

wish on the sun

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ACT I

Prologue

The CHORUS and its leader, BRITANNIA.

CHORUS

Brittania calls,
Columbia cries.

in this, the ancient country, the United States,
there is a forgotten prophecy

they are called "revolutions"
because they always come around
again;
Brittania calls and we all go home
we give the lost our golden land
we board our mayflowers
and leave the new world behind;
and the pilgrims of britain,
and all the world sail back home
to leave a vast and undiscovered continent
to new explorers
for pilgrims to come,
after a thousand future years of peace

long live the united states and their goddess Columbia
long live the canceled country
good bye, new world

ask me where we'll go,
but take my hand and lead me
before I can answer

we have just become the nation that we are

when quiet settles on the canceled country like sleep
and the language of its people is solitude
touch me, and bless this land
touch my face and sing
you brush across this landscape,
the longing history
from a cloudless night

Scene 1

Dawn.

*The door of the church. SENATOR VAUGHN appears.
He knocks.
FATHER CLEO opens the door.*

(CONTINUED)

FATHER C.

What the fuck do you want?

SENATOR V.

Well, Father, I--

FATHER C.

I was asleep.

SENATOR V.

I'm sorry, Father, I just--

FATHER C.

No, please, it's fine, let's hear it. Tell me, in detail and at great length: what the fuck do you want?

SENATOR V.

Can we talk inside?

FATHER C.

No.

SENATOR V.

Okay.

FATHER C.

It's great to see you, Senator.

SENATOR V.

Thank you. Am I interrupting some--

FATHER C.

I was asleep.

SENATOR V.

Oh. Well, I'm sorry, this is urgent.

FATHER C.

Then do you care if you're interrupting? Talk.

SENATOR V.

I brought you something.

He presents a ring of keys. FATHER CLEO takes them and looks at them.

FATHER C.

Okay. And?

SENATOR V.

These are the keys to the NASA hangar. See, down there on Rice Avenue? There's a prototype shuttle there. It probably won't do anything, but the property and the

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

SENATOR V. (cont'd)
building and anything you find inside, they're yours if you want them. If not, sell it, give it away, forget about it, whatever.

FATHER C.
A shuttle?

SENATOR V.
Yeah, a space shuttle. The shuttle Olympus? It's never flown. I've never even seen it, but I have the documents on it somewhere--

He shuffles papers.

FATHER C.
Why are you giving me this? Is this legal? Did you kill someone?

SENATOR V.
Yes, it's legal. No, I didn't kill anyone. I was assigned to liquidate a given monetary quantity of United States federal property, and this was the last thing. So. This one is to the ignition, no, wait, this one's to the ignition, this one's to the outer doors--

FATHER C.
Liquidate property. This is a mob thing, isn't it.

SENATOR V.
Can I just come inside?

FATHER C.
Explain or go.

SENATOR V.
I would really feel more comfortable talking inside.

FATHER C.
Sorry.

SENATOR V.
Where were you born, Father?

FATHER C.
Paris.

SENATOR V.
Paris?

FATHER C.
Paris, Michigan.

SENATOR V.

Lived in the USA all your life?

FATHER C.

All my life.

SENATOR V.

Imagine there's a man in your hometown in Michigan doing the same thing. Giving away national assets. Someone in Paris is going home with a bucket of standard-issue hand grenades. Someone's driving home in a Postal Service car, with the steering wheel on the right side the way they drive in England. Some of it for sale, some of it for free, and some of it personal gift. Like this.

FATHER C.

Why?

SENATOR V.

We're going home.

FATHER C.

Home? I thought you lived all your life here in Albedo, Senator.

SENATOR V.

Not like that. Home, home. (Beat.) Britain.

FATHER C.

I'm going back to bed.

SENATOR V.

Take these.

He offers the keys again.

FATHER C.

Get out. You're still not funny. Jesus.

SENATOR V.

Just take the keys.

FATHER C.

Why don't we go down to the hangar right now, then? Why don't we take the damn shuttle out for a spin?

SENATOR V.

Come on, Father, we couldn't.

FATHER C.

Really!

(CONTINUED)

SENATOR V.
It's day.

FATHER C.
And?

SENATOR V.
We can't go out in it. The sun would be in the way. You can't take off unless it's dark and you can see the stars.

FATHER C.
Oh, right, of course.

SENATOR V.
Alright, I'm going. I'm going to get in that car, and we will go down to the harbor, and the rest of the Congress and judiciary and the president and his family and all of us are going to get on a fleet of ships and land at Newport. In the UK.

He starts to leave.

SENATOR V.
The fifty British colonies are done.
We failed.

FATHER C.
And that's fine, and I understand what you're saying, but that doesn't explain why you're at *my* door trying to give me a present.

SENATOR V.
You don't want it?

FATHER C.
Are we friends?

SENATOR V.
Look. I remember when we were in school you had that jacket with all the NASA patches, and when you moved here you wore it on the first day of your freshman year I called you a nerd and wrote "space fag" on your face with a marker.

FATHER C.
I remember that.
So we're not friends?

SENATOR VAUGHN throws him the keys.

FATHER C.

And this will make us friends?

SENATOR V.

Why? You're never going to see me again.

FATHER C.

I guess that's true.

So are you "apologizing"?

SENATOR V.

I guess I am.

FATHER C.

Thanks.

Fuck along, now.

SENATOR V.

Thank you.

FATHER C.

What?

SENATOR V.

That means you believe me at least a little bit.

I have a letter from the President and a letter from the Queen. Share them with the rest of the town for me. They're important.

SENATOR VAUGHN hands FATHER CLEO two envelopes.

FATHER C.

Say hi to the fucking queen for me.

SENATOR V.

I will. Goodbye, Father.

FATHER C.

Suck it.

SENATOR V.

God save the queen.

SENATOR VAUGHN exits.

FATHER CLEO looks at the letters and the keys.

FATHER C.

God?

God??

I hope you heard all that. I'm not going to deal with this shit right now.

I'm going back to bed.

(CONTINUED)

HELENA appears.

HELENA

Who was that?

FATHER C.

I'm going back to bed.

HELENA

Who was it?

FATHER C.

Come on, I'll tell you later.

HELENA

(indicating the envelopes and keys)

What's all this?

FATHER C.

(calling to God)

God bless America, right? God bless America! Fucking
Roanoke problems! Fuck me!

(To HELENA)

Are you coming?

HELENA

(looking at the keys)

What are those?

FATHER C.

These are the keys to a spaceship.
Senator Vaughn gave them to me.

HELENA

He was here?

FATHER C.

Yes, he was. He was saying goodbye. He gave me these.
The keys to a spaceship. He said it's at the NASA
facility on Rice Avenue.

HELENA

Can we go see it?

FATHER C.

Now?

HELENA

Why not?

FATHER C.

Tonight.

(CONTINUED)

HELENA

Okay. Tonight.

FATHER C.

You can't go during the day anyway.

HELENA

Why?

FATHER C.

You can't go during the day because the sun is in your way and you won't see the stars.

HELENA

You're bad at being romantic.

FATHER C.

I'm not.

That's what he said.

HELENA

You can't see the stars.

FATHER C.

Isn't that the point?

Come back to bed.

HELENA

Okay.

FATHER C.

I'm sorry.

HELENA

No.

FATHER C.

Okay.

Fuck that guy.

HELENA

It's the day, isn't it?

FATHER C.

What?

HELENA

It's the departure day.

FATHER C.

Did you know about this too?

(CONTINUED)

HELENA

I had a feeling.

FATHER C.

Yes. It is "the day".

HELENA

Why aren't you going?

FATHER C.

He didn't invite me. Why aren't you going?

Hey. Why aren't you going?

HELENA

I didn't want to yet. There's still an America
regardless of the politics and the paperwork.

FATHER C.

That's cute.

HELENA

I have the store to take care of.

FATHER C.

Well, I'm not staying here.

I'm going to SPACE!

HELENA

Oh my God.

Will you be serious?

FATHER C.

I am being serious. I'm taking the keys down to the
hangar bay on Rice Avenue, tonight, when the stars come
out, and I am opening the doors and getting in the
captain's chair or what the fuck ever, and tearing out
into the firmament.

Isn't that a beautiful word? "Firmament".

HELENA

You're going to leave me here?

FATHER C.

Like sad, sorry Penelope.

Why, do you want to come?

HELENA

Maybe.

FATHER C.

I'm not going to space. I'll probably go back to Paris.

(CONTINUED)

HELENA

I thought you were from Michigan.

FATHER C.

Yeah, a town called Paris. In Michigan.

HELENA

You want to leave too?

FATHER C.

I don't want to stick around here and fuck around in this post-imperial bullshit. Even if it's the same in Paris I should go back and see.

HELENA

Won't your flock here need you?
You're the man God talks to.

FATHER C.

God talks to all of them just as much as He talks to me.

HELENA

All of this--the collar, the building, the certificate on your wall--this means you're the one who has learned how to listen.

FATHER C.

What, to God?

HELENA

Yes.

FATHER C.

It's not as hard as you would think.

HELENA

Really.

FATHER C.

It sounds like musical saws.

HELENA

You're not funny.

FATHER C.

(to God)

God.

God.

Talk to Helena for a while. She wants to know what your voice sounds like. I told her, it sounds just like playing a saw with a violin bow, but I don't think she believes me.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

FATHER C. (cont'd)

So just peek down and maybe whisper in her ear a little bit.

Doesn't matter what you say.

God?

Maybe he's still asleep. It's hard to tell because of the time zones.

HELENA

Maybe that God just isn't taking care of us anymore.

FATHER C.

What?

HELENA

I'm having a crisis of faith, Father. Help me! Save me! Turn me back from the spiritual void.

FATHER C.

Now you're not funny.

HELENA

Come on. Convince me. It's your job.

FATHER C.

I can't convince anyone of any god.

HELENA

Why not?

FATHER C.

If God can't, or won't, convince you of Himself, it's not my place to interfere.

So you think that God isn't taking care of us anymore?

Maybe you're right. Maybe you're wrong. Maybe that God is Britain's God, and He turns away when our politicians do.

Maybe he's just offering a little test and we'll transcend it just like this beautiful fucking country has done for ten thousand years.

Here. Maybe there's something about it in the Senator's letters.

He offers her the letters. She unfolds and reads each one.

HELENA

No.

She tears them up.

FATHER C.

I didn't get to read those yet.

HELENA

They're nothing useful.

FATHER C.

So God is dead?

I knew it. I knew it! "God bless America"! Irving Berlin. Did you know that song was written by a Russian? That's Russia's God. That's Britain's God. That's fucking Italy's God. Uncle Sam. Is that America's patron God? Is that what the letter says? Is it the Statue of Liberty? Is it Mickey fucking Mouse?

HELENA

It says they're all "going home". There's some congratulatory fluff about a wonderful historical experiment and a promise to "do better next time". And it ends with a prayer.

FATHER C.

What's the prayer?

HELENA

It's not important.

FATHER C.

Not important. How could a prayer not be important?

HELENA

It's more like a wish. It's a for a goddess named Columbia.

FATHER C.

Columbia.

HELENA

That's her name. Patron Goddess of the United States. Columbia. And Britain's goddess is named Britannia. You see.

FATHER C.

Oh. Of course.

Columbia. Look down and bless us, like Athena always did for her city. Send me a new American flag and a tanker full of rocket fuel.

Fuck Albedo. Fuck Britain. Fuck you. Fuck you, Columbia. So what is it, you tire of us and you leave us to the cold wind? Where are you when we need you? Today? Fair-weather goddess, that's what you are.

(CONTINUED)

HELENA

She's testing us.

FATHER C.

Testing us? Don't be stupid.

HELENA

That's what you just said. And don't call me stupid.

FATHER C.

Sorry.

HELENA

She's testing us. Just testing us. Maybe Athena was kinder, but that's what gods have always done to their cities. And she wants us to succeed. No god wants to see their nation fail. Just testing us to make sure we're worthy of her protection and her love and the prosperity she can bring us.

FATHER C.

Maybe you should be our priestess. Priestess for a new America.

HELENA

Maybe.

And so what if Irving Berlin was a Russian?

FATHER C.

We shouldn't sing his songs in this country, then.
At least he wasn't British.

HELENA

He lived and died in New York City.

FATHER C.

All Americans should.

HELENA

That's not funny.

FATHER C.

Nothing about this is funny. That's why it's so fucking funny.

HELENA

What are we going to do now?

FATHER C.

I don't know.
Pray?

(CONTINUED)

HELENA

Okay.

FATHER C.

Okay, here we go.
HEY, GOD.

HELENA

Not like that.
Not to that God.

FATHER C.

To your new goddess Columbia.

HELENA

Our. Goddess Columbia.

FATHER C.

Why don't we pray to Britannia, too, and cover that?
Safe travels for the president and Senator Shithead
Vaughn. And freedom from taxes.

HELENA

We don't pray to Britannia in this country any more.

FATHER C.

Not since 1776, right? Who decides?
You?

HELENA

Yes.

FATHER C.

So you'll be our high priestess, today onward?

HELENA

Yes. High priestess to Columbia and matriarch of fools.

FATHER C.

And how do we pray to this goddess, high priestess?

HELENA

We make a wish.

FATHER C.

Wow.

HELENA

What's more American than that, right?

FATHER C.

Right.

(CONTINUED)

HELENA

Here. Eyelash.

She brushes an eyelash off FATHER CLEO's cheek and raises it on her finger in front of his face.

HELENA

Close your eyes. Come up with your wish.

He does.

HELENA

Now blow.

FATHER C.

Blow?

HELENA

Just blow your dumb eyelash off my finger.

He does.

FATHER C.

Did I get it?

HELENA

Open your eyes.

FATHER C.

So yes?

Your turn.

You don't have any stray eyelashes. Should I just yank one out, or--

He pokes at her eye looking for a loose eyelash.

HELENA

No. Stop.

FATHER C.

You don't get to commit a prayer? That's no good.

HELENA

I'll wish on something else.

FATHER C.

You can make any kind of wish?

HELENA

Any kind of wish, any custom. Birthday wishes, star wishes, coins in fountains.

FATHER C.
Really?

HELENA
Are you accusing me of making up a religion?

FATHER C.
Oh, no, not at all.

HELENA
Are you trying to incite a holy war?

FATHER C.
Columbia's priestess, haven't you already lost your holy war?

HELENA
Nobody ever loses a war permanently. Especially in America.
I'll wish on a star, then. Tonight. When we go?

FATHER C.
When we go?

HELENA
When we go to the NASA hangar.

FATHER C.
You still want to do that.

HELENA
I'm not letting you run off by yourself.

FATHER C.
It probably won't even fly.
Fuck, it probably doesn't even exist. Vaughn was probably just fucking with me.
I hate that son of a bitch.

HELENA
I still want to see it.

FATHER C.
You think I'm going to fly off and ditch you.

HELENA
Am I wrong?

FATHER C.
Fuck.

(CONTINUED)

HELENA

Am I?

FATHER C.

He said there's probably no fuel anyway.

HELENA

Well, you like to believe against the odds.
Don't you?

FATHER C.

I'm not an irrational man.
There's probably no fuel anyway.

HELENA

Is that what you prayed for? Enough fuel to get you out
of sight of me and the rest of Albedo?

FATHER C.

I love this town.

HELENA

Cleo.

FATHER C.

What.

HELENA

This country needs its holy men.

FATHER C.

It doesn't need me. You've taken my role, my priestess.

HELENA

So you wanted to go to the station without me and
vanish off into the black infinity.

FATHER C.

I told you. I couldn't get anywhere even if I tried.

HELENA

Is that what you wished for? A blessing of rocket fuel,
to take you beyond the whispering horizon?
I can hear the wishes you make.

FATHER C.

Isn't saying the wish against the rule of wishing?

HELENA

You're the worst priest I've ever met.

FATHER C.

I'm the worst priest I've ever met.

Maybe I just want to die in space. In peace, in silence, looking out on this confused, miserable blue sphere.

When I was a kid I read every book I could borrow or steal about space. About the Russian dogs they sent up alone, or all the Apollo missions, and the nights you could see Sputnik from your porch in Albedo. I thought about being out there alone with nothing but a crackling radio and a little window, looking out on Earth, and everyone at home is looking at me on their televisions and I'm looking at all of them too. I would press the button on my radio transmitter and I'd say, "My friends, my country, I wish you all could see this."

That's what I want. Peace among the cosmic tides. I'm not such a bad priest, am I?

HELENA

Yes. But that's between you and your own god.

FATHER C.

Well, fuck me, right?
Come on.

They exit together.

The chorus enters.

CHORUS

The moon rises over this ancient country like a wise and violent guardian.

The night that follows is bright and alive.

When the light of all the stars penetrates the sky and nighttime blazes white with heat.

This is to see the face of gods
and look past them into time.

Scene 2

The hangar.

FATHER CLEO enters. He finds the light switch.

HELENA follows.

HELENA

Oh.

Oh, I'm sorry.

You didn't really expect something to be here, did you?

FATHER C.

What is this.

What is all of this?

Why can't I read this?

(CONTINUED)

HELENA

It's in Russian.

FATHER C.

Of course. It's in Russian.
It's all in fucking Russian!

HELENA

I'm sorry.

FATHER C.

Yeah. Me too.

HELENA

Did you really expect there to be something here?

FATHER C.

Didn't you?

HELENA

No.

FATHER C.

What?

HELENA

No. I never did. I thought you were joking. I was joking.

FATHER C.

When they say spaceship, they mean painted drops and studio lights.

HELENA

I'm sorry.

FATHER C.

Columbia! I can hear you laughing down at us!

HELENA

Don't mock her like that.

FATHER C.

She mocks me. An empty hangar bay full of television equipment?

HELENA

She tests you. She tests us both. I want you to find that peace you were talking about. I want to see it myself. But if she delivers us to a television studio, then the television studio is our peace.

(CONTINUED)

FATHER C.

This is our salvation?

HELENA

It might be.

FATHER C.

Thank you, Columbia, thank you, for this blessed gift.
I wish you were here in this room with us, here in this
television studio so I could kneel and kiss your feet
myself.

Helena. This is where the moon landings happened.
Doesn't that feel historic?

HELENA

It's better they happened here than anywhere else. Here
in our neighborhood, here in Albedo. History lives
beside us. What happens on the moon is imaginary
nonsense. This is something real.

So yes. It does. It does feel historic. Can't you take
this for what it's worth? It's worth so much more than
what it's worth.

FATHER C.

Fuck it. Turn on whatever you can turn on. The lights.
The camera.

HELENA

Why?

FATHER C.

Do it.
Please.

*He starts to scramble around. He finds a
false-looking helmet and a radio.
She doesn't move.*

HELENA

What are you doing?

FATHER C.

I told you. I wanted to die in space. I wanted to see
the earth from the moon and taste that grand
enlightenment. Looking past the faces of our gods.

HELENA

Stop this, come here.

She tries to approach him. He pushes her away.

(CONTINUED)

FATHER C.

No. I can't. Did two gods abandon me in one day?

HELENA

No.

FATHER C.

The camera.

He picks up a flag.

This is it, the window through which I see the earth is a Russian video camera lens. Fly me to the moon. Let me die among the stars.

COLUMBIA enters.

COLUMBIA

Is that your wish?

FATHER C.

Who are you.

COLUMBIA

Father, you know who I am.

FATHER C.

No.

COLUMBIA

Maybe you don't.

It's been a hard day for faith. That's okay.

You don't know,

but you do, Helena. Don't you?

I'm very proud of you both. It's been a hard day and every country has them.

Helena. You're already out at the harbor in two weeks' time with your neighbors. And he doesn't know.

It was in the letter, Father. There's one more ship leaving from Albedo's harbor, and she wants to slip out of your bed before you wake and go with her husband to never see this country again.

Some high priestess.

She should be punished.

HELENA

That's not true.

COLUMBIA

Don't contradict me.

It's a lovely night, and there are so many stars.

(CONTINUED)

FATHER C.

They're studio lights.

COLUMBIA

And they are lovely too.

You want to die out there, behind the faces of gods?

We've had a pilgrim or a soldier on every continent,
but there's one place out there beyond the sky that's
been out of your reach.

FATHER C.

What, the moon?

HELENA

I'm beginning to think there's no such thing.

COLUMBIA

I'm talking.

*She gives FATHER CLEO a wrench. It is an ancient
and holy artifact passed down by heroes and gods
spanning millenia.*

Take this. You want the whole country to watch you, and
you them?

Even the sleeping queen across the ocean will watch you
fly. Even the ghost of the goddess Britannia. My
pilgrim. My wish courier.

Goodbye, Father. I won't be far.

She starts to leave.

FATHER C.

Hey.

She stops.

How am I supposed to get there?

COLUMBIA

You'll find a way.

The Age of Exploration doesn't end here.

She exits.

FATHER C.

Fuck.

HELENA

It's not true.

FATHER C.

I thought you were going to leave him.

HELENA is silent.

FATHER CLEO looks at the wrench in his hand.

(CONTINUED)

So. That was exactly as enlightening as I had hoped.
You want to be on that last ship?

HELENA

Yes.
Sorry.

FATHER C.

This is the worst fucking day.

She starts to exit.

But seeing Columbia like that--I did have a revelation.
And it was good. And I have never felt faith like that
before.

HELENA

It's not faith if it's shown right in front of you.
That's not faith at all.

FATHER C.

Then I'll build her ship and drive her to the moon. A
chariot past the stars.

HELENA

What was the revelation?

FATHER CLEO looks upward.

FATHER C.

Ceilings are walls that hold out the sky.

Silence.

HELENA

I'm still her high priestess. And she said so.

FATHER C.

I know. But I'm her prophet.
Did you make your wish? Pick a good star for it. I have
to go.

*FATHER CLEO exits. HELENA stays. The CHORUS
appears.*

COLUMBIA returns.

COLUMBIA

Helena.

HELENA

I thought you were leaving.

COLUMBIA

Are you angry with me?

HELENA

Are you going to hurt us?

COLUMBIA

I don't think so.

HELENA

What am I supposed to do now?

COLUMBIA

I gave him a job because he's a man of faith, and he needs lost causes like that to thrive. What kind of person are you?

HELENA

Not a person of faith.

COLUMBIA

Then the priesthood must be for you. Learn faith first, and work your way up to lost causes. What do you want?

HELENA

I want to get out of here. Just like you said.

COLUMBIA

Oh. I'm sorry I did that. But I wasn't lying.

HELENA

No, I want to stay. This is my home.

COLUMBIA

What, with your husband? In Albedo? You don't have a home. That's part of your essential character. When you're at work you wish you at your house, when you're at your house you wish you were with Cleo. And when you're with Cleo you wish you were dead. Even when you're in my country you're wishing to be in Europe. You can't like to me like you do yourself.

HELENA

You're an asshole.

COLUMBIA

So are you.
Are you afraid of me?

HELENA

No.

(CONTINUED)

COLUMBIA

Honestly this time. Are you afraid of me?

HELENA

No. Are you afraid of me?

COLUMBIA

I don't like when people can't decide what they want.
I'll glorify failure and success alike if it's all done
with ambition.

HELENA

So if I follow him, that's no good. If I go back to
town, no better. And if I go back to Britain...?

COLUMBIA

Good night, Helena.

She exits. HELENA watches the chorus.

CHORUS

Wish on a star,
or a studio light,
or an eyelash,
or the greasy bones of your blooded Thanksgiving meal.
And other gods collect your prayers,
but fair Columbia deals in wishes.

long live the united states and their goddess Columbia
long live the canceled country
good bye, new world

the night is warm
the breeze is cool
we honor the figure above
bless us and
keep the dark away

ceilings are walls that hold out the sky
ceilings are walls that hold out the sky
ceilings are walls that hold out the sky
ceilings are walls that hold out the sky

BRITANNIA

Daughter,
daughter:
I never asked so much,
never
you are my saddened wildness,
the voice of ancient bells.

I chose to give you love
and I can choose to stop.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

BRITANNIA (cont'd)

don't ask me so--
swim home, to empire's family
and a reverential love,
home, with your daughter Helena
and the congressmen, your sons

Scene 2.5

*Dawn. The church interior. HELENA is asleep.
FATHER CLEO enters; he is wearing the previous
day's clothes, and he has not slept.*

*He clings to HELENA, kissing her and touching her
with great desire and tenderness. She stirs.*

FATHER C.

Why are you here?

HELENA

Where have you been?

FATHER C.

Columbia. She showed me what the other side of the moon
looks like. That's where we're going.

HELENA

What?

FATHER C.

Are you coming with me?

HELENA

What?

FATHER C.

You're not really awake yet, are you?

HELENA

Come here.

FATHER C.

You have to get up, we're starting today. We're going
to build her ship and go, together.

HELENA

I'm not doing that. You can't do that.

FATHER C.

Why?

(CONTINUED)

HELENA

I'm going back to Britain like she said. You do whatever.

She rolls away to go back to sleep.

FATHER C.

Helena.

HELENA

What.

FATHER C.

Wake up.

HELENA

I am.

FATHER C.

Wake the fuck up!

HELENA

Don't shout at me.

FATHER C.

You're not coming?

HELENA

No.

FATHER C.

But I love you.

HELENA

That doesn't mean I have to tilt at windmills with you.

FATHER C.

I'm not--

HELENA

I love you, I do. But I choose to love you. And I can choose to stop. I think Columbia taught me that.

FATHER C.

You're not coming.

HELENA

No.

FATHER C.

You're going back to your husband like she said.

(CONTINUED)

HELENA
Maybe.

FATHER C.
(backing away)
She was right.

HELENA
Cleo.

FATHER C.
I'm going.

HELENA
Cleo!

*The chorus appears.
They surround HELENA, and say nothing.
She leaves.*

Scene 3

*FATHER CLEO building a ship from assorted
detritus. He has his wrench and the books in
Russian from the studio. Night. SENATOR VAUGHN,
disheveled and drunk, approaches.*

SENATOR V.
Father!

FATHER C.
You're back?

SENATOR V.
I think I'm in exile.

FATHER C.
Right.

SENATOR V.
They said this was an important diplomatic assignment
but they put me in a lifeboat by myself and sent me
back here. Can I sleep at the church?

FATHER C.
Yeah.

SENATOR V.
What are you doing?

FATHER C.
Making a spaceship.

(CONTINUED)

SENATOR V.

What happened to the one I gave you?

FATHER C.

It wasn't really a ship. It was more the idea of a ship. I'm surprised you didn't know that.

SENATOR V.

There wasn't a ship?

FATHER C.

There's never been a ship.

SENATOR V.

There really is a lot that nobody tells me.

FATHER C.

I wonder why.

SENATOR V.

What are you doing?

FATHER C.

What?

SENATOR V.

Making.

FATHER C.

A spaceship.
I just told you that.

SENATOR V.

That doesn't look like a spaceship.

FATHER C.

How would you know? You've never seen one.

SENATOR V.

Where are you going to get fuel for it?

FATHER C.

It runs on faith. And wishes. The fuel comes from here.

He motions to his throat.
And here.

He motions to his heart.

SENATOR V.

Are you okay?

(CONTINUED)

FATHER C.

You're the one to ask?
I'm fantastic.

SENATOR V.

You got a little weird.
Are you taking the whole departure pretty bad?

FATHER C.

No. I was, but not anymore.

SENATOR V.

Why?

FATHER C.

Well, how about you?

SENATOR V.

I thought I was getting set up with an easy desk job in Equinox or some other little town. But they kicked me right off when I told them I gave you that NASA hangar bay. They put me on a lifeboat with a sack of food and a gun with one round in it.

FATHER C.

What kind of food?

SENATOR V.

Leftovers from one of the banquet halls. A big thing of turkey and about six pounds of cauliflower.

FATHER C.

I hate cauliflower.

SENATOR V.

I think it's grown on me a lot.

FATHER C.

Smells like they left you some whiskey, too.

SENATOR V.

I stole it from behind the bar on my way out, yeah.
Want some?

FATHER C.

No. Do you still have the gun?

SENATOR V.

What?

FATHER C.

Do you still have the gun they gave you?

(CONTINUED)

SENATOR V.

I dropped it.

FATHER C.

Where?

SENATOR V.

No, I dropped it in the ocean somewhere, off the side of the lifeboat. I didn't want to jump in after it because I thought I would be too weak to climb back in.

FATHER C.

You really are a shithead.

SENATOR V.

I know.

FATHER C.

Everyone knows.

SENATOR V.

That really is a weird-looking ship.

FATHER C.

It's not finished.

SENATOR V.

Can I help you?

FATHER C.

Why?

SENATOR V.

It looks important.

FATHER C.

This is for my goddess.

SENATOR V.

Columbia?

She came to you too.

FATHER C.

I made a wish. She's helping me make it come true.

SENATOR V.

What kind of wish?

FATHER C.

An eyelash wish. But you need a friend for that, so now I wish on stars instead. You can do that one alone.

(CONTINUED)

SENATOR V.

I made a wish too. To make it back home on my lifeboat. She came to me in the night. Wishing on stars is fine, but your wish will take hundreds of years to reach its destination. I made my wish on the sun at noon. It reached the sun in minutes and Columbia came to me that night. Columbia guided me. But I can't see too well now. There are dark spots hovering over my vision. And she won't help them go away.

FATHER C.

That was a stupid choice.

SENATOR V.

Where's your faith?

FATHER C.

Where's yours?

SENATOR V.

I don't need the sight as much as I thought I did. I just listened for her voice. I can see well enough that your ship still looks stupid.

FATHER C.

Fuck off. We don't want you back.

SENATOR V.

We? There's just you, Father. Working out here alone on the outskirts of town for a goddess who went out of style in the 1920s. You can't send me away. You don't have any more right to this land than I do. She blessed us both.

FATHER C.

You made your choice.

SENATOR V.

She forgave me. Can't you?

FATHER C.

What do you want?

SENATOR V.

Can't you just be nice to me? Jesus.

FATHER C.

Why?

SENATOR V.

I don't have anyone.

(CONTINUED)

FATHER C.

I don't either. Do your feelings hurt? That's life. That's what life is. I don't have anyone. You don't have anyone. We don't have anyone. Fine. Go to. Be pious. Do penance. I'm busy.

SENATOR VAUGHN draws a gun from inside his coat. He presses it against his own chest.

SENATOR V.

I'm going to her, then. She'll take the dark shapes off my vision.

FATHER C.

I'm not going to stop you. You have your path and I have mine.

FATHER CLEO squeezes the trigger. The gun clicks.

FATHER C.

You got the round wet. Idiot. Show faith. Go home.

SENATOR V.

Go where?

FATHER C.

I don't care. Find someone else. See if they take you back. Because they don't want anything to do with me. In town they're shooting every messenger.

SENATOR V.

Ask her to save my eyes.

FATHER C.

Why?

SENATOR V.

I'm a weak man.

FATHER C.

Tell her, not me. I already knew that.

SENATOR V.

I wasn't supposed to give you the keys.

FATHER C.

Even a dead nation loves its secrets, is that it? Even the documents of ghosts are redacted to death?

SENATOR V.

You weren't supposed to know.

(CONTINUED)

FATHER C.
Fine.

SENATOR V.
I was never supposed to tell you.

FATHER C.
Well, nobody told you, did they, Senator? You were to keep a secret that nobody ever called a secret. For you it was some kind of destiny. What's worse than solitary death? Being laughed at. And those men gave you both. All because you wanted to give something to me. No wonder you got elected.

SENATOR V.
What does that mean?

FATHER C.
How can you not have faith in a man who has so much faith?

SENATOR V.
That's why the town had faith in you.

FATHER C.
I'm not going back there.

SENATOR V.
You should get to shelter. I think a storm is coming.

FATHER C.
No. Those are just shadows on your eyes. You have no idea what's coming.

SENATOR V.
I can hear it. Let's go back to the church.

FATHER C.
No.

SENATOR V.
Why?

FATHER C.
The rain in Albedo is the purest water in the world. Maybe it will wash the shadows out of your eyes. Stay and help me.

SENATOR V.
I can't help you with this. I don't know anything about this.

He touches FATHER CLEO's wrench on the ground.

FATHER C.
Don't touch that.

SENATOR V.
What?

FATHER C.
Don't fucking touch that.

SENATOR V.
You feel that?

FATHER CLEO looks up.

SENATOR V.
The rain is come.

SENATOR VAUGHN lies on his back and weeps.

SENATOR V.
She's here.

FATHER C.
Get to the church.
Or maybe the hospital.

SENATOR V.
She's here.

FATHER C.
It's not raining.
Senator.

SENATOR VAUGHN is still.

FATHER C.
Christopher.

*FATHER CLEO jabs him with the wrench. He is dead.
FATHER CLEO takes his whiskey and his money. Then
he buries the body.
He extends his hand and looks at the sky. He
touches his cheek.*

FATHER C.
Oh.
It is raining.

CHORUS
no water clearer than the rain in albedo,
no
no prayers floating out beyond the moon
no wishes granted tonight
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CHORUS (cont'd)
no history
no music
no clouds
no shadows

we are a nation that is not a nation
with a goddess who is not a goddess
and a destiny that is not a destiny

Scene 4

*FATHER CLEO lies down to sleep.
HELENA enters. COLUMBIA is watching.
HELENA looks at FATHER CLEO asleep. She leaves
some supplies for him: food, a book, a jug of
water. She leaves.
FATHER CLEO stirs, then sees the supplies and
looks around with fear and suspicion like a hunted
creature. He inspects the gifts and eventually
eats and drinks with caution. He prays.*

FATHER C.
Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

*He cradles the wrench and kisses it. COLUMBIA is
watching. She approaches him. Startled, he
brandishes the wrench as a weapon but relaxes when
he sees her.*

FATHER C.
Thank you.

COLUMBIA
They're not from me. I don't hand out gifts.

FATHER C.
Who? Who sends me these?

COLUMBIA
Her. Helena.

*FATHER CLEO spits out the food and pours the water
out over the ground.
What are you doing?*

FATHER C.
Punishment.

COLUMBIA
You've punished her enough.

(CONTINUED)

FATHER C.

Have I?

Have you?

Do you go to her like you do to me?

COLUMBIA

Yes.

FATHER C.

And the Senator?

COLUMBIA

Of course I did.

A pause.

FATHER C.

I wanted to be your prophet.

COLUMBIA

You are my prophet.

I'm asking you to be kind. At least accept her gift.

She's helping you and if she's helping you she's helping me.

FATHER C.

She wants to leave me. And you. She's going back. You told me that.

COLUMBIA

Then they can take her.

You don't have to forgive her all the way, but forgive her enough.

FATHER C.

I'm not hungry.

COLUMBIA

I love your pride. I think it's no vice. But you need to keep up your strength.

FATHER C.

I get it from you.

COLUMBIA

She doesn't want to leave you.

FATHER C.

You told me that.

COLUMBIA

She wants to go back. But she wants it to be with you.

(CONTINUED)

FATHER C.

I don't care. I'm beyond the little economies of sex and romance. I don't care anymore.

COLUMBIA

It doesn't sound like you're past anything.

It's okay if you want to go with her.

I'm not like other gods. In this country you can do as you please, and the choice you make is right, as long as you make one.

FATHER C.

Please don't say that. Tell me what I should do.

COLUMBIA

You sound like the Senator.

Fly away. Or don't. Go back to her. Or don't.

I love you.

And you can stay here for a thousand years and wait for the next pilgrims to come from the mother-land.

That's what I'm doing.

FATHER C.

Can I stay with you?

COLUMBIA

Is that what you want?

She points out to the sky.

FATHER C.

I know.

COLUMBIA

Do you know why we went to the moon?

FATHER C.

We didn't.

COLUMBIA

But do you know why we did?

FATHER C.

To defeat the Soviets?

COLUMBIA

Yes. And do you know why I'm sending you?

FATHER C.

To defeat...

(CONTINUED)

COLUMBIA
Whom?

FATHER C.
I--

COLUMBIA
China?
North Korea?
Mexico?
Iran?
No. None of them.

FATHER C.
Who, then?

COLUMBIA
It's not about defeating anybody.
It's called Manifest Destiny, and you're free to turn
it down.

FATHER C.
Do you mean that or is that just your way of being
polite? Am I really allowed to say "no" to you?

COLUMBIA
Look.

She points again.
Your hundreds and hundreds of little wishes are
outliving both of you.

FATHER C.
I don't believe in destiny.

COLUMBIA
I know.

FATHER C.
I don't believe in martyrdom.

COLUMBIA
I know.
What do you believe in?

FATHER C.
What does that even mean?

COLUMBIA
The child, Father Cleo. The child that lives in there,
somewhere, buried beneath all that cynicism: what does
young Cleo believe?
How many of those wishes, flying out there in the
blackness, belong to that boy?

(CONTINUED)

FATHER C.

Why do you want me to go?

COLUMBIA

Why did the Pilgrims sail to Plymouth Rock?

FATHER C.

To escape oppression.

COLUMBIA

Our leaders have left us. They abandoned me as much as they did you. To turn your back on someone is to oppress them in the worst way, especially when you once loved that someone. And they loved us both once.

FATHER C.

You think we're doing what the Pilgrims did?

COLUMBIA

The difference is, they did that in the service of another goddess.

FATHER C.

Britain's goddess?

COLUMBIA

Yes.

My mother. My lovely mother, Britannia!
The one the Senator abandoned me for.

FATHER C.

You want to make your mother proud of you.

COLUMBIA

Isn't that what all children want?
The gods are no better than the people they serve.

FATHER C.

You mean the people that serve them?

COLUMBIA

I meant what I said.
So maybe I just wanted to make my mother proud.

FATHER C.

And I want to honor you.

COLUMBIA

I know. I love you.

FATHER C.

I love you, too.
Did Christopher tell you he loved you?

(CONTINUED)

COLUMBIA

Yes. The Senator loved me very much. He turned his back on me. But once he stepped onto my shore again...
You see.

FATHER C.

I didn't like him, but I didn't want to kill him.

COLUMBIA

I know. But he wanted to die. I don't know whether I punished him or saved him.

FATHER C.

Are you going to do something like that to me?

COLUMBIA

I won't have to. You've been faithful. You've been blessed.

She touches him.

COLUMBIA

And if I don't have you, I have no one else.

She begins to exit.

FATHER C.

Don't leave.

COLUMBIA

If you never leave me, I'll never leave you.

She exits.

He lies down again, curled up with the wrench.

HELENA enters; FATHER CLEO speaks without looking.

FATHER C.

I'll do it. I can.

HELENA

You don't have to.

FATHER C.

(noticing HELENA)

Why are you here? I don't want your charity.

HELENA

She said you could say no.

FATHER C.

I heard her.

(CONTINUED)

HELENA

Come back to the church with me and we'll pack together. We'll go to the harbor in the morning and get on the boat. There's another church in another small town somewhere, a town that will love you and care for you like this one can't anymore.

FATHER C.

It's called Equinox.

HELENA

Equinox, then.

FATHER C.

(with a scornful British accent)

Equinox!

She laughs. His humor vanishes.
Where is your husband?

HELENA

What?

He brandishes the wrench.

FATHER C.

Where, is, your, husband?

HELENA

Come with me back to the church.

FATHER C.

I'm not going to ask you again.

HELENA

He was shot in the store by looters.

FATHER C.

Good.

HELENA

I'm alone.

FATHER C.

Don't say that. People have a tendency to say that just before they die. Why should I come with you?

HELENA

That machine you're making is going to kill you. And if it doesn't, Columbia will.

(CONTINUED)

FATHER C.

Not good enough.

HELENA

I have nobody else.

FATHER C.

Even worse.

I'm not going to be your second-best any more. He's gone and so you come to me.

HELENA

I brought you water and food every night.

FATHER C.

And I gave it all to stray dogs.

HELENA

I see through this.

You're afraid, and you're alone, and you buried a man who died of those same symptoms.

FATHER C.

How did you know that?

HELENA

I watched it happen.

Don't let her take you like that.

FATHER C.

What?

HELENA

She strung him on a vicious, empty journey back here to a wasteland. She's doing the same to you. His homecoming, your departure, you both arrive at solitude and death.

FATHER C.

I don't believe you.

HELENA

Why?

FATHER C.

She gives us free will.

Come here tomorrow before the harbor. I'll show you. I will. Come before the sun comes up so we can still see out.

HELENA

Okay. I'll come and look.

But I won't come with you.

(CONTINUED)

FATHER C.
Why?

HELENA
I'll see you in the morning.

FATHER C.
It's one thing for a man to believe in a god, it's
another for a god to believe in a man. That's what I
have. That's what I want to share with you.

HELENA
Good night.

She exits.

CHORUS
before the sun comes up to drown us
before our sails open
toward history and home

what does a nation of pilgrims do when there is nowhere
else to go? we were disappointed to find that the world
is round:

and no matter how far you walk, a coast rushes up
to stop you
so we looked upward and knew:
we own the moon, and all the distance in between

if a wish can carry to the surface of the sun enough
together can carry a man to the moon

BRITANNIA
you're not alone,
you've never been alone
you choose to be
who you think you are:
who you thought I was

forgiveness is the virtue that cannot be taught
you know me least of all

I do not have a daughter
or a friend;
I do not need your frontiers or your war machines
the sky is not for you

and the earth will always be flat
the shore of California
is the edge of the earth
and you have nowhere else to go

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

BRITANNIA (cont'd)
come back to me
or don't:
die.
die at the edge of your aborted nation

*FATHER CLEO works on the ship.
He takes off his shirt and writes on his chest:
WISH COURIER
He finishes the ship. It is early, early morning,
before the dawn. He sits reading one of his books.*

Scene 5

HELENA enters.

HELENA
You can't read Russian.

FATHER C.
I know. I look at the pictures.

COLUMBIA enters.

COLUMBIA
You've finished.

FATHER C.
You came.
I told you, Helena. I told you.
Her faith is shaken.

COLUMBIA
That is her right.
Maybe catastrophe awaits. But I don't know. I don't
care about her anymore.

HELENA
I didn't come to find you so you could gloat.

FATHER C.
You came to find me so you could snatch me back to
England.

HELENA
Last chance.
When you can see the whole town, and then the whole
coast, all receding backwards and it's you and your
family--just you, and your family, living your own
truth beyond those ancient petty gods, isn't that
America?

(CONTINUED)

FATHER C.

That's what I'm asking you.

HELENA

We've already parted, haven't we?

FATHER C.

Please, no.

HELENA

Pray for me.

FATHER CLEO looks at COLUMBIA.

FATHER C.

I will.

HELENA

Goodbye.

Goodbye, Columbia.

FATHER C.

Do you know what "goodbye" means? It's a contraction of "god be with ye" and she is.

Godspeed, Helena.

HELENA leaves.

COLUMBIA

Breathe. You're not breathing.

FATHER C.

What?

COLUMBIA

Are you alright?

FATHER C.

What?

COLUMBIA

Cleo.

FATHER C.

I can't do this.

COLUMBIA

It's been done before.

FATHER C.

It was fake before.

(CONTINUED)

COLUMBIA

I'm here. I'm here guiding you.

FATHER C.

It's like the picture in this book.

The problem with space travel is fuel. You need fuel to lift the weight of the ship. But then you need more fuel to lift the weight of your fuel.

There aren't enough wishes in history to carry me and my ship and all this country's wishes that far.

COLUMBIA

Where will you go?

FATHER C.

To catch Helena.

I've seen people die from being alone and afraid, and she's both, and so am I.

COLUMBIA

He had shadows over his eyes. You don't. You see best in the night when thousands of stars are out.

FATHER C.

The sun is rising.

COLUMBIA

And clouding over your vision with this false beacon. She's just a woman.

FATHER C.

The sun is rising!

I can't fly when the sun is up. You said I could choose.

COLUMBIA

You still can.

He gives her SENATOR VAUGHN's keys.

FATHER C.

A goddess should be able to act her own will.

COLUMBIA

A goddess is as good as the people who believe in her.

FATHER C.

I'm going to catch Helena. And if I don't make it, I'll stand at the edge of the dock and look out over the ocean and wait a thousand years for the next pilgrims. Leave me. Take the Olympus and find a new home for yourself. And a new prophet.

(CONTINUED)

She refuses the keys. He drops them at her feet and turns to go.

COLUMBIA

Father.

And my wrench?

FATHER C.

Yes?

COLUMBIA

It isn't yours. It was loaned to you, not given, and our agreement has ended.

FATHER C.

No.

I'm going to give it to my child.

COLUMBIA

You're going to die waiting on the dock looking for that woman to come back for you. She told you, that was the last chance.

FATHER C.

My other god believes in forgiveness.

COLUMBIA

I believe in loyalty.

FATHER C.

If I keep this lifted high to catch the light of the stars, I'll live a thousand years.

COLUMBIA

That isn't yours.

FATHER C.

Of course it is.

COLUMBIA moves to take it. FATHER CLEO threatens her.

FATHER C.

No. Leave me. Please.

He begins to exit. She stops him by force. They struggle and wound each other badly.

FATHER C.

All this. All this I did for you. My goddess.

(CONTINUED)

COLUMBIA

I know. I know.

FATHER C.

Let me go, then, let me find her. I could kill you.

COLUMBIA

No. I need you here with me. Stay with me.

If you never leave me I'll never leave you.

FATHER C.

Man needs gods even less than gods need man.

Farewell.

He drops the wrench and begins to leave.

She picks it up and kills him.

She moves to the ship and leans against it in pain.

COLUMBIA

Mother. Britannia. Mother. Mother. Mother Britannia,
I'm wounded. Mother. I can't swim. Carry me home. I
can't swim, I'll only drown. Carry me home.

She looks across the ocean, then out to the stars.

Blackout.