

Tongue of a Bird

by Ellen McLaughlin

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION



New York Hollywood London Toronto

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TONGUE OF A BIRD was originally presented as a staged reading by
New York Stage and Film Company and the Powerhouse Theatre at Vassar
in Association with Ron Kastner, July 1996

Originally Commissioned by Center Theatre Group of Los Angeles
Gordon Davidson, Artistic Director

TONGUE OF A BIRD was originally produced by
Intiman Theatre in 1997
Seattle, Washington

Warner Shook, Artistic Director; Laura Penn, Managing Director

TONGUE OF A BIRD was produced in New York by the
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George C. Wolfe, Producer

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GORDON DAVIDSON

PRESENT

TONGUE OF A BIRD

By **ELLEN McLAUGHLIN**

With

CHERRY JONES SHARON LAWRENCE MELISSA LEO

JULIA McILVAINE ELIZABETH WILSON

Scenic Design

RACHEL HAUCK

Costume Design

CANDICE CAIN

Lighting Design

MARY LOUISE GEIGER

Original Music/Sound Design

GINA LEISHMAN

Sound System Design

APPLIED AUDIO TECHNOLOGIES

Production Dramaturg

JOHN DIAS

Production Stage Manager

NANCY ELIZABETH VEST

Directed by

LISA PETERSON

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Artistic Associate

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**JORDAN THALER/CINDY TOLAN
STANLEY SOBLE**

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CHARACTERS

MAXINE: Mid- to late thirties. A search and rescue pilot.
Solitary, ironic and guarded.

DESSA: Mid- to late thirties. Charlotte's mother. Tough,
without self-pity and utterly focused.

ZOFIA: Early to mid-seventies. Maxine's grandmother,
Evie's mother. A Polish exile, survivor of the
1939 Nazi invasion. Visionary, difficult and wise.

CHARLOTTE: Twelve. Dessa's daughter. Canny, bold
and slightly malicious.

EVIE: Roughly Maxine's age. Maxine's dead mother.
Cool, wry and lucid.

TIME

Mid-winter.

PLACE

The Adirondacks.

Note on the text:

One speech follows another, unless a speech includes a slash (/), which indicates that the next speaker interrupts the previous speaker at this point. As in:

MAXINE. —I don't think that had anything / to do with—
DESSA. —They were laughing.

In this case, Dessa's cue word is "anything" and she talks over the end of Maxine's speech.

*This play is dedicated to
Jane Lincoln Taylor
and to the memory of Sigrid Wurschmidt,
dear friends who gave me sight and
courage.*

ACT I

Scene 1. Globe.

(In the darkness we hear an unidentifiable sound. Lights reveal a child's large globe, spinning. A small figure appears, dressed in brilliant white, perhaps completely wrapped in gauze. The figure approaches the globe and leans over it, peering at it. The figure then places a finger on the globe, stopping it.)

As the figure leans in to look at the place it has pointed to, the globe's colors fade, as if frosting over into white. The figure looks down, looks out and then moves on, batting the globe into motion as it goes. The globe spins again, regaining its colors.)

Scene 2. The Buzzing.

(MAXINE stands in a high place. She looks down.)

MAXINE. There's a girl, this is me, standing at a high window, looking down. She tells herself: you will remember this. And I do. I remember everything. But I don't remember why

I remember this. It is morning and I'm looking down across a vast landscape and I've lost something which I think I will spot from this height. The farther up you are the more you see. This is true, I have learned this since ... and it's like a flicker of light sometimes, perhaps the glint of a climber's goggles, the quirk, almost indiscernible, of the wrong color, the dropped glove, the upturned shoe. These things, the slight, the rare, I see them as others don't, I am gifted—and here, there's something about this memory, but I can't ...

A fly, I know, is buzzing up the window, a trapped fly, going up the air, which it finds strangely hard and unyielding, going up when it means to be going out. This is crucial but I don't know why. Perhaps it just tells me the season, which must be late autumn, a time when flies are dying in just this way, going up when they mean to be going out. And it seems to me that all nature is dying on this day. Except me, who stands and watches.

So there's the fly and there's the landscape, dropped like a platter below me.

I see it as if I were above it, looking down over the back of my own blond head. I see most of my past this way, remembered with a detachment which looks coolly down on a child I am, experiencing some dreadful thing, which I experienced but didn't, and experience again in recalling it, but don't.

There is that girl, who is me, so far below me, who might have lived my life if I hadn't left her there and come up here to watch her. (*Smiles.*) I was so terribly good at that. A trick I learned so early.

So I became a flyer.

But she asked me to remember this. So I look down with her on the bald hills of some uncertain autumn, and we hear the fly and we wait.

Scene 3. Dessa.

(Sound of a fly buzzing becomes the sound of planes droning. An airplane hangar, denoted by the light cast from high windows and a rickety table where MAXINE and DESSA sit with their coats on, holding paper cups of coffee.)

DESSA. —They told me you were the one who doesn't give up. So I'm asking you.

MAXINE. They haven't given up, they're—

DESSA. —Yes they have. They look at me sideways when I come in—everybody runs, pretends to be doing something—

MAXINE. —I really think—

DESSA. —Look at them, unscrewing engines and shit—that guy, Robbie Something—

MAXINE. —Robbie DaCaprio—

DESSA. —He says he's going to be up all day looking for my daughter. I came in, he's sitting there eating soup—

MAXINE. —They have to eat—

DESSA. —Playing with his game-boy computer thingie—

MAXINE. —They have to come down occasionally, if only to get / gas—

DESSA. —And they're sitting around the table, all of them, laughing—

MAXINE. —I don't think that had anything / to do with—

DESSA. —They were laughing.

(Pause.)

MAXINE. I really don't think they've given up. It's just that it's been more than a week—

DESSA. —Eleven days, four hours *(she looks at her watch)*, twenty-five minutes, no, twenty-six, and twelve, thirteen seconds, no, fourteen ... fifteen ...

MAXINE. You realize you'd be hiring me. It's not free.

(DESSA takes out an antique watch.)

DESSA. That's what I got. Heirloom. I got no more money. I spent it on posters and stuff, this asshole detective, Carl What's-his-face, the milk cartons—

MAXINE. —Do the milk cartons / cost ... ?—

DESSA. —But I figure it's a plane that's going to—'cause if you could just see her—And the money's just—'cause I don't have time to waste, she's—I've been emptying out my ... So you can have the, this, there's still some money, I've just got to get it out of the bank, just ... I got your name and called you and I came here right away so I just picked up the watch ... *it doesn't matter* ... I'm sitting in that fucking house all day, all night, I'm looking at all this shit, these *things*, and you can have anything, come over, take a look, in fact, do me a favor, rent a U-Haul, like a huge one, pull it up outside the door and just start loading it up, couch, T.V., oven mitts, shampoo bottles, bath mats, clocks, celery sticks, just take it—and then get some suction thing, some supersonic vacuum thing, park the hose at the front door and get the, the, everything, the air, the dust on the walls, between the cracks, the sounds left over in there, and, while you're at it, *me*—yeah, suck me right up out of that place and then the house itself after me, like in some cartoon, if you can do that, porch, bannister, walls and windows, get it all, don't leave anything, just a hole, just nothing, not even a hole, nothing, and drive away. If you can find her, if that would help find her, 'cause I'm telling you, whatever it takes, I don't give a shit anymore.

I just want her back. I just want my daughter back.

(Pause. MAXINE slides the watch back to her across the table.)

MAXINE. I'll need some money later for gas.

Scene 4. Babcia.

(ZOFIA's house, denoted by an ancient armchair, a side table and a small light, covered with dust. ZOFIA is sitting, staring intently straight ahead. MAXINE enters, carrying a laundry bag.)

MAXINE. Babcia?

(MAXINE drops the bag.)

ZOFIA. *(Slightly startled.)* I thought you were the bird.

MAXINE. What bird?

ZOFIA. There is a bird down the chimney, oh, such a terrible omen, see the black wing marks? The soot all over everywhere? Beat, beat, beat against the walls all night, so frightened. I think she maybe broke herself trying to get out.

MAXINE. Do you want me to find her?

ZOFIA. No, no, I got her out. *(Confused.)* I thought I did. *(She remembers.)* I did. Yes. I put the blanket *(she makes the gesture)*, so like that, she was flapping and beating in there, her black wings, yes, I did, because I remember, yes. I stood at the door and ...

(ZOFIA makes the gesture of opening her arms and watching a bird take flight.)

MAXINE. So she's gone.

ZOFIA. Yes. And here you are. *(She really looks at MAXINE for the first time.)* Why?

MAXINE. I told you I was coming. This morning, you remember?

ZOFIA. I don't believe in telephones.

MAXINE. Nevertheless.

ZOFIA. Why have you come back to me?

MAXINE. What do you mean, I told you—(*ZOFIA nods toward the laundry bag.*) What? You think I could get all of my earthly possessions into a laundry bag?

ZOFIA. Yes.

(*Silence.*)

MAXINE. I'm sort of between places.

ZOFIA. What happened?

MAXINE. Oh ... (*She makes a gesture.*) I don't know. It didn't work out.

ZOFIA. I don't have room for you here.

MAXINE. What do you mean? That's all you've got—room.

ZOFIA. It's all filled up.

MAXINE. (*Laughs.*) With what? You've never even had furniture / here.

ZOFIA. (*Furious, slapping the arms of the chair.*) I have—!

MAXINE. —Well, yes. There is the *chair*, but nothing, almost nothing—

ZOFIA. —Space!

MAXINE. What?

ZOFIA. It's all filled up!

MAXINE. What?

ZOFIA. With space!

(*Silence.*)

MAXINE. Look, I won't be staying long. Just a few days. Just for the search.

ZOFIA. What is this?

MAXINE. I got another search. I'm going to be flying these mountains for awhile, until we find her of course.

ZOFIA. Who?

MAXINE. A girl.

ZOFIA. How young?

MAXINE. Twelve.

ZOFIA. How long has she been lost?

MAXINE. Eleven days.

ZOFIA. Eleven days? In this weather? Ach. She's frozen already.

MAXINE. Well, actually, I'm looking for a black pickup truck.

ZOFIA. (*Confused.*) She's driving ... ?

MAXINE. She was kidnapped. A man. She was hiking with some friends. Girl Scouts. She's standing on the edge of a clearing, and a truck drives out of nowhere, her friends watch her have a conversation, they can't see the man inside the truck, pickup truck, we don't know what make. Suddenly he reaches out and grabs her, drags her into the truck, drives away up into the mountains. All the roads out of there have been closed off since then, he can't have gotten out so he must have gone up. The police, the Mountain Rescue, the Civil Air Patrol, it's been a big thing. Her picture is all over the place. But it's been awhile and the weather's too tricky for the helicopters anymore and they're too expensive. So that's where I come in. Her mother heard about me.

ZOFIA. Twelve years old?

MAXINE. Yes.

(*Pause.*)

ZOFIA. *Biedny malutki ptaszek.*

MAXINE. What? (*ZOFIA shakes her head. MAXINE continues, writing in the dust of the table.*) Are there any clean sheets?

ZOFIA. There are always sheets. You know where. What are you doing?

MAXINE. Writing my name in the dust.

(ZOFIA slaps at MAXINE's hand.)

ZOFIA. I don't want your name all over my nice table.

MAXINE. It looks like nobody's cleaned since I was here last summer. Why don't you ever let What's-her-name come in and clean this place? She's offered dozens of times.

ZOFIA. That woman. She changes things.

MAXINE. Well, yes, she cleans them.

ZOFIA. Stop *looking* at everything. Who are you to look so much?

MAXINE. (*Gestures to the room.*) I have eyes. It's a problem.

ZOFIA. Ach.

MAXINE. I brought you cake.

ZOFIA. What kind?

MAXINE. *Czekolada.*

(MAXINE takes a slice of cake wrapped in a napkin out of her coat pocket. She unwraps it and hands it to ZOFIA.)

ZOFIA. Ah. *Ciastko czekoladowe.*

What is that smell in it? That dark smell? How nice.

MAXINE. I remembered, you see? Such a doting granddaughter.

ZOFIA. It was the strangest thing. All the children who arrived in New York off the first boat from Poland. Some rich woman sent cake to us, chocolate cake. And we stood on the dock and ate it. It was the first thing I tasted in America. Some ... what-do-you-call—eccentric millionaire woman, I forget her name, she sends all the children of the war cake. After that our troubles began. But at that time I thought, so this is what it will always be like here—chocolate cake and the salt air, and the sugar frosting on my wool gloves.

MAXINE. So that's why.

ZOFIA. Someone had thought of us. (*Pause.*) Only until you find her. So long you can stay. No more.

MAXINE. I wasn't planning on staying any longer.

ZOFIA. It's good.

MAXINE. What?

ZOFIA. That you can put your life into a ... everything you have you can hold in a ...

(ZOFIA can't find the word; she snaps her fingers with impatience.)

MAXINE. Laundry bag?

ZOFIA. No, not "laundry," not "bag" ... ach, *torebka*...

MAXINE. "Sack"?

ZOFIA. *(Relieved.) Sak! Sak, sak, sak!* Yes. That you can do that, you learned from me that. Yes. Good.

MAXINE. Oh, I'm not so sure anymore.

ZOFIA. Oh, yes. All you need you have to carry here. *(She taps her head.)* Because everything else they can take from you.

MAXINE. Who?

ZOFIA. Who takes? *(She laughs.)* The world. *(She gestures out.)* That. *(She taps her head.)* This is all you can take. When I was a little girl, walking out of Poland after the bombs ... the ones of us who were left. Ach. We took all the wrong things ... little spoons, a duck, a purple table runner ... We were so stupid. We would be holding all the wrong things for the rest of our lives, no matter where we went ... Ach. I would hold the little comb to my chest all night long on the boat across the ocean, because I cannot hold my mother's hand, never again. And I think, this will save me. This will be enough. A comb she gave me. Because her hand had been on it. This will save me. This thing.

MAXINE. Where is the comb?

ZOFIA. *(Smiles.)* I threw it in the ocean. It was not enough. The cup my dead father made for me, her glove ... seven silver buttons ... *(She makes a gesture of throwing.)* I walked off that boat with nothing in my hands. Like an animal. I

made myself do that. Skin and bones and this. (*She touches her head. She gestures to the sack.*) What's in there?

MAXINE. Nothing much. Clothes. Some books.

ZOFIA. Throw it in the ocean!

MAXINE. Right.

ZOFIA. Throw them away! (*She laughs.*) Who needs them? Not even little girls. (*She looks out into the night.*) She was twelve?

MAXINE. Who?

ZOFIA. That little girl?

MAXINE. (*Not quite sure which girl they are talking about.*) Yes.

ZOFIA. She's probably dead by now.

Scene 5. Mama.

(*A very dimly lit bedroom. MAXINE's old room in ZOFIA's house. Something is wrong. MAXINE is asleep in bed. She wakes, startled. A pause. She turns on the bedside light. A woman is hanging like a side of meat, her feet perhaps five feet from the ground. She is dressed in a stereotypical flight suit—leather dust coat, goggles and helmet. MAXINE gasps and turns off the light. Pause.*)

MAXINE. Mama?

(*Pause. MAXINE turns on the light. The figure is gone.*)

Scene 6. Powder Blue.

(Airplane hangar. Predawn. DESSA is sifting through some photographs and papers she's brought for MAXINE. MAXINE enters, already exhausted, surprised to see DESSA.)

DESSA. I got another picture for you. It's the sixth grade class picture so it's not ... I mean, her hair is longer and she doesn't have the braces but still. And it's not really like her, the eyes, I think she's about to blink, she hates it, this picture, see she's standing next to this guy, Neil Kransky, she says he smells or something, see how she's leaning away a little bit. *(Laughs.)* I never noticed that, she's got these *opinions*, she *hates* this photo. See how tall she is, though? She's the tallest one in the back row. I keep thinking that's ... I keep thinking that's going to make a difference, you know? It's not ... it's not *rational* but ... *(Suddenly.)* Oh, Jeez, I almost forgot—the jacket she's wearing—it's *really* light blue—powder blue they call it—I went back to the store to look at it, they still had one—so it's not just light blue, like I told you, it's powder blue like—*(She looks around.)* Shit, I was going to bring in something that color—I could go buy the jacket, it's the same one, how about that?

MAXINE. No, that's O.K., I think I—

DESSA. —*(Pointing.)* Like *that*.

MAXINE. What?

DESSA. The sky right now.

MAXINE. *(Too quickly.)* O.K.

DESSA. No. *Look*. Not near where the sun's coming up. Further up.

MAXINE. *(Looking.)* O.K.

DESSA. Not where you're looking. Where I'm pointing.

MAXINE. *(Trying to oblige.)* Yeah. Right there. Got it.

DESSA. Shit, it's already changing. (*She takes MAXINE by the arm and pulls her over, then puts their heads next to each other.*) Where my finger is. Is it the same place for your eyes?

MAXINE. Close enough.

DESSA. Fuck, it's already changing. *That* color. Right there.

MAXINE. I see it. Very light blue.

(*DESSA lets go of her abruptly.*)

DESSA. It's changed. Not that color. What it *was*. Do you remember?

MAXINE. Yes.

DESSA. What it *was*.

MAXINE. Yes.

DESSA. Not what it is now.

MAXINE. Yes.

DESSA. Remember that.

MAXINE. Yes.

DESSA. That's the color of the jacket she has on.

It's brand new. (*Pause.*)

Go. It's light enough.

Scene 7. Charlotte.

(*Day. MAXINE is in the cockpit of her plane, searching.*)

MAXINE. Charlotte. Charlotte Hobart. I am looking for you. Serious girl, almost pretty, shy, quiet. A good girl. On your report card, your teacher writes: "She seems to be in love with nature. Rather romantic and solitary." I know the type. Always looking out of windows.

Twelve years old. What goes on in that head of yours?

Sex? What do you know about it? What you read in books?

Movies? There is a kid in your class who punches your arm a lot and that does mean something. There is one day when you

are alone with him in a barn and you find yourselves discussing religion. You lie on your backs and he lazily tosses a baseball straight up toward the rafters and catches it in his glove. Leather smacks neatly into leather. At that moment you say, "I think God exists in everything—the barn swallows, the straw, the dirt under my fingernails, your sneaker." And it so happens that his investigations into things have led him to the same conclusion. "Everything is sacred," he says. And there is a long silence because what now can be said? You lie there, not looking at each other, not touching each other either.

But then, you don't have to. (*Bang. Something hits the side of the plane.*)

It was as perfect as it gets. (*Bang.*)

What was that? A bird?

Life for you was as simple as a long plank to walk.

And at the end of it, this man. Is that right? (*Pause.*)

Bullshit, Maxine. What do you know about it? (*Pause.*)

Charlotte Hobart. What is being done to you?

What is being done to you—right now? (*Pause. Subdued.*)

Oh Jesus. (*A final bang, the loudest, on the window. MAXINE is startled back to reality. As irritated as she is frightened.*)

What the fuck is that?

Scene 8. Ta Da.

(*Lights flicker. Suddenly, the girl, CHARLOTTE, sits beside MAXINE in the cockpit; bloody and dead but unperturbed, she looks out the window. MAXINE is surprised and horrified.*)

CHARLOTTE. You found me. Ta da.

MAXINE. Jesus.

CHARLOTTE. Congratulations. Aren't you something.

MAXINE. Oh God, what's going on?

CHARLOTTE. Well, what *would* you do?

MAXINE. What?

CHARLOTTE. See, you can't even imagine.

MAXINE. Of course I can. This is, this is what I do.

CHARLOTTE. No it isn't. You make the search, you sometimes see something. Then you send the helicopter or whatever, right? *You never land*. It's all pretty pristine. You never have to deal with *this* for instance.

(CHARLOTTE draws a bloody finger down MAXINE's face.)

MAXINE. I hate this.

CHARLOTTE. Some hero.

MAXINE. So all right, since you're here. Maybe you can tell me.

CHARLOTTE. What?

MAXINE. Where are you? What is happening to you?

CHARLOTTE. Sometimes the quiet girls go completely mute. Isn't it provoking? Neither seen *nor* heard. Poof. They just vanish. No one can see them, even when they stand right in front of you. Like your mother.

MAXINE. What about her?

CHARLOTTE. You're so far-sighted now maybe you can only read suicide notes when they're printed out in huge stones and felled trees. Look. It says maybe "STOP LOOKING" or "GIVE UP comma I'M ALREADY DEAD."

MAXINE. That's not what's going on. Not this time.

CHARLOTTE. How do you know? Can you imagine what I'm going through?

MAXINE. Yes. I can imagine.

CHARLOTTE. (*Laughs.*) No you can't. Me and that Norman Rockwell boy in the barn? You wish, Honey.

MAXINE. I can imagine. Too well. Better than others. It keeps me up here. Looking longer. Past other people's threshold of hope. That thin line between hope and despair—mine's a longer suspension of disbelief. That's why I'm good.

CHARLOTTE. A tightrope walker after all.

MAXINE. Yes.

CHARLOTTE. Just like you dreamed of being when you were my age.

Don't you find yourself looking at your feet these days?

MAXINE. You never look at your feet. That's the trick.

CHARLOTTE. You've been looking lately. I've noticed.

MAXINE. Never.

CHARLOTTE. You have. You're stuck in the middle of the rope. Right smack in the middle. No going forward, no going back. Fright. Hits the best of them at your age. So you find yourself looking at your foot, and you know what? You're right. This is exactly, just exactly where your mother's foot slipped.

(CHARLOTTE disappears.)

MAXINE. No.

Scene 9. Demon Machine.

(MAXINE is in the airport hangar building. She is leaning against the coffee vending machine, obviously tired and cold.)

MAXINE. *(Beleaguered.)* Christ. *(She puts some change into the machine. A cup comes down, but lodges wrong, at an angle.)*

No, no, don't do this to me again. *(She starts to try to right the cup but isn't quick enough; the coffee starts pouring down and burns her hand.)*

Fucking demon machine.

(As the scalding liquid pours down, it runs all over the floor. MAXINE stands back to watch.)

MAXINE. Oh, tremendous. Lovely. All over the floor. And coffee, yet, not hot chocolate, as I requested. Ah, thank you so much. Are we finished? All done? (*Final spurt.*) All righty, then.

Shall we try again?

(*She fishes in her pockets for change. As she does so, EVIE descends, looking as she usually does. She hangs behind MAXINE and about a foot above her head. MAXINE senses something and slowly turns. This is quite disturbing. She quickly looks around to see if anyone else is in the hangar. No one is. She looks back, then experiments. She puts her hands in front of her eyes for a moment, then looks again. Her mother is still there.*)

MAXINE. All right, Maxine. Just fucking deal. Just fucking—(*Down to business.*) O.K. Get out of here. Shoo. Vamoose. Or at least—

(*MAXINE walks over and reaches up for EVIE's foot. EVIE begins to ascend; MAXINE just barely has grasp of a foot. EVIE shakes her off and ascends just out of reach. MAXINE jumps. EVIE is out of range. She ascends slowly out of sight.*)

MAXINE. (*Calling after EVIE.*) And you never flew a—
YOU NEVER FLEW A PLANE IN YOUR ENTIRE LIFE,
SO WHAT IS THIS GET-UP SUPPOSED TO ...

Ma? Mama? (*EVIE is gone. MAXINE looks around, shaken. She slowly walks to the coffee machine, begins to reach for change, and then suddenly punches it violently, hurting her hand. She holds her hand.*) Ow. (*To the machine.*) I'm sorry. Fuck. (*She leans her face against the machine.*)
I'm sorry.

(*MAXINE begins to cry. She embraces the machine, crying.*)

Scene 10. Flight.

(Night. MAXINE draws a chair up next to ZOFIA's.)

MAXINE. I think it's quite possible you haven't moved from that chair since I left you there, exactly like that, eighteen hours ago.

ZOFIA. It's possible. I guess it looks so to you. But it is not so simple ... My grandmother's mother, your, what?

MAXINE. Great-great-great-grandmother.

ZOFIA. Great, great, great ... She was one of the real, the first. The traveling women. They put henbane, an herb it is, rubbed it on the soles of their feet at night and *(she makes a gesture)* shoop, like a black bird. To the mountain. To dance.

MAXINE. You're saying she was a witch?

ZOFIA. *(Laughs.)* A witch. Yes. Traveling woman. *Czarownica.*

MAXINE. Huh.

ZOFIA. *(Laughs.)* You don't believe me. That's why I never told you. It doesn't matter. But I saw them, the traveling women. Like black swans across the sky one night. I was not supposed to see that. Her husband, he tried to tie her up on those nights, to a chair, to a bed, thick rope. And he would watch her. But always he would fall asleep and when he wakes up there is just this neat circle of the rope on the floor. What could he do? It was not so nice, maybe, what she was doing ... maybe ... But she couldn't help it. And then there was your mother. There was nothing I could do. *Masz to we krwi.* It was the blood in her. Even when Evie was a little girl. Running always out into the night away from me. Me calling and calling for her as the dark came and she never comes until so late, even it was morning sometimes, and when she finally comes in she looks so like an animal, her eyes, ach, her eyes ... You look like that sometimes.

MAXINE. But I can fly.

ZOFIA. Oh, yes. The first one in a plane, but not the first one to fly, only the last one. It's maybe a disease. We pass it down.

MAXINE. It's the only thing that makes me happy. It's good.

ZOFIA. (*Nods.*) It's the blood. Mother to mother to mother. This (*she stamps her foot*) is not enough for any of us. We travel. Ach. (*She holds her head.*) We can't help it.

MAXINE. Babcia?

ZOFIA. Traveling too much.

MAXINE. You're traveling?

ZOFIA. (*Holds her head, as if to keep something in.*) Can't stay in. I try, it's very hard. So I think some day you will come here and look in the chair and, oh, nobody. No more.

MAXINE. Where will you be?

(*ZOFIA shrugs, smiles.*)

ZOFIA. Away. (*She closes her eyes. She takes MAXINE's hand.*) If you could see it. It's here. Just here.

(*ZOFIA gestures to her closed eyes. She leans back. They hold hands for a moment, ZOFIA with her eyes still closed. MAXINE jerks her hand.*)

MAXINE. Come back.

ZOFIA. No.

MAXINE. Come back.

ZOFIA. Why?

MAXINE. Because I can't go with you.

ZOFIA. Ach. Just let me...

(*MAXINE takes ZOFIA by the shoulders and shakes her.*)

MAXINE. No. No. No. Stop it.

ZOFIA. (*Opens her eyes, irritated.*) What's wrong with you?

MAXINE. I'm not going to just *watch* ... You can't expect me to just *watch* while you ... I don't want to lose you. Not yet.

ZOFIA. But you will lose me. It's how it happens. There comes a day. No one will find me. (*Pause.*) Some things cannot be found.

MAXINE. And some things can.

(*Pause.*)

ZOFIA. Why do you have to find her?

MAXINE. (*At a loss.*) Because it's important.

ZOFIA. What if she is only dead?

MAXINE. Even so. There's a difference I can make. Even if she's dead. It's the difference between catastrophe, the chaos of this horrible, senseless event, and something else. Not tragedy exactly, but ... It's important. That I do this. Search. I can't explain it to you.

ZOFIA. What's lost is lost. You run out into *that*? (*She gestures.*) You get yourself lost in *that*? (*Another gesture.*) Ach. You cannot expect anyone to come looking for you. These things happen. It's a terrible world.

MAXINE. But you *can* expect that. You *can* expect someone to come looking for you. We owe that to each other. At least that much.
And I'm good at it.

ZOFIA. This world. Ach. This world, I think, wants to lose all her children and forget them. She is so good at losing. She is a mother who puts her children out of doors to die and forgets them as she turns to make more. We tap on the windows and call her name but the night is cold and she has turned away. So we run into the darkness and hug our sides and suck our dirty fingers for the memory of food. She will not take us back again no matter how we cry. Time goes by and we get older and we forget the warmth of her house, the taste of her bread, and soon we stop crying for them. Anything, I think,

can be borne. "Catastrophe," "tragedy" ... Whatever you want to call it. It doesn't matter.

We are all put out of house and forgotten.

MAXINE. This one girl. I will find her. I can do that.

Scene 11. Tongues.

(MAXINE's room. Night. EVIE, the figure, is hanging above her, as before. MAXINE stares at her. Silence.)

MAXINE. All right. How does this work? Are you going to talk to me? *(Pause.)* I guess I'll get used to you. Like some absurd empty piñata that everyone forgot to take down. *(Trying another approach.)* Since you're here, Ma, about your mother ... what gives? I mean she seems to be ... like she's doing some aerial, imaginary tour of the globe before she ... I mean it's not really that simple, but she does seem to be going somewhere ...

EVIE. You know where.

MAXINE. Oh, so it is that simple. *(Pause.)*

How many times did you try to kill yourself?

EVIE. Seven. Eight. Seven. Nine? Does it matter?

MAXINE. Oh, let's say nine. That sounds good. Like a cat.

Am I making you up?

EVIE. You're asking me?

MAXINE. I guess I didn't realize how obsessed I was with Earhart.

EVIE. That's only the most obvious part of this.

MAXINE. What do you have on under your coat?

EVIE. Cut me open and find out. I'm your piñata.

MAXINE. I can't. I think it's feathers.

EVIE. Could be.

MAXINE. Damp, matted feathers. Go away.

EVIE. You'll never find out anything if you're so afraid. Chicken.

(EVIE begins to ascend, making clucking sounds.)

MAXINE. I'm not afraid of you. *(EVIE halts in her ascent.)* How could I be? You're just embarrassing more than anything else.

EVIE. You used to be. Afraid.

MAXINE. I'm sure I was. I was a little kid. All I knew was that you were mad.

EVIE. "Mad." How you flatter me. Sounds so romantic. Why not "crackers," why not "loony tunes"? Why not "My crazy fucking mother drove me nuts"?

MAXINE. It's what I was told. "Mad woman." "Sent away."

EVIE. "Away." Lovely. It sounds like a white place, like a plate, where all the mad women lie, waiting for judgment day. Mouths open and stopped up, tongues flat and silent ...

MAXINE. Right, Ma. Cooked meat. Pigs' tongues under apples.

EVIE. Cooked, yes, but not apples on our tongues. Black rubber. It tasted of nightmare factories. And you bite down hard. So that when the electricity courses through your soft brain the scream you scream goes meaningless and tiny into the piece of dull night you hold between your dangerous animal teeth. We bit and bit, grinning like the lit skeletons we became.

MAXINE. So you were one of them.

EVIE. Oh, yes. One of the many. Quite the little unhinged sorority. Lining the cots waiting for the daily execution. In our identical thin gowns. And afterwards, all our open mouths, like holes ripped in sheets and nothing coming out, nothing going in. We would walk up and peer into each other just to make sure. You know what a wild bird's tongue looks like? Not your nice birds, I'm talking about the ones you shoo off the garden, the greasy, sinister types—grackles, starlings—the types who steal from nice birds' nests and shriek and dive at

the house cats. Look at their tongues—black, flattened, moving splinters.

And the sounds they make with tongues like that. Horrible. In all of our open mouths. Imagine.

MAXINE. I wanted you to be different.

EVIE. Ah, no. There was never any difference between us. And when the treatments began, we knew for sure. We are all the same woman, that thrashing body on the table, biting rubber. You talk about “madness.” No, my darling. Much, much simpler, much less grand. For instance, you’re looking up at me now, and let me tell you something: You’re right. I’m exactly what you look like.

MAXINE. Family resemblance.

EVIE. Oh. More than that. Just another flight-bound, black-tongued thing.

(EVIE ascends out of view.)

MAXINE. *(Calling after her.)* Forget it, Ma. I’m not scared of you anymore. You’re just something I made up to spook myself.

EVIE. *(Out of sight.)* Just another greasy-feathered bird.

MAXINE. FUCK YOU! I’m *nothing* like you.

(Sound of wet wings.)

Scene 12. Earhart.

(MAXINE in the cockpit, searching.)

MAXINE. I dress my mother like you, Amelia. What is that about?

Amelia Earhart. Air Heart. Airheart. *(She laughs.)*

One thing I know, Amelia. I would have found you. Weeks they looked for you, all those air force yahoos, the largest air search in history. Not a trace. Hundreds of square miles of gray slate

water and no you. I would have found you. Because I know you. I could see it in those eyes of yours. Photo after photo of you, standing in front of planes as if you were guarding them, that obliging beauty, that squint, that smile, that lovely preoccupied air. You weren't there. The drug is what you see. I know that drug. It's coursing through my veins right now. It's solitude taken to the utmost extreme. You hear a snap and yes, complete disconnection from the world. What wings do. Abandon.

When I say I remember everything I'm lying. I don't remember my mother. Memories only begin after her death, and then they rear up in Technicolor and just won't quit. But before that, just ... nothing ... silence. Blind, aching void. And there is very little evidence to assert that she *did* exist, that woman, except for me, I suppose, who must have come from somewhere. She left no trace, no trail, not a mark on this world apparently, no more than a water bug leaves on the surface of a lake.

It would seem that my mother never wrote a letter in her life, not a grocery list, I have never, in fact, seen her signature.

I have no memory of her voice, her touch, the true color of her eyes, the way she laughed, if she ever laughed ... I look for memories of her inside me and find nothing, no likeness, no scent, except perhaps here, in the air. Airheart ...

Because you came here too, didn't you, Mama? Countless times. Shot as if from a cannon out of yourself. Nothing and no one, not even you, could hold you in. Disappeared ...

The search continues. For you, whoever you were ...

I have so little to go on. The only thing you bequeathed to this earth was me, Mama. I am your bread crumb trail. (*She looks at her hands.*) My bones, my sinews, every single part of me ... including this (*she raps her head with her knuckles*), which is what? Just some bomb you set ticking before you stepped off the face of the world? ... You left no traces on this earth except me, Mama, your unwilling shadow, who can do nothing now but limp down your tracks sniffing the air and wondering what strange woods you have brought me to.

Scene 13. Winter.

(Airplane hangar. Night. MAXINE enters, exhausted, another day gone. DESSA is sitting at the table wearing her coat, waiting for her. They don't have to say anything; DESSA knows. Silence.)

DESSA. At least it hasn't rained or something. 'Cause you got to find her before it rains or something. Before the snow melts 'cause the black truck—it'll only show up against the snow. That's what I figure. The black against the white. That shows up well, right? You would see that. The truck.

MAXINE. Yeah. That's what I figure too.

DESSA. It's better if it's white. The snow. It's better. Even though it's cold. She's got that jacket and the snow boots from Christmas, they're good. She'll be warm. I know she took her gloves. All the girls said she was wearing them—the thermal what-do-you-call-it, some kind of warm plastic, they're waterproof and everything. She's always out all day in those. That's what these guys *(gestures around the room vaguely)*, they don't understand, I'm always calling to her to come in, she'll freeze to death ... but she won't until she's good and ready. She's like that. That's the thing I know about her. I'm always calling and calling out the back door. And when she's good and ready she comes in. She always comes in.

MAXINE. That's good to know.

DESSA. I hope spring never comes. I need the snow. Until you find her. I need the snow.

(Pause.)

MAXINE. Mrs. Hobart, / I really—

DESSA. —NO. *(Long pause.)* I'm not even going to take