I taught it to you. You see an end to this war? Me neither. We need to save. And you know I'm right.

(AUGUST moves away).

LENA

Oh. let's not argue. It's a pretty night. So still. Let's enjoy this quiet for a change.

(AUGUST returns; sits at LENA'S feet. A long beat).

LENA

You're a good boy, August. You're Lena's good boy.

(LENA begins humming. It's a lullaby AUGUST knows well. He relaxes a bit; leans in against LENA's chair. She hums and mends as the lights slowly fade).

SCENE SIX:

Time: The next day, late afternoon.

At Rise: CLAIRE stomps out onto the porch carrying an arm load of thistles and a large cooking pot; she is careful to slam the door behind her. She dumps her load and slams the door a couple more times; waits, listens and looks into the house; still no response. She slams the door one more time and finally sits down. After a moment, LENA comes out carrying a small suitcase. This she sets down in front of CLAIRE, and starts back into the house.

CLAIRE

What's that?

LENA

I'm so glad to hear you're feeling better.

CLAIRE

That case.

LENA

Oh. I won't be needing it. And since you aren't planning to dine with us tonight...

CLAIRE

You can hardly "dine" on thistles.

LENA

They're edible. They can really be quite tasty. Especially in the spring. Like sweet celery.

CLAIRE

Well, this isn't spring.

LENA

We'd be fools not to take bounty where we find it.

(CLAIRE, feeling LENA's gaze, finally gives in and gingerly picks up one of the long thistles. She immediately pricks her fingers).

CLAIRE

Bounty?! – Owwww!...

LENA

Yes, sir! This is the place to sit out a war in style, eh?

(LENA watches with some satisfaction as CLAIRE struggles. Determined not to give LENA more fuel, CLAIRE perseveres. LENA picks up the case and starts into the house).

LENA (continued).

Do the big end first. Gives you something to hold onto.
(disappears into the house).

CLAIRE

(to herself).

Should'a just let me die in the first place – Ouch!

(CLAIRE tries another way, though the thin fabric gives very little protection. LENA returns with a large knife and a leather glove and hands them to CLAIRE).

LENA

Makes it much easier.

CLAIRE

Well, why didn't you – Never mind. I know the answer...

LENA

Trim off the leaves and then scrape the stem. No! Don't throw away the strings. We can use them. Makes a sturdy rope.

CLAIRE

(picks up the strings; to herself).

Yeah? To hang who first?

(throws a tiny stem into the pot).

All this work for that?

LENA

If you're tired...

CLAIRE

I am not tired!

LENA

Good. Now, slice the root along its length; tastes like Asparagus. You could serve it as *Coq a vin d'Asperges*, Yes? And nobody would know.

CLAIRE

Except that we have no *Coq*.

LENA

Well, and no *vin*, for that matter. They have forgotten in town. How to get by. How easy it is.

(She takes up her old rifle).

Now, if I can only get that pesky crow. King's feast.

(to CLAIRE).

Trim the stickers off the leaves, you've got spinach. How about *crème d'épinard*?

CLAIRE

Only no crème, right?

(LENA laughs; shrugs; aims; loses her target).

LENA

Damn. Out of range.

(We hear a loud squawk from the crow).

CLAIRE

He's laughing at you, old woman.

LENA

I'll get him next time.

(calls after the crow).

Tomorrow!

CLAIRE

You don't want to shoot that old crow. He's your only friend.

LENA

Just watch me.

CLAIRE

I can't figure you out. You're not cruel by nature.

LENA

No?

CLAIRE

No.

LENA

Keep watching.

CLAIRE

I think maybe I *am* tired.

(CLAIRE stands; opens the door to the shack).

LENA

Quitter.

CLAIRE

Bully.

(sits back down).

I've never seen you in town. August – that's his name, August? – August sometimes, but never you.

LENA

Don't have much need to go into town. What's left there, anyway?

CLAIRE

Not much.

LENA

No need to go into a place of not much.

CLAIRE

I see the women all line up to hire him. Very respectable women. All the heavy work that needs to be done. How was your boy spared? Both sides are fighting with children now. Young boys, fifteen.

LENA

He's not like other people.

CLAIRE

I know. They say he's touched. They say he's slow. I don't believe it.

LENA

Believe it. You leave him be.

CLAIRE

You know what I think? I think you perpetuate this lie to keep him here. To keep him with you.

LENA

I've protected that boy.

CLAIRE

And those women, those very respectable women, they all share in the lie too, because they don't want to lose him either. They don't want your son to be called up any more than you do.

LENA

(beat).

He's not my son. Born to another whore during the last war.

CLAIRE

His mother...

LENA

Died. She wasn't proud like you.

CLAIRE

And August...?

LENA

Dumped off the wagon with the whore. The whore died.

CLAIRE

Why do you call her that? Is it to hurt me?

LENA

They knew I was here to take him. To take care of him. She died. He never spoke.

(They work in silence for a few moments).

CLAIRE

You could leave this place, Lena. You could move on with your life.

LENA

Move on to what? This is my life.

CLAIRE

Some life.

LENA

I never want to forget what they did.

CLAIRE

To August?

LENA

To me! To me!

(points to the field).

This is me. This is what happened to me!

CLAIRE

You get laid waste by both sides.

LENA

This is my land. My home.

CLAIRE

Ancient history, Lena.

LENA

Who knows history? This war, the last war, the war before that. We've had no break out here. And me? I've been Catholic. Protestant. Orthodox. Gypsy. Jew. It makes no difference. I'm still ravaged. This is still the field they all march through with their tanks and their muddy boots. Why should I move for them?

CLAIRE

Because you're living in a wasteland. Because you hang onto this ugliness like it's some kind of badge of honor.

LENA

I am not bowing down to any more flags. This is my land.

CLAIRE

Lena, Look. Look at your land. It's ruined. Nothing grows out here. Let them have it. They've already destroyed it. Destroyed its use for the next ten – twenty years.

LENA

I can wait.

CLAIRE

Stubborn!

LENA

And right.

CLAIRE

And dead.

LENA

Don't you just wish? Then you could take my boy.

CLAIRE

Oh, Lena, I don't want your boy.

LENA

You do. I can tell.

(Once again, we become aware of the far-off sounds of battle. A closer sound catches CLAIRE's attention).

CLAIRE

Do you hear that?

LENA

You get used to it.

CLAIRE

No. Listen.

LENA

What?

CLAIRE

Singing.

(A man's voice is heard. CLAIRE looks at LENA who seems unaware, or perhaps is deliberately ignoring this).

LENA

I don't hear anything.

(LENA picks up the thistles and retreats into the house. The singing gets louder as the lights fade).

SCENE SEVEN:

Time: The next day, early evening.

At Rise: AUGUST appears from the road. He walks quickly into the field ahead of CLAIRE, who is following him.

CLAIRE

Will you stop?!

(AUGUST stops, but doesn't turn).

CLAIRE (continued).

Thank you.

(she catches up to him; winded).

Let's sit down, can't we?

(CLAIRE sits. AUGUST lingers at a slight distance).

CLAIRE

I know you know I've been following you. I saw you slow down when you thought I had lost you. So, your name is August. Lena told me. That's a very distinguished name.

(AUGUST moves away and into the field; CLAIRE follows).

CLAIRE

Why don't you want Lena to know you can talk?

(AUGUST stops, but does not look at CLAIRE).

I saw you last night. I heard you when you came home. I heard you singing.

(LENA comes to the door, sees them, but with nothing to do, disappears back into the house).

CLAIRE

(low)

I followed you into town. When Lena hired you out to those women. I followed you almost the whole way. Along the edge of the woods. Nobody saw me! And I stayed in the woods and watched you work. You're very strong. Lifting those heavy timbers. Moving those stubborn animals. Being all the men for all those women.

(LENA returns to the porch with rugs and a carpet beater. LENA beats her rugs with vigor, punctuating the following as a reminder to CLAIRE and AUGUST of her vigilant eye).

CLAIRE (continued).

And I saw how they looked at you. And when you came home, I heard you singing. Hypocrites! – Not you! Them. They all think it's all right because you don't know. You're dumb. They think you're – Oh, don't look so offended. You want them to think that. Is it so you don't have to fight? You don't seem like a coward. But I've seen the bravest men run away like scared little boys. All I know is you like how they look at you, those dried up old women. And you want them to think that you're slow. Just like you want your – You want Lena to think you can't speak.

(AUGUST crosses away. CLAIRE follows him).

CLAIRE

She can't hear us. Don't worry, I won't tell – I wish you'd talk to me. Just say your name. August. Did she give it to you? August? I know Lena doesn't like me, but – I'm not a whore. Believe it or not, it was love. So, don't you think I'm in any hurry to – I'm not like your other women.

(AUGUST continues to move away; CLAIRE follows).

CLAIRE

What does Lena have over you? She's not your mother. She's not your mother!

AUGUST

(cornered).
She saved my life!

CLAIRE

(almost to herself).
Oh! – You do – You can – [talk] –

AUGUST

She saved my life.

CLAIRE

And so, you've been serving hers ever since.

AUGUST

No!

CLAIRE

Don't you ever think about leaving this place? Choosing your own life? Don't you have any dreams?

AUGUST

Just leave me alone, can't you?

CLAIRE

I just want you to know I understand.

AUGUST

You don't understand at all.

CLAIRE

I do. I know what it is to be frightened. To be alone. And lonely. I loved a boy. About your age. Handsome, like you. He liked to sing too.

AUGUST

Well, it wasn't me.

CLAIRE

I know. I...

AUGUST

He was nothing like me.

CLAIRE

I could be your friend.

(AUGUST moves away).

AUGUST

I never should have talked to you. I don't know why I talked to you.

CLAIRE

(moves toward him).

Yes, you do. You do know – I can be a good friend.

(catching LENA's disapproving eye; whispering).

And I could be more...

(AUGUST sees LENA, watching and waiting for him. Automatically returning to his little boy self, he approaches the porch. LENA meets him and ushers him back into the house. CLAIRE is left alone in the field and as the lights begin to fade, she makes a decision and marches off toward the road).

SCENE EIGHT:

Time: The next day, early evening.

At Rise: LENA is on the porch, watching, waiting. After a moment, CLAIRE enters from the road. She carries a square black box. This is not who LENA expected, and she quickly takes up her mending and puts on an attitude of cool disinterest.

LENA

(finally, without looking up)
Thought maybe we lost you.

CLAIRE

Miss me?

LENA

As much as I miss that old crow. We had him for supper last night.

CLAIRE

He greeted me from the gate as I came in.

(A dismissive grunt from LENA).

CLAIRE (continued).

I missed you sweet mother.

LENA

You've been drinking.

CLAIRE

Look. Music.

LENA

From that box?

CLAIRE

It's a phonograph. For August – Where is he? Is he home yet?

LENA

Where did you get that?

CLAIRE

I got it. Listen.

(CLAIRE takes a crank and winds up the phonograph; a scratchy orchestration of a popular tune can be faintly heard).

CLAIRE (continued)

It's lost its horn, but you can still hear it.

LENA

Don't think I don't see what you're trying to do.

CLAIRE

It's a present, that's all.

LENA

I know you. You want my boy. You want to take him away from me.

CLAIRE

I don't want him. I don't want *you* to have him...

LENA

Well, it won't work...

CLAIRE

I want to set him free.

LENA

You're drunk.

CLAIRE

I wish. Oh, Lena, I do wish!

LENA

Where did you get drink?

CLAIRE

You think that just because there's a war on, people have stopped living. No, good Lena. Only you. You're the only one who's stopped living. Not everyone's like you. Life goes on. People go on. People – Everyone but you – They have needs and appetites and dreams. Everywhere. Everywhere but here, sweet Lena – Shouldn't he be home by now?

LENA

Oh, have you come back to stay? I didn't realize I was running a boarding house.

CLAIRE

I need to find something to use for a horn.

(CLAIRE disappears into the house. LENA calls after her).

LENA

Do you think you live here now, or something??

(to herself).

Back like a bad penny. You're too kind, that's what. Lena, you have too soft a heart, I've always said so.

CLAIRE

(reappears carrying an old religious print)

Do you mind? Since you've sworn off the saints?

LENA

I didn't know there were any left.

CLAIRE

Stacks. Under his bed.

(CLAIRE fusses with her phonograph. LENA looks out for AUGUST).

CLAIRE (continued).

Augh! This isn't working!

LENA

Maybe Saint Stephen doesn't approve of being used that way. He's already suffered enough.

CLAIRE

(laughs).

Well, he obviously abandoned you long ago. Oh, I give up!

(CLAIRE puts her ear close to hear the music.

AUGUST enters from around the house. He carries a tin of something, a present for LENA. He sees CLAIRE and quickly hides it).

CLAIRE

August! August, come here! Look what I got for you. It's a phonograph! I'm sorry you can't hear it better but –

(She winds up the phonograph once again; pulling him close).

Put your ear right there. Listen!

(AUGUST listens for a moment, looks at CLAIRE; smiles).

LENA

Boy! Boy!! We need more water.

(AUGUST looks in the bucket. It is nearly full. LENA glares at him. He takes the bucket off to fill it. He returns; sets the bucket against the house. AUGUST studies CLAIRE's pitiful, tightly wound horn. He removes the saint from the hole, smooths it out and then deftly fashions a new horn with a wider bell. The volume of the music increases).

CLAIRE

August! You're a genius!

(AUGUST smiles; LENA glares).

LENA

(to AUGUST).

Aren't you forgetting...??

(August looks confused, but LENA nods him into the house. As soon as he's gone, LENA turns on CLAIRE).

LENA (continued).

You leave my boy alone.

CLAIRE

Come here, listen to the music. Come on, just put your ear down here; right here...

LENA

I don't want your music. I want you to leave my son alone.

CLAIRE

Listen! Listen!...

LENA

No, you listen. I'm letting you stay because for some God-awful reason my boy likes you and would blame me if I sent you away. But you steer clear. And you find a reason to be on your way as soon as...

(AUGUST re-emerges, and LENA quickly turns away from her threatening pose. A smug CLAIRE welcomes him back to the phonograph and their concert. The two, heads together, listen blissfully as a disapproving LENA looks on. The lights fade on the scene).

SCENE NINE:

Time: Morning, a few days later.

At Rise: LENA stands on the porch, watching and waiting with an edgy defensiveness, ready for battle. A new tool, a large metal harrow rake sits beside the water bucket. After a moment, CLAIRE and AUGUST enter carrying brushwood and kindling for the wood box.

CLAIRE

Hello, good Lena! You're particularly cheery this morning.

LENA

That all you found? That won't take us very far into winter.

CLAIRE

You're welcome.

(LENA moves to block the door of the house).

CLAIRE (continued).

Lena, something's up. What? What is it?

(CLAIRE pushes past LENA and goes into the house; she quickly returns).

CLAIRE (continued).

Where's the phonograph?!

(LENA addresses only AUGUST during the following).

LENA

Old Stumpy came by.

CLAIRE

Who's Old Stumpy?...

LENA

You know we've been needing something stronger to make the rows. Look, this we can use for the threshing too.

CLAIRE

You gave up August's phonograph for that??

LENA

(to CLAIRE).

I traded it for what was needed...

CLAIRE

I gave him that phonograph...

LENA

For something useful.

CLAIRE

I gave that to August.

LENA

The boy understands. The boy knows. He knows.

CLAIRE

Knows what? What do you know, August? What do you know??

LENA

That a tool should do half the work. This will lighten your load. Right, boy?

CLAIRE

You had no right.

(LENA turns on CLAIRE).

LENA

And what work did that machine ever do?

CLAIRE

Only the work of bringing a little happiness into this miserable place.

LENA

The boy understands. This is for him. He knows. This was the right thing to do.

(AUGUST looks at LENA. He looks at CLAIRE and then he picks up a piece of kindling, indicating he's going out to look for more firewood, and exits. CLAIRE glares at LENA).

CLAIRE

You had no right.

LENA

(looks after AUGUST, a bit of her bravado gone).
He understands. The boy understands.

(Lights fade on the scene).

SCENE TEN:

Time: The next night.

Rise: LENA sits on the porch. After a time, AUGUST, returning from town, appears from out of the darkness.

LENA

Oh! August!...

(AUGUST hands her a can of something. LENA is ready to play their game).

LENA

What's this? Peaches??...

(CLAIRE emerges from the house).

CLAIRE

Peaches! I haven't had peaches since...

LENA

(making a great show of being surprised).

Oh! How is this possible??...

CLAIRE

(to AUGUST).

Give me your knife.

(AUGUST does not move).

CLAIRE (continued).

All right, you open them.

LENA

We can't eat this.

(LENA places the can under her chair, out of reach).

CLAIRE

What??

LENA

There'll come a time when we really need it.

CLAIRE

Now is that time.

LENA

We've not gone hungry.

CLAIRE

We're starving. You and I are starving while your son gets fed the rations of a whole town!

LENA

He needs it. He's a growing boy.

CLAIRE

Look at yourself, old woman.

(She grabs LENA's wrist).

I could snap this bone by just turning your wrist. You're only alive because you're too mule-headed to lie down and die.

LENA

And thank God I am. You wouldn't be here if I wasn't. And I'm making you tough too. This war, or one like it has been going on for as long as I can remember. And if we don't act foolish and selfish now, we'll still be living after all of the rest of them are dead and gone.

CLAIRE

What is this, a game? See how long you can go?

LENA

If you like. You give it up now, you might as well just lay right down this very minute. And when this war moves into their fine parlors and finds them unprepared and soft, made weak by eating all their stores when they didn't have a need, we will be dining like kings.

CLAIRE

On a single tin of peaches. One little can of joy – If we have enough life left in us to even open it! – Of course, you can't deal with joy, can you, Lena? Or pleasure. Or comfort. Got to keep all that misery alive. Lena, you are an old fool.

LENA

Fool? I'll show you fool.

(She goes to the wood box; begins shifting the wood).

There's nothing like a young fool, that's what I say. Look at this. Look at what we'll have. Now, tell me who's the fool!

CLAIRE

My god, look at this! Look at all these tins. Fruit, crackers – Coffee! – You have coffee!! – My god, olives!...

LENA

They are not going to find old Lena unprepared.

CLAIRE

They're going to find old Lena dead. How could you? Where's a knife? Where's something I can use to open these??

LENA

(snatches a tin away from CLAIRE)

I don't know how much longer this war is going to go on, do you?

(LENA places her chair in front of the wood box; sits).

CLAIRE

Until long after you're dead and these are still buried. Lena, Lena, we're starving *now!* And we've been sitting on top of a full store house of food. Real food! Why? You cannot possibly eat all this in your lifetime. You're not only a mean old lady, you're crazy!

(She turns on AUGUST).

And you! Do you want to be serving old ladies all your life? You're not a little boy anymore. You're no longer her little war-torn waif. You're a man. Why don't you want your own life?

LENA

You leave him alone...

CLAIRE

He gets their last tin of beef; their last cup of real coffee. No wonder your son is such a specimen; he's the only one who gets enough to eat in this whole province.

LENA

He's strong. He works hard.

CLAIRE

But that's not why they hire him.

LENA

You know nothing about it.

CLAIRE

They hire him to have a man close. Even if it's only for an hour. To share a meal...

LENA

You don't know...

CLAIRE

I've seen him in town. I see him with your pious ladies. Oh, He provides a service, all right.

LENA

What an awful thing to say!

CLAIRE

And he can charm the women when he's a mind to, can't you, August? And it's not just the young ones he charms. The old hags...

LENA

That's not true...

CLAIRE

It's with them he shines. They appreciate him.

(to AUGUST).

Those old women you serve – You're their substitute man. Don't you want to be a real man?

LENA

Stop it! Stop saying those horrible things to him. He's not like other people. He's not like you.

CLAIRE

You're their man while theirs are away and dying. Well, I don't have to stay here. And August, if you had any self-respect, you wouldn't stay here for another night either.

(CLAIRE grabs AUGUST by the hand and tries to pull him with her. He breaks away, and after a moment, CLAIRE runs out into the night).

LENA

We don't need her. You're still Lena's good boy.

(LENA replaces the treasured food to its hidey hole).

LENA

Come sit. Come sit by Old Lena.

(LENA reaches out for AUGUST. He stands, ridged, holding his ground).

LENA

Right you are. Early morning tomorrow. We best be off to bed. Don't worry about her.

(LENA goes into the house. AUGUST turns as if to follow her. He reaches the door and stops. After a moment, he turns and walks quickly off in the direction that CLAIRE has just taken. Blackout).

SCENE ELEVEN:

Time: A few days later, just dawn.

At Rise: A very drunk and very happy AUGUST comes careening around the corner of the house, quickly followed by CLAIRE.

CLAIRE

Shhh!...

AUGUST

You know what?

CLAIRE

Shhh!...

AUGUST

(an exaggerated whisper; not much softer than before).
You know what??

CLAIRE

(laughing in spite of herself).
What?

AUGUST

I'm happy.

CLAIRE

You are?

AUGUST

I'm happy!

CLAIRE

You're talking.

AUGUST

I'm talking! I'm talking to another person.

CLAIRE

And the earth isn't caving in.

AUGUST

(looks down).

No. No earth caving in.

CLAIRE

And the sky is not opening up to swallow you whole.

AUGUST

(looks up; waits).

No! No falling sky.

(he laughs).

Hello, sky. Hello, earth. I'm talking! Hello scrubby dry dirt.

CLAIRE

(in a "scrubby dry dirt" voice).

"Hello, August."

AUGUST

Hello, little rock.

CLAIRE

(rock voice)

"Hello, Big August."

AUGUST

Hello, scabby little potatoes.

CLAIRE

(various little scabby potato voices)

"Hello!" – "Hello, August." – "Hello!!" – Hey! Who are you calling scabby??"

(They are laughing. AUGUST stops).

AUGUST

Hello, Claire.

CLAIRE

Hello, August.

AUGUST

(suddenly sober).
It's Gabriel – My name is Gabriel.

CLAIRE

Gabriel? That's a nice name.

AUGUST

Gabriel! My name is Gabriel!

CLAIRE

Gabriel! A man with a voice.

AUGUST

A man with a Loud Voice!

CLAIRE

A Very Loud Voice!

AUGUST

A Very, Very Loud Voice!

(AUGUST laughs. His laugh is infectious).

AUGUST (continued).

And it's all because of you.

CLAIRE

No. It's you. You're the one who's talking.

AUGUST

You. You. You.
(beat).

I. Love. You. – I love you.

CLAIRE

Oh – No. No, August – Gabriel, you don't. You don't love me.

AUGUST

I do. I love you. I. Love. You.

CLAIRE

No...

AUGUST

I, Gabriel, do love you, Claire.

CLAIRE

I'm just here, that's all. I'm your witness. I, Claire, do hereby witness that you, Gabriel can speak VERY LOUDLY, when you want to.

AUGUST

Marry me!

CLAIRE

What?!?

AUGUST

Marry me! Marry me!

CLAIRE

What?? Why?

AUGUST

That's what people do.

CLAIRE

In Little Boy Naïve land.

AUGUST

I'm not naïve.

CLAIRE

(after a time).
What do you do with them, anyway?

AUGUST
Who?

CLAIRE
Your old ladies.

AUGUST
I work for them.

CLAIRE
No. I mean –

AUGUST
What?

CLAIRE
After.

AUGUST
Sometimes they feed me. If they have anything left.

CLAIRE
And then?

AUGUST
And then, what?

CLAIRE
August – Gabriel – I don't know if you're the slickest wolf going, or really that dumb.

AUGUST
They talk to me. They tell me about their sons who are dead, or missing. Or, their husbands, or sweethearts.

CLAIRE
(laughs).
“Sweethearts...”

(During the following, we become increasingly aware of the distant sounds of battle).

AUGUST

They tell me about when they were young, and their husbands were their young men. And they tell me about their sons. About when their sons were little boys. They show me their rooms. Their toys. Sometimes they give me things that belonged to them. Or, they make pies, or the cakes they would have made if their sons were coming home.

CLAIRE

So, you let them waste their last rations on you – the sugar they’ve been hoarding; their last real flour – so they can talk.

AUGUST

I let them pretend.

CLAIRE

Just like you let Lena pretend you’re still Little Boy Blue.

AUGUST

Let’s not talk about Lena.

CLAIRE

Yes! Yes, let’s talk about Lena. Come on, let’s tell her. Let’s tell her you can talk.

AUGUST

No. Not yet.

CLAIRE

I think she probably already knows, the old fraud but – Come on. Come on, let’s tell Lena. I’m sure she’s been worried since you left. Gabriel, come on.

AUGUST

No. No, I can’t.

CLAIRE

Why not? Don’t you think she’ll want to know your name? Gabriel...

AUGUST

No. It’s August. I’m August. I’ve become August.

CLAIRE

Did Lena call you that because it was August when she found you?

AUGUST

(seriously).
July. I think.

(She laughs, forcing him to laugh. They laugh together).

CLAIRE

Come on! Let's tell Lena. *You* tell Lena.

AUGUST

No.

CLAIRE

Why not?

AUGUST

I can't. I can't tell her.

CLAIRE

You can! It's a miracle!...

AUGUST

And you have to promise me you won't tell her either.

CLAIRE

Gabriel...

AUGUST

It's August. My name is August. I'm a mute. I'm Lena's idiot boy who does chores for the women.

CLAIRE

What are you so afraid of? You're not a little boy anymore.

AUGUST

It's too late, anyway. She needs me. She needs me to be...

CLAIRE

Oh, Gabriel...

(CLAIRE starts toward AUGUST; he moves away).

AUGUST

Hey! Let's not get morbid! We're celebrating! Hello wormy carrots.

CLAIRE

Surely, she wants you to...

AUGUST

Hello, wormy old carrots!

CLAIRE

August – Gabriel...

AUGUST

(louder still; a demand).

Hello, tough old wormy rotten carrots!!

CLAIRE

(long beat; then).

Hello, Gabriel.

(A beat. Lights fade).

SCENE TWELVE:

Time: Two days later. Early Evening, near dusk.

At Rise: LENA on the porch, waiting. After a moment, CLAIRE enters from the road

LENA

Where's the boy? Where's August? What have you done to my boy?!

CLAIRE

Nothing.

LENA

What's happened? What have you done?

(LENA starts off. CLAIRE stops her).

CLAIRE

Lena, Lena! He's fine. He stopped to help the Duchess. He's right behind me.

LENA

If you've done anything to...

CLAIRE

Oh, he's still your good boy, as far as I'm concerned. I thought I was after him. But I'm not.

LENA

(calls).

August! Boy!...August!!...

CLAIRE

He's probably dining with the Duchess. You know what a fine table she sets.

LENA

Shouldn't he be back by now?

CLAIRE

Oh, Lena!...

LENA

Where is he?!...

CLAIRE

All Right! All Right. I don't know where his is. I haven't seen him for two days.

LENA

What?!?...

CLAIRE

Hasn't he been back here? Not at all? I thought he would come back here – Maybe I did it! Maybe I really did it. I set him free, good Lena!

LENA

We have to find him...
(she starts out).

CLAIRE

What if I did? What if I did set him free?! Oh, Lena – If he is gone...

LENA

If he is gone, it's all your fault!

CLAIRE

If I did set him free...

LENA

Selfish!...

CLAIRE

No. No! Maybe the only *unselfish* thing I have ever done in my life!

LENA

Why did you come? Oh, why did I ever let you stay??...

CLAIRE

Oh, Lena! – If he is gone...

LENA

I knew you were trouble. The first time I saw you...

CLAIRE

Lena, you cherish your misery. And you want August to join you. Well, you stay, you go on enjoying your martyrdom, but I'm not going to let you swallow his life too.

LENA

You don't know. I saved him. I gave him his life back when others were ready to end it. I gave him what life he has.

CLAIRE

Yes.

LENA

Yes!

CLAIRE

And what a stifling little life it is – Lena, he's not your little boy any more.

LENA

You'd be happy to see my bones under this earth.

CLAIRE

Who would I have to argue with?

(she laughs).

Lena. Lena, you need to accept that he's gone.

LENA

And be killed in this senseless war!

CLAIRE

You were killing him here.

LENA

I've given that boy everything.

CLAIRE

Except your leave to grow up. And if you were a real mother you'd have let him go. If you were a real mother, you'd want him to grow up.

LENA

You can leave right now. You're healed. Get out before he comes back.

CLAIRE

Listen to me. August is gone. Let him find his way as a man. Let him learn to do a man's work.

LENA

Both sides. Both sides wanted him. But I kept him here with me. I kept him safe. I protected him.

CLAIRE

Yes. And now he's gone.

(AUGUST enters. He is muddy and bloody. It is obvious he has been in a fight).

CLAIRE

Damn ...

(The following lines overlap).

LENA

August! August!...

CLAIRE

Guess I spoke too soon...

LENA

My boy, my boy...

CLAIRE

I thought you might have made it this time.

(CLAIRE starts toward AUGUST; LENA pushes CLAIRE away).

LENA

Leave us!

(LENA leads AUGUST into the house and lets the door fall closed behind them. CLAIRE starts to follow and then stops. She sits; looks out over the fields as the lights slowly shift to evening).

SCENE THIRTEEN:

Time: Later, the same evening.

At Rise: CLAIRE sits against the house in the shadows. As the light shifts to dusk, AUGUST comes slowly out of the house. His face has been washed, but it still shows cuts and bruises. AUGUST looks out over the fields. Suddenly, he turns away and flops down on the flagstones. He takes out a knife, picks up a stick and begins whittling with quick angry strokes. CLAIRE studies him. After a time, she speaks from the shadows).

CLAIRE

We can still be friends, can't we?

(AUGUST continues to stab aimlessly at the stick with his knife).

CLAIRE

You're not really in love with me, you know. You're not. It's just that I'm just the only female you know who's under eighty.

(Claire laughs. AUGUST continues to ignore her. She nudges him playfully with her foot).

CLAIRE (continued).

Oh, come on. You know I'm right. If you left here, you could find someone. Seriously. Someone your own age. Not a substitute. Not a surrogate.

AUGUST

I love *you*.

CLAIRE

I know I flirted with you. That was stupid. That was selfish. I'm sorry. Oh, come on, Gabriel. It's not the end of the world! – Well, I didn't think you'd take it seriously! It was to get to her, you know, to your – to Lena. Come on, you're not that hurt. Forgive? Okay, don't forgive. Keep on serving those old ladies. Don't take a chance on your own life. So, what happened to you, anyway? Where'd you go that night?? Were you out defending my honor, or something?

(CLAIRE laughs; AUGUST flushes; crosses away).

CLAIRE (continued).

You were??

(she laughs again).

Oh, I'm sorry. I'm sorry! I shouldn't have laughed. But you're such a boy.

AUGUST

Just leave me alone, can't you?

(LENA comes out of the house).

LENA

(to CLAIRE)

What did you say to him?

CLAIRE

Nothing. One of his fine ladies must have looked at him cross-eyed.

LENA

No. It's you. I can tell. What did you do?? What did you say to him?

CLAIRE

Only the truth. That you don't want him to grow up.

LENA

I keep telling you. He's not like you and me.

CLAIRE

Oh, but he is, good Lena. Just like me, however chaste.

(looks out over the field).

Hey, look at your crow, Lena. So close. You know, you could shoot him clean from here if you wanted to.

(sees the old rifle leaning up against the house; picks it up).

Come on! Let's get that old crow.

LENA

What are you doing??

CLAIRE

How do you use this thing? I bet I'm a pretty good shot. Better than you, with your rheumy eyes.

LENA

Put that thing down before you hurt someone – It's an old gun. It's not...

CLAIRE

Why do you suppose he stays here? There's no food. Is he your mate? Is he your familiar? Or, maybe, you are his familiar. At night, Good Lena, do you turn into a crow and meet him for a midnight tryst?

LENA

Put that gun down.

CLAIRE

He's not moving. He's just waiting for me to shoot him.

(swings the gun around toward LENA).

Or, I could shoot you.

(moves gun toward AUGUST).

Or him.

LENA

Stop it now.

CLAIRE

Put him out of his misery.

LENA

Give me that gun!

CLAIRE

Right, Gabriel?

(AUGUST curls up into himself, and puts his hands over his ears).

LENA

Stop! You're frightening him!

CLAIRE

No, sweet Lena, I'm saving him. He sees a way out and he's contemplating his options.

LENA

You're not going to shoot anyone.

CLAIRE

(turning on LENA).

I'm not??

LENA

No, you're not.

CLAIRE

Well, I need to shoot somebody!

LENA

Give me the gun. It's old. It's not safe...

CLAIRE

So, who'll it be? Old man crow? You? Him?

(swings the gun wildly around; then aims toward the sky).

Okay, old man crow it is. Look. He's still waiting so patiently to sacrifice himself.

LENA

No!

CLAIRE

Why not? Why do you care about that old crow? Why do you care about anyone but yourself? You're so strong. You're so independent. You don't need that old crow. There he is. He's hopping closer. Thank you, Mister crow! Thank you for your sacrifice!

(CLAIRE takes aim once again. We hear the crow squawk. LENA knocks down the gun).

CLAIRE (continued)

Aw, I could have had him for you. A clean shot!

LENA

You're just doing this to punish me. To frighten me.

CLAIRE

Me, frighten you? Come on, Lena...

LENA

Please, give me the gun – You're scaring August.

CLAIRE

Gabriel! His name is Gabriel, you selfish old woman!

(Suddenly, AUGUST jumps to his feet and runs through the field out. The following lines overlap).

LENA

August! Now, look what you've done! August! Boy! August!...

CLAIRE

Go, Gabriel! Run! Run like the wind! Get as far away as you can!!

LENA

August! August! – Gabriel?...

CLAIRE

Ha! Take that, old woman! I hope he makes it out. I hope he's gone for good this time.

(LENA returns to her chair. The anger seems to have drained out of her. She takes out her lace tablecloth and slowly smooths it out in her lap. CLAIRE, sensing a shift in the game, slowly approaches the porch).

CLAIRE (continued).

So, I guess I'm cured, huh? – I know it's time for me to go. But it's late. Can you wait until tomorrow to boot me out? – Lena – Lena, I'm –

LENA

They shouldn't have taken the buttons. I don't understand why they had to take the buttons.

CLAIRE

Well, I like my new buttons. Surely, that wasn't the worst part...

LENA

Yes! Yes, it was. I can understand the rest. The taboo was broken. Codes had to be restored. I can understand the beating, the un-careful stabs with the scissors – But the buttons – They weren't so fine.

CLAIRE

They – No. Not so fine.

LENA

Not fine at all.

(She strokes her tablecloth).

CLAIRE

I did love him, you know – in my way. And they shot him. They knew he was off sides. They knew he had deserted. And they shot him. But they turned me over to the women, to their wives, their daughters.

LENA

(vaguely; almost indifferent).

Yes. Of course.

CLAIRE

The men were kind. Indifferent, anyway. But the women – It was the women...

LENA

No. It was the men. They were the ones who turned you over to their women. Because they knew the women would be more harsh. It's an old trick. Cruel, But –

CLAIRE

We made it across the river. We were just outside the village. Near old Cilla's place – Maybe you're right. Maybe it was the men. They made sure there was a witness.

LENA

Yes.

CLAIRE

I could have kept running, I suppose. I don't know. I was just so tired. So sick of it all. I knew old Cilla would scurry off as fast as her scrawny little legs could carry her, but – Why couldn't they just shoot me too?

LENA

You had to be punished. You had to be punished to help them put down the cravings in their own bodies; to teach their daughters. You took what they all wanted – But the buttons. That wasn't part of the punishment. That was something else. Something more. They've all looked at the soldiers. Their own men gone, or dead. They looked at your soldier maybe; with the same eyes of longing. It was the claws of envy and jealousy that grabbed your head by its long beautiful black hair...

CLAIRE

My hair's not...

LENA

Jerked your head back onto the gravel as other jealous hands held you down and with rusty scissors and dull knives sawed off your hair – Conscious of being not too careful to avoid taking bits of scalp with them – They weren't such fine buttons. Cheap, rather ugly, actually. But I had spent everything I had to buy them. The last card the man had. Maybe that's what the excess blood was really about.

CLAIRE

(after a time; quietly)

So, we're alike, you and me.

LENA

We're nothing alike! We were engaged! It was a mistake. We lived in the same province. We grew up together. We fell in love. Then the boundary shifted – half a mile! – and we were suddenly enemies. And we were both punished. He lost his life. I lost him. And I was dumped out here.

CLAIRE

Like me.

LENA

Not like you! I know you. I know your kind. You sleep with them for a cup of black coffee. It was never like that with us. I never loved the enemy. I loved a boy from my village.

(LENA holds out the tablecloth to CLAIRE).

LENA (continued).

Look at this. Feel how fine this thread is. My dowry. My grandmother made it for me. She started it when I was eight years old.

CLAIRE

It's beautiful.

LENA

Some of the women – Those same women who now pay to worship my boy – Some of them felt remorse later. Wanted to take me back into the village. But I was through with them. I wanted none of their simpering apologies, their hypocritical smiles and sympathy. My August was dead. And dead at their hands. And when I didn't take their insincere apologies, they turned on me, and I was glad. I was glad to stay out here away from them! And over the years they have reminded me of their hatred. Whenever another one is caught, is punished, they bring her out here to me. They dump her, just as you were dumped, in the ditch by the side of my field.

CLAIRE

Gabriel – Your boy, August –

LENA

I'm not asking you to leave.

CLAIRE

I think maybe I should.

LENA

I feel him pulling away. Maybe if you stayed...

CLAIRE

It wouldn't keep him, Lena. You'll lose him anyway. Let him go. He needs his own life. But he won't go unless you free him. He should, but he won't. Let him go, Lena. Make him go. You can. You have to.

(Lights begin to fade on the scene. CLAIRE goes into the house, but LENA remains).

SCENE FOURTEEN:

Time: The next morning.

At Rise: There is a light shift, and it is as if LENA has been sitting there all night, waiting. CLAIRE comes out of the house with a shawl and a cup of something hot. Without speaking, and without any acknowledgement from LENA, CLAIRE puts the shawl over LENA's shoulders, hands her the drink and sits. After a moment, AUGUST enters from the road. He walks slowly through the field. LENA stands, and after a moment's hesitation, goes quickly into the house. AUGUST approaches the porch).

CLAIRE

You came back.

AUGUST

To say goodbye.

(AUGUST peers into the house).

CLAIRE

She's probably just rushed in to iron you a clean handkerchief. You know Lena.

(AUGUST hesitates, and then sits; CLAIRE sees he's holding something).

CLAIRE (continued).

What's that?

AUGUST

From the Duchess.

(AUGUST holds out a medal on a ribbon).

CLAIRE

She gave you that?

AUGUST

You don't think I'm a coward, do you?

CLAIRE

Who cares? – No. I don't think you're a coward.

AUGUST

She has lost her husband and three of her four sons. Gregory's missing.

CLAIRE

He's about your age, isn't he?

AUGUST

I want to go. I want to go and fight.

CLAIRE

When I said, leave, I didn't mean...

AUGUST

What did you mean?

CLAIRE

I don't know – Just get away from here – I didn't think.

AUGUST

(smiling).
No.

CLAIRE

(joins him; a rueful smile).
No.

AUGUST

I want to join up.

CLAIRE

To impress your Duchess?

AUGUST

No!

CLAIRE

To get killed, then. Oh, yes, a much better idea.

AUGUST

Not everyone gets killed. I could get lucky.

CLAIRE

Just like I could get my clean and shiny reputation back.

AUGUST

Don't talk like that.

CLAIRE

August – Gabriel – I know you want to think I'm innocent. That it was all a mistake.

(instinctively, she reaches out toward his cheek).

Does it hurt a lot?

AUGUST

(pulls away).

Don't...

CLAIRE

Shall I tell you about him?

AUGUST

You don't have to.

CLAIRE

I want to.

AUGUST

You really don't – All right.

CLAIRE

At first, he was just one more – They were new recruits, so it was a good place to be. They were still being fed. Still being lured in. He was young. He was a long way from home. He'd been conscripted, of course. He didn't know what he was doing. He panicked. He ran. And I helped him. I shouldn't have. I know that now. But I wasn't thinking of him – of what would happen to him – I was thinking about how it would be an adventure. We could run away together. Get away from all this blood and confusion; all this ugliness –

CLAIRE (continued).

That's the only part I'm really sorry about – That I – He might have been caught anyway, but – You know, Gabriel, if you think about it, we're alike, you and me. You and your old lady tea parties, and me with –

AUGUST

What do you mean?

CLAIRE

Well, think about it. Your old hags...

AUGUST

Don't call them that...

CLAIRE

You let them talk. They give you things. You give them comfort.

AUGUST

Yes, but...

CLAIRE

You let them pretend someone cares for them. Well, that's all I did. Let them pretend someone cared. Only this one time it turned into something, well, truer, I guess. In the end, it was – well, maybe not love, but – I just want you to understand, that's all.

AUGUST

I do – I think I do – And can you understand why I need to go?

CLAIRE

It's not what you think out there. It's not all about medals and ribbons.

AUGUST

I know.

CLAIRE

Do you?

AUGUST

I do. I do – But listen, I've been thinking...

CLAIRE

You're always thinking. You're always so serious!

(LENA has come to the door. She stands in the doorway, listening).

AUGUST

I know I could help. I know these woods. I've been over to their camp, six – eight times – I don't know how many. And Nobody. Nobody saw me. I could help. I could really help.

CLAIRE

Help who? Lena says she's not loyal to either side.

AUGUST

That's Lena.

CLAIRE

Yes. And she'd skin you alive if she knew you weren't right there with her.

AUGUST

She doesn't understand.

(LENA starts out; then turns on her heel and disappears into the house).

CLAIRE

And how do you know what side I'm on?

AUGUST

You're on my side.

CLAIRE

Oh, no. No. Don't you pull out your old lady charms with me...

AUGUST

I'm not.

CLAIRE

Yes, you are. Only I'm not a hundred years old.

AUGUST

Our side is losing.

CLAIRE

And so, you want to martyr yourself to the side God is *Not* on.

AUGUST

I've been lucky so far. I've always been lucky.

CLAIRE

(looking over the fields).
This? Luck? – All right. Lucky you.

AUGUST

Help me.

CLAIRE

Oh, August – Gabriel –

AUGUST

Help me.

CLAIRE

I don't know. I –

AUGUST

Please.

CLAIRE

Well, what do you want me to do?

AUGUST

Just don't rile her.

CLAIRE

I don't! –

(AUGUST calls her on this by a look).

CLAIRE (continued).

Well, I don't do it on purpose! – Okay, okay. I'll be sweetness and light – Promise. Quiet as a mouse.

(LENA reappears in the doorway. There is a long moment of uneasy silence, AUGUST, unsure of the greeting he will receive, LENA not knowing how to begin and CLAIRE, waiting for something to happen. AUGUST stands as LENA finally comes out).

AUGUST

I'm leaving, Lena.

LENA

Yes.

AUGUST

I'm –

LENA

It's all right, boy. I'm just – I'm just trying to get used to – You have to go. You've made your decision.

AUGUST

Yes.

LENA

Yes. So, August...

AUGUST

It's – It's Gabriel, Lena.

LENA

Yes. August is gone. It's Gabriel. You're Gabriel – Gabriel. Your name.

AUGUST

I'm sorry I left.

LENA

Yes. And I'm – Yes.

(LENA sits, beckons AUGUST to join her. He stands apart, determined to hold his ground. LENA repeats her summons. AUGUST finally gives in and sits in his old place at her feet).

LENA (continued).

I don't know anything about your story. Your mother – I assume it was your mother – died shortly after you arrived. I missed your babyhood. I can't tell you what you were like. I don't have any stories of your first words or your first step. I don't even know how old you were. Three? Maybe four. Maybe even six or seven. Children don't grow as they should during a war. You've made up for it; but my, you were a skinny little thing. All angles. Elbows and feet.

(She takes his hand; examines it).

But always these big square hands. The same strong stout fingers. Stubby little sausages –

(She laughs).

Do you remember when you came to me? Wrapped up like a mummy. Somebody had wrapped your chest and your head. So, I knew where you were fragile.

(beat).

I never learned how you came to be caught in the crossfire. I can't believe it was deliberate. Even they aren't that cruel. Even they spare the children. Usually. You looked at me; held your arms out to me. You didn't cry. Whimpered a bit. Just a bit. Very softly. I felt so helpless. I had no medicines. There were no doctors to be had. I didn't know what to do – So, I sang to you. All the songs my mother sang to me. All the songs I thought I had forgotten. They came to me like a miracle to soothe you. To distract you from your pain since I couldn't hold you, your ribs wrapped so tight, the bandage on your head practically closing your eyes. I could rub your legs and your hands and feet. And after a few days, if I was very careful I could stroke your cheek. I could lay you on your back and rock you. And the songs came back from a long way away and a long time ago. Shall I sing?

(AUGUST leans back against her chair and LENA sings an old familiar song. Lights fade on the scene).

SCENE FIFTEEN:

Time: The next day, early morning.

At Rise: AUGUST comes out of the house carrying a small suitcase; it is the same case we saw earlier. LENA follows closely on his heels. She carries a post card.

LENA

(putting the card in his pocket)

Now, I want you to mail this as soon as you land somewhere. It's all filled out. All addressed. The post mark will tell me where you are.

AUGUST

All right.

LENA

(reaching up to button his top button).

I'm sorry I didn't do a better job teaching you your letters. Maybe you'll find someone who can write for you. Tell me how you are.

AUGUST

I will.

(AUGUST unbuttons his top button. LENA automatically re-buttons it as he bends down to kiss her on the cheek).

LENA

Enough of your foolishness. Now get going before it gets too hot.

(AUGUST hesitates. A sleepy CLAIRE comes out onto the porch).

CLAIRE

You weren't going to say goodbye!

AUGUST

Goodbye.

CLAIRE

(as to a small child)
...Claire. Good-bye, Claire.

AUGUST

Good-bye, Claire.

CLAIRE

Goodbye, Gabriel.

(He hugs her and she gives him a quick kiss).

LENA

Yes, all right. Now, get going. Where's that post card?

AUGUST

I have it.

LENA

Right. So –

AUGUST

Good bye, Lena.

LENA

Good bye, Aug – Gabriel.

(LENA gives him a fierce, quick hug and retreats.

CLAIRE walks AUGUST to the road as LENA watches him go. CLAIRE returns; sees that LENA is at a loss).

CLAIRE

Sit down, old woman.

(LENA glares at CLAIRE, but sits).

CLAIRE (continued)

Now you can be like any other mother, waiting for her brave son to come home safe from the war – It will be all right, you know. He's strong. And he's smart. Come on, let's celebrate! Peaches I think.

(CLAIRE moves toward the wood box. Finally, with a spark of life, LENA bars her way. CLAIRE shrugs good naturedly).

CLAIRE (continued)

Fine. I'll just wait until you're asleep. Or, I could wring your scrawny neck right now and live out my days peacefully, in the lap of luxury.

LENA

(she smiles).

Maybe.

CLAIRE

What do you mean, maybe? I could snap it like a twig.

LENA

Oh, I have no doubt you could kill me if you wanted to. But how long do you think that would last you?

(LENA points to the wood box).

CLAIRE

You mean there's more? – Right. I should have known. You probably have food enough buried for two more wars and six lifetimes.

LENA

Probably.

CLAIRE

Then, why – Oh, no use asking your that. Where? Where is it? – That old root cellar.

LENA

Obviously.

CLAIRE

No, you probably store your best frocks in there.

LENA

Of course.

CLAIRE

Where? Where is it?!?

LENA

You'll have to keep me alive to find out, won't you?

CLAIRE

You are an evil, horrible old woman.

LENA

That's better.

CLAIRE

Ogre.

LENA

Weakling.

CLAIRE

Harridan.

LENA

Pushover.

CLAIRE

Nag.

LENA

Strumpet.

CLAIRE

Harpy.

LENA

Baggage.

CLAIRE

Tyrant!

LENA

Tart!

CLAIRE

(beat; then very quietly).
Sweet Mother.

(CLAIRE smiles; LENA is in danger of smiling as the
lights fade).

End of Play

Production Notes:

Shorn may be performed without an intermission, or an act break can come between SCENE TEN and SCENE ELEVEN.

Scene Transitions: To support the flow of this play with many scenes, unless a blackout is specified, scenes will transition in a colored ghost-light, the actors continuing the action, making the prop and blocking changes necessary for the next scene, thus advancing time and giving the impression of a continuous life.

SHORN Nora Douglass

