

Dara Weinberg

AN ACTOR'S LIFE FOR ME

"As to the action which is about to begin, it takes place in Poland—that is to say, nowhere."

—Alfred Jarry, *Ubu Roi* premiere, 1896.

I wake mid-afternoon of our one day off
from rehearsals, sagging as if I had never slept,
and go to the window. In the city below
are churches with ceilings of varnished timber
and people in hooded sweatshirts.
I don't know what I am looking for any more,
but I look down as if I knew. It rains,
the familiar Oregon drone—
a rain that never stops and never starts,
that thrums and crackles in the background
like a guitar cable yanked from the amp socket. I lie down
with my chin on the couch and my nose on the glass.
Suddenly, I hear myself, loud as a kettle,
bawling into the Monday silence
for a reason that makes no sense to me:
I weep for the mother I never had,
the one I did,
and the one I will never be—
and the hills of Portland look back down at me.

No response from the dim blue walls
of my temporary "artist housing," provided by the theater.
(For "artist," read "vagrant.") When I moved in,
last month, it was empty except
for the things that people leave when they leave places:
a bowl full of laundry change (food for three days
while waiting for the first paycheck);

unclothed metal hangers, lined up
 at one side of the closet
 like the parallel teeth of a comb; cotton blankets
 washed too often to be warm; a shower curtain
 half-torn from its rings; shelves with no books; a bed
 too big for one person. Too many Mondays where the only
 sounds
 are my slobbering lips over tea-bag tea—
 and I weep for the mother I never had,
 the one I did,
 and the one I will never be—
 and the hills of Portland (this is how you know
 that you're two hubcaps short of a Buick)
 start—I swear to God—to speak to me:

*Leave this city after previews—
 buy a rowboat, find a train—
 and make your way to anywhere
 where no one knows your name.*

*Take an empty sheet of paper,
 we'll play Hangman in reverse—
 one by one, cross out the letters,
 and we'll see who blanks out first.*

*Take the T and make for Poorland—
 Take the R and go to Pot—
 (Broke and hungry—wake-and-baking—
 what's the difference? Not a lot.)*

*Keep on striking out the letters
 till there's only one place left—
 Call it Portland, call it Poorland,
 call it going-straight-to-Potland,
 call it Poland
 (what you will—)
 that is, the nowhere you know best.
 Find yourself another nowhere—or else, find no rest.*

Some of us give up theater gracefully—
 you get older, feel like making some money,
 making some kids, maybe,

and you never make a speech again,
except at a wedding. But most of us
have quit more times than a backsliding smoker
and still come back for another, and another.
For us, there will always be
another Tuesday call-time, another table
papered with copier-warm script pages,
another cup of pencils, another coffee,
another play. In time, one window's as good as another.
The same carry-on bag of worn-out sweaters,
underwear, and ghosts comes along to every foreign city.
So what if I happen to spend my days off
draped over a couch like a drying sock?
What's another Monday, or two, or three?
Take away the R and the T—
may the hills of Poland (*that is, nowhere*) do their worst to me.