Many years ago, my husband Martin Chervin wrote a one-woman play entitled: Myself, Alma Mahler. This was produced under the aegis of the Mahler Society of New York City at a theatre in Columbia University. The actress was Judith Barcroft. The audience was delighted. Here is an excerpt from one response to the play:

"A remarkable thing and unlike anything I've read: what a tour de force….It got me to listen to Mahler again."

Myself, Alma Mahler was then taken up by an actress, also a professor of Theatre Arts, Pam Fields with quite a number of performances through the years in the Phoenix area. She is still performing it and you can get a sense of her and of the play by going to Pam Fields www.myalmashow.com/index.html.

Here is a typical reaction to Pam Field's performance: "A superb production! Gustav would have enjoyed having me in the audience as I became so entwined in the music and dialogue that I wanted to stand up and shout into the heavens."

The play has the widow Alma giving lectures about her husband. Gustav's "voice" in response is his music on stereo or played in piano version. With lots of humor and histrionics Alma tells what it was really like to be the wife of Gustav. But by the end the beauty of Mahler's music "wins" the battle of the sexes. Myself, Alma Mahler, has been appreciated greatly not only by Mahlerites but also by those interested in the nature of marriage, feminists, and widows.

I, the widow of the author of the play, Martin Chervin, am putting the written version of Myself, Alma Mahler on a link. This is with a view to attracting readers and also actresses who might want to perform it. There is no charge for reading the play or performing the play. But let me know if you are performing it so I can be glad: Ronda Chervin - chervinronda@gmail.com
MYSELF, ALMA MAHLER

A lectern, microphone, water jug and glass attend the arrival of tonight’s lecturer--Alma Mahler, widow of Gustav Mahler, the celebrated composer. Off to one side, but prominent, is a super-life-sized portrait of her subject, looking gravely and speculatively over the whole proceedings.

She is late, as will become apparent when the lights come up on stage and nobody appears. To cloak that embarrassment, the management fills the gap by playing the first movement, the ALMA theme, of Mahler’s Sixth symphony through the theater’s sound system.

As the music reaches the cow-bells, Alma rushes in, immediately taking command, examining the set-up before coming to a pause before the Mahler portrait.

ALMA

Cow bells, yet.

(observ ing it from many angles)

You say: MY TIME WILL COME!

It came! It’s here!

Bravissimo! You have become an industry!

(confronting her audience)

Kind of grim, isn’t he?

(back to the portrait)

Underneath, lost. Lost and searching, like your music.

Sad, romantic, controlled before it leaps.

A glimmer of light, then -

CONSCIOUSNESS IN SPACE.
Yes, Gustav?

(As if in reply, we hear the ending of the First Movement of the Sixth. Alma makes her way to the podium, bemused but relaxing visibly as she looks into the audience, returning stare for stare, seeing a familiar face, nodding—in complete self-possession.)

I introduce myself.

Should I say Alma Schindler?

My father’s name.

He was an important Austrian painter.

But who would come to a lecture by Alma Schindler?

So, here I am.

Alma MAHLER.

His wife! My husband!

(Now, we can examine her more closely. No doubt, she is well along in years—vintage years with body and flavor—erect and well-preserved. She affects her self-image with a velveteen coat, a long scarf, a wide-brimmed hat and the unselfconscious flair of Bohemia. Of course, the Viennese accent, while charming, should be non-obtrusive.)

Yet the dead are so jealous of their prerogatives

Is it because they remember, once they had also been alive? I suppose I should now add Alma Mahler.

WERFEL.

He, too! Also, I was the wife of Franz Werfel, the great novelist.

‘Song of Bernadette’—you must know him.

Should I leave out poor Walter? Another genius!

Walter was GROPIUS—architect and founder of the Bauhaus school.

Blame or praise him for the modern look of your big cities.

I bore his child. My daughter, Manon.
Archly

Alma Mahler—Gropius—Werfel!

Breakfast, lunch, dinner! In between, one tends to snack!

My! Oh, my! Oscar Kokoschka! Hardly a snack!

The Crown Prince of Expressionism!

This one lasted, let me see, three years? Three years of sturm und drang.

When I left, he had a doll’s likeness made of me, taking the empty place

I had left in his bed.

But, it’s Mahler you came to hear about. How we do digress!

(places a European style briefcase on the lectern and begins skimming through sheaves of notes and papers)

I am looking for a very, very important letter, written in his own hand.

More!

The smudge of ink with his fingerprints! So much of him is there!

(not finding it)

Oh, well! It will find itself. Meanwhile, about myself a little—yes?

I watched your faces from behind the curtain a moment before I entered.

WHAT! IS SHE STILL ALIVE?

Will they wheel her in on ice?

Nein! It’s only an actress playing ME! Believe what you please.

Give it time!

Soon, a string will come down, dangling a black widow spider with a hearty appetite for genius. La femme fatale! The Eternal Widow!
EWIG!

Eternal! Aha! Here we come!

One of Gustav’s favorite words!

Ewig! Eternal!

Here, if you please, the first clue.

(faces the poster)

All right, Gustav! Your letter!

(rifflles loosely through the briefcase once more, apparently not searching too hard)

Bear with me, please.

More Mahler than Schindler--I promise you. The letter, more of his music.

(nods toward Mahler. As if in reply, the Andante movement of the Sixth Symphony begins)

I promise, everything you came for. Even more! Names!

You want names?

All the great and famous that can crowd into one life. And I am not finished yet!

Painters, especially, went wild over me.

I mentioned Kokoschka--but surely you know Klimt!

Adored as he was by so many women, he followed me to Venice, catching up to me in the Piazza San Marco, pleading: “Come! Come to my studio!”

There is that greatest of modern operas--

Wozzeck.

The composer, Alban Berg, dedicated it to me--to ME!
In his eyes, I was Lulu, Lilith—the fatal temptress who brings desire to madness while crushing men under the weight of their fantasies.

Arnold Schoenberg!

Gerhard Hauptmann!

Richard Strauss! Bruno Walter!

Why go on!

You save up names when you outdistance the lives of your contemporaries.

Leave it at that.

*(leaves the lectern to approach the apron of the stage, establishing a more personal contact with the audience. Music fades out.)*

Now that we have said 'hello' and 'guten tag' to one another, you know me for myself a little better.

Now maybe, we talk like friends and I can share with you some memories, even a few secrets, you know about who.

*(returns to the lectern)*

First! If you please! One point of order!

**THERE WILL BE NO QUESTION AND ANSWER PERIOD!**

And for good reason!

*(shaking her finger at the audience)*

Shameless!

What some people want to know!

Where they poke their noses!

Sniffing!

And that’s less than the half of it!

*(looking up and down the aisles)*
I knew it! The experts are here!

MAHLER SCHOLARS!

They know what I don’t know.

They can tell you—tell me!—things about my own Gustav that make me wonder where my eyes were!

An example, if you please!

I wonder: do you know this about your own husband?

Does he put on one stocking first and then one shoe, or—heaven help me—is it first both stockings, THEN both shoes?

I did not know the answer. They did!

They are able to pin down feelings on top of every note of music he ever wrote—here, a butterfly—there a moth.

Is it any wonder that I feel uncomfortable?

Look!

Look to the seat beside you.

It could be one of them!

Accusing me of not knowing the REAL Mahler!

And, naturally, I begin wondering, was that really Gustav sleeping in my bed?

Or somebody masquerading as my husband?

What reply would you give to these Mahler Scholars?

Like Beethoven to a pesky young musician: Work hard seven more years.

By then, you will realize, you have no talent.

Funny—but not fair!

This much I will grant these Mahler Scholars.

Sometimes, too close is not to see.
Diamonds are born in darkness, working toward the light, unpredictably.

With that, we go all the way back to the Year One of the Twentieth Century when Mahler’s planet just entered my zodiac.

(facing the portrait)

Remember, Gustav?

(MUSIC: main theme, First Symphony, First movement)

The new wine was sparkling in Grinzing!

There were perfumed groves and the grass was soft.

The leaves overhead were green birds dancing in the sky when we raised our heads.

Remember?

Not yet burdened with weltschmerz!

(shakes her head wistfully, finally turning away from the portrait as the spirit of light and carefree sentimentality breaks through once more)

I was in love, one thousand times! The new century was cracking the shell in Vienna. And I tumbled right out of it-fresh from the egg!

How beautiful was Bohemia!

I was impossibly young—unbelievably without experience!

My feet were never still.

In my world, you rubbed your eyes in sheer amazement at the sun pouring into the morning.

You leaped out of bed, opening doors and closets, looking for surprises, trying on new dresses in a room full of mirrors.

What promise for the new day?

As the daughter of a celebrated painter—of course, I flirted with Art and, of course, artists! We watched the world go by our
outdoor cafes, and got drunk on the milk of the new philosophers—Nietzsche, and the irrepressible Schopenhauer.

My own heart, however, was given over totally to music.

I began composing my own songs!

(Music fades)

Only the night before, I had been in the camp of the Wagnerites holding forth against Brahms.

In those dear, dead days before politics took charge, we fought over music in Vienna. We ate, drank, slept with it.

Just then, I was sipping hot chocolate in the late morning, feeling tired but exhilarated, quietly recollecting the tirades of the previous night.

Just then, the door bell rings.

(We hear it ring.)

My maid brings in a calling card.

(pantomimes receiving the card, reading it, acting delighted and surprised)

Herr Director Gustav Mahler! Vienna StaatsOpera!

Calling on me!

(To the maid)

Wait! Let me catch my breath!

(Her hands move to her head as she pats and sets her hair in place with nervous touches. As she steps back from the podium, the curtain rises on a time-dividing setting: in the foreground, the speaker’s stand is the immediate present; the past is represented by the Schindler living room—later with some minor additions, also the Mahler living room. The portrait of Mahler, instead of the man, is for direct personal contact—generally accompanied by his music, the other voice in the play.)

(Alma steps in to the living room, motioning the maid to bring in the caller. She tries out various positions while waiting, reading a book—no—absorbed in a painting—no—fitted
languorously on a couch--but then, jumps up, staring decorously into the wings, with a sharp intake of breath as she watches him approaching.)

That's him! There he is, coming down the hallway.

Those piercing eyes! Balls of black fire! Accustomed to command, to be obeyed!

What if they demanded, anything! Could I resist?

Instead, his head bows abruptly.

He smiles--surprising me. He is shy. Even timid!

The corners of his lips turn up.

(moves forward to meet him, hand extended, reaching near the portrait, stops)

Guten tag, Herr Mahler.

Didn’t the maid take your coat?

(pantomimes leading him into the living room while conversing. His replies should be implicit within the pauses.)

(pause)

Very well. As you wish, Gustav.

You are so persuasive.

How can I disagree?

When you were so immediately familiar with me at the Zuckerkandi’s,

I said to myself:

‘isn’t he the condescending one!’ But now that you mention it, it was both strange and natural, rehearsed and spontaneous, that we met.

As if by fate, and appointment, you say?

(pause)

The recognition of a previous lifetime together!
(laughs)

Were you my slave in Egypt before Moses took you away?

Or is it another time,

I remember both of us in Greek tunics, looking over the Aegean Sea while speaking of love and death.

(pause)

No, Gustav! I am not at all superstitious.

Yes, Gustav.

I believe in fate and the stars, the faces that destiny keeps hidden from us.

By the way, was it ME you came to visit?

In this lifetime, I mean.

(pause)

Indeed! You flatter me!

Vielen dank, Herr Gustav!

I bow to your compliment, but falsely.

Truly, it is not meant for me.

I am Alma Schindler—not Gretchen at the spinning wheel.

I am a musician like yourself.

I compose my own songs.

Who do you think I am?

(pause)

Again! Ah, but you are teasing me!

Not Gretchen!

Don’t you think I’ve read Goethe’s Faust:
Now, I have studied philosophy, medicine and the law, and, unfortunately, theology no wiser than before.

Every German schoolgirl weeps for Gretchen, modest and virtuous, by the world, unspoiled, brought to early tragedy as Faust sells his soul that he might have his way with her.

We are watching the dawn of a new century,
Herr Mahler.

We dance to new music-Not Johann Strauss, yes?
Your new First Symphony needs young ears, and more.
Gretchen would not understand it.
You do Faust a great injustice sending him to me for redemption.
Emancipation is my theme.
Find me among the struggling-to-be-free spirits of my sex.
That word!
Sometimes I think Doctor Freud invented it!
You smile, Herr Mahler!
It’s deeper than you think!
Someday, a woman--it could be me!--will conduct the Vienna Philharmonic!
What would you say to that?

Is Faust such a proper theme for you? Already, you would exchange your soul for a simple village maid under a double featherbed whose unblemished virtue is celebrated with cooked goose on Sunday?
All that--for the promise of Resurrection?
But it does suit the legends that begin to spring up about you.

One intermission, I saw you look past me with that brooding look that attends youthful despair.

It seemed to me, even then, Faust-like!

You, all cocked and ready to exchange your dark soul for the first song of Eve.

(pause)

Of course! I do have my circle of admirers.

(pause)

Of course, I would be faithful!

If a man stood taller by a head above other men. I mean...uh...you are not sensitive about your height?

‘Genius’ is what I meant--of course!

To such a man, I would be devoted. Two souls with one fingerprint!

However...

(pause)

Yes, there is one ‘however.’ If another one came along, even greater than him...But, why are you smiling? And looking so smug, Herr Mahler?

(pause)

Your modesty overwhelms me!

(pause)

(As the bantering ends, there is a sudden rise of intensity in her voice as her innermost hopes well up)

GUSTAV! Will you look at my songs?
(She does not want to wait for an answer. Doesn’t want to hear it, perhaps, too painful. Walks out of the scene up to the Mahler poster. Music begins. Snatches of Das Knaben Wunderhorn: Verlor’ne Muh.)

Just bantering.

You know how it is.

Painful beginnings.

Unsure!

Aren’t they always?

(facing the audience)

(Somewhat hesitantly, returns to the lectern)

I suppose I should ask you, ask myself, what this audience would like to hear.

Shall I tell on him, that he snored!

About the one boiled egg every morning?

Four minutes!

I know! I’ve done this lecture before.

Expect anything!

Stay with me, if you want to go back that long tunnel of time.

Look at me and see the young lovely girl under the wrinkles.

They’re there all right! Grew overnight!

Yet, if I want to take you back with me, dispensing with whim or fancy, there is one obstacle.

We must get past a solid block of polished marble.

(a mournful outcry)

My lover has become a monument!

How do we get past the last station of the cross--the gas light that I kept lit over the door to his death room! Past the wrinkles!
Past the wasted, small, chalk-white body that wanted to be Faust!

To that day when we whirled in dance, and I whispered, “YES!” eagerly!

Too soon!

(Self-hypnotized, dream-like, she backs off from the lectern, humming to herself as she holds an imaginary Mahler in her arms, dancing a waltz)

OOM-PAH-PAH! OOM-PAH-PAH!

Terribly off-key!

Poor fiddle! Sorry horn! Sagging drum!

Don’t they know who’s listening!!!!

But, he! Of all people! Eyes closed!

Smiling! WITHOUT RHYTHM!

Clumsy!

Oh, Gustav! Not one more time!

(stops, looks over her shoulder)

The musicians have stopped playing.

Look at that sad face chewing on a cold sausage.

Gustav?

Why do you call me by your mother’s name?

(pause)

No. It doesn’t begin or end with Doctor Freud. Coincidence, you say?

But then you also called it a sign of love!

(drops her arms from the dance position, leans her head back, looking up, ravishing the thought)

You! Herr Director! StaatsOpera! Vienna!
It begins!

There is a certain inevitability to a summer night.

MAHLER WAS MINE!

It repeats itself—the same haunting dream that began the first of my lifetimes.

My slave! My lover! Son! Father! Faust! Gustav—I will bear your child!

There is no way back anymore!

I am Gretchen.

(takes up her stance at the lectern)

You heard me say Mahler was mine.

Wait!

Before you start envying me, wait!

Look at my inheritance:

Mahler the conductor—that demon with the magic baton!

Why—he belonged to his first violinist as much as to me.

More, in fact!

They spent more uninterrupted hours together.

Mahler the composer—forget him as a man!

This was a piece of furniture surrounded by quiet, occasionally needing to be fed.

In the theater, where he was at his best—interpretative, creative, a whirlwind of passion...

If you could afford the price of any seat, he was YOURS!

Servant and slave—starving for applause! To you, his audience, he gave away the best of himself...unstintingly.
So...once we have divided all the separate portions—what is left over?

What scraps for Mahler’s wife?

I’ll tell you.

A tired body, aging fast, full of aches and pains, too weary to rebel against (what shall I call it?) the dictatorship of the spirit?

The world seen as notes and instruments.

I won’t subject you to a litany of complaints--the small tantrums, the petty furies--those self-indulgences that are justified at home after the strain of maintaining the public image...if you know what I mean!

If it were only as simple as … another woman.

TAKE HIM!

Listen! Consider me an expert on Genius! I know something about these so-called vegetarians who proceed to feed on the flesh of the ones nearest and dearest to them...as if LOVE gave them special graces to commit mayhem and murder!

I know!

I have lived among enough of these leviathans when changes of tide have left them marooned in the harbor.

How fast they rot and stink!

Envy me...?

Do all the great men of this world have their wings clipped at night?

(crying out with part annoyance, part motherly concern)

Gustav! Sl...ee...p!

Grinding your teeth!
How often must I shake you awake in the middle of the night to hush those groanings? Must you cry in your lungs like a small boy who has been punished and not yet forgiven?

Faust begging for mercy?

I forgive you...forgive you!

What have you done?

(shakes her head hopelessly, then faces the audience)

In the morning, he didn’t just wake up.

He was resurrected!

(music enters softly. Second movement of the Eighth Symphony)

How well I remember the early days of the Eighth Symphony--his masterpiece.

The way his eyes shone and couldn’t keep their secrets... the gush of confidence of a man possessed, feeling the full maturity of his art.

I can still see him pacing back and forth in frantic circles trying to keep pace with his inspiration. Then...unexpectedly, he would let loose with those horrible, gravelly sounds from his throat that one day would become a chorus of young angels.

I should add...there were those moments when he would remember that I was there in the room with him. Happily, he would look up, smile sweetly...then forget me.

Forget me?!

Not exactly!

I was pinned and labeled to the pages of the Eighth Symphony.

Faust had sprouted Gretchen!

Some women might be flattered. Believe me--I never encouraged it!
Without sun on my part, without care or watering—a sprig of green
had kept itself alive all those years from the first day he greeted me
as Gretchen to now when I became a harp theme glistening across
heaven as the Mater Glorioso blazes a fiery path in reply to
Gretchen’s prayers for the soul of Faust.

You can imagine my wonder: what appalling secret sin could
provok such an obsessive need for forgiveness and salvation?

Do all men have something of Faust in them? When does the child
bride become the mother?

Ewig!

Eternal!

One doesn’t raise such speculative questions with Gustav Mahler
without accusations of being earthbound. If a single theme could
declare itself over and above the complex instrumentation, his
essence, it would be...always toward the light!

Call it an ideal...call it religious! There was always that part of him
that remained a child in the womb groping upward...mystic spirit
within sensual flesh.

Which brings up...Mahler, the Jewish convert to Catholicism!

There are still those who smile knowingly, as if to say: ‘Would a
Jew have been given the baton in Vienna otherwise?’

Some truth here--yes?

They recognize opportunism—the ones who say this—perhaps
because it is so familiar in most lives....

But they don’t know Mahler.

Neither him nor his music!

Let them ask Alma Mahler, awake in the night beside him when
tides of grief don’t lie... when a pure, but tortured soul reminds
God of His promises....
Which is not to say that being born Jewish was not an imposing obstacle in Austria.

\textit{(shrugs it off)}

Finally, the day came with a blast of trumpets.

Gustav presented me with a large packet, announcing with tears in his eyes, “This...is your symphony.”

I knew it was his Eighth—the Faust and Gretchen symphony—and I trembled.

I was only a small boat...

This was a vast and endless ocean!

Here, I should pause to bring into focus—for myself, as well—what I might call...the dark side of genius.

Oh yes, they all have it—the single-mindedness, the pursuit-regardless, the virtuous flaw.

Remember the sprig of green

I mentioned before?

Now it had broken through the crevice in the rock, straining toward the light.

Sometimes, I think...

Faust sinned that he might enjoy salvation!

\textit{(facing his portrait)}

Yes, Gustav!

The making of music!

Isn’t that all that matters?

\textit{(obviously troubled and angry, charging up to the portrait)}

You, up there! Looking down on us—a genial Buddha, smiling at your own wisdom, imperturbable!
(Music: Kindertotenlieder. Alternating strong and subdued, not to conflict with Alma.)

Kindertotenlieder.

Songs on the death of children.

You read Ruckert’s poem lamenting his child’s demise—and couldn’t wait to set it to music!

Could you?

(pause)

I know!

All about a grieving child haunted by all the deaths in his own family... especially the brother you loved! But does that give you the privilege to mimic a father’s tears?

Meanwhile...our own child, baby Marie, sits there, playing by your feet...

You can’t be that removed, Gustav!

I’m her mother!

And I worry about tempting fate that way!

(pause)

I am listening! I hear you! No, I’m not being overwrought!

Hysterical!

All those names you call me!

Yes, I know it’s only poetry!

But, before the poems... these were Ruckert’s own children.

Their deaths were real!

Real! Real!

That’s why he wrote the poems! And for you to appropriate his sorrow—that is plainly dishonest... crossing forbidden boundaries... like lying next to a corpse to know the feeling of death.
There is a plague on it! It spreads...

Gustav!

If you don’t believe in such boundaries... what about plain and simple good taste?

You act as if Ruckert’s children went to their death just to give you an excuse for a song cycle...

(The music comes through to her, forcing her to listen, which she does for awhile—becoming more and more agitated, finally spilling over...)

NO! No, Gustav!...

(waving her arms in protest)

You must stop, Gustav...

STOP PLAYING!

(Music cuts off abruptly)

Never!

The death of children must never become so... artful!

Don’t you see how it goes beyond blasphemy... a curse on the lips that spoke it!

What happens when you look at the door imagining the entrance of death?

It arrives!

(starts to turn away, but whirls back with an afterthought)

Wasn’t it you...?

Your own words!

“Art can be sacrificed toward a greater good...”

Gustav! I believed you!

Why else did I swallow my own songs?
One composer per family!
You put that in our marriage contract!
And I...
I obeyed!
It’s not the same as censorship!
Didn’t I hear that from your own lips?

(shricking)
And I...
I obeyed!

(pause)
I’m sorry.

(pantomimes picking up Marie and stroking her head)
There, there!

(to Gustav)
Look at our little angel...all upset.
You know how she trembles when we raise our voices...

(to Marie)
There, there! Go to papa!
You know how he loves to read to you...your new, big red book of fairy tales...bring it to him.
Pretty, colored pictures!
See how the handsome Prince kisses the lips of the beautiful dead Princess, waking her, and they live happily together forever.

(turning to Gustav with a note of sarcasm)
Fairy tales!

(puts Marie down, straightens her dress while still addressing Gustav)
FAIRY TALES!

Are you remembering Marie when she was born, Gustav?

How terrible it was when the fever came, turning her face red--
and she kept waving her tiny hands up and down, growing weak
with the effort to breathe.

You were a giant in those days!

Like God blowing into the clay!

I saw how you picked her up in your arms...

I saw you open her purple lips with your finger; then, blowing,
breathing for her with your own lungs....

I saw you grow wild when Marie grew convulsive...lifting her high
above your head with both hands to show God what He was doing!

The terrible agony in your voice still haunts me...

Marielein! Marielein! It’s papa!

Miraculously, she hears you!

Her eyelids begin fluttering like a small bird testing its wings...

You see, Gustav!

Life also imitates Art!

Isn’t that what we have been trying to say to each other...and never
found the words?

It where pity begins… and God descends?

(Music: Kindertotenlieder. Last two stanzas.)

(Stone-faced, brooding. Alma lets herself be possessed--yet steeling herself, proceeding in a
monotone)

(surprised)

But there was no pity...

Marie died....
Is dead....
Is dust.
When the time came...time for tears...
Gustav-
Isn’t your eyes had been emptied for Ruckert’s child....
Only dry wells for Marie.

(Now, overwhelmed. Her lips quiver as the well-buried past is exhumed...as the last stanza of Ruckert’s poem is embraced by Mahler’s score. Swaying, wailing, she crumbles and gives way.)

...Gone away...come out of the night...
The night is dark...and you are lost.
What is the child doing out there...alone?
Soon it will storm...come home!...
Home!
Lost out there...alone.
Marie--the storm!
Come home!

(weeping)
May the large hand of God cover you and keep you warm.

(Music concludes. Alma catches sight of the audience, shocked and surprised that anyone is witnessing; pulls herself together visibly, then walks in measured paces back to the lectern. There must be an air of unreality in so quick a recuperation.)

Sometimes...life imitates Art.
Every death...its own drama.
One performance.
The curtain falls.
That’s all...
And then, what becomes only too visible, the gates to pain and horror won’t stay submerged.
The wounds won’t scar.

(She leans on the lectern, arms supporting her head, digging fists into her eyes)
I still have not emptied my tears...

(struggling for calm)
Forgive me...I’ll be back.

(‘Forcing herself not to weep, she takes her briefcase and leaves the stage)

(Lights down to dim)

(As Alma makes her way back to the lectern, she stops once en route to apologize)
Forgive me.
If I had my choice, I would have much preferred ‘The Merry Widow.’

(reaching the lectern, holds an envelope aloft)
His letter!

(studying the postmark)
Berlin, November 12, 1910.

(Suddenly, without warning, her composure is gone--short spasms of choked-up grief get past her control despite her struggle to forge ahead...)
What more needs to be said?
That Gustav became insane with grief...that was expected!...
I could predict that!
Of no help to me...or to himself!
With one hand, I lowered that small, wasted, much-cried-over body into the grave.
The other hand restrained Gustav, keeping him out of it.

"Marielein! Marielein! Marielein!" shrill and to the end of his breath.

He had lost the power to do miracles... and I, my faith.

There was no pity....

It seems that God was also made of clay.

(Deliberates within herself, taking a moment of silence. Sighs, then continues.)

Once introduced, I might say that ‘death’ knew its way around our house. It had a role in all our conversations--on our lips in the present tense, using the familiar form of address... taking full advantage of our tolerance.

With a sly sense of humor, it insinuated itself into the doctor’s guttural announcement to Gustav after a casual examination:

“Your heartbeat is nothing to be proud of...!”

Actually, Dr. Hamperl had come to visit me, and was already leaving when Gustav interjected himself as a subject, half-playfully.

The doctor’s face was stern and humorless, as he listened.

There were shadows behind Gustav’s smile as he received the news.

Who ever listens to the first statement of such a theme?

Who ever completely ignores it?

(She takes a thick epistle out of its envelope, and begins to unfold it)

Mahler had been agonizing over his Sixth Symphony...and now he was off to Berlin to fulfill a conducting engagement.

His Third Symphony-childlike, naive, worshipful-laying bare pure innocence before an audience of sophisticates-- to quote Gustav on the eve of his departure...

“Ashamed to feel...Purgatorio!”
The rough manuscript of the Sixth lay open on his desk, sentimental, lyrical, much of me, green hills with cow bells...also notes of doom which worried me.

I was feeling anxious when his letter arrived...

(Music: Sixth Symphony. Andante Moderato. Throughout the reading of the letter, the music will underline Mahler’s voice--becoming silent before continuing again after Alma’s interjections.)

(reading)

My dear, dearest Almschl...or Almschi...or Almalililili...or Almscherl...

(aside)

How he does play with my name-- like a cat with a ball!

The orchestra, willing; the performance went most splendidly. I sustained the pause between movements as long as I dared, not even realizing until I caught myself, how much I needed to know the pulse of this audience. The only clue was the absence of whispers, and the deep breathing as from a giant monster. The usual coughs and clearing of throats, especially during the slow movement, but more restrained. It made me think of a funeral service when each mourner mourns their own impending death.

After the final notes, there was a long sustained silence--much too long for me to be without breath, waiting. Then, a long sigh. The sound that waves make, pulling back before rushing onto the shore. A tremendous roar!

And now, it was bedlam! Shouting and stamping of feet--a surge toward the podium. There were those who remained in their seats-openly weeping. Also those few who stayed behind, even after the house lights were turned off--the ones who, hushed and reverent, had taken full communion with me. They had held my soul like a quivering child in their own sacred hands....How rare and fragile the moment was!
(Music stops)

(aside, as she puts down the letter,)

Poor darling!

Still flushed with his celebration of the spirit.

Keep him out of the lobby during the intermission!

Poor Moses!

Fresh after talking with God-- to be greeted by this!...this stream of trivia...vulgar gossip...this primping and pandering as the chosen ones dance around the Golden Calf...

I remember him poring over the score of his Second Symphony,

pointing with his finger to a particular passage...

“Here, they must burst into tears…”

(glancing at the poster)

Here, Gustav! Just here?

“During this crescendo, everyone will look to their neighbor, surprised to find their souls transparent...and so beautiful! Here! Here! Now it comes! A new theme enters...the answer to why we were born!”

To do the memory justice, I must describe the way it was said...simply, without personal vanity, and with as much innocence as William Blake looking out of the window and seeing Angels...

It was Mahler who taught me that, at the end of a concert, an audience never merely disintegrates--cell by cell, couple by couple--going home to become what they were before.

NO!

It may appear that way on the surface Zum beishpeil!

In the last movement of the Second Symphony when the massed trumpets blaze forth with full throats in all their glory, my Gustav fully expected that the audience would rise to their feet and form a
line of march behind the orchestra and chorus extending into the clouds, and beyond, resurrected dust taking swirling form before the eyes of God.

You will please forgive me if I wander.

No?

Which brings back a memory? How do you say hop scotch?

One on each shoulder!

I am now remembering how the audience for the first performance of the Second Symphony had been prepared for a spectacle. To begin with--wasn’t it called the Resurrection Symphony?

A spectacle--yes!

But what is this?

First, an augmented orchestra--a colossus of sound-making; then, a chorus of so many voices--the forming of it must have emptied all the music schools.

Gustav enters, a small ball of fire dwarfed even more by the gross weight of all the elemental forces surrounding him.

An awed hush, he lowers the baton.

What issues forth are those awesome bursts of escaping pressures of sound that would continue to ring in many an ear for many a week afterwards.

Toward the end, he turns on the audience, fierce, demanding, like he was conducting them.

The music turns hysterical; the drums are bursting their skins; trumpets wide open calling for the Last Judgment; chorus at a fever pitch.

His eyes are wild.

His lips are foaming.

The man is in a seizure of passion!
He raises his voice, is heard above the thunderous din.

“AUERSTEH’N! ARISE! BELIEVE!”

Well! You can imagine!

The audience squirmed in their seats, uncomfortably, turning away in embarrassment from the ferocious thrust of those challenging eyes on the podium.

Who is that impertinent Jeremiah up there anyhow?

The Jew, Mahler!

Their dinner is still settling under the frilled white shirts and the soie de Paris gowns.

They regard one another self-consciously, biliously responding to the Voice in the Wilderness with soft belches.

Everyone knows if you are going to upset the bile of such an audience with a sermon-- or if you intend to give them the head of John the Baptist on a silver platter--give them a ballet to go with it!

How else do you mix wine and whipped cream?

I must say this.

Richard Strauss certainly knew his Wiener Schnitzel!

(Shaking her head, her eye falls on the letter.)

Dear me! We have wandered.

(Music resumes as she picks up the letter, scanning a few sentences before she resumes reading.)

The critics! Always the critics! The Kurier pounces on me, like on a mad dog, denying me, least of all, musical talent. Schmetterlink of the Tagenblatt lectures me on the basics of orchestration and I don’t even dare quote the Berliner Zeitung. Unanimous contempt!

Patience more than patience! You, Almi! You, by my side! How I need your love and understanding. Young Schoenberg was at the concert, also the playwright Gerhard Hauptmann who came
backstage to embrace me tearfully. Their tributes and others would take some of the sting off the reviews.

However, sometimes I wonder—if there were no critics—what excuse would we have to defend ourselves?

Most of all—what do you think kept running in circles around my mind all this time? Guess!

I know that you warned me. I would forget. I laughed, and protested vigorously. I forgot!

Give me a hint. What was it that I promised my Almalilili I would bring her back from Berlin? So important that she would be offended. That it couldn’t wait until next we stroll by the lovely stores on the Kartnerstrasse? Dearest one! I have so much on my mind these days—not least of all, your health. The scarf that I brought you do you wear it when you go out?

Please take proper care of yourself. What would I do without you!!!!!! Soon, soon, I will be home again to look after you.

Looking after me? Oh, Gustav!

(Music stops. Alma puts the letter down, half smiling within herself, reminiscing.)

Gustav! Gustav!

It was my first experience of real labor pains.

Blow after blow, without mercy, tearing at my insides.

If I had not already been so debilitated, I might have dashed my head against the bedpost—pain against pain.

I bit my teeth.

I shrieked.

The sound of an animal came out of my throat.

Gustav rushed into the bedroom, alarmed, stopping short at the door.

Poor man!
He was completely at a loss.

Fill a basin with hot water?

Call for help?

Was there time?

One question mark after another crossed over his face.

I twisted my limbs.

I moaned.

He froze!

Not knowing what else to do, he moaned after me in the same key!

All at once--an inspiration!

He assumes the conductor’s stance, shaking his head as he raises his hand for complete silence.

Something about him--perhaps that familiar pose--gives me confidence.

I keep my trembling lips tight-pressed together while he enters the living room.

He pauses before the bookcase.

A medical book for reference?

Now, he returns--and I swear it’s true!

He began reading Immanuel Kant to me!

Page after page of this jumble of big words, droning on and on...where I had left understanding behind--all on an even keel.

He might have been speaking Japanese.

How could I stop him?

He was so pleased with himself--proud that he was able to help me, smiling before turning the next page.

What’s more, it worked!
I fell asleep!

(Picks up the letter, and though she holds it before her face, her presence is elsewhere remembering.)

Try to be angry with him!

Suddenly, he comes upon you like some imp from the forest, hair bristling out in all directions, eyes burning, fire on his tongue.

It’s not possible!

He seems to be completely out of reason’s reach--absolutely insane.

You take another look and you find a little boy, grinning without his front teeth, playing games in which his are all the roles.

Speaking of teeth,

Mahler at the dentist!

The door to the consultation room bursts open.

Gustav comes rushing out--the napkin still around his throat--the dentist after him.

(mimicking, with a finger inside her mouth)

“Almi! Almi! Which tooth is hurting me?”

(picks up the letter with a sigh, almost regretfully. Music continues.)

The days away from you grow large, while the years between us recede to become...

(halts abruptly)

“One dazzling memory” he calls it.

We won’t go into that!

The lean years of my creativity!

That sensitive, truth-seeking man, embracing art and freedom, was himself the jailor of my songs!
One composer per family!

He, who wanted to give most to me, gave least.

Not that he could help himself, or become like other men.

Could I have loved him in another skin? I couldn’t answer that.

I copied his scores, was his musical confidante—for which I earned an appreciative nod.

It wasn’t his fault.

It was natural to him.

It was not in my nature to share long silences.

Listen to this.

(Music continues as she reads from the letter.)

These days, I have become attuned to my own silences; walking, reading, listening to myself trying to be equal to my resignation from the material things of this world. In this quiet, I can hear the beating of my heart, astounding me by its sheer persistence. An incredible range! I wonder—is this what Dr. Hamperl heard?

Adagio! Now it seems to be skipping a beat and what is this?!

Agitato! I watch the vein pulsing on my wrist. Ach! This is not a game one should be playing!

You know, I did consult Dr. Hamperl again. His prognosis: ‘A slight valvular defect, entirely compensated for. No cause for concern.’

But, getting back to my unfortunate lapse of memory, yes, Liebste. Need I remind you—this time of night, after the concert, the shops are all closed. Except for some trinket and trash souvenir places. And that, I know from experience, would hardly suit you. Not at all! But then, in retrospect, what else is there to give when one has given all of oneself?

(aside)

All, Gustav?!
Yet, Almscherl, I wonder about you. If it came to a choice between me and Salzburger marzipan!

(Cut music with a lilt)

I simply adore marzipan!

Extra-specially--the kind they make in Salzburg.

Mozart Kugein!

Gustav was invited to conduct at the Festspielhaus--and I was big enough in the middle to indulge myself.

I must have reminded him one thousand times--yet still despaired that he would remember.

I put notes in his pockets, in the middle of his scores, next to his razor.

Be a Man--Remember Marzipan!

(walks up to the portrait, shaking a finger at his face)

Now, I am giving warning.

I will be waiting right here when you return. If I don’t see the confectioner’s packet under your arm, back you go to Salzburg!

On the next train!

(turning to the audience)

I was there, all right!

Under the glass roof of the station as the train from Salzburg let out a last puff and came to a halt.

I saw him first--nose pressed flat against the pane-eyes straining to focus while he cleaned his spectacles.

Now, he was fussing with the window, muttering to himself, while he tried to raise it.
Now, he descends, looking left to right and back again, before handing his bags over to the porter. All but that priceless packet of marzipan which he retains— one finger under the string.

In the other hand, his hat—never on his head.

I admit, it was cruel, not revealing myself, carrying it this far.

I knew how easily Gustav tended to feel abandoned—but for this rare and objective perspective—I readily forgave myself.

Accustomed as I was to see him dominate the podium, it was a revelation,

even if unflattering, to note that he walked eccentrically head poked forward off-balance; the parts of his body never seeming to find harmony; one foot brushing hard against the other like a small boy having to go, restraining himself.

That expensive suit!

Already bulging in the wrong places! Frankly,

I was not yet prepared to say hello with the proper enthusiasm, but just then he turned and saw me.

(confronting the portrait)

No, shatz. Not abandoned!

“ALMI! ALMI!”

Excited, unpremeditated— as if he feared I would be blown away!

Blown away I was, by the force of breath behind his trumpet. I waved to him.

(pantomiming)

He waved back to me, raising both hands ecstatically.

(looking down on the ground ruefully)

That!

Was the end of the marzipan!
There was Gustav, on his knees, ruefully trying to reassemble the scattered and broken pieces.

A crowd was now forming around him.

Excited, unpremeditated--as if he feared I would be blown away!

Blown away I was, by the force of breath behind his trumpet. I waved to him.

(pantomiming)

He waved back to me, raising both hands ecstatically.

(looking down on the ground ruefully)

That!

Was the end of the marzipan!

There was Gustav, on his knees, ruefully trying to reassemble the scattered and broken pieces.

A crowd was now forming around him.

As if he was taking a first sip of a highly recommended wine, you know what I mean?

The eyes--like an opal hiding its flashes of fire.

If anything, I would say Mahler had the face of a medieval monk that came to life in prayer.

(resumes as she reaches the lectern, picks up the letter, and reads from it.)

Now, my dearest, to the crux—and, I hope, the exact spiritual center of our troubled storm.

Since you are more likely to adopt the new insights of Freud than the visions of Christ, it pleases me that you compromise with Goethe, whose art is more flesh than theory, whose intuitions sometimes enter heaven.

(aside: groaning)

Faust and Gretchen again!
At least, with Goethe, I can see you reaching out for the light. I can still hope and anticipate the heights to which you may yet aspire.

As the heavens part.

(music)

(aside)

The Eighth Symphony!!!!!!

I am both dazzled and overwhelmed by the number of secret places I have kept hidden from myself. Above all, from myself! Only too fully aware of that tragedy.

To believe, and it were not true!

Yet, if our goal is inner harmony--shouldn’t we take that risk?

Bring sunlight into all the hiding places! Cast out vanity--expose all the shabby pretences--facing fear with courage letting only what’s best, remain!

Surprising myself, though my feet still touch the earth--I soar! Can I possibly describe what I have never experienced before? As death is to life--that much further apart is this new awakening. I am born again! I breathe music!

Such are the habits of a lifetime that my first thought is to rush to my desk I am weeping with joy. I raise my pen. It remains suspended. I have been flying too long and blindly into the sun and brought back only a handful of pale reflections.

All this time, I have been flying with my feet tied to the earth. Suddenly, I became the fool of God! The notes in our musical vocabularies do not exist to describe the celestial sounds I am now permitted to hear. Go! Invent new instruments to play this new music!

With all the restlessness that love provokes when it sets you free to reach higher--and with my singular passion for transcendence.

(Alma drops the letter with a thud on top of the lectern. Music pauses as she stares into the audience, trying hard to control her emotions.)
Where am I in all this?! 

Do you find me?

(She retrieves the letter, holding it with a tight fist as she reads--this time, with a heavy scornful accent. Also, without musical accompaniment.)

Yet! I am still bound to a rational world!

(aside)

Me, included!

My task is to pull this captive body free of restraints, spirit intact to soar over the earth’s blandishments, beyond the forest of flesh, beyond forms made of words, notes, colors taking the last road where there are no more roads.

Life has brought me into a darkness which I now recognize as a second womb from which I must grope upward, breaking up the light toward...

CONSCIOUSNESS IN SPACE.

That place in the universe where the breath of God returns to its source.

(Once more, she slaps down the letter, looking distraught, trying not to scream, but not very much controlled.)

GENUG! STOP! ENOUGH!

I have left behind the longings of the earth, he tells me!

What else, WHO else did you leave behind?!

“Nothing of my flesh remains to be consumed!”

Yes, Gustav!

(under her breath)

Now you can feast on mine!

Only by faith, and by faith alone, will it be possible to step outside this tired shell, filled with yearning, to gaze with reverence at the
holy flame without becoming blind, without fear of burning. I am a pilgrim in beggars clothes, aspiring to those sacred groves where those whom love has blessed are redeemed, and deathless.

(in a rage)

Poetry, yet!
The final contempt of the flesh!
The pose!
The insult to my intelligence!
The refuge of self-pity!
Don’t I know!
How he pretends to nobility.

(Alma steps off the lectern, indifferent to time, place or circumstance—or the existence of an audience—screaming over a distance at the portrait.)

I will not be Gretchen to your Faust!

(In reply, we hear the actual recording of Mahler on the piano, playing a movement of his own Fourth Symphony.)

(She listens for awhile, growing more bewildered by the moment.)

(frightened)

That’s his touch! It isn’t possible!

(The lights begin to fade. Alma runs to the living room, looking toward where Mahler had entered before. Now—full darkness. She rushes out, nearly colliding with the lectern, now in shadow.)

(The spotlight is full on the Mahler portrait. She looks up in wonder mixed with fear and horror.)

Is that you, playing games?!

The Stone Guest for Mozart’s Don Giovanni?

(The final choral part of the Eighth Symphony enters softly, barely making an effect—more like a memory of a theme. Alma repeats the opening phrase in German.)
Alles vergangliche ist nur ein gleichnis.

(As the spotlight fades—in near, ending in total darkness, we hear a soft masculine voice rise (on tape) from anywhere in the theater.)

All that went before was only transitory.

I believe that all of creation was sifted like sand to find peace for the anguished soul that on earth once had borne the name, Faust.

Therein is the passion and mystery of the Eternal Feminine.

We comprehend God by knowing the child at her breast.

So, with my Eighth, this best work of my soul, in life and in death, I dedicate to my own Alma, in trusting fulfillment of that sacramental vow made solemn by marriage—to share the best of myself.

This is our symphony—more yours than mine.

(We hear Alma’s sarcasm as she leaves the stage.)

Here!

They must burst into tears!

Nicht wahr, Gustav?

INTERMISSION

(Alma reenters, ignoring the audience, looking down thoughtfully until, just short of the lectern, with a sarcastic smile, she flings this teaser at them.)

The Eighth Symphony by Alma Mahler!

Our symphony, he said.

More yours than mine!

Would you believe it?

Well, for once, this is not the Passion of Mahler according to Mahler!

You’re in for something more than a lecture.
I may not speak with an ear tuned to eternity...ewig!

But you will be hearing it from me...my way.

She married again!

After Gustav Mahler she married again...and again.

I took other men into his bed!

Am I obscene?

Would you call me a Philistine?

You, men!

You don’t like it when we take the initiative.

Only a man could have written Faust.

I’m not fixing only on Goethe.

All of literature crowds in with the guilt-figures of women idealized by men....

Ophelia, Desdemona, even the holy mother of Christ.

Ask Freud, a man, about this Eternal Feminine...

(Bypassing the lectern, anxious to share an inspiration, she confronts Mahler through his portrait.)

How would you like that!

Someday, I am going to rewrite Mozart’s Don Giovanni from the viewpoint of Donna Elvira! You look shocked!

You gasp!

You and your Saint Mozart take too much pride and vicarious pleasure in the Don’s escapades!

I know what’s bothering you!

After MOZART, she married again!

Inconstant Constanza!
I should have known...you would have pulled out that tooth!

INCONSTANT CONSTANZA!

Marrying again so soon after your adored Mozart’s death!

How many times have I heard you turn that phrase like screws into his coffin?!

Then, you would raise your arms heavenward, leaving her to a more divine judgment.

(pause)

I repeat, Gustav!

I am a musician, like yourself.

You know that I adore the music of Mozart!

That was never in question.

In the name of his wife, Constanza, I am asking...what did it matter to her that his time will come!...that his fame will leap spectacularly...in the next century?

(pause)

Are you counting the ways in which she was blessed?

I hear you speak of sparkling wit, humor and wisdom...surely, comforting words to a woman who is cold and hungry.

I can see Constanza, not knowing where to turn in sickness, or how to run away from death, taking satisfaction in the great fame to come in the far-off future...

Who can condemn her, sitting cold and shivering in a dark corner, that she protests bitterly about the few coins he needs for manuscript paper!

The child-prodigy who had to be raised up to reach the piano keys, so to charm the crowned heads of Europe, was now prematurely old, mostly forgotten.
My heart breaks as I picture him putting on his shabby wig and faded court clothes, not quite ready to beg for a few groschen of remembrance.

And Constanza, watching him leave, sick at heart, too weak and too disillusioned to find room for hope.

(pause)

After Mozart... who? You ask.

Now, I am really offended!

It is the day of Mozart's funeral.

(pause)

I am standing with Constanza. It is raining.

I feel with her the damp chill in her bones...no, I am not forgetting the fame that will be hers next century.

But my attention is taken up by the indifferent gravediggers that attend the exit of the poor and destitute.

After Mozart... who?

You ask.

Shall I give you an answer—or tell you the question you are really asking:

After MAHLER... who?

Sorry....

I should know better than to raise the subject of death with you....

What is it with these premonitions?

You will outlive all of us!

Why can’t it be as it was in Toblach that one summer when you gave yourself permission to be happy.

(Music: Fourth Symphony. First movement.)
I remember that your face was tanned and free of weltschrnerz.

You were more child than our daughter, Anna...watching you with a serious face while you blew tunes through leaves of grass like the Great God Pan.

Both of you...standing in a field of long-stemmed daisies with touches of red poppies--the wet green leaves, the legendary mountains reflected in the clear lake... two pairs of eyes shining...drinking all of this in.

Whatever we can know of heaven, I said to myself...this was it!

(peremptory)

But then, you put it into a symphony, cow bells and all!...and never again would it belong anymore...just to us!

(Music cuts off.)

Nein, Gustav.

This can’t possibly be the death you have been rehearsing for all your life.

You--going out--slow fading--only with an adagio!

No!

I won’t start worrying until the whole orchestra comes in--counts up to three--leap!--coming to crescendo most violently. Even then, I would wait.

You have a way, which you share with Bruckner, of developing a climax, enjoying the view, before leaping down to start all over again.

It’s when the fire-specked thunder clouds part, and chaos comes to order, making way for an unearthly choir...then I would start worrying!

You didn’t see me enter your room last night-- yet, already, you were straining up, sensing my presence through closed, wet eyes...saying words to me without breath... shouting in silence:
I HAVE CONQUERED DEATH!

You told stories to your brother Ernst in the night, never reaching an end, trying to outwit death.

Then, when you fell asleep on that cold body and they dragged you away, you learned, you said: Death’s favorite cue is the middle of the story.

So why are we still telling stories to keep death at bay?

Once upon a time, in the middle of his life, there was a maker of music who greatly feared the number 9--calling it 'the magic number of death.'

His fear was so great that for a time he stopped the making of music altogether.

After a long silence, the people of the village, whose hearts were gladdened by the sounds he made, deputized their mayor, a wise old man, to search out and repair the problem.

To him, the maker of music explained:

"Look to Beethoven!

To Schubert!

To Bruckner!

All three wrote nine symphonies--and died!

I do not wish to die like them. I have written Eight!"

The wise old man pondered this, and came up with an idea.

“What is this music about that you will not call number nine?”

And the maker of music explained the text, taken from Chinese poetry.

“Don’t call it number 9!” the wise old man said, lighting up with joy.

“Call it the Song of the Earth.”
And again, the making of music was heard in the village...

(Music: The opening of the Song of the Earth. We listen for awhile...)

My compliments, Gustav!

You did finish this!

You did write a symphony marked Number 9--defying superstition.

Now you tell me that you are in the throes of a Tenth...and that, while you were working, an eagle chased a crow into your room....

Are you listening to me?

Gustav!

You boast that you can hear a cellist scratching his nose in the middle of Gotterdammerung...

(music ends)

So why can’t you hear me when I address you?

Don’t touch me!

Your hands are cold!

All right!

So you say to me:

I will give myself to you completely...whatever there is that is worthy of my spirit, I offer up to you, my darling.

If you insist on peeling off flesh from spirit-- can I consider this a legal contract?

It’s the kind of agreement a Faust makes--a pound of flesh for a pound of spirit. One composer per family!

Shall I sign it in blood?

Better yet, shall I sign it...Constanza?

Poor Gustav!
Still imprisoned in the flesh!

If ever a sin needed redemption-- it’s this lechery of the spirit...

You overdo it!

These days, when you touch me... I hide like a frightened mouse under your hand.

My heart shrivels and rolls into a tight ball... you don’t have to say it.

I have a choice.

Either you fear the effect of passion on your heart--or, you don’t mean it at all...

Weep...weep for the real Gretchen. At dawn, the child of scorn will be dead in her arms, her mother and brother lost, and she, driven insane...given fault for what was not her blame. Her jury will draw the red line of blood on her neck--and she will enter death...praying for your soul.

Anyway!

Small sympathy! She let it happen!

(She draws away from the portrait, showing distaste, shivering a little, before returning to the lectern. Her eyes wander over the audience as if making contact with every one present.)

(frigidly)

His body had begun to smell of death...

There was a loud crash one night.

I ran out and found Gustav lying unconscious.

After I shrieked and pummeled him hysterically...he started ticking...like an old watch.

That formless heap from which a hand emerged, holding mine...had once been my Emperor, an all-powerful King.

We exchanged roles.
Instead of a Titan--the next morning there was this changeling--an irascible, raging infant making loud, whimpering sounds...arbitrarily demanding twenty-four hours of daylight.

Heavens! The tyranny!

Excuse me...

(leaves the lectern, advancing close as she can get to the audience...being confidential.)

I address this particularly to the women members of my audience. This may sound impertinent, insensitive...what not.

Lower your guard.

Be at ease with me.

Let’s say that we are in your own living room... maybe having a coffee.

We are alone.

No eyes are watching us.

No one with waggish tongues.

There’s no reason not to be honest with me...and with yourselves.

What I am asking of you...is there...a secret that we keep hidden from ourselves...cover it when it threatens to come out, under a flood of tears, protesting its appearance.

Yet, when, despite everything, it is revealed...you will recognize it, and feel relieved of a terrible burden...I will make it easier by proving it is something we share.

Tell me...are there any recent young widows in the house?

(adding quickly)

No!

Don’t reveal yourselves.

Remain incognito.
There is no worthwhile reason to expose your secret selves...except to yourself.

We are alone...one to one.

I am confiding in you...dare to see it my way...have you not felt...also...LIBERATED?

(Music: The three hammer blows at the end of Mahler’s Sixth Symphony.)

Each beat of the largest drum he could find... autobiographical.

Every beat of the heart, I shared with him!

(Returns to the lectern)

The first blow felled both of us--the death of Marie, our baby.

Fortunately,

Anna was there to comfort us...the second was a disgrace!

Ungrateful!

The premature curtain on Mahler’s musical dominance in Vienna.

The third blow!

The threatening one that could only be sensed.

Was it the one before the last heartbeat?

It has taken all these many centuries for the church to acknowledge and forgive Jesus the formidable indiscretion of being born...Jewish!

Even now, the fact is not easy to live with... but!...covering up the traces--try to imagine His disciples with Jewish faces!

In Vienna, the result would be caricature.

Suspicious of Mahler’s conversion, and disregarding the evident Catholic soul of his music; it was anti-semitism behind the conspiracy that brought an abrupt close in Vienna to the glorious epoch of music guided by his special genius.

In the year 1907 we made our first landing in America.
The lion was wounded...this far had the jackals driven him!

For Gustav, it was only a strategic retreat...Napoleon at Elba listening for the fife and drum of a new French army.

But what he kept hearing instead was the sound of the wood dove as it hovers over the Salzkammergut mountains and lakes.

He was out of his roots, away from his source.

The yard-long horns of the shepherds in their lederhosen kept summoning him home...and we listened.

Suffice it to say, when we returned to Vienna, there were no long lines of impresarios with contracts in their hands.

Of course, there were offers!

But nothing worthy of his time and talent...

Unexpectedly...a contract offer to conduct the New York Philharmonic...magnanimous terms!...irresistible!

So there we were, in 1909, once more taking passage westward, this time, more prepared to believe in a benevolent shift of winds.

(Music: Song of the Earth. The Lonely One in Autumn.)

Faust and Gretchen stayed.

We left behind the cobwebs.

All was predisposed to a new life … the vigor of the sea air; the forward cut of the prow....

All was predisposed to bring Gustav inside his deeper self, to find the strength he needed for a new assault--a rebirth.

He remained on deck from dawn to sunset, always staring off into an expanse, following--who knows!--what mystic routes!

More than halfway across the Atlantic, we lost the sun.

Despite the rough seas and the winds bringing blotches to his cheeks--sick roses on grey parchment, as I saw it--he stayed on deck; hair, blowing wildly, eyes never losing their observant calm.
The mystery.

Consciousness in Space, Gustav?

(Cut music)

The new world-- when we arrived--was just that.

Up heaving energies.

Sky-raising buildings.

All roads taking beginnings from endings...but, unfortunately...the same critics!

After conducting the American premiere of his Second Symphony, the most prominent newspaper commented: Struggling of the most exalted sort, but Mahler’s achievement has not soared as high as his ideal. Close quote!

Mahler sat listening, bent over, holding his head in his hands.

As on previous occasions, I fully expected him to flare up in a withering rage.

Instead, his voice was almost too subdued: For this, I did not have to leave Europe.

Here, I must pause to pay tribute to a very special kind of faith particular to Mahler.

One that resists fatigue, jousting reason out of the saddle, keeping steady on track, never leaving the goal out of sight, or poetry out of mind...

The taste of death was on his tongue; yet he kept spitting out and fighting off the ravages of the night.

His Tenth Symphony was forming into a uniquely modern masterpiece....

He, who had inspired the young musicians of his time, Schoenberg, Webern, Alban Berg...now was taking inspiration back from them.
He fought sleep, stayed awake as long as he could, sinking into a coma when he couldn’t fight any longer. No one could talk to him, nor would he say much—as if the dread word might slip out. I watched him grow feverish, flailing his arms like windmills to fill his lungs—wanting to resign, but unable to.

One mitternacht...I had fallen asleep while he, in the adjoining room, struggled note by note with his Tenth.

I think I was having a nightmare, starting up suddenly, hearing the sounds groaning makes when interspersed with the whistling effects of forced breathing.

Then he burst into our bedroom, looking wild, and for a moment I thought he was going to attack me. His eyes were burning between the bones of his face as he leaned over the bed for support.

I could see the great effort it took to steady his voice.

We must go home!

Gustav— you frighten me!

How is it with you?

We must go home!

Shouldn’t we talk about it in the morning?

Perhaps, by daylight, you will change...

We must go home!

And then he added one more word, and I understood what he was telling me.

MARIE!

I remembered (how could I forget!) the great sob of grief wrenched from him as our baby’s coffin was being lowered... followed by this tormented promise: I will be buried beside you...my child!
(MUSIC: Kindertoten lieder. Last segment.)

Try to get some rest, my darling.

We leave for Vienna early in the morning...I understood what he was telling me.

He couldn’t sleep...didn’t dare close his eyes.

We talked into daybreak...soft, sentimental reminiscing...no big topics.

Never was the sun made more welcome.

I brought him his egg for breakfast.

He was trembling--unable to raise the spoon to his lips.

When I fed him, he couldn’t swallow...I dare not say it...we had lingered too long.

If we were to get back to Vienna before ...

Reservations, packing--every detail became a frantic race against time.

I don’t even want to try to recall our wild dash to the first available steamer.

You can imagine...not a moment to spare!

There was to be no more romancing with the sea.

Gustav was hardly able to rise by himself, let alone leave the cabin.

Somewhere, I must express my gratitude to the pain-killers and sedatives that kept him asleep or semi-conscious throughout the voyage.

Oh yes--one small detail.

Once I saw Gustav’s finger making graceful circles, and he smiled as he slept, saying one word...Mozart.
I must confess, it is a terrible challenge to love—watching its object shriveling, hour by hour, becoming unclean, an unpleasantness of nature.

Betrayer or betrayed...or both!

In a way, even before this, I must have begun imagining myself a widow, even before admitting that my Mahler was actually dying.

After my child’s tragic death, and my mother’s subsequent heart attack, it became necessary on my doctor’s advice—the same Doctor Hamperl—to enter a sanitarium.

While there, I met the young architect who—how shall I put it?—overwhelmed me.

In his eyes, I was impossibly fascinating!

Such a juxtaposition of words!

But I must add, I was less than displeased that a man could regard me so blatantly.

*(she walks jauntily off the platform, heading toward the living room.)*

But ... I am married!

I told the young man, laughing heartily.

*(Mind you—the twentieth century was still in diapers.)*

*(makes herself comfortable on the sofa)*

Indeed! Don’t I know!

Walter...that is, Walter Gropius responded. Now, I can understand the well of Gustav Mahler’s inspiration! But he is an impeccable spirit!

A man who combines honor with integrity. Give him time to surmount his jealousy.

Give US time to STABILIZE...!

*(aside)*
A good architect’s term!

May I call you Alma?

From what I hear tell of him...his feet are not on this world.

And even if...there are dozens of women in the opera to soothe and comfort him...

I winced-seeing Gustav sputtering in absolute fury, even imagining such a scene.

Locked up in a cabin beside Gustav, storm following storm in mid-Atlantic, there was more than ample time to keep warm with these memories...

But, here we are, arriving in Cherbourg.

*(she returns to take up her stance at the lectern)*

It was a bleak, grey and chilling dawn--the kind you feel in your bones.

I had spared Gustav his dosage that morning.

Poor dear!

He insisted on keeping watch on deck. The shimmer of land was at the edge of the horizon, looking through the mist.

And if there was any doubt, the dots and dashes of lights, and the warning bells of the buoys dismissed them.

Now, the pilot boat was alongside. Excitement was rising as we heard him exchanging greetings with the First Mate...in French!

We strained our eyes past the haze, and then, filling all of us with a sense of joyful mystery, Europe was emerging grey as a ghost.

From airport to airport, it’s not like it was-those many days crossings on the lap of the oceans.

There were always cheering crowds, bands playing.

Confetti thrown as the taut hausers pulled us alongside the pier.
Hands waving our way.

I could hear the name Mahler on many lips.

Even the ship’s passengers were turning to us—seeing Mahler on deck for the first time.

It was a frantic scene.

All of Europe was on that pier, it seemed.

All waiting to welcome Mahler?

I was not pleased.

It was impossible!

I appealed to the ship’s purser who happened to be standing nearby, and by some ruse, he enabled us to get away and slip through customs with a minimum of fuss...

After the train ride from Cherbourg to Paris, we had reserved a direct connection on the Orient Express to Vienna.

Before making the transfer however, one look at Gustav’s face decided me...that loose bag of fragile bones must rest!

Gott sei dank!

We managed reservations in a first class hotel in Paris with a picture-postcard view, overlooking the Rue de Rivoli, within walking distance of the Opera and the Louvre.

Hardly had we been shown to our suite, Gustav collapsed on the bed and, in seconds, was fast asleep and snoring.

That other buzz in the room was the life sounds coming from the street.

Closing the shutters didn’t help.

After the close quarters of the ship, and the train ride; and then, all those many months chained to a sick room...it was begging the impossible to keep Paris locked outside!

Instead, I opened the windows wide.
Myself, Alma Mahler

Life!

The streets throbbed and beckoned...your turn to live!

On a quick impulse, I summoned the maid and induced her to keep an eye on Monsieur while I went to the café outside the hotel.

Seulement un croissant chaud et un café filtre...

A stolen hour of freedom!

Looking around, I couldn’t believe that everyone else in the world took their leisure so casually.

At the outdoor cafe, that suave gentleman eyeing me over the top of his copy of Figaro seemed to be waiting for me... to invite him!

When my glance half-lingered his way and he began clearing his throat, I knew it was time to leave...Garçon!

I took my leisure feasting on shop windows; imagining this and that gown on me; translating dollars into shillings into francs-- no small feat, I assure you--all three ways...expensive.

That Figaro man again!

What a compliment!

He had actually forfeited his little table, his Pernod, his Gauloise, his superior pose...formidable!

Now, he was leering my way as if...as if I had encouraged him!

That very same moment...

(Tenth Symphony. A short outcry of alarm from the First Movement.)

... as if some guardian angel watching over Gustav was summoning me, I could hear his voice crying like out of Gethsemane:

Almi! Almi! WHY!

Suppose Gustav was gasping for breath, dying!
My look of alarm frightened Monsieur Figaro off, muttering something about les Americains.

I began running, not stopping to wait for the lift, taking the stairs two at a time; passing the maid who gave me a guilty look. I pushed against the door with my shoulders.

It opened easily...

The bed was empty!

(The immediate shock is enough to send her off the lectern, rushing toward one of the wings.)

Gustav?

(Now, to the opposite wing...calling inside.)

(relieved)

Gustav!

(recovering)

There you are!

(pause)

What are you doing...?! Standing by yourself...on the balcony!

Dressed! Shaved! Hair combed!

...that I had abandoned you! Gustavele!

Meine liebe!

What are you saying?!

Yes! Yes! Yes!

I know!...you predicted it!

I remember you saying...it impressed me!

“Breathing the air of Europe will make me well again...” That’s the way you put it.

Still—it’s a miracle!
You waste your breath.
I see you standing on your own two feet... doing well.
The color has come back to your cheeks. Sure! I'm happy!
I would be shouting for joy...
I would be breathing more easily... if you came off that balcony....
I'm your wife! Not your nurse!
Please!
Hold on!
Tight!

*(she laughs, but her joy is not quite full-bodied.)*

Shouldn't you be in bed?
Don't talk so fast!
Don't point down to the street!
You will grow dizzy...you'll faint!
GUSTAV!
I DON'T WANT YOU OUT THERE!

*(pause)*

Then...it wasn't the maid that assisted you!
You mean...you just flung yourself out of bed...onto the rug...dressed yourself...

*(pause)*

You're interrupting me! What does it mean... ich komm von Gott?...I come from God.
Suddenly, what does that have to do with it?
Lieber Gott!

Come on, Gustav.

Say that you saw that...Monsieur Figaro following me... that you were spying!

Look at you now!

Trembling with anger, swaying like a young elm in the wind!

GUSTAV!

(pause)

You’re going to faint!

All right! I won’t touch you. Do it yourself.

I see that you can manage. But get off that balcony!...CAREFUL!

Carefully!

(pause--then as if to a small child while following him, ready to catch hold if he falls...they enter the living room.)

There, there! At last...safe and snug...and so warm.

Soon you will stop trembling...and looking at me that way!

Your own little bed...your own little blanket...

Now, if you will stay as you are, your own little Almi can bring you... something against fever...something against pain...

Gustav...what are you muttering now?

‘Safe and out of the way!’ Is that a nice thing to say?

(treacle sweet)

Should we really disturb our hearts with such troublesome thoughts?

Lento, Maestro, lento!

Sleep...sleep...sleep.
LIGHTS OUT!...

I CAN’T HEAR YOU!

I refuse to listen!

Gute nacht, meine Gustavele.

When you awake, we will be in Vienna. Our Marielein waits!

Kiss her!

Kiss her for both of us!

(Lights dim to low.)

Gehen sie zu weit enferten lander wo vater toten kindern kussen.

Go to the faraway land, go...where fathers kiss their dead children.

(The mood is sharply broken by an errant spotlight, coming out one of the wings, retracting and advancing errantly. Alma grows tense, chasing the light like it was a butterfly.)

(scolding)

This is a death room, Walter!

Is that so hard to understand?

Go away, Gropius!

He musn’t see you!

He’s dying!

Stop being so capricious!

You wild, romantic creature of impulse.

When will you stop beating ashes to raise a spark?!

(The light dances teasingly to the opposite wing, disappears only to reappear. Alma follows it...)

...wounding on top of a wound!

And, speaking of that...how are such blunders made?
That last letter you sent to me... you addressed it to him!

Gustav came bursting into my room, slapping the open letter trembling in his hand.

What’s this?

What’s this?

Turning purple, the vein on his neck bulging until I thought it must burst...

Is he asking permission to make love to my wife?

How does one explain such a thing? That I met a foolish young man in a sanitarium who keeps pursuing me...regardless of the many times I keep repeating...no.

He cuts me off, choking as he points a finger, letting out an anguished groan...

CHOOSE!

That storm had barely passed, when you brought on another one....

You know--he saw you watching me from under that bridge.

It was he who sent me out to find you, to send you away.

Listen to me!

It’s important!

Stand still!

(The light does an extra bounce, then remains fixed.)

When I returned, after telling you to leave, I found him at his desk, two candles lit, reading the Bible...

CHOOSE!

As If I had a choice!
All the time, firing at me with choose! He kept a tight grip on my arm...his white knuckles giving me to understand that I was his prisoner forever.

He must own me, down to the last inch of my soul-- even to possessing what he had discarded before...he asked to see my poor, forsaken songs!

Oh, Walter!

How shall I put it?

I was not Gretchen anymore!

(It becomes the signal for the light to disappear. Alma watches that knowingly, then, with a shrug, returns to the lectern.)

Gustav brought himself close to me as he turned page by page of my manuscript with a new reverence.

I saw the pressed flowers I had saved up secretly between the pages.

Here, my tears had fallen.

For me, time rolled back to my earliest innocence.

Finally, there was Gustav entering my deepest life--my fondest hope--and I found it...an unwanted intrusion.

Strange, isn’t it?

To find oneself stripped naked before an old man who kept humming to himself, while I squirmed at being exposed this way.

Now his middle finger was taking up the beat of my music.

It was an ordinary gesture-- a simple proof of response. But, suddenly...I loved him! Watching him nod his head, giving me a tender glance as he pointed out passages that affected him...tears rose to my eyes, and his, simultaneously.

We were one.

Our marriage had just begun!
He lingered on the last page, looking off to a distance yet within himself.

Then, with me--pressing the score between his palms...Once or twice, he started to speak; then swallowed the words down, too heavy to bring it out.

Finally, forced, he spoke:

MYALMA...ALMI!

What have I done to you?!

(Music: Tenth Symphony: Adagio. That sustained moment of anguish and stark terror in the score which stares death in the face.)

(said simply)

He dies...

(Shetakes a halting step off the platform, looking indifferently ahead--nearly, but not quite, dismissing the audience. Very deliberately, she puts on her coat, adjusts her hat, flings back her scarf. Very softly, almost as a whisper, we hear the beginning of the final movement of the Eighth Symphony commencing with the ecstasy of Doctor Marianus through the Alles Verganglich 1st Nur Em Gleichnis of the final Chorus Mysticus.)

How many other old women--last survivors, like myself--when they take courage to close the last light in the bedroom...become little girls again?

I clasp my hands and cross my toes under the blanket; and then I look up to the ceiling where the dark clouds are gathering.

Suddenly, very, very quietly, I feel without seeing, the kindness of my father’s open smile... reassuring me.

(music begins to swell)

And then... I have no more difficulty with all the small sounds. The rain on my window becomes elves and fairies making music with tinkling bells.
Now, I will not be out of love with the night. With my father’s soft kiss, like a passing wisp of grass on my cheek...now, I am permitted to sleep...and forget.

(The music rises higher, triumphantly. Alma starts to leave the stage, pause...)

I have stopped being cruel to myself with memories...

(At the organ entry, the Eighth Symphony dominates the theater gloriously.)

END