Miriam
(For a performance-artist and pianist.)

William Osborne
Stage Directions

Miram is in an asylum. She is wearing a dirty, worn, white, sleeveless night gown extending past the knees. She is unkempt. She sits in a large, heavy austere wooden chair. Her lap and legs are covered with a white blanket.

Attached to the stage right side of the chair is a dowel holding a musical instrument. On each arm rest is a spring loaded clamp, triggerable to lock her wrists in place. Swiveled on the right arm is a small table, currently positioned in front of her, covered with small objects, and rotatable to the side of the chair. A thick dowel with a cross piece at the top rises about 40 centimeters from the center back of the chair. A heavy hemp rope is twined about the cross piece with one end looped over the stage left of the chair back. A white gauze veil is draped over the dowel and rope. Two rests extend from the lower front legs of the chair to support her feet. (See the drawing.)

She holds before her face a white plaster mask that leaves her mouth uncovered. It has a short, white handle on the stage left side, the eyes are cut to give the appearance of weeping. Light rises slowly on the mask, and then the chair as she begins to sing. All else is darkness.
She begins singing in darkness, the mask before her face. Light slowly rises on the mask, then the chair. All else is darkness.

Miriam
Part II: The Chair
(A chamber music theater work for soprano and piano with an optional instrumental part.)

William Osborne

Quiet and slow (p = ca. 48)

Sing-ing to her-self no ri-ver flow on deep wa-ter

and writes vigorously in the manuscript before here.

She sets down the mask.

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Subito

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Rhythmic, stress downbeats

She picks up the manuscript, looks at it, then resumes writing.

Noth-ing but emp-ty words - all use-less

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try to keep sing-ing just prat-tle a few more lines
a few more emp-ty lines-it just won't be stopped

inspects manuscript,

rip out, wads, and tosses a page over her shoulder
ditto
can-not be stopped

picks up manuscript and looks at it,
(very hard accents, almost sforzato)
(right hand only)

sets it down.

sets manuscript down.
looks at pencil still in hand.

writes in manuscript as before.
music no text, no scene, no theme, all dust. Nothing I can write, not long until I be-

puts it before her face and sings.

She suddenly sets the mask down.

Dead end! Nothing but empty words.

Not a whimper of truth, no text, nothing.

(examine point, both hands)
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takes the powder brush, powders her nose.

claps hands in prayer,

ironically claps hands in prayer,

suddenly breaks off to powder her nose

claps hands in prayer,

powders,

save me, oh Lord,

for the waters

puts it in sharpener,

puts down brush, takes pencil,

angrily

cranks,

steps, looks in mirror,

claps hands in prayer,

are come un-to my soul.

All useless! Nothing but empty words.

In search of a use-able text,

and finally cranks mindlessly while looking in the mirror thus considerably shortening the pencil.

tire-less and hope-less at-tempt to voc-a-lise sing-a-ble words.
She suddenly stops, looks at the pencil without removing it from the sharpener, takes the manuscript and turns to the side as if to throw it away.

Can't be longnow until they arrive.

She suddenly turns back front and sets the manuscript down.

but never mind. Nothing to sing at all, not a word to sing. Gar-vo-lous prat-ty-ning words, but nothing at all.

puts it before her face and sings.

breaks off, removes mask, pauses.

contemplates mask.

sets mask down.

Slower

Lo stesso tempo

faltering...

to sing. sing-ing to her-self no ri-er flow on deep wa-ter A drought up-on the wa-ters... gra-ven im-a-ges... mad... i - dols...
She looks at herself in the mirror and runs her fingers through her hair.

She sets the manuscript down contumaciously. The a-ter! No music no text. No scene, no theme. She looks in the mirror and tries to put her hair in order.
(both hands 8va)

and writes vigorously in her manuscript.

Come sopra

She throws pencil down, looks up reflectively, takes a small dictionary.

leaves the pages.

and reads:

Cantabile; non troppo lento

Piu mosso

spoken, dryly

Having passed the markb-sorbed. gone—by
persimmon in a hopeless pre-destination.

Find the dictionary and reach.
gone - et am gone -
goose gone -
gone - ness, state of ex-hausted, faint-ness.
gone-goose? a
She takes the make-up pencil, looks in the mirror, and draws a stylized tear under her eye.

As in waters

So the heart of man to man. Bah!

Rubbish!

Examines face in mirror.

Plasters mask.

Come sopra

Empy words.

Sets down mask and make-up

Takes the pencil.

Write vigorously in her manuscript.
slows to a halt, sets down pencil.
takes the eye-liner and uses the mirror to draw a stylized eyebrow over her left eye.
sets the make-up down, takes pencil.

sets the pencil down, puts the mask before her face, and sings.
singing to her self

sets the mask down.
takes the powder brush, powders her face, sets down the puff.
takes pencil, puts it in sharpener.
cranks vigorously leaving pencil in sharpener.
takes liner.
She slowly lowers her arms.

and sets the mask down.

She contemplates the strewn papers. Throughout the following section she orders the things on her desk top.

These tedious broken words will never make the stage.
Not that they would like to hear me speak, but all these frenzied words, these empty frenzied words,

wouldn’t their patience help them to lighten up? I mean lighten the lull that both-ers them when you’re mute?

But this is not what I ought to sing.

It’s clear that they would prefer that I follow the rules, that I warble some dead tune into the ground,
not a thought of who I am, 

hard-ly a mo-ment to be my-self, 

just the twit-ter-ing of a hap-py wo-man.

So shall I pour out a ri-ver of words 

that will flood o-ver them with their charm?
I mean something that tilates,
not a thought with connotations,
not a thought that has a bite,

but a word to entertain.

With increasing anger

Certainly prattling amusing,
even when forbidden to speak, so

warble away on a row of cheery tones,
nothing offensive to ears polite,
with a cas-can-do of happy notes, and your cordially smiling face.

But there are days when hardly a word appears, barely a tone, nothing at all, nothing to set me free, not even a sigh to help me to breathe,

just a stubborn hush.
what if I sing an- y thing that comes in- to my head, prat-tel-ing on just to keep up the rhy-mi-cal flow,

while they rum-mage a- bout in their cul-tured souls pon-der-ing what it means. Then may- be they'll shat- ter the si- lence with gra-cious ap-plause,

prob-ably think-ing your stut- ter-ing bab- ble was cle-ver.

They'll leave there i-mag- ing you are a-live,
to say nothing of your fas-ci-nat-ing body.

I-mag-ine that! All those i-mag-ined in-tel-lect-u-als,

softer, but still intensely angry

You know, all those i-mag-ined mo-ments,

faltering

when a woman gnaws off... gnaws off, her...

She rotates the table to the side.

and takes her instrument.

May-be a mel-o-dram-a.
She begins to tell a story interspersed with playing her instrument.

She was once a mother, but then came that day.

Father gone away. Mother left to care for all. She was buried in her song.

(Notes without text are always the instrumental part.)

She begins entering her story with increasing urgency.

Then the neighbor came and knocked, knocked at the door, but she played on to the end.
He says, you have left the wa-ter run-ning, run-ning through the floor.
She kept on, singing louder, with the neighbors there, neighbors running through the door, water running through the floor.
She becomes fully immersed in the terrors of her story.

Is An-na-com-ing?

Where is An-na?

Flash-ing lights pack-ing sing-ing her a-way.

ANN-NA!

Where is An-na?
She breaks off playing and screams, first slightly through the instrument, then without it in front of her mouth.

She returns the instrument to its stand, turns back then speaks.

Ah, I've had bet-ter nights.

But when it's pos-si-ble to sing all your words, you need say noth-ing.

Oh one sen-tence might have a point, but si-lence is the best.
But still, if the day comes you say a few words that seem like your own, will they be a bit... fake?

Can it be true that you have some words, good words, sing-a-ble words? played out to all of those looking at me, a wo-man and her voice in use-les ef-fort,
She takes the mask in her hand and looks at it.

sets the mask down, takes the pencil.

looks for paper but finds none

and writes obsessively and vigorously on the left palm of her hand.

One cannot believe there are so many words.
If I don't write, I can only sit here and look at my bindings.

Yes, that's what I always say, but then isn't always said?

I must keep my pencil
dull or my skin is cut away to the flesh.

More words and more words, but not a thing to sing.

Pause. She holds her gaze forward unaltered.

She turns the bleeding palms of her hands to the public, then slowly lays her arms on the arm rests of the chair. Long pause. Suddenly the wrists lock slam shut with a horrendous snap, one then the other, locking her wrists in place.

Some-times it's hor-ri-fy-ing be-ing
And yet it's difficult to think of... of not being here at all.

So I'll stay in my chair. Everyone probably feels a little cramped in.

But it should be very relaxing to be locked in my chair with all my things here.
say I'm in my own place. morendo poco a poco

Will they listen if I tell my story.

The common story.
The birth. The cesarean night in the clinic.

abdomen cut, the birth cord cut, the first embrace. and the stilling breast. The squeaks of the gum sole shoes when they wheel in someone new,
the clinks of the ap-par-ra-tus.

The dou-ble steel doors, the hys-ter-ec-to-my.

Then they took her home.

Come supra

The old-er child-ren had hard-ly de-part-ed when she rose,

start-ed the wa-ter... slipped... slipped off her night-gown,

start-ed the wa-ter for a long bath,

let the wa-ter flood the floor be-low, heard the door-bell ring-ing... hud-dled... hud-dled...
nak-ed... nak-ed on the floor.

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Too much fan-ta-sy.

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That's the ob-vi-ous dan-ger.

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But what if she's not i-mag-ined?
I mean, not i-ma-gin-ing her-self to be.

And what if she were real?

Why then she should just close her eyes

and keep on sing-ing.

She vocalizes to preserve her voice.

The weekend is here and my voice is dead!

Piu mosso; gradually building

It's so cold in this house! shi-ver con-stantly.

la la li la li li la li la

The week-end is here, and my voice is dead!
She vocalizes to preserve her voice.

ho ho ho ho ho ho ho

And this time I get a visit. du di li di li du di li du di li du

I'll ask them for some thermal underwear.

ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha if I can speak at all.

ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha I'll try to keep myself in

voice. we we we we we we we we we we we

I'm ready for them! pi pi pi pi pi pi pi pi

And if I can't sing, if I can't speak a word?
Becoming agitated to the point of madness. I'll start ap-ing things. Just like this. I won't sound like a...

She mimics singing. With a tone of anger.

I can't say how happy I am. I tell them how happy.
tell them how I feel. I say I love you

(I love you!) I force them to listen. (I love you.)

Cold angry glare

(I love you.) (I love you.)

She is suddenly still.

Subito molto quieto (z = ca. 72)

Sud-den-ly the door flew o-perand they all ran in and up she jumped and
up scream-ing An-nie! And ask-ing and ask-ing AN-NIE! AN-NIE! while they all ran a-bout look-ing for the spig-ot, the po-lice in all their par-a-pha-na-li-a the su-per,

Mis-ter Cle-mons, all run-ning a-bout for the spi-got, Math-ew and Mar-y and old Lad-y Hes-tand all run-ning a-bout watch-ing her nak-ed poi-soned,

poi-soned.

The left wrist lock raises and locks open, then the right. She takes her instru-ment and plays.
She returns the instrument to the rack.
Molto lento, quieto e sospeso

The night.
The light house, the swell-ling sea.
The arched back, The con-cep-tion.
No. On-ly night.

Long pause

She takes the mask. Light slowly fades to face alone, gaze forward.

The moon u-pon the sand.
On-ly sand.
Sing

Sing an-gry cries.

All dark except her face.
She puts the mask before her face, but can only be silent. Long pause.
She slowly removes the mask. Her gaze remains fixed forward.

I'll find the words.
I'll find some-thing.

Words.
The light dims.

Morendo poco a poco

She puts the mask before her face.

Slow fade to black.