

Still Far Still Wide

By Dan Bray

Act I, Scene 1

September, 1849. Providence, Rhode Island.

Sound of church bells; a crow calls out. Edgar Poe enters carrying a valise and wearing his army jacket over a shabby suit.

As he emerges, Emily Dickinson speaks from the darkness.

Emily: “My wheel is in the dark,—
I cannot see a spoke,
Yet know its dripping feet
Go round and round.”

Upstage, Helen Whitman appears, veiled and draped in black.

Helen: Edgar.

They embrace. From the darkness, Virginia “Clementine” Poe speaks.

Clementine: “My foot is on the tide—
An unfrequented road,
Yet have all roads
A clearing at the end.”

They go in. Her home is lit by a few candles. A table, dressed with the tools of a séance, is set.

Edgar: Helen of a thousand dreams— How I feared you would not be here when I returned.

Helen: Never doubt me, harbinger. If your soul grew dark and lost its way — Believe, Edgar, mine would find it. *(Beat)* Tea?

Edgar: Oh, yes please!

Helen: *(As she works)* So, tell me: how did audiences take to “the greatest poem ever written”?

Edgar: Oh god, Helen, please, you know I said those words when I was... not myself.

Helen: Well, I just hope it went better than that time at the Lyceum.

Edgar: As though it could be worse. For once, I dare to recite a poem that does not involve a talking bird, and the world reacts as if I shot the president!

Helen: The vulgar herd can never understand.

Edgar: (*Growing agitated*) That I was born in that godforsaken city is perchance the greatest cruelty committed against me!

Helen: Don't exaggerate. It's predictable.

He begins to fling open the windows.

Helen: Edgar, it's freezing out—

Edgar: I have such a noise about my head!

Helen: Come, rest. You are home.

Edgar: Home... (*Noticing the séance gear with snobbery*) What is all this, anyway?

Helen: I had the sitters over tonight. You just missed them.

Edgar: Not how *I* would have put it.

Helen: Now, now. Sit. Rest.

Edgar: If only I could rest a moment.

Helen: What now?

Edgar: I must be gone in the morning.

Helen: I do hope these lectures pay well enough to justify your being carted across the country each week like a Barnum monstrosity.

Edgar: No doubt the circus would pay better.

Helen: Where to now?

Edgar: The Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in Massachusetts.

Helen: Need I be jealous?

Edgar: Of my corrupting nuns? Maybe.

Edgar yawns suddenly.

Edgar: On second thought, it sounds exhausting.

Helen: You've had the dream again.

Edgar: Of course.

Helen: Your child-bride in the grass?

Edgar: Helen, please.

Silence.

Edgar: No grass this time, no moonlit fields... Just a little room.

Helen: A cell?

Edgar: There did seem a desire to be free of it...

Helen: Does this vision not madden you?

Edgar: I cannot give one nightmare priority above the others.

Sitting before the séance table:

Helen: Let me tell your fortune.

Edgar: Oh please, don't make me waste what little time we have together on parlour games!

Insulted, she spins away from Edgar and takes out her ether-soaked handkerchief.

Edgar: Helen—

Helen: You drink your poison; let me huff mine!

Edgar: (*Seizing her wrist*) This toxin will waste your brain. You're no use to me dull.

Helen: How can you be so stubborn?

Edgar: Decades of practice.

Helen: Are there no mournful memories yet to share? No questions left unasked? I can weave my mystic spell and bring Virginia back.

Edgar: I have nothing to say to my wife.

Helen: Then why have you dreamt of her every night for the past two years?

Edgar is silent.

Helen: Please, Edgar.

Edgar: Very well.

Helen: Wonderful!

Edgar: I never thought I would love a spiritualist.

Helen: We are an irresistible lot. Now, shut the window.

Edgar: You're not going to lock me up in a Spirit Cabinet, are you?

Helen: And leave you with my sherry? Unlikely. To your perch, darling.

Edgar: If you spew ectoplasm, I'm leaving. (*Sits*) How does this work?

Helen: When the spirit enters the room, it shall ring this bell—

Edgar: And at what point do we throw the chicken bones?

Helen: (*Ignoring him*) That spirit shall be our guide beyond the veil. Once we have established contact with the discarnate soul, we shall use this.

From a dark box, she reveals a small, peculiar, heart-shaped piece of wood.

Edgar: And what, pray tell, is that?

Helen: This is my planchette.

Edgar: And what, pray tell, is a planchette?

Helen: (*Inserting a pencil into the device*) The planchette guides the sitter in automatic writing. The spirit moves my hand, leaving a message on this sheet of paper.

Edgar: I never knew you employed a ghost writer, darling.

Helen prepares. Figures appear upstage, drifting through the darkness beyond the table, waiting patiently for the séance to begin.

Helen: *Hic locus est ubi mors gaudet succurrere vitae.*

Edgar: (*Mockingly*) Are the spirits among us?

Helen: Always.

Now, Edgar, in order to make our guide feel welcome, I want you to try something new.

Edgar: And what would that be, my little sibyl?

Helen: I want you to think of a time when you were *happy* to see someone.

He tries to remember. Silence.

Edgar: Give me a moment...

Henry Poe emerges from the chorus, his face still mostly in shadow.

Helen: (*Simultaneously*) Eddy?

Henry: (*Simultaneously*) Eddy! Welcome to Baltimore, you ole pug-ugly!

Helen: What are you remembering?

Edgar: When I was reunited with my brother.

Henry: You remember Virginia.

Clementine steps into the light and curtseys shyly.

Henry: Looks like we're bunkmates!

Edgar: He died in his bed right beside me, with Aunt Maria and Virginia across the room. Coughed until he slipped away, red across his cheek, red along the pillow—

Helen: Put that to a halt. And do not think of Virginia, either. These cogitations will prevent our attempts to breach the Shadowland. Banish them.

Edgar: If I purge the darkness, there'll be nothing left of me.

Helen: Come now. Focus on Henry's face the moment he opened the door.

Henry vanishes. Clementine does not. Helen squeezes Edgar's hands.

Helen: Is there a spirit present?

The spirits lean their faces closer to Edgar and Helen and make atonal noises.

Edgar: I hear nothing.

Helen: But— Oh, do you smell that?

Edgar: What?

Helen: It's... It's like someone's breath.

Edgar: Their *breath*? Jesus Christ, Helen—

Helen: Hush!

She sets her fingers on the planchette and focuses.

All of the spirits — except for Clementine — retreat. She is about to speak when she looks up and sees someone - Newton - in the shadows. He rushes forward swiftly, flicking the bell as he passes the table.

Edgar: Balderdash!

Clementine laughs.

Helen: Peace—

Newton passes again, ringing the bell once more.

Edgar: Where's the magnet? Under the table?

Helen: There is nothing to the bell. Now be silent or the spirit will leave us. *(Beat)* Spirit, we thank you for coming. Will you tell us your name?

Newton retreats into the shadows.

Edgar: I cannot continue the charade. It's charlatanism—

Helen: Silence, it wants to speak. Yes, spirit?

Helen prepares to act as a channel for the spirit. Clementine leans forward again and opens her mouth to speak when she is overcome by a coughing fit. Helen, too, coughs violently.

Edgar: Helen?

Helen: I'm fine— *(Seizing the planchette intensely)* Spirit, please, what should we call you?

Clementine touches Helen's hand. The planchette glides swiftly across the paper.

Helen: "Clementine"? Does that name mean anything to you?

Edgar: It's immaterial, Helen. The planchette moves through Ideomotor Response: we ourselves adjust it without even realiz—

Helen: So explain "Clementine."

Edgar is silent.

Helen: Allow your breathing to synchronize with mine.

Edgar: This is a humbug.

Helen: Try.

Helen closes her eyes and refocuses.

Helen: Spirit, are you still there?

Silence. Clementine moves behind Helen. Newton appears at a distance behind Edgar.

Edgar: She's gone.

Helen: Clementine?

Edgar turns from the table, distracted. Slowly, Clementine guides Helen's hand back to the planchette.

Edgar: "Broken is the golden bowl, the spirit flown forever—"

The light changes. Helen and Clementine speak as one. Newton joins in - fainter than the others. Combined, the voice is otherworldly and disjointed. The planchette flies across the paper.

Helen/Clementine/Newton: Behind Me — dips Eternity —
Before Me — Immortality —
Myself — the Term between —
Death but the Drift of Eastern Gray,
Dissolving into Dawn away.

The spell complete, Clementine lowers Helen's head to the table.

Edgar: Helen?

Helen: (Weakly) My ether...

He brings her the handkerchief; she inhales deeply and revives.

Edgar: Well?

Helen: This "Clementine"... It seems as though she is caught between two worlds... the "term between"...

Edgar: What would a spirit be doing between worlds?

Helen: Delivering a message. Forewarning mischief. Waiting to guide another spirit from this world back to hers.

Edgar: This is madness.

Helen: Can you still not acknowledge the existence of spiritual influences? At least trembily?

Edgar: You swear that was not an act?

Helen: You think I orchestrated all this just to trick you?

Edgar: *(Taking the sheet with Clementine's message)* I do not know what to believe. These verses—

Helen: Not mine. Nor the handwriting.

Edgar: I shall never forget them. *(Then, suddenly, leaping to his feet)* Can we open a window? It gets so damn tight in here!

He throws open the windows.

Helen: I wonder who this Clementine could be. I had expected Virginia—

Edgar: I need a drink.

Helen: Edgar, no—

Edgar: I am so puckered I can hardly stand it. Look at my hand! Just a drop—

He pours himself a glass of cognac. Helen tries to stop him.

Helen: Come now! There's no reason to be nervous—

Edgar: That is very easy for you to say.

Helen: Who is Clementine?

Edgar: I don't know!

Helen: Edgar!

Edgar: *I don't know, goddammit!*

Helen: Don't be angry, pet. Just tell me who.

Edgar stares her down and goes to throw back the drink, when he seizes suddenly and crashes to the ground. Helen tries to revive him before rushing offstage. Clementine steps into the light and crosses to stand over Edgar.

*On the table, the planchette begins to move of its own accord. Beyond, in the shadows, Emily sits with pen and paper and she writes, her hand making strange, erratic motions as she does so— motions not dissimilar to the movement of the planchette. She writes noiselessly throughout the following images:
Henry re-appears in the shadows.*

Henry: Jesus, she's your goddamn cousin!

Clementine gives a little cough.

Henry: And she's practically still a child!

Clementine coughs again, more fiercely. The planchette stops.

Henry: What d'you think Mum would say if she heard you now?

Eliza Poe of 1809 appears, pregnant and vexed.

Eliza: For fuck's sake! Muddy!

Muddy enters, harried.

Muddy: What? Is it time?

Eliza: Help me outta my corset.

Muddy: Why you got it done up so tight? No wonder the little devil's trying to get out!

She unlaces Eliza's corset and yells at an unseen group of spectators.

Muddy: Can someone find that good-for-nothing brother of mine? (*Placatingly, to Eliza*) He's probably just out looking for little Henry.

Eliza: Right, in the bottom of a bottle— Can someone open the goddamn window?! It's a furnace in here!

Muddy: There's glaciers in the streets—

Eliza: Then where'd all these flies come from?

Muddy: Now, Liza—

Eliza: Ssh! Listen—

Muddy: What're you—

Eliza: Doggone it, that's my cue! Stitch me up, Muddy!

Muddy: You can't go onstage with a baby falling out of you.

Eliza: It's the fifth goddamn act! I'll finish the show buck-naked if I—

She coughs uncontrollably. Blood appears on the sleeve of her gown. She swoons, but Muddy catches her.

Muddy: *(Barking at her spectators)* Someone find David!

Eliza: I knew you Poes would be the death of me! Let me go!

Muddy: Listen, it's coming. Your baby's almost here. Just breathe and we'll have you up and dancing for tomorrow's matinee.

Jeers and hissing.

Eliza: Listen—

Muddy: Just breathe.

Deep uneven breaths through the jeers. Muddy makes a tent with Eliza's skirts and picks up a long, draconian instrument. She plunges it up and into Eliza. Darkness.

Henry: She's your goddamn cousin!

Eliza screams.

Henry: She's practically a child!

Helen screams.

Edgar stumbles backwards into light, in front of his mother. Eliza sits up in a flurry of undergarments, the shadow of a man between her legs.

Eliza: What are you doing in here?

The man rushes off. Helen shrieks again.

Eliza: Get out!

Edgar tries to breathe, to get away, but dark shapes close in around him.

Helen: Edgar!

Eliza: Now!

Edgar: No—

Clementine spews blood across her dress and falls to her knees before Newton, who is looking at Emily. Austin Dickinson is pulling her away from her writing desk.

Austin: Get your bags. It's time to go—

Emily: But Austin—

Austin: Father needs you home—

Emily: When to return?

Muddy and Helen enter.

Muddy: When did it happen?

Helen: Twenty minutes ago?

Muddy takes Edgar's head in her hands.

Muddy: Eddy! Eddy love! Come back! Can you hear me?

Deep, uneven breaths. Beyond Muddy and Helen, Clementine and Emily circle in the darkness.

Clementine “ ’Tis Miracle before Me — then —”

Emily: “ ’Tis Miracle behind — between —”

Clementine “With Midnight to the North of Her —”

Emily: “And Midnight to the South of Her —”

Muddy: Just breathe!

Edgar awakens.

Edgar: “And Maelstrom — in the Sky —”

Darkness. The wind blows.