

Far left, the front porch, strewn with dead grass and a few rolled-up small-town newspapers.

The Second Floor:

The stairway arrives at a landing (above the sitting room on the first floor). A cushioned window seat, a hallway leading to the bedrooms, off, and another stairway leading to ...

The Attic:

A single chamber, center, with peaked roof and slanted walls, inexpensively modeled into a bedroom.

The house is filled with books. All the windows in the house have been covered with cheap plastic shades. Black duct tape seals the edge of the shades, effecting a complete absence of outside light.

At rise: Lit dimly by his desk lamp, BEVERLY Weston, drunk, nurses a glass of whiskey as he "interviews" JOHNNA Monevata.

BEVERLY. "Life is very long ..."

T. S. Eliot. I mean ... he's given credit for it because he bothered to write it down. He's not the first person to say it ... certainly not the first person to think it. *Feel* it. But he wrote the words on a sheet of paper and signed it and the four-eyed prick was a genius ... so if you say it, you have to say his name after it.

"Life is very long": T. S. Eliot.

Absolutely goddamn right. Especially in his case, since he lived to be seventy-six or something, a very long life, especially in those days. And he was only in his thirties when he wrote it so he must've had some inside dope.

Give the devil his due. Very few poets could've made it through his ... his trial and come out on the other side, brilliantined and double-breasted and Anglican. Not hard to imagine, faced with Eliot's first wife, lovely Viv, how Hart Crane or John Berryman might've reacted, just foot-raced to the nearest bridge, Olympian Suicidalists. Not Eliot: following sufficient years of ecclesiastical guilt, plop her in the nearest asylum and get on with the day. God a-mighty. You have to admire the purity of the survivor's instinct.

Berryman, the old goat: "The world is gradually becoming a place where I do not care to be anymore." I don't know what it says about me that I have a greater affinity with the damaged. Probably nothing good. I admire the hell out of Eliot *the poet*, but the *person*? I can't identify.

VIOLET. (Offstage.): ... son-of-a-bitch

BEVERLY. Violet. My wife. She takes pills, sometimes a great many. And they affect ... among other things, her equilibrium. Fortunately the pills she takes eliminate her need for equilibrium. So she falls when she rambles ... but she doesn't ramble much.

My wife takes pills and I drink. That's the bargain we've struck ... one of the bargains, just one paragraph of our marriage contract ... cruel covenant. She takes pills and I drink. I don't drink because she takes pills. As to whether she takes pills because I drink . . . I learned long ago not to speak for my wife. The reasons why we partake are anymore inconsequential. The facts are: my wife takes pills and I drink. And these facts

have over time made burdensome the maintenance of traditional American routine: paying of BILLS, purchase of goods, cleaning of clothes or carpets or crappers. Rather than once more assume the mantle of guilt ... vow abstinence with my fingers crossed in the queasy hope of righting our ship, I've chosen to turn my life over to a Higher Power ... (*Hoists his glass*) ... and join the ranks of the Hiring Class.

It's not a decision with which I'm entirely comfortable. I know how to launder my dirty undies . . . done it all my life, me or my wife, but I'm finding it's getting in the way of my drinking. "Something has been said for sobriety but very little." (Berryman again.) And now you are here.

The place isn't in such bad shape, not yet. I've done all right. I've managed. And just last night, I burned an awful lot of ... debris ...

Y'know ... a simple utility BILL can mean so much to a living person. Once they've passed, though ... after they've passed, the words and numbers just seem like ... otherworldly symbols. It's only paper. Worse. Worse than blank paper. (*JOHNNA wipes sweat from her brow. Beverly takes a folded handkerchief from his pocket and hands it to her.*) This is clean.

JOHNNA. (*Wiping her forehead*) Thank you.

BEVERLY. I apologize for the temperature in here. My wife is cold-blooded and not just in the metaphorical sense. She does not believe in air-conditioning ... as if it is a thing to be disbelieved.

JOHNNA. My daddy was the same way. I'm used to it.

BEVERLY. I knew Mr. Youngbird, you know.

JOHNNA. You knew Daddy?

BEVERLY. Small town. Bought many a watermelon from his fruit stand. Some summers he sold fireworks too, right?

JOHNNA. Yes, sir.

BEVERLY. I bought roman candles for my children. He did pass didn't he?

JOHNNA. Yes, sir.

BEVERLY. May I ask how?

JOHNNA. He had a heart attack. Fell into a flatbed truck full of wine grapes.

BEVERLY. Wine grapes. In Oklahoma. I'm sorry.

JOHNNA. Thank you. (*He finishes his drink, pours another.*)

BEVERLY. May I ask about the name?

JOHNNA. Hm?

BEVERLY. He was Youngbird and you are...

JOHNNA. Monevata.

BEVERLY. "Monevata."

JOHNNA. I went back to the original language.

BEVERLY. And does it mean "young bird"?

JOHNNA. Yes.

BEVERLY. And taking the name, that was your choice?

JOHNNA. Mm-hm.

BEVERLY. (*Raising his glass*). Cheers. (*Violet calls from offstage.*)

VIOLET. (*Offstage*). Bev ...?

BEVERLY. (*To himself*)

By night within that ancient house

Immense, black, damned, anonymous.

(Lights up, dimly, on the second-floor landing. Just out of bed, wearing wrinkled clothes, smoking a Winston, Violet squints down the darkened stairway.)