

THE WHITE PLAGUE
(A Black Comedy)

CAST OF CHARACTERS

JESS, a mammalogist

SHEL, a religious studies professor

TRACY, a grad student

SHEL is reading from the King James Bible to a class.

SHEL

(Reading)

And it came to pass in those days, when there was no king in Israel, that there was a certain Levite who took to him a concubine out of Bethlehemjudah. And his concubine played the whore against him, and went away from him unto her father's house to Bethlehemjudah, and was there four whole months.

(Lecturing)

"Played the whore" means she escaped slavery and ran home to her family. Eventually the Levite had a friendly negotiation with her father, who entertained him for five days and handed his daughter back to the Levite.

(Reading)

And they passed on and went their way; and the sun went down upon them when they were by Gibeah, which belongeth to Benjamin.

(Lecturing)

Benjamin being one of the twelve tribes of Israel.

(Reading)

Now as they were making their hearts merry, behold, the men of the city beset the house round about, and beat at the door, and spake to the master of the house saying, Bring forth the man that came into thine house, that we may know him.

(Lecturing)

You all understand what "know" means, right, in this context? Like Lot's adventure in Sodom? So the master said:

(Reading)

Behold, here is my daughter a maiden, and his concubine; them I will bring out now, and humble ye them, and do with them what seemeth good unto you: but unto this man do not so vile a thing. But the men would not hearken to him: so the man took his concubine, and brought her forth unto them; and they knew her, and abused her all the night until the morning: and when the day began to spring, they let her go. And her lord rose up in the morning, and opened the doors of the house, and, behold, the woman his concubine was fallen down at the door of the house. And he said unto her, Up, and let us be going. But none answered. Then the man took her up upon an ass, and gat him unto his place.

And when he was come into his house, he took a knife, and laid hold on his concubine, and divided her, together with her bones, into twelve pieces, and sent her into all the coasts of Israel.

(Lecturing)

Imagine getting that from Amazon.

(Reading)

And the children of Israel wept and asked counsel of the Lord, saying, Shall I go to battle against the children of Benjamin my brother? And the Lord said, Go up against him.

(Lecturing)

I won't get into all the details of battle, the tens of thousands killed because of this outrage against the concubine, the property of the Levite. The tribe of Benjamin is almost completely wiped out by the other eleven tribes of Israel, and then at the last minute they realize they're committing a kind of self-genocide with this Jew-on-Jew violence, so they kidnap some Benjamite virgins to serve as wives.

(Looks up)

Yes, a question?

Lights out on SHEL and up on JESS, who is trying to eat with chopsticks but sucks at it. JESS has a distinctive tattoo of a bat. SHEL sits down to eat as well and does much better.

JESS

Millions dead and the government's done next-to-fucking-nothing--the economics alone should force some action--50 billion dollars worth of free insect suppression annually, and not just mosquitoes: moths--

SHEL

Beetles--

JESS

Mayflies--

JESS

--Winged ants--

(spills food)

Goddamnit!

(SHEL cleans JESS)

It's spreading.

SHEL

I got it. Hold still.

JESS

White nose syndrome--not--

SHEL

Right, the fungus--

JESS

They think now it originated in Europe--brought here by spelunkers--

SHEL

I actually understand science, if you'd--

JESS

But the bats in Europe are immune--

SHEL

Different species?

JESS

In both Europe and the US it's the genus *Myotis*--

SHEL

Only in the US they're dying, right?

JESS

There are four other species that apparently recover. If you'd listen, instead of--

SHEL

Spread only through physical contact?

JESS

We thought so, but *Pseudogymnoascus destructans* also survives on cave floors in the cold stew of urine, insect parts, feces--

SHEL

Guano.

JESS

Duh!

SHEL

See, I'm paying attention.

JESS

The skin of the bats is colonized by--*destruclans* is--
psychrophilic--

SHEL

Psychrophilic?

JESS

Cold-tolerant--

SHEL

That sounds like toad-licking--

SHEL

(gesturing toward mouth and
nose)

You showed me the pictures last year--

SHEL

--White mouths, noses--

JESS

On the muzzles--

JESS

--Only while they're
hibernating, so it hasn't
come too far south yet--
Missouri--

SHEL

And they smother?

JESS

They kinda go mad, batshit crazy, literally, waking up from
hibernation, flying in the daytime, looking for insects in
winter--

SHEL

When there are no insects--

JESS

So they use up fat and starve
to death--

SHEL hands JESS a fork since the
chopsticks aren't cutting it.

JESS

Anyway, they're flying me to Albany--

SHEL

When?

JESS

The cave where it started--

JESS

Tomorrow.

SHEL

Nobody knows more about bats.

JESS

I shoulda said how bout some fucking grant money first, but--

SHEL

It's a good way to get their attention.

JESS

I woulda been there five years ago if the museum had a decent expedition budget--but it's finally at a tipping point, a chiropteran armageddon, a--

(Sings)

Nanananananananana--

SHEL

(Sings, overlapping)

Nanananananananananana--

JESS AND SHEL

(Singing)

Bat Plague!

SHEL

So you can't go to the reception on Wednesday--

JESS

(dismissive wave)

Yeah, the religious hoody-hoo whatever--

SHEL

That's OK.

JESS

But I'm not done--I didn't even get to the significant--they may have found--

SHEL

(Overlapping)

Bat plague is pretty significant--

JESS

You always interrupt at the good part.

SHEL

Sorry.

JESS

There's a way to tell a story, and you--undercut--just before the ending--the most amazing--

SHEL gestures: I'll be silent.

JESS

Oh, God, now you're--this is an awesome opportunity--colleagues from everywhere--scientific and even national attention--I get excited and you're all--

Silence.

JESS

(After a moment)

How was your day?

SHEL

No. Finish.

JESS

It can wait.

SHEL

(face palm)

We really shouldn't talk about anything important until after we've eaten. Low blood sugar, just like my father. I should know better.

JESS

How. Was. Your day?

SHEL

Not quite as good as a plague.

JESS

What happened?

SHEL gets out a phone, starts a video, and hands it to JESS. Hubbub on the video, with SHEL'S voice audible but indistinct.

While JESS watches, SHEL looks away.

JESS

Jesus!

(Watches more)

Holy crap!

Some strange ripping sounds. SHEL speaking loudly but indistinctly is the last single voice audible on the video.

JESS

It's hilarious.

SHEL

Wait.

Sound of many voices shouting on the video.

JESS

Shit! Shit! Are you okay?

Sound of video ends.

SHEL

I'm okay.

JESS

And it's posted?

SHEL

How do you think I got it?

JESS

A student?

SHEL

I certainly didn't post it.

JESS

Oh, sweetie, I'm so sorry.

JESS holds SHEL, who isn't quite ready to be held yet.

JESS

I went off on white nose syndrome and you had this--shit in your head.

SHEL

It's my shit. I have to own the shit. The guano.

JESS

Has the college--?

SHEL

The dean called once. The attorney twice.

JESS

You could sue their ass.

SHEL

I'm being handled gingerly.

JESS

Duh! You *had* to teach at a Christian college in the desert.

SHEL

I had to teach *somewhere*.

JESS

Sorry.

SHEL

Did you see how many views?

JESS

(Looks at video)

Jesus!

SHEL

I'm trending.

JESS

I need a drink. Do you need a drink? Let me get you a drink.

Hemlock?

SHEL

JESS

A drink drink. A distraction.

SHEL

I'm sorry. The ending?

JESS

What?

SHEL

Your story.

JESS

(dismissive wave)

Not important. This--

(Gestures to phone)

Much more--

SHEL

You said significant.

JESS

Nothing compared to the dean, the attorney--

SHEL

Oh, and the president. Whom I've met once.

JESS

Jesus H. Crap!

SHEL

You'd better tell me since you'll be leaving tomorrow--

JESS

Flight's at 8:30--

SHEL

They may have found--?

JESS

The fungus--

SHEL

The cause--

JESS

May be just a symptom. A negroni?

SHEL

A symptom of what?

JESS

A bacteria or something. Gotta make sure there's Campari--

Lights out on them and up on TRACY,
who wears a distinctive necklace,
perhaps tribal.

TRACY

History starts way over there--

TRACY points and walks through a
complicated invisible timeline with
many twists and turns.

TRACY

With the Big Bang--or the Garden of Eden I guess I should
say. It flows along in broad bands full of plankton and
Neanderthals and Denisovans and *Quest for Fire* until here.

(Points)

Noah. The Ten Commandments, Intolerance--

(Points)

Spartacus, Ben-Hur--

Lights come up slowly on SHEL
listening.

TRACY

Barbarians, Goths, Visigoths, lots of saints getting
tortured, *Sebastiane--*

SHEL

What about the Warring States in China, Buddha, Aztecs?

TRACY

(winks)

Right? And who knows what was going on in Africa cause they
never tell you, do they?

(Increasingly manic)

Rashomon, Beowulf, The Tale of Genji. Now this happens a lot:

(Indicates a series of switchbacks in the time ribbon)

The Name of the Rose, The Black Plague, probably hobbits in here somewhere, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*--oh!

(Runs back to just before *Sebastiane.*)

Maya civilization reaches its peak.

(Points)

Expulsion of the Jews from Spain, the Spanish import the first African slaves to the New World--

(Several quick points)

Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth, the problem plays that people only pretend to like--

SHEL

Plays, not movies--

TRACY

Shakespeare wrote excellent screenplays--oh, forgot to switchback.

(Points)

Apocalypto, Man of La Mancha, Pocahontas--

SHEL

Wait a minute--is this most people, or just you?

TRACY

Marie Antoinette, Napoleon, Les Miserables, Roots, Gone With the Wind, The Birth of a Nation--

TRACY starts making mini-switchbacks for each decade. SHEL gives a small mock scream at every switchback: aagh!

TRACY

Titanic, Doctor Zhivago, Cabaret, To Kill a Mockingbird, Pearl Harbor, Schindler's List, Zoot Suit, Hiroshima mon Amour, Malcolm X, Apocalypse Now, The Planet of the Apes, Shaft, Saturday Night Fever, Angels in America, 2001: A Space Odyssey, Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, Zero Dark Thirty, Fruitvale Station, Nomadland and now. Now is right where we're standing. The future goes off that way--

(Gestures)

Blade Runner 2049, Interstellar, Metropolis, Alien. Also kind of switchbacky till the sun burns out in five billion years and the universe collapses or Jesus returns, whichever comes first.

SHEL

That's certainly...linear.

TRACY

Okay, maybe not the most original concept, but I can only think in four dimensions at a time.

SHEL

Not everybody has an undergraduate degree in Shakespeare and film studies.

TRACY

It's not just me!

TRACY

Everybody blindly accepts Hollywood's version of history.

SHEL

The history of the world in Oscar nominees.

SHEL

It's very sweet of you to try to make me laugh.

TRACY

I'm serious! History's what makes us human!

SHEL

Let's get back to the midterms.

TRACY

Planet of the Apes only won for make-up.

SHEL

Midterms.

They review marked-up exams.

TRACY

I failed the three Creationists.

SHEL

(face palm)

Tracy, you can't fail them for their beliefs.

TRACY

Aline spent two pages on how Moses had 50 pairs of dinosaurs in the ark.

SHEL

The ark was Noah.

TRACY

Right?

(indicating midterm)

This one goes off on the blasphemy of reincarnation--

SHEL

It's a Christian college.

TRACY

You always challenge the students. That's what makes you a great teacher!

SHEL

As you can imagine, I'm under a lot of scrutiny presently. If I fail--

TRACY

I failed them.

SHEL

The TA isn't responsible for the course grade--I am. If I fail--

TRACY

Three fundamentalist kids.

SHEL

I've got enough journalists knocking at my door already.

TRACY

Controversy is cool if you play it right.

SHEL

You can't play journalists. They play you.

TRACY

The popular press, yeah.

SHEL

Journalists of color would be more fair?

TRACY

What you did was awesome!

(claps encouragingly)

You should take advantage of it! At least let me interview you for the school paper.

SHEL

No! It's thoughtful to give me a chance to rehabilitate myself--

TRACY

You don't need rehabilitation! You need--expansion!

SHEL'S cell phone rings.

SHEL

Hello. Speaking.

(Listens, rolls eyes, hangs up)

TRACY

Telemarketer?

SHEL

Yep. You think I was set up?

TRACY

What do you mean?

SHEL

Provoked, deliberately goaded into--

TRACY

Scaring the shit out of them!

SHEL

So one of them could record me?

TRACY

They deserved it. Bitching all term cause you're comparing Christianity to Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and--God help you!--Islam.

SHEL

Aagh! That poor girl who brought up theodicy.

TRACY

(Imitating)

"Why did God let such awful things happen?"

SHEL

God made them happen. If you believe every word.

TRACY

And what's-his-name, the redhead--

SHEL

They were bullying each other.

TRACY

And you! You had to do something to take back control.

SHEL

I lost control! Big time!

TRACY

Now make the most of it.
Post your own video.

SHEL

Did you see who had their phone out?

TRACY

All eyes were on you.

SHEL

From the angle it seemed like--

TRACY

The Creationists sit together--

SHEL AND TRACY

On the right side!

TRACY

(Moving closer to SHEL)

That cracker from Arkansas who keeps saying "now wait a cotton-pickin' minute"--

SHEL

So was I reading it right that their reaction--

TRACY

Reaction? Assault!

SHEL

--Was more about race than religion?

TRACY

No shit!

SHEL

Of course it's both, but--

TRACY

It's really about you.

SHEL

Anything I say is wrong?

TRACY

Anything the pinko, commie, atheist, intellectual--

SHEL

I'm not an atheist--that's Jess.

TRACY

Progressive, same thing.

SHEL

I was raised Catholic.

TRACY

Catholic, really?

SHEL

Cross my heart and hope to die.

(crosses self)

My mom was half Jewish, half Irish.

TRACY

Irish!

SHEL

The niggers of Europe, as my father said.

TRACY

Nice.

SHEL

He said it with affection.

TRACY

How progressive are you, really?

SHEL

I believe in God.

TRACY

But?

SHEL

God is unknowable.

TRACY

Why study religion then?

SHEL

Humans are knowable, or at least you can figure them out. That's what makes history fascinating, especially religious history, like you just said.

TRACY

History's a clusterfuck. But no other species has it.

SHEL'S phone rings again. SHEL
rolls eyes and shuts it off.

SHEL

Didn't they used to say tool-making is the trait that distinguishes humans?

TRACY

Chimpanzees do that.

SHEL

Or war?

TRACY

Ants. Even ants have wars. It's history.

SHEL

Religion.

TRACY

Religion's just another word for history.

SHEL

You should hear Jess: "why waste your mind peering into religion, the cesspool of humanity?"

TRACY

Jess the atheist?

SHEL

I love Jess' skepticism. It's kind of sexy.

TRACY

Not home today?

SHEL

New York. Bat fungus.

TRACY

You getting enough support? Cause I'm happy to--

SHEL

Should I revise the syllabus for Tuesday's class? I'm freaked about the next session.

TRACY

Most were shocked, some were thrilled.

SHEL

Some expelled.

TRACY

But none of 'em will forget the class.

SHEL

The dean says he'll be hearing from parents.

TRACY

There were parental comments on the post.
 (Massaging SHEL'S shoulders)
 You're incredibly tense!

SHEL

I was stupid.

TRACY

You're awesome!

SHEL

But posting the video was
 malicious--

TRACY

(claps encouragingly)

Maybe they just thought you were amazing and needed to be
 shared.

SHEL gets up, ending the massage.

SHEL

The extras from *Deliverance*?

TRACY

Everyone else is on your side.

SHEL

Count the Jews.

TRACY

What?

SHEL

My mother's mother taught her to always count the Jews when
 she walked into a room.

TRACY

Why?

SHEL

So she'd know who's on her side.

TRACY

Everybody does that. Don't they? Finding their tribe.

SHEL

I don't.

TRACY
Everybody's your tribe.

SHEL
And nobody.

TRACY
I'm your tribe.

Noises off.

SHEL
Must be Jess.

TRACY
I thought you said--

TRACY moves away from SHEL.

SHEL
Secret mission, no ETA.
(Calls)
Jess, we're in here.

JESS comes in with a travel bag.

JESS
We're?

TRACY
Hey.

JESS
Tracy--what?

SHEL
Grading midterms.

JESS
Oh.

TRACY
And talking about the--you know--video--

JESS
Goddammit, still?

SHEL

I've gone viral.

JESS

Your students are self-selected morons and violent racists. Who else would care about lies written in a book thousands of years ago?

SHEL

I care.

TRACY

Religion's important! It underlies all of modern society, whether we like it or not.

JESS

I'll never understand you people.

TRACY

Did you really just say that?

JESS

Holy rollers! Bible thumpers!

TRACY

Harsh!

SHEL

Jess, you know I'm not--

JESS

You give them credence with your scholarship.

SHEL

Science is the how, religion is the why. Religion makes us human.

TRACY

No--history--we said--

JESS

Are you really grading midterms?

SHEL holds up some midterms.

JESS

Not everything is as it seems.

TRACY gets out a cell phone,
taping, but trying to be subtle.

SHEL

Tracy, we can go over grades tomorrow--

JESS

Lies so old everyone thinks
they're the truth.

TRACY

Are you sure? Maybe I should--
-

JESS

Evolution is slow--bullshit! What about punctuated
equilibrium?

SHEL

(To TRACY)

Please go. I can handle this.

JESS

I don't think you can!

TRACY

Punctuated what?

JESS

Stephen J. Gould! Leaps in evolution! Conditions change!

TRACY

Dude! Stressful! Chill!

SHEL

What happened in New York?

JESS

Atlanta.

SHEL

Atlanta?

JESS

New York and then Atlanta. I hate flying. I had a drink.

TRACY

One?

JESS

I fell in the baggage carousel and nobody would help me out.

SHEL
Aagh! You're home now.

TRACY
(Trying not to laugh)
Shit!

JESS
Everybody just grabbing their
suitcases--

SHEL
(Holding JESS)
It's okay. Shhh.

JESS
Like they couldn't see me.

TRACY
This what you been dealing
with?

JESS
I went round and round--!

SHEL
They were trying not to
embarrass you further--

JESS starts sobbing.

TRACY
Cause I can see why you might wanna have a breakdown in class--
-

JESS
Round and round!

SHEL
Is that what they're saying?
A breakdown?

TRACY
If this is your homelife.

SHEL
Why were you in Atlanta?

JESS
(Clutches SHEL)
I love you, baby!

SHEL
Jess, what's wrong?

JESS
Your passion for--the irrational--your psychotic students--

SHEL
Right now, that's you--

JESS
I love you for that as much
as anything!

JESS

Never forget that in a million years!

SHEL

You never get scared like
this--scientific--as a
cucumber--!

TRACY

Musta been some motherfucking
fungus!

JESS

It's not a fungus.

SHEL

Yes, it is--*pseudo-gymno-destructo*--

JESS

Not *just* a fungus.

TRACY

I got that on my toenails.

JESS suddenly pinches TRACY'S nose
shut and won't let go.

TRACY

Dude! Nose! Let go!

JESS

Open up! Open up!

SHEL

Jess, you can't assault my
TA!

JESS

Open your mouth! Open!

TRACY

You're gonna get snotted!

JESS grabs TRACY'S mouth, trying to
force it open.

SHEL

I'm in enough shit at school
as it is!

TRACY

I have a sinus condition!

SHEL

You gave up drinking!

JESS

Their mouths! Their mouths!

TRACY

You're giving me a nosebleed!

JESS

Inside their mouths!

TRACY, drops the phone, gasps for
air, open-mouthed.

SHEL

Jess, stop! Aagh!

JESS

You're okay.

(Lets go)

You're okay.

TRACY

(Rubbing nose)

The hell I am.

SHEL

What about their mouths?

JESS

I can't say.

TRACY

Whose mouths?

JESS

Federal--confidentiality--

TRACY picks up the phone.

TRACY

You just had your hand in infected bat mouths and then groped my nose?!

JESS

I signed some shit.

TRACY

With your nasty bat fingers!

JESS'S cell phone rings.

SHEL

Jess, what'd you see?

JESS

Hello? Sure.

JESS starts to hand the phone to
SHEL who waves it away.

JESS

(Into phone)

Sorry, now's not a good--

(Listens)

Holy crap!

(Hangs up)

TRACY

Who is it?

JESS

Some crazy-ass--

SHEL

What'd you see, Jess?

JESS

(Hesitates)

At first it's subtle. Unusual behavior, not too weird, but noticeable if you're looking for it. Within a few days, though, you can't help noticing--very observable, inconsistent, self-destructive activity.

TRACY

Like what?

JESS

Confusion, aggression, violence--

TRACY

Dude--

SHEL

Shhh!

JESS

Then, their mouths, all--white--inside--like a cottonmouth--

SHEL

That's a snake.

TRACY

I know. I practically grew up in a damn swamp--

JESS

And then they can't breathe-- gasping on the ground--!

SHEL
Poor little things!

TRACY
Gross little bastards.

JESS
Dozens, hundreds--making horrible sounds--

TRACY
Who cares about a buncha dead bats?

SHEL
Insectivores!

JESS
Buncha what?

SHEL
It's not gonna move south, is it? Was that why you were in Atlanta?

TRACY
The CDC is in Atlanta.

JESS
Punctuated equilibrium.
Rapid change.

SHEL
Southern bats don't hibernate--it's cold-loving--

JESS
Accelerated evolution--

TRACY
The fungus among us--

JESS
It's not.

SHEL
What?

JESS
It's not just a fungus. It's a co-evolved virus.

SHEL
What kind of virus?

TRACY
A bat-killing virus,
obviously.

JESS
I don't know. Not my
expertise.

SHEL
Nobody understands bat pathology better than you.

JESS

Apparently the fungus and the virus are symbiotic--but who cares?

(dismissive wave)

I'm off the project.

JESS

I had federal security clearance for about five minutes--

SHEL

You're the world expert!

JESS

The Global Disease Detection program is taking over.

TRACY

Yeah, freak.

JESS

Not my species--

TRACY

Center for Disease Control!
I knew it!

SHEL

They sent you home?

JESS

It's not bats!

(Pause)

Not just bats. Something like Nipah virus, but worse.

SHEL

Worse than COVID?

TRACY

Dozens, hundreds--gasping on the ground--?

JESS

COVID was just a rehearsal.

SHEL

What's Nipah virus?

JESS

Much more virulent.

JESS

And it's jumped the species barrier.

TRACY

You just touched my nose!

Lights out on everyone but TRACY,
who self-tapes on phone.

TRACY

Care to comment on the religious response? God's retribution for advances in queer rights, abortion rights, civil rights? Miracle cures by televangelists?

Lights up on JESS.

JESS

I'd prefer to answer scientific--

TRACY

People claiming their religious rights are infringed by quarantine?

JESS

I thought you were here to help Shel prepare for the academic whatever-the-fuck--

TRACY

Hearing. I have news about that. But while I'm here--

(Indicates phone)

People are looking to science for answers.

(winks)

You, too, can be an internet sensation.

JESS

I'm not that kind of scientist.

TRACY

Prayer vigils then, any comment?

JESS

Nothing fails like prayer.

TRACY

People take comfort where they can.

JESS

Comfort?! Willfully ignoring science, when all the evidence suggests--

TRACY

Benjamin Netanyahu, Angelina Jolie, JK Rowling, Elton John--

JESS

I mean, the first ones, the kids from the cave--their parents were afraid to take 'em to the doctor, sent them to fucking school--

TRACY

Donald Trump, Rahm Emmanuel, James Cameron, Vladimir Putin--

JESS

Ignorant people are the most dangerous in the world--

TRACY

Angry people--no!--people who are afraid--they're the most dangerous--unpredictable, panicked--

SHEL, wearing a distinctive hat or cap, passes through carrying a couple of different Bibles with yellow stickies.

TRACY

(Jumping up)

Shel, let me--

SHEL waves TRACY away.

JESS

The Bible is the source of so much stupidity, so much evil, so much conflict, so many bad things in the world.

SHEL and JESS exchange a look and SHEL disappears. TRACY notices.

TRACY

What about the Koran?

JESS

The Koran's trying to catch up, but the Bible's way ahead.

TRACY

But you can't blame the Bible--it's a virus.

JESS

Is this an argument or an interview?

TRACY

Sorry. Keep going.

JESS

A virus can be contained. Stupidity can't. The research is going at this the wrong way--the answer's in the numbers, statistics--not how people are infected, but who's dying--monitoring media reports and Google searches isn't enough--

TRACY

The politics around naming it--

JESS

White nose syndrome was just the fungus--

SHEL passes through carrying
several more Bibles with stickies.
TRACY jumps up and takes the
Bibles. SHEL disappears.

TRACY

Bat Plague isn't accurate anymore either--

JESS

I found out the CDC tried to name it, but since the French isolated the virus--

TRACY

American Henipavirus pissed off an entire hemisphere.

JESS

It probably originated in Europe, but first went viral in the US.

TRACY

Like the spread of democracy.

JESS

In three weeks the whole world will blame us for the outbreak.

TRACY

At least we're a little isolated out here--

JESS

Any day now.

TRACY

So you're not satisfied with the government response?

JESS

I'd rather not answer that--I'm no longer officially--

TRACY

Closing the ports--

JESS

There's been no fucking response!

TRACY

Cancelling flights--

JESS

Too late!

TRACY

Setting up quarantine centers--

JESS

Not aggressive enough.

TRACY

Martial law?

JESS

At least.

TRACY

Concentration camps?

JESS

Won't be anyone left to complain about their rights when the species is extinct.

TRACY

It's not gonna come to that?

JESS

What's not being said is more important than what is.

TRACY

Human extinction?

JESS

It almost happened once before.

TRACY

The Spanish flu? The Black Death? The Cold War?

JESS

Seventy thousand years ago homo sapiens populations shrank worldwide until there were a handful of bands isolated in southern Africa--possibly as few as a thousand individuals, or 40 breeding pairs--

TRACY

Like condors!

JESS

Something almost killed them, but they recovered.

TRACY

We recovered.

JESS

Maybe that was just a preview.

TRACY

A preview of final extinction?

JESS

Is there another way to interpret a 100% mortality rate?

TRACY

So far! Some people are still alive--

JESS

But not likely to survive.

SHEL comes back with a huge stack of Bibles, all different. TRACY jumps up to help, but SHEL moves away. TRACY follows.

TRACY

And it's airborne.

JESS

Exactly.

TRACY

What about the government conspiracy theory?

JESS

That's why I agreed to this interview.

TRACY

You believe it?

JESS

I'm generally skeptical of conspiracies, but the mismanagement has been astonishing, bordering on criminal. Maybe if you post this, people will--researchers, statisticians--

As TRACY tries to help SHEL, SHEL'S tower of books collapses.

JESS

Shel, for God's sake!

TRACY and SHEL start picking up the Bibles.

TRACY

Hell of a lot of Bibles!

SHEL

(Muttering)

For the disciplinary hearing--

JESS

But wouldn't one or two do?

SHEL

Evidence--translation errors--

TRACY

Actually, I came to tell you--

SHEL

What?

TRACY

The hearing was cancelled.

SHEL

How would you know?

TRACY

OK, postponed. They're afraid of a lawsuit.

JESS

Then why are you--?

SHEL

I don't think so--

JESS

Shel, your shoes.

They look at SHEL'S shoes. They
are from two very different pairs.

SHEL

Aagh.

TRACY

You couldn't decide?

JESS

One for fight, one for flight?

TRACY

Shel, are you okay?

SHEL

(Still muttering)

A little--nervous--of course--

SHEL drops the books again and
staggers. JESS catches SHEL.

JESS

Honey! Sit down!

(Guides SHEL to a seat)

SHEL

I'm okay--I'm okay--!

TRACY

Relax! There's no hearing--

JESS

Look at me.

(SHEL does)

Open your mouth.

(SHEL looks down.)

Please.

(SHEL shakes head)

JESS tips SHEL'S head up and SHEL'S mouth open. The inside of SHEL'S mouth is a vivid white. Both JESS and TRACY back away from SHEL.

TRACY

Oh, my God.

JESS

We'll get you to a doctor right away.

TRACY

The hospital! 911!

JESS

We just have to get--protective--

TRACY

They haven't set up a distribution center here yet--

SHEL

(Getting up)

I have to get to the hearing--

JESS

No!

TRACY

It was cancelled.

JESS

There's not going to be any hearing.

TRACY

Now they won't even let you on campus.

SHEL

(Stumbling)

You may have to drive me--

JESS

Honey, I can't--

TRACY

Legally prohibited--

JESS

They have medical transport--

TRACY

Emergency training--hazmat suits--

SHEL takes a halting step toward JESS, who backs further away, torn between helping SHEL and trying not to become infected.

SHEL

Jess--help me--!

Lights out on SHEL, but lights stay on TRACY and JESS in their own pools of illumination. Perhaps they are consulting smartphones. Their lines overlap. They are not in conversation with each other.

JESS

(Panicked)

It's in the statistics. Who's surviving, who's dying--

TRACY

Tracy Ullman.

JESS

We just have to figure out the right analysis.

TRACY

Warren Buffett.

JESS

They're not going to find a cure in the next few weeks.

TRACY

Anderson Cooper.

JESS

Not soon enough for Shel.

TRACY

Damien Hirst.

JESS

And isolation isn't working.

TRACY

The Pope.

JESS

It gets in everywhere.

TRACY

Joe Biden.

JESS

But not everyone contracts it.

TRACY

Anne Coulter.

JESS

And some are surviving--

TRACY

A few people seem to be recovering. It's too early to know whether they'll relapse like so many others who then went on to die. But we can't treat Shel like a biohazard.

JESS

The statistics, the demographics--who's dying, who's surviving--or at least not dying quickly?

TRACY

Barack Obama. They said he's feeling better. Shel seemed better today.

JESS

They're spending too much time figuring out the viral genome, when the genes of the victims are what's important. And those who've been exposed but haven't gotten sick.

TRACY

Bill Cosby--

TRACY

Thaksin Shinawatra, Ruben
Blades--

JESS

Linda Ronstadt, Jet Li--

JESS AND TRACY

Oprah--

Lighting change. TRACY is
interviewing JESS again.

TRACY

China's almost untouched.

JESS

South America has low rates of infection, except for
Argentina.

TRACY

Bolivia has hardly any.

JESS

South Africa and Egypt are suffering, but most of the other
countries between South Africa and the Sahara--very few
fatalities.

TRACY

But Europe--

JESS

The US--

TRACY

Canada.

TRACY

Devastated.

JESS

Decimated.

JESS

Neanderthals. People with the most Neanderthal ancestry are
vulnerable.

TRACY

People of European descent?

JESS

The Neanderthals went extinct 40,000 years ago. Theories range from inability to adapt to climate change, competition with anatomically modern humans, to interbreeding with those same competitive homo sapiens.

TRACY

How could they interbreed? Weren't Neanderthals a different species?

JESS

There was definitely some interbreeding between homo sapiens, Neanderthals and Denisovans in western Asia about 50,000 to 60,000 years ago, and that's evident in 1 to 4 percent of genomes carried by non-African people living today.

TRACY

So how come Asians aren't dying?

JESS

Many Asians have Denisovan genes as well as Neanderthal. Hybrid vigor.

TRACY

But Europeans just have Neanderthal?

JESS

Right! Did this virus make the leap from bats to humans once before, 40 thousand years ago, wiping out the Neanderthals? Did a thousand homo sapiens in Africa survive the virus and pass on immunity to their descendants, including Denisovans in Asia?

TRACY

But not the Neanderthals in Europe.

JESS

The European bats were immune but the Neanderthals sharing caves with them weren't.

(shows tattoo)

This is a Neanderthal bat painting from a cave in Spain.

TRACY

The virus and the fungus got reactivated--

JESS

So it's happening again.

TRACY

To their descendants.

Lighting change. Interview is over. JESS and TRACY put on masks.

JESS

Shel.

TRACY

A quarter Irish.

JESS AND TRACY

But a whole person.

They look at each other and smile, embarrassed, sad. Lights up on SHEL sitting or lying alone in a room between TRACY and JESS. They are not occupying the same space. SHEL looks pretty bad, but still wears the hat.

SHEL

We *wish* we were the niggers of Europe.

TRACY

Barack Obama's part Irish, and they say he's recovering. You can, too.

SHEL

I'm too Irish.

JESS

They don't know. If you don't have too many Neanderthal genes you could be feeling better any day now.

TRACY

And we can take you out of there--

JESS shoots TRACY a look.

SHEL
I can't see.

JESS
What?

SHEL
When I woke up this morning, the lights never went on.

TRACY
There's a light on in your room right now.

SHEL
I can't see anything.

TRACY
For some the blindness is only temporary.

JESS
Oh, Jesus.

SHEL
I can't read. And I don't think I have time to learn Braille.

TRACY
Audio books!

JESS
I can read to you!

TRACY
Me, too!

SHEL
Come in and read to me.

JESS
Shel, I can't--

TRACY
We're not supposed to, but--

JESS
The quarantine order--if I come in, I'd have to stay. And then who would take care of us?

TRACY
I would.

JESS

Tracy, you've been great, but--

SHEL

Come hold me. If you were going to get sick, you would have already.

JESS

They're not sure.

TRACY

Which means maybe we could--

JESS

No, we couldn't.

SHEL

You gave this to me. You carried it from the bats.

JESS

Honey, I was completely disinfected--I've shown no symptoms--

SHEL

You're a carrier!

JESS

It was your students!

TRACY

Neanderthals!

JESS

I can read to you through the door.

SHEL

I want you to hold me, Jess. Get me out of here. Take me to the chapel.

JESS

The chapel? The school chapel?

SHEL

I want to pray.

JESS

Shel, I can't! I could get shot. I want to, more than anything but I can't!

SHEL

You're afraid. Of me.

TRACY

You can hear us, though. We're right here.

SHEL

Who's that?

TRACY

Tracy!

SHEL

Who?

TRACY

You remember me!

JESS

Your TA from school.

SHEL

Won't be going back there.

TRACY

You might! You're not 100% Neanderthal.

JESS

It's possible you have enough other genes to save you.

SHEL

How many do I need?

JESS

They don't know.

SHEL

How much Neanderthal blood will kill me? One drop?

TRACY

The one-drop rule--

SHEL

Who's died this week?

JESS

Shel, don't dwell on that--

SHEL

I want to know!

TRACY

Miley Cyrus.

JESS

Tracy--

TRACY

George W. Bush.

SHEL

Anyone important?

TRACY

Nobody's more important than anyone else nowadays.

JESS

Tracy, maybe you best go.

TRACY

You need me! Shel needs me!

JESS

Honey, they're working on a vaccine--

SHEL

Important people have to die for that to happen--

JESS

I know one of the epidemiologists--went to school with her--

SHEL

Somebody people care about--

JESS

I care about you!

TRACY

We care about you!

JESS

I love you, honey.

SHEL

Then read to me.

JESS

I will! What would you like? Poetry, a short story--

SHEL

Not fiction!

TRACY

I will, too. You've got a big library.

SHEL

No. Jess.

JESS

That's OK, I can do it.

TRACY

I can't just stand around while--

SHEL

The Apocalypse of Peter.

JESS

What? The Bible?

SHEL

Not the Revelation to John. The Apocalypse of Peter.

JESS

(dismissive wave)

Shel, anything but that--

SHEL

It's not in the Bible.

TRACY

It's an apocryphal text.

JESS

A lie about a lie.

TRACY

Where is it?

SHEL

It's on my desk--big paperback--I marked the passage--

TRACY disappears.

JESS

The apocalypse? The end of the world?

SHEL

Yes.

JESS

How's that a comfort?

SHEL

I don't want comfort. I want the truth. A sign.

JESS

The truth isn't in--scriptures!

SHEL

Is science the truth?

JESS

As much truth as we know.

SHEL

We have to have faith in science?

JESS

Not faith!

SHEL

You worship science.

JESS

I worship knowledge--thinking--the mind--

SHEL

Science. Is that what makes us human?

JESS

Maybe--

SHEL

It's not enough! I want a sign.

Suddenly lights out on SHEL and JESS and the video of SHEL in class appears. Although video is phone quality, jerky, perhaps showing students as well as SHEL, SHEL looks vibrant and healthy, angry but in control.

SHEL

(On video)

Enough! Enough! I encourage argument in class--it's a valuable part of the learning process, and not just because it keeps you awake. But name-calling is--primitive--tribal. So stop it. We're all in this together--and yes--

(To a student)

You're right to bring up the Hindu genocide in Bangladesh--

(To another)

And the Buddhist mobs killing Rohingya Muslims in Burma. Not to mention the Inquisition, the Holocaust and 9/11. All religious texts justify genocide, usually at the behest of a god.

(Holds up Bible)

And this--this is ours. Whether you believe it's the inspired word of God, whether you're Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Shinto or animist--the Bible is ours because it's the founding document of our society. The basic literature of the genocidal culture we share.

(An indistinct voice)

What? Reincarnation?

(Facepalms)

What does that have to do--? I'm not answering any more--no--

(Voice continues)

Oh, that's easy to show.

(SHEL pages through Bible)

And if you'd been paying attention this quarter you could find it yourself.

(Reads from Bible)

Deuteronomy 7:2: And when the Lord thy God shall deliver them before thee; thou shalt smite them, and utterly destroy them; thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor shew mercy unto them.

(Indistinct voices)

Shew means show. It's Elizabethan English. Your own language. And believe it or not, the translation from Greek and Hebrew was pretty accurate in King James.

(Indistinct voices)

That is not an argument. That is not--!

(Rolls eyes)

So if God couldn't have said it, then maybe we should--

(Rips a page out of the Bible)

Take it out. What? That's what you're saying. It's the inspired word of God except when we don't like it.

(Much hubbub, reads)

The people of Samaria must bear their guilt. They will fall by the sword; their little ones will be dashed to the ground, their pregnant women ripped open. Hosea 13:16.

(Rips out the page, more hubbub)

This is you, this is me. We can't just rip--

(Rips another page)

--Our evil out. It's inherent in our culture and in humanity. We have to deal with it, and not just by--

(Rips several pages, more hubbub)

No, you're wrong. I love this book. I've studied it my whole life. But that's all it is: a book.

(Rips out another page)

God can take it. But maybe your faith is too fragile. And if you lose your faith, do you lose everything?

On the video, many students rush SHEL, who is knocked out of view, disappearing in a mob. Video ends and lights come up on JESS and SHEL as they were moments earlier. TRACY has returned with a book and stands outside the isolation room.

TRACY

I got the Apocalypse.

SHEL

Jess, please. You don't have to even read it if you hold me.

JESS

No, honey--all I want to do is hold you but--!

SHEL

If you love me, you'll hold me.

TRACY

I'll do it.

TRACY goes to SHEL.

JESS

Tracy, no! That whole room's infected--

TRACY

Somebody has to! And--

SHEL

No one's touched me in ten days.

JESS

Shel, we can't! Tracy, come out now before--!

TRACY

(Holds SHEL)

And...I love you.

JESS

Just breathing the air--touching--

TRACY

Love is sacrifice, isn't it?

SHEL

Line 298.

JESS

We have to trust...science...

JESS collapses outside the sick room, crying, as TRACY holds SHEL and reads.

TRACY

But those who have cared for justice and good deeds angels shall carry through the flaming river unto light, and life without care, where is the immortal path of the great God; and three fountains, of wine and honey and milk.

TRACY

And the earth, common to all-- I'm scared, Shel.

JESS

SHEL

Does history make us human?

TRACY

Not parted out with walls or fences, shall then bring forth much fruit, and life and wealth shall be common and undistributed.

SHEL

Does religion make us human?

TRACY

For there shall be no poor man--

JESS

Scared.

SHEL

Does science?

TRACY

Nor rich, nor tyrant, nor slave, none great nor small any longer, no kings, no princes; but all men shall be together in common.

JESS

And I'm sorry.

SHEL

(To TRACY)

You posted the video, didn't you?

TRACY

And no more shall any man say "night is come," nor "the morrow--"

SHEL

History? Religion? Science?

TRACY

--Nor "it was yesterday."

SHEL

Or something else? What lasts?

JESS

I thought I could find the answer--

SHEL

Maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe from now on, nothing matters.

TRACY

He maketh no more of days, nor of winter, nor summer, neither

marriage, nor death, nor selling, nor buying, nor set of sun,
nor rising. For God shall make one long day.

END OF ACT ONE

Wearing slightly dusty outdoor clothes, JESS is eating with chopsticks, this time quite expertly.

JESS

Attraction and attachment are just chemicals: estrogen, testosterone, oxytocin, vasopressin and dopamine, primarily. The result of evolution--a survival mechanism in our pre-human ancestors. Most mammals demonstrate some form of affection, if not for mates, certainly for offspring. Even goddamn crocodiles guard their nests and all birds feed their young--

TRACY appears with chopsticks and a bowl, also wearing outdoor clothes.

TRACY

Well, yes, of course, but only humans really--

JESS

There's a theory that our nervous systems aren't actually self-contained but are intimately attuned to those around us. Limbic resonance, it's called--

TRACY eats, also good at chopsticks.

TRACY

Or love. Right?

(JESS shrugs)

I'm naturally cautious.

JESS

Asking nervous questions, hesitating--

TRACY

Why jeopardize--?

JESS

Don't you ever want to do something no one else has done?

TRACY

Dude! What do you think my research is about?

JESS

At least you care about the past. Everyone else is just "tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow." That's Shakespeare, isn't it?

TRACY

Macbeth. But it's turned into a cliché.

JESS

I need a drink. Do you need a drink? Let me get you a drink.

TRACY

Sure.

JESS

This is fucking amazing by the way.

TRACY

Maybe a little salty.

JESS AND TRACY

Too much soy?

They smile.

JESS

(getting water)

The whole field of paleontology is underfunded. Instead it's technology, astrophysics, delusions of space exploration--

TRACY

Right? But don't. I'll have an embolism.

JESS

Oh, I know--

TRACY

When was the last time *I* got a grant? Shakespeare's a dead language.

JESS

Sorry, I didn't mean to--you're a great teacher--I love your work--

TRACY

Never forget. What a joke.

JESS

Yeah, what the hell does that mean? Never forget what?

TRACY

Another cliché.

JESS

Guess we forgot.

They smile.

JESS

I'm not going to get my ass in trouble.

TRACY

You're always in trouble.

JESS

Sweetie, I'm trying to say thank you for worrying about me.

TRACY

It's my job.

(Kisses JESS)

That and using too much soy sauce. But you should have applied for a permit.

JESS

They don't issue them.

TRACY

Government land--

JESS

(dismissive wave)

No one's out here.

TRACY

For good reason. Nothing but tumbleweeds and desiccated mountains for miles.

JESS

And the mound.

TRACY

You couldn't pick one closer to civilization?

JESS

They're all built over. No one's touched this one.

TRACY

No one cares about Neanderthals.

JESS

At some point someone did. The mounds had entrances--

TRACY

That's theory--

TRACY finishes eating, puts on the
necklace from Act One.

JESS

And they were deliberately hidden, filled with rubble, buried--
-

TRACY

Cursed?

JESS

(shrugs)

Maybe.

TRACY

Dude! I don't want a curse.

JESS

But what if there are artifacts? Art? Writing?

TRACY

Shakespeare?

JESS

I'm not joking.

TRACY

The mound builders are a little older than Shakespeare.

JESS

Not necessarily. We'll do core samples and we'll know for sure. They could be contemporary.

TRACY

(claps encouragingly)

You intellectual renegade, you.

TRACY gets up, uses something like binoculars to scan the horizon.

JESS

If I were you, I'd be dying to get inside. Tomorrow we can get up early--I've identified two places where we can start lateral tunnels--

TRACY

We?

JESS

Honey, you agreed--

TRACY

Of course, I'll help. But there should be a team of--

JESS

Post-docs and volunteers--duh!

JESS

That's what a grant would have paid for.

TRACY

The idea of a tunnel, with just the two of us--

JESS

I brought the right equipment. Perfectly safe.

TRACY

(Looking through binoculars)

Or maybe not just the two of us.

JESS

What?

TRACY

(Giving binoculars to JESS)

Someone's coming.

JESS

Goddamnit. Where?

TRACY

(Points)

Now you're nervous.

JESS

There isn't supposed to be anyone--Jesus H. Crap!

TRACY

Should we hide our tools?

JESS

(dismissive wave)

No, we have every right to be here--

TRACY

Just no authorization.

JESS

(Looking through binoculars)

They're alone. Doesn't look like a government vehicle.
They're parking. Right next to us.

TRACY

Too late to hide.

JESS

We're not doing anything wrong!

(Using binoculars)

Coming up the hill.

TRACY

Act natural. We can say we're just having a nice bowl of
noodles and enjoying...the dust.

JESS

Be courteous but discouraging.

TRACY

You mean lie?

JESS

Probably just a curious local--

TRACY

There are no locals. Not for hundreds of miles!

JESS

Waving...

(Waves)

TRACY

Should I dish up some more noodles?

JESS

Hello!

SHEL appears, also dressed for outdoors. SHEL'S skin is noticeably darker than in Act One.

SHEL

Hello.

JESS

Are you looking for someone?

SHEL

You, I think.

JESS

(Taken aback)
I doubt it--

TRACY

I told you--

TRACY

This is Ash, and I'm Lou--

SHEL

It is you! Thank goodness. I'm Miki.

LOU

How'd you find us? This was quite a trek--

ASH

You contacted the university?

MIKI

I'm a big fan of *The Neanderthal Brain*--

LOU

See, Ash, I told you somebody read it!

ASH

That was a group effort--the researchers weren't listed--

MIKI

I knew you worked on it.

ASH

Nobody's ever--sought me out--

LOU

Ash, chill, accept the compliment.

MIKI

I've wanted to meet you for a long time. And I want to help.

ASH

Help what?

MIKI

I'm also a paleontologist--

ASH

Miki--?

MIKI

You wouldn't have heard of me. Certain kinds of scholarship are notoriously hard to publish--

MIKI

--As you know.

ASH

I know.

ASH

So you're what, a hobbyist?

LOU

That still doesn't explain how you knew we were--

MIKI

Professional network--

ASH

Who?

MIKI

Everyone. Neanderthal mounds. It's very exciting.

ASH
 (To LOU)
 Who'd you tell we were coming?

LOU
 No one. You?

MIKI
 Must be in the zeitgeist.

ASH
 We don't really need help.

LOU
 Actually--

MIKI
 My study has been exclusively Neanderthal.

LOU
 (To ASH)
 Weren't we just saying we needed some help?

ASH
 Raw labor, not a Neanderthal scholar.

LOU
 How are you with a shovel?

MIKI
 (To LOU)
 And you read Shakespeare, don't you, Lou?

ASH
 Only the world expert--

LOU
 Yes, but--

MIKI
 I only know it in translation.

LOU
 Well, most people don't--

MIKI
 Sorry if I sound a little unprofessionally enthusiastic meeting you both, but I know my way around a mound.

See, Ash?

LOU

No one's ever opened one.

ASH

Dude!

LOU

No, but--

MIKI

Any advice?

LOU

Are you tunneling horizontally or vertically?

MIKI

Vertically?

ASH

Might be a short cut. The internal structure--

MIKI

You know the internal structure?

ASH

In the middle of the mound there should be a shaft--

LOU

Already excavated?

ASH

We're not the first?

LOU

The first...since the Neanderthals.

MIKI

They tunneled in themselves? Are the mounds graves? How do you know this shit?

ASH

Aagh! One question at a time! How overwhelming! You're the real scholars.

MIKI

Okay, start by answering one.

ASH

LOU

Ash, chill. Miki could be an amazing resource.

MIKI

I don't think the Neanderthals tunneled. They built the shaft.

ASH

Before they built the mound?

MIKI

The mound came later. Have you tried sonic testing?

ASH

We're going to do that--

LOU

First thing tomorrow.

MIKI

Perfect. I packed food for the season.

LOU

(claps encouragingly)

Awesome!

ASH

The season?

MIKI

May I treat you to dinner?

ASH

We already--

LOU

But just noodles. I could always eat more.

(To MIKI)

Very nice to meet you as well.

Lighting change isolates LOU and ASH in one pool of light and MIKI in another. ASH is tinkering with an electronic device that looks a bit like a portable metal detector, and LOU is gathering rope. MIKI opens a pill bottle.

LOU

Don't be so suspicious.

ASH

No one knew we were coming here. Miki could be--

MIKI shakes the pill bottle, but no pills remain. ASH takes off jacket, revealing a distinctive bat tattoo.

LOU

What? An academic spy? As if anyone cared. Neanderthal studies are discouraged, not prohibited.

MIKI

(facepalm)

Aagh!

ASH

But historically--

MIKI rummages through a backpack or knapsack and finds a bottle of liquid, is relieved. MIKI looks searchingly in a small mirror.

ASH

We didn't get one straight answer. Not a single fucking--!

LOU

We will if Miki's here all season.

MIKI puts away the mirror and bottles.

ASH

Jesus!

LOU

You're way more paranoid than I am. We need the help. You're not the only one with expertise.

ASH

If you'd listen instead of--

(puts on jacket)

There's something about Miki that doesn't look right.

LOU

If we find a vertical shaft, I want you--
(winks)

--To apologize.

Lighting change puts them all back
in the same space. ASH is using
the device, which makes a strange
sound.

ASH

Oh.

MIKI

Right where I said.

LOU

I'll be. Not even a meter down, if we dig right--
(Points)

--There.

(Hands them shovels)

Ash, how about that apology?

LOU and MIKI start digging.

ASH

You're not a paleontologist, not even amateur.

LOU

Dude! Rude!

MIKI

No, you're right.

LOU

Then how did you--?

MIKI

I belong to a group.

ASH

A paleontology *club*?

MIKI

It's not so much scientific as...esoteric.

ASH

So you have all this secret paleontological information known only to initiates? That's creepy.

MIKI

We don't so much hide knowledge as guard it.

ASH

From whom?

MIKI

From anyone who wouldn't value it.

LOU

Which is kind of everybody.

MIKI

I knew you'd understand. You're both in marginalized fields.

ASH

That's blunt.

LOU

Shakespeare isn't
marginalized!

MIKI

No, I mean--how many students do you have in your Shakespeare class on average?

LOU

A dozen at least.

MIKI

And is it offered every term?

LOU

Once every other year. I also teach modern poetry, historic literature, *The Mahabharata*, *The Tale of Genji*--

MIKI

And how many of your students can actually read Shakespeare?

LOU

They know the plotlines, the themes--they can quote long passages.

MIKI

In Mandarin.

Of course.

LOU

Only in Mandarin.

MIKI

Lou, you're marginalized--admit it.

ASH

None read Shakespeare in the original tongue.

MIKI

A few learn phrases--it's ridiculously difficult--

LOU

But you speak it.

MIKI

Better than anyone.

ASH

Just not *with* anyone.

LOU

Nobody understands.

MIKI

I'm sorry, but that sounds a bit condescending.

LOU

No, no! I'm envious! We study the philosophy, but only in translation.

MIKI

Philosophy?

LOU

MIKI
(Quoting)

To live or not to live--that's what must be answered. Is it more worthy to endure the torments of fate or fight them, even to the death?

LOU

What commission translated that?

MIKI

It's not translation--it's tradition. As close as we can come to Shakespeare's words.

LOU

Shakespeare's a period, not a person--

MIKI

We believe Shakespeare was a person.

LOU

One person who wrote so much? A Neanderthal? The writing's far too complex, contradictory, even beautiful, although that's not apparent from your paraphrased garble.

ASH

Lou, now who's being rude?

MIKI

I apologize. I'm not a scholar.

LOU

A work of art is a cultural product, not the invention of an individual, but an outgrowth of the engagement of an entire culture, an expression of a moment in history. People don't make art--time makes art.

MIKI

And art makes us human?

ASH

I wouldn't go that far.

MIKI

But Neanderthals were sophisticated, a culture, a society?

ASH

It's gotten Lou in trouble, academic discipline--

LOU

Ash! Not a society exactly, but a loose organization, tribal. Again, I'm kind of the only one.

MIKI

We believe that, too!

ASH

That word again! What does "believe" mean?

LOU

It's an archaic term.

MIKI

It's knowing something is true--in your heart.

LOU

Without any evidence.

ASH

Like a hypothesis.

MIKI

Belief is like hope.

ASH

In other words, not scientific.

LOU

Artistic. Not provable.

MIKI

We've more in common than you think.

ASH

Does your group have a name?

MIKI

Just enthusiasts.

LOU

Neanderthal enthusiasts.

ASH

Did they send you?

MIKI

Lots of people wanted to come--

LOU

Lots?

MIKI

I was voted. They're envious of me.

ASH

I, for one, am very glad you came.

LOU

What do you think we'll find down there? Why was it worth traveling all the way from--?

MIKI

Tokyo.

ASH

Really? All the way from Tokyo?

LOU

What about this mound is so important to your anonymous philosophical group? We could find toxic whatever--nasty subterranean creatures--

MIKI

I'm sure there's nothing alive. It's been sealed for what? Thousands of years?

ASH

That's what we hope to figure out. Nobody knows the age of these mounds.

LOU

My point exactly! What are you looking for?

MIKI

Evidence. A sign.

ASH

Of what?

MIKI

That our beliefs are true.

ASH

Hopes!

LOU

That Shakespeare was an individual?

MIKI

Among other things. Are you afraid of that?

ASH

Why would anyone be afraid of the truth?

MIKI'S shovel sudden strikes
something that makes a hollow
sound.

ASH

I think everyone's about to be very envious of *us*.

LOU

I'm not going down there.

Lights out on MIKI and ASH. LOU
finds MIKI'S knapsack and goes
through it, finding the bottle of
pills. LOU reads the bottle, then
puts it back in the knapsack.
Lights out on LOU and up on MIKI
and ASH rappelling the shaft. They
have something like headlamps in
addition to the light from the
opening above.

ASH

The walls are stone. With mortar.

MIKI

So they had a primitive kind of technology.

ASH

Their brains were actually bigger than ours.

MIKI

I know. I read your treatise. Do you really think they
communicated through music?

ASH

The music center of their brains was huge.

MIKI

Did you notice that broken structure at the top where we
entered?

ASH

That rusty bar and mechanism?

MIKI

It might have had a musical function.

ASH

What?

MIKI

We can see if they've fallen to the bottom, but legend has it-

ASH

Seriously? Legend has it?

MIKI

Legend found the shaft.

ASH

What fell?

MIKI

Large metal cones of various sizes. They were struck to make tones.

ASH

Why?

MIKI

A musical signal for gathering.

ASH

Is all this esoteric knowledge documented? Do you have evidence?

MIKI

Only a kind of oral tradition.

ASH

Oral tradition from the days of the Neanderthals?

MIKI

Humans and Neanderthals co-existed for thousands of years.

ASH

You're using my treatise against me.

MIKI

I don't mean to. I'm your greatest admirer.

ASH

Sorry I was so skeptical earlier.

MIKI

Scientists are skeptics. Sorry I upset Lou about Shakespeare.

ASH

Sore subject.

They look at each other a moment.

MIKI

Look at this.

MIKI stops by an indentation in the wall. Hanging very close together, they shine their headlamps on it.

MIKI

Is that glass?

ASH

Fragments, but probably. Why all the colors?

MIKI

To color the light.

ASH

Light? Underground?

MIKI

I don't think this was always buried.

(Shines light elsewhere)

There were stairs here once--look--broken supports--

ASH

So the shaft is a tower?

MIKI
That's the legend.

ASH
Another legend!

MIKI
Towers of colored light.

ASH
Why would they want to do that?

MIKI
Art. Something beautiful that lasts.

ASH
More likely a primitive evocation of nature--
(Pries loose a piece of
glass)
--Oh--shit!

MIKI
What is it?

ASH
Not sure. I'll clean it when we get back up.

MIKI
Maybe it wasn't just pretty, but told a story to illiterate
masses--

ASH
(pockets the fragment)
Hard to tell now it's so blasted.

MIKI
A lot is intact. It looks etched. I see--faces!

ASH
And...bodies.

MIKI
Images of Neanderthals by Neanderthals.

ASH
They look almost human.

MIKI

The physical differences were minor, weren't they?

ASH

Washed out. Even in these images.

MIKI

They had art, history--

ASH

Science?

MIKI

(rolls eyes)

I do admire your skepticism.

ASH

Your beliefs--is that what you--?

MIKI

Yes--

ASH AND MIKI

Beliefs--

ASH

Are kind of insane, but so far--prescient--

MIKI

Thank you for believing enough to dig.

ASH

(Shrugs)

Testing an hypothesis.

They look at each other.

MIKI

We could excavate this from the side of the mound.

ASH

Awful lot of work.

MIKI

Maybe Lou would--

LOU

(Shouting from above)

Ash! Can you hear me?

ASH

Yeah, Lou, what is it?

LOU

I think you better come back up!

MIKI

(facepalm)

We're almost to the bottom!

(Shines light below)

I think I can see it!

LOU

No, you need to come up now!

ASH

We're so close!

LOU

Now!

Lights out on them and up on LOU
scanning the horizon with the
binoculars.

LOU

Hurry! They're almost gone.

MIKI and ASH appear.

ASH

Who's almost gone?

LOU

Our visitors. You just missed 'em.

LOU takes down the binoculars,
revealing a bruised or bloodied
eye.

ASH

Lou, what'd they do to you?

MIKI

Your eye!

LOU

They asked a lot of questions. Roughly.

MIKI gets something like a first
aid kit and treats LOU'S eye.

ASH

About our dig?

MIKI

Were they official?

LOU

I think so. They seemed familiar with our resumes.

(To MIKI)

I didn't tell them you were here, but--

ASH

They'll run the registration on both vehicles.

MIKI

But what?

LOU

They told me to be on the lookout for--

MIKI

Me?

MIKI dabs at LOU'S eye with a cloth
doused with disinfectant. ASH
cleans off the glass fragment.

LOU

Someone like you.

ASH

What does that mean?

LOU

I got the impression they'd be back.

ASH
Then we'll have to work fast.

LOU
What'd you find?

ASH
(Hands LOU the glass
fragment)
This.

LOU
It's your bat!

MIKI
What?

ASH
(shrugs)
A common ancient symbol.

MIKI
Can I see it?

LOU hands the fragment to MIKI and
takes the cloth.

MIKI
There's a lot of bat imagery in Shakespeare, isn't there,
Lou?

(looks at fragment)
Aagh!

(crosses self)

LOU
(Quoting)
On the bat's back I fly.

ASH
And isn't bat fur an ingredient in stew--?

MIKI
A potion, actually--!
(excited)
For my group, bats aren't just a symbol--they're sacred.

ASH
What's "sacred"?

MIKI
Bats go into the cave to hibernate all winter, then come back to life in the spring.

MIKI
We're not allowed to eat them.

ASH
I should hope not!

MIKI
(re: glass)
This is incredible! What else could be down there?!

ASH
(to LOU)
There's a whole collage of images just a few meters down.

LOU
Shakespearean art?

ASH
Come see!

LOU
(dabbing eye)
I'm not going down there.

ASH
Seems like there's more to worry about up here.

MIKI
(Pointing down the mound)
It's probably right about there, if you dig laterally--

ASH
The mound's subsided a bit--it's quite close to the surface--

LOU
I got a very clear message. We should leave.

ASH
We're literally on the threshold of a major discovery!

LOU

It's not worth it.

MIKI

This glass is proof! Imagine what lies at the bottom!

LOU

I imagine a lot of things.

LOU suddenly swipes at MIKI'S face with the cloth, wiping away a streak of dark make-up, revealing pale skin beneath.

MIKI

What are you--?

LOU

And I imagined right!

ASH

Your skin!

MIKI

I have a condition.

ASH

(Backing away)

Are you sick?

LOU

You ran out of melanin pills, so you resorted to make-up. What are you?

(Throws MIKI the cloth)

Take off the rest of it.

MIKI

Hardly matters now, I guess.

MIKI wipes off the make-up.

ASH

It's not albinism--your eyes are the wrong color.

LOU

What's your condition?

MIKI

It's not a disease. I'm just like this.

ASH

I've never seen anyone so--

LOU

Is everyone in your group like that?

MIKI

No! I mean, a little, but I'm--

LOU

The pinkest.

ASH

Lou! Rude!

MIKI

I'm not pink! Just light.

LOU

Ash, people like this could be all around us and we'd never know it, taking melanin, painting themselves--

ASH

They can't help it.

LOU

Born that way--?!

MIKI

You see why I try to pass--!

ASH

Can I...touch it?

LOU

Ash, don't--!

MIKI

It doesn't feel any different--

ASH

(Touching MIKI'S face)

Yes, it does.

LOU makes a noise of horror and disgust. Lighting change puts LOU in the dark. MIKI and ASH turn on their headlamps;

they are now on the bottom of the shaft. Faint sounds of excavation high above.

ASH

It's completely level.

MIKI

And much wider than the shaft.

ASH

A cave.

MIKI

A room. This floor is mortared like the tower.

ASH

(Playing the light around)

That broken wood might be your collapsed stairs--

(Kneeling)

And look at this.

MIKI

Bones!

ASH

Don't touch. This is a paleontological site.

ASH starts recording images with something like a camera.

MIKI

To me it's more than that. These bones look human.

ASH

Do you see a skull? Neanderthals had brow ridges--

MIKI

(Picks up a skull)

Here.

ASH

Don't!

MIKI

(Shining light on the skull)

I don't see a brow ridge.

ASH

You're right. That's Homo sapiens.

(Shines light around)

More bones. More bones. More--

MIKI

Dry bones.

They walk around, shining their
lights on more and more bones,
capturing images, documenting.

MIKI

What did Lou mean, your bat?

After a moment's hesitation, ASH
reveals the bat tattoo.

MIKI

(crosses self)

You're one of us!

ASH

The hell I am!

MIKI reveals an identical tattoo.

MIKI

It's a sign!

ASH

What is this place? You know, don't you?

MIKI

It's really just a theory--

ASH

An unscientific one--

MIKI

A hope. A belief.

ASH
What belief?

MIKI
There is no God but God.

ASH
A nonsense interjection--

MIKI
God is great.

ASH
Gibberish!

ASH
What are you talking about?

MIKI
I'm a rabbi.

ASH
A rabbi? What's that?

MIKI
It means teacher--

ASH
A teacher?

MIKI
--A keeper of knowledge.

ASH
Knowledge of what this place is?

MIKI
We always hoped--

ASH
What is it?

MIKI
We don't have a word for it. Just a place. Where God is.

ASH
What's God?

MIKI
Everything. A through Z. The one who made us.

ASH

Made us?

MIKI

Makes us. Makes us human.

ASH

And found in this place?

MIKI

I think so.

ASH

This place of death?

MIKI

Death is the beginning of life. Like a bat in a cave.

Coinciding with an excavation sound above, a small patch of colored light appears near them on the floor. They don't notice.

ASH

Jesus!

MIKI

Exactly!

ASH

What?

MIKI

We believe in Jesus.

ASH

That's just an expletive. It doesn't mean anything.

MIKI

It used to. And to us it still does.

ASH

How big is your group?

MIKI

A few dozen. There may be more, but--

ASH

They hide.

MIKI

We do.

Another patch of colored light
appears on the floor. They notice
it.

ASH

I'm sorry Lou was so nasty about your--

ASH

--Condition--

MIKI

It's okay.

MIKI

I know it's a shock.

ASH

Lou is cautious--

MIKI

Afraid of me? Are you?

ASH

I'm here alone with you, aren't I?

MIKI

I'm kinda glad Lou didn't come.

ASH

Me, too.

(they smile)

Have you shown anyone before?

MIKI

Just people in my group. And we're mostly related.

ASH

And it really doesn't have a name?

MIKI

We call ourselves The People of the Book.

ASH

Another nonsense word. What's a book?

MIKI

Not nonsense, just old.

ASH

As old as Neanderthals?

MIKI

As old as these bones.

ASH

So not that old. These are human.

MIKI

Part.

ASH

Part human?

MIKI

And part Neanderthal.

ASH

That's impossible! They couldn't mate across species! At least not with fertile offspring.

MIKI

I'm not a mule.

ASH

You're not Neanderthal!

Another patch of colored light.

MIKI

My skin is light like the images on the glass.

ASH

Did these...people die because they were hybrids?

MIKI

Possibly. A mass killing, a disease--

ASH

Are we in danger now?

MIKI

It was so long ago.

ASH

Why are they all here? Why not properly buried?

MIKI

They were buried. That's what the mounds are.

ASH

But they're not laid out, that one's twisted in pain, those two holding each other--

MIKI

I didn't say they were buried respectfully--it's a mass grave--
-what's that?

They shine their lights on a particular skeleton. MIKI picks up an ancient, decayed hat, the one SHEL wore in Act One, and puts it on.

ASH

Take that off! Pathogens can lie dormant for millennia.

MIKI

It's holding something.

ASH

(As MIKI kneels)

Don't touch it! We have to document--

MIKI

We don't have time--the authorities will be back--!

ASH

I'm the paleontologist here--I'm the authority--

MIKI

I knew we'd find it!

MIKI picks up a dusty Bible, the same one SHEL tore in class, now ancient.

ASH

What?

MIKI

This is why I came! They were wrong!

ASH

Who was wrong?

MIKI

The People--they said I'd never--I knew it--!

ASH

They didn't really send you, did they?

MIKI

They sent me...away. I'm kind of in exile, I guess.

ASH

Because you wanted to come here?

MIKI

Because I wanted--

(Indicates Bible)

--This--confirmation, evidence.

ASH

They kicked you out.

MIKI

They wanted their memories, traditions, hand-me-down mistranslated scripture, not the truth.

ASH

So you don't really have--People--

MIKI

It doesn't matter.

ASH

You don't have anything. Nothing left.

MIKI

(Indicates Bible)

I have this. And I know why these people came here.

(Indicates bones)

ASH

Why?

MIKI

They were seeking protection from The Book!

MIKI clutches the Bible, ecstatic,
as if speaking in tongues.

ASH

What does that mean? That's
a book?

MIKI

Why is today different from
all other days?

ASH

How could that--object--
offer them protection?

MIKI

God sent not the One into the
world to condemn the world--

ASH

You haven't given me proper
answers to any of my
questions--just nonsense,
gibberish--!

MIKI

But that the world through
the One might be saved. Let
there be light!

A slightly louder excavation sound,
and a much larger patch of
multicolored light connects the
random patches, illuminating MIKI
and the Bible. A bat image in
light on MIKI's skin matches the
bat tattoo.

MIKI

Let there be light!

ASH

Ohhh! The bat...on your skin!

ASH reaches out and touches MIKI'S
tattoo in fascination.

MIKI ASH
 God willed us to find it! Let me...let me...

ASH
 I'm not...afraid.

MIKI takes ASH'S hand. ASH
 suddenly kisses MIKI.

MIKI
 (Resisting)
 Careful--careful--!

ASH
 I'm not afraid! I want--to know what you know--

MIKI
 No, you don't--

ASH
 You know so much.

ASH MIKI
 The rational and the I'm not like you--
 irrational--

ASH
 That's what--

MIKI ASH
 No--no--! I want--!

Silently, LOU rappels down from
 above and sees them entwined.

MIKI
 You don't know what it means--!

LOU
 Get your filthy paws off Ash, you damned, dirty--!

ASH
 (Jumping up)
 Lou!

LOU
 (Landing)
 You pursued Ash all the way from Tokyo.

ASH
 No, Lou, I'm the one--

MIKI
 (Holds up Bible)
 I was pursuing this!

LOU
 I've never cared if you had sex with other people--

LOU
 --But not other--

ASH
 Nothing happened!

LOU
 --Not even human--!

MIKI
 We don't believe in sex!

ASH
 Lou, you have to see this!

MIKI
 The greatest discovery of your career!

LOU
 My career? This horrible trip was for your--!

ASH
 Worth the whole journey, even the hassling from the government--

LOU
 What is that?

MIKI
 The Book.
 (Holds it open)
 Written in Shakespeare.

LOU
 I doubt it.

MIKI

Read it.

(Gives Bible to LOU)

LOU

First of all--

(Turns Bible right side up)

MIKI

(Turns a page for LOU)

You're the expert.

ASH

Can you read it, Lou?

LOU

I've never seen an object like this.

MIKI

It has writing. All through it!

LOU

It is in Shakespeare...but it's not a familiar text--

MIKI

What does it say?

LOU

I can't translate instantly. There are a lot of words in Shakespeare for which we have no equivalents.

ASH

Like what?

LOU

They had a variety of pronouns indicating gender.

ASH

What's gender?

MIKI

Mating counterparts. They couldn't reproduce unless--sex meant something different then--

LOU

Is this from your esoteric tradition?

MIKI

What does it say?

LOU

(Translating, haltingly)

You may purchase...male or female...slaves from among the strangers...who live with you.

MIKI

That's gender! Male or female!

ASH

What are slaves?

LOU

You may also purchase the children...of such resident strangers...including those who have been...born in your land. You may treat them as your property...passing them on to your children...as a permanent inheritance.

ASH

Slaves are purchased people?

LOU

Neanderthals.

ASH

Property?

MIKI

Read a different section.

LOU

(Translating)

You Ethiopians--

ASH

What are Ethiopians?

LOU

A group of people--

MIKI

A tribe--

LOU

You Ethiopians will also be...

MIKI

--Associated with a particular place--

LOU

--Slaughtered by my sword...says the Lord.

ASH

Who is this bloodthirsty Lord?

MIKI

It's God--

ASH

That word again!

MIKI

But there are nice parts, too-

-

MIKI

--According to tradition--read a nice part--!

(Reciting)

You shall love your neighbor as yourself--

LOU

(Translating)

You will hear of wars--

ASH

What does that mean?

LOU

--And rumors of wars.

ASH

Is this whole--object--
untranslatable--?

LOU

War is killing. Mass
killing.

MIKI

There are better parts, holy parts!

ASH

Holy?

LOU

I saw another sign in heaven--

ASH

All these lost words--

MIKI

Yes! Heaven! It's like the sky. A beautiful place!

LOU

--Great and marvelous...seven angels--

ASH

Angels? Can't you translate better?

ASH

Neanderthals had government?

LOU

It's described in Shakespeare--hereditary rulers--

ASH

Why would the government cover up a plague? Did they create it?

MIKI

We didn't have any evidence.

(Gestures toward bones)

Until now we assumed it was just a metaphor--poetic--

LOU

(Gesturing toward the bodies)

Do these bones look like a metaphor? A bunch of dead Neanderthals?

ASH

They're human, Lou. At least part. Look at the skulls.

LOU

So we're standing in a pit of plague victims? You were having sex in a pit of--

ASH

We weren't having sex!

MIKI

How could they be infectious after thousands of years?

LOU

You tell me. They're your relatives. Maybe you're infectious.

ASH

No, Lou--

LOU

Step back, both of you. Who knows if you reactivated some quiescent--

MIKI

It only killed Neanderthals!

LOU

So says your oral history! What about these people? Humans who had sex with Neanderthals? That plague could jump the species barrier.

MIKI

I'm not sick!

ASH

It's possible a plague could survive this long, stay dormant, then--

LOU

We don't know, do we, Ash? All we know is these people died all at once in this hole.

(Starts climbing rope)

You can die here, too, go ahead, but not me.

MIKI

Lou, this place could unlock your life's work!

LOU

(Climbing)

No one cares about my life's work! I've wasted my life!

ASH

I care, Lou! I love your work!

LOU

Love?! I always wanted to think so. But here you are in the arms of this...extinct species!

LOU disappears up the rope.

ASH

Lou, I'm sorry! Lou!

MIKI

No, I'm sorry, Ash. I didn't want--

ASH

I'm the one who wanted--I can't explain it--maybe because you have nothing--no people, no culture--I almost feel like it's my fault--

It's not!

MIKI

I don't know why--

ASH

Knowing why.

MIKI

What?

ASH

That's everything, isn't it? We know what things are, even how they are, but never why.

MIKI

I always want to know.

ASH

That's what I believe. That someday we might know why.

MIKI

That's your oral history.

ASH

And tradition says it's explained in the Book. My God!

MIKI

What?

ASH

The Book!

MIKI

What?

ASH

Lou took the Book!

MIKI

They look up. Lights out on them and up on LOU studying the book. After a few moments, ASH and MIKI appear.

ASH
Lou--

LOU
Don't speak to me, Ash.

MIKI
Lou, I want the Book.

LOU
I'm the only one who can read it.

MIKI
But you don't believe--

LOU
It's fascinating. And utterly evil.

MIKI
No! It's transcendent!

LOU
It's a threat to society.
(Translates from the Book)
And those that curse the name of the Lord shall surely be put
to death, and all shall certainly stone them.

MIKI
You're just selecting the worst--

LOU
(Translating)
Whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell
fire.

ASH
Hell? Another expletive?

MIKI
It used to mean a place of torment, the opposite of heaven,
but--

LOU
And God sends you there for name-calling. Is that what God
did to your people? What crime did they commit?

MIKI

If you despise it so, give it to me.

LOU

There are seven pages missing, ripped out. Imagine what was so bad it had to be excised.

MIKI

I'll take it. You'll never have to see it again!

LOU

Imagine if this got out. If these--ideas--infected the general population, if everyone got to be like you. Mass killings, executions for impure speech, a fiery pit of torment--?

MIKI

But--the knowledge! A whole culture! These people lost their art, their science, their religion--everything--

ASH

Lou, both our careers are dedicated to knowledge--teaching--

LOU

Some knowledge is best lost, forgotten. We're better off now, without people like you.

MIKI

The history!

LOU

Those who live in the past are condemned to repeat it.

LOU lights the Bible on fire.

MIKI

No! Lou, please don't!

ASH

Lou, you're just afraid of the authorities!

LOU

Of course, I'm afraid!

ASH

Destroying this before they return!

LOU
 Afraid of what this might do
 to the world!

MIKI
 (Sobbing)
 You'll be punished for
 burning the Book!

LOU throws the book down the shaft.

MIKI
 God will punish you!

MIKI grabs a rope and disappears
 down the shaft.

ASH
 Lou, all our work--!

LOU
 Ash, there's a reason we couldn't get grants, a reason this
 place was buried, a reason this--terrible knowledge--was
 lost! It died with the Neanderthals, as it should have! We
 can't bring it back!

ASH
 I can't let Miki die down there!

LOU
 Yes, you can. That madness must die.

ASH
 Miki knows so much!

LOU
 So much that must not be known!

ASH
 That's why we want to know it. There's always more to know.

LOU
 Ash, don't go down there! This whole mound is going to
 collapse in flames!

ASH
 I have to!

LOU
 Are you--in love with that--that--?

ASH

I love you, Lou!

LOU

And that Neanderthal? You don't know what love is--
oxytocin, dopamine--human!

ASH

Love *is* knowing, isn't it? Knowing someone else?

LOU

Belief. Without evidence. Go. Infect yourself! Love is
holding onto something even if it'll kill you. That's what
I've done with you!

ASH moves to embrace LOU, but LOU
pushes away.

LOU

Don't touch me! You're contaminated!

ASH stares, then disappears down
the shaft.

LOU

What do you have? What's left? Nothing. Nothing!

Lights out on LOU and up on MIKI
and ASH at the bottom of the shaft.
The Bible burns on the floor.
Other fires burn nearby.

ASH

Miki, come with me, we can climb out before it spreads.

MIKI

Look.

ASH

It's burning. We can smother it--!

MIKI

I tried that. It keeps on burning. But look.

ASH

It's not...consumed.

The glow of other fires grows
around them.

MIKI

Not even singed.

ASH

It's catching everything else on fire, but it's not consumed--

MIKI

A sign. I was right to believe.

MIKI

The church is true.

ASH

There must be a reason--logic--
-it's coated with something--

MIKI

A belief--in your heart--

ASH

A rational explanation--

ASH

Climb with me, Miki, or we'll burn with the rest of this
structure--a lot of it's wood--

MIKI

Stay with me, Ash.

ASH

The whole place is on fire!

MIKI

If we believe, we won't be consumed.

ASH

Miki, I'm sorry--

MIKI

Hold me.

ASH

It's all going to collapse!

MIKI

We don't know that.

ASH

All I want to do is hold you, but I'm scared.

MIKI

I'm scared, too. But if you hold me, you'll know.

ASH holds MIKI.

MIKI
Don't you want to know?

THE END