



10-2005

The Natural: A Story in Three Scenes

A.E. Marlowe

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape>

Recommended Citation

Marlowe, A.E. (2005) "The Natural: A Story in Three Scenes," *Inscape*: Vol. 25 : No. 2 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape/vol25/iss2/5>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Inscape* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

The Natural: A Story in Three Scenes

a.e. marlowe

The prodigy of the class arrived only five minutes late. She couldn't be barred from the studio for lateness. Besides there was the excuse that after less than a year she was still rough on the protocol of the dance studio. Miss Breaker Marley was allowed in the room with merely a bushy-browed glare and a scornful "*Tu es en retardé.*" M. Girardin kept a mental roll of those who had displeased him. He never spoke in French to be understood; he spoke it so that others around him would understand. Miss Gloria Bennett always understood. Miss Marley, it seemed, did not understand.

"*Je regret,*" she cheerfully replied, flinging her yellow duffle bag against the wall, unzipping a hooded sweatshirt in three paces and tossing it to meet its compatriot on the fourth step. The tight fabric on her shoes made broom-scuffing noises against the dry wood floor. She took her place at the barre, glancing at the other girls (Gloria Bennett pretended not to notice but everyone noticed every stinking thing Breaker Marley did since she first strutted in the place), before assuming their position, her arm arced from the shoulder and her legs remarkably well-turned from the hip. She had hummed a couple of notes from *The Rite of Spring* before noticing that all was silent and they were looking at her in varying degrees of horror. "Oh. Right." She swallowed her cinnamon gum.

"Right," M. Girardin unconsciously echoed. "On we go then, one two three four five six seven eight, *and* one two three . . ." His black, black cane beat the rhythm into submission. "Fourth! *Sauté!*" he cried out and Gloria Bennett and the rest of the girls obediently switched, spring-loaded, into

fourth position, continuing the exercise. "Again," he commanded, and they did it again. He paced alongside, reviewing the troops as it were, if troops came in tulle and toeshoes. "Miss Ivanov, please keep your rear tucked under," he might call, and Miss Ivanov would very well tuck her rear, or "Miss Johnson, watch your elbow," and he could be absolutely certain Miss Johnson's elbow would in fact be well-watched. He almost never corrected Miss Bennett; she came prepared. When he passed Miss Marley he stopped and sighed. "Miss Marley," he said. "Do tell us why you are grinning." The arranged dancers smiled themselves, smugly and low. Gloria Bennett covered her mouth with the fingers of her free hand.

"Cause I'm enjoying myself?" She answered his stated question with a questioned statement, looking past M. Girardin to consult what the other dancers were doing with their mouths. She craned around behind and found only solemn lipstick buttons on pale, powdered faces. Miss Bennett blinked, innocently. Miss Marley hounddogged her gaze around to face the dancemaster. From the way the Frenchman's mustache twitched she could tell this wasn't the correct answer. She must try again. Darken the skies with arrows, her schoolteacher mother had always told her, and perhaps you'll hit the mark. "Not because I'm enjoying myself," she amended, drawing herself in serious and firm. "Because ballet is not enjoyable but it is hard work." That sounded like something M. Girardin himself might have said, and how could he disagree with his own motto? "But I smile . . . because I need to create the appearance that ballet is effortless for me." That, at least, was something she thought he was often shouting when the girls panted, or fell heavily on a leap, or grimaced after a long while *en pointe* without a break. Bullseye.

M. Girardin cocked his head to the right and pushed out his lips in contemplation. "We smile to make ballet appear effortless" (here, of course, he was not actually including himself in the first person plural) "when we are performing, Miss Marley, not when we are doing exercises."

She nodded vigorously, her close afro faintly bobbing. "Good." M. Girardin pulled himself up straight. He had made his point but was not entirely certain what his point was. He pulled at the end of his mustache and felt the perfect wide eyes on him.

"Why are my girls standing still? Again!" He demanded and Gloria Bennett and the girls started, then complied.

During the corps section, M. Girardin was frantically waved at from the doorway. The secretary of the school had a message for him from a self-important and needy donor. This was more important to the school than the girls of the first class. So he informed them that they were to practice the routine and left them to themselves. Immediately, the girls began splintering off from the corps. Gloria Bennett left first. She always considered these simple exercises mindless busy work. She hated doing them when she knew her time

was better spent somewhere else. Her talent was the type that should not get pulled back by a corps of other girls. She'd rather die, of course, than tell M. Girardin that. But she didn't have much time to practice before tryouts for *Swan Lake* and every moment mattered. People who got a good role in *Swan Lake* almost always got into the professional troupe. After Gloria Bennett left there was really no sense in everyone having to stay.

The Sorensen girls wandered off to work on their *pas de trois* with Carol Whitefield and then the Russians left to watch Irena Volkova's *assemblé*. Then the rest of the girls slunk off to get a drink, examine their technique in the mirrors, or merely gossip while presumably stretching long limbs longer. The effect was an orchestra run backwards, as if when the conductor leaves the musicians tune and release spit vales and knock their stands against each other.

Breaker Marley alone maintained the corps piece, but only because by then her muscles were on autopilot. *The petit sautés*. *The ronde de jambe a terre*. Whatever. It was only when the New York girl laughed at Sarah Johnson's dirty joke that Miss Marley realized she was a corps of one. She came to a stop slowly, like waking from a daydream when you overhear your name. She dazedly looked around her, stretched one leg out behind and yawned. Scratching the back of her neck, she mazed her way to the drinking fountain.

She heard applause while bent over the stainless steel basin, watching the water run in spirals down to the drain. When she craned her neck around, she could just make out the stiff fingers of Gloria Bennett, midleap, as they poked over the heads of her admirers. Forgetting she was thirsty, she nudged her way through the pink-suited crowd adoring Gloria Bennett. While Gloria's feet wood-scratched and thumped, the only other noises in the room were whispers that Gloria Bennett had studied under more than one master in her extreme youth and was now favored for a principal in M. Girardin's professional troupe, provided she keep up her practice before and after class and not put on any more weight.

She performed a flawless *chaines series en point*, twisting left and right in a graceful little circle, a leaf spinning side to side before its rest. She tried not to stick her tongue out of the corner of her mouth in concentration. The effort was worth it. Even the Russians looked up at the sudden quick little motion and clapped. Breaker Marley clapped too, but the difference was that on the last beat of her clap, as if it had been M. Girardin's heavy cane, she sprung up herself and performed the same *chaines*, to the last flick and adding on to it a *battlement glisse*, the little flutter of kicks, before and after. She grinned broadly, without looking at Gloria Bennett, who felt as though a safety net had been pulled from beneath her. She desperately scrambled for composure, tilting her chin a notch higher, becoming a perfect imitation of Alice Markova.

But when Gloria Bennett one-upped Breaker Marley by launching into her *Giselle* solo audition piece, the mad scene, Breaker Marley followed directly in her shadow, as if she had trained every minute with Gloria

Bennett. Two paces behind, a beat, or less than a beat after, Breaker Marley performed the perfect imitation of Gloria Bennett, except that the imitated kept tossing her head behind her to cast incredulous dislike at the unbanned ballerina behind her. Why was that bushbeater doing this to her? What, was she trying to humiliate her?

The audience of girls loved it. There were not few jealous of Gloria Bennett's stranglehold on artistic superiority. All the same, they were waiting for Breaker to misstep, to slip up, hopefully even spill to the floor. It would prove only that you can't just waltz into this academy and play ballerina. But Breaker Marley didn't. Didn't fall that is, or slip or misstep, and when Gloria Bennett finished the sweepingly dramatic piece, she was compelled to continue her lead. She couldn't focus; she had no idea where her next steps would take her. She could feel the sweat on the soft hairs at the nape of her neck. *Never let them see you sweat*, she suddenly remembered from somewhere.

Gloria Bennett stumbled into a series of pseudo-assured *sauté pas de basque* and *pirouettes*. But Breaker Marley's attention wandered from Gloria's tenuous motions. She spun out and leapt up into one *pas de chat* after another, then, teeth bearing, dashed around the room in terrible flight, huge leaping steps like a man, scarcely keeping one foot on the ground and never resorting to both, she dusted the floor to the corners while terrified Gloria Bennett demanded back her audience with variations on the *pas de bourree*, little foot-bound steps run forward and back in vain as the very rhythm of Breaker Marley's footdrops and brushings possessed even the New York girl frozen with her hair half retied, even the Russians awed into an unsmug silence, even M. Girardin, who stood in the doorway, his cane keeping him upright, tripodded between his black-trousered legs. Miss Marley finished in a spectacular double *tour en l'aire*, seven hundred and twenty degrees of midair finesse, finished in a steady *arabesque*. Until she noticed M. Girardin. And the rest of the class. And Gloria Bennett, beginning to tear up.

"Uh" was the only noise she was able to call out of her mouth as the Cheshire grin broke into straight-faced embarrassment. Miss Bennett, unable to face the fallout of all this, snatched her bag, two-handed, from beside the wall and fled the class, clutching the bag tightly to her chest, which seemed to resist her breathing. Her face burned with double-bound humiliation: first the event, then her childish response to the event. She felt as though everyone was staring and judging. But Miss Marley was the only one watching Miss Bennett's near-silent departure.

"Class is dismissed," M. Girardin intoned dully, still looking at Miss Marley, who was polished with a thin layer of sweat, which she desperately wanted to wipe away from her face, if everyone would get their eyes off her.

The class broke like a storm, first in whispers and shuffles, then impatient flung limbs and calls after each other, then full hurricane force of runs and stops, bags miraculously flung up and locker doors flung shut. In the midst of

such a storm, Miss Breaker Marley found refuge, hiding from M. Girardin's stare behind gusts of ballerinas, demurring from conversation by excuse of the clamor of lockers, the flurries of leotards and tights protecting her from a locker room encounter. And when she was gone, riding alone on the bus, and when Mrs. Baker called about the *Swan Lake* tryouts, M. Girardin was still frowning to himself, his hands wrapped around each other, wrapped around his cane, the eye through the storm and the eye in the calm.

Breaker Marley caught up with Gloria Bennett at a corner which could be seen from the window of the studio. Her bus stop was just across the street, and coming up on Gloria, she couldn't just say nothing, not after all that. "Hey Gloria, how are you doing?"

Gloria rolled her lips in on themselves. She fingered the edge of her cardigan, feeling the smooth, fine knit. She kept her eyes staring up the street, trained on identifying cars that could be her father coming to get her.

"Uh . . . okay. I guess I'll see you tomorrow then," Breaker took a step off the curb, not heeding the great glowing stop signal.

"What?" Gloria's head snapped around, incredulous. "What? That's it?"

"What's it?" Breaker pivoted back. She took a stick of gum out of her sweatshirt pocket and tore it in half before unwrapping it and laying it on her tongue like it was communion. "You didn't want to talk about it, so I figured I'd go wait for the bus."

"You just don't get it, do you?" Gloria shook her head, her bun resisting the motion. She was very conscious that she was getting angry, but she had known that she would be angry with Breaker, had been plotting it from when her hands touched the cold familiar door leading out into the street. "I can't believe that you just don't get it."

"Hmm, what?" Breaker furrowed her forehead and leaned in with exaggerated curiosity. "Oh, did you want the other half of the stick? I should have offered, huh?" She knew that Gloria wasn't talking about gum, but something hard in her made her say it.

"I'm not talking about that." Gloria felt her rage boil the remnants of tears on her cheek. "I'm talking about what just happened there. Why the . . ." (this was an appropriate time to swear) "hell did you think it was okay to just humiliate me in front of M. Girardin, in front of everyone?" The "hell" hadn't worked. It felt calculated in her mouth, like a science experiment of profanity.

Breaker seemed to have picked up the thread anyway. She scratched the back of her neck with one short-nailed hand. "I wasn't trying to humiliate you. I just wanted to, you know, dance." Her strange mouth frowned. "I probably got a little carried away. It was just the moment and I knew I could do it if I tried, so, what the heck, right?"

"No! Not right," Gloria turned full face towards the force that was Breaker Marley. "I don't care if you've never danced before, I don't care that

you're just doing this while your 'kickboxing'" (she put the word in verbal quotations and raised her eyes upward momentarily) "career is on hold, I don't even care that you're" (she was going to go with "a hell of a lot" but after the last attempt she thought she maybe ought to pull back) "better than me." She knew that she had spoken lies, knew that Breaker also probably knew, but she also knew she had to officially deny it. "But why are you so damn cold about everything?" That one just slipped out.

"Cold?" Breaker took a long blink. She had never heard herself described that way before. Everyone thought she was friendly, quirky, outgoing. Her mother used to call her "Sunshine." Breaker reeled with the accusation. She caught her breath thickly in the autumn cool. "I'm sorry; I guess I've never thought of myself as cold before." She glanced at Gloria and found her unrepentant and staring out into the street. "Usually people think I'm spontaneous and fun," she defended half-heartedly. She zipped her yellow sweatshirt up to her neck.

"That's just the problem." No, somehow that didn't fit with what Breaker had said. "I mean, not that people think that, but being spontaneous, what you did up there." (Gloria flung an outraged loose gesture towards the window of the studio, didn't even follow it with her eyes, just let the motion happen.) "Did you stop to think what you were doing? What you were doing to me? How everyone was watching? M. Girardin!" Her throat felt tight and heavy.

"I wasn't thinking," Breaker quietly confessed. "I just wanted to dance."

"No, you weren't thinking," Gloria sparked. "You don't want to even be a ballerina. You won't try out for *Swan Lake*, you won't go out for the professional troupe, you'll be gone as soon as you can get back to your stupid kickboxing. This may not matter to you, but it means an awful lot to some people." Her hand slapped her chest, harder, more dramatically than she intended and the clap was audible. With so many melodramatic strikes against her, she went for no-holds-barred. "Do you know why you don't have any friends here in the city? Because you don't care. You don't care about ballet, you don't care that no one here likes you, and you don't care that anyone else is in that room! You think you have nothing to lose and everyone knows it. You're entirely contained and maybe that keeps you from being embarrassed or scared, but it also keeps you from thinking that other people might be. You, Breaker Marley, are just quintessential Ice Queen from the bush."

The crosswalk chirped cheerily. "I think I've missed my bus," Breaker dully remarked, looking over her shoulder. She realized this was a perfect illustration of whatever Gloria was talking about. But she felt so numbed, so oppressed that she retreated into this banality. Maybe this was exactly what was wrong with her. Maybe this is what Gloria was talking about. She shrugged her shoulders, but couldn't conjure up repentant tears. "I'm sorry."

"I don't think you are," Gloria retorted. She wasn't very angry, though. She felt the anger using itself up and leaving a thick, sticky residue of regret

and exhaustion. She wasn't the kind of girl that said things like that; she hadn't been raised for catfights. Gloria felt she might even cry again, from the sheer effort of the thing she had done. She would have to wash her face when she got home. "Maybe someday you'll wonder how you got through life being so smug and . . ." and she had nothing to say and her father's smooth Beemer drew up like a satin ribbon along the curb. "I have to go." She hitched her bag up around her shoulder. She knew how to get into the car like a lady.

"Hey sweetie," her father said over the BBC news. "How was class today?"

"Fine."

"That's nice, dear. Who were you talking to over there? A friend?"

"A girl from my class." She didn't feel like talking.

Gloria Bennett then caught up with Breaker Marley in the lockerroom the next day. They were both early. Breaker was listening to hip-hop on her iPod, swaying her head like a snake and mouthing the emphasized words that only she heard. She was slowly lacing up her shoes. Gloria saw that she was oblivious and considered just backing out of the lockerroom, taking a long trip to the restroom and telling herself that she'd just avoid Breaker for the next couple of months, until she got into the professional troupe. But Breaker thwarted her, removing her earbuds and draping them around her neck. "Hey, Gloria. How are you doing?"

Gloria smiled ironically. No getting out of it. She knew she'd have to deal with this sooner or later. "Hi, Breaker." She leaned back, folded her arms across her chest, her smile like a laser cut sticker on her smooth white face.

When Breaker shook her feet out and started to return her headphones, she stopped suddenly and struck out, "Gloria, actually, can we talk?"

"Sure we can talk." She was actually hoping for this. She was glad Breaker had started it, though.

Breaker had already swung her legs up on the bench, holding on to her round knees. Her lungs filled with a steady breath. "It's about yesterday." Gloria felt herself blush a little and had to restrain her emotions, holding on to her right shoulder with her left arm.

"Listen, Breaker, I'm really sorry about what I said yesterday." She had this planned, had been planning it since the quiet ride home the day before. "That was inappropriate of me. I was just feeling . . . a bit like a trapped animal, I guess, so I just lashed out. It was rude. I'm sorry."

Breaker shifted on the bench, crossing her legs under her as she wound up her headphones around her hand, slowly. "Okay. I mean, I forgive you, I guess. I thought about it, though. What you said. I think maybe you're right." She had thought it the whole bus ride home, while doing kickboxing drills at her cousin's dojo, she even woke several times during the night to punch the pillow and mutter to herself, "I'm a jerk! Man, what was I *thinking*?" The bad

taste of the previous day was still in her mouth. "I'm . . . I'm going to work on being more, open, I guess." She smiled hopefully at Gloria, whose stomach suddenly ached.

Gloria sat down, her knees pointed towards Breaker, intimate. She took a long deep breath, controlling it so that it wouldn't be so obvious. "Have you really never danced before this class? Because if so, it's okay; you can tell me and I won't tell the other girls. It's not that I'm accusing you of lying because I would *never* do that." It came out so phony, so drama-queen, so made-for-TV-movie.

Breaker leaned back, her long arms lengthening, her spine curving. Her funny mouth formed a frown. "Uh, no, this really is my first year." She cast a long sideways glance at the anxious blond and offered a little sideways concession smile. "But I am an athlete, so it's not like I haven't spent hours conditioning my body."

"Oh that's right, kickboxing and everything." Gloria tried to think well of Breaker's sport, but all she could conjure was the image of small Thai boys spitting teeth and blood framed by the shaking fists of gamblers around a ring. She was skeptical that it had anything to do with the controlled rigor of ballet. "But why ballet? I mean, it's not a typical crossover, is it?"

Breaker laughed, shaking her head. "No, probably not." She realized this was usually where she'd get off, but if that was what Ice-Breaker would have done, she'd have to go on. "Actually, it's a concession to my mum. She was a bit traumatized about the whole kickboxing thing. She's always wanted me to try something a little more graceful and less, uh, brutal. And so when I had that concussion during semi-finals last year . . ."

"What?" Gloria leaned forward, keeping herself balanced by holding on to the bench with both arms. "You had a concussion?"

"Yeah," she conceded with a series of small, fast nods. "Got hit pretty hard in the noodle." She pointed to the spot on her head. "It was scary, and my coach was freaking out and everything. So I had to promise Mum I'd take a break for a while." She sighed and leaned her chin on her hands. "Which is sad, because I think I really had a chance for nationals. But there's always next year, so I was all, 'so what am I going to do to keep, you know, fast and smooth' and then I thought: hey, I like the New York City Ballet Workout, so why not give ballet a shot?"

Gloria grinned, would have laughed if it wouldn't have been rude. "Really? As in the New York City Ballet exercise tape?"

"Oh, absolutely. Every girl knows how a few million *pliés* keep a figure trim." She rolled her eyes. "A bunch of my girlfriends and I would do that routine every day after school. I think I can recite the instruction from memory."

"So you don't care about ballet?" Gloria tested the water gingerly.

"Well, I care, I mean, I don't not care. Well . . . okay; ballet's great fun, and I haven't felt so pretty in a long time, and I like the idea of being up on a

stage but . . . ” She linked her fingers and rested them on the top of her head. “I mean, you’re right; I don’t seem to have any friends here, even when I try to be nice or try to be a real ballerina like the rest of them.” She felt awkward that she was sharing this with such an almost stranger. She knew she had to get used to it and just buck up. “And M. Girardin’s a little . . . ” she tilted her head slightly. “You know.”

She did know. Gloria laughed, “I think it’s because they’re all jealous of you.”

“Jealous?” Her eyes shot wide open. She thought they just hated her. She thought Gloria was a nutcase, too, so maybe her first impressions were imperfect. “Really? But they’re these brilliant dancers. They’ve all been dancing since birth practically. Some of them have traveled around the world dancing. Like the Russians or that New York girl. I think she even went to this fancy school in Paris.”

“The Paris Opera Ballet School.”

“Right. Why’d any of them be jealous of me?”

“Because you’re good, Breaker. You’re really good. And we’re all ostriches.”

“Ostriches?”

Gloria smiled thinly and stretched her legs out before her. “Remember ‘Dance of the Hours’ in *Fantasia*?”

“The one with the dancing hippo?”

“Exactly. No one remembers the ostriches.”

Breaker caught on fast. “Ostriches, they should dance. I mean, of course, they shouldn’t, but if any animal were to dance, you’d bet it would be an ostrich.”

“Exactly. They have those long feet, the eyelashes, the neck,” Gloria stroked up her own neck from the clavicle to the jaw.

Breaker laughed. “But a hippo, that’s worth remembering.”

The door to the lockerroom opened and two Russians, talking loudly while pulling up their hair, claimed the room.

“Oh, no. Looks like we’ve lost our practice time.”

“I probably would have just wasted it. I guess I don’t really mind.”

“Neither do I.” She slowly folded up her sweater, fingering the collar. A Russian slammed a restroom stall door, the echo ringing in unison to her nervous laugh. “Breaker?”

“Yeah?”

“You aren’t going to try out for the professional troupe, are you?”

The other girl shook her head, her tight curly hair following a beat behind. “I want to be a mathematician when I grow up. It turns out I’m a natural.”

“A mathematician! Really!” She laughed so hard that she had to lean way over, looking between her knees at the cold floor, her eyes welling up with tears.