

Tom Petsins

Elena and the Nightingale

CHARACTERS:

ELENA - A YOUNG WOMAN
THE NIGHTINGALE

THE FIRST NIGHT

Elena is sitting on a balcony, embroidering on a hoop. The Nightingale appears and plays on a flute. She looks up from her work and listens. When the Nightingale stops, she sings.

ELENA: As twilight blazes high
She's at her window,
Calling out to the sun
Bound for tomorrow.

Take me away with you,
Far to Australia,
That I may find him there -
My love, my saviour.

Will you accept this loaf
Meant for my father?
You want my burning cheeks
To ease your hunger.

Will you accept this wine
Meant for our church?
You want my crimson lips
To quench your thirst.

Will you accept these coins
Sewn on my vest?
You want to lay your head
Here on my breast.

[The Nightingale approaches Elena.]

NIGHT: Good evening to you, Elena.

[Elena is taken aback. She crosses herself.]

ELENA: God grant it be good, Nightingale.

NIGHT: Ah, spring's come early this year.

ELENA: Yet I fear it's come too late.

NIGHT: You're lovely in this homely light.

ELENA: Are we caught in a common dream?

NIGHT: Your song was sweeter than the bell
That sounds the coming holiday.

ELENA: Or, with Easter in the air,
Are you a spirit from the grave?

NIGHT: Dreams aren't what they appear.

ELENA: It seems my grandmother was right.

NIGHT: Their meaning, too subtle for words,
Lies buried in expended breath.

ELENA: Don't clip your fingernails at dusk,
She'd warn, or phantoms will arise.

NIGHT: Those old wives' tales have a truth
Which only children comprehend.

ELENA: Your being here's proof of that -
But you've distracted me enough.

NIGHT: Devoted to your needlecraft
You sneak glances at the icon
Of Gabriel the messenger,
Like one long sworn to solitude.

ELENA: I've also undertaken vows:
Just as the nun's sustained by love,
The countenance of my saviour
Shines brightest in the dead of night.

NIGHT: Who knows the form Archangels take -
Look, my wings are as fine as His;
My voice, a hymn in praise of God.

ELENA [crosses herself]: I can't be certain of a thing:
You might be fallen Lucifer
Who leads the innocent astray.

NIGHT: This is no time to be alone:
The peach tree's wakened from winter
And stepped out in her petticoat.

ELENA: I used to wait for that and more:
The cuckoo's sugar-coated call
Would teach my heart to count by two's.

NIGHT: Children have returned from the hills
Wearing flowers and daisy chains.

ELENA: Happy seamstresses, the swallows
Would snip my wishes with their tails.

NIGHT: The breeze scented with camomile
Caresses feather, fur and flesh.

ELENA: The stork that crowned the church's dome
Would teach God how to build a home.

NIGHT: You speak as though already old -
Yet I wouldn't exchange your brows
For all the rainbow's wheat and wine.

ELENA: What happiness is there in spring?
It's consolation in the end -
They know this well who suffer least.

NIGHT: Your lips weren't meant for such talk,
Nor eyes to be a haunt for shades.

ELENA: Return to that whispering grove
And play your melody again.

NIGHT: Where's the smile that would ripen plums?
The glance that swept clouds from the sky
And set the sparrow-hawk to flight?

ELENA: Your tune echoed my sentiments,
And shivers trickled down my spine
Like moonlight through a poplar tree.

NIGHT: The fate that notes my score in blood
Composed the verses of your song.

ELENA: What is it in those brooding tones
That opens hearts long closed to hope?

[The Nightingale approaches Elena and stands before her.]

NIGHT: Listen! Down in the village-square
Folks are buzzing around the band,
Lanterns are liberating light.

ELENA: What brings you here, nocturnal bird?
Have you overcome the fear
That crafted wings from blood and bone?

NIGHT: And look! Crucified on skewers
Grinning lambs sizzle on the spit,
Their swollen eyes embracing all.

ELENA: Or have I been alone too long?
And is this nothing but a trance
Induced by staring at the lamp?

NIGHT: The Easter festival's begun:
You should be moved by what you hear.

ELENA: Advising me on civic joy!
You've never flown with the flock.

NIGHT: Music mixes with human kind
And, like yeast, makes warm bodies rise.

ELENA: Are you the player of your tunes
Or have they sorrow of their own?

NIGHT: Enjoy the evening while there's time.
Youth's more a blossom than a branch -
Blinded by intemperate wants
We fail to see this in our prime.

ELENA: A spoon of wine, a crust of bread,
Boiled pomegranates and wheat -
Yes, they've broken their six-week fast
But it's all bitterness to me.

NIGHT: The drum beats for a hundred hearts
And leads them with a common will;
The accordion's bellowing
Ignites faces darkened by coal;
The clarinet threads crimson ears
Like peppers drying on a string.

ELENA: Faith's instrument moves reason
To celebrate a miracle -
But as their saviour isn't mine
I'm still committed to my vow:
Abstain from happiness until
I take communion from his lips.

NIGHT: No, he'd want to see you dancing,
Not shrouded in these coarse shadows.

ELENA: My longing for him's blinded me -
This shadow's like a wedding veil.

NIGHT: Let music be your faith, dear girl.
It was the poetry of words
That turned water to wedding wine.

ELENA: Perhaps only the bride and groom
Tasted the twilight of that hour -
For others there was nothing new.

NIGHT: The circle draws the villagers:
Discarding trusty walking sticks,
The infirm skip with newfound spring;
Girls are showing off their dresses
Paid in full with silver tears;
Caught in black throughout the year
Grandmothers rise from crooked stools
And dip their slippers in the dance.

ELENA: Why waste your breath on what I know?
Become another Orpheus
Who played for his departed love
And raised her from the underworld.
Go, make the Seven Sisters weep
A spray of joyful meteors,
And loosen their abundant hair
That grief has braided tight as rope.

NIGHT: What do I want? Why have I dared
The dread that drives me from your kind?
Perhaps your song has drawn me here.

ELENA: The rising moon has lost its glow,
The oil's falling in the lamp -
There's little light and much to see.

[Elena bows to her embroidery. The Nightingale walks around her.]

ELENA: My embroidery's not done:
A few more nights, that's all I need
To finish what tradition wants.

NIGHT: Save your precious sight, dear girl.
Your lovely eyes were rolled from clay
By an eternity of light.

ELENA: And if I sacrifice these eyes
It is my act of reverence,
Like the deeds of martyrs and saints
Who starved their bodies down to soul
In order to embrace their love.

NIGHT [admiring her work]: Your restless needle clothes the world
And yet itself remains unclothed -
Life's full of little ironies!
God comes to claim His masterpiece
Reflected in your handicraft.

ELENA: Play your melody, Nightingale.

NIGHT: Ah, if only I were in your art.

ELENA: Console the women scraping home
With pitchers that would strain a mule,
Who pour for men intent on cards
And scrub the floor when they're away.

NIGHT: I'd be perfected by your touch:
A singer sewn from golden thread
And perched among undying leaves
Above this world of rot and rust.

ELENA: Who cannot satisfy infants

With milk made thin from overwork
And drinking vinegar for lunch.

NIGHT: The daisies woven in a chain
On the borders of your fragrant sheet
Would fill bees with admiration.

ELENA: Who tend and trim the twisted wick
On which the dead return to life.

NIGHT: Your hands have thawed the linen's snow
And summoned an unfading spring.

ELENA: And those for whom fate writes in black
Of an impossible romance.

NIGHT: A spring that stirs our desires
And warms us to another love.

ELENA: And if my work is beautiful
I don't embroider by design:
My heart's been made a pin-cushion
By waiting for the one I love.

NIGHT: How wonderful your pillowcase!
The vine winding around the edge,
Whose grapes glisten with silver thread,
Will sweeten your endearments.

ELENA: My singing and my work are one,
Not meant to please those walking past.

NIGHT: The small crosses in each corner
Will bless those times of tenderness.

ELENA: Enough! Leave me! There's much to do!
Another day, another night,
My love may return tomorrow
And I haven't commenced his shirt.

NIGHT: The bright sun of your creation
Will never set on your happiness,
But keep watch even as you sleep
To drive away unwelcome dreams.

ELENA: I've pricked myself because of you!

NIGHT: Here, wipe your finger on my wing.

ELENA: Leave, before the cat appears
Whose yellow eyes are traps for you,
Or boys mistake you for a bat
And shoot white pebbles from their slings.

NIGHT: Your presence is a joy to me:
I wouldn't give the speck of star
That decorates your handkerchief
For a wealth of constellations.

[The Nightingale looks over her shoulder.]

NIGHT: Have you already given word?

ELENA: I wear his cross around my neck.

NIGHT: And he carries your photograph?

ELENA: An amulet against his heart.

NIGHT: But when will your betrothed return
To promenade you on his arm
As though you were a prized falcon?
Has he gone south to pasture sheep?
Or has he cruelly jilted you -
Taken a rifle as his bride
And joined those bearded groomsmen
Who bleed to liberate the land?

ELENA: All the young men are back again
From working in Australia.
Three years, he swore, and he'd be home
When the poppy opened its mouth -
Returning with a pair of rings,
Crowns that cross when exchanging vows,
A wedding dress whose spreading train
Would hide the shadows of this world.

NIGHT: Australia's a distant land -
Perhaps a storm's delayed his ship.

ELENA: They say that place is paradise -
What if he's found another love?

NIGHT: Don't despair, dear Elena -
I've come to be your messenger.

ELENA: God's blessing to you, Nightingale.
His absence has unreasoned me.

NIGHT: Tomorrow, faster than the wind,
I'll fly through forests full of wolves,
Beyond mountains with jagged peaks,
Over an ocean of regret -
To bring news of your fiance.

ELENA: How can I repay such kindness
And make your journey easier?
Would you like a sugared almond?
Some Easter bread with sesame?
Or clear raki from my thimble?

NIGHT: Time's edge is sharper as we age:
Spring has already burst the bough
And I've yet to complete my nest.

ELENA: We're more alike than I imagined.
There's still much to be embroidered
Before my dowry chest is full.

NIGHT: My needs are small, my wants are less:
A few fine threads, that's all I ask.

ELENA: I sold my earrings for these -
They were gifts from my godmother!

NIGHT: Some coloured threads, kind Elena -
To weave black twigs into a home.

ELENA: I'd have to sell his cross for more -
It would be like betraying him.

NIGHT: I'd fly to Australia -
You would be doing it for love.

[Elena reflects a moment, then extends a few threads. The Nightingale accepts them. Slow fade.]

THE SECOND NIGHT

Elena is sitting at a loom, singing as she weaves. The Nightingale appears and listens.

ELENA: Come out, young wife,
Your husband's calling down in the square. Le-le.
Losing his life
Over a rumour of an affair.

He stirs and asks:
What wind is this now cooling my pain? Le-le.
Has summer past?
What mists are falling? What autumn rain?

His eyes are dim,
She makes her cross and trembles with fear. Le-le.
And says to him:
The wind's my sigh, oh, the rain's my tears.

After the storm
There'll be no trace of where I bled. Le-le.
After you've mourned
You'll find another to share your bed.

I'm leaving you,
I've found a woman dark as the earth. Le-le.
Faithful and true,
Just like the mother who gave me birth.

[When Elena stops, the Nightingale plays the flute. Elena continues working, looking up from time to time. The Nightingale approaches her.]

NIGHT: Good evening again, Elena.

ELENA: May good be better, Nightingale.

NIGHT: Your voice was sweeter than before.

ELENA: And your tune moved me to tears.

NIGHT: The loom's clattering is a curse -
It echoes through forest and field,
And accompanies your singing
As though an instrument of doom.

ELENA: It was crafted by grandfather:
With his sense for walnut and oak,
And his feel for sharp implements,
He whittled melodies from wood.

NIGHT: The knots are eyes darkened by grief.

ELENA: Soothed by a woman's patient palms.

NIGHT: The grain's a river dry from drought.

ELENA: Smoothed by years of tenderness.

NIGHT: Your hands are meant to be caressed
Not callused by the shuttle's flight;
Your slippered feet are for the dance
Not for the pedal's creaking step.

ELENA: These hands will hold the one I love,
These feet will waltz in step with him -
I'll weave my sorrow if I must
Until the day of his return.

[The Nightingale circles Elena.]

NIGHT: Yes, sorrow nourishes the soul,
With darkness as its element.

ELENA: The earth's our inheritance,
But wisdom is distilled from tears.

NIGHT: The humble root gives rise to trees
And ripens the forbidden fruit.

ELENA: Are these fine sentiments of yours
Preparing me for what's to come?

NIGHT: You look at me with such unease -
Relax, enjoy my company.

ELENA: Or have you been deceiving me
With lies more beautiful than truth?

[The Nightingale moves closer to the loom.]

ELENA: I've met the likes of you before:

I asked a gypsy for a sign,
A hint of where my love could be.

NIGHT: Don't despair, dear girl, have faith -
Shun the prophet and the poet
Who prey on our untutored love.

ELENA: She arranged her cards, read my cup,
And saw a way into my hopes.

NIGHT: Use your scented breath for songs -
Let them console and comfort you.

ELENA: I filled her sack with sifted flour,
Her palms with pomegranate seeds;
And she, my heart with promises -
Not one of which has yet come true.

NIGHT: If I could sing and play my tune,
A voice and instrument at once,
I'd perish in that blaze of sound
And like the Phoenix rise again.

[Elena considers the Nightingale for a moment.]

ELENA: Have you been to Australia?
Don't spare my feelings, Nightingale.

NIGHT: You're too impatient, Elena.
Let's talk of music's mystery

ELENA: My heart's heavy, contracted,
Like a pinecone before the storm.

NIGHT: Of how timed intervals of sound
Overcome Time's mute tyranny.

ELENA: It's better to confront our fears
Than be gnawed by uncertainty.

NIGHT: Of what delightful melodies
Our deepest sufferings compose.

ELENA: Will summer see my bridal gown
Or am I cursed to dress in black?

NIGHT: Of why I trill clawed to a branch
Yet never in unbounded flight.

ELENA: I'm not afraid of what fate holds.
Each day dread seeps into my mind
And I experience nightmares
That would make a priest run and hide.

NIGHT: Don't speak of sorrow, Elena,
Or if you must, turn it to song:
The one that drew me from the hills,
Clear, uncluttered by the loom.

ELENA: Last night I dreamt of murky streams,
And he, wearing his Sunday suit,
Wading chest-deep away from me.

NIGHT: Your song was that of harvesters
Who sing beneath a prodding sun
To overcome their misery.

ELENA: It's on the eve of All Souls Day -
I'm in a kitchen stained by smoke,
Preparing to receive my groom.

NIGHT: Your song was like the evening bell
That crosses fingers in repose
And lifts the head to higher things.

ELENA: I saw a table in a grove,
Set with bread, olives, lentil-soup,
Where he sat eating with the dead.

NIGHT: Your song was like the sweet lament
That women sing on Friday night
Around the effigy of Christ.

ELENA: Enough, you bright-beaked Nightingale!
Are you a messenger who's come
For my deliverance or doom?

[The Nightingale steps back and looks around.]

NIGHT: This balcony is crafted well -
The ancient trees that fell for this
Forgave the tooth of saw and axe.

ELENA: Is this your way of teasing me
And having fun at my expense?
This is no time for childish games!

NIGHT: These boards are waxed by monthly moons,
These rafters dark from human breath,
These beams keep heaven in its place.

ELENA: Love has scattered my knucklebones
And cast me in blood's turbulence.

NIGHT: It overlooks the church, the school,
The hill where your ancestors lie.

ELENA: Gnawed by years of brutal pain
Father saw out his days up here.

NIGHT: His ribs more arched with every breath,
Releasing nature with each sigh.

ELENA: I saw him from behind this post
And fell in love with him at once.
Our ewes gave birth to twins that year,
St. George's Day was May the first.

NIGHT: He had just trimmed his first moustache,
Wore a carnation in his cap,
And strolled past with boisterous friends
Singing ballads and serenades.

[Elena gazes at him. The Nightingale stares into the distance for a moment, then turns back to the loom.]

NIGHT: What are you weaving, Elena?
Is it a kilim to be hung
From the wall of the dining-room,
To impress relatives and friends?
Or a rug for the polished floor
That welcomes visitors who come
In memory of your father's name?
Or will it be a tapestry,
The showpiece of your handicraft:
A girl resting at a fountain,
Her right cheek blazing with twilight,
Bright coins decorating her vest.

ELENA: As you won't talk to me of him,
Then listen to what women do.
Our scissors honed on spit and stone,
We shear ewes at summer's end
And pick the nettles from their fleece
With fingers aching to the bone.
We wash it white in autumn rain
And hang it from a tree stripped bare
By winds pursuing crying geese.
With light contracting to a wick
We tease and comb it like our hair,
Then spin it finer than a mist.

NIGHT: The stream unwinds and rests at night -
A woman's work flows from her hands,
Who fetches water down to dusk
And fills the house with love and warmth.

ELENA: And twice prepares a wooden chest:
First for her dowry, then for death.
It's not a kilim or a rug
But a spread for my marriage bed.

NIGHT: I flew far for you, Elena:
Through six forests and a seventh
Whose breadth only the eagle knows
And depths the day has never seen.

ELENA: And did you stop there, Nightingale?
Oh, you don't know the man he is -
Gypsies gathered when he whistled
And circled him with instruments.

NIGHT: A forest without road or track,
Where brigands baptise lead in wine
Before they set out for the raid
With bullet-belts across their chest -
But not a leaf was crushed by him.

[Elena clatters the loom.]

ELENA: If you'd but seen the way he moved,
And how his tireless feet would weave
When drummers struck the heavy tune,
Stepping on each ascending note

As though on stones to paradise.

NIGHT: No, I went further for your sake,
Despite the aching in my wings.

ELENA: Over mountains where gods once lived,
Whose lightning leapt from peak to peak?

NIGHT: And others where ascetics pray
Above an unrepentant sea.

ELENA: Who spread thin arms from sin to sun
And fly off cliffs to paradise?

NIGHT: I met a monk there all in black,
Walking backwards, barefoot in snow.

ELENA: Did you ask if he'd seen my love?

NIGHT: He pointed to a cross with crows.

ELENA: Leave me, deceitful Nightingale,
Though I still fear you're something else.

NIGHT: How long has it been since he wrote,
Or sent a gift of any kind?

ELENA: My hopes were pinned on your bright beak,
You've disappointed me instead.

NIGHT: Australia's a land of wealth,
And not lacking in temptations.

ELENA: Go, it's time I replaced the wick
And filled the lamp with olive oil
That glows before kind Gabriel.

NIGHT: It's happened to others, dear girl.
That place has seduced countless men
And kept them from family and home.

ELENA: My work is waiting, doubting bird!
You'd not have uttered such a thought
If you but knew how he'd observe
All our customs and traditions.

NIGHT: Men who journey overseas change:
Days in factories, nights alone,
They're casual with promises
Made to wives, mothers, fiances.

ELENA: He'd keep his fast at Easter time
For forty days and one long night;
He'd carry kindling on his back
To stoke the fire on Christmas Eve.

NIGHT: Don't spend another night alone:
Sing, walk arm-in-arm with your friends,
Enjoy the evening promenade
Between the monument and mill.

ELENA: Red oleanders yawned in bloom
On the day of his departure.

NIGHT: Direct your glance at those young men
Who wink at girls too shy to blush.

ELENA: He observed what his elders said,
Just as his grandfather had done
Who journeyed to America.

NIGHT: Repay those cocky youths in kind
Whose smile flashes like a sickle
In biting salty pumpkin seeds.

ELENA: He stained the step with purple wine
And threw a crust onto the path,
So fate would bring him home again.

NIGHT: Torment them with your lovely curves
And make them burn for days to come
For just another glimpse of you.

[The Nightingale approaches Elena, stands above her.]

ELENA: Are you testing my faithfulness?
Or tempting me with flattery?

NIGHT: Don't bite your lips and make them bleed –
Your words flow as though from a wound.

ELENA: Why choose to sound your tunes at night

Unlike the dove that courts at noon?

NIGHT: Like me, you also shun the day
And sing to soothe your heaviness.

ELENA: You've taken my threads for your nest,
What more do you now want from me?

NIGHT: I've turned from the call of my kind
Because of sympathy for you.

ELENA: You used my hopes for your affairs
And now you dare to ask for more?

NIGHT: Have pity, sister Elena -
There's still so much I have to do.

ELENA: You had your chance, sly Nightingale!
The moon's now low and almost full -
Learn something wise from granny owl.

NIGHT: Drawn to you I've neglected all,
And if my nest is not complete
I'll never sound my mating call.

ELENA: The young are moved by sympathy.

NIGHT: Just a strip from your bridal spread.

ELENA: Would you spoil what's for another?

NIGHT: Your sacrifice would be for love.

[Elena takes a pair of scissors and deliberates a moment.]

ELENA: Will you fly to Australia?

NIGHT: Just like a faithful messenger.

ELENA: But can I trust you, Nightingale?
You've made those promises before.

NIGHT: May watchful God pluck out these eyes
If I'm not bearing welcome news.

ELENA: Sight's not a precious sense to one

Who lives intensely in the dark.

NIGHT: May the stern Archangel Michael
Take these wings with his righteous sword.

ELENA: You're not a migratory bird
Whose flight spans continents and seas.

NIGHT: May your Gabriel seize my voice,
My tunes, and leave me destitute.

[Elena cuts a piece from the spread.]

NIGHT: Tomorrow, once I've made a home
For the generation to come,
I'll fly to that unchartered place
And bring a message from your love.

ELENA: Line your nest with what's meant for him.
I give it as an offering,
As women hang their golden chains
On icons dark from smoke and grief.

[The Nightingale leaves. Slow fade.]

THE THIRD NIGHT

On the balcony, Elena is sitting on her dowry chest, combing her long hair, humming. The Nightingale is playing the flute. Elena listens. When the Nightingale stops, she sings.

ELENA: Seems like I bore you
Yesterday -
Now wealthy suitors
Come our way.

Turn from your carefree
Childhood games -
And make from daisies
Marriage chains.

Place on the table
Bread and wine -
And when you serve them
Don't be shy.

Don't cry, my daughter,
I know best -
The swallow's sure to
Leave its nest.

And when in autumn
Strong winds blow -
That's when the oak-leaf
Must let go.

There's no love now,
But you'll see -
One day you'll love him
More than me.

[The Nightingale approaches Elena.]

NIGHT: Another evening, Elena.

ELENA: I've prayed to God that it be good.

NIGHT: I wanted twilight to blaze and burn
And fall like ash upon the land,
For crying jackdaws to disperse,
The Pointers to conceal the Plough -
Before I dared to venture out.

ELENA: And I've been here all afternoon
Unable to touch loom or thread,
Greeting women from field and fold,
From well and mill, from home and hell -
Waiting for you to come again.

NIGHT: I watched you from the walnut tree
As you were unbraiding your hair
Made golden by the sun's descent.

ELENA: Your melody was so intense
I can barely take a breath to ask
The meaning of your soulfulness.

NIGHT: I thought the village would dissolve
In your melancholy ballad.

ELENA: Did you find my love, messenger?
Is he preparing to return?

NIGHT: Come with me, dear Elena.

ELENA: And would you take me straight to him?

NIGHT: You weren't meant to keep company
With the likes of spinster-spider:
She crochets silence and regret,
And spreads her doily from your loom
To catch an unsuspecting hope.

ELENA: Where on earth would you have me go?
I belong with my handicrafts,
With this ancestral dowry chest
Carved with images whose meaning
Goes back to times before the cross.

NIGHT: Go, silence the lone cicada
Preaching salvation to the stars.

ELENA: This chest has served us women well
Since grandmother's shadow was young.

NIGHT: Don't let the night devour your cheeks -
They're waiting for you in the square.

ELENA: My preparations are all done.
Will he be home by summer's end,
Or must they bury me in this?

NIGHT: May such an hour never come!
Brush the darkness from your hair
And join the others at the well.

ELENA: It's knotted fast with threads of smoke -
But even if I brushed them out,
I couldn't be a wedding guest.

NIGHT: Will you disappoint your friend?
Go, join the women, young and old,
Escort the bride around the well,
Dip sprigs of basil flowering white
And sprinkle water on her face.

ELENA: Yes, this evening she'll need help
To cater for her relatives,

To keep the groom's young men in line
And see to it they pay in gold
When they come for her dowry chest.

NIGHT: Help them prepare her bridal bed:
Tie its head with silk and satin,
Throw silver coins upon its spread,
And roll a boy from side to side.

ELENA: Yes, this evening she'll need hands
To flesh the flour for the loaf
Which the groom's brother raises high
Before he scatters it to guests.

NIGHT: Then be her bridesmaid, Elena!
Share in your girlfriend's happiness.

ELENA: In my uncertain state of mind
A wedding's like a funeral.

[The Nightingale steps closer to Elena and touches her hair.]

NIGHT: Your hair glows with unnatural light,
Like the halo of those young saints
Who fell in happy martyrdom.

[Elena touches his wings.]

ELENA: What lies hidden under your wings?
What mysteries of wind and world?
What distances and tracts of space?

[The Nightingale draws closer to her.]

NIGHT: Sister in sorrow, Elena.
It's time to tell you what I've seen.

ELENA: The heart we safeguard is a loan
With which our soul must be redeemed.

NIGHT: I saw a thousand wonders there:
Birds, belled, no bigger than a hope,
Whose notes were tips of broken glass;
Others, fearless, puffed with pride,
Whose laughter mocked the rustling night;
Their arrogant crests singed yellow

By fire that stripped the forest black,
Flocks descended on ghostly trees
And screeched like souls condemned to hell.

ELENA: But isn't it the Promised Land -
A place where deserts of red dust
Conceal gold, silver, diamonds?
Where sheep outgrow the shepherd's count
And wheat-fields spread as far as God?
Where fig trees aren't hung with leaves
But with crispy green one pound notes?
Where girls don't wash the feet of men
And women are not water's slaves?

NIGHT: I found your young man, Elena -
He hasn't fared as well as most.

ELENA: May that seducing place be cursed
With pestilence for seven years.

NIGHT: Your love was injured working hard,
His body torn by a machine -
His life's now hanging on a thread.

ELENA: May ewes give birth to stillborn lambs!
May worms and flies devour its fruit!
May crows descend upon its wheat!

NIGHT: I found him in a hospital -
His room scented with eucalypt,
His linen harsh and comfortless.

ELENA: May fire consume every forest
And floods wash mountains to the sea
So it's no longer on the map.

NIGHT: He wants his ashes sent to you
In an urn with a wedding scene:
Youthful dancers in silhouette,
Whose profiles strain to flute and drum,
And arched feet barely touching earth.

ELENA: Australia, Australia!
You lured him with promises
Then took him from me as your groom.
Now, instead of a bridal sheets,

You'll wrap him in unbridled flames.

NIGHT: He asks that you mix his ashes
With soil from the cemetery.

ELENA: Enough, you heartless Nightingale!
Your words would crack foundation stones.

NIGHT: Then set them in a coloured pot
And plant some basil for his sins.

ELENA: You're an instrument of doom
Whose tunes now lead me to the grave.

NIGHT: And when you've mourned him a year
(A wife would dress in black for three,
While a mother laments her son
Until they meet beyond the grave)
Insert a sprig between your breasts
Before the evening promenade.

ELENA: Oh, if only I had your wings!
I'd fly from this dark balcony
Straight to his sunlit window-sill.
Two words I'd whisper, nothing more -
No, a breath broken into sighs -
And he would rise like Lazarus.

[The Nightingale stands directly before her.]

NIGHT: The threads, the strip - they weren't enough
To weave a future for my kind.

ELENA: Don't ask for more, ungrateful bird.
My dowry's now for my coffin.

[The Nightingale reveals a gash in its throat.]

NIGHT: I need your hands, kind Elena.
This wound is slowly killing me.

ELENA: What tooth has sought you as its prey?
What claw has violated you?

NIGHT: Flying in search of winter twigs,
I tore my throat on the thorns

Of a devil-eyed rosehip bush.

ELENA: I'll pour some raki on the gash
And clean it with a handkerchief
Intended for his wedding suit.

[Elena cleans the Nightingale's throat with raki. She then opens the chest, takes out a handkerchief and dresses the wound.]

NIGHT: Yes, comfort me in my distress
As though this body were your love's.
My strength, like his, is ebbing fast -
There's no time now to build a nest,
Nor breath to sound my mating call,
And if I'm destined to survive
Muteness would be worse than death.

ELENA: Let's sound our sorrow, Nightingale.
Let's put our heartache to the test.
If my song's sweeter than your tune
Allow me to use my scissors,
To cut your wings off at the blades,
To fly there faster than a thought
And raise to life my dying love.

NIGHT: Sister-in-sorrow, Elena,
Let's put our soul-ache to the test.
If my tune's sweeter than your song
You'll cut your hair off at the root,
With which I will complete my nest.

ELENA: I combed and braided it for him,
And promised not to snip an inch
Until the day of his return,
When he'd remove these silver pins
And loosen it like Magdalene's.

NIGHT: One's loss will be the other's gain -
Or we'll both die in hopelessness.

ELENA: But who will judge what we propose,
Whose verdict we shall both accept?

NIGHT: The golden coin your mother hides,
Stamped with a cockerel and queen.

ELENA: Our fate decided by a toss?
That's too inhuman, Nightingale.

NIGHT: Let's call upon old widow Owl,
She knows the nighttime of the soul.

ELENA: Feather and flesh are enemies:
Her hoot has sounded with your tune.

NIGHT: The choice is yours, dear Elena.
Is there someone we both could trust?

ELENA: The shepherd boy upon the hill:
He knows his songs and plays the flute.

NIGHT: I've seen the way he looks at you,
And how he whistles walking past.

ELENA: Let's ask the cricket: the blind voice
That strikes its key and wakes the stars.

NIGHT: The cricket has its own lament
That cracks the courtyard of the house.

ELENA: The new moon's rising from the hill,
With blue dreams circled in her arms.

NIGHT: Yes, she draws the bird to the nest -
Her circle's full of speckled eggs.

ELENA: She moves the girl to womanhood -
Her circle's full of wedding charms.

[A slight fade. A faint light to represent the moon. The Nightingale plays its melody first. Elena sharpens her scissors. She combs her hair. The Nightingale stops. Elena sings to the same melody. As she sings the Nightingale tends to his wound and preens his wings.]

ELENA: Daughter, daughter
On your bed of reeds,
My palm is burning
On your glowing cheeks.

You were meant to have
A finer home,
Hands were meant for silk

And not for stone.

Taps are calling
Girls to the square,
The heavy pitcher's
Waiting on the stairs.

Mother, mother,
Morning-light's a curse -
Summer's full of toil
And endless work.

In my dream he
Called me from above:
The balcony shone
With the one I love.

Your caress has
Snatched me from that spell:
My heart's a pitcher
Shattered at the well.

[A slow fade, followed by a soft glow.]

ELENA: Should we act on the moon's advice?

NIGHT: She knows God better than the sun.

ELENA: Let's put her wisdom to the test.

NIGHT: I'll summon my remaining strength.

ELENA: And I, a final, fading hope.

NIGHT: To perform the duet she proposed.

ELENA: Together, instrument and song,
We'll draw good God to our plight.

NIGHT: And move Him as no prayer has done,
To feel the suffering on His earth.

ELENA: To heal the wound and give you strength
Not only to complete your nest
But court a mate before spring ends.

NIGHT: To turn you into dreaming dust
And, faster than a meteor,
Transport you to the one you love.

[Elena sings and the Nightingale accompanies her.]

ELENA: Why are you here,
All alone with your sighs.
Go join the others,
Down by the fountain,
Down by the fountain,
Where the young men walk by.

My fate has been sealed
By this note in my hands.
It's come from afar -
Distant Australia,
Distant Australia,
Where the soul turns to sand.

There stands my suitcase,
Waiting by the old loom.
Tomorrow I'm leaving,
Farewelling my friends,
Farewelling my friends,
For a stranger, a groom.

Father, where are you?
Take this stone from my heart.
How can I marry
Someone you've shown me,
Someone you've shown me,
In a small photograph.

ELENA: Your tune is a precious thread
That weaves the world with harmony.

NIGHT: Creation gathers close to you
And finds communion in your song.

ELENA: With blood oozing from your wound
I didn't think you'd hold the notes.

NIGHT: Music is full of miracles:
The swan moves heaven close to death.

[Elena considers the Nightingale for a moment.]

ELENA: Your eyes glow with a human light.

NIGHT: They mirror your bright countenance.

ELENA: Have I become the stuff of dreams?

NIGHT: Have you answered my mating call?

[Elena holds her cross with her right hand and crosses herself with the left.]

ELENA: We've been brought together again.

[The Nightingale embraces Elena with its wings.]

NIGHT: Come, follow me, my strength, my life.

[Elena takes a few steps, then looks over her shoulder.]

ELENA: My hoop, my loom, my dowry chest -
Is there no place for them with us?

NIGHT: Don't look back at what hands have made -
We take each other, nothing more.

ELENA: Are they forever out of reach
That guided me through solitude?

NIGHT: They've served their purpose, Elena -
They're glowing in your happiness.

ELENA: My very name sounds distant now,
As though no longer part of me.

NIGHT: Names are garments that must be shed
If we're to consummate our joy.

[The Nightingale draws her away.]

NIGHT: Let's leave, before their wailing starts.

ELENA: I move and yet my shadow's still.

NIGHT: I've built a house beyond this night

And furnished it with all your wants.

ELENA: My words are lighter by a breath,
My soul is wedded to your tune.

[A slow fade. They exit.]

END

Tom Petsins is an Australian poet, playwright and novelist. He was born in Macedonia, Greece, and emigrated to Australia as a child. The Australia Council has awarded him a Writers' Fellowship and a Residency at the B.R. Whiting Library in Rome. He lives in Melbourne with his wife and two daughters and lectures in mathematics at Victoria University. His writing includes the novels *The French Mathematician* and *The Twelfth Dialogue*, plays *The Drought* and *The Picnic*, poetry *Naming the Number* and *Four Quarters*, and a collection of short stories *The Death of Pan*. His work has been translated into a number of languages.

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