

SHINING BROW – Usonian Edition

A Chamber Opera in Two Acts with no Interval

Libretto by Paul MULDOON

Music by Daron HAGEN (b.1944)

Commissioned by Madison Opera

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The Madison Opera / Roland Johnson

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UrbanArias / Robert Wood

CHARACTERS

Frank Lloyd Wright

Mamah Cheney

Louis Sullivan

Edwin Cheney

Catherine Wright

baritone, an architect

soprano, WRIGHT's mistress

tenor, WRIGHT's mentor

bass-baritone, WRIGHT's client

mezzo-soprano, WRIGHT's wife

SETTING: The memories of Frank Lloyd Wright leading up to the destruction of the first Taliesin.

SYNOPSIS

The opera concerns events that occurred between 1903 and 1914 during the great American architect Frank Lloyd Wright's life. Wright's determination to leave his wife and children, his relationship with Mamah Cheney, and the subsequent murders and conflagration at Taliesin, are all part of the historical record. The opera takes Wright to the point at which he vows to rebuild Taliesin in Mamah's memory.

ACT I | SCENE 1

All characters are onstage. SULLIVAN stage right, WRIGHT, center, and MAMAH stage left. CATHERINE and EDWIN are a step back in between SULLIVAN/WRIGHT and WRIGHT/MAMAH respectively. CATHERINE and EDWIN move between their actual characters and chorus with SULLIVAN also adding to the chorus commentary where appropriate.

SULLIVAN: So much so, that even now I flinch
at the very thought of a stone taking wing
from Madison, Wisconsin;

It was every inch a proud and soaring thing
that, true to form following function,
lodged itself in my brow. As I did in his.

I was his *Lieber Meister*. He was a ‘pencil in my hand’.

I was his *Lieber Meister*; he was a ‘pencil in my hand’;
Together we would make our mark
On the clean slate of America.

We dreamed of a mile-high building with a huge tap-root;
But his ambition, or my pride –
It’s hard to say exactly which –
Would drive a wedge between us ...

And this, perhaps, is how things were meant to be;
For Troy must fall, Achilles must slay Hector.

And therein lies ...

CATHERINE/: *(as echoes)*
EDWIN And therein lies the poetry ...

SULLIVAN: And therein lies the poetry of architecture.

ALL: The poetry of architecture
is a poetry of vision;
we set our sights on unscaled heights
with our ground-plans and elevations.

The poetry of architecture
is a poetry of tension;
we take as our theme
the brick and the beam
and we add an extra dimension.

But the poetry of architecture
is not without its laws;
there’s someone at the bottom
of every totem- pole:
you can’t make bricks without straw.

For the poetry of architecture
has its Masters and its Schools;
some are destined to stand
with their pencils in their hands ...

(WRIGHT uses this anthem to step forward relishing the thought of dominance as an architect. SULLIVAN looks away disgusted by his ego. WRIGHT steps forward.)

WRIGHT: And some are destined to rule.

(EDWIN couples up with MAMAH, whom he ushers to WRIGHT's drafting table, on which are spread the plans of various houses.)

CATHERINE: *(bitter and judgmental)*
Some are destined to stand
With their pencils in their hands
(with awe and regret)
... and some are destined to rule.

(CATHERINE crosses to SULLIVAN)

WRIGHT: The poetry of architecture,
Mister and Missus Cheney, is universal.
The Sioux and the Shoshone might have taught
the Greeks and Romans a lesson in harmony.

MAMAH: *(spoken)*
I can't quite imagine the appeal to John Ruskin of a few sticks
covered with deer-skins.

EDWIN: *(spoken)*
Mamah, please.

MAMAH: In any case, we might as justly speak of the 'music' of
architecture...

WRIGHT: Indeed, we might. Be it mud hut, mansion or mosque,
Cabin, cathedral or kraal –
They should all be integral.

(WRIGHT comes around to the front of the desk and stands beside MAMAH.)

CATHERINE: They should all be somehow integral...

WRIGHT: And Mah-mah – if I may?

MAMAH: *(correcting his pronunciation)*
May-mah – if you would.

CATHERINE: Mah-mah. May-mah. My, my, my.

WRIGHT: May I say that what's uppermost in my mind
When I take my pencil in my hand
To draw up a plan for *your* Erewhon, *your* Utopia,
Is that...

ALL: ...form and function are one.

MAMAH: What a curious expression – 'my pencil in my hand'.

CATHERINE/: We know pretty much exactly what he has in mind
EDWIN/ When he mentions his 'pencil in his hand.'
SULLIVAN

WRIGHT: Take, for example, this house in Buffalo;
Each room opens into the next, so one may follow
One's bent, as it were, from the living room

Through the den to the bedroom ...

EDIWN: It's faintly reminiscent of a maze ...

MAMAH: But a maze in which one finds oneself, my sweet,
The way the greatest rivers must meander.

EDWIN: The way in every labyrinth there lurks a Minotaur.

MAMAH: ... like a meandering river ...

WRIGHT: Over the lintel of the hearth
In this house in Buffalo I've had the following carved:

WRIGHT/
SULLIVAN/: *The reality of the house is order*
CATHERINE *The blessing of the house is community*
The glory of the house is hospitality
The crown of the house is godliness

MAMAH: What a curious sloping roof.

WRIGHT: That, Mamah, is a hip-roof;
So called, I might say, because it follows the curve of ...

EDWIN: Far be it from me to lower the tone
Of these proceedings, but when all's said and done
There's the little matter of how much it'll cost ...

MAMAH: *(spoken)*
Dear Edwin, you sound like Banquo's ghost.

WRIGHT: It's still a tad early to say exactly.
I'll have a more concrete idea by the end of the week.

MAMAH: Oh, Eddie, the cost is as nothing to the worth
Of a home designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.

EDWIN: Just so long as it doesn't cost the earth.

MAMAH: *(extending her hand)*
Until the end of the week.

WRIGHT: *(kissing her hand)*
Until then, Mamah.

EDWIN: *(abruptly)*
Goodnight.

(EDWIN and MAMAH turn upstage back to audience.)

WRIGHT: *(spoken)*
Her hip ...
(sung)
And her scent. Was it musk?
Not musk. Cedar perhaps. Perhaps night-scented stock.
It all goes back to those Froebel blocks
my mama gave me as a child.
La Belle Dame sans Merci, The Lady of Shallot –
these were my first patrons; I was their Master Builder.
Not stock. Saxifrage. A flower to split a boulder
in the prairie of men's hearts;

(Unbeknownst to him, CATHERINE crosses to him.)
Mamah has pierced my heart like an arrowhead.

CATHERINE: Frank, my dear.

WRIGHT: Catherine. What brings you here?

CATHERINE: An arrowhead? But this is all so sudden.

WRIGHT: What bring you here?

CATHERINE: Is it jasper or obsidian?

WRIGHT: What brings you here?

CATHERINE: Is it Minnetaree or Mandan?

WRIGHT: What brings you, Cat?

CATHERINE: If Moahomet won't come to the mountain ...

WRIGHT: Oh Catherine, dear ... now, Cat.

CATHERINE: We've scarcely spoken in a month.
If not for mine, then for the children's sakes,
Come home one evening at six
If only to play a nursery game.
I doubt if you even remember their names.
Have you forgotten those evenings in Oak Park
When we built upon the built-up dark
And climbed aboard the old toboggan
And ate roast chestnuts and pecans?
At least do me the honor ...

WRIGHT: Lloyd Junior ...

CATHERINE: ... of joining me for a late dinner ...

WRIGHT: John ... Kate Junior ...

CATHERINE: I'll wear the taffeta ...

WRIGHT: David ...

CATHERINE: ... dress and the pendant that reads *Semper Virens* ...

WRIGHT: Frances ...

CATHERINE: ... that was given to me by Louis Sullivan ...

WRIGHT: Llewellyn ...

CATHERINE: For, though I may have grown a little stout ...

WRIGHT: Has anybody been left out?

CATHERINE: ... still and all, Frank, still and all ...

WRIGHT: *(insistently)*
Has anybody been left out?

CATHERINE: All of us. We've all been shut out by the wall

You've thrown up around you;
Your pursuit of fame and wealth
Would be laughable ...

WRIGHT: It all goes back to Froebel.

CATHERINE: ...if it weren't so cruel.

WRIGHT: All somehow integral.

CATHERINE: A paradox, Frank. In public, you espouse the ideal
Of family life – all that tittle-tattle
Carved on lintels and picked out in tesserae –
While your own life's in disarray.
As for your prattle about 'integrity' ...

WRIGHT: *(spoken - final)*
I'll be home no later than nine-thirty.

(CATHERINE exits, leaving WRIGHT alone at his desk.)

WRIGHT: Each room opens into the next, (Catherine, -) so one may follow
one's bent, as it were, from glade to sylvan glade –
till the valley of disenchantment gives way to the Great Plains.
There Louis Sullivan and I dreamed
of a mile-high building with a huge tap-root
It was every inch a proud and soaring thing.

Only the other day I read a newspaper report
of a man who complained of an ache in his chest.
When they opened him up they found a lump
of gristle and keratin big as a baby's first;
that lump was his own twin
whom he'd ousted in their mother's womb.

Not stock. Not saxifrage. Gardenia.

SULLIVAN/: *(ghosted by SULLIVAN)*
WRIGHT He was my *Lieber Meister*, I was a 'pencil in his hand';
together we would make our mark
on the clean slate of America.
But my ambition, or his pride –
it's hard to say exactly which –
would drive a wedge between us ...

WRIGHT: Edwin, Edwin, what a curious name ...
'Edwin' ... Edwin ... Brood.
Mamah has pierced my heart
Like an arrowhead;
(spoken)
And the Seminole, the Sioux, the Shoshone, the Sans Arcs –
(sung)
They come sweeping back across the land
To build upon the built-up dark.

EDWIN/: *(humming the offstage chorus lines)*
SULLIVAN

– ORCHESTRAL INTERLUDE OF 'HYMN TO NATURE,' a piece attributed to Goethe –

SCENE 2

The Cheney house in mid-construction.

EDWIN: *(spoken over the end of the interlude)*
Look out below. Here comes a bit of skirt.
Dig deep, little lady, I'll give you something hard.

CATHERINE:
Far be it from me to suggest
that these ruffians could lower the tone
of the neighborhood, since it's already been
lowered out of all recognition.
I mean by Frank Lloyd Wright and the Cheney woman.
It's an open secret!

(spoken)
He's just another man of forty,
Turning his back on years of connubial bliss.
While she's no better than a common whore.

EDWIN: *(with wounded pride)*
Three long days and three long nights in the belly of the beast
Was as much as Jonah could bear;
For more than three months,
I've been trapped in the hump-backed whale
Of this so-called 'prairie house'.

I know, I know, I know;
I know only too well the features of the 'prairie house' –
its walls of rain, its window-panes of ice, its door of wind,
its roof packed hard with snow, and,
at its core, a vast emptiness.
The truth is that my mouth is full of nails.
For three long months I've hunkered in the maw,
bowed under, mortgaged to the hilt,
and pondered the universal law;
for everything that's built something is destroyed.
(EDWIN spots a flint on the ground, picks it up.)
So it was that the Master Builder
Assigned Prometheus his rock
And Sisyphus his boulder.
(EDWIN scrutinizes the flint.)
And Job his little pot-sherd;
I do believe it's an arrowhead.
(EDWIN puts the flint in his breast-pocket, then stands in the door-frame, extending both arms.)
For three long months I myself have been the grist
to Frank Lloyd Wright's grist-mill.
I've been pinned up by my wings.
*Instead of the cross, the Albatross
about my neck is hung.*
Everything's out of kilter.
The very house stands at a list;
there's not a line that's not somehow askew.

(WRIGHT and MAMAH enter. They are in buoyant spirits, oblivious of EDWIN.)

SULLIVAN:
I know, I know, I know;
I know only too well the features of the 'prairie house' –
its walls of rain, its window-panes of ice, its door of wind,

its roof of hard-packed snow, and, at its core, a vast emptiness.

WRIGHT: Each room opens into the next, if you remember,
Like the chambers of the heart.

(WRIGHT goes down on one knee.)

SULLIVAN/: I know, I know, I know;
EDWIN I know only too well the features of the 'prairie house' –
its walls of rain, its window-panes of ice, its door of wind,
its roof of hard-packed snow, and, at its core, a vast emptiness.

WRIGHT: *(spoken)*
As the kiss of two lovers at night
Makes the darkness a choir,
The dusk is a-quiver with light
Of its heart's desire.

MAMAH: *(extending her hand)*
Oh, Frank, you've such a way with words.

WRIGHT: *(taking her hand)*
Those were the words of the Welsh bard, Taliesin,
To the Lady of the Lake, with whom he ...

MAMAH: ... had a secret liaison?

WRIGHT: Something of that ilk.

MAMAH: A lover's tryst?

WRIGHT: She was less a lover than a muse.

MAMAH: How dull. So it's what you might call an allusion?

WRIGHT: I borrowed those lines from a masque
By a certain Richard Hovey.

MAMAH: Do you mean 'borrowed' or 'purloined'?

WRIGHT: Borrowed.

MAMAH: How positively dull.
(distracted)
Was the house always meant to list?
It seems somewhat topsy-turvy.

WRIGHT: Be it mud hut, mansion or mosque, a Minnetaree earth-lodge,
a cabin with antlers of an elk gracing its eaves –
be it the Chapel of the Holy Grail –
They should all be somehow integral.

MAMAH: It's faintly reminiscent of a maze.

WRIGHT: To borrow a phrase from my old mentor, Louis Sullivan ...

EDWIN: *(singing out from within the house)*
In every labyrinth ...

(WRIGHT starts, releases MAMAH's hand and gets to his feet as EDWIN appears.)

... there lurks ...

MAMAH: Eddie ... It's you.

WRIGHT: ... a Minotaur.

MAMAH: Oh Eddie, you sound like Banquo's ghost.

EDWIN: Far be it from me to lower the tone
Of these proceedings, but when all's said and done
There's the little matter of the Wedding Guest.

MAMAH: Please, Eddie. Try not to be distraught.

EDWIN: I've just been pondering the motto over the hearth.
I think it should read;
For everything that's built something is destroyed.

WRIGHT: I hope you don't mind, Ed;
I borrowed your wife for the afternoon.

EDWIN: Mind? Why should I mind?

MAMAH: Why so crestfallen, so forlorn?

EDWIN: *(EDWIN moves towards MAMAH)*
So crestfallen?
(EDWIN takes MAMAH's hands and presses them to his head.)
So forlorn?

WRIGHT: In the phrase I borrowed from Louis Sullivan ...

EDWIN: Can't you feel those little nodes of gristle and keratin?

MAMAH: I feel nothing, Eddie.

EDWIN: For three months I've been growing horns.

MAMAH: *(snatching away her hands)*
You know I simply can't abide your self-pity.
(EDWIN puts his hands to his head.)

EDWIN: For three long months I've tried to ease
The pain of these nodes of gristle and keratin
But have found no salve, no Balm of Gilead.
It's been to no avail, to absolutely no avail.

MAMAH: I feel nothing, Eddie, not the merest hint
Of remorse, not a pang of guilt for having followed my bent,
As it were, towards my own enfranchisement.

EDWIN: If not for mine, then for the children's sakes,
Come home one evening at six;
You've made us all a laughing-stock.

MAMAH: For three long months I've been ostracized
but the nods and winks and twitching curtains
have only strengthened my resolve;
my love for Frank will prevail even when all else fails.

WRIGHT: For three long months I've tried to loose the knot,

That binds Mamah and myself.
I'm consumed by guilt,
Yet I'm adamant as Percival...

EDWIN: For three long months I've tried to ease
MAMAH: For Three long Months I've been ostracized
WRIGHT: For three long months I've tried to loose

EDWIN: The pain of these nodes
MAMAH: But the nods
WRIGHT: The knot,

EDWIN: Of gristle and keratin
MAMAH: And winks and twitching curtains
WRIGHT: The inextricable, Gordian

EDWIN: Bu have found no salve,
MAMAH: Have only strengthened my resolve
WRIGHT: Knot that binds Mamah and myself.

EDWIN: No Balm of Gilead
MAMAH: My love for
WRIGHT: I'm consumed by guilt,

EDWIN: It's been to no avail
MAMAH: Wright to prevail
WRIGHT: Yet adamant as Percival

EDWIN: To absolutely no avail.
MAMAH: Even when all else fails.
WRIGHT: In the Chapel of the Holy Grail.

MAMAH: I'm leaving you tonight!

EDWIN: One of these days I'll boast
a set of antlers fit to grace
the eaves of any 'prairie house'.
For in the belly of the beast
There's a lump of ambergris.

If all else fails,
I'll swallow hydrochloric acid;
I'd hang myself by a rope
from a purlin if I thought
it might be to some avail.

MAMAH: To no avail. I won't go back to needlework,
Monotony, the Oak Park dark.
To absolutely no avail. I won't go back to needlework,
To the drab monotony of plain one, purl one.
My love for Frank Lloyd Wright will prevail.

(EDWIN steps back into the shadows.)

WRIGHT: Let us set sail;
Together we will make our mark
On the well-worn slate of Europe;
In Rome, or Paris, or Berlin,
We'll build our Chapel of the Holy Grail.

(WRIGHT sweeps MAMAH off her feet and exits.)

– ORCHESTRAL SEQUE –

SCENE 3

Escape to Europe

MAMAH: Earth and air and fire and water;
All somehow integral.
We – are – all – within – Nature;
She – is – within – us – all.
Die Menschen sind alle in ihr und sie allen.
(MAMAH gets up from her desk and moves towards the window.)
Frank. How much longer must I endure our being apart?

I look out from the walls of Troy,
like Helen sighing for a sail.
I see nothing. Only a camisole of a clothes line
Over Friedrichstrasse.
It might be a Rhinemaiden,
A damsel in distress.
It calls to me, ‘Cuckoo ... cuckold ...’
As seamstress calls to seamstress
Across a mile-wide quilt.
I feel nothing. Not the merest hint
Of remorse. Not a pang of guilt
For having followed my bent,
As it were, from Boone, Iowa,
And the monotony of needlepoint
To the realm of Julia Ward Howe;
As they say in Boone –
Or used to say – *per ardua ad astra*.
I’ve gone to such pains
to throw off my manacles of yarn ...
(MAMAH makes a show of wringing her hands, moves back towards the desk.)
... the truth is that my mouth is full of pins.
(MAMAH picks up the piece of paper.)
Am I destined merely to darn
The socks of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe?
(MAMAH sets it back on the desk and moves towards a chair.)
For everything that’s built something is destroyed.
(MAMAH runs her hand along the lapel of WRIGHT’s distinctive overcoat, which is draped over the chair.)
Am I destined to mend the torn pocket
of Frank Lloyd Wright’s overcoat?
To be nothing more than a vassal
destined forever to kowtow?
To be some well-wrought urn, or some pot of basil,
Into which a great man may flow?
(MAMAH moves back towards the window.)
For three long months he’s languished in Fiesole
Laboring over a portfolio of drawings;
Meanwhile, I sit, my pencil in my hand,
And look back down the valley
Of disenchantment
That runs from here to Chicago.

Even now I hear an echo
 In the built-up dark, as Catherine, dear Catherine,
 Cries 'cuckoo ... cuckold ...'
(CATHERINE echoing)
 To the Gadarene swine in the Cliff Dweller's Club.
 While I embroider the quatrains
 Of Goethe's high-and-mighty verse
 I hear a higher, mightier voice resound;
 'There can be, and there will be, no divorce.'
(CATHERINE falls out)
 Though he's a stag dragged down by his own hounds,
 Actaeon to my Artemis,
 Edwin's honor knows no bounds.
 But me? Can I? How can I redeem myself?
 On a November evening in Berlin, as the light further dims,
 I look out from my chamber
 At that camisole, those three sheets in the wind,
 At what remains of my life.
 And perhaps I do feel the merest hint
 Of remorse as a violin
 Rehearses from the apartment
 Opposite the high-flown
 Maunderings of a new piece of music
 By Richard Strauss. So much for Avalon.
 So much for our making our mark
 On the well-worn slate of Europe.

(SULLIVAN looks up suddenly from his newspaper.)

SULLIVAN: So Frank has got an **elephant** portfolio?
 An elephant's graveyard, more like.

(SULLIVAN begins to tear out a column from his newspaper, which he folds meticulously.)

MAMAH: I stand on the edge of an abyss. I look into a chasm.
 There is no Balm in Gilead, no holy chrism
 Nor extreme unction
 With which to anoint my shining brow.
 Only a cataclysm of burning oil ...

SULLIVAN: ... and true to form following function ...

MAMAH: ... and molten lead, an avalanche
 of fire and brimstone, broken glass and bricks
 taking wing ...

SULLIVAN: ... he lodged himself in my shining brow.
 He was every inch a proud and soaring ...

MAMAH/
 SULLIVAN: So much so ...

(SULLIVAN puts his hands to his head, MAMAH turns in a decisive gesture.)

ACT II | Scene 1

A Christmas memory at Taliesin

CATHERINE/:
EDWIN
When it comes to good old-fashioned scandal,
I can tell you ...
Scandal. Scandal. Sodom and Gomorrah
Wouldn't hold a candle
To this flesh-pot of Spring Green.

Not since Sodom and Gomorrah
has someone so assaulted
everything we hold dear.

EDWIN:
Keep your eyes peeled for a pillar of salt.

CATHERINE/:
SULLIVAN/
EDWIN
It's an assault.
Now we've Sodom and Gomorrah
Here in Spring Green!
An assault on everything that we hold dear.

(WRIGHT and MAMAH enter, MAMAH keeps a discreet distance while WRIGHT, in his distinctive hat and coat, greets the assembly.)

WRIGHT:
Good morrow.

CATHERINE/:
SULLIVAN/
EDWIN
... Gomorrah.

WRIGHT:
Good morrow.

CATHERINE/:
SULLIVAN/
EDWIN
Gomorrah. Gomorrah. Gomorrah.

(WRIGHT's public pronouncements are intercut with private ruminations.)

WRIGHT:
Ladies and gentlemen, let me take this occasion
To welcome you to Taliesin.

You know only too well
The details of my private life,
How a great misfortune befell
Myself and my wife,
How we drifted further and further apart.

(private)
Can a man be a faithful husband and father
And devote himself to his art?
The truth is that my back is to the wall.

(public)
Our love is seen as a serious upheaval
Of 'conventional' mores.
I'm 'the very embodiment of evil',
She's 'no better than a common whore'.

To hell with the 'conventional'.
The average man may live by average laws;
But the artist must forge in his own maw
Some new vision of order,

An even more exacting moral code.
For the artist must take a higher road,
A harder road,
Through the dark night
Of the soul towards a necessary light.

(private)
... the light, the truth and the light ...
The truth it that my back is to the wall.
The truth ...

(public)
That light comes from within;
From there, and there alone.
For seven long years we've been prey
to rumors and allegations.

I prithee now; *Let him who is without sin
Cast the first stone.*
Let it lodge in the 'Shining Brow'
Of Taliesin.

For, just as Taliesin is not 'on', but 'oF', a hill,
So my love for Mamah Cheney is truly integral.
This is our Avalon.
This is our Chapel of the Holy Grail.

(WRIGHT begins to fold his prepared speech.)
Now, ladies and gentlemen, we wish you all
A very merry Christmas.
We hope you will join us in a glass of sherry,
Here in this house that hill might marry.

EDWIN: Never mind a 'house that hill might marry';
When are you gonna marry Mamah Cheney?

CATHERINE: Don't you have any qualms of conscience?

WRIGHT: *(impatiently)*
The artist must take a higher road,
A harder road.
And that, ladies and gentlemen,
Is my final word.

*(WRIGHT pulls MAMAH aside. They sing a descant above
CATHERINE, SULLIVAN, and EDWIN who counter them.)*

CATHERINE/:
SULLIVAN/
EDWIN
He's swept us off our feet
And danced us round and round
Then flung us back, exhausted,
On the muddy ground.

WRIGHT: Together, Mamah, we will take that higher and harder road.
You pierced my heart like an arrowhead.
You did me mortal hurt.

MAMAH: *(Teasing him)*
An arrowhead? But this is all so sudden.
Is it jasper or obsidian?

WRIGHT: Mamah, try to maintain a...

MAMAH: Tell me, is it Minnetaree or Mandan?

CATHERINE/: So much so
SULLIVAN/: That even now we flinch
EDWIN: At the thought of all this hullabaloo
For the sake of a column inch.

MAMAH: Can a man devote himself to his art
And be a faithful husband and father?

WRIGHT: A great man may be true to both.
He need never choose
One path over another.
You, Mamah, are both mother
And muse.
When all is said and done
You are both key- and corner-stone.

*As the kiss of two lovers at night
Makes the darkness a choir,
The dusk is a-quiver with light
Of its heart's desire.*

(WRIGHT has gone down on one knee to present MAMAH with a single rose.)

MAMAH: Those lines you borrowed from a masque
By Richard Hovey.

WRIGHT: The rose I borrowed from *Der Rosenkavalier*.

MAMAH: *Ist wie ein Gruss vom Himmel.*

WRIGHT: And its scent? Is it musk?

MAMAH: *Ist bereites zu stark,
Als dass man's ertragen kann.*

WRIGHT: Accept it, Mamah, as a token of my love.

MAMAH: It reminds me of that night in Dresden
When we ate roast chestnuts and pecans
And built upon the built-up dark.

WRIGHT: We built upon the built up dark.
That was the night we met Richard Strauss.

MAMAH: The night **you** met Richard Strauss;
I was merely a codicil to your iron will.

WRIGHT: Accept it, Mamah, as a token of my love.

SULLIVAN/: Is she destined to go down in history
CATHERINE/: As a codicil to Wright's iron will?
EDWIN:

MAMAH: My heart goes out to Catherine. So pure. So noble.
So noble, so woebegone.
Though Frank and I may seem the picture of connubial bliss ...

I'm destined for ever to do crewelwork on quatrains.
And now a Great War has begun.
The Goths under Alaric,

Come sweeping back across the land
To build upon the built-up dark.
My heart weighs like an anchor.

MAMAH/:
CATHERINE/
SULLIVAN/
EDWIN

(spoken)
I am the birch stripped of its bark.
I am a raven swooping over the squadron.
I am a hang-nail on a finger.
I am the eye that looks askance.
I am a flint that holds no spark.
I am the rain falling at a slant.
I am a half-moon-shaped gold torc.
I am a sponge steeped in vinegar.
I am the hart. I am the hind.
I am the green and burning tree.
I am the cloud no bigger than a hand.

WRIGHT:

(fiercely)
I will go down in history!

– ORCHESTRAL SEQUE (*The Fire*) –

Scene 2

WRIGHT & SULLIVAN *Confrontation*

SULLIVAN: Frank.

WRIGHT: *Lieber Meister.*

(They shake hands.)

SULLIVAN: Well! I... You're well, I trust?

WRIGHT: I'm well. And you?

SULLIVAN: So so.

WRIGHT: I often think of you perched on a ledge
At the Cliff Dwellers' Club
Like an Anasazi
In Canyon de Celly or Mesa Verde.

SULLIVAN: An Anasazi? You speak far better than you know.
The Anasazi were eclipsed
By the Hopi and the Navajo.

WRIGHT: The Hopi, the Haida, the Huron, the Hunkpapa Sioux
Might have taught the Greeks and Romans
A lesson in harmony.

SULLIVAN: I know, I know, I know, I know, I know;
I know only too well why you see me
'perched on a ledge'
of the Cliff Dwellers' Club:
I am Prometheus on his rock.
(SULLIVAN raises his glass.)
There's an eagle or vulture feeding on my liver.
(He drains the glass.)
I know only too well why you see me hanging in chains,
Full of self-pity, pie-eyed, peripheral.

WRIGHT: No, no, no, no, no;
When I see you perched on a ledge
I'm thinking of your dream of architecture –
To borrow your phrase –
'virile and indigenous'.

SULLIVAN: Do you mean 'borrow' or 'purloin'?

WRIGHT: I mean 'borrow'.

SULLIVAN: It's a sore point, Frank.
(pause)
What of your own dreams?

WRIGHT: I had a dream of a house that hill might marry.
Its walls are of stone from a local quarry.
Its roof bespeaks the strength of native oak.
The hill is a mass of apple trees in bloom,
Gooseberries, cherries, plums,
Heavy horses and Holstein cows,
Hens and ducks and swans and geese.
Be it beer garden, bedroom, or bank...
They should all be organic, don't you think?
Form follows function. Form and function are one.

SULLIVAN: A phrase you purloined, Frank, from me.

WRIGHT: Do you mean 'purloined' or 'borrowed'?

SULLIVAN: I mean 'purloined'.

(WRIGHT moves towards the window.)

WRIGHT: You were my *Lieber Meister*. I was 'a pencil in your hand'.

SULLIVAN: It's a sore point, Frank.

WRIGHT/: Together we would make our mark
SULLIVAN On the clean slate of America.

SULLIVAN: But your ambition ...

WRIGHT: Or your pride –

SULLIVAN: I think I know exactly which –

WRIGHT: Would drive a wedge
Between us.

SULLIVAN: It's a sore point, Frank.

WRIGHT: *(moving towards SULLIVAN)*
Is there no Balm in Gilead?

SULLIVAN: *(getting to his feet, steadying himself on the table)*
Would that there were, Frank; would that there were:
For ten long years I've cowered in the Gothic arch
Of his Leviathan,
How he would damn
Me with faint praise, then steal my thunder
As Prometheus stole fire,

All to the greater glory of his name;
There's malice in your magnanimity.

WRIGHT: *(turning away)*
For ten long years I've tried to heal the breach
Between you and myself.
You know only too well
How great I deem you to be. You were my first mentor.
You were the first to fire my imagination.
I am the keeper of your flame;
Why should he hold me in such enmity?

We hold so much in common.

SULLIVAN: Oh? So much?

WRIGHT: So much. The fact that we're both Celts.
I often think of you perched on a ledge
At the Cliff Dwellers' Club
Like an Irish high king
On the ramparts of Tara.

SULLIVAN: Not Tara, Frank. The parapets of Troy.
The Irish are 'a pack of hounds
Dragging down every noble stag'.

WRIGHT: Goethe?

SULLIVAN: Goethe.

(The two remain motionless, as though reaching out to each other, yet unable to touch. An agitated EDWIN rushes in.)

WRIGHT: Eddie? Why so crestfallen? So forlorn?

EDWIN: For three long hours I've tried to reach
You by telephone, all to no avail.
(EDWIN takes a telegram from his breast pocket.)
I've had this telegram
From Spring Green.

WRIGHT: *(spoken)*
Well, read it.

EDWIN: 'Taliesin destroyed by fire'.

WRIGHT: By fire? And Mamah?

EDWIN: Nothing.

WRIGHT: Nothing?

EDWIN: Please, Frank. You're distraught.

SULLIVAN: Try not to be ... I'm sorry, Frank.

WRIGHT: What?

EDWIN: Quickly, now. We must be off.

WRIGHT: I know, I know, I know, I know, I know.

EDWIN: We can still catch the 5:05.

WRIGHT: The 5:05?

EDWIN: The train. It's almost five o'clock.

WRIGHT: I know, I know, I know ...

(EDWIN has helped WRIGHT into his coat; he now steers him out. SULLIVAN calls after them.)

SULLIVAN: Please, Frank. Please don't go.

(SULLIVAN goes over to the window.)

I cry out from the Slough of Despond
 While the Mohawk, the Shawnee, the Delaware,
 Come sweeping back across the land
 That was not 'borrowed' but 'purloined';
De profundis exclamavi ad Te Dominum.

Scene 3

The smoldering ruins of Taliesin

ALL: Out of the depths we heard them cry again;
 Out of the depths of hell.
 We formed a human chain
 To bring water from the well.

Our efforts were all in vain;
 We did little more than stand by
 As bricks took wing and a black rain
 Fell from the sky.

The door was shut.
 We broke it down.
 We mounted the burning stair.
 Then and only then
 We were truly made aware.

We slid them out to rest on the muddy, muddy ground.
 As if wild clove and mint might somehow absolve the blame.
 Wright knelt by each sheeted mound
 And heaped it with boughs and blooms.
 As if sumach and sassafras might somehow ease the rancor.

WRIGHT: Emil Brodelle...Ernest Weston...
 David Lindblom...Thomas Brunker...
 Has anybody been left out?

EDWIN: Please, Frank.

WRIGHT: For ten long hours they were trapped in the hump-backed whale
 Of this so-called 'prairie house':
 The truth is that I myself am the whale;
 I am both Ahab and Ishmael.
 The truth is that my mouth is full of steel;
 So much so, I'm flayed and flensed
 And my blubber rendered to boiling oil
 The oil that poured down on Mamah and your children.

EDWIN: Please, Frank. Don't fan the embers.

WRIGHT: Forgive me, Ed. Forgive me; forgive me, Ed.
It's cost us both. It's cost us both the earth.
My mouth is full of mud.

EDWIN: It sounds like you might believe in fate.

WRIGHT: It seems somehow appropriate
That a fire should crack the boulder of my heart;
My mouth is full of stones.

EDWIN: I used to believe that some Master Builder
Assigned Sullivan his rock and you your boulder
(He removes a flint from his pocket and hands it to WRIGHT.)
And me this little pot-sherd.

WRIGHT: *(examining it)*
She pierced my hardened heart like an arrowhead.

EDWIN: It's not arrowhead, Frank. It's a broken-off flint.
Accept it as a token of the randomness of things.

WRIGHT: The **seeming** randomness of things.

EDWIN: The randomness of things.
This broken-off flint
Is an emblem of the haphazard;
It's no more part of some grand design
Than Carleton taking a violent
Turn and setting fire to Taliesin.

WRIGHT: No, no, no, no, no;
Had I not set myself above the 'average' laws
For 'average' men,
This might still be our Avalon,
Still be our Chapel of the Holy Grail.

EDWIN: The Holy Grail's a stove-in pail.
The Holy Rood's a splintered tree.
I view your notion of destiny
With nothing less than disdain.
That there is some grand design
Is the height of self-delusion.

WRIGHT: Is there no balm in Gilead?

EDWIN: Would that there were, Frank; would that there were.

WRIGHT: Is there no holy chrism
With which to anoint her brow?

EDWIN: Her brow is ashen, Frank. Her hand is cold.
(pause)
I'm going now.

WRIGHT: Oh, please don't go.

EDWIN: I must go. I must attend to the burial of my children.

WRIGHT: And Mamah?

EDWIN: Would that I could, Frank.
Would that I could.

WRIGHT: Good-bye, Ed.

I kneel on the edge of an abyss.
I look into a chasm.
(He ponders the flint.)
So much for my so-called 'lack of scruples'.
So much for my 'ostracism'.
(He puts the flint in his pocket.)
And her scent? Was it musk?

Not musk. Pine; the scent of a plain pine box
Where she'll lie in this hallowed ground.
(WRIGHT unfolds the paper MAMAH left in the pocket. He reads the Goethe translation.)
She sweeps us off our feet
And dances round and round,
Then flings us back, exhausted,
On the muddy ground.

(The disembodied voice of MAMAH ghosts WRIGHT.)

WRIGHT/: We lie on the muddy ground
MAMAH And take her in our arms.
She's nowhere to be found
Amongst her thousand forms.

ALL: Though she takes a thousand forms
She's always in one place.
She takes us in her arms.
She holds us in a fast embrace.

WRIGHT: Would that she might take me in her arms.
Would that I might fill the grave myself.

MAMAH: That something is destroyed
Is itself a grand illusion.

WRIGHT: I will make of their *De Profundis*
a *Kyrie Eleison*.

I think the balsam-fir
That springs up a hundredfold
In the aftermath of a forest fire;
Surely there is balm in Gilead?
The Gila Apache, the Adirondack,
All perceived the intricate
Order in even a pine cone.
That she is dead and gone
Is itself a grand illusion;
She'll be both key- and corner-stone
Of a new Taliesin.
She is the house. She is the hill.
She is the house that hill might marry.
I will dedicate both field and hall
To Mamah's memory.
She is within us all,
We are all within Nature.
Through spring and summer, winter and fall,
We will – we must – endure.

Would that the Osage, bows in hand,
Might come sweeping back across the land ...
It all goes back to those cowboy books
My mama gave me as a child.
I'll fill her plain pine box
With wild flowers, marjoram,
And mulberry leaves.
Oh, would that she might take me in her arms.
Would that I myself
Might fill her unmarked grave.
Why mark the spot where desolation began
And ended? It followed the curve
Of an old toboggan.
So much, then, for the domain
Of the Ottawa, the Ojibwa, the Omaha Sioux,
The Potawottoman;
So much for all that tittle-tattle:
They've all gone into the built-up dark.
Yet my heart goes out to Louis Sullivan.
In the prairie of my heart, a little
Bird cries out against oblivion;
I know, I know, I know, I know, I know.
A shrike, perhaps. A siskin, or some such finch.
So much. So much So much ... So ...