

She-Who-Is-Made-Of-Clay

Simon Levy

A PLAY IN ONE ACT

CHARACTER: She-Who-Is-Made-Of-Clay

TIME: Early 1800s.

PLACE: A small island on Tulare Lake, San Joaquin Valley, California.

(Complete darkness. A burning stick glows in the dark. The stick moves and we hear the sound of singeing hair. Someone begins to quietly chant.)

VOICE: Ah-hah-now'-uh
Ah-hah-now'-uh
("We sing.")
We-ah'-ah-hah
We-ah'-ah-hah
("We are crying.")

(The chant grows louder.)

VOICE: Wuk'-e le'-o
("We cry again.")
Ah-hah-now'-uh
Ah-hah'-nah
Yoo'-e uh'-la
("You are going to burn.")
We-ah'-ah-hah.

(Lights up slowly on a marshy area surrounded by tule reeds. The tules are a natural fortress protecting the dry high ground center stage from the outside world. It is late afternoon and the sky is a searing blue-white. Bird songs and frogs are everywhere. It is a place of intense life.)

(On the ground, sitting like an Indian woman with one leg tucked under and the other thrust to the side, is She-Who-Is-Made-Of-Clay, a Yokuts Indian in his early 30's. He is naked and completely unadorned, except for an elaborate tattoo on his chin—three straight lines from lower lip to chin, and a zig-zag line from each corner of the mouth. Using a glowing, split stick to singe off his long hair, he stares straight at us singing the Mourning Dance for the Dead.)

SHE-WHO-IS-MADE-OF CLAY: Ah-hah'-nah
 Yoo'-e uh-'la
 We-ah'-ah-hah
 We-ah'-ah-hah
 We-ah'-ah-hah.

(Note: She-Who-Is-Made-Of-Clay is a berdache, what we would call a transvestite; but in the tradition of many American Indians s/he is both man and woman, sometimes homosexual, sometimes not, and the actor should make every attempt to not play effeminate but to simply be both man and woman—to create a third gender. Additionally, the play is greatly enhanced if all props are as authentic as possible and not reduced to the clichés of the Plains Indians that we have become used to.)

(A funeral bier has been constructed UC. It is made out of scrub oak branches and tule matting that have been laced together and stands five feet high. Sitting on it, one at each end, are two effigies. They have been lovingly made out of branches, bunch grass, and tule reeds and include arms, legs, and rough representations of faces. The male is dressed in a rabbit blanket and deerskin loincloth; on his head is a djuh, an elaborate ceremonial headdress made from magpie and crow feathers; in his hand he holds a very large cocoon rattle. The female effigy is dressed in a chohun, a string skirt of eagle down; on her feet are brand new antelope skin moccasins; where her nose would be is an elk bone as if inserted into the septum; her earrings are sticks tipped with quail crest feathers.)

(The effigies stare straight at us.)

(Scattered all around She-Who-Is-Made-Of-Clay are baskets, strings of shell disks, a babies cradle made from greasewood and tule matting, bows and arrows and crude bark quivers, pottery, and grinding stones.)

We-ah'-ah-hah!

We-ah'-ah-hah!

(He continues to singe her hair off, carefully laying it in a pile in front of him. He speaks directly to the audience.)

I am the Daughter and Son of my People. I am She-Who-Is-Made-Of-Clay. When I told this to the man in the brown blanket at the Mission, he smiled and said, "In our world there is only man and woman, as God intended. You cannot be both." "I am between," I said. He touched me gently on the head and said, "You will learn soon enough. But first we must get you clothes and give you a new name." And I knew then there were many things he would not understand.

(She finishes singeing his hair, places the burning stick upright in one of the stone bowls, gathers the singed-off hair and places it carefully in a basket with a rattlesnake design.)

He was a good man, with kind eyes. His face, like mine, was round and the color of elk. And though he spoke the language of the Southern tribes, he was not Yokuts. Not of the People.

(During the following, he rises, crosses to the male effigy, removes the leather loincloth and puts it on.)

How then could he understand that I was *tongochim*. That the irresistible call came when I was only a few worlds young. That among my people I was honored. When other boys would play *katauwish* with their sticks and balls, or learned how to shape the different arrows, I would sit with the women and girls learning to grind and leach acorn, or pound tule roots into meal, or weave intricate designs into baskets.

(She crosses to the female effigy, removes the eagle down skirt, and puts it on.)

The people of my village whispered and smiled, started dressing me in the best eagle-down skirts or earrings made from crests of quail. They would leave gifts on my mat and give extra food to my parents. They said I had the calling, and gave me the tattoo of woman. Even when I was very young, they treated me with respect, like a great shaman, as if I knew secrets, because I straddled the world between woman and man.

How could I explain all this to a man whose god created only a man and a woman. If he could not understand *tongochim*, then how could I make him understand that only we can bury the dead and sing the prayers:

You are going to another land.
You will like that land.
You shall not stay here.

How could I make him understand the only reason I had come to his great *kawi* was to dance the death of my people. That it was here among his people I lost mine.

(He begins to dance, raising one foot high, slamming it down, then doing the same with the other. He dances counterclockwise around the bier.)

Si-woh! Si-woh!
Ah soon po-ro soo en-no ka-ro.
Si-woh! Si-woh! Ah soon po-ro.

So aht po. So aht wah ne-vo.
Yi-vo. Yi-vo. Soon po-ro soo e-no ka-ro.
Si-woh! Si-woh! Ah-soon po-ro!

(At the end of the dance he stares straight out at the audience.)

How could I make him understand that I wanted to dance for all the Yokuts—the Tulamni and Tuhohi, the Hometwoli, Paleuyami, Bokninwal, Yokol, Choinok, Entimbich, Wetehit,

(His litany turns into a chant.)

Gashowu, Nutunutu, Kawia, Dumna, Chukaimina, Hoyima,
Chauchila,

*(Then into an aria of vowels and consonants, a cry that rings out over
time and space.)*

Wikchamni, Choinimni, Toltichi, Kechayi, Dalinchi, Koyeti,
Chukchansi, Yauelmani, Telamni, Kumachisi, Yaudanchi, Wimilchi,
Tachi, Apiachi, Pitkachi, Wakichi, Heuchi,

(He is crying now.)

and all the lost peoples who lived in the great San Joaquin Valley.

*(She cries for a long time. When she is done, he takes the moccasins and
earrings from the female effigy and puts them on.)*

How could I make him understand that I even wanted to dance for
the Salinans and Chumash and Costanoans to the west, the
Shoshoneans to the east, the Miwok and Maidu and Wintun to the
north. But I am not of those tribes, and though it is forbidden to
name the dead, the names of my people are in my heart and for
them I can sing and dance and send their *ilit* to *Tihpiknits Pahn*.
Other *tongochim* will have to sing and dance for all the other lost
people whose names I do not know.

I knew I could not make this man and his god understand these
things, so before they could change my clothes or take my name,
I decided to come back here, to the home of my people, the island
of the Wowol, in the Lake of the Tules.

*(She takes the elk bone from the male effigy and places it in his
nose.)*

On the trail back over the mountain five men on horses found me
catching grasshoppers by the side of the trail. I thought I had been
careful, but I was very hungry.

They would have killed me there if they thought I were man, but
because I wore my skirt of antelope and had my hair tied back like

the women of my village, they thought I was woman and surrounded me with their horses. I did not run. Could not.

(She ritualistically picks up all the items scattered around the stage and places them on the bier.)

Their horses pushed against me as the men reached down and grabbed my hair, rubbing their legs against my body. I trembled and tried to stay very still. Oh, how I wanted to run—and I understood this is what the animals felt when we surrounded them in the hunt. I now knew their fear, and why they screamed and ran wild. But I could not run, and I had to live so I could perform the rites that would let my people live in the land of the dead.

Then one of the men, his face overgrown with hair, climbed down and reached under my skirt. He yelped like Coyote when he discovered I was not woman—then hit me across the face with a strap of leather and put his gun under my skirt. Its coldness burned. There was much shouting and other straps of leather hit me. Inside, I tried to go somewhere else, to be anyplace but here. What if I had left the Mission earlier? Or had stopped for grasshoppers somewhere else?

But I was here. And the men laughed as two of them dragged me from the trail. But their laughter was without joy. It did not come from the belly like a great rush of water or the splitting of a tree in a great wind. It stuck in the throat like a frog, and I could not understand why they would laugh if there were no joy in it. And when they tore my skirt from me and bent me over a rock, their laughter turned into the sound of night animals. I was afraid, not because I hadn't given pleasure to other men—after all, I am *tongochim*, it is my calling—but this taking of pleasure was so angry and full of hate. What were they ashamed of?

Through the pain I thought about their smell. They smelled of horse. It made me hungry. And I remembered my first antelope hunt. I was sixteen worlds then, and it was a great honor to be the one to cook and bear for the hunters and to give them pleasure when they came to me at night. We traveled away from the Lake

of the Tules, from this hidden island here, and went out into the great valley where we joined with other tribes from the east.

They, too, had *tongochim*, and we cooked the meals and played dice with acorns late into the nights. There was much laughter and sharing of secrets. When they learned I was also a rattlesnake shaman, even the older *tongochim* treated me with great respect.

(She continues to place items on the bier.)

We finally came to the magic place where they say the antelope come to share their meat and leather with us. There were hundreds of us and we formed a large circle. It was so large we could not see the men on the other side, and we shouted and beat the ground until the antelope leapt out of the dry riverbeds and bushes and bounded away. But wherever they ran, we were there, shouting and scaring them back. And the circle got smaller as we came closer together until we could see each other. Then one warrior from each tribe stepped forward, chose his animal, and killed it with one arrow to the neck.

As the circle opened up to let the live antelope escape, a strange animal charged from the brush—one we had never seen before. He was tall and powerful. He frightened us because we did not know his name. Two arrows took him down. And in a great feast that night we shared him between the tribes.

Never had we tasted anything so sweet. Few ate the antelope. There was much dancing and lying about the animal's name. But one old man from an eastern tribe said the animal's name was Horse and that men from further east rode them and were coming over the mountains. This was the first we had heard of the strangers, but it did not take long for us to see them come and see what would happen when they did.

The taste of horse became our destruction. As the strangers built upon the land, our men would steal their horses. They were easier to hunt than the antelope and the disappearing elk. And we hungered for meat. We would do anything for the taste of horse. And so we hunted them down just as the new people hunted us. There

was no way to keep the strangers from the valley or from the shores of our lake. This island, crowded with the tules, hid my tribe for many worlds. We were safe here. But some of the men tired of fish and bird and turtle and would sneak across when the fog was thick to find horse. Many never came back, some did, and that's when the red spots began to appear and the people began to die.

(She's finished putting all the items on the bier, except for the rattlesnake basket.)

I must have fainted from the pain or hunger, but when I woke the men were gone. Maybe they thought they had killed me with their pleasure. Maybe they did not care. It took many days to get back here, days without food or drink. I had decided that my hunger and thirst were no longer important. Still I came carefully, hiding whenever I heard or smelled horse.

(She picks up the rattlesnake basket with its alternating rows of black and red triangles.)

Before anyone ever taught me about rattlesnake, I would make small baskets like this.

It was Frog-Bite who told me I should be a rattlesnake shaman. She was the *tongochim* my parents apprenticed me to. She was many, many worlds old and very, very ugly. They say he had always been ugly. Because frog is forbidden meat, she was nicknamed Frog-Bite because no one would want to eat her. He would tell this over and over to anyone who would listen. And each time he would laugh a laugh like a hundred owls scattering into the night. He taught me all the songs and dances and duties to the dead. And like all *tongochim*, she was very wealthy because all the belongings of the dead belonged to her.

(He crosses to the male effigy, removes the rabbit blanket, and puts it on.)

During the winter of my fourteenth world, Frog-Bite took me every night to a water hole far from the lakeshore. For weeks I

would sit in the pool and wait for the spirit of the rattlesnake to inhabit me. Then one night a six-mouthed rattlesnake came to me and led me down into the water through a cave with four doors and out onto a ledge where the sun like a giant red spot sat on the edge of the land and said:

I am eagle and coyote,
water and air;
you are earth
run with the rattle.

And I entered the sixth mouth of the snake and came back to the surface of the water.

(He takes the cocoon rattle from the male effigy.)

This is the tail of *Trah-ud*, chief of all rattlesnakes, messenger and spy of *Tihpiknits*, who is Keeper of the Dead.

(He shakes the rattle.)

After the doctors and the bear shamans died from the red spots, I tried to save my people. I sucked the poison from their bodies, cut out the spots, wrapped ants in eagle down and made them swallow the medicine, sang the songs of the *Trip-ne shamans*, "Hahl-mo-hah'-hah hah-'hah!" But still my people died. And all my *tipni*, all my powers could not save them.

(She dips her hand into a stone bowl and draws a broad black line diagonally across her face. Then dips his other hand into another bowl and draws a broad red line below the black one. She climbs up on the bier, takes the elaborate headdress from the male effigy, and places it on her own head. Her outfit is now complete. He looks out over her land and at all the items on the bier.)

This is all that is left of my people. The Yokuts are no more.

(She shakes the rattle.)

Hear me, *Trah-ud!* I call you from the earth to take my people to

Tihpiknits Pahn! Hear my song! and come to me! for I am She-Who-Is-Made-Of-Clay! and I can no longer live in a world where there is no name for what I am!

(She reaches down, picks up the burning stick from the stone bowl and places it on the tule matting. As the bier catches fire, and the lights begin to fade, turning the stage blood red, She-Who-Is-Made-Of-Clay dances and sings atop the bier, among the remains of her people.)

O, Chochin Witche Pah
O, Chochin Witche Pah
(There is a bird's children.)
O, Chochin Miah Witche Pah.
(Oh, bird, I want your children.)
O, Chochin Witche Pah

O, Yo-e he-te ketre e-he Dinne
(Poor rattlesnake.)
Kiowhi No-wu utu Sudongtow
(I am looking in the tree.)
O, Chochin Miah Witche Pah
Yah weah Yah!
(Everyone hear me!)

(Blackout.)