The Strokes
A Verse Play in One Act

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Introduction

This play is about two people trying to reclaim a common language of understanding. The use of verse – with its rhythms, assonance and capacity for metaphor – seemed a natural choice for its expression. It is written in a customised pentameter: fractured, idiomatic. The theatre theory of Jacques Lecoq regarding the embodiment of text and the literary theory of Pierre Bourdieu regarding habitus, field and symbolic capital has informed the writing of the play. The MOTHER is located in her own broken habitus, profoundly transformed because of the strokes. The SON, rooted in his habitus, can no longer share his symbolic capital with the MOTHER, but she is still aware he has it: ‘This is my son. This is my son.’ They repeatedly try to cross a bridge of understanding, reclaiming in language an old customary relationship as they try to enter each other’s field of experience through memory and affection. The power/knowledge theory of Michel Foucault, particularly regarding the behaviour of the NURSE, the ORDERLY and the DOCTOR is indicated in the professional relationships with MOTHER and the SON. The panopticon aspect of the hospital is conveyed through the ever-present sound effects of buzzers, pagers and footsteps.
When did you arrive?

SON: When did I -? I told – I arrived yesterday.

MOTHER: Yesterday?

SON: Late.

MOTHER: You arrived yesterday?

SON: Came down by train. It was late, very late; dark, so very dark.

MOTHER: Dark?

SON: Dark. And wet. That’s why I came today.

MOTHER: Today?

SON: Yes. That’s why I’m here. Here today.

He gets up and turns off the dripping tap. He sits down.
MOTHER: Here today. And gone tomorrow.

SON: No, no.

I’m staying the weekend.

Pause. A buzzer sounds

MOTHER: What – what was that?


MOTHER: It isn’t nice here but what can I do?

Another buzzer.

The bab-wabs. The days are full of bab-wabs.

SON: I know.

Why did you come today?

SON: To see –

To see you. I arrived late, needed sleep.

MOTHER: They found you a bed? They – they put you up?

SON: No, no. Not here. The hotel.

MOTHER: Where?

SON: Nearby.

A pause. Footsteps in the corridor.
MOTHER:

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SON: The mirror. They’ve covered the mirror. Why?

How strange.

SON: The nurses seem nice.

MOTHER smiles.

SON: Why have they covered over the mirror?

MOTHER: Went out to fetch the goose-bumps, didn’t she?

SON: Why the mirror?

MOTHER: She did go, didn’t she?

SON: The mirror...

MOTHER: Mirror? She went out, she did.

Pause.

Eh, eh, eh; eh, eh, eh; eh; oo, oo, oo.
Eh, eh, eh; eh, eh, eh; eh; oo, oo, oo.

Pause.
A distant clock strikes eleven.

MOTHER:
Is it finished?

SON: The eleventh hour.

MOTHER: When -

When did you arrive?

SON: I – Last night.

MOTHER: Last night?

You arrived last night?

SON: I arrived last night.

MOTHER: They gave you a bed – here?

SON: Not here, no. No.

MOTHER: Where?

SON: In the hotel.

MOTHER: In the hotel?

SON: Yes.

MOTHER: You’re staying in the hotel?

SON: Yes, that’s right.
Not here?

MOTHER:

SON: No, not here. I could not stay here.

*A buzzer sounds.*

SON: The bab-wabs.

MOTHER: Bab-wabs?

SON: *The MOTHER laughs.*

MOTHER: Wab-babs.

SON: *She laughs again.*

SON: Wab – wab-babs?

MOTHER: Bab-wabs.

SON: *They laugh together.*

SON: Bab-wabs. Wab-babs.

MOTHER: Wab-babs.

SON: Bab-wabs.

*Pause.*

SON: *An ORDERLY looks in.*

ORDERLY: Everybody OK?

SON: *The SON and the MOTHER turn to look.*

MOTHER:
This is my son.

ORDERLY: Yes, we’ve met. Would you like a cup of tea?

MOTHER: Would you like a cup of tea?

SON: Yes. Yes please.

ORDERLY: Two cups of tea.

SON: The doctor is around?

ORDERLY: Up the corridor. Be here shortly.

SON: Right.

Why – why is the mirror covered over?

ORDERLY: Why is the mirror covered over?

SON: Yes.

ORDERLY: Well – Why is the mirror covered over?

SON: Please enlighten me.

ORDERLY: You see - well you see...

Why is - ? There are people in the mirror.

SON: There are people in the mirror?
ORDERLY:  
People in the mirror.

SON:  
Is that a problem?

ORDERLY:  
The medical staff  
Think it is.

SON:  
What if – what if they’re people  
She knows?

ORDERLY:  
Suppose that might make a difference.

SON:  
What harm can it do?

ORDERLY:  
What - ? Two cups of tea.  
He goes out.

SON:  
Bab-wabs.  
The MOTHER laughs.

MOTHER:  
Bab-wabs. So many of them.

SON:  
Yes.

MOTHER:  
Last week I went in the bath.

SON:  
In the bath?

MOTHER:  
I went in the bath.
SON:
You went in the bath?

MOTHER:
I went in the bath to Marks and Spencer’s.
He laughs. She laughs with him.
Funny, isn’t it? The nurse went with me.
They laugh again.

SON:
You mean a taxi?

MOTHER:
Yes. The bath, the bath.
Pause.
I don’t like it here but what can I do?
Pause.

SON:
Where’s the tea?

MOTHER:
When did you arrive?

SON:
The –

MOTHER:
The nurses are scoop. Croop boop and a doop.

SON:
I had my first sexual intercourse
With a nurse.

Pause.

MOTHER:
They’re very good.

SON:
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Pause.

SON:
I’ve murdered the Prime Minister. *Pause.*
The MOTHER laughs. And laughs.

MOTHER:
Good. Good.
They laugh together.

SON:
You remember the nurse, remember her?

MOTHER:
Eh, eh, eh; oo, oo, oo; eh, eh, eh; oo.

SON:
What is a mother?

MOTHER:
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SON:
Too late, too late, too late.

MOTHER:
It is too late.

SON:
No it isn’t. Yes it is. No it isn’t. *A tear falls.*

What is a mother? Someone always there
In time of need; a comforting presence
As we ascend the stairs; that kindly voice
First in the darkness; making all things safe
With a firm tone and a spell smile;
Someone who takes us where we need to be;
Eager in sacrifice, full of all love
As the hours strike. That is a mother. *Pause.*

MOTHER:
Eh, eh, eh; oo, oo, oo; eh, eh, eh; oo. *Pause.*
SON:
You look better. What’s that tied to your leg?

MOTHER:
How long are you staying? How long, how long?
Pause.
Sound of a trolley wheeled along a corridor.
The ORDERLY enters with two mugs of tea. He gives one mug to the SON, placing the other on a table near the MOTHER.

This is my son. (Slight pause.) This is my son.

ORDERLY:
We’ve met.
The doctor will be here soon. Well, enjoy.
The ORDERLY goes out.

When did you arrive?
Pause.
The SON drinks his tea. The MOTHER drinks her tea. They drink in silence.

SON:
Do you remember - ?

Yes, I do.

Pause.

SON:
Do you remember that time –

Yes, I do.

SON:
Do you remember that time
When we –
Pause. He stares at her, then recomposes himself.

MOTHER:

Eh, eh, eh; oo, oo, oo.

SON:

What’s the - ?

Pause. The MOTHER begins to sing.

MOTHER:

‘Away in a manger, no boo for a day
The little kabuki asleep in the hay.
The bob-wabs are bleating, the boo-boo awakes
But little kabuki no bob-wabs he......... takes.’

Pause.

I love to sing.

SON:

You always loved to sing.

MOTHER:

My father loved to sing. The piano –
Do – do you remember the piano?
I was just a girl. We girls loved to sing.
He bought a sing-song for a piano.
Wheeled it down the hill, down the hill a wheel
But – it ran away –

SON:

Chased it down the hill
Shouting ‘Piano, piano!’

They laugh.

MOTHER:

Piano, piano, piano!

SON:

Yes.

They continue to laugh.

Pause.

MOTHER:
Christmas. How we used to sing. Didn’t we?
She sings.

‘Way down upon the Swanee River...’

SON:
Yes.
Yes. Yes, I believe there was some singing.
Pause.
A distant clock strikes the quarter hour.
They listen.

The strokes.

SON:
Relentless. Have you thought about –

MOTHER:

Yes, I have.

SON:
- you thought about the future...?

You can’t go home. What is that on your leg?
The house will have to be sold. Very soon.
You can’t live alone in the house.

MOTHER:
House? House?

SON:
Do you remember the house? Your address?
Where you lived? Do you remember your house?
Pause.

Do you remember anything?

MOTHER:
The house...
There was a long, long, long, long garden.

SON:
Garden of memories...

MOTHER:
We should walk
There, walk there – go back to that green garden.

SON:
It should fetch a good price, fetch a good price.

Pause.
You remember the woods, remember Stoke woods?
You walked with us, knee-deep in bluebells.
Deep in the woods, you laddered your stockings,
Broke your heel, knee-deep in blue-bells –

MOTHER:
Bluebells.

SON:
We ran ahead, my – my – my friend and I,
Ran ahead, always a little ahead,
‘Wait for me’, you cried, ‘wait for me’ –

MOTHER:
Bluebells.

SON:
We ran ahead, into that green darkness,
Into that green womb alive with stardust –
Time surged backward – then we came to a stream –

MOTHER:
We did, didn’t we?

SON:
You tripped and fell – You -
You tripped and fell and - and laughed - at the smell –
They laugh together.

MOTHER:
Will you do the necessary?

SON:
Bluebells...
She sings.
'The bluebirds of Scotland
I hear they are smiling
Just like the old zoo-zoos
Who call back to me –'

MOTHER:

Pause.

SON:

You walked with us, into that green darkness –
Pause.
A NURSE enters.

We’re looking chipper.

NURSE:

This is my son.

MOTHER:

And sounding chipper. Yes, I’ve met your son.
She walks to the clip-board on the bed.
She picks up the clip-board and looks at it.

Now what are you going to have for dinner?
You should have filled this in, it’s overdue
You naughty girl. What are you going to have?
The MOTHER looks blank.

For lunch there is either ravioli
Or steamed fish with creamy mashed potato
With rice pudding or sorbet for dessert
And for dinner there is prawn sandwich
Or spicy cauliflower cheese and chips
Then raspberry jelly or yogurt punch.

Pause.

SON:

What’s yogurt punch?

The NURSE flicks through the menu sheets.
NURSE: Yogurt punch? It - it’s off.

SON: Off?

NURSE: Off. Well, lover, what – what do you choose?
What do you select from the menu?

Pause.

What?

Pause.

SON: Mum –

Lunch and dinner.

NURSE: Mum: you’ve got to choose.

Long pause.
The MOTHER looks from one to the other.
The NURSE becomes slightly exasperated.

SON: Ravioli or steamed fish for the lunch
With rice pudding or sorbet for dessert
And for dinner there’s the prawn sandwich
Or spicy cauliflower cheese and chips
Then raspberry jelly or yogurt punch.
What’ll you have?

SON: Mum – yes?

Pause.
The MOTHER looks in a state of controlled panic from one to the other.
The Strokes

MOTHER:
The usual.
The NURSE ticks several boxes, detaches the menu, puts down the clip-board on the bed, smiles at the SON and walks out. A distant clock strikes the quarter hour.

SON:
There must be two clocks.

MOTHER:
Strange, isn’t it! Mm.

SON:
Or maybe there’s one... repeating itself. Pause.

How long are you staying?

SON:
How long am I – We need to know how long you are staying. We need to know what happens next, what plans The hospital have for you, if any. What does the doctor think, what is the prognosis?

MOTHER:
Prognobis?

SON:
Prognosis.

MOTHER:
I don’t know that one.

SON:
We need to know how long you are staying. A buzzer sounds. Voices in the corridor.
The doctor. The doctor is on his way.
MOTHER:
And we are on our way.

SON:
Are on our way.
What is that hanging there on your leg?

MOTHER:
Eh?
She lifts her skirt. We see a bulging plastic catheter bag strapped to her leg.

It’s a choo-choo.

Loud voices in the corridor. MOTHER and SON sit and look at each other. Silence. The DOCTOR enters. He stands looking at both of them. The SON stands up.

DOCTOR:
Sit down, sit down. Please, please. Pause. The SON sits down.

SON:
My mother-

MOTHER:
This is my son, this is my son. The DOCTOR smiles.

I know it is your son.

Pause.

SON:
What happens now?

Pause.

DOCTOR:
That’s up to you.
SON:
Up to me?

DOCTOR:
It’s your choice.
Your mother can stay in the hospital
Until such time as, until such time as –

SON:
Yes?

DOCTOR:
You decide what to do with her.

SON:
What should I do? What would you recommend?

DOCTOR:
What would I recommend? You’re asking me?
With vascular dementia, vascular
Dementia, occasioned by the five strokes,
I would recommend residential care.
Strongly recommend residential care.
She needs round the clock care and attention.
Pause.

SON:
I will have to sell the family home.

DOCTOR:
Yes.
Pause.

SON:
Will she – will things – improve – will they improve?
The DOCTOR shakes his head.

MOTHER:
Good morning, doctor.

DOCTOR:
Good morning.

SON: No, no?
The DOCTOR shakes his head.
Silence.
He turns to go.

Let me know what you decide.
The DOCTOR smiles.
Let me know.
He goes out.
Silence.

SON: Mum, what do you – what do you want to do?

MOTHER: 

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SON: The doctor wants to know our decision.

MOTHER: 
You – you do – you do the necessary.

SON: Sell the house?

MOTHER: 
You take care of it all. Yes.

SON: You want me to sell the house?

MOTHER: 
Sell the house.

It’s all gone now. Isn’t it? It’s all gone.

Pause.

I’m old, what can I do? What can I do?

Pause.

SON:
He – he’s recommended residential care.

MOTHER:
I’m old, what can I do?

SON:
The place you chose
Last year – when you felt a bit wobbly,
When you had blurred vision, felt a bit funny –

MOTHER:
I know the place. I’ve been there many times.

SON:
You should have told us. You *could* have told us –

*Mother:*
*What has happened to me?*

*Pause.*
*What has happened?*
*Pause.*

SON:
There was a path –

MOTHER:
What has happened to me?

SON:
There was a path – we once followed a path –

MOTHER:
Followed a path –

SON:
- followed a path through it –
Knee-deep in bluebells, to a brown branched bank
Among celandine and primrose, wild fern
And snowdrop, the woods flooded with bluebells –

MOTHER:
Flooded?
SON:
Flooded through and through. It became
An undulating sea of blue and green
In that dark wood – a secret lake –

MOTHER:
Secret.
Yes. I remember.

A buzzer sounds.
We heard the bob-wabs.

SON:
There was a path – through that green darkness,
Through that green womb alive with stardust;
Night had fallen, we had ignored the night,
And had walked onwards, you, you came with us –

I came with you.

SON:
We walked on through the trees.
Walked through the trees, toward - toward that light
Not knowing if it were stars or moon. Do –
Do you remember?

Another buzzer.
MOTHER:
Did I come with you?
Pause.

Did I come with you?
Pause.

SON:
I must go soon. Go.
Must let the doctor know our decision.

We are not out of the woods yet.

SON:
No, no.
I can’t look after you, Mum. I can’t do it.
Pause.
MOTHER:
When did you arrive?

SON:
I arrived last night.

MOTHER:
Last night? You arrived last night?

SON:
Yes, last night.

MOTHER:
How long are you staying? How long? How long?

SON:
I can’t look after you.

The MOTHER smiles.

MOTHER:
There are people here.

SON:
I know. You have your visitors, don’t you? Who visits? Who are these people you see? The MOTHER smiles. She looks towards the mirror.

Anyone I know? Anyone we know?

MOTHER:
I don’t know why they’ve done that. I don’t know.

SON:
Strange, isn’t it?

Pause.

MOTHER:
You do what is needed.

Pause.

Do you remember the music?

Pause.
SON:
Music?

MOTHER:
He bought a sing-song for a piano.
You should always remember the music.
You should always remember the music.
I would play for my father, and sing, sing.
I would sing the piano in the room.
Sing the piano in the room.

SON:
Piano.

MOTHER:
I would sing the piano in the room.

Pause.
The ORDERLY enters.

ORDERLY:
The mugs.
He walks over and collects the mugs.

MOTHER:
That’s us.

ORDERLY:
Still able to make jokes.
That’s a good sign.

MOTHER:
He stands to attention and salutes the MOTHER.
Then he goes out.

SON:
I can’t look after you –
But I - but – I can follow the same path.
Follow the path.

MOTHER:
That’s a very good sign.
A distant bleeping Pager goes off followed by a scream.
The MOTHER shakes her head and shrugs her shoulders.

I don’t like it here, but what can I do? 

Pause.

When did you arrive? When did you arrive?

SON:

You will like it in the new place.

MOTHER:

Like it?

SON:

You will like it in the new place.

MOTHER:

New place?

SON:

You know it well.

MOTHER:

I know it well, do I?

SON:

You’ve been there.

MOTHER:

I’ve been there. Have I?

SON:

You’ll recognize it at once when you see. 

The MOTHER bursts into song.

‘Way down upon the Swanee River, 
Way, way, way down. 
That’s where my boo and goo are waiting, 
Far from the old folks at home.’ 

The SON gets up and stands before the mirror. He stands looking at it.
Platform 5.1, Transformations

A distant clock strikes the half hour.

SON:

Do you know what this is, Mum?

MOTHER:

A mirror.

Pause.

He slowly begins to tear strips of paper from the papered-over mirror. She watches.

SON:

Do you see anyone in there?

Pause.

MOTHER:

Yes.

Pause.

They look at each other.

Me.

Blackout.