

Little Red

April 2017

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*“The wolf thought to himself:
what a tender young creature, what a nice plump mouthful.”*

Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm

CHARACTERS:

AMBER SPENSER, a petite, red headed poet in her early twenties

DOCTOR RODERICK RONDEL, a teacher and former forensic artist in his forties

MARGARET MADRIGAL, a poet, professor, and editor in her thirties

VISCOUNT RUDOLPH VILLANELLE, a British born literary critic in his forties

TIME:

The present and recent past

PLACE:

New York City: the interrogation room of a police station, and a sparsely furnished apartment with a desk, several chairs, and shelves filled with human skulls

(New York City: in the interrogation room of a police station, AMBER SPENSER, a petite, unkempt, red headed young woman stands facing an audience of detectives.)

AMBER

Like where to even start. So, okay, maybe you detectives like things in order, like from the beginning. Right. Look, I didn't expect so many of you -- not that I'm scared. I'm totally into danger, but later for that. I wouldn't even be here if The Fang's wife hadn't tracked him down which is how she wound up at that creepy apartment in Harlem. So like picture the Doc sitting at his desk typing his memoirs or whatever. Everything's black: the walls, the chairs, his desk, and he's got these freaky skulls on his shelves.

(As AMBER continues, dim lights reveal the sparsely furnished apartment of DOCTOR RODERICK RONDEL who sits at his desk, tapping the keys of his computer.)

AMBER

So The Fang's wife starts knocking at the Doc's door. At first it's just tap, tap...

(A tentative knocking is heard.)

AMBER

Then it's bang, bang!

(AMBER retreats as more insistent knocks are heard, and RODERICK looks up to acknowledge the frantic woman calling from behind the door.)

MARGARET

Doctor Rondel...? Hello? Hello!

RODERICK

Who is it?!

MARGARET

Margaret Madrigal! I left several messages!

RODERICK

About what?!

MARGARET

My husband! He's missing!

Sorry, but I'm busy!

RODERICK

I can pay you!

MARGARET

No thanks!

RODERICK

I can pay you a great deal!

MARGARET

Go away!

RODERICK

May I leave my card?

MARGARET

No!

RODERICK

I have a note from your former colleague...

MARGARET

Leave me alone!

RODERICK

Oh, please, Doctor, I drove all the way from Montauk! I'll just hand you his note and leave!

(RODERICK shuffles to the door. The moment HE cracks it open, MARGARET, a striking woman in her thirties, thrusts a note in his hand.)

There! Now won't you please let me in?

MARGARET

No!

RODERICK

(As RODERICK starts to close the door, MARGARET thrusts it open and dashes into the room.)

RODERICK

What the devil...?

MARGARET

Please, please hear me out!

RODERICK

You can't just barge in here!

MARGARET

I...I'm sorry, but I...

RODERICK

Leave this instant or I'll call the police!

MARGARET

I...I just hoped you'd listen...

RODERICK

Oh, Christ, don't tell me you're about to cry.

MARGARET

Forgive me, but I...I'm desperate.

RODERICK

Sorry, but damsels in distress don't move me.

MARGARET

I...I feel faint; could I sit a moment? Then I'll leave, I promise.

(MARGARET draws a handkerchief from her purse and blots her tears.)

RODERICK

Look, I know why you're here, but I left the department months ago.

MARGARET

Yes, but I was told you were the best in the city.

RODERICK

In the world! Look, whoever you are...

MARGARET

Margaret.

RODERICK

(pause, he sighs) When I was employed, I was asked to identify two kinds of people: the living and the dead, but my specialty was the dead, so if your missing person is...

MARGARET

But that's the problem; we don't know! At first everyone assumed he was at one of his retreats -- until someone sent me this.

(MARGARET reaches into her purse, draws forth a small pointed object, and drops it on the desk.)

RODERICK

A tooth...?

MARGARET

Not just any tooth. It's a canine with a diamond embedded in the center -- the result of an adolescent whim. The police think it's a prank.

RODERICK

Did they check his dental records?

MARGARET

There aren't any. Rudy only saw a dentist as a child, but no x-rays were taken. His full name is Rudolph Villanelle, and he's been missing for nearly a month. I need to know if he's alive or dead, and I heard that you're a forensic medium, that bones speak to you.

RODERICK

Oh, really? Bones speak to me, do they?

MARGARET

I was told that when you touch them, their deceased owners are drawn to you and identify themselves.

RODERICK

And you believed it?

MARGARET

No, not at first, but if it's possible...?

RODERICK

It is, but after I resigned, the dead had the decency to leave me alone. Now why don't you do the same.

(MARGARET starts to leave, then turns.)

MARGARET

I don't understand. Why would you want to stop sharing such a...a gift?

RODERICK

Ha! How naive you people are!

MARGARET

Fine, I...I just want to understand.

RODERICK

Do you...?

(RODERICK grasps a skull from the shelf and approaches MARGARET.)

RODERICK

All right then, imagine that you're holding a cranium like this, possibly excavated from a construction site. You'd either employ a computer or make a cast to determine tissue depth, then apply clay and start sculpting until a recognizable human face appears. But all I have to do is I clasp the cranium and voila: a stranger suddenly materializes -- not looking his best, mind you. My last case was a monstrosity caked in blood with his eyes gouged, maggots crawling from his mouth, his wounds seeping yellow pus...

MARGARET

Stop, please! You've made your point.

RODERICK

With clothing, photographs, or cathected objects, the deceased would simply whisper, telling me where their bodies were buried, and if they were murder victims, they might reveal how and by whom they were dispatched. Then the police would unearth their remains, DNA tests would confirm their identities, and the perpetrators would be arrested.

MARGARET

Well, wasn't that gratifying?

RODERICK

Not when fellow officers accused me of being a freak or even a suspect, although some learned to accept and even respect me. My captain referred to me as “a forensic intermediary.”

MARGARET

So is it true that most victims know their murderers?

RODERICK

Yes, though I’ve had my share of abandoned infants, neglected grannies, vagrants exposed to extreme weather -- some so demented, they couldn’t even tell they were dead.

MARGARET

Then you don’t see the radiant souls we read about?

RODERICK

Ha! What I see looks like faded films, projected visions of deteriorating mortality that I assume is some sort of transitional phase between here and the world beyond. Now I’ve said enough, so please leave, and don’t forget your tooth, which by the way is *not* a bone. Teeth are made of calcium phosphate, dentin and pulp, but bones are organic collagen.

(MARGARET snatches her smartphone from her pocket, taps it, then thrusts it in RODERICK’S face.)

MARGARET

Here! This is Rudolph! He was thirty-eight!

RODERICK

(glancing, then turning away) You still don’t understand what you’re asking. Surely you’re educated enough to know that there’s no such thing as objective observation. In other words, the dead have had their effect -- which is why I’m divorced, depressed, and sick of being in perpetual mourning.

MARGARET

I...I’m sorry; I didn’t realize...

RODERICK

Look, even if I agreed to help, what good would it do?

MARGARET

It would give his colleagues and me some closure.

RODERICK

Ha! That's what you think, but suppose he was tortured? That won't give you closure; that gives you nightmares -- trust me, I know.

MARGARET

But if he was murdered, you could help me find his killer; he'd be arrested; there'd be justice.

RODERICK

You mean "revenge."

MARGARET

Well,...yes. In fact, that's why I think he disappeared. You see, Rudy was a critic, a literary critic who specialized in poetry and wrote under the name V. Villanelle. He also blogged, tweeted, and had a huge online following. He was widely respected, but also reviled; his enemies called him "The Fang" -- because of the tooth.

RODERICK

It does appear denser and longer than most.

MARGARET

Yes, it made his smile seem...

RODERICK

Vampiric...? Is that what the V stands for?

MARGARET

No, it's for Viscount. He was the only son of a British earl who loved poetry so much he changed his name from Villers to Villanelle.

RODERICK

So do the police have any suspects?

MARGARET

Hundreds! The detectives read his reviews and amassed a long list -- all the poets he'd humiliated and excoriated. When they searched his office, they found folders filled with hostile, life-threatening letters, and now everyone's convinced he's been murdered, but I think he's in hiding.

RODERICK

Even from his wife?

MARGARET

Yes.

RODERICK

Well, he's not; he's definitely deceased. (*pointing*) He's right there!

(RODERICK'S eyes widen as an approaching apparition appears: the dimly lit SPIRIT OF THE VISCOUNT VILLANELLE.)

MARGARET

Oh, I...I don't see him...

RODERICK

But I do! Thanks to the mistake I made of touching his tooth. (*pause*) I'm afraid his hands are covering his throat as if he can't speak. Now he's coming closer, gesturing to my phone. (*pause*) Good god, he's texting! Ha!

(MARGARET'S smartphone jingles as SHE jumps, startled, then reads her screen.)

MARGARET

(*reading*) "Too many threats on life. Moved to woods near Montreal."

(MARGARET slumps in a chair, her hand at her breast.)

RODERICK

You're not going to faint, are you? Hang on! I'll get some water!

MARGARET

Have you got something stronger?

RODERICK

Scotch all right?

MARGARET

Yes, anything...

(RODERICK opens a cabinet, removes a bottle of scotch, two glasses, and pours as MARGARET speaks.)

MARGARET

Where is he now?

RODERICK

(pointing) Over there, by the wall.

MARGARET

How does he look?

RODERICK

Scruffy and bearded, but fuzzy -- like peering through an unfocused lens.

MARGARET

(raising her voice) Rudy! If you're listening, please tell us where you're buried and how you died!

(Pause as the VISCOUNT'S SPIRIT flutters his fingers and RODERICK's phone chimes.)

RODERICK

Now he's texting me! *(reading)* "Murdered by pack of poets."

MARGARET

Poets...? Who?!

RODERICK

(reading) "Call themselves Mad Doggerels." *(pause)* "Poets great grudge holders. Twenty-four in all."

MARGARET

Twenty-four!? But how...? Did each one strike you?

RODERICK

(reading) "One poet sent as emissary: Amber Spenser."

MARGARET

I'll call the police!

RODERICK

(pause, reading) "No police! Meet Amber."

MARGARET

Yes, of course, Amber will know the others.

RODERICK

(pause, glancing down) What?! You can't be serious!

MARGARET

What...? What did he write?

RODERICK

“Meet Amber here.” Absolutely not!

MARGARET

I...I’m sorry, I realize that’s a terrible imposition. *(raising her voice)* Now Rudy, listen: how do we get Amber to come here?!

RODERICK

(pause, reading) “Text her that you want interview; here is her number.” *(to Margaret)* You heard me; I won’t allow it!

MARGARET

Oh, please! As I said, I’ll pay you.

(MARGARET opens her purse, retrieves a check, and drops it on Roderick’s desk.)

MARGARET

Here!

RODERICK

Are you deaf?! I said no!

MARGARET

I hope it’s sufficient.

RODERICK

Nothing’s sufficient!

MARGARET

You haven’t even looked.

RODERICK

That’s right because I’m not interested!

(RODERICK’S glances at the check.)

RODERICK

My god...

MARGARET

What...?

RODERICK

Twenty thousand dollars! Rather exorbitant, isn't it?

MARGARET

You're worth it.

(RODERICK sighs then reluctantly pockets the check)

RODERICK

Oh, all right -- damn! But text her from your own phone! The sooner she comes, the faster you're out of my life! Oh, Christ, now he's drifting towards the bedroom.

MARGARET

Should we follow?

RODERICK

No! Now he's gone, vanished -- poof!

(RODERICK and MARGARET freeze in time as AMBER reappears, addressing the detectives.)

AMBER

So she like texts me, and I fall for her bullshit and set up a meeting as soon as I can get there 'cause I'm at work waiting tables. So that's when they start chatting, and you can hear how Margaret sees the glass half full, but his is half empty and spiked; like the words from her mouth are all pearls and his all lizards and toads. The forensic wonder says his life's been...

AMBER

...regrets, bitterness...

RODERICK

Regrets, bitterness,...

RODERICK

...preternatural violations of nature. Grief is the street I stroll, ha, ha!

AMBER

Can you fucking believe it? Like I know all this 'cause he's a posterity freak who records everything -- which is cool since now you'll believe my side of the story, right? Anyway, he explains why in his place...

AMBER
...everything's black.

RODERICK
Everything's black...

RODERICK
...since I'm told the deceased have an aversion to black.

(AMBER departs as RODERICK pours another scotch.)

MARGARET
What about all these skulls?

RODERICK
Souvenirs from the staff at the morgue.

MARGARET
(pause) Since you're an artist, I wonder if you'd draw Rudy -- how he looked just now.

RODERICK
I can't, I told you he was indistinct. I'd prefer to draw you.

MARGARET
Me...?

RODERICK
Yes! Let me get my sketch pad.

MARGARET
I...I'd rather you didn't.

RODERICK
Look, I've done what you asked; now it's your turn.

MARGARET
(pause) Well,...if you insist.

(RODERICK retrieves a sketch pad and begins drawing.)

RODERICK
Now turn slightly to the left -- yes, perfect! I see you're blushing; how quaint.

MARGARET
May I speak?

RODERICK

If you must.

MARGARET

You'll tell me if he reappears?

RODERICK

Yes.

MARGARET

(pause) I always imagined the dead gazing down at the tops of our heads, as if they were passing by in glass-bottomed gliders.

RODERICK

Afraid not, some emerge from under the rugs which is disconcerting.

MARGARET

(pause) Well, I still consider your unique sensitivity a gift. Some people would hang out a shingle, join the lecture circuit, appear on videos, yet here you are.

RODERICK

Yes, I'm such fun.

MARGARET

Have you always had this ability?

RODERICK

No, thank god. I had an uneventful childhood in Brooklyn, then attended Columbia thinking I'd become an orthopedic surgeon.

MARGARET

So bones have always been of interest?

RODERICK

Indeed. I'd be replacing hips if I hadn't witnessed a purse snatching. When the police asked for a description, I volunteered to sketch the thief, and my drawing led to his arrest. Their usual artist was impressed, said I should take courses in sculpting, and since I much preferred drawing to cutting, I became a forensic artist. After several years, I was called to identify the victims of a bread factory fire. That's when I had my first encounter -- brought on by a femur of a baker from Belize. Then a few more started making appearances. At first I was terrified, thought I was going insane, but the police psychiatrist had the same response as you: "Consider it a gift," she said, "and carry on with our blessing."

MARGARET

(pause) Well, I suppose working with the police, you've had to acquire a degree of...detachment.

RODERICK

Yes, but that doesn't stop some of us from becoming cynical catastrophists, heavy drinkers, or zombified -- to quote my ex.

MARGARET

I...I'm sorry.

RODERICK

It's my own fault. There's an empathy threshold I seem to have reached, so I've joined the living dead, holed up in my hovel. Christ, I can't believe I'm telling you this -- must be the scotch.

MARGARET

You don't look like a zombie to me, and I've heard you're teaching.

RODERICK

At City College: three courses in drawing which scarcely covers the rent -- which is why I'm accepting your check against my better judgement. Now could you please tilt your head a bit to the right? Good. So are you staying in the city?

MARGARET

Yes, I have a house in Montauk, but keep an apartment here. I teach poetry at Hunter. In fact, I aspired to being a poet myself, but well, I...I gave it up.

RODERICK

Whatever for?

MARGARET

My own inner critic was agonizing over every syllable of every word -- which is what poets do, of course -- but then they stopped coming.

RODERICK

So the muse fled, did she?

MARGARET

She was tired of trying to start fires, floods, and shake up the world with words, so one day I trashed the lot -- everything stored and everything printed -- gone forever.

RODERICK

It must have been a challenge being married to a critic.

MARGARET

Well, yes, though what he really wanted to be was a dancer -- until he had a skiing accident that shattered his right leg which healed an inch shorter than the left. He was devastated, doomed to the sedentary arts, so he became a critic, but so harsh we couldn't go to restaurants or theatres without his victims causing a scene -- cursing or tossing drinks in his face.

RODERICK

Oh, dear.

MARGARET

Oh, he loved it. He was driven by an obsessive need to impress people, but now that he's gone, I realize how little I knew him -- I can't even name his favorite poets.

RODERICK

What about his family?

MARGARET

There's no one left, not even a cousin. The police asked why I hadn't reported him missing sooner, but we'd decided to divorce and were living separate lives. You say you feel like the living dead; well, so do I, though not now, not in your company.

RODERICK

And I'm no longer sorry you're here. You have very distinctive bones, especially your mandibular ramus. Amazing, isn't it? How bones endure centuries beyond organs, which is why they belong more to death than to life, though you're very much alive, your flawless flesh still bonded to your frame, still emanating...radiance. Would you mind if I adjusted your hair?

MARGARET

No.

(RODERICK gently pulls back Margaret's hair.)

RODERICK

It's so long I should call you Rapunzel. My god, you have such lovely eyes.

MARGARET

So do you.

RODERICK

To think I wanted you to leave.

MARGARET

I'm glad I stayed.

(MARGARET gazes up as RODERICK bends down then kisses her. SHE responds, then backs away.)

MARGARET

I'm sorry, but I...I'm seeing someone.

RODERICK

Ah! So that's the real reason you want to find his lordship. You need his remains so you're legally free to marry this other man.

MARGARET

No, not at all, not yet anyway. Elliot and I are still only dating.

RODERICK

Was it true what you said -- about feeling like the living dead?

MARGARET

Yes.

RODERICK

Even with Elliot?

MARGARET

Sometimes.

RODERICK

Then he's not the right one.

MARGARET

You're not being fair; you don't know him.

RODERICK

True, but I have extraordinary intuition.

MARGARET

About someone you've never met?!

RODERICK

No, about you. *(pause)* You see, when your vision includes the deceased, a veil is lifted so to speak; you realize that nothing matters -- nothing but the real intersections.

MARGARET

“Real intersections”...?

RODERICK

The people who move something inside you, who make you feel most alive. Of course, I realize we’re just getting to know each other, but kissing you made me feel like...

MARGARET

What...?

RODERICK

Like a frog turning into a prince -- though we’d have to do it again to be certain.

(MARGARET smiles, and as their lips meet, loud knocks are heard. THEY separate, then RODERICK opens the door and AMBER enters.)

AMBER

Hi, I’m Amber! I’m here to see Margaret Madrigal...?

RODERICK

Yes, come in.

AMBER

(pause, seeing Margaret) So you’re the lady who wants to interview me...?

MARGARET

Yes.

RODERICK

Won’t you take a seat?

AMBER

Thanks.

MARGARET

(pause) I’ll be candid, Amber: the reason I called is that it seems you found my husband, the literary critic...

AMBER

(leaping up) Oh, shit!

Don't leave!

MARGARET

(RODERICK blocks the door.)

RODERICK

You heard the lady.

AMBER

What do you want?!

MARGARET

Where is he!? We know he was murdered by a group of poets who sent you.

AMBER

Murdered?! I didn't murder anyone!!

MARGARET

Just tell us what happened.

AMBER

Nothing! *(to Roderick)* Are you a cop?

RODERICK

No.

MARGARET

Doctor Rondel is a forensic intermediary. He contacts the spirits of the deceased which is how we found you.

AMBER

He what...? *(pause)* You're saying he like speaks to the dead...?

RODERICK

Actually, they speak to me.

MARGARET

That's how we know you killed him.

AMBER

No way! He's lying!

RODERICK

Please, just sit down and tell us what happened.

AMBER

Why? You won't believe me.

RODERICK

Try us, we might.

MARGARET

Look, I don't want to hurt or upset you; I just need to know the facts.

AMBER

Then you'll let me go; you won't call the cops?

MARGARET

No, no cops.

AMBER

Promise?

MARGARET

Yes!

AMBER

(to Roderick) You too.

RODERICK

Sure, I promise, now sit.

(AMBER sits.)

MARGARET

First can you tell me where he is?

AMBER

Right. In Canada. One of the poets in our group knows an ex-cop hacker who like tracks people through their cars and phones, so that's how we figured he was in the woods near Montreal.

MARGARET

Go on.

AMBER

So there's a drawing from a pot with our names on scraps of paper? So my name gets picked which bites 'cause I'm not sure I have the guts, but they loan me a car and I find this stone cottage surrounded by trees.

(As AMBER continues, SHE evokes the past, drawing forth a gun, then turns to encounter the VISCOUNT who wears a velvet robe and speaks with a British accent.)

AMBER

Hi, remember me?

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

No. Is that a real gun?

AMBER

Yeah, and if you don't want me to blow you away, you'll sit and do as you're told.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Who the hell are you?

AMBER

I'm the girl you called a prime example of the decline of literacy. You said my poems were the most lamed brained idiotic doggerel ever tweeted by a twat.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Sorry, I hit the wrong key; I meant to type "twit."

AMBER

Right. You trashed everything I ever wrote and called me and my friends "doggerlists," so now we call ourselves The Mad Doggerel League. There's twenty-four of us, and I'm their messenger.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

How did you find me?

AMBER

How do you think?

VISCOUNT

A trail of bread crumbs...?

AMBER

Everyone thinks you're dead.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Obviously not "everyone."

AMBER

Why are you hiding?

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

I like the woods; this is my den.

AMBER

But what do you do here?

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Dress up like grandma and trick little girls into following me home.

AMBER

Oh, yeah?

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Then I make indecent demands in case you're interested.

AMBER

No thanks. It's my turn to make demands, so here's what you're going to do: You see this sheet of paper? All your victims copied the meanest, snarkiest sentences from your hatchet jobs, and now you're going to read them out loud. Then you're going to eat your own words while I record you in the act.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Ha, ha! I see, so I'm to be humbled.

AMBER

Right, and then you'll go viral.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Do I really deserve this?

AMBER

Yeah, at last count you caused twelve breakdowns and drove nine poets to suicide from guns, drugs, and the last hanged himself -- and they're just the ones we know about.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Impressive. You people really ought to develop thicker skins.

AMBER

But then we wouldn't be poets, would we?

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Really, darling, why bother? Who gives a shit about poetry?

AMBER

Thousands, maybe millions thanks to Facebook and all the other social networks. Even Queens and Brooklyn have laureates now, and there's slams with poets performing all over the city, so yeah, people do give a shit.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

(pause, staring) Are you the poet they call Little Red?

AMBER

Yeah.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Then I think you'd like my woods. Why don't you stay here with me?

AMBER

Fuck no!

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

If you stay, you won't be little anymore. You'll expand from all the fresh meat and buttery buns I'll bake, and the babies you'll breed after we roll in the hay. Here we can live according to instinct, indulge our appetites, do whatever we bloody well please.

AMBER

No way, and don't get any ideas! If I go missing there are twenty-three people who know where I've gone and they'll finger you!

(AMBER hands the VISCOUNT the sheet of paper and starts filming with her phone camera.)

AMBER

Now here, take this, read it, then eat up!

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

And if I refuse, you're going to shoot me?

AMBER

That's right.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Not bloody likely, and you can't force feed me, now can you?

AMBER

You're starting to piss me off. Just eat the damn words and I'll leave.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

So why didn't your Doggerel friends send a man for gods sake? You're just a cunning little fox.

AMBER

A fox with a black belt in karate and -- what are you doing?!

(The VISCOUNT has crumpled the paper into a ball.)

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

I've decided to humor you, but I'd rather gobble my words quickly -- yum, yum.

(The VISCOUNT pops the balled paper into his mouth.)

AMBER

Wait! Stop!

(The VISCOUNT chews, then chokes, grasping his throat.)

AMBER

Oh, shit! Oh, no, don't croak on me!

(The VISCOUNT falls to the floor gasping as AMBER pockets her phone.)

AMBER

Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck! I'm outta here!

(The lighting alters and AMBER returns to the apartment to face MARGARET and RODERICK.)

AMBER

Before I left, he sat up and puked. Gross. Sorry but it was.

RODERICK

But you're sure he wasn't...?

AMBER

No way! He was still breathing, but maybe after I left he like stroked out or had a heart attack.

MARGARET

He did have a minor arrhythmia. *(pause)* Did you try to resuscitate him?! Did you call an ambulance?!

AMBER

No.

MARGARET

When did this happen? How long ago?

AMBER

Two weeks.

MARGARET

Two weeks! He's been lying there for two weeks...

RODERICK

I'll make a call to the Montreal police on my landline.

AMBER

I thought you were going to call the cops!

RODERICK

Don't worry, I won't mention you.

(RODERICK snatches a pen and paper from his desk and approaches AMBER.)

RODERICK

Here: write down his address.

AMBER

(writing) Yeah, okay, I remember it.

(RODERICK picks up the address and leaves as AMBER stands.)

MARGARET

Please don't leave. Can you tell me how he looked?

AMBER

Wasted, like hungover, with a beard and bad breath.

MARGARET

And his tooth...?

AMBER

What about it?

MARGARET

(holding the tooth) How did he lose it?

AMBER

Fuck if I know.

MARGARET

You didn't send it...?

AMBER

Why would I do something so stupid?

(MARGARET draws a notebook and pen from her purse.)

MARGARET

Write down the names of the Mad Doggerels -- all of them.

AMBER

No way; we like swore a blood oath.

MARGARET

Do you have that recording you mentioned?

AMBER

I left my fucking phone in a diner before I had a chance to send it around, but at least I snatched his poems.

MARGARET

What poems...?

AMBER

He had stacks on his desk, all scribbled in ink, so I figured they were his.

MARGARET

Did you read them?

AMBER

Yeah.

MARGARET

Do you remember what they were about?

AMBER

Maybe. Why?

MARGARET

I'm curious.

AMBER

Right. *(pause)* Oh, yeah, one was about a girl who was so sensitive her tears left bruises on her cheeks.

MARGARET

And she lived in rooms lined with feathers.

AMBER

Right. And there was one about six swans and another about a hedgehog named...

AMBER

...Hans.

MARGARET

Hans.

AMBER

So are they his poems or yours?

MARGARET

Mine and I'd like them back.

(RODERICK enters.)

RODERICK

I've called a former colleague with the Montreal police. He's sending a car to investigate.

AMBER

Just keep me out of it.

RODERICK

I'm afraid that might not be possible, but don't worry, if the coroner's able to determine the cause of death was a heart attack, then you're not guilty of murder.

AMBER

Right.

RODERICK

However, you are guilty of stalking, breaking and entering, and aggravated assault. I don't know Canadian law, but you shouldn't get more than five years.

AMBER

What assault?! I didn't touch him!

RODERICK

Nevertheless, he died.

AMBER

Then he got off easy! *(to Margaret)* Your husband was one mean ass dick who did more damage than he'll ever know.

RODERICK

Because you let him. Why do writers let critics have so much power over them -- you and the Mad Mongrels.

AMBER

Doggerels!

RODERICK

What...?

MARGARET

They call themselves "Doggerels."

(The lights flicker then black out.)

MARGARET
What's happening?!

AMBER
Fuck!

RODERICK
Relax ladies,...

RODERICK

...rooms touched by death are subject to blackouts, brownouts, and sporadic flickerings. Trust me, it's just another day at Roderick's House of Horrors.

AMBER

Jesus...

RODERICK

My flashlight's in a drawer.

(RODERICK retrieves a flashlight as AMBER starts to leave.)

AMBER

Sayonara!

MARGARET

Wait! Don't leave!

RODERICK

Not so fast!

(RODERICK grasps AMBER'S arm, but SHE kicks him and runs.)

AMBER

Hands off, creep!

RODERICK

Owwwww! Shhhhit!

MARGARET

Wait! Amber, wait!

RODERICK

Stop, Margaret! You'll never catch her! Besides, we know where she lives.

MARGARET

Are you all right?

RODERICK

Yes, I'm fine. Now relax, we have plenty of evidence. I've been recording everything from the moment you arrived. See this clock? I simply tap this button and it becomes a video surveillance device -- one of the perks of working for the police.

MARGARET

Is it still recording?

RODERICK

Yes.

MARGARET

Well, would you please turn it off?

RODERICK

(pressing buttons) If you insist.

MARGARET

(pause) She's obviously on drugs -- all that restless pacing.

RODERICK

Did you notice how she tends to stand on tiptoe? As if she had springs in her shoes!

MARGARET

How can she think she's not responsible?! I'm calling the police.

RODERICK

She'll be easy to track with that flaming hair, but let me call. I still have connections.

(RODERICK turns to make a call as lights flicker then focus on MARGARET at a future time, standing in the interrogation room, squinting at the audience of detectives.)

MARGARET

I...I wasn't aware that there were so many of you. Are you all detectives? I'm asking because I was hoping this interview would be kept confidential. I'm a very private person -- unlike Amber who's shamelessly exploiting the situation for her own self-promotion. In fact, the whole city seems to be joining her online fan club. I'm told she's creating a new audience for poetry and here's her latest effort:

(reading) "If you're looking for Amber, she's girl gone,

Falsely accused of doing wrong;

For shaming the vicious Viscount V,

Poor little Amber was forced to flee."

And now I'm sure you won't mind hearing one of my ditties.

(glancing at her phone): "If you're looking for Amber, the girl who fled,

Look not towards the clouds but water instead;

She's a raging river, a storm at sea,

That's rocking the boat that carries me."

(pause, she sighs) Now you've asked me to explain what transpired after Amber left

Doctor Rondel's apartment. Well, the lights snapped back on and the phone rang. It was

the Montreal police. Roderick answered and told me...

(MARGARET turns to address RODERICK in the past.)

MARGARET

...his house is empty.

RODERICK

His house is empty.

RODERICK

There's no sign of the Viscount -- or anyone for that matter, and the morgue has no record of anyone fitting his description.

MARGARET

Then he must be alive! Amber was right and he fainted or had a seizure...

RODERICK

But how...? How could he appear to me if he wasn't dead?

MARGARET

Well, maybe he was having a near-death experience, floating between worlds. That might explain why he couldn't speak or why he was so indistinct.

RODERICK

Trust me, Margaret, when people die, they tend to stay that way.

MARGARET

But what if his heart stopped then started again and he recovered, then took a trip and died somewhere else. Would you be willing to touch the tooth again -- to be sure.

RODERICK

I'd rather not.

MARGARET

Of course. I...I shouldn't have asked.

RODERICK

No, you shouldn't have.

MARGARET

Yes, but I...I could pay you more -- whatever you wish.

RODERICK

That's not the point!

MARGARET

Sorry, I...I guess I should leave.

RODERICK

No, no, stay -- please. *(he sighs)* Oh, all right! Give me the damn tooth!

(Pause as MARGARET rummages through her purse.)

MARGARET

Oh, dear, it not here. Did I leave it on your desk? *(pause, scanning)* No... Maybe it fell on the floor. *(pause, searching)* I don't see it -- oh, no! What if Amber took it? When the lights went out, she could've snatched it!

RODERICK

That's possible.

MARGARET

Of course! To show her fellow Doggerels -- the little beast!

RODERICK

Relax, Margaret, sit down. Let's have another drink.

(RODERICK pours two more drinks.)

RODERICK

I've been meaning to ask: why did his lordship choose to pillory poets? I mean why not pick on novelists or playwrights, or painters and musicians?

(As MARGARET responds, SHE evokes the past and the VISCOUNT appears more formally dressed.)

MARGARET

I asked him that and he said...

MARGARET

...poets need the most attention.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Poets need the most attention.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

After all, poetry's the poor invalid cousin of the arts, which is why poets tend to be undervalued, underpaid, and assumed to be less stable -- which of course they are.

MARGARET

And why they need more kindness, more tenderness. You've never understood that true poets possess a purity of purpose; they write because they're driven, compelled to express their music through words that resonate, that keep us in touch with our feelings or to quote Dylan Thomas, "that change the shape of the universe."

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Ha! So you want to reshape the universe, do you?

MARGARET

I'm not talking about myself, but I believe that poems read aloud emanate subatomic ripples, that they alter the world the way frogs leaping into ponds make concentric circles that expand, growing wider and wider.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Dream on, Maggie dear. I'm afraid technology's providing the circles, only they're expanding with trivia, consuming our days till we "go gentle into that good night."

MARGARET

Which is why we need poetry more than ever.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Christ! How can you say such things without blushing? Really, it makes me want to slap your pretty face.

MARGARET

(backing away) Please don't! I'm still recovering from the bruises you gave me last time.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

What is it about you that makes me want to lash out? Could it be your blathering like an imbecile about things you can't possibly comprehend given your limited capacity to create anything remotely original.

MARGARET

At least I know I need poetry like I need food, even if people like you make poets feel so shamed, so inhibited, they become mute and fade into oblivion.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

That's not likely given this generation of instaposting instapoets. In any case, I have to live up to my reputation as the Vampire of Verse, sucking self esteem from inflated egos.

MARGARET

Why did I ever marry you?

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Because my title inflamed your imagination and you love playing Cinderella, dressing up for opening nights and book launchings. *(approaching, stroking her)* But you especially love your heart racing, your knees buckling, every muscle in your lithe body convulsing while your back bends and I open you up like a purse.

MARGARET

You used to say rose: “open you up like a rose.”

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Did I?

MARGARET

But you think of me as a purse!

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Better a purse than a curse. (*glancing at his watch*) Ah, I’d better leave; I have friends waiting.

MARGARET

I thought you were staying for dinner. I was going to broil lamb chops -- your favorite.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Sorry, I made plans.

MARGARET

With whom?

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

No one you’d know.

MARGARET

Where are you going?

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

To a kingdom far away.

MARGARET

Wait! (*pause*) If you leave, don’t come back! I’m serious; I’ll change the locks!

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Oh, dear, am I being banished? Not that I blame you. I’ve been a bitter disappointment, haven’t I? You equated my title with deep affinities, expecting me to grow warmer, wiser, more worthy of your beauty and affection. You thought you’d turn straw words into gold, that I’d crown you the Queen of Poetry, but instead you’re the goose girl who became the ogre’s whore.

MARGARET

The ogre’s bank!

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

If the person I am is not the person you perceived, whose fault is that?

MARGARET

I admit I was naive to think you had the same feelings for me that I had for you, and I'm sick of feeling sorry for myself, but I'm sorry for you too. I think what you could've been was stolen from you.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Oh, bollocks! I just can't be who *you* want me to be, and I certainly don't want to be pitied, caressed and fawned over. That's what *you* want!

MARGARET

(pause) Maybe, but I take full responsibility for my...mistake.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Me! I'm your mistake because I haven't fulfilled your infantile needs, but what you really need is something tangible to hate me for, so here, take this!

(HE slaps MARGARET'S face!)

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

There! Now I'll see you when I return -- or not.

(The VISCOUNT departs as MARGARET turns to rejoin RODERICK.)

RODERICK

Did the bastard really hit you?

MARGARET

When he drank, but it would be wrong to let you think he couldn't be charming. When we first met, he embodied my ideal: a proud, courtly, cultured prince of a man who could discourse on any subject. I'm sorry you only saw him for a few minutes.

RODERICK

Yes, but I only told you what I saw -- not what I didn't. *(pause, he sighs)* It's a strange ontological mystery, but even the dead radiate light: the best are the brightest, but his lordship only emitted a weak shimmer with a faint musky stench. I'm hesitant to tell you, and perhaps I shouldn't...

MARGARET

What...? Tell me!

RODERICK

(pause) I saw a human form, but superimposed was something else, something feral with yellow eyes. Sorry, Margaret, but your Viscount was one of the most hideous apparitions I've ever encountered.

MARGARET

Then it wasn't him!

RODERICK

Of course it was; he led us to Amber.

MARGARET

Well, there's always reasons people are the way they are; it takes a monster to make a monster, especially if your mother died when you were four, and your father shipped you off to Canada to live with a lunatic.

RODERICK

A lunatic...?

MARGARET

His uncle, a taxidermist who believed that objects could be infested by ghouls, then leap to life and attack. That's one of the few things Rudy told me about his childhood: how he overcame a morbid fear of everything sharp: knives, scissors, needles, but especially the teeth and claws of the animals his uncle made him shoot. When he told me, I mentioned how his pen was wickedly sharp, and he confessed that when he wrote, he felt energized, high on the power of his own malevolence.

RODERICK

He actually said that?

MARGARET

Oh, yes.

RODERICK

You realize that everything you've told me describes a seriously narcissistic sociopath: he was bold, disinhibited, and mean -- a soul-slaughtering sadist hired by the media to express his contempt for all the world to read. Yet somehow he adopted a personality charismatic enough to seduce you.

MARGARET

Me and dozens of others -- men as well as women.

RODERICK

Did it ever occur to you that you'd succumbed to a suggestive state induced by a kind of hypnosis?

MARGARET

Yes, because I...I kept letting the abuse continue, even though it was strange how he especially enjoyed making love when...when I was bleeding.

RODERICK

Ah, and did he relish red meat, preferably raw?

MARGARET

Sometimes.

RODERICK

Was he nocturnal? More active between dusk and dawn?

MARGARET

Well, he usually wrote at night and slept during the day, but so do many writers.

RODERICK

Tell me, did he travel in packs?

MARGARET

If you mean did he have male friends, then yes. They played poker.

RODERICK

Did they hunt?

MARGARET

Well, yes, ducks and deer.

RODERICK

Did he howl at the moon?

MARGARET

You're joking, right?

RODERICK

Did he?

MARGARET

No! But when he snored he growled, but none of those things bothered me as much as other couples. I mean I'd watch how they related to each other, and it made me realize what we were missing. There was rarely any tenderness or kind words, just ravenous...lust. When I tried to confront Rudy, he accused me of being too needy, too demanding. Then we started drifting apart, and he began...

RODERICK

Prowling...?

MARGARET

I minded at first, but later I was relieved.

RODERICK

What about those retreats you mentioned?

MARGARET

He said he sometimes needed to leave the city and get...

MARGARET

...back to nature.

RODERICK

Back to nature?

RODERICK

Margaret, there's something you should know. At first I wondered, but now I'm certain. *(pause, taking a breath)* You married a revenant. I'm told they're growing in numbers, but your Viscount is the first I've encountered.

MARGARET

I'm not sure what you mean.

RODERICK

Surely you've heard of revenants? They're all the rage among fantasists and film stars, but real revenants infuse themselves into susceptible humans, then continue their blood lusting habits.

MARGARET

You mean like vampires?

RODERICK

No, that's fictional nonsense.

MARGARET

You're the one talking nonsense!

RODERICK

No, I'm talking *canis lupis* -- that's the genus and species of wolves, and there's plenty of wolves in Canada. While most are social, even monogamous, some become revenants.

MARGARET

I can't believe what I'm hearing.

RODERICK

How can you doubt it with all the savagery in the world? Where do you think it comes from?

MARGARET

Human nature!

RODERICK

Humans are animals, often enslaved by the basest of instincts, but revenants are spiritual infestations, reveling in rapes, lootings, and arson, while others manifest their cravings as outright assassins, either directly with guns and knives or indirectly with drones, maps and a mouse. Believe me, there are revenants functioning in virtually every profession. We can't always tell when we're encountering one, or worse, when we become one ourselves. *(pause)* I feel I'm failing to convince you.

MARGARET

I...I don't know what to think. I mean, I always suspected that his hunger was perverse, but never...inhuman. *(pause)* Am I such a fool...?

RODERICK

What you are is a vulnerable woman who succumbed to a powerful force. Truth be told, the minute you mentioned his name, I knew who he was. In fact, I've read his reviews, knew all about his disappearance.

MARGARET

Why didn't you say so?

RODERICK

I didn't want to get involved -- ha!

MARGARET

Are you sorry...?

RODERICK

No, in fact I'm hoping you never leave.

MARGARET

Really? But I feel so...corrupted, so lacking in whatever attracts -- what was it you said -- "a real intersection." How can you feel the way you do after all I've told you? How can you draw someone so...insubstantial?

RODERICK

Oh, you're more than substantial. Your hair alone is enough -- a torrent of silk flowing from the tower window. I keep wishing I was a humming bird and could entangle myself. But since I'm grounded, I'll settle for sketching you again -- only this time in profile. Would you mind opening your blouse and exposing your clavicle? Now look this way; turn your head. Yes! Perfect! Later I'll add a crown of jewels.

MARGARET

And are you the king?

RODERICK

Not till I'm kissed.

(THEY kiss.)

MARGARET

So are we trapped in a fairy tale?

RODERICK

Isn't everyone? Now stay still, don't move. I need to sharpen my pencils.

(RODERICK departs as lights alter and MARGARET turns to address the detectives.)

MARGARET

Sorry to keep rambling, sharing such intimate details, though I want to cooperate. I know you've been questioning Amber, and I wonder if she mentioned that she salvaged my poems. They were stuffed in a large envelope and delivered to Roderick's apartment. Well, he can confirm everything I've said. You'll be questioning him too, won't you? Now where was I? Oh, yes, I was in my apartment revising a sestina when Roderick called and insisted I come right away, and there was Amber, extremely upset about three members of The Mad Doggerel League. She was convinced that...

MARGARET

...they're being murdered.

AMBER

They're being murdered!

(MARGARET has entered the apartment where RODERICK and AMBER are seated.)

AMBER

The Fang's alive and getting his revenge!

MARGARET

You can't be serious?! How did they die?

AMBER

Suspiciously, that's how!

RODERICK

Sit down, Margaret. Apparently, a blind balladeer fell down a flight of stairs, concussed, then passed on.

MARGARET

Well, if he was blind...

AMBER

He was in his own home and totally sober!

RODERICK

Then an epic poet drowned in her tub, and a sonneteer fell off -- where was it?

AMBER

The Fulton Street platform!

MARGARET

You mean...?

AMBER

The train! He got whacked; he was pushed!

MARGARET

Oh, god, how awful, but couldn't the timing just be a...a tragic coincidence? Maybe the sonneteer was a suicide...?

AMBER

No way! I've warned the others; he knows who they are.

MARGARET

But that's absurd, although... Oh, dear.

AMBER

What...?

RODERICK

Go on, speak up!

MARGARET

Well, I once heard Rudy say that most poets were wasting their lives and should be put out of their misery.

RODERICK

Ha! So he's euthanizing the Doggerels!

AMBER

That's not funny; we need bodyguards!

RODERICK

Especially you. After all, if what you suspect is true, then you'd be a prime target. *(to Amber)* I don't suppose you've shared your suspicions with the police?

AMBER

Actually, yeah, but they said they need evidence, so it's up to you. If I find pictures and stuff, can you conjure their ghosts?

RODERICK

I'm not a magician; I can only summon the ones who want to be summoned, and bones are my primary conduit. Of course, the fact that I don't see them, doesn't mean they're not there.

AMBER

But if you can't see them, can you tell if they're around?

RODERICK

Sometimes they emanate sensations of restless anticipation, like negative ions before a storm.

AMBER

So is anyone here now?

RODERICK

Possibly, but it's hard to tell with your incessant pacing.

(AMBER starts to text on her phone.)

MARGARET

You're texting a poem...?

AMBER

Yeah. (*while texting*) “Heed these words if you give a rat’s ass,
Life will be short if you let The Fang pass
Into your presence awake or asleep,
Now you’ve been warned: stay clear of the freak.”

MARGARET

Then you just send it forth without a second glance?

AMBER

Right. I’m spontaneous like Wordsworth. You’ve heard of flash fiction? Well, I’m a flash poet; my specialty is couplets at city slams. That’s when we meet in bookstores and bars and read our stuff: “Our keystrokes make a steady click;
Our fingers burn, our thumbs catch fire;
Each word a flame upon the pyre
Of verses that vanish, never spoken aloud,
Suspended forever inside a cloud.”

MARGARET

So that’s a flash poem?

AMBER

Right. Written in a flash to be read in a flash.

MARGARET

And forgotten in a flash?

AMBER

Look, I get it: You’re marginalized and unappreciated, so you resent me, right?

MARGARET

No!

AMBER

I read your poems; I get the passion and imagery, and you’re cool, but you’re also a cliché, the Sylvia Plath type. Anyway, to me anything that calls itself a poem’s a poem.

MARGARET

Yes, it’s a great time to be a poet; everything’s fair game. You can write: “On sorting my socks.” or “While filing my nails.” Of course, my response is only my own biased opinion, but I believe a good poem is a densely crafted work of art that takes time, effort, imagination, and changes the way we see the world. In the words of Robert Frost, “A poem begins with a lump in the throat and ends where emotion has found its thought and...

MARGARET
...the thought has found its words.”

AMBER
The thought has found its words.

AMBER
Yeah, I remember your quoting him in class.

MARGARET
Oh, you were one of my...?

AMBER
Right, two semesters ago.

RODERICK
Ha! Small world!

MARGARET
I...I’m sorry, I didn’t recognize you.

AMBER
My hair was blue then, and I came at night with a hundred other drones, all of us writing shit, but you got us started.

RODERICK
Was she a good teacher?

AMBER
Yeah, she told us not to be slaves to old forms, to find our own voices and not forget the smallest details are sometimes better than spilling our guts on the page.

MARGARET
Yes, well...

AMBER
Your class was where I wrote my first tree poems in the same meter as “The Raven.”
(to Roderick) She was great; she even helped my friends get jobs and told us her favorite poems and novels and sent us to readings and galleries, and thanks to her I’m writing every day and as of last night, I’m getting around five thousand retweets; my Facebook page has thirty thousand likes with nearly ten thousand shares and counting.

MARGARET
(mumbling) Impressive...

RODERICK
With all this attention, are you being paid?

AMBER
Fuck no, not a cent! *(to Roderick)* What about you, Doc? I notice that stack on your desk. Are you like writing ghost stories?

RODERICK

My grim tales, recounting my tour in Iraq identifying casualties. There were even some aspiring poets whose work I'm including. When asked why they volunteered, a few admitted they wanted heroic lives, though sometimes I think they meant deaths.

AMBER

Bummer.

RODERICK

Most had watched family members suffer the indignities of dying, and wanted none of it. On the battlefield, they had three choices: either survive intact; survive with afflictions; or check out in bright blasts of brain and bowel bursting assaults. It's violent and messy, and if the politicians who send them there could see what I saw, they'd think twice about playing their war games.

MARGARET

So is your book political; are you attempting to end the insanity?

RODERICK

Why not? Is that asking too much? But seriously, will anyone want to read anything so depressing?

MARGARET

Yes.

AMBER

No.

(The lights flicker, then turn off.)

AMBER

Whoa...

RODERICK

Oh, dear.

MARGARET

Not again.

RODERICK

I'll get the flashlight.

(RODERICK leaves as violin music fades in.)

MARGARET

(whispering) Do you hear that? Where's it coming from?

AMBER

It makes me want to dance...

(As AMBER sways, the VISCOUNT'S SPIRIT enters, unseen by Amber and Margaret. HE controls AMBER'S movements like a shadowy conductor of a hypnotic ballet. Then AMBER grasps MARGARET'S hands and THEY waltz around the room. RODERICK turns on his flashlight, observing them until the lights are restored, THEY cease dancing, and the VISCOUNT'S SPIRIT departs.)

MARGARET

What just happened...?

RODERICK

You were waltzing; it was enchanting.

MARGARET

(to Amber) But why...? Why did you grab my hand?

AMBER

Fuck if I know. My shrink says I have no impulse control.

MARGARET

But you heard the music?

AMBER

Yeah.

RODERICK

My neighbor's a violinist.

(AMBER'S phone rings and SHE glances down.)

AMBER

Shhhit! I'm late for work! I've gotta go; so long, Roddy!

RODERICK

So long, Red.

(AMBER dashes off.)

MARGARET

Roddy...? She calls you Roddy?

RODERICK

Apparently. You're looking distressed. Would you like a drink?

(MARGARET nods as RODERICK pours.)

MARGARET

(pause) While we danced, she was stroking the small of my back.

RODERICK

I noticed; cheeky devil, isn't she?

MARGARET

Appalling! She's so careless, so out of control. How can she live like that?

RODERICK

God knows, but what a coincidence -- that she was your student.

MARGARET

Not really, I run into them all the time. You're starting to like her, aren't you?

RODERICK

She amuses me, her acceptance and delight in herself. She shines, adds a little glitter to these rooms. Of course, I can only take a small dose of glitter, and she can't help it if she doesn't hold herself to your standards.

MARGARET

Why should she? The world loves her as she is, though the popularity of her poems may have more to do with Amber than poetry. But how can anyone create anything meaningful when everyone's gawking, expecting great poetry under pressure -- it's insane. *(she sighs)* I hate the caprices of the literary world. It's like a hungry giant devouring people, then spitting them out, and the outs resent the ins and the cycle never ends, and it's so unfair.

RODERICK

I suspect you were offended when she compared you to Sylvia Plath.

MARGARET

Well, no one likes to be called a cliché -- even if it's true.

RODERICK

I wasn't going to mention it, but I've penned a few verses of my own.

MARGARET

Oh...?

RODERICK

They're filed in storage, embalmed in formaldehyde. I felt my drawings didn't adequately capture the suffering of my apparitions, but my god, the reams of rubbish, mostly rhymed couplets -- not unlike Amber's.

MARGARET

I'd love to read them.

RODERICK

Never! Although there's one little ditty I happen to recall: *(he clears his throat)*
 "One night I beheld a young man's head,
 Attached to a body presumably dead.
 Oh, ghost, I cried, why appear to me?
 There are things the living aren't meant to see."
 Want to hear the rest?

MARGARET

Of course.

RODERICK

"The ghost replied, I need your eyes;
 Bear witness to my cruel demise.
 I need your ears to hear my tale,
 Through you true justice will prevail."
 "Your lips will speak the tragic truth;
 She passed the pox, destroyed my youth;
 Then loved another, said we're through,
 They shot me dead, so now it's you
 Must catch the witch who loved me not,
 Inside a jail, her snatch will rot." Ha, ha! I made you smile!

MARGARET

I love the humor, the voice you gave the ghost.

RODERICK

Inspired by a genuine visitation. Now let's hear one of yours.

MARGARET

Oh, no, none are worthy of you. Since Amber retrieved them, I've been constantly revising, trying to write what I hope I'm capable of writing as the poet I wish I were. Lately I'm having trouble with a villanelle I started years ago.

RODERICK

I've never attempted a villanelle.

MARGARET

It starts with five tercets with the first and third lines recurring alternately at the end of the other tercets.

RODERICK

Can you give me an example?

MARGARET

Well, my first tercet goes like this:
 “Oh, slayer of such tender lives!
 Who flees to woodlands all alone,
 Haunted by dreams of mournful cries.”

RODERICK

What’s next?

MARGARET

Four more tercets:
 “He tracks his prey with sharpened eyes;
 With savage pen impales the poem,
 Haunted by dreams of mournful cries.

This feral fiend they once thought wise,
 Whose brutal judgements they bemoan,
 Oh, slayer of such tender lives.

Soon bristles on his neck arise;
 He morphs throughout from fur to bone,
 Haunted by dreams of mournful cries.”

“He seeks redemption in disguise,
 Forgetting monsters can’t atone.
 Oh, slayer of such tender lives!”

That’s all. A villanelle ends with a quatrain containing both the first and third lines, but I haven’t finished it.

RODERICK

My god, Margaret, listen to yourself! You knew! You knew the Viscount was a revenant!

MARGARET

What...?

RODERICK

“This feral fiend?” “He tracks his prey?” It’s all there! Clearly, he inspired it -- unless you inspired him, ha!

MARGARET

Are you saying my poem was...devious, that it affected him?

RODERICK

No, no, not consciously, but somehow you knew what he was but didn't know you knew.

MARGARET

So my poem was more awake, more aware, than I was...?

RODERICK

Did Sleeping Beauty know she was sleeping? Aren't our destinies influenced by other people's perceptions of us? -- even unconscious ones. In any case, I really like the poem and I'm not an impartial judge. I grew up reading poems, and hope you'll finish yours.

MARGARET

Were your parents poets?

RODERICK

No, just avid readers, especially my father who was always defending the loftier impulses, a cheerleader for truth and beauty while being a feckless fucker of students. I guess I shouldn't speak ill of him -- I'm worse. At least he preferred the living to the dead.

MARGARET

What are you saying...?

RODERICK

The real reason I ceased being a forensic intermediary is that I'd become obsessed with their presence, their strangeness. But I neglected Dianna and she left me, then I left the force. Since I'm no longer employed there, I've stopped summoning them, but I also stopped drawing -- until you came along. In fact, I was wondering if you'd be willing to remove your clothes, so I can study the alignment of your vertebrae. The truth is I've come to admire your beauty even more now that I know what it hides.

MARGARET

If you mean my secrets, I'm afraid I've told a roomful of detectives -- complete strangers! Oh, why am I always compelled to reveal so much more than I intend?

RODERICK

Because the police know the city's a dense forest, and they're the wizards who draw out our darkest witch-tales, but fear not: They're all spellbound by the internet which means they've heard worse and have short memories. So will you pose for me?

MARGARET

Only if your spying gadgets are turned off, and you have to be naked too.

RODERICK

Really?

MARGARET

Yes, Roddy, really! I only want you wearing the emperor's new clothes. Now I'm going to your bedroom to undress.

(MARGARET departs as RODERICK turns to face the audience of detectives in the future.)

RODERICK

Why am I here?! I was told my surveillance recordings would suffice in lieu of my having to appear. In fact, I'd have nothing to do with this case if Ms. Madrigal hadn't employed my services -- not that I regret her coming. *(pause, he sighs)* Now regarding my observations: I believe the vanished viper of a critic is in the grip of a lupine revenant. Ha! I can see by your condescending smirks that you think I'm a deluded crank, but clearly the beast wanted us to meet Amber who claims he's causing no end of mischief -- murder actually. After three deaths from presumably accidental causes, Amber returned with the victims' photographs and slippers, but I couldn't summon a shadow. Then three days later she appeared at my door explaining that...

(Now RODERICK joins AMBER in his apartment.)

RODERICK

...there was a crash.

AMBER

There was a crash;...

AMBER

...four more croaked driving to Jersey when they veered off the freeway into a fucking pole. The driver was like wasted which was weird 'cause he was in AA, so maybe somebody spiked his drink. That's seven Dogs down, so don't tell me The Fang isn't out to get us. I even called the cops again, but the dick-heads accused me of being off my meds.

RODERICK

You're on medication...?

AMBER

So what? You think I'm like bat shit and making this up?

RODERICK

No, it's obvious you think these tragedies are premeditated murders.

AMBER

Executions! Yeah, like without a fucking doubt!

RODERICK

But how? How can you possibly know?

AMBER

(pause, she sighs) If I tell, you won't believe me.

RODERICK

Try me; I'm more gullible than I look.

AMBER

Right. *(pause)* I know 'cause before it happens, I get flashes, like pictures from crime scenes, only they're dreams, then I wake up and have total recall which is like weird 'cause I never remember my dreams.

RODERICK

Has anyone witnessed The Fang or someone resembling him anywhere near the accidents?

AMBER

Fuck no 'cause he's like morphed into something we can't see, but how?

RODERICK

From pure spite I suppose.

AMBER

So you believe me...?

RODERICK

Let's just say I've seen things I can only describe as manifestations of pure malice, though I tend to be skeptical of prophetic dreams.

AMBER

Right. *(pause)* Look, I have a favor to ask: Would you mind if I crashed here tonight?

RODERICK

Here...?

AMBER

Yeah, if I'm not like sleeping in my own bed, then maybe I won't have the dreams. Just last night I dreamt this guy who writes haikus got whacked near Times Square while riding his bike, so I like told him to take the subway, but he said forget it -- the dick!

RODERICK

Isn't there some other place you can stay? What about your parents?

AMBER

They live in Yonkers and they're still pissed I dropped out. The last time I went home, they went apeshit when they saw my tattoo. We all have tattoos. Mine's on my boob, see?

RODERICK

Lovely. What is it?

AMBER

A small dog 'cause "doggerel" means small dog in Middle English. So can I stay?

RODERICK

Surely you have friends; what about your fellow Doggerels?

AMBER

No way! They're targets, and I need someplace safe.

RODERICK

You think this place is safe?!

AMBER

Look, I won't be any trouble, just for tonight.

(Pause as AMBER twitches, then appears to undergo a subtle change, lowering her voice.)

AMBER

You're not afraid of me, are you?

RODERICK

Of course not.

AMBER

Maybe you should be. *(smiling)* Little Red's got a whole basketful of goodies, so we could have some fun.

RODERICK

Fun...?

AMBER

Just the two of us. *(stroking his arm)* I know you like me.

RODERICK

Not that way.

AMBER

Why not? Margie will never know.

RODERICK

That's right, because you're leaving.

AMBER

Too bad. You're missing out on the fuck-fest of your dreams.

RODERICK

Stop talking nonsense, I mean it! I don't know what drugs you're taking, but your pupils are dilated and you're behaving badly.

AMBER

Tsk, tsk, so why don't you teach Little Red to mind her manners?

RODERICK

Because I'm not like that!

AMBER

But what strong arms you have. The better to rip off my clothes and jam it into me like a...

RODERICK

Stop it! Stop this instant and get the hell out!

AMBER

(pause, she sighs) Okay, Roddy, whatever you say.

(AMBER starts to leave.)

RODERICK

Wait! Wait! *(pause, he sighs)* All right, you can stay; you can sleep in the spare room, but only because it's late and you could get into trouble. Tomorrow you'll have to find other accommodations. I'm not running a hotel!

AMBER

I really thought you liked me.

RODERICK

I do, but I'm not a candidate for seduction.

AMBER

Why? 'Cause you crave Margie?

RODERICK

That's none of your business. *(pause, he sighs)* Some things can't be explained, especially to an oversexed drug addict, but trust me, it can happen: a person can meet his destiny, and know it almost instantly.

AMBER

And live happily ever after?

RODERICK

That's right. Haven't you ever been in love?

AMBER

Not since I was twelve; now I do hookups.

RODERICK

Then I hope you're protecting yourself. Now there's fresh linens in the hall closet. Take what you need, then go to bed!

AMBER

Okay, but do you mind if I play some music?

RODERICK

Just keep it down.

(AMBER turns up the volume on her smartphone and as SHE dances the VISCOUNT'S SPIRIT appears shadowing her movements. RODERICK feels compelled to watch and as the volume fades, HE faces the audience of detectives.)

RODERICK

I confess I was enthralled. Amber didn't dance like anyone I'd ever seen. She swayed to her own rhythms and it was sad, as if she were dancing to escape the crushing grief of being young in these dark, tumultuous times. Somehow I forgot I was watching until I sensed something moving behind her, something not visible except as a shadow, then suddenly...

(AMBER and the VISCOUNT'S SPIRIT spin off.)

RODERICK

...she spun off like a dervish! The next morning Amber left, then later the news featured a video of a cyclist being struck by a taxi -- exactly as she predicted.

(RODERICK fetches the poem from a pocket and reads.)

RODERICK

She left a limerick on my desk that I happen to have with me.
 “A poet who travelled quite light,
 Rode the streets of New York on his bike;
 But he made the mistake
 Of neglecting to brake,
 And was rammed riding through a red light.”

(As RODERICK continues, MARGARET appears, and BOTH face the detectives at presumably different times.)

RODERICK

I mentioned to Margaret that I’m suspicious of prophetic dreams, but I’m sure she told you that the accuracy of Amber’s were quite...

RODERICK

...uncanny.

MARGARET

Uncanny...

MARGARET

...how Amber recalled the details of her dream about a pastoral poet who was changing a lightbulb while balanced precariously on a ladder. Amber called to warn him, but...

MARGARET

...he fell.

RODERICK

He fell...

RODERICK

...cracked his head on a countertop and expired of a cerebral hemorrhage.

MARGARET

Then four days later a poet writing a biography of Chaucer in quatrains had...

MARGARET

...an accident.

RODERICK

An accident...

RODERICK

...occurred while a Chaucerian named Fletcher was strolling down Morton Street when...

RODERICK

...a brick slipped.

MARGARET

A brick slipped...

MARGARET

...off a ledge of scaffolding.

RODERICK

...and onto the poor man's head.

MARGARET

Then his fiancé threw herself off the roof. She wrote...

MARGARET

...blank verse.

RODERICK

Blank verse....

RODERICK

...in iambic pentameter.

MARGARET

You know, you should be questioning...

MARGARET

...Amber.

RODERICK

Amber...

RODERICK

...can explain how last Sunday she texted Margaret and me.

(Now RODERICK and MARGARET freeze in time
as AMBER appears to face the audience of detectives.)

AMBER

I asked for another meeting 'cause attending funerals was getting to be a drag. All the Doggerels have been writing elegies, and I thought they wouldn't mind hearing one of mine, so listen up and I'll share it with you too. (*glancing at the poem on her phone*)

“Don't ask us not to weep for you,
To say you've morphed into morning dew;
To pretend your smiles are beams of light;
All your thoughts the birds in flight.
All those poems that say don't weep,
You're not really dead, not even asleep;
That you're the hundred winds that blow,
The diamond glints upon the snow.
It's just not true, we know you're gone,
Your friends no longer hear your song.
So let's stand by your grave instead,
And weep because we know your dead.”

(By the last line, AMBER has returned to Roderick's apartment to face RODERICK and MARGARET.)

RODERICK

Lovely, very comforting.

AMBER

(to Margaret) Derivative and cynical, right?

(MARGARET shrugs.)

AMBER

Remember two nights ago when we had that record breaking freeze? I dreamt this gay couple were holding hands on a park bench, and guess what? On the news I saw two lyricists were downing shooters, then walked through Central Park. They like stopped to rest, fell asleep, then froze in each other's arms. And guess what?

RODERICK

I assume they were...?

AMBER

Right! That's fourteen Dogs down and ten to go, and he doesn't off them alphabetically or by age, sex, or income, but they all have tattoos which is why the cops are finally taking notice.

MARGARET

Tell me, Amber, did they question you?

AMBER

Who the cops?

MARGARET

Yes, did they ask where you were during these incidents?

AMBER

Me...?

MARGARET

Yes, you.

RODERICK

You can't seriously suspect...?

MARGARET

Of course, haven't you...? *(pause)* Well...?

RODERICK

But how could she have caused that car crash?

MARGARET

She drugged the driver's drink, and that bike rider's -- not to mention the frozen lovers. Think about it: what made them all so careless? Drugs! Which Amber has access to, right?

AMBER

Maybe...

RODERICK

Well, what about that man on the ladder?

MARGARET

How do we know she wasn't actually there to knock him off? And she could've pushed the blind man down the stairs and the one who fell on the subway tracks.

RODERICK

All right then, explain the brick incident. How could Amber have been in that building on Morton Street?

MARGARET

Ask her.

AMBER

(pause) I have the key from when we hooked up.

MARGARET

So you could've let yourself in, leaned out the window, waited for him to pass and pushed the brick off the scaffolding. *(pause)* So are your dreams premonitions or premeditated plans?

AMBER

But why? Why would I harm my friends?! I wouldn't! And if I did, why don't I know what I'm doing while I'm doing it?!

MARGARET

Why do you think?

AMBER

(pause) 'Cause I'm possessed, right? 'Cause The Fang's like some kind of body snatcher who's using me to kill off the Doggerels, right?

(MARGARET and RODERICK glance at each other.)

AMBER

So should I shoot myself now or later?

RODERICK

Look, why don't we just sit still a few minutes and think.

MARGARET

(pause) Have you noticed any time that's been missing?

AMBER

Yeah, plenty.

MARGARET

Anything else out of the ordinary?

AMBER

Yeah. I like sleep a lot and wake up in weird places, and I'm always hungry then forget to use a fork and slobber. Lately I don't even show up at slams; yesterday I got sacked at work 'cause I'm always late; and my roommate's leaving 'cause I bring in horny hookups.

RODERICK

If you lost your job, how will you pay the rent?

AMBER

I'm good for another month.

MARGARET

You can stay with me.

AMBER

Thanks but you'll have to put locks on the doors 'cause I have cravings, like wanting to paw people inappropriately: men, women; old or young, straight, gay, or trans; it doesn't make any difference, does it, Roddy?

MARGARET

You didn't...?

RODERICK

No! What else have you noticed?

AMBER

Sometimes I find myself dancing at sleazy clubs, or like leaping across streets or twirling like this while in lines, and I've stopped shaving my legs and started cutting myself like this.

(AMBER takes out a knife and slashes her arm!)

MARGARET

(gasps) Stop! For godssake!

RODERICK

(snatching the knife) Jesus! Give me that!

AMBER

Then I like to suck -- yum! I can feel myself creeping people out, (grasping Roderick's arm) like even now I'd like to lick your face.

RODERICK

(pulling away) Stop that!

AMBER

And while I'm spilling my guts, there's something else you should know. (pause)
The Fang's dead -- definitely dead. I know 'cause I buried him.

MARGARET

Oh...

AMBER

Sorry. I would've told you sooner, but didn't know till my shrink put me under hypnosis.

RODERICK

(pause, to Margaret) Are you all right?

(MARGARET nods.)

RODERICK

Go on, tell us what happened.

(As AMBER evokes the past, the VISCOUNT VILLANELLE appears in his cottage.)

AMBER

She made me remember how he called me a fox, how he said...

AMBER

...I have standards.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

I have standards,...

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

...expectations. As a titan of taste, I want your poems to break my heart.

AMBER

What heart?!

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Ha, ha! I'm just saying that you all settle for so little. You're shallow, tone-deaf clones, programmed to accumulate friends and be "liked" as the mediocrities you've become. Why do you all seem to post before tasting the words on your tongues, before rolling them in your mouths? (*he sighs*) Once, in days of yore, there were ambitious court poets who wrote about momentous occasions: births, deaths, wars and weddings, and every word, every syllable, every vowel and consonant had to be utter perfection. There were eclogues in hexameters singing praises to match the tolling of temple bells. Oh, why am I wasting my breath? You doggerelists don't even use pens much less dip them in blood.

AMBER

Yeah, well, you've made plenty of poets bleed.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Yes, but I've made my share of mistakes: exalted plagiarists and pummeled precious gems, though usually I'm superior to the texts I'm forced to read, and I judge by creativity versus conformity, metrical analysis, principles of punctuation and grammar as well as laws governing reality and civility -- all of which have collapsed thanks to insane politicians, archaic religions, and barbarians with bombs determined to destroy everything beautiful.

AMBER

Is that's why you left...?

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Well, that and the anarchy of the internet has rendered me passé. Now everyone's a critic with legions of friends. I have more, of course, but it's still not like the old days when I could ruin reputations with the stroke of my pen. But really I left because I'm weary of people and their unctuous flattery, their shrill laughter, and the manic pace of the city: the filth fueled air, the garish lights, the sonic assault of sirens, the cruel indifference to nature. Think of all the trees leveled, the stars obliterated by buildings holding multitudes who've forgotten Manhattan was once rolling hills carpeted by grasses, with forests of noble creatures foraging for food and water. Oh, don't you crave fresh streams of water -- or would you prefer wine?

AMBER

Neither. So you just sit here all day...?

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

No, I walk miles in every direction. You see, "These woods are lovely, dark and deep," but we who venture into the deep take some of the dark back with us.

AMBER

No shit. What's wrong with you anyway? You look sick.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Sick of myself, of my memories, of being stuck in the same old story. *(pause)* I've never told a living soul, but once upon a time it wasn't love at first sight between Mama Bear and me.

AMBER

You're kidding; you're blaming your mother.

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

She blamed herself. After four years of pretending, she opened a vein and bled to death on the Persian rug.

AMBER

I...I'm sorry, but why? Why didn't she love you?

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Papa Bear said she sensed the meanness in me or perhaps her loss made me mean. In any case, I was banished from the royal roost and sent to live here with Uncle Nedrick.

AMBER

Here? In this house?

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

Yes, all these shelves are filled with the works of poets Neddy admired, mostly traditional lyric poetry by the likes of Keats, Hardy, Dickinson, Browning etcetera, most of them dead before their time, though the suicides were our favorites: John Berryman, Dylan Thomas, Robert Lowell, Delmore Swartz, Vachel Lindsay, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Yukio Mishima, and the ladies: Anne Sexton, Sara Teasdale, Deborah Digges, and here's poor Charlotte Mew -- death by lysol. Yes, they all paid a perilous price for the pursuit of beauty.

AMBER

Was Neddy a poet?

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

No, he used poetry to rouse his feral, fatalistic nature while awakening my own potential: the wild, stealthy canid within who devoured the poor beasts we butchered, and oh, how we loved their lupine lullabies. Ouuuoooooooo...

AMBER

Jesus! *(covering her ears)* Shut up!

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

They're so much nobler; they mate for life, work collaboratively, possess great, soulful intelligence...

AMBER

And scare the shit out of us!

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

But never forget: they were here first; they link us to our prehistoric, undomesticated selves which is why we have congruent appetites -- oh, how I'd love to paw your plump little breasts.

AMBER

Oh, Jesus, back off creep! Look, just eat the damn words and I'll leave!

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

(pause, he sighs) So why didn't your Doggerel friends send a man for gods sake? You're just a cunning little fox.

AMBER

A fox with a black belt in karate and -- what are you doing?!

(The VISCOUNT has crumpled the paper into a ball.)

VISCOUNT VILLANELLE

I've decided to humor you, but I'd rather gobble my words quickly -- yum, yum.

(The VISCOUNT pops the balled paper into his mouth.)

AMBER

Wait! Stop!

(The VISCOUNT chews, then chokes, grasping his throat.)

AMBER

Oh, shit! Oh, no, don't croak on me!

(Now AMBER returns to Roderick's apartment and continues to speak as the VISCOUNT vanishes.)

AMBER

Then he fell and when I kneeled to help him up, he blew his last sick breath in my face. Then this voice in my head told me to drag him into the woods where I buried him under a pile of leaves. Then I went back to his place, swiped the poems, and split. If the police had used dogs, they'd have found him. *(pause)* So aren't you going to call them?

RODERICK

You'd be arrested.

AMBER

Yeah, but if I'm locked up, I can't be offing people and seeing their friends bawling at their memorials. So go on, call the cops; I don't give a shit; I can't live like this.

RODERICK

But you seem to feel empathy, you care...

AMBER

Not enough! Why else can't I stop craving the chase, the kill, and then...*(smiling)* the nap in the shade when it's over. *(pause, recovering)* What's wrong? What did he do to me?

RODERICK

It appears the Viscount possessed a preternatural force that transferred itself or migrated into you, and it usually resembles an animal, and in your case -- well, it's obvious.

AMBER

Yeah. *(pause)* When I'm like staring into mirrors, my lips ride up showing my gums and teeth like this. Then I really feel like Little Red, only instead of being swallowed by the wolf, I'm the one who does the swallowing.

RODERICK

So are there specific times when it intrudes?

AMBER

You mean invades, violates, and embarrasses the shit out of me?! Mostly at night, but I don't know when it comes till I'm doing something I'll regret like pole dancing on subways, but sometimes it's cool to see guys with their eyes popping 'cause they like know I'm hearing howls they'll never hear.

(AMBER starts to slowly dance as SHE speaks.)

AMBER

The weird thing is if I don't do what I'm doing then I feel like the whole city will like crash and burn, the whole planet spin out of orbit.

MARGARET

Stop it! Stop dancing! You can't stop fighting this, you can't give in!

(MARGARET grasps AMBER'S arms, and pushes her into a chair.)

AMBER

So what now? Do I like hire an exorcist and start wearing a crucifix? Or maybe I need a woodsman with an axe to chop it out of me.

MARGARET

What did your psychiatrist prescribe?

AMBER

Heavy meds and a trip to Bellevue. Even under hypnosis, the bitch thinks I'm making this up. She tells me to keep writing about how it feels, so I wrote:

“Where was my fairy godmother,

When something slipped its hands and feet

Inside my own.

Now our arms and legs

Rise and fall,

So forget gravity,

Forget who Amber was.

Now she longs to cut loose,

Then be stuffed back

Into that soft white skin

That didn't grow fur

Or make her tongue

Want to lap up your soul.” That's the last poem I wrote. You should follow me and watch how I leave trails of dead animals when I walk in Central Park. Then when I'm home I see my bloody hands and teeth. Gross.

MARGARET

Speaking of teeth, did you take the tooth I showed you?

AMBER

Yeah.

MARGARET

I want it back.

AMBER

(pause) Okay, but are you sure? I mean, what if that's what's making me what I've become.

MARGARET

Are you suggesting that the tooth is related to the....transference? Like a talisman?

AMBER

Right.

RODERICK

But if you thought it had power, why didn't you destroy it?

AMBER

'Cause I'm so fucking dense I just thought of it!

MARGARET

Did you mail it to me?

AMBER

Maybe.

MARGARET

Did you or didn't you?!

AMBER

Yeah. Sorry, I lied when you asked me the first time.

MARGARET

How did you get it? Did you wrench it from his...

AMBER

No! Fuck no! It was with the poems on his desk -- in the envelope with your address.

RODERICK

He must have extracted it himself.

AMBER

After I showed it around, I figured I should do what he wanted, so I mailed it, but when I saw it here, I snatched it back.

MARGARET

Why?

AMBER

Fuck if I know why I do anything! All I know is I had to have it!

MARGARET

Do you have it with you now?

(From beneath her shirt, AMBER removes a necklace with the tooth as a pendant, and hands it to MARGARET.)

AMBER

Yeah, here.

MARGARET

(pause, staring) It's always reminded me of a claw -- bleached, flattened and filed to a point -- his mean, mad soul hammered down to a diamond hard tooth.

AMBER

Yeah, granny, the better to eat me with, *(growling)* grrrrrrr....

MARGARET

Shush!

RODERICK

Stop that! *(to Margaret)* Put it down!

(MARGARET places the necklace on the desk.)

RODERICK

You realize, Margaret, if the tooth is related to the transmigration, then his lordship intended you to be the recipient.

MARGARET

But it didn't affect me when I had it.

RODERICK

Perhaps you didn't have it long enough or Amber was more sufficient to the task.

AMBER

Lucky me.

RODERICK

(to Amber) You were there, you were open, and perhaps you were...vulnerable. *(pause)* Have you ever wanted to do away with Margaret or me?

AMBER

Not yet, and so far the victims are mostly guys -- a refreshing change.

MARGARET

I keep wondering: how could I *not* have suspected...? How could I marry a...a stranger?

RODERICK

Maybe at the time you considered a stranger ideal, though most people want more.

MARGARET

Do you...?

RODERICK

Oh, I want it all.

MARGARET

I might not be able to give it.

RODERICK

That would be tragic -- for me.

MARGARET

And me.

AMBER

And me! You've got to stick together; you're all I've got! My friends see me coming and run for their lives.

MARGARET

Amber, please sit, you're making me nervous.

(AMBER sits as MARGARET draws a notebook from her purse.)

MARGARET

(to Roderick) After you told me about revenants, I did some research. *(reading.)* "When a person accepts or receives a revenant, it's called "integration." Some revenants take on the characteristics and desires of the original human hosts when they impose their wills on new hosts." So if Rudy was the original host, then Amber has to cease doing the things he enjoyed -- so no more dancing or eating meat.

RODERICK

Or seducing strangers.

AMBER

So stop being his slut, his creature, his killing machine!?

MARGARET

(reading) “If the possessing spirit originated from a specific host, then knowing the host’s weaknesses may destroy it.”

RODERICK

So what were his lordship’s weaknesses -- aside from being cruel, promiscuous, and criminally insane.

MARGARET

Envy. When confronted with poems from living poets that inspired awe, the diminishment he felt made him sick, even feverish -- not that it kept him from writing such savage reviews that the poets were perceived as pathetic failures.

RODERICK

So the revenant hated feeling reverence.

MARGARET

Yes, and what he loved was feeling contempt, especially for clichés, mixed metaphors, and alliteration which he said was the surest sign of an inferior poet.

AMBER

You use it.

MARGARET

So do you.

RODERICK

And so do I, but so what? You’re not suggesting we start writing better poems, compose brilliant sonnets that will make the beast shrivel and die? That could take months! Years! Decades! We need a plan that’s immediately effective! In the meantime, Amber can’t leave the premises unless we’re with her.

MARGARET

But what if it leaves Amber and infests someone else? What if his rampage doesn’t stop till he’s killed every Doggerel? Then every poet in every country till they’re all gone, until all the meaningful, memorable, beautiful speech we call poetry is utterly wiped out, extinguished, leaving the last gasping word ever wrought, ever spoken...

RODERICK

Jesus, Margaret!

MARGARET

Well, that's the worst case scenario.

AMBER

No shit.

MARGARET

(pause, she sighs) If only we could find words so perfectly pure and powerful that when we spoke them, they inspired empathy and obliterated all oppressive ideologies...

(A phone rings.)

AMBER

Oh, shit!

MARGARET

(to Roderick) Answer it!

RODERICK

It's not mine.

AMBER

(pointing to Margaret) It's yours!

MARGARET

(drawing forth her phone) Hello? *(pause)* Yes, this is Margaret Madrigal. *(pause to Roderick)* It's the Montreal police; they've found a...body. *(pause, to Roderick)* They asked if they could send a picture. *(into the phone)* Yes, please!

(Pause as MARGARET stares at her phone screen.)

MARGARET

Yes, that's...him.

(RODERICK glances at the screen, then takes the phone from Margaret's trembling hands.)

RODERICK

Hello? Yes, that's Rudolph Villanelle. I'm a friend, Doctor Rondel. *(pause)* Yes, I'll tell her.

(RODERICK puts down the phone.)

RODERICK

(pause) It seems the hunter who found him was tracking a rabid wolf. Because of the frigid temperatures, the body's well preserved, and since his death is a suspected homicide, there's going to be an autopsy. Are you all right?

MARGARET

(she nods) After the autopsy, I'll have his body sent here to the city morgue. Then I'll return the tooth to its source and have him cremated.

AMBER

Bury his ashes in stone! That's how the wolf in the story died; he fell off granny's roof and into a stone trough.

MARGARET

Yes, I know, that's how I ended my villanelle. *(closing her eyes)*

“So came the hour that dimmed his eyes,

Encased in stone, he cannot roam.

Oh, slayer of such tender lives!

Haunted by dreams of mournful cries.”

(pause) Roderick, would you be willing to hold the tooth, to summon him one last time?

RODERICK

What if I do, then what?

MARGARET

I'll tell him that if he meant to prove his hatred was harder, colder, and crueler than that of the poets who threatened him, then he's won. But he has to stop; he has to leave Amber and go back where he came from.

AMBER

Right! Tell the wolf man if he doesn't leave me alone, I'll slice open my gut, cut him out, and chop him to pieces!

(The violin is heard as RODERICK picks up the tooth, closes his eyes, then opens them and frowns.)

RODERICK

Sorry, nothing. *(he sniffs)* Actually, there's a slight odor...

(Lights flicker, followed by a growl that becomes a snarl.)

MARGARET
(gasping) No...

AMBER
Holy shit!

RODERICK
Good god.

(The music intensifies as AMBER starts twitching, then the VISCOUNT'S SPIRIT appears, his face transformed to that of a furious WOLF. The VISCOUNT/WOLF and AMBER dance wildly around the room, leaping and twirling while lights flash. Finally, MARGARET and RODERICK grasp AMBER'S arms as SHE writhes violently between them, then opens her mouth to howl.)

Ou ouooooooooo...
 AMBER

(MARGARET and RODERICK join the howling.)

AMBER	MARGARET	RODERICK
Ou ouooooooooooooo....	Ou ou hooooooooooooo...	Ou ouooooooooooooo...

(Slowly all THREE hunch their shoulders, then collapse to their knees as lights fade to black.)

EPILOGUE

(Weeks later in the police interrogation room: AMBER, MARGARET, and RODERICK stand before the detectives in different areas at presumably different times.)

AMBER
 Like what to even say; I've told you...

AMBER
 ...everything I know.

MARGARET
 Everything I know...

MARGARET
 I've told you already.

RODERICK
 The autopsy proved the Viscount died of a coronary thrombosis, so...

RODERICK
 ...Amber's absolved.

MARGARET
 Amber's absolved,...

MARGARET
 ...but the poets' deaths have been reclassified as possible homicides, so...

MARGARET
 ...Amber's a suspect.

RODERICK
 Amber's a suspect,...

RODERICK
 ...but you don't have any evidence, do you?

AMBER
 No more Doggerels have died, but the question you should be asking is...

AMBER
...where is he now?

RODERICK
Where is he now?

MARGARET
Where is he now?

MARGARET
Revenants have been known to replicate, so...

MARGARET
...is he in me?

RODERICK
Is he in me?

AMBER
Is he in me?

MARGARET
You see, I worry because I find myself dancing.

RODERICK
I have a craving for raw meat, and...

RODERICK
I'm constantly aroused.

MARGARET
I'm constantly aroused.

AMBER
I'm constantly aroused,...

AMBER
...still hooking up with strangers.

MARGARET
Roderick and I stayed together, and lately we're drawn to...

MARGARET
...the woods.

RODERICK
The woods,...

AMBER
The woods...

AMBER
...are awesome, but I freak at fires and trees chopped for houses and...

AMBER
...paper.

RODERICK
Paper!

MARGARET
Paper,...

MARGARET
...whole forests felled for poems.

MARGARET
Amber's famous.

RODERICK
Amber's famous,...

RODERICK
...she has millions of followers.

MARGARET

She has a publisher and a book coming out next week.

AMBER

My agent wants me to do a tour, but I can't leave...

AMBER

...the cottage.

MARGARET

The cottage.

RODERICK

The cottage,...

RODERICK

...is where we live now, surrounded by...

RODERICK

...trees.

AMBER

Trees.

MARGARET

Trees.

MARGARET

Once upon a time our forests were a perfect.

AMBER

They'll be perfect again when all of...

AMBER

...you are dead.

RODERICK

You are dead.

MARGARET

You are dead.

AMBER

(pause) Like what did you expect?! Not all fairy tales end happily!

(AMBER tosses back her head and howls, then is joined by
by MARGARET and RODERICK.)

AMBER

Ou oooooooooo...

AMBER

Ou ou oooooooooo...

RODERICK

Ou ou oooooooooo...

MARGARET

Ou ou oooooooooo...

(Lights fade to black.)

End of Play

