CAST OF CHARACTERS

Old Man ........................................ A man in his middle sixties, bearded, dressed in a casual set of clothes.

Boy 13 years old ............................. Looks like the old man at an earlier age.

Boy 16 years old ............................. Looks like the 13 year old a few years older.

Young Man 20 years old .......... Looks like a young version of old man.

Mother’s voice ............................. Brittle and tired sounding.

Hospital voice ............................. The sort of neutral voice heard over a hospital loudspeaker coming from speaker hanging over the stage.

Chorus One and Two ................. Off stage voices.
At Rise

Scene 1

Stage lights come up on older man, about sixty-eight years old, wearing a beat up sport jacket, a black t-shirt and corduroy pants, sitting on a chair. There is a nightstand with a pen and writing tablet next to it. Across the stage there is a hospital bed. It is empty and curtained in such a way as to be completely obscured.

The man looks around slowly, taking his time, as if he were examining the stage upon which he is sitting.

OLD MAN:

I remember the first time I broke through to another universe. You were dying of cancer and I was locked up in the house with you, day after day. We lived on a hill. When you slept, I would run out of the house and down the hill. When I got to the bottom of it, I knew that I was in another world. That made me an alien, but what did I care. I mean, it seemed right, but again, even then, forty-nine years ago, I couldn’t explain it to anyone. Then, I mean back then, I would pass people on the street and look at them with the eyes I had behind my eyes and notice how much their souls seemed like cardboard.

(pause)

You’re not in the room, but it really doesn’t matter because I’m going to talk to you anyway. Maybe it’s strange, a man of my age talking to his own mother like this, but I don’t know if you’ve been dead forty-two years, dead since yesterday, not dead at all: I just can’t always tell. That’s just how it is now.

You don’t understand what I mean, do you? Being cryptic, that’s what I’m always accused of. Ok, it’s like this now: imagine a city, well, more like a suburb of a city, and right next to it, the suburb of another city. The city limits are indecipherable. I mean, you can’t tell when you have gone from one suburb to the next except for this vague feeling that lasts for a while and then, like a fog, evaporates. When it is gone, you don’t know anything more than when you first entered it; maybe, you know less.

The two suburbs have everything and nothing in common. Here’s how it works. Lets say that for fifty or so years I only lived in one suburb because I had bought a house and I needed to pay it off. In fact, I needed to do a lot of things: earning money not the least of them, but it wasn’t the most important thing either. Anyway, time goes by and the suburb seems like a decent place to live and not having any choice seems only to make it seem that much better… most of the time.

Of course, every once in a while I think about another place, but the thoughts sort of fall apart because this voice inside my head keeps saying, “what difference would moving make?” Finally, I just put my head down and trudge onward, day after day, in the suburb I always lived in.
Part Object: A One Act Play  
By Gene Alexander

Then one day someone comes to my door and says “here, here is something which will make it possible for you to stop having to live in this place, something that will turn necessity into possibility.”

Of course, I accept.

Then I go to work and on the way back home I cross over the city limits and everything that looks the same feels oddly different. Forget it. That’s what I say to myself. Forget it. I say this because the differences are subtle and I can’t be sure what I would say to anyone about them. I feel like I just stepped into an elevator shaft in which there was no elevator.

All right. I get home and now I go through the motions. I act as if, as if I was still in suburb number one, the one of necessity. But I’m not. I’m in suburb number two, one that looks like number one, but is meaningless. Yes, meaningless. (short pause) Isn’t that the right word?

Ok. I should be able to analyze this and get to the bottom of it. I walk in the house. My wife is there. No, not my first wife, the one you met before you died. This is my third wife, the one I had my second son with. She says hello and how was your day. I answer her but it’s like I’m just tacking up an ad for something on a bulletin board no one ever reads. (short pause) She doesn’t notice. Forget it.

(pause)

Ok. Here’s the hard part. I’m pretty sure that I can’t get back to the first suburb. Let’s say, at least for the moment, I can’t. Then I live here. I try to explain. It must be you, she’ll think. Then, if I keep talking about it, she’ll get annoyed. You’re depressed, she’ll say and suggest that I talk to my therapist about it. Can you guess how that feels? It’s like if I said I am a sixty-eight year old white male and my wife looked at me and said “Maybe you ought to talk to your therapist about it.”

All right. I don’t blame her. I mean, not only am I cryptic, but I am a bit of an hysterical as well. If I have an idea that seems a bit off, it’s just because I imbue my world with a kind of reality that isn’t really justified. But I don’t want to face that that’s what I do because it would throw me into facing some horrible emptiness that I am trying to avoid at any cost, which, obviously, would be a much more terrifying experience. But isn’t that the point, I want to shout. Isn’t that the point, that there really is that emptiness and that it isn’t pretty but it isn’t ugly either and that the worst of it is it looks just like the thing that was in the other suburb so that I’m the only one who can tell? And don’t you think that’s pretty damn terrifying? Really?

(pause)

When astronomers consider the age of the universe, they need to look no further than that moment in which I passed from one world into another. At that point in time, two universes were created simultaneously. In fact, whenever one universe is created another almost twin universe is created as well. This is a law of nature. It is fundamental. They move together. Like everything else, they move on.
and they do it in synch; that is they move on the same but different. Sometimes I wonder whether or not I'm the only one who understands this.

Scene 2

The stage is bare except for a dining room chair facing at a diagonal towards the audience and placed stage right center, a small night stand with a writing tablet and pen next to it, and situated stage left center, a hospital bed, partly propped up but empty.

When the lights come up, a young boy of thirteen is sitting on the chair. He is looking around expectantly; his hands are frozen in his lap. He turns to the audience and begins to speak but before he can a voice comes as if from a loudspeaker in a hospital waiting room.

CHORUS VOICE ONE:

We don’t know how it chooses its destination, or why in the cellular congress a vote is taken, but the body, with its battling constituencies, wars incessantly, until battlegrounds are marked, give way, and chronic sites, with millions of partisans, are established. How long after death does the battle continue? Why does the enemy die when we die? What is the sense of such a battle? Is it like all wars, painful silly little moments in an unstoppable wheel of time? We don’t know.

The boy looks around for the source of the voice, almost rises from his chair, and then sits back down, shaken.

BOY 13:

You said when the glint from that distant star reached earth, I could drink the milk from your breasts. Standing beneath the eaves, waiting for the light to make a syrup on my tongue, I laid there, mouth open, raised to the night. I watched a nebulae of shadows spread across the sky of your blouse. The milk drop stars began to fall. I prepared for illumination. But now, when the cool light leaves your skin, what am I to a distant star? The triumph of my patient tongue, held back breath, waited to feel the first glow from that far off spring, as heavy as the moons of Neptune, as tardy as the overdue thirst of sea. You loosed yourself and, bent over, spilled the light of luminous space, drop by infinite drop, in a gesture of beginning.

HOSPITAL VOICE:

This is the same hospital in which you came to see and speak. Here is where your eyes and the reputation of reality slept. (The nurse said “to sting and scour” and wiped the jell of emergence across the site.) Here your eyes were sealed, the incandescent visions burned and dark and baffled images
battled. (The scrubs said “to bite and nettle” and lay the gauze of hope against the windows.) The voltage of suddenness, that vacuum in the flesh, the picture turning inside out.

**BOY 13:**

I remember! The doctor who stole darkness from me sang loudly!

This bazaar of loosened orbs, the long needles with their metallic colors and silver button tops, were hairpins in our faces, a litany of explanations at the center of things.

**HOSPITAL VOICE:**

In both the darkness and then the puncture came the light. Was that the tear of becoming that you longed for or the rupture that you feared? Buried so deeply in your unfinished face was searing pain followed by light.

**BOY 13:**

I have seen her! I have held her! Aphrodite, Asphodel, apostle in a veil of leaves, apprentice to prosperous buds opened by the temple gate. I snapped her stem and fingered her branches, traced the shaft of my stark trunk into her fecund earth.

I have seen her and pressed her goddess door ajar. I have opened her, still screaming, the way lilies scream, their petals torn and tossed aside, their sad lips wiffed and wiffled and wiped clean. I have seen her! When I floated on the pond of my solitude, floating on a lotus pad, I was carried by the flood that took my breath to bed. I have seen her thrice slashed mouth form the debased moans, heard the unbidden words that spoke her open, called the coming of the world: fish!, fowl!, broad backed beast!, out from the water and the razor grass, starved, spittle-grey and bubbled, with liver colored lips, and raw tongue yearning. I have seen her and have buried so much of me deep inside that which I have seen. And I have burned so much of me about the chorten of her wanting. And I have finished myself within her, and finished my hunger at her table, finished my hunger at her breast; finished my hunger and hated my hunger and would loathe my hunger on her lolling lap.

**MOTHER’S VOICE:**

Could you close the drapes and sit here while I fall asleep?

**HOSPITAL VOICE:**

Her blouse, a flat disbalance, faltering breath, mislaid flesh. She is still in her bed. The Vicodin, the Codeine, the morphine pills, a glass of water, an absent breath, a lava field. Her private weeping is calling out to the confusion of your body.

**BOY 13:**

*Gets up and walks carefully over to the hospital bed.*
I came back hoping you were asleep, slipped into an hour of not needing help.

The long hallway to your bedroom, the half-closed door; I wanted to run to places radiation cannot reach... crawl spaces, imaginary dens, box-furnished attics, that secret room above the garage.

**MOTHER’S VOICE:**

Don’t go out with your friends today, sweetheart. Stay with me and we’ll do something together.

**CHORUS VOICE TWO:**

Things to do: listen to uncomfortable breaths, watch her struggle, get more water, bring in the mail, find that magazine, watch her eat crackers and drink ice water, fetch cigarettes, fetch matches, stay home, go through your step father’s suit jackets, looking for change.

**MOTHER’S VOICE:**

Promise me you’ll never smoke.

**BOY 13:**

Your blouse! It’s half flat in its white, retired shame. I am looking out through your bedroom window and outside, in so many clouds, that missing shape.

**CHORUS VOICE ONE:**

Flesh as if on loan to flesh, as if on loan to a dream, the last simple pleasure of a body indentured to dying. It is no matter. The gods. No splattering breath upon the window, no crime that goes unpunished. Return is another impossible feather chosen by the sun.

**CHORUS VOICE TWO:**

Mothers die in certain postures. Its all a dark flurry of hope, confiscated and buried, the head turned eastward.

**BOY 13:**

Walks back to his chair and sits down. He picks up the pen and tablet on the table next to him and starts writing.

Dear mother, your spirit of small intent is a light, the frost upon the road, a grieving. Where are the breasts of a mother when she dies? I know we are not finished yet. Loved ones keep disappearing over the edge of time. Last night, together, we watched the moon fade. Your eyes were as pale as your hope.
Then, for a moment, you brightened and your onion-skinned breath softened to lamb’s wool. The color of light in your eyes...it was like night time caught in a mountain tarn.

**CHORUS VOICE ONE:**

The way mothers die – that loss – as if the tree line was only an idea, somewhere on a path, miles from an open window.

**CHORUS VOICE TWO:**

Show wind an opening in the branches and not even a child can pass without tearing off a leaf.

Scene 3

*Stage goes black and then the lights come up and a new boy, now about sixteen, is standing behind the chair in which the thirteen year old is still seated.*

**BOY 16:**

If I am smoke

**CHORUS VOICES ONE & TWO:**

lost out into a vacuum

**BOY 16:**

called the world by some

**CHORUS VOICES ONE & TWO:**

because you sought internment outside the sphere of traffic

**BOY 16:**

I practice myself, knowing what awaits me.

**CHORUS VOICES ONE & TWO:**

as if you were breath

**BOY 16:**

Sucked out into the one body I thought I was entitled to cast aside

**CHORUS ONE & TWO:**
as if obvious, as if taken alone

**BOY 16:**

she could cry all night, smoke and breath and spirit

**CHORUS VOICES ONE & TWO:**

somewhere, out there, in what they called living.

**BOY 16:**

This is murder turned sideways. This is the place where her smoke plays surf with the windows. I am familiar with .....Did you say something....?

**MOTHER’S VOICE:**

If I am sleeping, go ahead and eat without me...

**CHORUS VOICES ONE & TWO:**

Out there, somewhere, in what we consider matter.

16 year old walks around chair and pulls 13 year old boy up violently and drags him over to the bed. The 13 year old tries to look away but the 16 year old holds his head so that he cannot turn away from looking toward the bed.

**BOY 16:**

(speaking to the bed)

On your flat of ugly sheets, where cancer ripped your breasts, you called me golden-lover-honey boy while you leaned the great puked pot of your rotting body over its plague-stained edge, needing me to witness the loosed refulgence of your scorched bowels. Or sitting, legs akimbo on the wobbly john, sent me for toilet paper to wipe that oft-used hither abandoned to the slab of absorbent pads, piss blotters for your bloodless womb. Did you have to let me know you were fucking your oncologist? Under the sun gun burn barrel x-rays that turned your flesh turtle green, your hair fried and fell into the Jell-o. Then you threw yourself across the room screaming

**MOTHER’S VOICE:**

“I will not be hideous.”

**CHORUS VOICE TWO:**
She needed you to know she wanted you. In her hungry psychotic dying lust she needed to offer up the mother she had been. But her flesh was a tv dinner, a panicked vamping girl doll fade out. To her your backing off was the abandonment of every desperate, hungry node, as if, in letting go, you had dropped the erotic rope that dangled her above the dry abyss.

**BOY 16:**

And did she have to let me know that my step father was a premature ejaculator? That my father hated sex? That most men couldn’t fuck her right?

**CHORUS VOICES ONE & TWO:**

You ran.

*The 13 year old breaks free and starts running wildly about the stage.*

**BOY 16:**

Glutted with things I never wanted to know.

**BOY 13:**

Filled with things I couldn’t understand.

**BOY 16:**

I ran from the ward, the bedroom

**BOY 13:**

the house

**BOY 16:**

down the corridors

**BOY 13:**

the escape-hatch hill

**BOY 16:**

to the neighborhood stores

**BOY 13:**
the donut shop

BOY 16:

then across the avenue

BOY 13:

to the endless playground

13 year old suddenly stops running, faces 16 year old.

BOY 16:

where I pressed myself against the cyclone fence as if to sieve what divided us, cock, cunt, burns, scars, desire, repulsion, fantasies, fears, the ticking clock of hope and despair, and the idolatry between generations,

BOY 13:

everything that separated us then and forever

BOY 16:

from having a normal life.

A moment of silence fills the stage.

CHORUS VOICE TWO:

Entering this training, this ouroborus snagged on the hook of time, you prepared for the eventualities, for all the small godheads of error. You followed her illness, becoming something urgent, a deadbolt or a message from a fire, dreadful, encouraging censure, a seizure, a suture, a collision of light, one shape, one would-be shape, then collapse.

16 year old goes to the chair, sits down and takes up the tablet and pen.

BOY 16:

Dear Mother, although you are dying, my mistake. Loose skin covering all the sacs? “Impossible”, you'd say remembering the inconveniences, practicing at the dining room table what I can no longer consider as truth. Of course, I tell you good night promises and, caught in a fragile web of hope, stop for those small errors I’m still sorry for. Dear mother, I am writing to tell you that vacuum you will leave...its wet streets are still slippery and if the breast cancer really does kill you....well, I think I’ll know error when I see it.
CHORUS VOICE TWO:

Beyond the range of arrows, prepare for eminent rain. Be no longer aggrieved.

What drives those dark clouds though occluded skies has passed in a weather of time no longer present. Bow to the wind with shuttered eyes, catch the air ensconced in solitude. She is watching the moonlight on the dark lake’s skin, in this absence, just before a dream.

HOSPITAL VOICE:

The surgeon says it is dreaming season. We cannot close her chest back up or next year, in the wrong shape of sleep, salmon may not return to spawn. I am watching her arched back, he promises. It is flashing in the halogen sun.

CHORUS VOICE ONE:

You have your fishing pole in hand above her throbbing stream. If you fail....accept this dying.

BOY 16:

When visiting time is over, I promise to return.

Scene 4

Stage goes black. Lights come back up and a twenty year old is standing next to the thirteen year old with an arm around him. The sixteen year old is sitting in the chair.

HOSPITAL VOICE:

Here’s to surgery and its offspring: small incisions into the curious things of the flesh which lay about within reach of sharp items we won playing doctor. Are you surprised that it was a competition? Who could cut closest to the cord without paralyzing the toes? Or peel back the cornea or cut the moons from fingernails and leave the greater parts intact? Today we won’t answer your questions. Tomorrow we just might order an autopsy. What good is your imagination? Only the morgue drawer of flesh and answers seems to count. Your questions don’t really matter... the game just seems to end.

A moment of silence on stage.

BOY 16:

The gentle rain has hid the window and her bed is shuttered against loss. Nevertheless, she is slipping away, in a house full of strangers, in a house full of friends. They poke briefly into her room of dying light and then speak no more about her. Each vigil keeper has a task. I am her son. I am meant for truth, not death and not for speaking death nor breathing death nor staring at the weakening pulse of
Part Object: A One Act Play
By Gene Alexander

dead. I am not for loss, no. Nor death’s grief, no. Nor death’s hate. And yet, and yet I am part of
death’s agreement.

YOUNG MAN 20:

She lay in bed most of Saturday in her burnt skin and bathrobe. Her green gown was suddenly open at
the top.

MOTHER’S VOICE:

I’m fifty-four and not much else.

YOUNG MAN 20:

I opened the curtain to let in the winter light. I was born on March thirteenth. After that my mother
died of cancer. I heard the phone ring. It was the hospital.

MOTHER’S VOICE:

I am dead.

YOUNG MAN 20:

It wasn’t my imagination.

MOTHER’S VOICE & YOUNG MAN 20:

I stopped breathing.

MOTHER’S VOICE:

I am fifty-four.
(pause)

BOY 13:

They kept the ward cold to stop infections. The blankets were homely. They made me sad.

BOY 16:

Doctors were being paged by voices full of plain fact.

CHORUS VOICE TWO:

The morphine held. She took a last breath, fluttered gently and left. Her staff of friends, lining the
fluorescent hall, fell into each other’s arms. It was too soon but the room was needed. Each of them, at
heart, was felled. The time... five forty-seven pm. The fog was rolling in. The world outside was nearly gone.

YOUNG MAN 20:

Once again I was a child whose care stopped this side of a gesture. I remembered my mother’s breast. It was stolen at the hospital. I closed my eyes and remembered. And wept.

A silent moment on stage.

YOUNG MAN 20:

You are lying on your death bed. The dusk lights the bay beyond your window.

BOY 16:

The friends you love are here.

YOUNG MAN 20:

In this house of rising moons we come to end the scattering of stars and time. Your seasons are finished, a terminus of tears and tides, ebbed heartache.

CHORUS VOICE TWO:

It is the Ganges, burning orange in the sunset, the fiery robes of friends, of all those who remain. They are crossing the universe with you, prayer by prayer. Your burnt skin, ashen in departure, is being washed, anointed.

YOUNG MAN 20:

Beyond the window, white egrets rise by the hundreds against the setting sun. We circle back, with you, together, and all alone, as though our own departure was death itself.

BOY 13:

But I can’t leave.

CHORUS VOICES ONE & TWO:

The moment holds.

BOY 16:

You said everything moves on.

YOUNG MAN 20:
Part Object: A One Act Play  
By Gene Alexander

Keeps going into morning

BOY 13:

You said everything moves on, ...but does it?

Lights out.

Scene 5

The old man is alone on stage. The hospital bed is gone. The chair and the nightstand are still there. The old man looks about the stage in exactly the way he did when the play opened. He gets up from his chair and paces slowly about until he comes to the place where the bed was standing. He mimes pulling back the curtains and reaching out at pulling covers up to the chin of someone who he imagines is there. Then he kisses her on the forehead, looks down and sighs. He goes over to the chair and drags it to a place alongside where the bed would be. He sits down and puts a hand on the bed. Then he sits back again.

OLD MAN:

The ripples of your dying seem to go on forever. I just don’t feel like talking about it any more. I don’t want it to be the big bang of my character. Sometimes I realize I led my life as if your dying was over. It made me feel like an adult. Now, strangely, I feel like an old man. I popped back up out of that elevator shaft and all the time between then and now has disappeared. I’m not who I was then, I’m barely who I am now.

Anyway, I wanted to tell you how wrong you were about this ‘moving on’ idea. You don’t move on. You appear and disappear from one suburb to another and as much as it looks like a real life, a continuous line of days and nights, it’s not. I don’t like knowing this. Popping up here and there, without a plan, without intention, is chilling. The ripples of your dying keep appearing. Appearing, disappearing, appearing again. I wish I could stop it.... but I can’t. You just die in a new suburb again and again and I hear it from one day to the next like a siren whose wail is the one thing which exists in both worlds simultaneously.

End of Play.
Gene Alexander is a psychotherapist in San Francisco, with an abiding interest in poetry and play writing. He sees his work as a way of deepening the experiences that we encounter in our daily practices and giving them a life outside the consultation room.