

The Virtues of Things

Libretto

ACT ONE

In the workshop.

PEG is hoovering and singing a bawdy song accompanied by the hoover's drone.

PEG

De Selby's in the Mason's,
His brother's in the Boot,
Where the raising of the wrist assists
Much downing of Veuve brut.

PEG picks up a prop from among those in the workshop and the sound of the hoover is augmented into a chord by the ensemble, creating a sustained pause before she puts the object down and the bawdy song resumes.

De Selby's in the Three Tuns,
His niece is up the Duchess,
Where when asked which lager, she pronounced
It's all much of a muchness.

SELBY enters and starts getting ready for the day's work. PEG taunts him with her song.

De Selby's in the King's Head,
His aunt is in the Griffin,
Where she sinks the wallop like a horse
And... [unsung: trots out feelin' spiffin'.]

SELBY

Peg, please!

Why have you so little respect for your lineage,
When it has led you to such a future?

PEG

But Uncle Selby, I'm young,
This family is prehistoric.
I shouldn't be making balsawood swords
I should be...

SELBY interrupts her, as he notices ELLIPSIS arriving.

SELBY

Good morning Ellipsis.

ELLIPSIS

(Dispelling niceties) Yes yes...

SELBY

How is Parabola feeling?
Is it that bug that's going round?

ELLIPSIS

It is no common bug,
But a rare condition.

PEG

Rare? Outdated more like.

The plague, I bet.

SELBY

Peg!

(To Ellipsis) I'm sorry,

I don't know how I raised such a hoodlum.

(Pause) Her seizure wasn't during the opera I hope?

ELLIPSIS

(Waving Peg away, as if her behaviour were inconsequential in light of so grave a matter)

Poor Parabola.

It came upon her so suddenly,

An internal jarring

During the final scene.

When the trees burst

Into blossoms of laughter.

Such a wonderful moment,

But it seemed to snatch her breath away

And convulse her to the core.

PEG

But we spent five weeks making those trees.

They can hardly have taken her by surprise.

ELLIPSIS

(Still ignoring Peg) Doctor Gravid says it's the brain.

SELBY

It's neurological then.

Of all the logicals,

The brain is the most mysterious.

An old-fashioned bell telephone rings. SELBY answers.

SELBY

Hello. De Selby Props.

Ah, Aunt Doric.

Yes, yes, Ellipsis was just telling us.

I know, terrible, yes, it's awful.

Of course, yes, we will.

I don't know.

No, not at all.

Yes, I see your point,

But I d...

Yes, but...

But I don't think...

I see.

Fine, if you believe...

Would you like to speak to...?

Alright, yes, I will.

Thank you Aunt Doric.

And to you.

Goodbye.

PEG

What did our illustrious figurehead want?

Are we to mine the Hittite era for even dustier inspiration?

SELBY

Oh Peg, what am I to do with you...

ELLIPSIS

Don't worry Selby.
What the tender bud now dismisses as passé
She will come to appreciate as timeless,
When she herself starts to wither on the stem.

PEG dismisses this as ridiculous, but gestures her acquiescence to keep the peace.

ELLIPSIS

(To Selby) Aunt Doric called about the new order, no doubt,
From the People's Opera.
I have it here.

ELLIPSIS lays a sheet of paper on a table and points to key elements, as the others pore over it.

PEG

Wow, it's vast!

ELLIPSIS

It might be more useful
To call it epic.

SELBY

Aunt Doric says she's sending a substitute.
A freelancer from town.

ELLIPSIS

An outsider?
Unprecedented.

SELBY

He's the best of the rest, she assures.

ELLIPSIS

But the De Selbys have never sought help.

Why, I remember when...

ELLIPSIS is cut short by a knock at the door.

SELBY

That will be him.

We should be welcoming, (*pointedly*) please Peg.

PEG goes to open the door and EAMES walks confidently in, shaking PEG's hand enthusiastically.

EAMES

Ms de Selby, I presume.

My name is Eames.

How do you do.

PEG

(*Flirtatiously*) Charmed, I'm sure.

PEG, distracted by EAMES' good looks and flattered by his addressing her as an equal, neglects to usher him in, leaving him standing awkwardly in the doorway.

EAMES

I've come to work –

Incapacity cover, I believe?

SELBY approaches, his arm outstretched.

SELBY

Mr Eames, so glad you could come.

Welcome to our little family business.

I'm Selby, master craftsman,

This is Ellipsis, senior designer.

And you've met Peg, the apprentice (*with emphasis, intended to chastise to Peg*).

Do excuse us, we're not used to guests.

Please, sit down.

Will you take some tea?

He waves PEG out of the room to make tea. EAMES is seated, while the other two stand above him, uncomfortably.

EAMES

It's an honour to meet you indeed.

I've admired your work for years.

I see everything you produce.

Such spunky design (*the others start at this word*)

And exquisite crafting.

This is a thrill for me,

An honour, a challenge,

Not to mention a magnificent feather

For my modest cap.

ELLIPSIS

The pleasure is all ours, I'm sure... (*Pause*)

(With vanity) So, you admire our craft?
Any piece in particular?

SELBY

(As if to excuse Ellipsis' vanity)
Yes, if we are to work together
It would be good to know
Where our tastes and expectations
Converge.

EAMES

I love everything you do.
Such a classical touch
And a feel for beauty.
Although perhaps your methods
Are a little traditional at times.
You might, dare I venture,
Up-skill your toolbox...?

SELBY

(Perplexed) Up-skill?

EAMES

Push the envelope a little...?

SELBY

Envelope?
...Envelope?

PEG returns with the tea trolley.

ELLIPSIS

(Tartly) We have our methods, Mr Eames,
Our standards, and our clients' expectations.

PEG

And, most importantly,
(Pointing to items on the trolley) Our digestives, our fig rolls and these
scintillating Bath Olivers.

PEG and EAMES laugh easily together.

SELBY

(Indicating the order sheet)
Here, Eames, is why Aunt Doric engaged you.
This is too big an order for us to refuse,
But we are, for the moment, one designer down.

They all take a cup of tea from the trolley and gather around the order sheet.

ELLIPSIS

It's not our usual sort of thing, I have to admit.
We tend towards the elegantly understated.
But this... *(tailing off, at a loss to describe it)*

EAMES

It's a challenge, certainly.

PEG

Impossibly big, surely?

EAMES

Not impossible.

I can do big.

I love big.

PEG

How big is your big?

EAMES

I once made America.

PEG

All of it?

EAMES

Every last clod.

PEG

(Flirtatiously) Oh, that is big.

EAMES

But while this *(referring to the order sheet)* would be the largest,

It's not nearly the hardest.

The infinitesimally small

Is most challenging, don't you agree?

PEG is clearly delighted by EAMES' account of his work, which starts to rankle SELBY.

SELBY

(Tersely) Complexity can occur at any scale.

Size is hardly the point here.

ELLIPSIS

Well, either way, the deadline is as tight as a lord.
Come along everyone,
Knuckle down.

PEG leaves with the tea trolley. EAMES, still holding his teacup, looks hesitant, not knowing what is expected of him.

ELLIPSIS

So, Eames, here's the drill:
(Rhythmic, like a mnemonic) I describe, you abridge,
Together we pool our special knowledge.
I invoke, you suppress.
This is the secret of De Selby success.

EAMES

(Confused) I'm sorry...?

SELBY

(To Ellipsis) If I may?
(To Eames) Our methods are simple but effective:
Cousin Ellipsis designs a real object,
The most vivid and beautiful version imaginable,
Then Cousin Parabola – that's you – reduces the design to its essence,
Boiling off the excess, as it were.
Then I take the designs and craft them.

EAMES

(Laughing) That's incredible!
You make it realistic
Then boil off the excess?

How quaint.
How perfectly loopy.

PEG returns.

ELLIPSIS and SELBY

This is the cornerstone of our method,
Generations old and still the best in the business.

EAMES

Forgive me.
I don't mean to be critical.
You are, after all, at the top of your game.

ELLIPSIS and SELBY

We are not here to participate in games,
We are here to make great art.

EAMES

(Cautiously persistent) Of course,
It's just that everyone else works the other way round,
Starting from nothing and adding essentials.
Why waste time on details if only to erase them?

ELLIPSIS

Regard if you will, Mr Eames, your teacup *(motioning to the teacup in his hand)*.

EAMES

(Unsure what to regard about it) It's a very nice teacup.

ELLIPSIS

But only one of many, many teacups in the world.
One cannot simply pluck general teacuppiness from thin air.
One needs to start with precisely the right teacup
To achieve precisely the desired effect.
(*To Selby and Peg*) Fetch the glass prop that's going off to Russia.

SELBY and PEG leave. There is a speechless, uncomfortable exchange between EAMES and ELLIPSIS during which EAMES drops the teacup. The shards stay on the floor for the rest of the opera.

ELLIPSIS

Don't worry about the teacup.
We have hundreds of them.

SELBY and PEG return with a large bell jar prop.

SELBY

Here we have the bell jar
From Miller's final opera *The Father of Chemistry*.
A facsimile of Boyle's own from 1659:
Hand-blown glass, using silica from the Sefton dunes,
With a fully functioning air pump,
Despite certain ...
(*placing his hand in the back opening to show that it is not fully round*)
...abstractions.

PEG

It's the key prop in the best scene,
When Boyle first demonstrates
The qualities of oxygen to an audience.

He puts a bird – that’s you – inside it...

As the prop covers Eames the sound of PEG and the music is muffled as we switch to Eames’ perspective.

PEG

(Muffled, pre-recorded with surtitles continuing)

Then the pump sucks it almost empty of air.

The bird is struggling,

Gasping.

It falls from its perch,

Floundering.

Boyle is excited,

On the cusp of a breakthrough.

He asks those gathered:

For the sake of knowledge do I continue?

Do I diminish the air to full vacuum?

Or shall we spare the bird

And remain ignorant?

EAMES starts to get worried, as the oxygen inside the bell jar seems to actually deplete. SELBY also becomes anxious and releases EAMES from the prop. As he emerges, the audio perspective switches back and we hear PEG and the music clearly again. The bell jar prop is left unpacked for the rest of the opera, providing a red herring for the final act.

PEG

The women and girls all plead pity,

But the men press for enlightenment,

At the cost of the life of one bird.

EAMES

(Out of breath) Knowledge was cheap in the old days.
Although if there's one thing I've learned
From my expensive education,
It's that the void is not empty,
But full of potential.

ELLIPSIS

Nonsense.
As I think we have amply demonstrated:
For convincing effect, start with the specific,
Because only in matter is quintessence prolific.
As I said, it does not float about in thin air.

PEG

I hate to break it to you,
(Motioning to the order sheet) But in this instance
You couldn't be more wrong.
A solar system does float about in thin air.

SELBY

In no air, in fact.

ELLIPSIS

Selby, you Vicar of Bray!

EAMES

And consider the practicalities:
Think of the time wasted
Describing irrelevant details.
Not to mention the cruelty
Of creating a whole planet

Then choking its plants,
Slaying its creatures,
Demolishing its cities.
And all to achieve a globe that I can design
(He draws a big circle and holds it up)
In a matter of moments.

ELLIPSIS

(Outraged) We, dear sir, are prop makers.
We do not peddle mere insinuations.
We craft beautiful, meaningful objects
That can be felt from afar.
(Picking up a crown and placing it on her own head)
Can you not feel the weight of the crown
Indenting your own treacherous forehead?
(Retrieving a small pistol from her clothing)
And the pearl-handled pistol
Unexpectedly light in your hand?
(Plucking what looks like a blood-soaked handkerchief from pinafore)
Don't you recoil from the dampness of blood,
(Producing fake strawberries)
And gag on the sweetness of strawberries?
(Throws strawberries)
(Picking up a glass vase)
Don't you flinch at the cold, strict glass,
As hollow as the perfidy
That you propose to pass?
Don't you feel the height of our outrage,
The shortness of our lighted fuse,
The brittle lengths that we can hurl
Our affronted virtues

At low, cheap, nasty, lazy imitators...

ELLIPSIS has worked herself into a frenzy; she throws the vase at EAMES and misses, then collapses unconscious.

Fade to black.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

A daybed has been brought into the workshop, where ELLIPSIS is laying, swathed in blankets and her head bandaged. The DOCTOR is in attendance.

DOCTOR

(In mnemonic mode, in reference to Ellipsis's head)

The tickle in reticular formation is arousing,
The bell in cerebellum rings for balance while carousing,
The hippo wanders round the campus remembering his salad days,
The limbic system, deep and old, weeps into his cabernets.
(Conversational, to the others) Do excuse me,
These little ditties are so useful.
There's so much to remember, you know.

SELBY

But what is it, doctor?

DOCTOR

(Gesturing to the medical equipment piled up on the tea trolley)

Until I analyse these samples,
We can only speculate.
But I think it's a glitch in cortical phase transitions
Just at the point
Where the limbic system shapes
The stimuli perceived
By the anterior temporal lobe.

PEG

Sounds painful.

ELLIPSIS

It is! It is!

DOCTOR

(Making notes, reiterating to self) Is painful.
(To the others) In lay terms, you might say
Ellipsis is drowning in significance.
Where you and I seek meaning that is useful,
And lay it aside when no longer needed,
She finds masses of meaning everywhere
And cannot leave hold of it.
What to us is the merest connotation,
A fanciful idea or an incidental thing
Is to her of real and all-consuming consequence.
And eventually these accumulating urgencies
Will overwhelm her common sense.

PEG

Is it a brain plague?
Are we all going to get it?

DOCTOR

Oh no.
It is most likely psychosomatic
Or due to lesions.
Contagion is impossible.

PEG

But Aunt Parabola has it too, doesn't she?

DOCTOR

They are identical twins, are they not?
With identical lesions, it seems.

SELBY

Are you saying they are both delusional?

ELLIPSIS

I'm not dead yet, you know.
I can hear everything you say.

SELBY

Sorry, let me put it another way.
Do you mean Ellipsis, in her illness,
Understands too much?

DOCTOR

Based on what I've seen so far,
It's more accurate to say
That she extracts more meaning
Than there really is.

EAMES

Extracts?
Meaning is not matter for extraction,
Like oil in the ground.
It's constructed by the mind,
By each mind, individually.

EAMES takes something from his wallet.

DOCTOR

Medically speaking...

EAMES

Take this photograph for example.

It means a lot to me,

But to you it's just a snapshot of a woman.

SELBY

(Strangely absorbed by the photograph – the illness compels him)

I wouldn't say that,

She's rather lovely.

The look on her face...

ELLIPSIS

Selby!

(Curiosity getting the better of her) Who is she?

PEG

(Craning to see the photograph) Your girlfriend?

EAMES

The most influential of women.

PEG

(Stricken) Your wife?

EAMES

My life coach.

Rest her soul.

DOCTOR

(Shaking his head at their lack of focus on the real issues)

Well, I shall leave you artists to your philosophies and muses

While I conduct my tests in your kitchen, if I may?

These 'efficiency savings' are the devil, you know.

Not a laboratory for counties.

Not what I'd call efficient.

I'll need hot water, towels and plenty of ethanol, if you please.

PEG leaves to show the DOCTOR to the kitchen. SELBY takes charge.

SELBY

So, Eames, to work.

We must press on through calamity.

ELLIPSIS tries to get up.

SELBY

No, you rest Ellipsis.

Lie there, where you can keep an eye on us.

(Thinking intently and pacing)

A solar system ... a solar system...

(Suddenly inspired)

I see a clockwork ballet

Of brass rods and plaster orbs,

Their trajectories described by

Cogs and cams and epicentric gearing.

PEG returns. EAMES goes to the second drawing board.

EAMES

That sounds ... fine.
But let's kick this idea around,
Throw some blue sky at it.

ELLIPSIS flinches at the choice of phrase.

EAMES

(Sketching casually)
I see a lighting effect.
No brass or plaster,
Just blazes, sparks and glimmers
Hanging in blackness.

PEG

Sounds gorgeous.

SELBY

Interesting.
No hard materials at all?

ELLIPSIS

(Weakly, from the daybed) That would be a mistake.
The audience would never be able to feel it.

EAMES

(Laughing) But what on earth does a solar system feel like?

The following passage is sung with the final syllable of each line overlapping with the first syllable of the next.

ELLIPSIS

Perishing...

PEG

Interminable...

SELBY

Balletic...

ELLIPSIS

Ticking... Faintly ticking...

SELBY

Intermittent gravity...

PEG

Tedious interval...

ELLIPSIS

Vaulted splendour...

PEG

Doornail deadness...

SELBY

Nested vacancies...

ELLIPSIS

(Shivering) Seizing chill...

SELBY

(As if to provide Ellipsis with warmth) Illuminating sun...

EAMES

(Overlapping with and obliterating Selby's 'sun') None of which can be made from hard materials.

My solution is more idea than matter,

Bent by eye and brain, not hands.

Just visualise...

ELLIPSIS

We don't visualise,

We create.

EAMES

Ah, but visualise this:

A technological twist to your repertoire,

A whole new direction, even.

Your reputation extended...

EAMES & PEG

...to television!

ELLIPSIS

(Dismayed) Never!

EAMES continues to sketch, narrating authoritatively to convince the others of his knowledge of astronomy. SELBY and PEG gather round to look.

EAMES

(While drawing, the words embellishing the movements)

To make a solar system
We're going to need
Elliptical orbits – both eccentric and apastron,
Lagrangian points here, here and here,
Moons full, quartered gibbous and waxing throughout.
And solar winds with azimuth angles
Ranging from oblique to obtuse;
Not forgetting corollaries,
With red shift for gravity and amber for quasars....

ELLIPSIS

(Weakly, desperately, echoing Eames' lines as he sings them)

Elliptical orbits, eccentric old pastors,
Deranged at their points,
Moons hung, drawn and quartered,
The gibbons are waxing,
Solar angels, so oblique, so obtuse...
Collieries, colliery gravity...
Quasi-ambush...

The others are so engrossed that they barely hear ELLIPSIS. She falls quiet, exhausted.

EAMES

There should be synodic rotations over event horizons,
Casting umbra, penumbra and of course antumbra,
Onto hypernovae perihelion.
And to top it off,
A spectroscopic declination, like so.
And that is how the heretic
Designs a solar system
In five minutes flat.

PEG

Awesome!

SELBY

(Grudgingly at first) I see how it might work.

(Becoming interested) Even a hydraulic mechanism

Would be insufficient for this...

What did you call it?

EAMES

(Bluffing somewhat) A ... perihelion declination.

SELBY

(Feeling the word in his mouth, warming to the idea) Perihelion
declination...

PEG

You know a lot about astrology, Mr Eames.

EAMES

(Laughing) I don't know anything about that claptrap,

(Adding more to the drawing) But I do know this will be a new
departure for you,

And a brilliant collaboration for me.

I promise you,

It's going

To be

Just

Huge...

PEG

(Pointing to an element on the drawing) But it starts as small as that?

EAMES

And the lamp projects it as big as you like.

SELBY

Paraffin lamps would be best, of course.

Tungsten flattens everything so.

EAMES

(With hollow jocularly) It's time to leave the Dark Ages behind, old chap.

LEDs are far more versatile.

SELBY

But a naked flame is essential

To strike up the dance.

The slow and subtle

Shrink from electric glare.

(Passionately) They prefer shadows,

Where time pools

And intimacy blooms...

There is an interruptive knock at the door. SELBY pauses and PEG leaves. EAMES continues adding to his design.

SELBY

The dance begins

As light curtsies to shadow,

Who bows deeply back.

A lighting effect [SELBY lights candles] creates shadows that appear to have an effect on SELBY.

SELBY

Shadow is dappled and fleet,
Swelling and plunging
As light swings him about.

EAMES continues working for a while, but breaks off to watch in puzzlement.

SELBY

Shadow is not the ponderous self,
But the phantasmagorical other.
He is the loved one, not the lover.
It's not the soul that's in the shadow,
But the shadow in the soul,
Cast out as dark material
To the floor
(Sinking to the floor)
Where he starves,
Losing likeness,
For lack of flesh and blood,
Laying low, thin and mean,
Bruising, brooding, bleeding...

PEG

(Shouting from off-stage) Will somebody come and help me with this?

SELBY is sitting on the floor panting, apparently surprised to find himself there.

EAMES

(Offering a hand to SELBY) Are you alright?

You're not getting sick are you?

SELBY picks himself off the floor, without EAMES' help.

SELBY

No. Never felt better.

EAMES goes to help PEG bring in the crate.

PEG

It's the end of the run at the Royal Opera House.

This is from a brilliant siege scene,

One of my favourites.

(To Eames) Want to see it?

EAMES makes encouraging gestures and PEG unpacks the prop and puts it together. It is a cleverly constructed length of crenulated castle battlements.

SELBY

(To EAMES) It's always the grimly dark

That appeals to her.

But it's a show of interest, at least.

PEG starts to re-enact a scene, which EAMES is visibly entertained by.

PEG

(Addressing EAMES as if he were another actor in the play)

The stores are empty,

We women have not eaten for days
So that you may continue fighting.
We are close to starving,
And so will you be soon,
Unless you surrender.
But we know that you would never give up.
You would not relinquish your lands,
Your castle, your kin.
And so we women shall surrender
Parts of ourselves to you.
We shall cut off that region
Where the last of our fat clings.
Our seats will nourish you,
For a few days at least.
We have two generous helpings.
The first we'll prepare now,
The second two days hence,
Keeping it fresh about our persons
Until needed.

ELLIPSIS is drawn in by the scene, thinking it is real. She rises from the daybed.

ELLIPSIS

No! Good, upright women!
Don't! You mustn't.
I can foretell what will pass.
You must not sacrifice
Even half of your fundamentals.
These men are weak.
They will surrender too soon
And you will be left to sit on the tilt

The rest of your uncomfortable lives.

PEG

Auntie, it's ok,

It's from the opera.

It's not real.

(To the others) She's actually gone mad!

ELLIPSIS

Don't do it, I beg you.

For the verticality of all women.

(Gesturing towards Selby and Eames with derision)

They will betray you, these *(with fury)* cowards.

SELBY

Peg, fetch Doctor Gravid.

SELBY strides over to slap her face, breaking in on her delusions. ELLIPSIS is shocked.

PEG runs out.

SELBY

I'm sorry Ellipsis.

It's alright.

Please, I'm sorry, it's alright...

ELLIPSIS falls quiet, panting and heaving; SELBY holds her.

EAMES

What a family!

Such histrionics.

How do they ever get anything done?

EAMES returns to his drawing board, to keep out of the way. PEG returns with the DOCTOR, who looks grave. EAMES' attention during the following exchange is frequently split between what's happening and what's on the drawing board.

SELBY

Doctor, it was just as you said.

She seemed to lose all sense of proportion.

The DOCTOR opens his case and administers an injection. ELLIPSIS is returned to the daybed.

DOCTOR

(To himself) But sooner than I thought.

(To the others) I've run some tests.

The two sisters have indeed

Fallen to the same illness,

But a new mutation

That seems to be hereditary,

With swift onset of symptoms

Triggered by I know not what.

PEG

Hereditary?

You mean we're all going to go nuts?

DOCTOR

That's not a phrase I care for,

But if left untreated,

You may well experience

Some ... mental disturbances.

SELBY

So there is a cure?

DOCTOR

Without immediate access to electroencephalography

It's hard to know which course to take.

To medicate or operate?

To operate or medicate?

But in the meantime,

While we wait

For the waiting list,

We must consult the ancient apothecaries.

(To Eames) You're not family, are you?

I don't remember delivering you.

Come with me to the forest

And I'll show you how to gather

Ingredients for a time-honoured elixir

Before I dash off to my next patient –

A most delicate case.

ELLIPSIS

An elixir?

I'm dying and you prescribe a fairy tale?

DOCTOR

Sometimes folklore contains the seeds of science.

SELBY

Sometimes...?

DOCTOR

Sometimes 'sometimes' is all we have.

It should minimise the symptoms until I return at least.

ELLIPSIS

Fine (*sighing her acquiescence to the treatment*).

You're the doctor.

EAMES

If you'll give me just one moment

To finish the design, like so, (*adds a final flourish*)

And then (*to Selby*) do you want to have a stab at making that?

DOCTOR

A prop design?

EAMES nods.

DOCTOR

In my professional opinion,

You should steer clear

Of evocative objects.

They could exacerbate the illness.

EAMES

This should be fine then,

So long as they don't turn it on.

The apparatus itself is entirely without meaning.

SELBY

(To the doctor) Is that possible?

DOCTOR

I'm not qualified in such philosophical matters,
But keep everything nice and banal
And you should be safe.

SELBY

(To SELBY and PEG) Deadlines have no respect for illness, I'm afraid
Doctor,
But there is plenty we can be getting on with.

PEG

Yeah,
Meaninglessness
Isn't difficult to find round here.

EAMES leaves with the DOCTOR while PEG and SELBY converge on the design on the drawing board.

Fade to black.

END OF ACT TWO

ACT THREE

The stage is full of balls. ELLIPSIS, SELBY and PEG are handling them in bizarre ways. The music is disjointed. It continues for some time. No one speaks.

EAMES returns and stands just inside the door, angry at what he thinks he sees.

EAMES

What have they done?
This is not my design.
These lunatics have reverted
To their tedious old ways.
Such ugly planets,
As stupid as circles.

PEG notices EAMES and breaks off from what she is doing.

PEG

Oh Mr Eames, you're back.
Success in the forest I hope?

EAMES

But Peg, dear,
What's all this?
It's rather a deviation
From the design we agreed on.

ELLIPSIS and SELBY stop their activities too.

PEG

(Handing him a ball) Oh this isn't the solar system.

That's over there. (*Points to a small black box on a table*)
This is the sub-atomic scene
From *The Father of Chemistry*.

SELBY

There is some mechanical reticence
Here in the atoms,
And they must go off to Russia tonight.

EAMES

Atoms?
What a welcome shift in scale.
(*Holding up the ball*) Atoms!

ELLIPSIS

One of poor Parabola's finest designs,
I've always thought.

EAMES

But the doctor said you shouldn't be handling these things.

SELBY

It's fine.
We checked.
There's no meaning
At the sub-atomic level.

EAMES

(*Faintly impatient*) And the solar system?

PEG

It's ready to go.

(To Selby) Can we throw the switch?

SELBY

Not until Gravid gives the say so.

PEG

But he could be gone days,

And we have the medicine now.

EAMES

Yes, about the elixir...

SELBY

What is it?

An infusion?

EAMES nods.

SELBY

(To Peg) Fetch the tea things.

EAMES

(With urgency) No!

I'll do it.

There's not quite...

Uh, it's complicated.

EAMES retreats, hanging at the threshold, regarding the others with some perplexity. PEG, ELLIPSIS and SELBY play the balls. The music starts off disjointed as before, but the De SELBYS' interactions with the balls appear to 'correct' the music.

EAMES

(To self) If this improbable illness
Is as the doctor describes,
Then they are so suggestible
That any brew of mumbo-jumbo, bunk and potpourri
Will work as a placebo.

EAMES leaves and after a while the music sickens, the performers' actions weaken.

EAMES returns and everyone stops. He pointedly gives PEG a particular teacup and allows SELBY to help ELLIPSIS and himself to theirs. They all drink. EAMES chats convivially in a bid to normalise the situation.

EAMES

It's a strange day's freelancing
When you find yourself in a forest
Gathering sap and roots.
I half expected to find three wishes
And a nice stout pair of seven-league boots.
I hope it doesn't taste too ... challenging?

PEG

It tastes like flowers.

SELBY

It tastes like soil.
I feel a little...

ELLIPSIS

It tastes like soil.

I feel a little...

There is a pause while everyone tries to find the words.

PEG

...Better? Me too.

In fact, I've never felt better.

PEG rushes over to the metal box.

PEG

Ready?

She flicks the switch before anyone can respond. Nothing happens.

SELBY

It's off at the wall.

But we must wait for Gravid...

PEG

Always waiting!

You'd miss the present entirely

If it didn't follow you around.

SELBY

Oh Peg!

PEG

Hit it Mister Eames.

EAMES

(To self) If I were a cautious man...

But what am I saying?

I am an educated man.

It has been proven that a placebo

Is a medication as good as any.

EAMES flicks the switch on at the wall. After a slight pause, a lighting effect fades up.
Everyone is awed to silence for a while.

EAMES

Everyone feeling alright?

ELLIPSIS, SELBY, PEG

Never felt better!

They take in the lighting effect a little longer.

PEG

To make everything there is

From practically nothing,

In less than a day.

It must be a record.

EAMES

Certainly.

You would usually expect

To turn on the lights

And still have a week's work ahead.

PEG and EAMES laugh. ELLIPSIS becomes agitated at their flippancy.

ELLIPSIS

(Rising from her daybed) Those who make light of everything,
For whom nothing has weight,
Must fill their pockets with a ballast of platitudes,
And tether themselves with received ideas.
But full knowledge is weightless.
Deep meaning is nonsense,
Wisdom unspeakable,
Inconceivable...

PEG

(To EAMES, uneasily) Perhaps you'd better turn it off...

EAMES reaches reluctantly for the switch to turn off the lighting effect.

SELBY

No! Not yet. Let us stay a little longer.
I like the immeasurable depth out here.

PEG

(Sternly) Mr Eames, I think you should turn it off.

SELBY & ELLIPSIS

No need.
We have never felt better.
We are beginning to understand.

EAMES

I knew you'd get it once you'd seen it.
Just one thing though:
I would turn up the amperage a touch,
For a real hit in the eye!

ELLIPSIS

A hit in the eye?

EAMES

Yes, if you really want it
To steal the show then...

ELLIPSIS

Hit the eye?
Steal the show?
Kick the idea?
Take a stab
With double-edged swords?
Pick your battles,
Shoot the breeze,
Twist my arm,
Bite the bullet,
Blow up in your face...
How brutality trips from the lips.

PEG

He was being figurative, Auntie.
(*To EAMES*) I don't think the medicine is working for her.

EAMES

(Hesitantly) There ... wasn't quite enough for them.

PEG

What?

EAMES

I could only find enough for one.

I thought it best if...

I didn't think it would...

It's just twigs and leaves!

PEG

Turn it off.

Turn it off!

Turn it off!

ELLIPSIS

Turn it off?

Foolish girl.

You can turn off the television.

You can turn off the motorway.

You can turn off the charm.

You can turn off the man.

You can turn off the lights.

But you cannot turn off the work of the gods.

I *am* light.

I am television.

I am motorway.

I am charm.

I am man.

I turn *you* off.

PEG falls to the floor. EAMES rushes over to her and feels her pulse, listens to her heart.

EAMES

My god.

(*To Selby*) Help me.

SELBY

I am not *your* god.

Why not ask your venerable sciences

To help you now?

EAMES

You don't seem to understand.

She's dead...

ELLIPSIS & SELBY

(*To one another, sinisterly amused*) We don't understand!

(*To EAMES*) Precisely what is it that we fail to grasp?

That her fickle faddism

And your gauche ambition

Are more meaningless

Than the meaninglessness from which

You enlist them to protect you?

EAMES

You've both lost your minds!

She's dead!

EAMES moves towards the telephone. ELLIPSIS unplugs the cord from the wall and holds it up.

ELLIPSIS

It's off at the wall.

EAMES

(Sung 'badly' and unaccompanied by ensemble or surtitles)

Ok Ellipsis, here's the drill.

It's a little operatic scene of my own.

The score is not very tuneful,

The libretto's rather limited,

EAMES reaches for an electric drill on one of the workbenches and turns it on.

EAMES

And its single prop is none too beautiful,

But it's incredibly meaningful.

(Shouting) It means you plug the telephone back in at the wall right now so I can call for help.

The drill has been building in volume, and the ensemble extending the sound of the drill, becoming uncomfortable for ELLIPSIS and SELBY. Eventually, ELLIPSIS crumples to the ground, dead. EAMES releases the drill trigger, stunned. SELBY recovers and is unperturbed by ELLIPSIS's death. He steps over her body to walk within the lighting effect.

SELBY

Have you never wondered why

The human race feels so alone in the universe?

Don't you see how microbes shrink from view,

How animals hide, birds keep their distance,
And plants grow on and on,
Sighing and shaking their heads?
Don't you notice the oceans
Muttering beneath their breath,
And the moon hiding its face
In periodic disgrace?

EAMES is still stupefied by what has happened.

SELBY

(Motioning about them) The sun radiates shame on your behalf,
The planets spin with worry,
The stars laugh amongst themselves.
And you – you fail to see.

EAMES

(Coaxing, emolliating) Well, I had certainly noticed the animals.
Come, sit down and tell me
Why we've earned such criticism,
And how we might redeem ourselves.
Take some tea perhaps...

SELBY ignores EAMES, who is now edging towards the lighting effect, to turn it off.

SELBY

It's because nature is embarrassed deeply
By your rough approximations,
Your cheaply manmade shams,
Crude imitations that do not even
Pass for flattery.

And we gods grow ever more insulted
By the meanings humans manufacture,
The false virtues they ascribe to things.
They overlook the obscurities
We are at great pains to devise,
And neglect our graver mysteries
In favour of confections
Contrived by so-called artists,
Those myopic, ham-fisted artificers,
Who mangle all they dream of,
Diminish all they touch,
And fill the world with brazen junk.
(Gesturing about him) We gods and planets and nameless forces,
(As music starts to dwindle and sicken) Take it now upon ourselves
To reveal all art
As ultimately meaningless,
And to condemn the artist
To a dreary, quick and simple death.

SELBY dies. EAMES is left onstage alone, bewildered. Slowly, he gathers his wits and looks about him. He turns off the lighting effect and carefully packs it away. After taking one last look about the place he leaves, with the new prop tucked covetously under his arm.

ENDS