

61 INCHES AND A THOUSAND TRILLION
TONS: A NIGHTMARISH MARITIME
LULLABY FOR PLAZA PERIMETER PEOPLE

A Play in One Act

by

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synopsis

A series of poetic vignettes told by various interconnected travelers. The individuals (and some spirits and saints) cross paths over time and cosmos, influence one another indirectly, and explore themes of success and burnout; love and family; and fate. Their parallels unite them and, ultimately, lead them all “home” - whatever that means.

players (4)

POET: From New York City; traveling Europe; in Málaga, Spain.

COVADONGA: From Málaga; traveling US; in New York City.

SANTIAGO: From Málaga; traveling Europe; in Berlin.

MADRE: Covadonga’s mother and Poet’s hostel host; in Málaga.

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Outro: Maestro’s Last Symphony (Play on)

setting/scene

Primarily Málaga, Spain, present, as Poet writes away in Covadonga’s childhood bedroom, rented out by her mother. The vignettes explore time and space and should be reminiscent of lucid dreams: vibrant, whimsical, creative, drastic, and juxtaposing in color, tonal shifts, lighting, and sound.

run time

one act; 20-30 min.

history

- Production, Iowa State University Theatre Department, May 2020
- Residency, Wallace Stegner House, Eastend, Canada, Feb 2020
- Finalist, New Perspectives Theatre Company Playwriting Lab, Dec 2019
- Finalist, Letter of Marque Ensemble Playwrights Lab, Aug 2019

ACT I
Scene 1

SETTING: Covadonga's bedroom, pink and warm. The space can act as a canvas upon which all recalled locations splash: a sleek reptile house, sunny plaza, and Paris and Mumbai across time, soaked in romance, etc. Or you can split the stage into multiple real settings, if preferred.

AT RISE: POET sleeps restlessly, late at night or early in the morning (is time a social construct?). They toss and turn, then jolt up.

Intro.

Recordando Covadonga y Santiago, Dos Teenagers en Málaga

POET

I was startled awake by the saint
of an alternative life that never was,
by a lover starved and neglected
before touching flesh or seeing sun
across the chin of Spain, in a pink bedroom
deserted with young lust, second-story,
beside a single bulb brushed
with red paisley cloth,

(ENTER COVADONGA, who joins, surprising POET.)

POET & COVADONGA

blushing

POET

for eternity...

(POET grabs a journal and starts writing as COVADONGA shares.)

COVADONGA

like my then perky, plumper cheeks
in that old school stairwell.
I'd stayed alone, independent, a long while.
but that time we crashed,
at 2 a.m.
accidentally

(ENTER SANTIAGO, who joins, surprising COVADONGA.)

POET, COVADONGA, & SANTIAGO

colliding

POET

like salty warm waves upon the tile.

(Now ENTER MADRE, into the literal bedroom, with a tray of coffee for POET.)

MADRE

“Covadonga journeyed far for Universidad,”

POET

her madre muses over Clásico instant coffee,

MADRE

bored pale by the coastal town

POET

that glows vibrant and romantic in my

POET, COVADONGA, & SANTIAGO

traveling

POET

eyes. The mosaic labyrinths I find exciting
apparently

MADRE

tire when you learn every route,

POET

and at dead ends, Covadonga,
in plaid skirt and mauve lipstick,
kept
re-meeting her rosy, irresistible ghosts. Like

MADRE

handsome Santiago...

(Showing POET a picture, embarrassing COVADONGA.)

POET

his still photography still framed
on her forever adolescent bookshelf
next to a vase of glass-

MADRE

complimentary apples!

POET

and native jasmine, carnations.

MADRE

Care for anything else?

ALL

We all recall

POET

these brief instants at 2 a.m.,
before dawn hands us places to see and be.
backpacks by strange beds but ceilings of stars
to count in Spanglish or Human,
pulled back asleep...

COVADONGA & MADRE

returning home,

COVADONGA & SANTIAGO

fading to black,

COVADONGA & POET

recordando lucid dreams
cast by the sea.

I.

61 Inches and A Thousand Trillion Tons (To Take Care Of)

POET

I snoozed through eight alarms
and entered the afternoon confused, unaware,
hungover mentally and physically,
empty stomach, messy nesty hair,
missed the boat, late to the show,
bleeding from who-knows-where.
Nothing out of the ordinary.
Nothing uncommon there.

I want to blame myself, but can I
for being human?
For slacking in my maintenance of this body
I feed, walk, and talk to
all consistently
(more or less than I should)?

Perhaps this is why the gods only gave me
61 inches and 100 pounds to watch over.
Perhaps I'll find or make more
to take better care of
someday
I could.

Perhaps we should grow
to love our masses
through their slips, spills, mistakes,
wounds, weights, and losses,

for simply existing as specks on Earth:
1,000 trillion tons in frickin' infinite space.

Only 1,000 trillion tons
to take the best care of
now.

We can. We must. We will.
We know how.

II.

No Smoking in the Berlin Reptile House!

POET

One time in Berlin, months or lives ago, in a black tile bar,

POET & SANTIAGO

I met a stranger

POET

whose red paisley bandana
at the white tie affair
hissed familiarity from afar.
In our corner by candlelight, I observed
the birds attempting to flee
his secondhand button-down shirt;
and reminded of zoos,
naturally, drunkenly,
proposed we go see.
Sure enough, early as a robin,
he appeared at my Kreuzberg flat next dawn,
we prolonged our lucid song with

SANTIAGO

pocketable bottles of corner-store champagne,

POET

tall hot coffees,

SANTIAGO

and a dented pack of Marlboros

POET & SANTIAGO

to split

POET

that rare, sunny Sunday,

POET

everything sparkled
in your pierced ears

SANTIAGO

and swam

POET

in my always watery eyes.

SANTIAGO

in your strangely watery eyes.

SANTIAGO

We sipped and smoked our way past the cages.

POET

I slipped on my shades.

SANTIAGO

Lions and tigers and bears, oh-

POET

God. What a life I've lived so far.
What a route I've journeyed,
firecracker I used to be,
explosive amber over dry lawns,
singeing vegetation with manic chemistry.
Restlessness in creative spirit is poison.

SANTIAGO

So is creativity in a restless one.

POET

And the danger I posed to myself and society I publicly acknowledge. Privately, I frickin' miss it.

(Beat.)

I wish I could justify carelessness with youth, narcissism with self-discovery, volatility: adventure. Recklessness: you.

(SANTIAGO points to himself and raises an eyebrow questioningly. POET shakes their head no, no, not you.)

POET, CON'T.

When I don't miss these sentiments, I let them swallow me, still and whole.

POET & SANTIAGO

(After a beat)

Once, in the Berlin reptile house, months or lives ago, we kissed against the glass.

POET

I swore I'd

SANTIAGO

You swore you would

SANTIAGO

Stay in touch?

POET

But I've never texted back. I leave strangers and lovers on read, red, red, awake at 2 a.m., keep plastic between us, film over eyes, hunger for skin, speak with slick, split forked tongue. Nocturnal, only right before grand climax, I switch off my screen. Delusional, believe players and audiences alike take blessing from my guessing game.

Is this a surprise?

(I ignored the No Smoking signs and felt serene surrounded by snakes.)

III.

The Scariest Country, Hands Up

COVADONGA

"You travel alone?"

POET

“As a woman?”

POET & COVADONGA

“How brave.”

POET

The truth is:
 I’ve experienced far more plaguing, paralyzing trauma
 in the shadows between flickering pools
 on my college campus streets,
 in those magnificent mansions,
 inside: gross and barren, sloshy with only beer,
 just like the guys that live there,
 the wealthy boys who cause abuse
 in the same chambers
 their fathers’ fathers did.

COVADONGA

The horror is:
 We’ve experienced far more plaguing, paralyzing fear
 in our Synagogues, festivals,
 elementary schools,
 while making memories, movies, music,

POET & COVADONGA

in the scariest country in the world.

COVADONGA

In many places, the men stare.

POET

In Jaipur, they holler; Dublin, whistle.

POET

But over there

COVADONGA

But here

POET & COVADONGA

in the United States of America,
 they attack.

POET

Explorers I meet across continents say:

SANTIAGO

The States? No, I haven't been.

POET

Parents draw the line there.

MADRE

It's a bad place to see and be.

POET

Because the boys and men, the people pent with poison and no outlet or awareness, can take up metal and flex muscled arms. Their angry minds and twisted beliefs can plague the scariest country with paralyzing trauma and fear. What to do? Where to go?

POET & COVADONGA

Where to go from here?

IV.

I Heart – cross out – Hate NY!

(a.k.a. The Inevitable) (a.k.a. Be practical, Nora.)

SANTIAGO

"I hate America,"

POET

spit a hostel concierge years ago, a boy with eighteen rounds of wisdom, home base afar, a fresh face and kind, giving heart. I can tell because I'm sensitive and immediately defensive to anything else. "Because Trump?" I guessed, planned to promise mutual contempt.

SANTIAGO

"Because capitalism,"

POET

he replied.

SANTIAGO

“Money, narcissism, greed.”

POET

Awkward, unprepared for the exchange, I paused. “I don’t think about that enough,” I admitted, then thought: Why not? When and where’d I become obsessed with this elusive success

POET & COVADONGA

I’ll never achieve? With my stupid, stubborn passion for Words, hopefully crafted into a Career.

POET, COVADONGA, & SANTIAGO

Only myself to please.

POET

Why’d I decide this route so offensive to my parents,

POET, MADRE, & COVADONGA

and theirs and theirs and theirs?

POET

From Poland and Slovakia,

SANTIAGO

Germany and

SANTIAGO & COVADONGA

Malaga,

POET, COVADONGA, & SANTIAGO

who worked so frickin’ hard to provide simple care,
in their towns and cities, factories, and farms,

POET

all with this - my - lifetime as the destination. Will I make way less?

POET, COVADONGA, & SANTIAGO

Of course. Will I offer anything more?

(ALL three shrug, uncertain.)

POET

My childhood house on the hill, that pink bedroom on the second story, is the richest, most magnificent place I'll call home. When I have a daughter, I'll have to stress stringiness:

POET & MADRE

"No, you cannot travel abroad, alone."

POET

"Or study the arts Pursue STEM."

MADRE

"Marry a wealthier man."

POET

"Be practical, Nora." That guilt and embarrassment swallows me whole. So, should I free my greedy green fever dreams and plot my narrative here?

MADRE

On the coast? Teach? Raising children around plants and peace?

POET

They'd probably hate it.

MADRE

They will hate it.

POET

And, bored sick,

ALL

relocate across the sea

POET

to foreign lands,

COVADONGA

to New York City,

POET & COVADONGA

to write indulgent, self-obsessed poetry.

V.
Screwed-up this time around...?

COVADONGA

I still visit the places we once called ours,
sit at the tables we used to claim,
convince myself it's exposure therapy
as if your presence now would cause any less pain.

SANTIAGO

I lean upon balconies at rainy dusks,

COVADONGA

with tea and a quilt?

SANTIAGO

Are you doing the same?
Watching the moon slowly pursue the sun
Nature's dark chase, cold eternal game.

COVADONGA & SANTIAGO

You'll never catch the sun, moon. Play on.

SANTIAGO

All these orbits, patterns, and arcs,
Destructive love is not newborn.
Stars have crossed for centuries, love.

COVADONGA & SANTIAGO

Millennia ago I know mine met yours.
Crashing like comets, *burning* like lava,

COVADONGA

two disaster artists addicted to disarray,
desperate for action, craving inspiration,
existing with craters where hearts were supposed to be.

SANTIAGO

Bet in the 20s we partied up Paris,
années folles, those crazy years!

COVADONGA

Cigars and feathers, drops of pearls, oil
 paintings in gold frames under glass chandeliers.

SANTIAGO

And lives before that, intertwined in Mumbai,
 we lapped up our wet bodies with lasting red clay,

COVADONGA

erotically working through the Kama Sutra.
 Jasmine and palm leaves;

SANTIAGO

You're nirvana, babe.

COVADONGA & SANTIAGO

Do you think we made it in another creation?

SANTIAGO

Salt lingers on my tongue.

COVADONGA

Uncertainty is strange.

COVADONGA & SANTIAGO

God, I frickin' miss it. Sometimes I get carried away.

COVADONGA

But then I inhale- not smoke, pure air,
 in this clean new place and glowing skin I call home.
 I run farther, stretch longer, than we could together.

SANTIAGO

Now write myself sweet, embarrassing prose.

COVADONGA

I wish my plants goodnight
 when difficulty feels like danger,
 my leafy patron saints, Raphael and Frances,
 blessing healing and the sea.

COVADONGA & SANTIAGO

And medication harbors the reckless volatility
 I associate with you, and crave.

SANTIAGO

So the poison only beats

COVADONGA

In semi-polluted waves.

SANTIAGO

Are you aware it still hurts?

COVADONGA

Were you ever of anything at all?

COVADONGA & SANTIAGO

Do you think we made it in another narrative?

SANTIAGO

I curse myself for wondering,

COVADONGA

beg the cinematic dreams to dull.

SANTIAGO

Maybe as we age, these heavy questions will
 plummet in one bottle to the ocean ground.

COVADONGA & SANTIAGO

From a foreign pitch-black balcony:
 Did we screw up this time around?

VI.

ode to plaza perimeter people

MADRE

how quaint it is

POET

to play not participant but spectator
 in a bustling social plaza,
 where shrieks temper to laughter
 carried away by pigeons performers shoo.
 But we watchers beckon
 with baked bread, mistaken for lonely, tired,
 instead of unbothered,
 sinking in existential thinking,
 but rather floating, quite content.

SANTIAGO

how kind it is

POET

to sense kin among observers, compelled to,
 when I stand, wish these fellows:
 “farewell,” our first and only words shared
 before my stroll rolls around the bend.

COVADONGA

how cogent

POET

to avoid rustling the present magic
 by documenting the moment later,
 nestled in the back corner
 of a bustling social cafe
 with a cappuccino, as I’m doing right now.

how quiet,
 cogent, kind, and quaint,
 in my personal private plaza,
 in the company of coffee and humans

I can talk to, but don't have to.
at least not very loud.

VII.
(scribbled on spare napkins; observations)

COVADONGA

New York City subways are thin tin microwaves.
And whenever a new artist, clad in paisley,
slips in to toast,
I want to slurp their buttery misery,
crunch their angst between my teeth.
The breeze is warm, air cool
in Chelsea this afternoon.
Monday. Two weeks from the first of fall.
October 8th.
Columbus Day.
Please.

(ALL shake their heads, roll their eyes.)

COVADONGA, CON'T.

Gazing from the High Line,
"It's high time," the hisses pester me,
to secure real action, plans.
But what's reality when moments feel like dreams?
What glass must I fill, when none look empty?
By brick and blue, my eyes tickle pink,
blood beating for the kids with sketch pads
and high school teens with diaries.

SANTIAGO

(In an "I'll say it one more time" sort of manner)
New York is unnecessarily capitalist,

SANTIAGO & POET

sneers at the hopeful, preys on the weak.

POET

But I've lived there eight years now.

COVADONGA

I'm excited to play my part.

POET

I miss it when I leave.

COVADONGA

I am proud I hiked my last year of life,
will return to old spots in a whole new place.

How universal:
crashing, discovering, deciding
loss isn't surrender,
but release of self-set restraint.

(Beat.)

The wind sweeps away anxieties.
Attachments pack up, leave town.
All moves along, under, through.
Culture is, I wrote this down:

COVADONGA & SANTIAGO

Diners at sunrise.

ALL

Letters to drifting loved ones
scribbled on crumpled napkins

POET & SANTIAGO

discarded at corner stores.

COVADONGA & POET

Free museums, public libraries.

POET & MADRE

Your favorite sweater and loafers,
as a set, more than gently worn.

ALL

A story adored by a planet

POET

all a thousand trillion tons! Or, perhaps, just few hundred pounds.
Enough, considering the pages blurred with tears or coffee stains,
Some torn, or traded, or simply long-gone.

COVADONGA & SANTIAGO

Drives to far.

COVADONGA & MADRE

Calls back home.

ALL

Places are: teachers.

POET & SANTIAGO

Berlin

SANTIAGO

taught independence, individuality, how to retaliate and explore.

POET

Malaga, Athens, and Edinburgh
specialized in

POET & MADRE

humility, family, tranquility.

POET

Spirituality, empathy, and compassion I was taught in Jaipur.

POET & COVADONGA

New York boasts courses in art, drive, ambition; so many still to take.

COVADONGA

And passion is:

Making love to a stranger you meet within,
who at first bristles as distant,

building the bursting thrill.
 How nice it is
 to ebb and flow,
 ripple and relax,
 to finally like that person.
 Care is infinite; can't be split or spilled.
 What a treasure, the horizon,
 a sight to behold.
 I'm grateful I decided
 to tighten my balcony grip,
 let land, earth, and ocean
 swallow me whole.
 Here, I write to Me:
 Do what you love.
 Grant everyone patience
 and space to speak.
 Let life happen, cultivate relationships.
 Homage past terrors, present uncertainty.
 Here, world, I am,
 and stand with open hands.
 No compulsion to chase or collide.
 At least, not for now.

VIII.

hostel lost & found / numerology

POET

2-milliliter vials, soap and shampoo (combined),
 jumpers, scarves, socks - all wool,
 pasta and rolling paper, boxes bent but half-full,
 maps, brochures, spare museum pass from a lucky streak,
 or an already-started café punch card
 three away from free small black coffee!
 weight shed among
 airport bathroom trash
 (like myself)

COVADONGA

oh please.

SANTIAGO

or exchanged in hostel lobbies, after returning

POET

the key, card...?

SANTIAGO

fob.

POET

thingy,
between explorers awaiting
yet another daybreak shuttle,
jetlagged perpetually.

SANTIAGO

(Offering)

pack of instant oatmeal?

POET

(Doing the same)

for two leftover eggs?
can't take 'em on planes, but still plenty energy
to offer prior expiration!

SANTIAGO

an omelette! whole meal, baby.

POET

thank you:
lost and traded
for detaching yourselves in pursuit of one aim,
keeping us clean, fed, cared for
in this infinite plot,
grand gritty kingdom of saints.
I'm sorry:
bittersweet and nostalgic,
towards the accidentally misplaced

names and WhatsApp contacts
 perhaps - or apparently - not rooted in fate,
 my favorite Texas forgotten on a plane,
 hopefully now strapped to other loving feet,
 trekking onwards, charting
 new paths, aware around Delhi;
 not needing me.
 also abandoned without apology:
 the trauma, fears,
 negativity,
 heartbreak,
 absorption,
 expectations,
 all stamped into Dublin streets
 or tossed overboard, a ferry off Athens,
 vomited figuratively
 into a journal, then tiled water closet
 literally,
 seasick with the movement
 but grateful for journey.
 at first, the harder my feet pound,
 the lighter my head lifts.
 the worse my back hurts, less my heart aches;
 through the maze, I could skip.
 but then my hair rustles with new whispers as
 Lost recedes and Found's released, and
 I lust again for packs bursting
 with excitement to free.
 my numerology, destiny number, is eight since you asked.
 I'm a Gemini sun, Capricorn moon,
 and while I can't articulate what that means,
 I guess I seek balance and fulfillment
 strolling secondhand stores for secondhand stories,
 collected like alternative records and late-night foreign film scenes,
 and I know we connect signs and spirits significantly
 to determine where we're supposed to see and be.

Outro.

Maestro's Last Symphony (Play on)

POET

Maestro, play to me

POET & SANTIAGO

Cigarettes on fire,
a scent stirred with that of smoked street treats,

POET & COVADONGA

The gloss across fresh boarding passes,

POET & MADRE

Fresh fruit to slurp immersed in
pure jasmine breeze.

POET

Play to me
the challenges and triumphs,
highs and lows, bright nights, dim days.
The moments I'll recall-

POET, COVADONGA, & SANTIAGO

I'll frickin' miss.

POET

In eight years or for eternity.
The seasons, arcs, and encores
introducing this outro finale.
But Maestro, play to me also
the rests, pause, stillness in-between.

MADRE

Silence observed in private plazas,

COVADONGA

Balconies during drizzle, not outpour,

SANTIAGO

Walks along water while what spills from

those skies
and traveling eyes explores

POET

The salt and sand (or cement),
and makes their way to grander pools,
old and new, with science and faith,
through cycles and miracles.
The lone notes piercing quiet with pride,
before fireworks and crescendos cue,
stimulating and impassioned
as embrace long-overdue.

(COVADONGA “returns” and envelops MADRE in a hug.)

SANTIAGO

Excuse me, Maestro, my dude.
Will all this not
sound like, as cacophonous as screws?

POET

Or worse: predictable?
The repetition and rhyme scheme?

SANTIAGO

(In agreement with POET)

That we have to... Release.

(By now, POET has packed a bag, prepared to depart.)

MADRE & COVADONGA

(To POET and SANTIAGO)

Do you not treasure rhythm you relate to?
Lyrics you remember but thought you forgot?

POET & SANTIAGO

I guess.

MADRE

Then breathe, listen, repeat.
 Before left you mistake for lost.

(COVADONGA takes POET's place in her childhood bed, cozies up.)

MADRE, con't.

Now, Maestro?

MADRE & COVADONGA

Carry on.

ALL

Play it all, at once, to me.

COVADONGA & SANTIAGO

My thrilling ballad...

COVADONGA & MADRE

Our familiar lullaby...

COVADONGA, SANTIAGO, & MADRE

This magic, cosmic, creative dream.

POET

And perhaps we'll laugh, cry, scream,
 but feel deeply balanced, full, complete,
 then coasting to the surface on one big ship,
 sailing at last into peaceful sleep.

(Beat.)

Sweet dreams, friends and strangers.
 Till the next time that we meet.

(EXIT POET.)

(Lights fade, perhaps accompanied by peaceful ASMR and a brief collective meditation. BLACKOUT.)

(End of act. End of story. Sleep well.)