

THE WRITERS' GROUP

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A Play in one act

by

Joe Oppenheimer

*[Precis, if asked for: ]*

In **The Writers' Group**, members of a writers' group for the homeless meet in a community center. Two volunteers are running the group. Members are there for differing reasons, not all of which are understood by the volunteers. The varying expectations lead to unforeseen difficulties. The drama takes place in the present.

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Cast of Characters (8 - one double cast.)

MARK: a new volunteer - retired. A bit of a casual slob. 70. First time enthusiasm. Clearly middle class or richer.

JACK: a white, long time, volunteer, also retired, age 78. Well dressed, trimmed beard. A gentleman. Weary.

MONA: elderly, tired (72 black woman). Dressed decently. Heavy. Balding with dreads. Lacerations and a black eye on one side of her face.

LEILA: elderly (68) Peruvian Indian woman, Spanish accent. Unbent. Could be played as any ethnic immigrant.

IRIS: middle aged woman, somewhat under the influence. (Can be played by same person as who does SHEILA)

STRANJ: (pronounced 'Strange') big, strong, bald, black man. Approaching 40.

TED: short, black man. Almost bald. Approaching 50.

SHEILA: Very attractive tall, slim black woman, smartly dressed, red tinted lines in her long flowing hair. Sun glasses, long white coat, high healed boots.

Scene

A large room in a community center for the homeless. No windows. Walls painted bureaucracy green. Linoleum floor. Stacked folding chairs on the left side. Stacked folding tables on the right. A couple of file cabinets closer to the front of the stage along the right wall. An entrance door from an interior corridor slightly off center. Hanging florescent lights, some don't work. Trite motivational posters on the wall. A TV (or set of screens) should be able to make visible for the audience some of the writing that is going on as indicated in the script.

Time

Now. Early autumn.

CURTAIN RISES

SETTING: A large room in a community center for the homeless. No windows. Walls painted bureaucracy green. Linoleum floor. Stacked folding chairs on the left side. Stacked folding tables on the right. A couple of file cabinets closer to the front of the stage along the right wall. An entrance door from an interior corridor slightly off center. Hanging florescent lights, some don't work. Motivational posters on the wall.

AT RISE: JACK walks in. He is carrying a large box labeled (in big black letters):  
"WRITERS' GROUP:  
MAGIC MATERIALS  
for WRITERS"  
General hubbub off stage (in the corridor randomly including raised voices and general talk, etc. intermittent through out the play). MARK enters. Has some papers and a slim paperback book on a clipboard.

MARK  
Hi. You must be JACK. I'm MARK.

JACK  
Nice meeting you. You're my replacement, right?

MARK  
I've heard a lot about your group here. Even read the piece in the paper about its history. Got hold of those publications of their writings. Pretty intense. Interesting. You've sure done good things with them. Sandra said you're moving on. That right?

JACK  
Sure am.

MARK  
That was a good piece in the Post. They said the group waxes and wanes. Really dies in the summer.

JACK

Yeah. Like now, we haven't met in 4 months. That's the summer - the weather's nice. People want to be outside. We start over every fall. It's a challenge. You learn a lot. But, yup, I'm quitting.

MARK

How come?

JACK

It's a lot of driving and I've got a pretty full plate. I help with my grandson. I'll stick with it long enough to teach you the ropes. Not that there's a lot to learn. But it can be frustrating.

MARK

I'll give it my all.

JACK

Yeah. Sure. Then no one shows up. Weeks go by. Then you just gotta start the whole thing over. It's like you're Sisyphus.

MARK

Probably like everything. Life butts in and creates weird patterns, doesn't it? I'm glad you'll be sticking around long enough to help me get my sea legs.

JACK

For a while. ... For a while.

MARK

Great.

JACK

Here're some things you gotta know. Of course, you can change what you don't like. First, there's the box of materials. They're stored in Sandra's office. We always gotta do the set up - you know, tables, chairs. Make sure you've got enough notebooks and pens. Let's do it. Here help me with these.

They start to set up a few tables together to form one larger table with some chairs. JACK sits down. MARK continues with some more chairs, and then they

banter ...

JACK

I try to keep everything simple. Anyone can come and write. If they sit and don't write, so what? For some it's just a safe space to talk. They can take a notebook. At the end, I encourage them to share - you know share what they write. Or not. No rules, of course. Rules don't work. They can tear out pages they write and take them with them, or leave the notebook here. They can write their name on the notebook so it's theirs for when they come to write again. If they don't come back after a while I tear out their pages and put it in an envelope for them. Then I cross out their name on the notebook. That's it. Oh, I often start with a quote, or a short reading, or whatever. I like some of the poems by this minister I know.

Then (after a few seconds) - MARK looks in the box, JACK takes out a few notebooks and yellow pads and a bag of pens from the box.

MONA walks in.

MONA

Morning.

JACK

Hi. I think you're new, aren't you? Or have you been here before?

MONA

That be right. I'm MONA.

MARK

Nice to meet you. I'm MARK.

JACK

And I'm JACK.

MONA

You the guys teaching reading?

JACK

Not really.

MONA

I can't do readin'.

MARK

Not at all?

MONA

Nope. The lady done tol' me this here's a readin' class.

Sits down on a chair such  
that her wounds aren't  
visible to JACK and MARK.

JACK

This is a writing group. Not a reading group. Ask at the desk. They could help you get reading lessons.

MONA not moving.

MONA

I guess I could ask again. But I jes did that. ... I can't read.

MARK looks at JACK, who  
remains totally  
impassive. MARK takes a  
few seconds of  
reflection.

MARK

Well, since no one else is here, I could help you. Do you know the alphabet?

MONA

Everyone knows the ABC's.  
Starts the alphabet;  
hesitates. leaves out  
'l'.

MARK

Interrupting her.  
You left out 'l.'

MONA

Oh yeah. Continues with 'l', after l says 'q' and then making a few more errors. MARK doesn't comment again.

MARK

Can you write the alphabet?

MONA

I think. I knows most of 'em.

MARK moves over to sit  
next to MONA with his  
clipboard, and an  
attached yellow pad.

**TV ON:** shows MONA's  
writing on the yellow pad

MARK

Go ahead and write the alphabet. ... Let's see ... watching  
... No, after G comes H, not J. Ok. ... Good. Wait. ...  
No. L comes before M. ... After T comes U not V. OK,  
that's all of them. Now let's talk about reading.

MONA

I done told you I don't read none.

MARK

We're just talking about it. We've got to talk about it if  
you want to learn to read.

MONA

OK.

MARK

Each letter represents a different sound. Since you know  
how to speak the language, all you need to know is which  
sounds are represented by the different letters. That will  
help you puzzle out the words you see when you see the  
letters. Want to start?

MONA

OK

MARK

Let's start with 'B.' What sort of sounds do you think that  
B would stand for in a word?

MONA

I don't know.

MARK

Think about it. What do you think it might be?

(MONA hesitates, then ...)

MONA

buh?

MARK

Great. That's right. And what about a T

MONA

(Quicker, though not quickly)

tuh?

MARK

Great. It's not so hard.

LEILA walks in. Looks at  
MONA. MONA doesn't look  
up.

LEILA

Is this the reading group?

**TV OFF**

MARK

No. This is a writing group.

LEILA

Well, that's what I meant. I've been here before.

JACK

Good to see you again Lillian. I think we have your book  
here in the box.

LEILA

I'm not Lillian. I'm LEILA. And I have my own note book,  
Mr. JACK. I left it in the box. I was here last winter.  
I was here every week back then.

JACK

Oh yeah. Glad you're back.

He looks through the  
notebooks, finds an old  
one with her name on it.  
Gives it to her.

JACK

Glad you can get here. MARK, LEILA is a regular. Or at  
least she was before last summer. Weren't you?



LEILA

Now isn't that what I was just saying?

MARK

Nice to meet you, LEILA.

Then to MONA

Ask at the desk. They'll fix you up with reading lessons.

MARK stands up, moves  
back to his first seat,  
with his clipboard and  
pad.

MONA doesn't leave.  
Stares at LEILA. LEILA  
takes a pen. Sits down  
and begins to write,  
assiduously.

**TV ON:** Shows LEILA's  
writing.

MARK

Quiet aside to JACK, but  
expressing surprise.

She's just writing "O dash O dash " repeatedly ... she's  
filling up a whole page.

JACK makes absolutely no  
response. Then long  
pause - still as quiet  
aside, to JACK, but less  
surprised.

She's doing another page just filling it with O's and  
dashes.

JACK makes absolutely no  
response.

LEILA

Looks up at MONA, then,  
softly, to MONA

Dios mio! What happened to your face, girl? ... Who cut

your face, girl?

MONA  
softly, turning to LEILA.  
This turning shows MONA's  
bruises to the audience,  
and to MARK and JACK for  
the first time. MARK  
stares at her bruises.

Archie.

LEILA  
That bastard. Archie again?

MONA  
Yeah ... Again.

LEILA  
You shoulda left him. He's a bully.

MONA  
Yeah, he's always in shit.

LEILA  
Don't I know. I hope you got him back?

MONA  
Sure did. I done hit him with a pipe.

LEILA  
Mia Madre, you could kill an hombre with a pipe.

MONA  
Well, if I wouldn't a hit him, it'd be me at the Pearlies  
right now.

LEILA  
Did the cops book you?

MONA  
Hell, no. They done told me I be good to go.

LEILA  
What'd you tell them?

MONA  
I told em what happened. He come on me with his knife cause  
he wanted what I got.

LEILA

All's cool?

MONA

He be in jail. I be pickin' some coins workin' the parkin' lot in front of the Giant. You know them's pretty easy out there. Lot's goin' down there.

MONA

Now at the bottom of page  
2 of her O-O's. To JACK.

You gotta 'scuse me, I'll have to check my laundry a few times. Like in a minute or two.

**TV OFF**

JACK

Sure.

JACK picks up a clip  
board with a sign up  
sheet and puts LEILA's  
name on it. MARK picks  
up the clipboard and  
looks at it.

IRIS walks in.

IRIS

I don't got me a lot a time. I'm tired. Know what I mean? Gotta get me some sleep. I ain't slept right in a long time. Know what I mean? This here's where you write, right? That's why I come here.

JACK

Yes. Do you need a pad?

**TV ON:** shows IRIS's paper

IRIS

No I got me paper. But I need one a dem pens. I gotta write what is that I come here to say.

She takes a felt tip pen,  
sits and writes quickly  
and boldly on one page.

Here it is.

She hands JACK a page  
which he puts down in  
front of him.

**TV ON:** IRIS's paper says:  
"SUCCESS IS NOT A  
DESTINATION  
IT IS A  
JOURNEY  
Iris Mitchell"

**TV OFF**

JACK

Would you sign in?

Slides over the  
clipboard.

IRIS

No way, man. I gotta get me some sleep. I'll sign in some  
other time when I come and write some more.

IRIS walks out. JACK  
looks at her 'writing'  
and copies her name on  
the sign up sheet.

MONA

Can you gimme something to write on?

JACK

Sure we have these note books. You can leave it here and  
use it when you come. Or you could take it with you; you  
can do that.

**TV ON:** shows MONA's tablet  
MONA takes a notebook,  
sits down, with the book,  
opens it. Doodles and  
draws in it.

JACK

You can put your name on it.

MARK

Aside to JACK

She can't read.

MONA doesn't put her name  
on it. Puts her head  
down, close to the open  
notebook. It appears she  
is going to sleep. LEILA  
gets up.

MONA

Goin' to check my laundry.

JACK

Sure.

MONA raises her head and  
begins to draw some more.  
Then switches to writing  
her alphabet (with  
errors) in a rectangle.

MARK

Quietly to JACK

She's writing letters, in a rectangle.

JACK makes absolutely no  
response.

MARK

MONA, what brought you here?

**TV OFF**

MONA

Sandra told me there was a reading group in here. Said I  
should try it. So I came.

MARK

Great. Glad you're here.

MARK picks up the  
clipboard and signs in  
MONA. MONA looks at him  
quizzically. LEILA comes  
back from checking her  
laundry.

MONA

Clothes good?

LEILA

No way. Them dryers don't hardly do nothing.

MONA

Well at least they're free.

STRANJ walks in.

JACK

Hi Steven. Glad to see you back. How've you been?

STRANJ

I'm not Steven, man. After a whole year I figure you'd be knowin' I'm Stranj. S-T-R-A-N-J. I'm all right.

JACK

Good summer?

Signs STRANJ in as Steven  
on the sign up sheet.  
MARK picks it up and  
looks at it.

STRANJ

Maybe ... Probably not.

JACK

Do you have your notebook or do I have it here in the pile?

STRANJ

You ain't got it and I ain't got it. And none of the others neither. I'm needin' a new one.

JACK

Finished another?

LEILA now writing  
seriously. **TV ON:** shows  
LEILA's writing

STRANJ

No, man. I ain't got any a my books. That's what fucked my summer.

MONA gets up stretches,  
takes a tiny walk around  
part of the room and sits  
back down.

JACK

What? What happened to your books?

STRANJ

I met this woman and she's askin' me what I was writin.' So I'm tellin' her my novel was most writ. So she be sayin' she could get it published - she wantin' to do that for me.

JACK

Great!

STRANJ

No, man. That ain't the way the shit came down.

JACK

What do you mean?

**TV OFF**

STRANJ

I'm jes gettin' to that. The bitch took my books. She be sayin' she jes borrowin' the books. So she done took all my books. She ain't never come back. She be stealin' my story. Gonna put her name on it. It's mine. My life. The bitch.

LEILA walks out.

MARK

Why don't you talk to her?

STRANJ

I jes told you, I can't talk to her. I don't even know the bitch's name. I never saw the hoe again. I should never be given her my books. I should a gotten me a copyright for all what I writ.

MARK

Sorry, I don't know you. I'm MARK. What's your name?

STRANJ

I'm Stranj, MARK. That's S-T-R-A-N-J.

MARK

Cool spelling.

STRANJ

Yeah, my Mom gave me that name. Said my great grandfather was a slave and he was named that way. My Mom said his real

name was strong but the slave owner couldn't spell none. So it was a family tradition to keep it spelt wrong cause it showed the owner weren't educated.

MARK

How much of your novel had you written when you gave it to the woman?

JACK

Must have been a lot. Stranj's been writing pretty steady for 3 years.

STRANJ

Yeah. It was 3 fuckin' big notebooks full and then some.

MARK

Jesus.

STRANJ

Right. God damn copyright's what I needed.

MARK

You don't need a copyright. If she ever publishes it, you can show you wrote it, you can claim it all. She'd have to pay. But she isn't going to publish it. Don't worry. Jack could back you up in court if she tried though, couldn't you Jack?

JACK

Maybe. I probably remember a lot of it from when you shared in the group.

MARK

But losing those books is a big deal. If you are writing something serious, you have to keep a backup of your writing. You know, a copy.

STRANJ

Ain't that a joke? How am I makin' a copy? Where would I get a copy? And where am I gonna keep it? In my bag? Stuff gets stolen all the time on out there and in these fucking shelters.

MARK

You could keep a copy here.

STRANJ

But I like to write when I'm not here.



MARK

Then you keep your notebook with you and let us make a copy before you leave. We can keep the copy here for you.

JACK

What are you going to do about the novel now?

STRANJ

I'm starting over.

MARK

Sounds like a real lot of work to me.

STRANJ

Yeah, but I'll do it.

MARK

Did you grow up around here?

STRANJ

'course.

MARK

Where?

STRANJ

DC. Southeast. That's what I'm writing about. Growing up in DC. Pauses. Sits down, grabs a pen.

LEILA walks back in.

JACK

Laundry done, Leila?

LEILA looks up, doesn't  
say anything. Goes back  
to writing.

STRANJ

I got shot up a lot. In the leg. In the back. In my head even. Got in trouble. Been in jail. In prison a long time. I got a lot to write about. Writin' helps me think about it. Gets it all out of me.

JACK

Glad you're back.

MARK

Let's make sure we make a copy of your stuff every time. We

can keep a copy here for you if you want.

TED walks in. Looks  
around. He's carrying a  
heavy backpack, a  
pamphlet and a book.

STRANJ

I don't know what I want. I gotta write some first.

TED

This the writers' thing?

MARK

Yup. I'm MARK.

JACK

I'm JACK. You need to sign in.  
Hands TED a clipboard  
with a sign up sheet.

TED

I'm Ted.

TED signs in. LEILA stops  
writing seriously. **TV ON:**  
shows LEILA's writing,  
She starts writing a  
repeated pattern of  
cursive "a's and d's" as  
"a d a d". She continues  
this until she enters the  
conversation again.

TED

Puts down the backpack on  
a chair and sits down  
next to it. The backpack  
falls off the chair with  
a crash. TED is sitting  
on a chair that is next  
to MARK.

I'll do it. Deal me in. I'm good. I'm here.

No one responds.

STRANJ

To the room.

Got in lots of trouble. Been in jail. Writing helps me think about it. Gets it all - the anger ...Gets it all out of me. ...

Looks at MONA.

What the fuck happened to you? Who cut you up? That fucker Archie again?

MONA

He cut me. But I got him good. He's in jail.

STRANJ

That's where he oughta be. He oughta never get out. I hope you slugged him good.

MONA

Smiling. Worsen he got me.

She then gets up to leave. Starts to walk out. Changes her mind; turns around and sits back down. **TV SWITCHES:** shows Ted's writing (& his pamphlet: which the audience can not identify but is the Watchtower newsletter.) Ted takes a notebook and opens it. He looks at his pamphlet, turns and copies, very carefully and slowly, as if he is going to write the address on a letter (right upper corner of the paper):  
International Court of Justice  
The Peace Palace  
The Hague, Netherlands)  
Ted turns the pamphlet over to page 3.  
Underlines Romans 24:17.  
Ted opens the pamphlet to page 2, folds over the pamphlet and underlines some words:  
"International Court of Justice The Peace Palace The Hague (Netherlands)".

TED

To the room.

I like these people. They minister. Like real Christians. They minister to the Romans. That's good. I like them. See?

No response in the room.  
Repeats softer now to  
MARK. Then opens his  
book, which proves to be  
an beat up old bible, to  
Romans 15:19. In it,  
Illyrikum is underlined  
in pen.

**TV OFF**

TED

To no one in particular.  
How do you pronounce this? Is it ill-ee-ree-kum?

MARK

Let me see. Gets up, takes a look. I'm not sure.  
Probably.

TED

I've never been good at this. I can't keep my consonants and vowels clear. You know, can't keep it clear in my mind. That makes it hard for me to read. I like to read. I learn a lot when I read.

STRANJ

Jumping up, starts  
looking at the walls for  
a thermostat

It's fuckin' hot in here.

MARK

Well, for not keeping those letters' sounds in your mind, you did pretty good with that word.

STRANJ

Can't we change the damn temperature in here? I'm melting.

JACK

No, we don't have control of the temperature here.

STRANJ

We don't control nothin, man. (Sits back down.)

TED

Well, what is Illyrikum? See it says here he ministered from Jerusalem to Illyrikum.

MARK

Well then, it probably is a city near Jerusalem. What do you think?

TED

Now reaching for the dictionary. MARK sits down. Ted struggles to find Illyrikum in the dictionary.

Got it. Here.

Very slowly reads

A Roman province on the Adriatic.

MARK

The Adriatic?

TED

That's what it says.

MARK

To JACK:

Where's the Adriatic, isn't it between Italy and Greece?

JACK

I don't really know. I'm not great on geography.

STRANJ

Can't we keep it quiet in here? Man's gotta have quiet to write.

MARK

Glances at Stranj. Then checks his cell phone.

Yup! Boy, was I wrong! Ted, it's not near Jerusalem. He walked a long way. Or maybe he rode a donkey. Either way that's a long way from Jerusalem. I mean to Illyrikum. That's longer than from here to Chicago. Much.

**TV ON:** shows Ted's pad.

TED

Wow! I like these people. They minister good.

Ted turns to the title  
page of the pamphlet.  
Picks up his pen and  
starts reading - letting  
his pen guide his eye  
movement along the words.  
Then he starts writing -  
underneath the Hague ...  
"Jehovah's Witnesses  
The Watchtower  
© 2015 Watch Tower Bible  
and Tract Society of  
Pennsylvania"

TED

They minister the Romans.

TED moves the pamphlet  
away and returns to the  
dictionary. He turns to  
the title page. Starts  
reading. Picks up his  
pen and starts writing -  
underneath the last line  
of writing but left  
justified now, he starts  
writing all the  
information on the  
dictionary's title page,  
including the formatting  
of the ISBN number, etc.  
SHEILA walks in. Wears a  
red hat. Stands at the  
door. Very agitated.

SHEILA

Life sucks. People make me so angry! These people - all  
over me . . . Every day. . . . All the time. I feel like I  
could pounce! Like a big angry cat.

TED looks up. Silently  
he is staring at her, but  
seems lost in thought.  
Doesn't really take her  
in at all.

JACK

Hello.

**TV OFF**

SHEILA

Hello. Is this the writer's group?

JACK

Yes.

SHEILA

Thank God. I absolutely need to write. When I get this angry there is like nothing else left for me. Nothing. I have to like sit down and write.

STRANJ stops writing and  
looks at her. Obviously  
thinks she is good  
looking.

STRAND

Pointing to the chair  
next to him. SHEILA  
looks at him, steadily,  
then turns toward JACK.

Want a seat, here's one.

JACK

Do you need a pen?

SHEILA

No.

She unbuttons her coat -  
wearing a shear blouse -  
and takes a seat on the  
other side of the table  
from STRANJ.

Got one.

She fishes in her big  
(red if possible) bag.

Shit. Looks some more. Fuck. No, I don't have a pen.

JACK

Have you been to this group before?

SHEILA

Would I have asked you if this was the writers' group if I'd ever have been here before?

JACK

Well,

pushing the plastic bag  
with the many pens and  
pencils toward her

we have lots of pens. Just take one.

SHEILA takes one.

JACK

Do you need some paper?

SHEILA

Still angry.

No, can't you see? I got my own notebook.

She takes out a 3 ring  
glossy red notebook which  
has blank lined paper in  
it.

Now everyone be quiet. I have to write. That's what I need to cope.

TED

They printed this a long time ago.

STRANJ

Quite angrily

You know it's hard enough to write in here without a lot of talking.

TED

But they did. Turning to SHEILA. When did you come in?

SHEILA

I just got here. Don't you pay attention?

TED

I didn't notice.



STRANJ

To TED.

No kidding. How could we know?

TED

I go to my church Sundays. My man there helps me. Makes sure I'm packing my Christianity strong and inside.

STRANJ

To TED.

You were staring straight at her, man.

TED

Well, I didn't notice. I was thinking.

MARK

Ted, do you like poetry?

TED

I don't know poetry.

MARK

I got one here.

TED

Yeah, what's that like?

MARK

It's by Gwendolyn Brooks. She's an important black poet. She died about 15 years ago. Her poetry is in this book.

Shows TED the book.

TED

He takes the book in his hand.

Looks nice. I like the design.

He turns it over slowly.  
Then with surprise and  
enthusiasm

She won the Pulitzer.

MARK

Surprised that TED  
recognized 'Pulitzer.'

Yeah, it is a nice design on the cover. She did win lots of prizes.

TED

But the Pulitzer, that's a very big deal.

MARK

Again surprised.

Yup. Here, let me find the poem I was thinking of: "We Real Cool."

TED

Let me read it.

Very slowly at first,  
starts to read the poem  
out loud.

"We Real Cool  
The Pool Players.  
Seven at the Golden Shovel."  
I think she been writing them seven people up where they  
been playing pool at some place called the Golden Shovel..

TED

Continues reading slowly  
out loud:

"We real cool. We  
Left school. ..."  
And that sounds like cool. I like that.  
... We  
Lurk late. We  
Strike straight. We  
Sing sin. We  
Thin gin. We  
Jazz June. We  
Die soon.

All this is read aloud by  
TED very slowly,  
carefully. Then  
everybody stops, stares  
at him and he repeats it,  
far more fluently and  
without the  
interjections.

"We real cool. We

Left school. We  
Lurk late. We  
Strike straight. We  
Sing sin. We  
Thin gin. We  
Jazz June. We  
Die soon.  
That 'Jazz June.' That's great. Jazz. Jazzy. I like  
jazz. And Miles. I like Miles. He's got a bee-bop tune I  
love. But 'Jazz June.' That's what's really great 'Jazz  
June.' I love that. Like each thing is a separate picture.  
Left school. To do what, play pool? Thin gin? Die soon?  
Listen to 'Lurk Late.'  
Even slower, more  
deliberate  
Lurk late. Lurk late. Lurk late. That sounds like  
trouble, for sure.

STRANJ  
Getting up, and then  
facing TED, with an edge  
of envy and anger.

Man, you're crazy.

Everyone goes back to  
their own papers.

MONA  
Why you bein' so up tight, Stranj? The man jus' likes  
poetry. Nothin' wrong wid dat.

TED  
To MARK.  
You got another in here? (Pause.)

MARK  
Yeah, there's one about a Mrs. Miles.

TED  
Let me see that.

MARK  
Here: It's about a woman in a Red Hat.

TED  
Starts reading it.

MARK

Can I read it?

TED

Sure.

MARK

Reads it. During his  
reading, STRANJ still up,  
paces. No one else takes  
notice of STRANJ. Only  
TED seems to listen.

Bronzeville Woman in a Red Hat  
They had never had one in the house before.  
The strangeness of it all. Like unleashing  
A lion, really. Poised  
To pounce. A puma. A panther. A black  
Bear.  
There it stood in the door,  
Under a red hat that was rash, but refreshing -  
In a tasteless way, of course - across the dull dare,  
the semi-assault of that extraordinary blackness.  
The slackness  
Of that light pink mouth told little. The eyes told of  
heavy care . . .  
But that was neither here nor there,  
And nothing to a wage-paying mistress as should  
Be getting her due whether life had been good  
For her slave, or bad.  
There it stood.  
In the door. They never had  
One in the house before.

TED

TED takes the book from  
MARK. He then reads the  
poem very slowly,  
hesitatingly, out loud.  
Everyone listens, again.

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heavy care . . .  
But that was neither here nor there,  
And nothing to a wage-paying mistress as should  
Be getting her due whether life had been good  
For her slave, or bad.  
There it stood.  
In the door. They never had  
One in the house before.

When he finishes, there's  
a murmur of shock. Even  
STRANJ, who is still  
standing. Then TED  
continues:

This is like Tom Cruise. There's this movie and this guy  
comes to Cruise's door to set things down. He says 'I am  
comin' to get you. Cruise,' he says 'I'm comin here to set  
these things down.' Cruise, he doesn't understand says,  
"You are in the wrong place." But no. Blackness.  
Slackness. Red Hat in the door. So much . . . I like  
poetry. I'm going to bring this to my white man in the  
church I go to. It's a black church. But I got my white  
guy there. I don't like to say that. But I got my white  
guy there. He help me. Keeps me tight with Jesus.

STRANJ  
Without his edge of envy  
and anger.

Like I bin sayin', man, you be one crazy mother-fucker.

Goes to his chair and  
sits down.

JACK  
Well, we have about 10 minutes. Does anyone want to read  
what they've written?

No response

JACK  
Does anyone want to read what they've written?

LEILA  
I wonder ...

JACK

No one has to read if they don't want to.

LEILA

No. I just mean ...

JACK

The rule is that no one needs to share.

LEILA

But that's not what ...

MARK

What was your question, LEILA?

LEILA

I mean did you know that it is very hard to see the difference between a 'd' and an 'a'.

STRANJ

Fuck woman. What you talkin' bout?

LEILA

I mean they look almost the same.

TED

Maybe that's why I have trouble with the consonants and the vowels.

MARK

Do you mean they look a lot alike?

TED

I think I can see some difference

LEILA

Yeah. If you are writing them and are a little sloppy, then they look alike. You have to be really, really careful or no one can read what you've written. Isn't that true?

MARK

Good point! Did you write something else you might want to share?

LEILA

Yes. I wrote a letter to my mother.

MARK

Would you like to share it?

LEILA

Yes, let me read it:

Dear Momma,

We don't call as much as we used to. But I was so happy to speak to you. Did you realize that I am now 68. How old would you be? I told you on the phone I would write you all the things I am doing. But yesterday I got so tired. Then I fell asleep. I promised I would tell you all about my days, what I do, what I eat, what I am seeing. There are so many things to say. It is not that I am doing so much, Mom. Did I tell you I had a son? He grew up and has been in wars and now is a citizen up here. But I don't know how to find him. What do you say about that? Your daughter without an address. We are all without mothers. I will write more often. And we can call more often too. I am sorry about our not having the time to talk.

I love you. Leila.

MARK

Is she alive?

LEILA

No, she died a long time ago.

MARK

Was she living here in Washington?

LEILA

No she was in Peru. I got here some 45 years ago.

JACK

Does anyone else want to share?

MONA

I do.

JACK

Wonderful.

MONA

Speaks slowly, carefully.  
I didn't write nothin' but I got something to say. I came to the writer's group today. The teachers were very nice and they were friendly and they were very helpful.

JACK

Thank you MONA.

SHEILA

I wrote a poem.

JACK

You don't have to share it.

SHEILA

I'd like to.

JACK

Wonderful.

SHEILA

Stands up. Reads her  
poem:

Where people be when you cry  
out for help? - They just hide  
Where people turn when they see you black  
and hurt? They but leave, turn their back.  
Where aid be when you need  
they just let you bleed  
in the street 'n cross to the other side  
so they's can glide  
to their next fix,  
their next tricks.  
It makes my blood boil  
makes me want to coil  
and strike so hard  
and minister to them  
that be sinister  
and force them to look in the cage  
and see the rage  
their turnin' away creates.

Shiela stays standing.  
There's audible mumbled  
approval from other  
members of the group.

STRANJ

He stands up  
Ain't she right!

MONA

She sure is. That girl is good!



STRANJ walks over to see  
her writing. Then goes  
back and sit down.

JACK  
Impassively.

Thank you, Sheila. That was very pretty. Lovely poem.  
Anyone else?

No response. But  
SHEILA's facial movement  
shows she doesn't take  
JACK's comment well.

Well, if not, then that's all for this week. If you want,  
you can take your notebooks with you, or you can leave them  
here.

SHEILA picks up hers and  
stands up as if to leave.  
All but STRANJ put the  
books on the table in a  
pile.

Thank you. There will be another writing group meeting here  
next Friday. 11 o'clock. Hope you all can make it.

SHEILA stares at JACK.  
puts her stuff back down.  
She grabs a notebook from  
the pile. She starts  
tearing out the pages.  
Ripping them furiously.  
Everyone stares at her.  
No one moves.

JACK  
After a moment's  
hesitation ...

What are you doing?

SHEILA  
What the fuck does it look like, dick head?

JACK  
You don't have to curse.

SHEILA

What you tellin' me what I am to do? I don't have to curse?  
To do what, get your attention? Don't you even hear  
yourself? I be writin' and then recitin' and you be no way  
listenin' to nothin' I say.

She continues to destroy  
the book. Picks up  
another, similarly  
destroying them as she  
talks, till she leaves.

Do you listen to nobody? Hear anything? Anyone? We can be  
sharing . . . What bull-shit. You never shared diddly any  
where no time with nobody.

JACK

Why are you being angry now?

SHEILA

You don't know? Can't understand? Your mamma never taught  
you to listen. Fuck you. You are never gonna see me again.

She drops the last book,  
picks up her stuff,  
throwing her coat over  
her shoulder and leaves.

JACK

As I was saying, hope the rest of you will be back next  
week.

TED

I'll be back, for sure. I'll be back.

STRANJ

Hesitates and not  
convincingly

Maybe I be back, man. Gotta write my story somewhere.

Hesitates then drops his  
notebook on the table.

SHEILA

From the hall, yelling  
back

I ain't never comin' back here again. You fuckers don't  
listen. You both just hankies. Soon as one of us say

somethin' you just crossin' to the other side like everyone else.

LEILA looks for her note  
book, finds her letter  
torn up in pieces.

LEILA

Wails

My letter!

Leaves, crying, quieter,  
hurt.

Momma, Momma ...

MONA

Hugging LEILA.

There, there ... There, there. It'll be OK. ... It'll be OK. Your Momma's got her letter. Your Momma's got her letter.

Leaves with LEILA.  
The others leave. JACK  
and MARK start to clean  
up.

JACK

What got into her?

MARK

Sheila? Who knows?

JACK

Something happened. She sure seemed to blame us. I said I liked her poem. Then she just went ape. She's one angry woman.

MARK

Maybe. Coming back one more time?

JACK

Yeah. See you next week?

MARK

Sure.

Lights dim.

**CURTAIN**

d11: Tuesday, May 7, 2019  
Joe A. Oppenheimer  
(5705 words)