

JULIA CHO

I still think about him often and what he loved. His crossword puzzles. His walks at night. His Shakespeare. I think about *Hamlet*. I think about how wise Shakespeare was. I think about Hamlet's father, sleeping in the garden, and how he was killed by poison being poured into his ear. I sit here and I think about that until it grows dark and I am looking at nothing and thinking of nothing and that is how I like it.

I'm nearing the end of my life; I know this. And this is the story I tell. I was a piano teacher. I taught piano to children. And in this way, I influenced children to love music, to appreciate it. And somewhere out in the world, perhaps one of my students is playing a song, and there is music ringing in a room and the room . . . the room is beautiful—

(She cannot finish.)

The room is beautiful—

(Silence.)

The room—

(Silence.)

I'll tell it to the end.

END

THE LANGUAGE ARCHIVE

PRODUCTION HISTORY

The Language Archive had its world premiere at South Coast Repertory (David Emmes, Producing Artistic Director; Martin Benson, Artistic Director) in Costa Mesa, California, on March 26, 2010. It was directed by Mark Brokaw. The scenic design was by Neil Patel, the costume design was by Rachel Myers, the lighting design was by Mark McCullough, the sound design and original music were by Steven Cahill; the dramaturg was John Gore and the stage manager was Chrissy Church. The cast was:

GEORGE

Leo Marks

MARY

Betsy Brandt

EMMA

Laura Heisler

ALTA

Linda Gehringer

RESTEN

Tony Amendola

The Language Archive had its New York premiere at Roundabout Theatre Company (Todd Haimes, Artistic Director; Harold Wolpert, Managing Director; Julia C. Levy, Executive Director) at the Laura Pels Theatre on October 17, 2010. It was directed by Mark Brokaw. The scenic design was by Neil Patel, the costume design was by Michael Krass, the lighting design was by Mark McCullough, the sound design and original music were by David Van Tieghem; the production stage manager was William H. Lang. The cast was:

GEORGE
MARY
EMMA
ALTA
RESTEN

Matt Letscher
Heidi Schreck
Betty Gilpin
Jayne Houdyshell
John Horton

The Language Archive was commissioned by Roundabout Theatre Company and developed at the O'Neill National Playwrights Conference and South Coast Repertory.

CHARACTERS

GEORGE, a linguist, a man in his thirties or forties
MARY, George's wife, a woman in her thirties or forties
EMMA, a lab assistant, a woman in her twenties or thirties
ALTA, an old woman
RESTEN, an old man

The actors playing Alta and Resten could also play the following:

THE DRIVER, a man of any age
OLD MAN/BAKER, an old man
LANGUAGE INSTRUCTOR, a woman of any age
A PASSERBY, a man or a woman of any age
A PASSERBY, a man or a woman of any age (different from the previous)
CONDUCTOR, a man or a woman of any age
OLD MAN/ZAMENHOF, an old man

A NOTE ABOUT TRANSLATIONS

English translations in brackets are provided for the reader, but are not spoken.

"Why should I take up such a burden?" I thought to myself. "Who would ever finish gathering so much material?" But then I did take up the burden. And I gathered—without finishing.

And now, in the midst of the garnering, I begin the tale.

—*H. E. Jacob, Six Thousand Years of Bread*

ACT ONE

SCENE 1

George and Mary.

GEORGE: Lately, I've become worried about my wife. She used to be an upbeat person. But recently, she's become very sad. She cries at everything—long-distance phone commercials, nature specials when animals of prey get killed, sometimes over nothing at all—

MARY: Um . . . George?

GEORGE: —she'll just be washing the dishes and then suddenly slump over.

MARY: George, I can hear you. I'm right here.

GEORGE: I'm just trying to explain how you've been lately.

MARY: How *I've* been?

GEORGE: Yes. The . . . your tendency lately to be kind of . . . sad.

MARY: Well, that's very funny. Kind of hilarious, actually, because from my viewpoint, you're the one who's sad.

GEORGE: Me?

MARY: YOU.

GEORGE: That's ridiculous—why should I be—why should you think I'm sad? I don't cry, I don't carry on—

MARY: Exactly, that's th—

GEORGE: *You're* the one who can't stop crying. (*To us*) She cries when she makes salad, she cries when she swiffs the floor, she cries when she pays the bills and then she uses her tears to seal the envelopes—

MARY: But I—

GEORGE: She even cries—she even cries when she's asleep. She wakes up in the morning and there are little pools of tears in her ears, she stands up and they trickle down her neck and become little pools in her collarbones and where are you going?

(*Mary has left.*)

(*To us*) And then she goes. She never wants to talk about it.

No matter. It's not like I don't have other things to attend to. There are many developments in my field that I must constantly keep abreast of. Too many, in fact. The task: it's quite Sisyphian.

(*There is an armchair and beside it, a towering pile of books.*)

George sits and opens a book. He flips a page.

He finds a small piece of paper tucked into the book.

He takes it out.

He reads it.

He is perplexed.

Mary?

(*Mary enters. She has the aspect of having been interrupted right in the middle of something—some piece of housework.*)

MARY: Yes?

GEORGE: Mary, do you know what this is?

MARY: What is what?

GEORGE (*Reading*): "Husband or throw pillow? Wife or hot water bottle?"

Marriage or an old cardigan?

Love or explaining how to use the remote control?"

MARY: What is that?

GEORGE: I'm asking you. It was in my book.

MARY: That's odd.

GEORGE: Right here, in my book. It's a new book.

MARY: Is it a bookmark?

GEORGE: It's written on a scrap of paper.

MARY: Maybe some bookstore worker put it there.

GEORGE: It's in your handwriting, Mary.

MARY: I don't know what you mean.

(*She leaves.*)

George goes back to reading. He takes a sip from a mug of tea. He drains it, then does a slight double take. He lifts out his tea bag. He sees at the bottom of the mug:

GEORGE: "In a moment of sadness, sitting on the last, lowest note, she knew they both saw the fragility of their marriage when he said: 'Maybe we should try ballroom dancing.'"

(*Calling*) Mary.

(*Mary enters.*)

George pulls out the wet piece of paper from the bottom of the mug.

What does this mean?

(Mary goes over, takes the wet piece of paper and reads it.)

MARY: I have no idea.

GEORGE: I know you put this here.

MARY: This couldn't possibly be me. You've never suggested ballroom dancing.

GEORGE: So someone else has crept into our house—

MARY: There are people, you know, / who go into houses and take ladies' underwear, so—

GEORGE: —and put a note into my book, my tea? *(Registering what she's said)* Yes, "take" operative word. Not leave behind—*(He reads)* "The fragility of their marriage." What is that? What does that mean?

MARY: These notes aren't from me, how many times do I have to say it?

GEORGE: Just admit it, admit you're going around leaving bad poetry lying around the house—

MARY: IT ISN'T ME.

(She leaves.)

GEORGE: Now. My wife is not one to lie. Neither is she one to write poetry. If that's even what these notes are. It seems quite impossible that she is the one leaving these for me to find.

And yet.

She is the only other person in this house besides me.

And so, I thought, maybe: I can catch her in the act.

(George spies on Mary. Mary is in the kitchen, washing dishes.

She wears bright yellow rubber gloves.

She begins to cry. It starts off with a tear trickling down her face. Then a few more. A few snuffles. She slumps over. It's not a big crying jag. But there is no doubt that she is crying. Weeping.

She tries to wipe her tears on the bit of sleeve not covered by the rubber glove. She sighs. She collects herself.

And then she resumes washing dishes as if nothing has happened.

George is unsure whether to stay or go.)

. . . Mary . . . ?

MARY: Have you figured it out?

GEORGE: No. But I wanted to, that is, perhaps we could discuss . . .

MARY: Discuss . . . ?

GEORGE: This habit of yours, this phase . . . perhaps you could use . . . help.

MARY: Well, now that you mention it, it would be nice if you could vacuum the stairs—

GEORGE: I meant help with other issues.

MARY: What issues?

GEORGE: Well, the . . . crying, among other things; I don't think—I could be wrong, but I highly doubt it—that it's normal to be this way—

MARY: Oh, you'd rather I be *your* way?

GEORGE: What way?

MARY: Well. I just find it odd, a little, don't you think, that we've been together now for how many years and I've never seen you cry. Not once.

GEORGE: Is that all?

MARY: When we watch the news, I'm weeping and all you do is continue to read—earthquakes, massacres, it doesn't matter, you read—

GEORGE: We've spoken about this—the magnitude, it numbs you, lots of people have the same—it's our inability as humans, large tragedies overwhelm us—

MARY: When Cookie died, you didn't even want to go to the vet—

GEORGE: She was *your* dog! She never even liked me!

MARY: And I should've known something was wrong when your grandmother passed away and everyone else was bawling but you didn't even shed a tear—

GEORGE: Well, she was *old*. And it's not like we were—you know—close. I mean we didn't even speak the same language.

MARY: But still, the human reaction, the normal reaction, is to mourn.

GEORGE: I do mourn. I mourn a lot.

MARY: You mourn ideas. Not people.

GEORGE: Cookie wasn't a person!

MARY: SHE WAS TO ME.

GEORGE: I just don't find death, a single human—or canine—death, a tragedy, I'm sorry. Because we all die. It's not like something unnatural happening. It's not like when my grandmother died it was a surprise. I mean, she'd been sick a long time, she was an old woman and she died—what, I should be . . . / devastated—

MARY: I'm leaving you.

GEORGE: What?

(*Mary is very, very still.*)

George is very, very still.)

What did you say?

(*To us*) At this point, I'm thinking I must've misheard her, that this is all some kind of misunderstanding and that we can go on, just as before—she could lie, is what I'm saying, and pretend the words that just came out of her mouth did not just come out of her mouth—

MARY (*Bravely, simply, with an amount of wonder*): I'm leaving you.

GEORGE: But she doesn't.

And they do.

MARY: I'm. Leaving.

(*A long pause. George stares at Mary. Mary stares at George. Lights shift.*)

GEORGE: It's a very curious thing when your wife leaves you. The world slows down.

Words become . . . (*Lugubriously*) lugubrious.

MARY: I'mmmleeevvinnnnnggyyooooo . . .

GEORGE: My heart was beating very loudly.

But instead of thumping, every beat was saying,

"Take it back, take it back, take it back."

Just like that. Like a rhythm.

And it was so loud that I couldn't hear anything else, even my own thoughts, whatever they might have been.

And I was sure she must be hearing it too.

It was as thunderous as horse hooves, louder than tanks, how could anyone *not* hear it?

Take it back, take it back, take it back.

Or if she couldn't hear it, I thought surely she must be able to *see* it,

the words running like ticker tape through the whites of my eyes,

like those old cartoons when the cat is hit on the head with a mallet.

Take it back, take it back.

My whole body was begging her.

Take it back, take it back—

If you go, it'll *destroy* me.

Take it back, take it back—

I'll be a city in ruins—

Take it back, take it back—

It's not too late—

Take it back, take it back—

My whole body was *shouting* it.

JULIA CHO

Couldn't SHE HEAR IT?

Why wasn't she saying something???

MARY: George?

GEORGE: Yes?

MARY: . . . Well?

(Pause.)

Don't you have anything to say?

(Silence.)

George struggles to speak.)

GEORGE: . . . Don't . . .

. . . Go . . . ?

(Mary sighs.)

She goes.)

SCENE 2

George.

GEORGE: I am a linguist.

This is my trade.

Lots of people ask me if this means I can speak a lot of languages.

And I do have a passable acquaintance with Greek, Latin, French, Cantonese, Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese and Esperanto. Of these all, I am perhaps most fond of Esperanto, that made-up, utopian dream of a language. Proudly, I say, "La vivo sen Esperanto estas neimagebla al mi!" Life without Esperanto is unimaginable to me!

So.

What is death to a linguist?

What is, so to speak, worth mourning?

I know this: