

#7

BALLS

one act by Paul Foster

(c) Paul Foster 1964  
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SET

A black curtained stage. Two white ping pong balls hang suspended invisibly on wires about midheight or lower and well within the depth of the stage. One on the left. One on the right.

Two stationary, small, white spotlights on either end are focused on the transits of the two balls so that the balls swing in and out of the lights' paths.

The visual entirety is a black emensity with the balls emerging from the wings, swinging slowly toward each other disappearing-reappearing into the light sources. When finally they touch, they begin to separate again and recede slowly to their respective sides until they disappear finally into the blackness of the wings.

All voices and sounds are taped and come from above us off-stage.

The players speak in coarse whispers, so integrated with the sea sound that their whispers seem to wash toward us from a great distance.

TIME

A foggy night.

PLACE

A cemetery by the sea. An ancient place. The sea has washed away the land and claimed all the graves except two

The players:

"COMMODORE"

WILKINSON

The voice of an old man, phlegmatic, deep and coarsely textured. There is strength in it. He whispers slowly with a feeling that his voice requires time to travel a great distance to reach us.

BEAU BEAU

The voice of a mature younger man. It is quicker and more spirited. He whispers too but it always seems more present to us.

MISS McCUTCHEON

The voice of a highly strung, nervous woman.

BUS DRIVER

The pedestrian-accented, deep voice of a man.

YOUNG LOVERS

The voices of male and female animals in heat

THE MILITARY  
COMMANDER

The strong voice of authority.

THE WOMAN  
WHO HAD NO SHADOW A beer-encrusted voice, brittle, hard and coarse.

NASTY BRAT

The intolerably innocent-evil voice of a 6 year old boy.

A GANGLIA OF HIGH-PITCHED CHILDREN

The sounds:

The sea.

A military march of drums, slow paced, sharp.

A player piano, rapid firing of joyous notes.

A bus.

Passage of water.

A bos'un's whistle.

Rain and thunder.

A bell buoy.

(Black. The sea insinuates. A bell buoy. 30 seconds. From an infinite distance, martial drums approach. The voice is deep, phlegmatic, strong in old age. He whispers:)

WILKINSON:

This wreck of a ship underfoot. Flying jib to spanker, full up. Sounding line a cunt's hair to first mark. Put up another leg-of-mutton and sprits. Look like? Look like? OH, GET ON WITH YOUR WORK, MAN! Gunnels gone, we at first mark and the stink of cannon sulphur fair to snuff us all. What's she look like?! Look like? GET ON, MAN!

(Drums pass into the distance. The sea rolls unperturbed throughout and is left alone now. 15 seconds. A heavy sigh.)

Ah, these memories, these ghosts.

(Pause.)

Yes...get on with it!

(Two small white spotlights pop on simultaneously at the command. The sea recedes quietly in the back and rolls throughout.)

Get on!

(From the left the first ball swings out, appearing-disappearing into the light. Pause. He follows its transit.)

Smartly now. Hup two. Hup two. Hup two. Hup...

(Pause.)

You too.

(Long pause.)

Fall into step. Hup two. Hup two. Hup...

(Pause.)

Get on!

(The second ball swings out, appearing-disappearing into the light. The two swing slowly, silently, imperceptibly toward each other. Pause. Only the roll of the sea.

A burst of bright, dance hall, player piano player music. 15 seconds. It stops abruptly. He sings immediately, jocosely dissonant, rapid fire, cocky as a red feather.)

BEAU BEAU:

I am a pretty wench,  
And I come a great way hence,  
And sweethearts I can get none:  
But every dirty sow  
Can get sweethearts enou;  
And I pretty wench can get none.

(Pause. Flatly:)

Yes, she was a ragged bitch.

Late as usual.

(Sarcastically:)

So sorry.

As usual.

(Pause.)

Well, get in line and fall into step. Hup two.  
Hup two. Hup two. Hup two. Hup two.

(Over his count.)

It's the fog. Slows them down. Always does.

Late is late no matter how it's turned.

The night don't help none either. Blackens up the fog. Makes it heavier than day fog.

(With finality:)

Late is late!

Then fug the fog!

(Muttering:)

"Late is late", bub!

(Pause.)

WILKINSON:

Hup two. Hup two. Hup two.

(BEAU BEAU sighs heavily. His boredom is apparent. A droning song:)

BEAU BEAU:

Two poor devils we are, great burdens we bear,  
On which we are bitterly pressed;  
The truth is to say, we are full all the day,  
And empty when we go to rest.

WILKINSON:

Easy...easy! Babble on and you'll get them tangled. Then it's trouble to square them away again. Hup two. Hup two. Hup two.

TOGETHER:

Steady...steady...

(Pause.)

WILKINSON:

Here we lie side by side. An ancient bone pile by the sea. We eat the land. The land eats us. Then the sea eats everything. A fieldfull have slipped away with the shore. Blackened ships manned by blackened bones set into a calm black earth. Nothing left now. No jib. No spanker. No leg-of-mutton sail even. To chew? To know more like it. TO KNAW!

(Pause.)

Cleave through to the raw, naked shore. KNAW THROUGH! A length of blackened box a century. Slow progress. But we get to the waves in time. The others did. A fieldfull did. And soon we'll set to drift, you and me. Prisoners borne on a prison ship from a prison earth to a prison sea. From locked keep to locked keep. Then?

(Pause.)

Oh, then...more of the same. A lovely diet to know. Dead to the second power. We go, a piece at a time. They're all gone now. All except us.

(Quickly:)

BEAU BEAU:

Us and a nasty pair of balls. I AM so tired of them.

(A loud burst of player piano. 10 seconds. A mighty, resounding slam. It is silenced.)

Cooly:)

That-ends-that. Will you get her out of your mind.

(With controlled anger.)

BEAU BEAU:

103 thousand, two hundred and TWO times you've blown yours out. 103 thousand, two hundred and TWO times I've blown mind out. Once a night. AND I'M MUCKING TIRED OF IT!

(Cooly, matter of fact:)

WILKINSON:

And you were late on every game.

BEAU BEAU:

Well, it was one-sweet-hell-of-a-lot-better-when-the-others-played! No rules. One great free for all. Hundreds of em all going which way. Carter came out first. Always Carter! Lean second. BUMP HIM! SMASH HIM A GOOD ONE! HERE!

(Intermittent grunting with the effort.)

BUMP HIM! Easy...A GOAL! SIMPSON! SIMPSON! GET RID OF IT, YOU ASS! RUN IT IN! RUN IT!

(Delighted, excited squeals.)

Hundreds of them all going which way. Back and forth, up and down, in and out, round and round. You never did know who scored what. WHAT A GLORIOUS MESS!

(Oblivious to him:)

WILKINSON:

Not a piece of chiseled stone left to say who was who.

BEAU BEAU:

Ahhh, many a good player in the lot, say that much for them.

WILKINSON:

The sea ate the shore, and they slipped out under the stars in the night. Past the big and little dogs. Over the sickle, chasing the lynx in the Spring.

(A growing nervous, forced excitement:)

BEAU BEAU:

There was Carter, a good boy Carter. Remember him? Pimply-faced, snot-picking kid in knickers.

(Pressing on calmly, imperturbable:)

WILKINSON:

Warm and black as pitch it was, except for the constellations. A whole section slid out in '85, running after the strong jock up there who chased the lion. Thunder to break your ears in the storm.

(Quicker, louder, his insistence growing:)

BEAU BEAU:

...a kid in knickers who begged to hear about my woman...she had no shadow.

(Unhurried:)

WILKINSON:

The lion...the hairy beast fell in the crater. Clawed away, pounded out a great chunk of it...

BEAU BEAU:

A white, skinny, celery stalk...

(On like a ponderous wave:)

WILKINSON:

...a slushy, soggy, rain-sodden soup of earth slid off. Ah, maybe it is the stars that say who will go and who will stay.

(Fully angry at last. Loudly:)

BEAU BEAU:

...a white, skinny, celery stalk for a Johnnyo he pumped on when I told the story!

(A final softly spoken conclusion.)

WILKINSON:

Here we lie.

BEAU BEAU:

SHE HAD NO SHADOW!

(The player piano bursts in. 10 seconds.  
BEAU BEAU mutters and clicks it off himself.)

Oh, turn it off, What's the use.

Steady...steady...

(A rapid burst of defiant song:)

BEAU BEAU:

I know a girl from Bango City,  
She strikes matches on her titty!

(With slow calm as though he has reached the end of a hymn:)

WILKINSON:

Steady she goes.

BEAU BEAU:

DAMN YOU!!

(Long pause. The sea rolls. From the distance a bus approaches, comes to a halt with a gnashing of gears and at once a boisterous ganglia of children shout and gang out.)

BUS DRIVER:

Go on. Out, out. Piss on your shoes then tread all over my bus. Go on, you little bastards.

(A whistle, thin, weakly blown. A woman's voice, maternal, trying to be authoritative, not succeeding. Shouts of jubilant children continue every which way.)

MISS McCUTCHEON: Two minutes, children. Girls over here. Boys over there.

(Whistle weakly again.)

Two minutes...TWO...oh, oh...darn!

(Shouts, treading feet, a muffled, quick thudding the sod. Then, all quiet. Pause. A small trickle. Pause. An embarrassed young giggle. Pause. Many, many trickles begin until it is oceanic.)

Turn and face the other way, children.

NASTY BRAT:

Miss McCutcheon...

MISS McCUTCHEON: Oh! MIND-THAT-FLASHLIGHT! YOU, NASTY BRAT!

(Squealing laughter and the thunderous thudding of little feet. Whistle again, frantic but weak.)

Back to the bus. Bus up, children. BUS UP!

(Whistle. Bus begins to start.)

BUS DRIVER:

Come on, little bastards. Get in.

(Thunder into the bus.)

MISS McCUTCHEON: Give that flashlight here.

(A good resounding crack. Bawling. Door slams. Bus takes off gnashing its gears. Bus disappears. Pause.)

BEAU BEAU:

Hmmmmmm.

(Pause.)

It's touching how thoughtful they are. Every Spring picnic they never forget to stop and water the grass.

(Pause.)

"Little" Miss McCutcheon has a bladder like a cow. She cocks up her leg and lets me have it dead center.

(BEAU BEAU roars. WILKINSON chuckles. It goes into a rasping fit of coughing.)

WILKINSON:

Easy...easy, fool! EASY! They're off again.  
Steady...steady...

TOGETHER:

...steady...steady.

(Pause.)

WILKINSON:

You start them off every time.

BEAU BEAU:

CHRRRRIST, I AM SO TIRED OF THEM! Go off course. Fall down. Tangle. Explode. Collide. Spill out their guts. SOMETHING! Dong dong, dong dong, DONG DONG! DO SOMETHING, YOU MOTHERS!

WILKINSON:

Steady...steady, old dog.

(Pause.)

They are. Swinging back and forth, back and forth Simple...smooth...hollow...perfect shape. Whole. Complete complete. One to mark time. The other to let it know its doing a good job. Moving? No. They're not balls. They're an exegesis.

BEAU BEAU:

Those eye...eye...those eyes

What are they here for? Who invited them?

(Sweetly:)

WILKINSON: Then they're not here. Don't think about them and they'll go away. Close your eyes. We'll turn out the lights.

(Pause.)

OUT!

(The lights snap out at the command. Black.)

Are your eyes closed? Are they?

BEAU BEAU: Closed they're closed!

(To the rhythm of the swinging:)

WILKINSON: Mark time. Hup two. Hup two. Hup two.

Have you stopped thinking about them?

(Annoyed.)

BEAU BEAU: I-am-trying-not-to, "Commodore" sir.

WILKINSON: Good. Then open your eyes.

(Pause.)

Well?

(Hesitant. Whispering:)

BEAU BEAU: I...I think...Wilkinson! Willy, they...they.  
It worked. It worked!

(Dripping sweetness:)

WILKINSON: Well now, that is something, isn't it? Beau Beau, let us just put it to the acid test, and see, shall we? On, OH!

(Lights on at once. Balls swing as before.  
Under his breath:)

BEAU BEAU:

Little bastards.

(WILKINSON a hoary hoarse laugh.)

OUT! OUT! Turn them out. Leave me alone. You did it. TREASPASSING! Let me alone in my box!

(WILKINSON's tone changes completely.)

WILKINSON:

Your box. Your gaudy geegaw box.

BEAU BEAU:

Go on. Eat your heart out. Teak and rosewood, solid brass fittings and red plush cushions all around in here. The sachet of roses still sweetens it up.

WILKINSON:

It smells like a bawdy house. A whore's nightmare she bought by flopping up her scabby legs at fifty cents a throw. She bought it for her pet pimp. That's your gaudy geegaw box.

BEAU BEAU:

And what have you got there, "Commodore", eh? Huh, the hero. I don't believe it. I never did. Pine slabs slapped together with horse shoe nails. Military grave? We never saw any troupin' the colors over there. Only Miss McCutcheon, troupin' her bladder up and down.

WILKINSON:

That's enough!

BEAU BEAU:

(BEAU BEAU laughs and sings smart and sassy:)

Don't want a bullet up me arse 'ole,  
Don't want me buttocks shot away...

WILKINSON:

THAT'S ENOUGH!

BEAU BEAU:

Call out the army and the navy,  
Call out the rank and file,  
Call out me old mother, me sister and me brother,  
But for God's sake, don't call MEEEE.

(BEAU BEAU roars. WILKINSON grunting as though trying to rise up. Thunder. The sea grows louder, more agitated.)

WILKINSON:

CARTER! CARTER'S THE ONE! TOLD EVERYTHING ABOUT YOU!

BEAU BEAU:

Carter? Carter? A joke. Never was a Carter. They crapped in a sack and burried it. That's Carter for you.

(With finality:)

WILKINSON:

And Carter got it from Simpson!

(With paced measure:)

BEAU BEAU:

Simpson. Simpson? Puh! I'll tell you a story about Simpson. A preacher painted his barn red enamel. The farmer's crosseyed cow sniffed the paint and had a red enameled miscarriage. The farmer flogged the cow for having improper relations with a minister of God. He burried her sin under a false name. A crosseyed, red enameled miscarriage! That's Simpson for you!

(Faster and faster, totaling up the evidence.)

WILKINSON:

And Simpson got it from Hodges and Hodges got it from Bowen and Bowen got it from Lowry and Lowry got it from Hummel and Hummel got it from Bates and Bates got it from Kinsey and Kinsey got it from Ardsfarth and...

BEAU BEAU:

Who?

WILKINSON:

ARDSFARTH!

(Meekly:)

BEAU BEAU:

Oh.

WILKINSON:

And ARDSFARTH got it from Sweeney and Sweeney got it from Killmer and Killmer got it from Dill and...

(Disparagingly:)

BEAU BEAU:

Oh, Dill. DILL! Who ever listened to DILL?

(Chuckles superiorly:)

Him give a clear account of anything. How could he? He only had one leg.

(From the distance approach a woman's high-pitched giggle and a man's husky laugh. The sea sounds are suspended entirely.)

Ahhh, here's the part I like.

(Disgusted:)

WILKINSON:

Oh, God help us.

(This scene operates independently, like a negative photograph in a line of positives. Each sound is clear and sharp, YOUNG LOVERS.

The laughter is conversational. Each makes a statement. The other replys with his laugh. It progresses from high-spirited excitement as they run toward us. An uncertain tapering when they stop. Then each, a deep breathing exhalstion. A protest; sensuous teasing. Ecstasy of anticipation; cautious determination. Pleasure-pain of anticipation; an iron determination. Fear. An awful fear. A fall. Tearing. Slapping. Moaning laugh; uncontrolled gutteral rasp.)

SHE:

Oh...God. MOTHER!

HE:

Ssssh.

(At once the sea loudly. Pleasure, pain, determination, protest, fear weave. Thunder rain, sea loudly. 10 seconds.

The balls touch and begin to recede at once back to their respective corners again at the same tempo. Each hymnlike, a drowsy humming of finality.

All sounds recede to half volume. Long pause. Flat, husky-voiced, slowly with effort:)

HE: Oh, here's a grave marker. It says, "Stranger... as you pass by..."

(Disappointed, whispering:)

SHE: It's gone.

HE: "Reflect...that someday you will lie."

(Whispering. An urgency.)

SHE: It's gone. The stone is worn away.

HE: "Here lies Beau..."

(Whispering. More urgent.)

SHE: It's gone.

HE: "Born crippled, died crippled...his life in a chair."

SHE: (A moan.)

HE: Wait. Here's another. It says. (Pause.) "A lesson. THE ROPE. Here lies Wil...and only God can forgive him. The quick and the dead."

SHE: It's broken off.

(Thunder clap, rain.)

HE: Let's go back. It's raining.

SHE: I'm drenched!

(Long pause. WILKINSON coughs politely. Stops  
Pause. At once, each urgent to speak first:)

TOGETHER:

He didn't read mine!

(Sounds recede to normal. Rain continues.  
Pontificaly:)

WILKINSON:

The stones have shifted.

BEAU BEAU:

Oh, yes?

WILKINSON:

Oh yes.

(Quickly, not to be outdone:)

BEAU BEAU:

Mine toppled long ago.

WILKINSON:

Oh, yes?

BEAU BEAU:

Oh yes.

(Pause. Earnestly:)

Wilkinson. (Pause.) Who are the quick?

WILKINSON:

We are.

(Pause.)

BEAU BEAU:

Wilkinson. Who...are the dead?

WILKINSON:

We are.

(Pause. Serious, earnest:)

BEAU BEAU:

Willy. What's the difference?

WILKINSON:

(A thick, weary laugh. Pause.)

BEAU BEAU:

Side by side. A lump of mud between us, we subtract  
away. You know...I've never seen your face.  
Centuries. Eons.

(Emphatically:)

The stones have moved, toppled. THEY DID!

(Whisper, barely audible:)

I've never seen your face... (Sudden, violent:) You must be an ugly son-of-a-bitch!

(The player piano careens into the same tune at once, loud, raucous, fast with the rasping brittle laughter of a woman. Her words convulse out between fits of laughter

THE WOMAN WHO  
HAD NO SHADOW:

I HAVE LEGS! I HAVE MY LEGS AND MY ARSE AND WHAT GOES WITH IT ALL IN PLACE, YOU FOOL! Beau Beau. The lover. The crippled pimp who never, NO NEVER stood up for two centuries. Ask me! Ask the bitch who didn't have a shadow, he says. A pimp who never touched a woman. Beau Beau, who watched and peeped and WHEELED himself into the toilet to live it all over again...

(With utter contempt:)

...behind the door.

(A final burst of laughter. It fades slowly with the player piano music. As it fades into silence, martial drums ascend smartly, nearer, more present and build to a loud, deafening, compelling crescendo. Ends abruptly. Dead silence.)

The wail of a bo'sun's whistle. 5 seconds. Pause. A clipped, deep voice: alternatingly a chant and rapidly clipped delivery. The chant portion follows the dirge rhythm of the whistle.)

THE MILITARY  
COMMANDER:

GUNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNELS GOOOOOOOONNNNNNNNE.  
WE, AT FIRST MARK AND THE STINK OF SULPHUR FAIR  
TO SNUFF US AAAAAAaaaaaaaAAAAAAAAL!

(Neat, precise:)

Flying jib to spankER. Full UP. Sounding line a hair to first MARK. Put up another leg-of-mutton 'n SPRITS!

(Ponderous, oratorical:)

Here lies in full military honors. OUR HERO! Flogged and beaten, dragged up the hill, rolled down it, drawn and quartered, salted and then smoked...

(Soft, celestial:)

to preserve him for a better life in the hereafter

(Proud, beefy:)

DECORATED and redecorated.

(Then flippantly, matter-of-fact:)

Decorated like a street tart.

(Pause.)

The rope still rotting around his neck. And...it claimed the sneaky bastard's life.

(A weary sigh of finality.)

He was a traitor.

(Coughs, clears throat commandingly.)

MOOOOVE...OUT!

(Martial drums crash at once smartly. 10 seconds. They fade away. Silence except for the rain and the sea. The rain beats much louder than the sea now.)

WILKINSON:

Steady...they're wobbling.

TOGETHER:

Steady...steady.

(With growing excitement and a reminder of an inescapable fact:)

BEAU BEAU:

The rain, Willy. A soggy bog over here on my side  
This old box, she's rocking something fierce!

(Harder the rain. Thunder.)

WILKINSON:

"The moon goes by in a pine tree. Now the pine  
tree comes in a wagon, dead and soundless."

(Exuberantly:)

BEAU BEAU:

That's fine. But my wagon's shipping out.

(Shouts:)

I hope you built her well, honey. I want it to  
sail me clear around the world and back. Land me  
on a beach where some pretty thing sits under a  
parasol reading sonnets.

(Exaggeratedly suspensful whisper:)

She'll tip toe over and lift the lid care...fully.  
BANG! I'll clack my teeth and pop my Johnny up at  
her!

(They laugh. BEAU BEAU's fades into the dis-  
tance. The rain and the roar of the sea  
with WILKINSON's hollow laugh left suspended  
It turns into a fit of coughing. The balls  
have swung so that the tips of their transit  
are already offstage.)

WILKINSON:

Scare the hell out of her. Clack your teeth and  
pop...Beau? (Pause.) BEAU?!

(From a distance:)

BEAU BEAU:

Still here. But not for long. I'm shipping out.

(Sings:)

Oh, I know a girl from Bang City,  
She strikes matches on her titty.

(Player piano very faint. The transits are  
only half on-stage at each swing now.)

WILKINSON:

BEAU!

(Music ends. One ball disappears. Softly:)

Beau? (Pause.) Clack your teeth... (Sighs.)  
"Unknown white hands are caressing our lives."  
Are they? From locked keep to locked keep, a  
length of blackened box a century. A prison world.  
He's shipped out. And me? When? When? With full  
military honors? WITH FULL MILITARY HONORS!

(Drums from the distance approach softly.)

With flags waving. Flanks and flanks at attention.  
Lined up at the salute. Banners at half mast.

(Drums recede.)

I'll slip out... down the bank... out on the crests.

(Drums out. Rain out. Lights fading. Only  
the tip of the ball visible now. A deep  
sigh. Pause.)

Steady... steady.

(Black. Bell buoy. Sea continues to breathe  
into silence.)

CURTAIN