Tom La Farge

TALKING WHILE SHAVING

Act 1.

Downstage center an oblong "mirror," large enough to frame the face and upper body of a middle-aged man shaving in his tee-shirt. The mirror is to be imagined hanging on the outer wall of a house. He holds a disposable razor in his hand as he searches for whiskers and talks. He is wearing tinted glasses, and his face is not brightly lit compared to the background: the upper floor of a courtyard house, across the courtyard a balcony brilliant with flowers; so also the columns supporting the roof, but the courtyard is open to the sky. The SCHOOLBOY and the PREGNANT WOMAN talk to the SHAVING MAN's back, but the MUSICIAN speaks to the face he must see in the mirror.

At the start of the scene the MUSICIAN is outside, sitting on a chair at the foot of the wall. He is a young man in a white shirt and a third-world suit; he hasn't shaven lately. He holds an instrument, violin or flute, and starts to play. Another young man in jeans and a girl in a colorful dress and headscarf, sit on the ground beside him, at the foot of the wall; the young man has a small drum and the GIRL claps.

A ten-year-old SCHOOLBOY comes into view on the balcony, satchel slung over one shoulder. The SHAVING MAN begins to shave.

SHAVING MAN. Where is that music coming from, inside or outside?

SCHOOLBOY. From outside.

SHAVING MAN. Outside in the street?

SCHOOLBOY. Yes.

SHAVING MAN. And who is playing?

SCHOOLBOY. A musician.

SHAVING MAN. Is he a musician?

SCHOOLBOY. Yes.

SHAVING MAN. I see. A street musician.

SCHOOLBOY. No, he lives in a house.

SHAVING MAN. But plays in the street.

SCHOOLBOY. Yes.

SHAVING MAN. He lives in this village?

SCHOOLBOY. Yes. He is my cousin.

SHAVING MAN. Does he live in your house?

SCHOOLBOY. Yes, he has a room here.

SHAVING MAN. I see. Is he a young man who wears a suit?

SCHOOLBOY. Yes. Excuse me. I have to go to school.

SHAVING MAN. Wait a little. It is not far to your school, is it?

SCHOOLBOY. No, not far.

SHAVING MAN. Then you can talk to me a few more minutes. Is she any better?

SCHOOLBOY. Who?

SHAVING MAN. Why do you ask me who? Don't you know who I mean? This is not the first time I am asking you.

SCHOOLBOY. She did not eat anything last night.
I brought her a dinner my mother cooked,
but she would not eat it.

SHAVING MAN. Then your wish will not be granted?

SCHOOLBOY. No.

SHAVING MAN. What did you wish for?

SCHOOLBOY. To pass my exams.

SHAVING MAN. That's a good wish. A very good wish. But really, it's up to you, isn't it? If you listen and learn and read and think and study and practice and correct your mistakes, you will do very well.

SCHOOLBOY. Yes. I suppose so.

SHAVING MAN. So then, you don't really have to wish.

SCHOOLBOY. No. But when we go into the room to take our exams, we wish each other good luck.

SHAVING MAN. Ah. Schoolboy solidarity.

SCHOOLBOY. Sometimes they ask us things we never learned. The teacher himself doesn't know what they are.

SHAVING MAN. I understand. They write the exams in the capital, at the Ministry of Education. They want everyone to take the same exam, but here you are in a village, so far, so very far from the Ministry of Education, where they are already remote from everyone else. They ask you questions that boys in the capital might answer, if they studied, but you cannot.

SCHOOLBOY. I have to go.

SHAVING MAN. But still you must wish for something more than that.

SCHOOLBOY. I wish my grandmother were well!

I wish she were young and well again.

Once we spent hours together, talking.

She cooked and told me stories.

Then when I could read, I read to her

while she cooked. I'd read, she'd sing.

We drank barley water, sweet and cool.

I wish she could be like that again.

Then I'd have someone to talk to,

not about school and exams,

not about football, not about anything.

Just talk.

SHAVING MAN. A very good wish. But consider. If your grandmother were what you wish, well and young, she'd cook her own dinners, wouldn't she?

SCHOOLBOY. Of course. And mine. Many people ate at her table.

SHAVING MAN. But then there'd be no wishes granted, isn't that so? The wishes are granted only if someone else cooks for her, out of love, and she eats what was cooked, out of love.

SCHOOLBOY. Well?

SHAVING MAN. Why, your wish cancels out your own wishing, don't you see?

SCHOOLBOY. It isn't wishes I need. I have to go now,

it's getting late.

SHAVING MAN. In a minute. Your cousin lives here in your house, but he plays music on the street? Is that correct?

SCHOOLBOY. Yes.

SHAVING MAN. Why does your cousin play his music on the street?

SCHOOLBOY. His friends can meet him there.

SHAVING MAN. Do they like to listen to him play?

SCHOOLBOY. Yes. Everyone likes to listen to him.

SHAVING MAN. I see. Why doesn't he invite his friends into the house?

SCHOOLBOY. His room is small.

SHAVING MAN. They could play in the courtyard.

SCHOOLBOY. No, his mother doesn't allow that.

SHAVING MAN. Oh no? Why not?

SCHOOLBOY. Because the music will disturb the lodgers.

SHAVING MAN. But I can hear it now, through the wall.

SCHOOLBOY. But not loud.

SHAVING MAN. True, the wall softens it. It must be pretty loud if I can hear it through the wall. So – the musician's mother – is she your aunt also?

SCHOOLBOY. Yes. [Shifts his satchel to the other shoulder.]
I have to go to school now.

SHAVING MAN. In a minute. Does she send dinners to the old woman too?

SCHOOLBOY. Yes, sometimes.

SHAVING MAN. Does your grandmother eat her dinners?

SCHOOLBOY. Sometimes. When she feels well enough.
The dinners are all the same.

SHAVING MAN. And does your aunt own this house?

SCHOOLBOY. Yes. [Shifts satchel.]

SHAVING MAN. But not your mother?

SCHOOLBOY. No. Please excuse me.

I have to take my exams.

SHAVING MAN. Hmmm? I'm sure you're well prepared. I see you studying. You never waste time.

SCHOOLBOY. I must do well if I am to pass to the next level.

SHAVING MAN. What will they ask you?

SCHOOLBOY. "What is money?"

SHAVING MAN. Not really? They ask you that?

SCHOOLBOY. Yes. [Shifts satchel.] I have to go.

SHAVING MAN. "What is money?" And how will you answer?

SCHOOLBOY. Please. I don't want to be late.

SHAVING MAN. Go, go. One question. Is money good or bad?

SCHOOLBOY. Both good and bad.

SHAVING MAN. Go on.

SCHOOLBOY. It lets you have what you want.

It makes problems between people. Good-bye. [Leaves.]

SHAVING MAN. Good-bye. [Reflective pause.] Good luck on your exams!

SCHOOLBOY. [Out of view.] Thank you!

Most of the lather is gone from the Shaving man's face. He searches for patches of whiskers he may have missed.

SHAVING MAN. "What is money?" Money makes problems between people. Music in the house will disturb the lodgers. Keep it in the street then.

Have your way in the street. On the way to school to take your

exams. Lodgers then can be undisturbed by problems. They can stay in their rooms without disturbance and with no problems. A calm house, tranquil rooms, sunny court, satisfied lodgers. But I am here in the house.

Behind him the PREGNANT WOMAN steps into the place the Schoolboy left. She is carrying a heavy basket of wet laundry, which she sets down. She is young and near her time. A canary chirps and she feeds it. Then she takes a camera that has been slung from her shoulder and holds it up. The Shaving man quickly tosses away his disposable razor and lathers his face again. He picks up a second disposable razor and takes off its plastic sheath. Once again he begins to shave.

SHAVING MAN. Good morning.

WOMAN. Good morning. Here is your camera.

You left it at the teashop.

SHAVING MAN. Not again!

He pauses in his shaving. She puts the camera down on a bench.

WOMAN. I have put it here where it is safe.

Did you sleep comfortably?

She starts to hang the washing up to dry, pinning or draping it wherever she can.

SHAVING MAN. Yes, thank you. Well enough.

WOMAN. Is your room large enough?

SHAVING MAN. Yes, it is large enough. Thank you. I don't spend much time in it.

Just to sleep. It is large enough for that.

WOMAN. The baker has left bread. I have put it outside your door.

SHAVING MAN. Thank you. Is there milk?

WOMAN. No, we don't have a cow.

Would you like me to go for some milk?

SHAVING MAN. It does not matter. I will get some later myself. Is that music coming from outside or inside?

WOMAN. From outside.

SHAVING MAN. Is that your brother playing?

WOMAN. My husband's brother.

SHAVING MAN. Then the boy, the scholar, who has gone to take his exams: is he your husband's cousin?

WOMAN. Yes.

SHAVING MAN. Are there many of you in this house?

WOMAN. Fourteen.

SHAVING MAN. Besides the lodgers?

WOMAN. Yes, fourteen.

SHAVING MAN. You are a large family.

WOMAN. Yes, thank God.

SHAVING MAN. Soon to be larger.

WOMAN. Yes.

SHAVING MAN. But not too large for the house.

WOMAN. No, it is a large enough house.

SHAVING MAN. Large enough. And when your child is born, will it have its own room?

WOMAN. [laughing] No!

SHAVING MAN. Where will it sleep then?

WOMAN. At first in our room.

Mine and my husband's.

SHAVING MAN. But not in your bed.

WOMAN. [laughing] No! In a crib.

SHAVING MAN. But there is room in your bed. [Pause.] I mean, your husband is not here.

WOMAN. No.

SHAVING MAN. Where is he?

WOMAN. In the city.

SHAVING MAN. Making money?

WOMAN. Yes.

SHAVING MAN. Does he have good work? Does he drive a bus or a truck?

WOMAN. No. He is a waiter in a restaurant.

SHAVING MAN. And will he come to see his child born?

WOMAN. He will come if he can. They are short-handed where he works.

SHAVING MAN. There is room for other waiters, then. [Pause.] Then will the child have a room in the house when it is older?

WOMAN. No. It will sleep with its brothers and sisters.

SHAVING MAN. Brothers and sisters. How many?

WOMAN. Six.

SHAVING MAN. You have six children. And will have seven. Bravo! Good work. [Pause.] You and your husband are good capitalists. [Pause.] The house belongs to your husband's mother?

WOMAN. Yes.

SHAVING MAN. How many rooms does she give you and your six soon to be seven children?

WOMAN. Two.

SHAVING MAN. Only two? Then your children all sleep in one room? Number seven, when it has lived outside you long enough, will join them in that room?

WOMAN. Yes.

SHAVING MAN. Your mother-in-law saves rooms for lodgers like me, to make some money?

WOMAN. Yes. There is no hotel in the village.

SHAVING MAN. And you help her to run the house.

WOMAN. Yes.

SHAVING MAN. It is very comfortable and clean.

WOMAN. Thank you.

SHAVING MAN. And quiet.

WOMAN. The music does not disturb you?

SHAVING MAN. No. It is outside. What is the use of money?

WOMAN. I never see any.

SHAVING MAN. Do you think money is a good thing or a bad thing?

WOMAN. I don't know. I never see any.

SHAVING MAN. Your mother-in-law keeps the cash? [Pause.] Forgive me, that is none of my business. Please don't answer. I am just talking idly.

This is what happens when a man shaves. Ideas and questions dance inside his head. Like a baby stirring in the womb. The music directs them, maybe, and the weather. Would you like your new child to have money – little Number Seven?

WOMAN. I don't know. It is as God wills.

If it is a boy he will work.

If it is a girl she will marry – and work.

SHAVING MAN. Labor. [Pause.] All kinds of idle thoughts. Words. Stories. I remember a story I heard. In this village, even. Of an old woman. Not so very old, but a grandmother. She owned a house like this one. She rented rooms to lodgers for money. She kept the money, but she never could feel it was safe. So she put it in a crock, a milk crock, and when the crock was full of money, she sealed it and went under her house, to the innermost room of her cellar. With a lighted lamp beside her she dug a hole in the floor deep enough to hold the crock of money and then she buried it. Then she kept a cow and kept the cow in the cellar in that room. The cow stood over the place where the crock was buried. One of her daughters, or daughters-in-law, came down every day to feed the cow and milk it. Do you think that is a true story?

WOMAN. I don't know. I have never heard it.

My husband's aunt Fatemeh keeps a cow

in her cellar. Her daughter takes care of it.

You can ask them for milk.

SHAVING MAN. Don't you dream sometimes of finding money like that, a treasure in a pot, buried by someone long gone. You would not have to give it back. Your husband could come home from the city then. He would not have to serve fat men in a restaurant. He could buy a farm, or perhaps he could open a hotel-restaurant here in the village. Your baby that you carry now inside you, warm and wellfed, could be warm and wellfed when it comes out into the world. It could have a room.

Hmmm?

Don't you ever dream like that?

WOMAN. No. Such dreams

are a waste of time.

SHAVING MAN. How is that? Please explain.

WOMAN. No, I cannot say. [Pause.]

All money is someone else's money.

SHAVING MAN. And why not yours? You say that such dreams are a waste of time, but if you had money like that, your children would not have to waste time dreaming such dreams.

WOMAN. Nobody has to waste time.

Excuse me, please.

I must go down to sweep.

SHAVING MAN. May God give you a healthy child and an easy delivery.

WOMAN. Thank you. His blessing on you. Excuse me now.

She lifts the large basket and carries it off. The music stops. The musician rises and shakes hands with the young man. He nods to the girl. They exit one way, he another. The Shaving man has once again reached the stage of searching for whiskers.

SHAVING MAN. "A waste of time." A saving of time. Spending time. Buying time. Burying time in a crock in the innermost room. Unearthing time some time later. "Oh, what is this?" "This is time, a treasure of time." "But how strange it looks! What sort of time is this? When did they mint it like this? "In olden time." "Yes, it must be very old. Look at this piece. It is like a bone pulled from a grave. That piece is no telephone call to the office. That's no taxi ride. Look at this one. Caked in dirt. That's no meeting. Look at this one. Whose face is stamped on this?" [He is searching his own face more and more closely in the mirror.] "Clean it off. Let's see it. Brush off the dirt, wipe off the blood. Let's see who owns this time." Why has the music stopped?

The MUSICIAN has appeared behind him. He has laid his instrument down and taken off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves. Now he is washing his hands and face in a basin and drying them on a towel. He turns on a radio. The first tune is brisk, edgy, urban with some touches of "country" sweetness. The SHAVING MAN, as the MUSICIAN washes, hurries to lather up his face again. He tosses away the disposable razor and picks up another, pulls off the plastic guard, and stands with the razor at the ready beside his face.

SHAVING MAN. Are you the musician?

MUSICIAN. I was playing in the street. The music did not disturb you?

SHAVING MAN. No, I liked it. You play well.

MUSICIAN. Thank you. Are you from the city?

SHAVING MAN. Yes.

MUSICIAN. Welcome.

SHAVING MAN. Thank you. [He starts to shave.] Haven't you been to the city?

MUSICIAN. No.

SHAVING MAN. Good musicians make good money there.

MUSICIAN. Yes, I have heard that.

SHAVING MAN. Is there work here?

MUSICIAN. For a musician? Not much. Maybe at festivals – weddings.

The music on the radio is more languorous, a love ballad without words.

SHAVING MAN. But there's no money in that, is there? Just a meal.

MUSICIAN. Yes, they give you something to eat.

SHAVING MAN. All you like.

MUSICIAN. Yes.

SHAVING MAN. It is better food than in the city.

MUSICIAN. Is it? I have heard that said.

SHAVING MAN. Everything grown locally, fresh, prepared in the old way.

MUSICIAN. Yes, by women with much slow work. Yes, it is good.

SHAVING MAN. But not much variety.

MUSICIAN. No, not much.

SHAVING MAN. And the women? The young women?

MUSICIAN. What about them?

SHAVING MAN. Much variety?

MUSICIAN. No.

SHAVING MAN. But they are good. Fresh, grown locally?

MUSICIAN. Yes, they work. They are good workers.

SHAVING MAN. They care for the village.

MUSICIAN. Yes.

SHAVING MAN. And the music? [Pause.] Your music? Does it change? Do you make it different when you play it?

MUSICIAN. A little. No, not much. Same old tunes.
Our songs and dances.
People would not care for them different.
They have the radio if they want something new.
The old tunes are all I know.

SHAVING MAN. You could learn others. [Pause. No answer. He looks hard into the mirror. Half to himself:] "What is music?"

MUSICIAN. Excuse me?

SHAVING MAN. [a little louder] "What is music?" The boy, your cousin? The scholar—

MUSICIAN. Yes.

SHAVING MAN. –is taking his exams today. He will be asked, "What is money?"

MUSICIAN. What is money.

SHAVING MAN. Yes. So then – you know how idle thoughts will run through your head while you are shaving, like a silly tune –

MUSICIAN. Yes.

SHAVING MAN. So I was wondering, "What is music?"

MUSICIAN. I understand now.

SHAVING MAN. And when I asked the schoolboy what money is, and whether it is good or bad, he said that money is good because it can get you what you want and bad because it makes problems between people.

MUSICIAN. Yes. He is right. He is a good student.

SHAVING MAN. And so then I was just wondering, Is music the opposite of that?

MUSICIAN. The opposite of money?

SHAVING MAN. Yes. What do you think?

MUSICIAN. I don't know. Perhaps. I have all the music I need but I rarely have money.

SHAVING MAN. You cannot trade the music to get what you want?

MUSICIAN. No. But it is what I want, and I have enough.

SHAVING MAN. Does music bring people together instead of making problems between them, as money does?

MUSICIAN. I don't know. I never stopped a quarrel by playing.

SHAVING MAN. But you bring your friends together to play.

MUSICIAN. They show up.

SHAVING MAN. People then come to listen to you play. Sometimes, at weddings, let us say, won't they sing together and dance together?

MUSICIAN. Yes.

SHAVING MAN. Then the music brings you together.

MUSICIAN. Yes. We come together,

and then music seems the right thing.

It gives us an easy way to be together.

SHAVING MAN. But it is not magic?

MUSICIAN. No.

SHAVING MAN. You do not feel you have power over those people?

MUSICIAN. Power?

SHAVING MAN. Yes, a good power. Power to make them happy, let us say.

MUSICIAN. I don't know. I never thought about power. [Pause.]
At a wedding people are happy
because there is a wedding.
The music goes along with that.
It follows what people want.
"We want to dance!" Then we play dances.
"We want to sleep!" Then I go out in the street.

SHAVING MAN. But money is magic. [Pause.] You see, I am still thinking about what your cousin said. Idle thoughts. But I would like to know something else, if you don't mind telling me: for what do you wish?

MUSICIAN. Wish?

SHAVING MAN. Yes. Don't you make wishes, like the others?

MUSICIAN. What others? What sort of wishes?

SHAVING MAN. The others in your family who send dinners to the old lady. They make wishes. She is also your grandmother, no?

MUSICIAN. Yes, she is. No, I make no wishes.

But now answer my question:

You are a film-maker?

SHAVING MAN. I work for one. When a crew is sent into the field to film something, I tell them how to do it. Later the film is edited and assembled in a studio, in the capital. Why, are you interested in making films?

MUSICIAN. [Shrugs.] I think of it.

SHAVING MAN. But do you ever see films shown here?

MUSICIAN. Not often. Not even in the market town.

But once or twice a year

a man comes through on a tractor

pulling a wagon, and he sets up

a screen, a projector, some speakers

in the courtyard of the mosque,

and the villagers bring stools.

SHAVING MAN. What does he show?

MUSICIAN. Agriculture films.

SHAVING MAN. Agriculture?

Yes, instructional films

about parasites and diseases,

about new crops.

“Quinoa.”

SHAVING MAN. Ministry films.

MUSICIAN. And also Charlie Chaplin.

SHAVING MAN. No Mickey?

MUSICIAN. No.

SHAVING MAN. No immodest women?

MUSICIAN. No. But sometimes cultural films.

Beautiful buildings and mosques,

the desert and the ocean.

SHAVING MAN. You would like to travel? To America, for instance?

MUSICIAN. No, I just like to look at things.

[Touches camera.] Can you teach me to use this?

SHAVING MAN. It will not take films, only stills.

MUSICIAN. Yes, please, I'd like to start with those.

I have a camera I can use

when you have left.

A Franj forgot it three year ago.

My mother keeps it for him.

He left on the bus, and we

sent word after him with the driver,

who is my cousin, but he has not

sent for his camera. My cousin

will bring me films from a friend he has

who owns a camera store,

who will develop and print the pictures,

or I will ride the bus and work in his store
and learn to do it myself.
Does it take long to learn
how to use a camera?

SHAVING MAN. No, not very long. For basic technique a week or two. After that you can teach yourself. Do you have film?

MUSICIAN. Yes, the Franj left eight rolls
of 400 ASA black and white Kodak film.
The camera is a Leica.

SHAVING MAN. A very good camera, better than mine. And you'd like to take pictures with it.

MUSICIAN. You asked to hear my wish.
That is what I wish.

SHAVING MAN. Yes, why not. I have little to do right now, until…. And your family and neighbors have been very kind to us.

MUSICIAN. Thank you. I will come tomorrow. I must go now.

SHAVING MAN. But still I would like to know: "what is music?"

MUSICIAN. [Shrugs.] Music is what I do with my time. Please excuse me. I must go work with my uncle on his farm.

SHAVING MAN. Does your uncle have a cow?

MUSICIAN. Yes. Do you want some milk?

SHAVING MAN. Yes, I would like some milk.

MUSICIAN. I will bring you some tomorrow. If you need milk today, ask at any house. They will be honored.

SHAVING MAN. Thank you. I saw a girl yesterday. In the next street. She had a large crock of milk. She is about fifteen.

MUSICIAN. Ah yes, Foroogh. I know her, she is my cousin. She will have milk for you. Her mother Fatemeh has a cow.

SHAVING MAN. In the cellar.

MUSICIAN. Yes, that's right, under the house.

SHAVING MAN. In the dark, under the earth?

MUSICIAN. Yes, Foroogh takes down a lamp
to milk the cow. Ask her mother
for as much milk as you need.
She will be honored. I must go.
God send you your wish. [Leaves.]

SHAVING MAN. Yes. Thank you. And your wishes as well!
[calls] Bring this Franj's abandoned Leica with you!

MUSICIAN. [out of sight] I will!

Now the radio plays a hopeful simple air sung by a woman with a voice like a young girl's.

SHAVING MAN. [Searches for missed whiskers.] "What I do with my time." Oh, so that's what music is. Something to do with time. Is time then not the master? Shall I do something with my time?

The soap on his face is gone. He throws away the disposable razor and picks up the lather-laden shaving brush in one hand, a towel in the other, and stands looking as if through his face, while the hopeful air charmingly ends. A second of static; then a male announcer's voice speaks rapidly

in an unknown language over dramatic newscast music. The Shaving man puts his brush down and leaves the mirror to reappear on the terrace across the courtyard. He switches the radio off, disappears, comes back into the mirror. He dabs at his face with the towel, still looking through the mirror, and speaks between dabs.

SHAVING MAN. A girl takes her lamp underground.

A cow waits under the house.

A man asks the girl for milk,

he stands beside the girl as she milks.

The lamp lights udders,

fingers, a headscarf's border,

a hairy flank. The man's face.

Is in shadow. Poetry.

Comes from his lips.

Verses he learned in school.

Memorized for his exams.

All the rich verse of Iran

in the cellar beneath the house,

below the earth, around the cow,

the light of the lamp,

the fingers on the udders.

The girl. Does not answer. But listens.

A cellphone rings an annoying little tune. Dabbing rapidly at his face with the towel, though all the soap has been wiped off it, he gropes with his other hand for his shirt, fumbles with the button on a pocket, at last pulls out the phone.

SHAVING MAN. Hello! Hello! Hello! Hello! Yes, I can barely hear you. No, I can't hear you. Wait, I need to move to a higher place. Hold the line, don't hang up. [Struggles into his shirt and leaves.] I have to get to higher ground. Please don't hang up. I have to drive to a higher place. I can't hear you here. Please don't hang up. It will take me three minutes. Or four. Hold the line – please. Can you hear me? Do you understand? I'm going to the cemetery to get better reception! Don't hang up! Don't hang up!

Act 2.

In the cemetery. A hillside where gravestones jut from the ground like teeth. A wind-twisted juniper at the crest. From a trench near the tree spadefuls of dirt are thrown out, together with occasional rocks and root-balls. A car door slams, and the SHAVING MAN enters, mobile phone to ear. A large screen covers the back of the stage, on which will be projected the things that the SHAVING MAN sees as he talks.

SHAVING MAN. Hello! Hello, Miss Nazli?

Yes it's me.

Yes, still here.

Yes, I'll wait.

He bends from the waist to study the ground at his feet. An image of sand, small stones, tufts of grass, vegetable litter comes up on the screen. He adjusts his glasses. The image becomes sharp and artfully composed. All the images that come up in this way in this part of the scene should have this same quality of knowing composition. A cloud's shadow crosses the stage, and he straightens. Now the screen shows sky and cloud.

Hello! Hello!

All right, how are you?

That's too bad.

That's a pity.

You must be miserable.

No, here there isn't much, not enough to trouble me, I

don't know why.

Yes, of course there are trees here.

He turns his head and adjusts his glasses. A beautiful tree comes up on the screen.

Well, I don't know, perhaps the wind carries it away.

Perhaps the wind carries the pollen away from the village, but…

Have you tried eye-drops?

Have you tried eye-drops?

He turns his head. The screen shows sky.

Any pharmacy, Miss Nazli.

They keep your eyes from itching.

Yes, I know, he likes flowers in the office, is he there, can I speak to him?

Any pharmacy at all, they all carry them, they sell them over the counter.

No, not hard at all, you hold the lids apart with one hand, and look away while…

A cloud crosses the screen, a shadow crosses the stage.

No, there's no pain at all.

Well, you could ask someone else.

Well, someone in the office could do it. Anyone would be happy to, any of the men, Mr. Jafar for instance, any of them would be happy to put drops in your eyes, Miss Nazli, even the boss, Mr. Abbas himself, is he there, by the way?

Yes, she could do it.

It's just a plastic dropper and you give the bulb a little squeeze.

Even Miss Afsaneh could do it.

He looks down. On the screen something is moving across the sand. He adjusts his glasses. A beetle is rolling a ball of dung. He crouches low to watch it, track it, and the beetle spreads to fill most of the screen. A beautiful dungbeetle, a picturesque ball of dung.

Oh, I didn't know she was so clumsy.

Not really?

The whole pot, was it? She didn't notice it pouring out?

Well, does the typewriter still work?

Amazing. I suppose all Mr. Abbas' correspondence will now smell

delightfully of coffee, is he in the office, Miss Nazli?

Can I talk to him please.

Just to report our progress.

Well, none at all, really, but

Yes, but I'd like to ask him some

Well could you go see if

How long do you think this conference will go on?

Well, I'm here on a hill, it's the village graveyard, the only place I can get good reception.

No, not yet, they're laying the cables for it now, listen, Miss Nazli, do you think you could just pop your head in and ask him if

Mr. Jafar? Yes, all right.

Well, when?

He'll call then, for sure?

All right.

Yes.

Good-bye.

The beetle pushes his ball out of sight, and the screen clears and shows sky as the SHAVING MAN straightens. He climbs the mound and calls down into the trench behind it.

Hello!

GRAVEDIGGER. Hello.

SHAVING MAN. Are you digging a grave? It's rather large!

GRAVEDIGGER. No, I'm digging a trench for the telephone cables.

SHAVING MAN. Making any progress?

GRAVEDIGGER. A little. It's slow. Too many stones and roots. Little by little.

SHAVING MAN. Why lay the cables in a ditch? Why not run them in on poles?

GRAVEDIGGER. This way the village gets a digging machine. We can use it for wells.

SHAVING MAN. But why not use it here?

GRAVEDIGGER. It's a cemetery. Too many dead people. Wouldn't be seemly to plough a machine through their bones.

SHAVING MAN. I see one. [Points.]

The screen shows a bone gleaming in rich red earth.

Can I have it?

On the screen a dirty hand pulls the bone from the dirt. Onstage a hand reaches up and proffers a legbone, a long femur, to the SHAVING MAN, who reaches down to take it. The screen still shows rich red earth.

Thank you. It's a leg?

GRAVEDIGGER. Want the other one?

SHAVING MAN. No. No, thank you.

He brushes it off and looks at it, turning it. The screen shows a bone revolving. He takes off his red shirt and spreads it on the ground, then lays the bone on it. The screen shows a beautiful bone on a blood-red cloth, artfully draped. The mobile phone rings; the image disappears; the screen goes blank. The SHAVING MAN straightens, plucks up the shirt, fumbles in its pocket for the phone.

Hello! Hello! Hello!

He moves this way and that for better reception.

Mr. Jafar? Hello! Hello!

Yes, from the village. From the cemetery just outside, I can't get good reception among the houses.

No, not dead yet but

Every day, Mr. Jafar, I go every day. I have made contact with her daughter in the teashop, her grandson in school, the doctor. They keep me informed.

Just for the pain, there's no hope of recovery.

No, not always, sometimes she eats her dinner, and then whoever cooked it gets a wish granted, so they say. She has even gotten out of bed. Look, Mr. Jafar, she is a hundred years old and sick. It can't take more than

Hardly anything, the bookkeeper will have no complaints. The room is cheap, the food is almost free, half the time they feed us for nothing. The milk, for instance

Hospitality.

They think we're important people, engineers.

Mr. Jafar, one more week, I am confident that

How? I must go get information every day. I must make myself known in the village, a familiar sight, to gain their trust, so they will speak to me, they do not much trust men from the city here, they think we're engineers come with I don't know what machines, backhoes to plough up their cemetery. They are camera-shy, Mr. Jafar, I must make them see that the camera is nothing, harmless, I am training one of them. They will trust him, they are all his cousins. Little by little, I must proceed cautiously. Little by little.

He bends from the waist to look at the ground on the reverse side of the mound. On the screen a tortoise is slowly scrabbling its way up the slope. He adjusts his glasses, the tortoise appears on the screen, but this time the image doesn't change, doesn't compose.

Mohsen and Hossein, they go help the villagers pick strawberries. They work in the fields alongside the men and

Yes, Mohsen likes strawberries and I like fresh milk. I will go later to get milk from a neighbor, she keeps a cow in the cellar, in the dark, a girl will be there, with an oil lamp, she's the granddaughter, and she won't sell me a bottle of milk labelled "Underground Dairies Grade A Milk."

I'm getting to the point, Mr. Jafar. She will put her hands on the cow's udders and make milk flow into a crock, the milk will still be warm and creamy. And while she milks I'll talk to her, though I won't see her listening, the cow will be in the way. It's like that, don't you see? Girls are modest. Her mother will not accept payment. She will make me take back my money. Your money. Our expenses are almost nil.

He starts to poke at the ground with the bone. The screen shows a bone descending to block the tortoise's path, the tortoise grows clear and moves, turning aside, but the bone blocks it again.

Yes, I understand that, but another crew can do that job as well as we can, we are already here and

No, right, peasants can pick strawberries as well as a sound engineer and a cameraman, or even better, they've had more practice, and for lower wages as you say, but Mr. Jafar, the peasant is not going to make friends with cameramen and sound engineers. He'll confuse them with their machines, their power, and we need to be on equal terms, neighborly relations, before we can even run the cameras and recording equipment. Otherwise we'll never get near the ceremony.

He makes little thrusts with the bone. On screen the bone slips under the tortoise's shell, first on one side then on the other, and raises it slightly so that the tortoise's legs on that side wave uselessly in the air before being set down again.

One week, please.

Two days is not enough, Mr. Jafar, please. How soon will this chance come again?

Mr. Jafar, no one practices this rite, only here, in this village.

Well, can I speak to him at least?

Two days.

Yes, understood.

Two days.

Good-bye.

He snaps the cellphone shut and jabs with the bone. The screen shows the tortoise flipped on its back. It waves its legs. He straightens and angrily plants the legbone in the mound. He addresses the trench behind the mound.

May I have some of your tea?

GRAVEDIGGER. Help yourself. It's by the tree.

The SHAVING MAN walks off. On the screen, the tortoise rights itself and crawls out of view. A real tortoise climbs over the top of the mound and makes its way down. When it is out of sight, the SHAVING MAN returns with an enamelled tin mug. He sips and stands a minute in thought while tortoise-progress music completes itself. Then he again speaks into the trench.

SHAVING MAN. I didn't drink it all. Only half.

Would you like some?

GRAVEDIGGER. Sure.

SHAVING MAN. Here.

The GRAVEDIGGER's arm appears above the mound, and the SHAVING MAN reaches the cup down. For an instant both hands hold it. Then the GRAVEDIGGER draws his hand back below the mound. The SHAVING MAN climbs the mound, pulls the legbone free, and swings it.

This legbone, did it belong to an athlete? A football player? Did he play in the match against Brazil or Scotland? Was he as fast a runner as your girl? The last time I came up here she ran away, she made a dash for it. I've never seen anyone run so fast in long skirts. And across country. Her legbones are young enough, what is she, sixteen? Her legbone carried the rest of her bones, her skeleton, heart, nerves, teeth, eyes, thighs, hands back to her cellar, back to her cow. And left you alone.

Now you need a new girl.

Now you need a girl

who will stay with you underground,

stay with a man-of-the-earth like you,

always digging. You need

a woman-of-the-earth, we'll make you one.

Find me a pelvis, please, we'll start with that.

From that, a pelvis plus one legbone,

we'll make a woman.

Find me roots and rocks to make

a cage of ribs,

and things to rattle around inside it

when she moves,

and rootlets for her nerves, a taproot

for her spine,

flexible and strong, for women must labor,

it's their fate.

And you must have a skull or two down there,

no matter whose,

we'll fill one with pretty gravel

and wood fiber,

worms too, aha, I've seen dungbeetles

on this hill,

dungbeetles for strong ideas, worms

for her moods,

and for her eyes gray stones are best

for seeing underground.

Then cover her with supple red clay

that will cling to her frame.

It will stay moist down there.

The sun and wind will not dry it till

it loses color, cracks like cheap leather,

turns to dust to make men sneeze.

If she grows fat you can pare her down,

or slap on more clay if she's skinny.

Put it where you want it!

The rootlets will grow out into the earth

around her.

They will draw clean water and diffuse it

through her.

She won't run away.

Stones in her skull will gleam with the colors

of wet stones and you

alone will see them gleaming.

What children you will make!
She will nurse them on a nourishing slurry of clay
and rainwater.
Your love will shake the village till down
in the teashop
her mother picks up the telephone
to call you—
surely the telephone cables will have been laid
by then—

He puts a mimic telephone to his ear.

"Hello, the village is rocking!
Hello, hello, the cow is terrified!
She can feel every shudder, what are you doing
up there? Dear married-people-in-the-earth,
your love is an earthquake, the houses are quivering,
the doorposts are dancing, the little boys
are running wild, shooting through the streets,
little girls watch them while cracks open in the walls,
and even the customers drinking tea
are starting to look up from their cards.

All the gossip is scrambled!

The neighbors are becoming engineers!

The chickens have remembered how to fly,

and look, here comes my cow up the cellar stairs,

my daughter on her back, her bones wrapped around the cow!

Our bones are moving us, taking us, where?

Help!"

Dust flies up from the trench, a choking cloud. The SHAVING MAN is immobilized, bending and straightening in mimic coughing, but we hear no coughs. We hear the cave-in, a long music with voices in it. At last it dies away and the SHAVING MAN comes forward out of the dust, coughing audibly and slapping at his clothes. Soon he turns and runs back up the mound. The screen shows a dirty hairy hand, the fingers feebly clawing at dirt, and the SHAVING MAN clasps it.

Gravedigger! Gravedigger! Hey, Gravedigger!

Can you hear me! Answer me! Hello!

Hello, hello? He doesn't answer me.

Gravedigger? Listen! Listen, don't move.

He *can't* move! Are you in there, Gravedigger?

Of course, where would he go? You're in there, listen!

Listen, I'm going for help. Hold on!

Keep breathing! Don't try to talk!

Telephone.

He pulls out his phone.

Hospital. Ambulance. Can't make it, there's no road.

The local authorities. No, don't have a phone yet, the phone hasn't come!

The army! Right! Mobilize the troops for a gravedigger.

Gravedigger! Wait here! Don't try to move!

He lets go the GRAVEDIGGER's hand and starts towards his car.

Men in the fields, I passed men digging.

I'm going to fetch them, they can dig you out.

I'm driving away, Gravedigger, I'm driving away,

but I'm not leaving you, don't feel abandoned,

I'm with you in my car, driving away to bring you help,

I'm not leaving, I'm getting closer!

He's offstage. The car door slams, the motor turns over and catches; the car moves off. These too are musical events with voices in them.

Act Three.

Still in the cemetery, two days later. The GRAVEDIGGER is digging a hole. A pile of dirt, stones, and fragments of bone is growing beside the hole opposite the tree. The GRAVEDIGGER is again invisible until the very end of the scene. FOROOGH, the girl seen outside the house in Act One, lies against the tree. Beside her an earthenware crock. Sober dress, bright headscarf. The voice heard off belongs to the SHAVING MAN. The GRAVEDIGGER works methodically, tossing out small spadefuls of earth onto the pile. Pause.

GRAVEDIGGER. Here's a skull.

SHAVING MAN. Hello! Hello! Hello! Hello!

FOROOGH. [Leaning around tree] He's here again.

GRAVEDIGGER. Who?

SHAVING MAN. Hello!

FOROOGH. The stranger. The engineer.

GRAVEDIGGER. What is he doing?

FOROOGH. He is walking in circles, calling "Hello!"

GRAVEDIGGER. Does he have one hand pressed up to his ear, l

ike a man with an earache?

FOROOGH. Yes. How could you see that?

GRAVEDIGGER. He's talking on his telephone. He comes up here

to talk to the city on his telephone.

FOROOGH. To the city.

GRAVEDIGGER. To his boss.

FOROOGH. Oh. He has a boss.

GRAVEDIGGER. Can't you tell, just by looking, you up there in the light?

[She turns and looks.]

His head is bent. He struggles to hear
the boss' words. The hand that isn't holding the telephone
is flying around.

FOROOGH. How can you see him from your hole?

GRAVEDIGGER. Oh I can see. Am I right?

FOROOGH. No. He was doing that, but now
he has stooped to look at something
on the ground.

GRAVEDIGGER. Ah. So I am wrong.

FOROOGH. He's stopped talking. He's put the telephone in his shirt pocket.
Now he's going to his car.

SHAVING MAN's voice. Good-bye!

[A car door slams. The car is thrown into gear and drives off.]

FOROOGH. Now he says good-bye.

GRAVEDIGGER. I heard him. Was there a bone in the car?

FOROOGH. No. What sort of a bone? A skull?

GRAVEDIGGER. A leg. [Pause.]

FOROOGH. A leg from here?

GRAVEDIGGER. Yes. From this hole. I was digging here the day of the cave-in.
He walked around talking even louder than today, and then
he put the telephone away and came to talk with me.
Very friendly.
He asked me questions.

FOROOGH. Was that the day I ran away?

GRAVEDIGGER. Yes. He wanted to know what the hole was for.
I said, "It's not a grave." He said,
"Yes, I can see that. The man who'd need a grave like that
would be twelve meters long." I said, "It's a trench, for the cables.
They're going to lay cables in here." "Is the village
getting the telephone?" he asked.

FOROOGH. The telephone is his life.

GRAVEDIGGER. Then my spade struck a bone. "What's that?" he asked.
"Can I have it?"
I tossed it out and he caught it. Cleaned it off
and put it in the car. Then asked if he could have some tea.
Sat there where you're sitting and talked and drank my tea.
[She shifts uneasily.]

FOROOGH. Did you hear him talk on the telephone?

GRAVEDIGGER. How could I not? He was shouting.

FOROOGH. The city's a long way from here. [The GRAVEDIGGER snorts.]
Did he talk about me?

GRAVEDIGGER. No. Why would he talk to the boss about you?

FOROOGH. I don't know.

GRAVEDIGGER. You're just a village girl that lives in a cellar with a cow.

FOROOGH. He saw me. The day I brought your lunch and stayed. He saw me
as he drove up in his car. I had to run away from him.

GRAVEDIGGER. Why did you run? No one minds. Except your mother.

FOROOGH. I was embarrassed. A man from the city.

GRAVEDIGGER. He didn't mind. He told me you're pretty. Is that true? Are you pretty out there?

FOROOGH. Climb out of your hole sometime and take a look. He was looking at me out the car window. Through his dark glasses. I couldn't see his eyes well. So, I ran.

GRAVEDIGGER. Doesn't seem something the boss would need to know.

FOROOGH. So what was he saying on the telephone?

GRAVEDIGGER. Well. It was about the old woman. Your mother's mother.

FOROOGH. Her? He wanted to know about her?

GRAVEDIGGER. No, his boss did. If she was dead. Every day. He was to stay here till she died.

FOROOGH. She had nothing to leave.

GRAVEDIGGER. No. Nothing to do with inheritance, nothing to do with her. Every day, every day. "How long she'll live? I don't know. No one knows."

"She's worse, she didn't eat dinner."

"She's better, she got out of bed."

FOROOGH. Why?

Why would an engineer

want to know about an old woman who's sick?

GRAVEDIGGER. He's not an engineer.

FOROOGH. Everyone calls him “engineer.”

GRAVEDIGGER. In the village they call anyone engineer who comes in a car,
not on a donkey. He makes films.

FOROOGH. Hmmph! Yes, he has a camera. No one
lets him take their picture
except a few schoolboys. He keeps forgetting that camera,
leaving it everywhere, someone has to bring it to his lodging. So
what did he want with my grandmother?
To take her picture when she was dead?

GRAVEDIGGER. No, not exactly. Not a bad guess, though, for a girl who lives in a cellar with a cow.

FOROOGH. What did he want? Will you tell me?

GRAVEDIGGER. Well. He’s a filmmaker. He was supposed to make a film.

FOROOGH. Here?

GRAVEDIGGER. Yes.

FOROOGH. But of what? Schoolboys?

GRAVEDIGGER. No. Or maybe them as well. Of the death rite.

FOROOGH. Oh.

GRAVEDIGGER. That was why his boss wanted to know when
the old woman would die.

FOROOGH. Why did he want pictures of the rite?

GRAVEDIGGER. The boss wanted them.

FOROOGH. Why?

GRAVEDIGGER. I don't know. They almost never do it any more.
Only the very old ask for it. The imams don't like it,
but they don't forbid it. I suppose this is one of the last
villages in Iran where the death rite is performed.
And she was one of the last who will ever ask for it.

FOROOGH. So he was waiting.

GRAVEDIGGER. What? Who?

FOROOGH. Waiting for her to die!
Every day you'd see him, up on someone's roof,
looking into our courtyard. Every day he'd ask,
"How is she doing?" He made friends
with my cousin the schoolboy.
He asked him every day!

GRAVEDIGGER. Well, now you know why.

FOROOGH. But then he never did it!

GRAVEDIGGER. Never did what?

FOROOGH. Took the pictures! He wasn't there. I would have heard.
Only on the way. I saw him in his car.
The women in the procession were walking by.
He rolled down his window and pushed out his camera.
He took their pictures and then he drove off.
The women let him. I don't understand.

They turned their faces to him. He had the camera in the window, he was behind it. Picture after picture. Then he drove off.

GRAVEDIGGER. Nobody was filming the rite?

FOROOGH. I would have heard.

GRAVEDIGGER. Yesterday?

FOROOGH. That's right. Haven't you dug a grave for her?

GRAVEDIGGER. I'm digging it now. They didn't tell me who it's for. He didn't leave at once. [Pause.] Maybe now he's going back to the city. He said good-bye. [Pause.]

FOROOGH. Yesterday he came for milk!

GRAVEDIGGER. Where?

FOROOGH. To me. To our house.

GRAVEDIGGER. He wanted milk?

FOROOGH. He saw me run away. Don't you remember?

He saw that I had been with you. He saw me run away!

GRAVEDIGGER. The day of the cave-in. Don't you remember that?

You've never asked about it.

FOROOGH. I don't want to know. Thank God you were not hurt.

I was underground too, when he came to my mother's house.

GRAVEDIGGER. True, we both work underground. And alone. Maybe that's how we're together.

FOROOGH. My aunt was grinding grain. She sent him to the cellar.

They move onto separate tracks of memory but are still telling each other their respective catastrophes.

GRAVEDIGGER.

I've been digging that trench two weeks.

I have to make it straight.

In places I have to tunnel under

roots and rocks. Four meters deep.

The stones are the hardest.

I have to dig around them, it's like carving

them out of the earth, till I can pry them loose.

Then I have to get them out.

Then there are the bones.

The earth is packed with them.

I can't dig without hitting old bones.

FOROOGH.

He was afraid of falling,

coming down the stairs.

It was dark to him. He didn't know

where the cow was. He didn't know

where I was. I had the lamp

in the storeroom in back.

He called me again and again.

My aunt told him my name.

Even after I answered him,

he went on calling. I told him

I'd be right there. I told him to be careful.

"Wait by the cow!"

But he hit his head.

And skulls.

So? It's a cemetery. What did you expect?

You probably put them there.

No, they're older than that.

Older than I am.

Older than anyone now alive.

There are jars down there

put up before I was born.

I was wiping off old sealed jars,

counting them, but I lost count

A root in the roof of the tunnel.

when he began to yell.

I was burrowing under it and hit a rock.

I started to scrape around it.

I asked if he had come for milk.

I put the lantern down beside the stool.

It was too big for me. There was no end to it.

He was startled to see the cow so close.

I kept as much in the shadows as I could.

I couldn't hide my hands.

I could tell he wanted to see me.

Did he have his camera?

No, but it was like that.

He had dark glasses in the dark!

He hid behind them. I hid behind the cow

I had to go up instead.

and kept my face down. Instead he watched

I had to cut the root.

It has others.

I've dug around a hundred of them.

There's a root in every grave.

The village feeds the tree.

The root was tough.

Tougher than I thought.

I sawed at it. I pulled at it.

It was as thick as my arm.

Clamped on every rock in the hill.

Old, twisted, gnarled, scaly.

I dug and I cut but in the end

there was nothing to do but to take it

between my hands and pull.

my hands on the udders.

The root of this tree?

That's a pleasant thought.

I began to milk the cow.

I began to milk, and he began to talk.

He talked in poetry. The cellar was

warm and damp, the cow's flank was warm

and flies were walking on it. Her udders

were warm and full, the milk steamed

into the pail.

His words were cold. I shivered.

Old poems, so he said.

They twisted around my head.

Pull and pull.

I'm sure they weren't love poems.

Fingers about the root.

I was impatient.

I pulled too hard.

The whole wall fell on me.

I heard a roaring. I was pinned,

my head against the rock.

I couldn't move. I didn't know

what bones were broken.

A rock sat on my back between my shoulders,

my face was pushed against the rock.

There was a little space where I'd been digging.

A pocket of air near my nose.

My mouth was full of dirt, I couldn't

spit it out to call for help. But I could hear.

Don't you want to know

what sort of poems?

No, not love poems. No. I don't know.

Old poems about women.

Words about beauty.

Cold hard words about beautiful women

twisting around me in the warm cellar.

Words packing the air.

I had to move closer to the cow

and breathe her smell.

Mountains and panting gazelles.

Lilacs and white doves rising, wheeling.

Running water, waves on shore, the changes

of the moon. Cedars. Sunshine.

I was afraid.

I could not move but I was

moving with everything. I was

pulled into the earth by the weight

of that rock below my head,

and I was spinning, spinning.

[He sings spinningly with her.]

What? Oh. Metaphors.

"Hello! Hello! Hello!"

Through the dirt I heard him calling.

Ripe round fruit.

A mine of sparkling opals.

A bowl of rose petals, jasmine.

An arrow. A tortoise with gold eyes,

crawling. Moss, a well,

an orchard of almond trees

in flower. The desert in winter,

the wind. A scattering of ducks

from a marsh, a pen on paper,

a pair of cupped hands.

That was what he said. Those were

his words.

Even the cow was restless.

I pulled my headscarf down.

I wished I had no breasts.

His voice was everywhere.

He was calling you?

I don't know! No,

I think he was calling the boss!

On the telephone! "Hello! Hello!"

I couldn't make a sound.

The earth was in my mouth, I tell you.

Talking to his boss.

No. No, not yet. Please

give me seven more days."

I wanted seven more minutes.

The strange thing was

I felt my fear leave me.

I listened to him talk to his boss

and I felt released. His speech

came through the dirt.

It made some space.

Fragrant orange blossoms. Honey,

the song of bees making honey,

bees dancing and bees flying and bees

pushing into flowers. Even the cow

shook her head.

"Yes. At last the pail was full.

Talking blind.

His words do not come from a place.

He speaks into empty air,

holding a telephone.

[The overlapping memories end here.]

GRAVEDIGGER. Some of that emptiness reached me, calmed me,

for there was a force there, like electric current

running through a cable–to drive a motor.

FOROOGH. His car?

GRAVEDIGGER. Yes. He drove to get help.

He told me not to give up and drove away.

FOROOGH. He could have pulled you out himself! He ran away!

GRAVEDIGGER. I was too deep. He did the right thing. He told everyone he found,

and they came. Motorbikes, tractors. The doctor

came on his motorbike. The film-maker told him. He organized it.

I felt the pressure grow less. I felt the air find my nostrils.

And it was as if I floated out of there. I never felt hands on me.

It was the earth growing thinner, emptier,

moved to a distance by his voice till at last I rose.

Maybe he really is an engineer.

FOROOGH. Hmmph.

GRAVEDIGGER. He gave his car to take me to the hospital. Omar drove. I lay

across four laps, my feet against the window,

and I watched the world between my toes move and change

while I lay on my neighbors' thighs and their hands held me.

Clouds, the hills, the mosque tower; a truck went by

with faces turned toward me. An orchard of almond trees went by,

a hillside in bloom. All moved past me, pictures, lovely.

Distant.

Moving.

FOROOGH. Poetry. A poetry engineer.

GRAVEDIGGER. Yes. And at the hospital they gave me oxygen.
A mask over my nose and mouth, and that first breath
went into my lungs like being born.

FOROOGH. He took the pail and climbed the stairs. I could hear him
talking to my aunt. He wanted to pay her. She took money, but
then my mother came out. She made him take the money back.
Nothing he could say could move her. She wouldn't hear him.

GRAVEDIGGER. No?

FOROOGH. She said we would be dishonored,
taking money from a stranger for milk.
He had no answer for that,
so he left.

GRAVEDIGGER. Your mother is very strong-minded.

FOROOGH. That's why I have to come up here, just to be with you,
and watch you dig yourself into that hole.

GRAVEDIGGER. When we're married, we'll live
in your mother's cellar,
with the cow.

FOROOGH. All right. And in summer
we'll come up here, and you
can dig us a grave for two. No, three.

GRAVEDIGGER. The cave-in made a big enough hole for all of us.

FOROOGH. The cow will need her own room.

GRAVEDIGGER. The engineer can bring us up here in his car.

FOROOGH. No, the doctor will take us on his motorbike.

GRAVEDIGGER. We'll be too heavy for a motorbike.

FOROOGH. We spend our lives in the dark, we must be very light.

We won't wait for people to die.

GRAVEDIGGER. No, we won't have to. We'll live

in the cemetery. They'll do the dying

in the village.

FOROOGH. In the houses, upstairs.

Their voices will fly off

through the telephone

to the place of poetry.

GRAVEDIGGER. The rest will settle here with us.

FOROOGH. You'll dig a tunnel

from grave to grave

so everyone can come to us

to get their milk.

The only price is silence.

Together. Buried. Married. Silence. Underground.

[He climbs out of the trench. They look at each other.]

GRAVEDIGGER. Please pour me some tea.

[She pours him some tea while he stretches and then brushes dirt from his clothes. She reaches him the mug of tea. Fade to black as he sets his hand on it, the mug held between them.]