dear heart: an autoethnographic exploration of the playwriting process through adaptation as reclamation and community curiosity

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ABSTRACT

dear heart is an autoethnographic exploration around playwriting and creation processes. *dear heart* as an artistic offering is the textual record of the text-based experiment upon which this thesis is predicated. The thesis itself is a distillation around the methodology of the author's process – a shareable articulation to serve as a bedrock for educational material in professional and academic settings. The author will articulate theoretical and analytical reflections of the role of instinct and positionality in the creation of performance texts, and to apply consciousness to the often-subconscious impulses of creation. The author interrogates the role of adaptation and community curiosity as methodology for other playwrights, through research into relational aesthetics and curational theory from visual art.

DEDICATION

For Iris, Brian, Joanna, Stephen, and all the dramaturges who taught me that

The personal is oh so political.

For Pierre, Orion and Sherlock for being my family.

For those who must write to survive.

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To my family, who still don't quite understand why I do what I do, thanks for the constant remembrance of where I came from.

To Pierre for being my everything.

It is a rare moment in a life to love and be loved, and from the bottom of my heart, I love you all for everything that you are, and everything that you allow me to be. Thank you.

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Artistic Challenge Document

dear heart is a text based theatrical experiment around connection, artistic interpretation, and the concept of a textual portrait. The lower case spelling of *dear heart* is inspired by bell hook's impulse to write her name in a similar fashion to highlight the content of this thesis, rather than focus on the title. The primary organizing theme of *dear heart* is autoethnography, which I will explain further in the thesis. Within autoethnography as a conceptual frame, I employ relational aesthetics, community curiosity, and adaptation as reclamation. These related themes support and mobilize my use of autoethnography. It is important to note that *dear heart* as an artistic offering is the textual record of the experiment. The thesis itself is an attempt to distill the methodology of how I came to write these pieces. I will hone in on specifically on how I wrote artistic responses for others, and find a way to articulate this process as a potential path of education in my continued work as an educator in professional and academic settings. The artistic offering, *dear heart,* is a collection of monologues, scenes, letters, other textual forms and genres inspired from the various hearts and souls I encountered throughout my time as an MFA student at York University. The writing experience has been an indelible and delicious experiment in writing rapidly in response to artistic offerings from others, or writing in response to observations of specific individuals, or writing in reflection of the various capacities I've held at my time with the institution. These experiences range from teaching as a TA, from being a student with various levels of undergraduate and graduate students, and finally from being a performer again for a professional setting in a different city (St. Johns, Newfoundland). By the sharing in April, 2023, I have over a hundred pages of material, strewn together through video,

pages, audio transcripts and visual material of two years of time spent with many hearts, a collection of artistic portraits.

The artistic challenge of *dear heart* is threefold:

1) How do I write as rapidly as possible in response to individuals I meet, and how do I artistically interpret the impact they've had on my heart and soul, while offering back a piece of text that instinctively captures a piece of their heart. Once these multitudes of offerings have been written, another artistic challenge presents itself, one of order and chronology and shape: How do I take these various disparate "portraits," and find a shape for them? As these pieces cannot be predetermined (I cannot write a portrait for someone I've not encountered yet), how do I decide upon style, genre, and form? What is the artistic process of these decisions? Also, how then do I best capture these portraits as a document? For some, I've asked folks to record themselves reading it, or I am in the room with them recording their reading of this portrait – a filmed documentation of these responses. For some, I've left it as text on a page, almost as pieces of theatrical monologues that could be picked up by anyone else to read aloud.
2) The other challenge that blooms from *dear heart* is simply: How am I doing this? How do I write? How do I receive the gift of the beautiful souls I meet in this specific framework of time, and how do I gift them something tailored for them, through words? How do I make any of these decisions? In all iterations of the sharing of progress of this work, I have received feedback around how accurate or astute these observations have been, and emotions and laughter always ring loudly in these sharings. In one meeting last year, Professor Eric Armstrong asked my cohort if these portraits felt true to the persons

who read them, to which my dear colleague Madeleine Martin responded with dry wit: "terrifyingly so." How did I do any of this? What is the process of meeting someone, and experiencing all that they offer as a human: from a speech pattern or physical tic, to their sense of humour, and to the various human qualities of operating day to day in our obligated social demands. Then, how do I capture that as an artistic portrait for them in a single take of writing? Does it need to be accurate? Does accuracy demand literalness? Where is the space for poetry and abstraction within a portrait, and can that still resonate truthfully for the participant?

3) As noted, *dear heart*, is the artistic record, while the thesis itself is the reflection, and distillation of process into an articulatable, shareable, and practical methodology. As part of the process of performance creation, there is an inevitable step of taking the page to the stage, of finding a shape and form for the performativity of the text. Another challenge arises from this: what is the performance potential of *dear heart,* and what are the potential forms and permutations? How do I weave in the shareable methodology and performance texts into a hybrid presentation? Also, what is the role of the audience in this? In many ways, the art happens between the writer and the participant, and the sharing of it between each other is the moment of connection, recognition, acknowledgement, and experiment. Presenting this hybrid presentation in front of an audience adds another layer of connection, and so, what are the ways that audience engagement may be facilitated? How can audience be involved in the experiment of *dear heart*, and how might they be part of the process of the articulated methodology that underlies each and every generated text? Might they partake in some exercises that could allow them to generate their own pieces of writing?

These myriads of questions serve as an incredible artistic challenge for myself as a playwright and artist, and as a human being. Drawing from experience as a professional playwright, I've had to meet demands of commissions with deadlines, with given parameters (for example, adaptation of Greek plays), and with specificity for narrative arc and other forms of playwriting "rules," (there aren't any). But through my time working as a professional playwright over the last decade, I have generated material entirely through impulse and instinct. I have had no actual formal education in playwriting, having been educated as a performer at the National Theatre School of Canada. My falling into playwriting was a constellation and collision of time, artistic opportunities, faith, and luck in meeting many mentors that opened pathways for me. I now work as a playwright as often as I work as a performer, with multiple commissions from multiple sizes of companies across the country, and with productions and publications throughout the last decade. *dear heart* and this hyper-specific and hyper-personal examination of instinct and process, is the very first time in my writing career to take a pause, a breath, and ask – how am I doing any of this? What are the underlying beats of technique or patterns that have translated instinct into performable text? It is also a chance to reckon with a firm faith I hold in the performing arts, that live performance, and playwriting is an offering from the heart, a gift for a team of artists, and for an audience. In committing to reflecting and deeply investigating my personal process, it is my hope that exercises, methodology and process can be laid out through *dear heart*, so that it can enliven and expand the ways that I can articulate the process of playwriting through the hyper-specific and the hyper-personal. This is all in the hope that it may be a process that I can then carry forward past my time in the MFA as potential resource for other actor/playwrights, as a unique way of rapidly responding to instinct, observing with all our

sensations and translating that into text, and to tap into the deep personal well of humanity within all of us towards the pursuit of sharing our own heart for the world and for others.

Documentation and Outcomes-in-process of the Artistic Challenge

It feels apt in a process like this to first articulate the documentation of *dear heart.* I will describe the participants for each section of text, as well as provide some brief context in how their initial sharings took place. I have created:

Seventeen Monologues for THEA 4030 (4th Year Movement with Allyson McMackon)
Participants: Allyson, Marianna, Miranda, Tito, Alex, Anton, Lonelle, Jordan, Owen, Tatyana, Jadyn, Tuna, Eliza, Trinity, Jessie, Pyper, Johnny.

These pieces were created as artistic interpretations of the movement work that the 4th Year York Acting Conservatory students embodied during their work with Director and Educator Allyson McMackon, a class that I took as part of my training at York University. Often drawing from a gesture that I observed, writing was generated to interpret their movement. With everyone's consent, these monologues were read aloud as part of the last class of the term, where the order of these seventeen monologues were determined by the students themselves, with agency and emotional logic proving to be a guiding point for chronology.

Six Monologues for THEA 5210 (Grad Research Seminar with Professor David Jansen)
Participants: Monica Dottor, Madeleine Martin, David Jansen, Mattea Kennedy, Sean Mulcahy, and Daniella Vinitsky Mooney.

As part of our 2021 Fall Term in the MFA Performance Creation Program, the MFA cohort (Performance Creation and Design) were in a class together in preparation for the comprehensive exam. As part of the class, we were assigned a manifesto to speak about our work. My manifesto took the shape of artistic responses for everyone in the class, including Professor Jansen. As the class was entirely on zoom, the consensual readings were also shared virtually with each monologue tailored for that form. The monologues were comedic in nature, often bringing to light an observation of personality or physical / verbal pattern that I had observed in my colleagues. A thematic throughline around Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage* served as a container and order for the pieces.

One Scene for THEA 5076 (Performance Creation with Keira Loughran)

Participants: Monica Dottor, Madeleine Martin, Daniella Vinitsky Mooney, Garrett Ryan, Sodienye Waboso Amajor, Keira Loughran, Erika Batdorf.

As part of a yearlong class in Performance Creation with my MFA cohort (with the addition of Garrett and Sodienye), it felt apt to capture the class dynamics and joy and rigour of the class in a scene that involved both our Professor Loughran and Professor Batdorf. With everyone's consent, the scene was shared as part of our last day in class in Spring, 2022 with everyone in the cohort reading it aloud for the first time as a cold read.

One Monologue for THEA 4290 (Playwriting with Nina Lee Aquino)

Participants: Nina Lee Aquino.

Nina Lee Aquino has been one of my most prominent mentors, and I quite simply would not have a career if not for her. To get this chance to be in her playwriting class, as a bit of a

double agent, both in generating writing as part of the class, and to shadow her teaching to deepen my learning of playwriting education, was hugely fulfilling. As part of *dear heart*, I created a monologue that honoured Nina in multiple ways: in her multiple achievements as an artist, her new tenure as the Artistic Director of the National Arts Centre, and as a dear mentor and friend. I wrote a monologue for her and with her consent, I recorded her reading through video means.

Two Monologues for the Summer Term

Participants: Jillian Keiley and Scott Jones.

As part of my summer term, I traveled to St. Johns, Newfoundland to work on Artistic Fraud's *I Forgive You*. It was a collision of time and persons that made this summer very special, having just written a piece for Nina as she began her tenure at the NAC, and catching Jill Keiley just as she was leaving that exact job. I wrote a monologue for Jill with that similar framework as Nina's, to celebrate her achievements, and her legacy at the NAC and beyond, and to also honour the very specific and rigorous rehearsal process that took place August, 2022. *I Forgive You* was a verbatim piece based on Scott Jones, someone who survived a homophobic assault that left him paralyzed. There are no words to articulate what it meant to be a part of his story on stage, and to meet and collaborate with him. I wrote a letter for him as part of my thesis, that I hope captures the spirit of that summer spent with Scott. Both pieces have been filmed with their consent.

Four Monologues for the Prince Hamlet Tour

Participants: Ravi Jain, Neha Ross, Miriam Fernandes, Sturla Alvsberg, Andrew Musselman, Eli Pauley, Barbara Gordon, Monice Peters, Dante Jemmott

In the fall of 2022, I embarked on a two-month, eight city tour of Why Not Theatre's *Prince Hamlet,* reprising my role as Ophelia across American and Canadian stages. As part of my work with Why Not Theatre, I often took part in residencies at American University's where I began the process of creating exercises to share the creative process generated from *dear heart*. I will articulate those specific experiments and sessions in the following section. In terms of writing during this period, I generated four monologues that were in response to the political news and conversations I was encountering in American Universities around censorship, adaptation, and questions around democracy.

One Monologue for THEA 5077 (Performance Creation with Erika Batdorf)

Following the tour of *Prince Hamlet,* I returned to York University, and generated a monologue entitled *For Ophelia.* Following the structure and prompt that I started with my very first set of writing from THEA 4030 (Movement with Allyson McMackon), I generated a text that was in response to having embodied the role of Ophelia over five years, and across dozens of theatres. It is a rare gift to have followed a character for so long, and an even rarer gift to be able to engage in conversations around gender, race, and ability by embodying this canonical character. Knowing that this would be the last time I ever perform this role in my lifetime, I generated an artistic response that served as a culmination of reflections with the process of following Ophelia across borders and beyond.

Research of the artistic challenge

As the artistic challenge involves reflection upon the process of writing itself, as well as researching potential pathways for a container for the piece, I took a deep dive into various points of inspiration both as a writer, as well as researching potential pathways into different models of curation and performance.

In researching similar modes of writing, including the body of work I've written both for *dear heart* and my professional plays, the theme of adaptation and identity was a clear one to begin with as a point of research. It felt apt to research and articulate the hyper-specific and hyper-personal positionality from which I write from, as every piece I've reflected to participants have always been through the world view with which I perceive. Adaptation is a weighted concept that swirls continuously in me. Adaptation resides within me as an immigrant, the "*adaptation* to a Canadian life," so to speak. By extension, migration as adaptation exists as study that governs the ways we view evolution in all forms of life. Adaptation resides within my very racial context, as a Hong Kong born Chinese, my HK culture is an adaptation of Chinese and British Colonial influences, a product of cultural collision. scholar Eva Kit Wah Man so aptly articulates this influence "… since the mid-nineteenth century, Hong Kong has experienced more cultural interchange than any other Chinese city. This is largely due to its colonial heritage and its geographical position as the southern outlet of China." (Wiseman and Yuedi, 363)

Most pressingly, adaptations reside within me as a playwright. There is a rite of passage for "new" Canadian stories from IBPOC writers, oftentimes solo shows (Anusree Roys' *Letters to my Grandma,* Anita Majumdar's *Fish Eyes,* Cliff Cardinal's *Huff,* etc.*)* that open windows into marginalized identity. In some way, I feel a touch of mischievousness towards that pressure (and

very much fell into, via my first play *trace*), to say yes, but why can't I also take a stab at the Greeks, or Shakespeare, or what have you? And deeper to that, what is it that is so core to these enduring myths that demand a new retelling, an adaptation that both reveals something of the now, and of the source material? My takes on the Greek were commissions, with the source material offered to me to adapt, rather than of my own choosing. There is something fateful in how it happened, similarly how it felt fateful to cross paths with the participants of *dear heart* in this exact moment in time. In his famous 1996 speech *The Ground on Which I Stand*, African American Playwright, August Wilson writes that:

"The ground I stand on has been pioneered by the Greek dramatists …. In another guise, the ground that I stand on …. is the ground of the affirmation of the value of one's being, an affirmation of [their] worth in the face of this society's urgent and sometime profound denial." (1) Similar to Wilson, I owe the Greek dramatist's a great debt in my early days in the theatre. Having immigrated to Canada with barely any inkling of popular culture (I was often ridiculed for thinking the Spice Girls were a cuisine), I latched on to these classical plays from the library as these mythic stories that felt so different than the ones I grew up on in Hong Kong. These Greek plays with their gore, high emotions, and gods felt like fantasy, or sci-fi novels to me, and it acclimatized me to the English language through poetry and rhythm. It feels important to say here, that English is my second language, yet every piece I've generated for *dear heart* is through this adapted tongue, exemplifying adaptation in daily motion. One of the first plays I ever worked on was Ted Hughes' version of Seneca's *Oedipus Rex* (Roman author, in what is already an adaptation of the Greek Myth) in Grade Nine. As a teen, the effect the play had on me was profound, with its immense heft of fate as an instrument of dramatic tension, as Professor

Marianne MacDonald so aptly defines it, “Seneca liked maxims and the macabre; his awe was for fate and stoic acceptance thereof.” This awe for fate, as MacDonald puts it, is exactly what I hope to capture in my writing for *dear heart* for each participant that I respond to, and the macabre is a texture of life that inevitably finds its way in the material.

In one of my more recent Greek adaptations, *Iphigenia and the Furies (On Taurian Land),* this quote, by American feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldúa from her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza,* was shared by Augusto Bitter who played Pylades:

“But it is not enough to stand on the opposite riverbank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white conventions. … The counterstance refutes the dominant culture’s views and beliefs, and, for this, it is proudly defiant…. — it’s a step towards liberation from the cultural domination. But it is not a way of life. At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes.... The possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react” (Anzaldua, 78). This powerful quote has stayed with me as something so true to the adaptation process, something that finds its way in the creation process for *dear heart,* in seeing through the serpent and eagle eyes at once, and the decision to act and not react in accordance with the material I generate for participants. There is always an attempt at responding with someone else, their lived experience, their personality, and their very truth of being on another shore than me. And it is in writing responses from a place of action, through perceiving multitudes at once, that I feel the process

can capture a potential for writing from a new consciousness, one to do less with logic and cerebral structures of playwriting, to one that connects the heart to another.

In researching similar writers that have written portraitures, in various genres and styles, I was stricken by the work of American author Gertrude Stein, whose "literary practice reshaped artistic ideas about what a portrait might be" (Imber, 61). I was stricken by Ery Shin's description of how perception shifts from within to without in the act of writing:

"The movement from mind to penned words likewise undergoes multiple mediations. While language structures, no matter how subliminally, the way we see and relate to the world, the entirety of perceptual experience cannot be contained in language. For the world is an overwhelming material matrix in which language and its users originate. To verbalize the inter-sensory interface comprising consciousness is to selectively narrow down upon the moment (a matter of milliseconds), then formulate this locus through an abstract system" (Imber, 63). So in that, the goal of *dear hearts* is not to contain the experience of connection and human encounters into generalized language, but to strike at anchors, things that compel and light the heart open. To attempt to capture a hyper-specific moment, human to human, through my positionality and to then narrow that moment down into theatrical words.

In considering potential hybrid containers for this piece, it felt right to honour my time on the US tour of Why Not Theatre's *Prince Hamlet*, a piece that has assuredly changed me as an artist and continues to provide inspiration and potential pathways into performance for *dear heart*. As Peter Kuling wrote in his academic analysis of *Prince Hamlet, "*In this light, all means of communication—spoken language, signed words, skin color, physical bodies—became unreliable signifiers of assumed meaning, forcing audiences to listen, watch, and interpolate a variety of levels of simultaneous performance" (459). This feels very much like an apt

description of what it might feel like to present parts of *dear heart* in my hybrid sharing. That my hyper-specific identity of being a cis-gendered homosexual Hong Kong-Canadian artist, any performance of texts from *dear heart* becomes an unreliable signifier of every participant and persons that I wrote for, forcing audiences to listen and watch and interpolate various meanings in performance through my embodiment of them.

My research led me down a pathway of curational theory into the worlds of museums and art galleries to glean insight for potential containers for the various texts of *dear heart.* I came to learn of the term relational aesthetics, and as scholar Georgina Guy explains:

"Relational aesthetics, in these terms, proposes a revaluation of artworks founded in their connection to, and creation and manifestation of, human interactions in a given social context. In this rendering, art is recognized as 'a state of encounter' wherein an 'exhibition will give rise to a particular "arena of exchange" (103). So, as I wrote further texts for *dear heart*, I held this concept of relational aesthetics in mind, to seek a given container that can most align with the given social contexts of the moments from which I created.

Performance Research Document

dear heart comprises of three separate processes:

a) An artistic record of text that stems from personal responses to my two years within the MFA. I followed a natural creative process for these creations as a playwright, a process that never requires ethics, and have always maintained written or oral consent in readings of the pieces. As well, this collection of writing is captured on the page, and will never be performed for an audience other than within the thesis itself.
b) Educational Material of *dear heart.* These are creation and performance exercises that are distilled from reflection and research upon my personal process of playwriting.
c) Primary research in experimenting with creation exercises in educational settings.

In the following section, I will document the various contents of *dear heart* under these three categories, as well as articulate the process and research that bridges the creation of artistic material, and the creation of educational material.

A) Artistic Record of *dear heart*

Seventeen Monologues for THEA 4030 (4th Year Movement with Allyson McMackon)

Six Monologues for THEA 5210 (Grad Research Seminar with Professor David Jansen)

One Scene for THEA 5076 (Performance Creation with Keira Loughran)

One Monologue for THEA 4290 (Playwriting with Nina Lee Aquino)

Two Monologues for the Summer Term

Four Monologues for the Prince Hamlet Tour

One Monologue for THEA 5077 (Performance Creation with Erika Batdorf)

B) Educational material of *dear heart*

In reflecting upon the artistic record of *dear heart*, I became heavily inspired by autoethnographic research across performance disciplines. It was exciting to find parallels between autoethnography and my practice as a playwright through the work of ethnography scholars Carolyn Ellis and Stacy Holman Jones: "…an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience." (ELLIS, 2004). The generation of much of *dear heart*, and my work as a playwright, draws from the very same interrogation of personal experience in relationship with the cultural experience that I live within (that being one of a cis - queer Hong Kong immigrant living and working in North America, specifically Ontario, Canada). I found great affinity with this further explanation by Ellis, Adams, and Bochner:

"Autoethnographers must not only use their methodological tools and research literature to analyze experience, but also must consider ways others may experience similar epiphanies; they must use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders." (4)

Large swathes of my career as a playwright have been through learning on the job. Being an immigrant, and holding English as a second language, and with no formal education in playwriting, I found instant recognition in this description of autoethnography and the path I've led towards becoming the artist that I am, and the artist I wish to be. I aim to be an artist that illustrates and writes from my positionality in cultural experience as a community offering to audiences and readers of my work. *dear heart* has allowed me the space and time to reflect on how I've worked over the last decade, to really dig in and understand certain elements of my process, so that perhaps, it may spark in others a similar epiphany to share stories on stages, and in doing so, work towards a more empathetic community and society. As Professor Nichole Lariscy writes: "individuals begin involvement in a theatrical moment as individuals, we each move during the course of the play to become members of the community. We concede individuality as we consider the ideas or problems together, whether as performer or spectator or both…" (132)

Towards this aim of demystifying my very personal writing process, I specifically distilled two categories of my playwriting as a bedrock with which to describe the artistic material generated in *dear heart* for further research, and for the genesis of educational material for other writers/creators: Adaptation as Reclamation and Community Curiosity (self as material / randomness as material). On these two elements, I take an autoethnographic approach in reflecting upon their recurring themes upon my work in the greater theatre ecology, as well as how they are reflected in the process of *dear heart*, both in the artistic records and as educational material.

Adaptation as Reclamation

The interrogation of fate and destiny pulses through the work of the Greek dramatists. And it certainly feels fateful that much of my works, past and present, have been adaptations of Greek Myths. I did not begin my career seeking to adapt the Greeks, they were opportunities that required an assemblage of fate and time to reveal itself. My first adaptation was *Antigone: 方*, adapted from Sophocles' *Antigone*, commissioned by Toronto's Young People's Theatre (YPT), in 2016. I was sitting up near the mountains at the Banff Playwrights Lab, just about to head back to Toronto when I received an email from Stephen Colella, Associate Artistic Director and Dramaturge at YPT, asking if I could pitch a treatment of the *Antigone* myth, a play which "… all the principles of democracy, which would be valued by the original audience as the cornerstones of their system of government, were not simply disregarded but completely violated." (Kekis, 3) I had only produced original new works up to that point, and I jumped at the chance to adapt. Eventually, I landed upon a treatment that would transpose the Antigone myth within a framework of Communist China, and my personal experiences living within the Umbrella Protests in Hong Kong during 2015/2016. Drawing upon Tiananmen Square and the student protests that followed, I placed Antigone in the square, quite literally, 方, fong, is the kanji symbol for square. This collision of the personal and political, hanging on the framework of a millennia old myth was discovered through writing and the doing of it. I had no prior knowledge of adaptation. As scholar Olga Kekis writes, "Such appropriations by cultures foreign to the Western hegemonic canon have transformed Antigone from a reverential monument to Western philosophical thought, into a performance text which functions as a reworking that divests the canonical text of its assumed authority and authenticity and becomes part of what

Helen Tiffin calls the project of "canonical counter-discourse." (10). I realize now, that in transplanting the myth into such a personal and cultural lens, that my adaptation adds to this "canonical counter-discourse," to reclaim my own history, and positionality, in collision with the education that I was brought up with in Canada. Being a queer immigrant ESL speaker, educated through English and through the assumed authority of texts from the Greeks, I realized at an early point as a writer that, "canons rarely speak to histories of inclusion and exclusion" (Ioannidou, 1). Through adaptation I can actively subvert the "canon," and by doing so, decenter the status quo of whose story or positionality in this world holds greater weight than others.

I have continued to wrestle with Western Canonical works through adapting Euripides's *Iphigenia in Tauris* (my version named *Iphigenia and the Furies: On Taurian Land),* commissioned by Saga Collectif and remounted by Theatre Passe Muraille in Toronto. Both *Antigone* and *Iphigenia* are published as an anthology through Playwrights Canada Press, and was a finalist for the 2022 Governor General's Literary Award, and a finalist for the 2023 LAMDA Literary Award for Drama in the United States. This recognition has further helped amplify my hopes and dreams that my adaptations, in all its hyper-queer, angry, and Chinese specificity, subverts who we envision as adaptors for these western myths, and to continually seek to ask who gets the right to tell whose stories, and how?

More recently, I fully embedded Shakespeare as "the bard," in my newest play, *cockroach,* at Toronto's Tarragon Theatre. And now, I continue this work of adaptation through reclamation in my upcoming play *don't cry when constellations beg to burn,* an adaptation of Aristophanes's *The Birds,* commissioned by the Stratford Festival, with support from the National Arts Centre's Artistic Director, Nina Lee Aquino.

This hyper-personal process of adaptation can also be seen through large sections of my work in *dear heart*. For example, many of the solo monologues for THEA 4030 (Movement with Allyson McMackon) were drawn from the movement illustrated by the conservatory students, alongside a myth that crept up through my consciousness. In particular, the piece *For Trinity*, was another reading of the Antigone myth that sprung up from a gesture she made in class, where she was digging ferociously into the ground, and in that instant, I saw Antigone again, fighting for her right to bury her brothers.

In translating this process into pedagogy, I combined elements of playwriting exercises that I've distilled from Brian Quirt, Artistic Director of Nightswimming and Facilitator of the Banff Playwrights Lab, alongside my own process of adaptation: where I ask participants to take distinct and polar parameters and find a way to write about it. For example, collide French fries with the character of Lady Macbeth.

I brought these exercises as research across my teachings throughout 2022-2023. In one of my residencies at Montclair University, in New Jersey, NY, one of the students created a monologue where Romeo was on a spaceship, ordering a bagel, to great comedic effect. During CODA, an end of year collaboration between graduate and undergraduate theatre students at York University in 2022, one of my students took the Atlas myth and collided it with their own exploration around gender and sexuality, repeating the motif of "SMITE MY BUSSY" (a colloquial term popular in the LGBTQ+ community for male anus). In all instances of my engagement with students, especially those from IBPOC and LGBTQ+ communities, there was a spark of "epiphany," similar to my own, way back in 2016 when I first connected the ideas of Antigone with the Umbrella Protest: the realization that we can write new stories that reflect the now, through adapting these old myths. I am eager to continue sharing these adaptation exercises

as a continued tool for writers and creators, towards a greater diversity of acts of reclamation on our stages and beyond.

Community Curiosity (self as material / randomness as material)

Theatre by nature is a collaborative art form. It demands the creative talents of many to be realized, and it requires an audience for the creative contract to be complete. Theatre is inherently based in community for that reason. Every contract is an encounter with new artists, old friends, and a largely anonymous audience. I was delighted to discover in my research around autoethnography, a similar pattern of community:

"Researchers do not exist in isolation. We live connected to social networks that include friends and relatives, partners and children, co-workers, and students, and we work in universities and research facilities. Consequently, when we conduct and write research, we implicate others in our work." (Ellis, et al, 28)

This seamless parallel between theatre practice and research inspires me to articulate and develop pedagogy that transparently embraces community. There is a common thought that writers write in isolation, and for a period, they do, but playwrights must become well versed with collaborating with actors, dramaturges, directors, designers, front of house, marketing, institutions, on and on. Playwrights foster a curiosity around audiences too, and this distinction that might mark the trajectory of a playwright, with say, a novelist, is its own unique practice.

In researching curiosity, I stumbled across a study by Researcher Natalie Mikhaylov about curiosity and its role in cross-cultural knowledge creation. In it, curiosity is defined in one way as, “a recognition, pursuit and intense desire to explore novel, challenging and uncertain events" (368). The study found that, “Learners are more likely to be engaged and perform well in a task when they perceive it as challenging, but engaging, as curiosity tend to initiate a process which involves flow-like engagement and the integration of novel experiences” (103).

It is this very thing, curiosity, which I believe to be a practicable skill in playwrights. I begin my playwriting workshops with a warmup called the curiosity list. I use this curiosity list exercise as a way to warm up for my own playwriting process. This exercise allows a practice of spontaneity by introducing personal curiosities as artistic material. This draws from Brian Quirt’s exercise of obsession lists, where he asks writers to take time to write out every obsession they’re holding in the moment. I think it was when I had to teach writing to teenagers, and obsession felt like a loaded word for them during the pandemic, that I changed obsession to curiosity. And curiosity has stuck since, as it has helped nurture and hone “personal characteristics such as imagination,” (Mikhaylov, 95) a trait well worth practicing for any playwright working within fiction and worldbuilding.

I have found that asking writers to write their curiosities, then developing playwriting exercises tailored to their needs and workshop goals, allows writers to write from exactly where they are that day. It acknowledges their individual lived experience, allows them to express their innermost questions for others to witness, and allows community building whereupon other writers may recognize their own curiosities in others: a bonding moment of shared questions and curiosities. I find that asking writers to write out their curiosities about themselves, in acknowledgement of their community, is aligned with another core tenant of autoethnography,

that produces writing "… that refuses abstractions and high theory. It is a way of being in the world, a way of writing, hearing and listening. Viewing culture as a complex performative process, it seeks to understand how people enact and construct meaning in their daily lives. This is a return to narrative as a political act" (Denzin, 182).

This curiosity list exercise immediately thrusts writers towards drawing from their own culture, and the way they construct meaning, and the results are always spontaneous and fresh. It prepares a writer for an internal check in, as well as a greater detailing of what is available on their palette on any given day, like colours for a painter. From there, I often bridge the curiosities towards another goal, for example, towards an exercise from Adaptation as Reclamation. I may provide a writer's group a prompt, such as: take three things from your curiosity list and write a monologue from the perspective of Hamlet. This exercise immediately bridges the personal, the performative, and the creative pressure of parameters.

As I embark on the thesis workshop phase, I will be using this exercise as a daily warm up with my undergraduate collaborators. It will also be the very first thing I lead the group through in my thesis presentations as well.

C) Primary Research

Within the last year, I have had the chance to experiment and share this autoethnographic process through teaching these two different elements of *dear heart*, either with one-day residency workshops or lectures, longer term courses, or community conversations, through these educational platforms:

Pennsylvania State University – Adaptation through Reclamation workshop

Stanford University – Community Conversation with Faculty and Students

Montclair University – Adaptation through Reclamation workshop

University of North Carolina Chapel Hill – Community Conversation with Faculty and Students

Le Diamant – Community Conversation with Faculty and Students

Tarragon Theatre – Generating Pages (Two Month course)

Suitcase in Point Theatre – Generating Pages (One day workshop)

Stratford IBPOC Mentorship – Year Long mentorship for young in craft IBPOC artists.

Shakespeare by the Bay – Adaptation through Reclamation workshop

University of Toronto – Year Long Playwriting Engagement with Students and Faculty

Playwrights Atlantic Resource Centre – Adapting Stories (Two Day workshop)

Conclusion

I began my MFA aiming to create a new play, *cockroach*, for my thesis. That play ended up being programmed by Mike Payette, Artistic Director of Toronto's Tarragon Theatre for their 2022/2023 season. With that professional opportunity, I was tasked to seek out another point of research and creation for my thesis project. This negotiation between academia and my professional work proved constant. In the professional world of theatre, there is a constant hustle to secure a gig, then the next, on and on. There is rarely a moment of reflection, a moment to slow down and ruminate on process and to articulate the hyper-personal act of creation and writing. That desire to reflect and slow down became this thesis, a chance to research and to articulate my playwriting process so that it may contribute as shareable methodology for other playwrights.

Getting a chance to experiment with sharing such a personal process in various cities and with different communities of students has been a revitalizing and joyous process. Students responded in such different ways across all the communities I got a chance to share with. Their diversity in creation, identity, and politic was inspiring to witness and to facilitate. Getting multiple chances to hone my facilitation has also been a necessary part of the research. There was much learning to discover the most active prompts to spur on curiosity or in the practice of facilitating trust and safety in a room for students so that they could feel brave in their writing. Finally, getting the chance to curate a more specific and intensive period of experimentation with my undergraduate cohort in April, 2023 was lifechanging. Bridging their natural curiosities, their diverse lived experiences, and shared commonality as theatre students at York University allowed a room where we could write fearlessly. In watching each of them grow and discover a new facet of their playwriting voice, I, I in turn, received such a vital reminder in how art resonates so deeply when the personal correlates with the universal.

Following the two sharings on April 14th and 15th, 2023, I left the weekend with a sense of joy, community and pride. Both sharing's went over my anticipated capacity of twenty, with a varied audience from within York, students and faculty, and professional colleagues from Toronto. The responses were kind, gentle and enthusiastic in celebrating the writing and sparks of creativity that the six undergraduate students had created. During the presentation, while the students were performing their new writing, I would often sit there beaming at them with pride at how specific, personal, and theatrical their creations were. They were messy. They did not fit traditional senses of good "playwriting." They wrote what they knew, and what they hoped for, and what their hearts wanted to write. There was such a sense of camaraderie between each of them, in how they supported one another and in being witnesses to each other's work. Seeing

them see themselves anew, beyond definition and categorization, is a joy. Being able to share with an audience, this process of reflection, and the possibilities of sparking new playwriting left me excited to bring this outside of York, and into the professional world and in other educational settings.

Since starting out as a playwright, my goal with every new play is to write something entirely different, something completely new to my own perception of what I can or cannot write. I learned how to write through the act of writing, and through the rigorous guidance of many dramaturges, directors and mentors. From each of these artistic relationships, I inevitably absorbed parts of their creative process into my own. From the provocative challenges from Iris Turcott to the gentle questioning from Brian Quirt, I have distilled my own process of playwriting through learning from them. It is with some time and reflection through these last two years that the bedrocks of adaptation as reclamation and community curiosity revealed themselves as prominent and recurring themes within my process. I return to them for inspiration and new possibilities. Being able to define these terms as anchors in my practice has been revelatory, and this research has allowed me to deepen my knowledge around them. Being able to share them as tangible creative exercises for future generations is deeply felt. It feels to me like an honoring of all the processes from mentors and artists that have shared their own artistry with me. A chance to reflect on all the artistic processes that spoke to me, that speaks through me now, so that others may speak their own.

As I continue to grow and mature as a writer, I am certain that these anchors of process will evolve, multiply into other categories, or transform into something new entirely. I am certain that how I share and facilitate educational settings will similarly transform. What remains at the core, in my heart, is the desire to create new plays and to nurture new playwrights across the

country. This MFA has allowed me the time to transform, evolve, and articulate where I come from, and how I wish to continue to be of service to the communities I write with, and write for. From this personal place, stems the possibility of contributing to the power of theatre in all its possible empathy, compassion, and heart.

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Appendix A: *dear heart* thesis presentation planning and details

My thesis sharing was held as a hybrid workshop, akin to the one's I led across my professional residencies and workshops. They were sixty-minute sharings where audiences were participants in the workshop. In between creation exercises and community conversation, a select group of undergraduates and myself shared artistic material generated (such as text from *dear heart*) so that the whole sharing was a hybrid model of presentation and participation for audiences.

Timeline

dear heart had two thesis sharings on Friday, April 14th and Saturday, April 15th – both at 3:00pm. Leading up to the sharing, I worked with a select group of undergraduates from Monday, April 10th to Thursday, April 13th from 1pm – 5pm each day. We generated material together under the guiding elements of my thesis (Adaptation as Reclamation and Community Curiosity) across those days in preparation for the sharing.

Casting

With a focus on IBPOC and Queer performer/creators, I reached out to these select undergraduates as collaborators: Jobina Sitoh, Antong Xu, Emma Ly, Mackenzie Mallory-Mcallum, Eric Trudell, Shaharah Gaznabbi. They joined me as performance creators exploring the themes of Adaptation as Reclamation and community curiosity. The material they generated was then shared in the thesis sharing, in between creation exercises facilitated with the audience participants.

Rehearsal Space

I rehearsed in CFT 138 with my undergraduate collaborators.

Production Support

I required front of house to count audience participants, and to set up basic seating layout of chairs in a circle in the space. I had the support of my undergraduate collaborators in this minimal set up. Otherwise, there was no requirement for other technical needs besides house lights.

General Funding Overview

No funding was required for this thesis sharing. For audience participants, we provided paper, pens, and clipboards for their writing.

Workshop Phases

With the undergraduates, I workshoped the exercises generated from *dear heart* to create material from April 10th – April 13th. On April 13th, we curated the material generated up to that point and provided an overall shape to allow a finessed balance of artistic sharing vs. creation exercises.

Final Presentation Details (venue / capacity / tech needs)

Venue – ACE 207. I shared a space with Monica Dottor's thesis presentation *Janice Almighty.* As mine was a workshop, it existed within Monica's set, which animated the space and provided a lively creative setting to create and workshop within.

Capacity – We had a maximum of 20 audience participants on both days of the showing. There was a general call for audiences via social media outreach, and internal York University communications targeting theatre students. I also selectively invited professional colleagues in the GTA region for performer/creators who were interested in participating in the thesis sharing. I also asked my undergraduate collaborators to reach out to their own cohorts for further word of mouth until we hit our 20 max participants each day.

Tech Needs

House Lights. Chairs and seating for up to 20 participants.

Appendix B: Sample Journal Entries

These selected journal entries draw largely from Summer, 2022 onward, while on tour in St. Johns, Newfoundland, and across the United States. Some draw from reflections and self-examination around the various teaching appointments I had 2021 through to 2023. Some are about the process of playwriting, and or progress I've made between my academic life and my professional life. They have been curated to provide a cross section of these various experiences.

August 28, 2022

Yesterday we closed *I Forgive You* at the ACC here in St. John's. Three shows only, but Apparently that's the norm here in Newfoundland. We've barely opened, and now we're closed. The luxury of a run is the chance to deepen, but at the same time, a short run allows for a continuation of adrenaline – a burst of energy that's like a sprint, rather than a marathon. It's been a joy being on stage again, to be live, in front of an audience. Two years into the pandemic, and I never could have imagined being on stage again. Acting is a full spirit act, it requires complete commitment, a demand of time unlike other parts of the theatre I work in.

It's been bonkers in the best way possible, but bonkers, nonetheless. Rehearsed *Prince Hamlet* on zoom on any time I had off, preparing for the tour that immediately follows after this. Rehearsed *cockroach* at the Tarragon and did rewrites in the evening's. That's the luxury of being a playwright. I don't have to be there for the work to be done. I can't do that as an actor. Different demands, same art. Somehow wrote my thesis stuff at the same time and trying to make sense of how to articulate this professional work as research.

I Forgive You was a beautiful moment of time, a beautiful play with a masterful team, and I'll never forget the experience. Working on a piece with a centre of disability is once again a heart expanding and necessary story to advocate for. Acting out Scott's life, and his trauma and pain, surrounded by a choir singing Sigur Ros… I'll never forget it. Never mind the team was all white, though race things came into play, and it was not always a smooth process, never mind that. We got through.

Today marks a special day that felt like a secret, or the witnessing of Canadian Theatre History in action. I'll never forget it. It had nothing to do with the work of being an artist, though of course, it has everything to do with being human, watching artists at work.

Today was Jill's last day as the Artistic Director of the National Arts Centre. Her last gig was to direct *I Forgive You*, here, in her own province. What a way to end an incredible decade of a tenure. Nina, the new AD, a dear friend and mentor, is in town so that they can do some

transition work together. Amazing that Nina get's to see the production too before we travels it to Ottawa in 2023.

Being there for Jill's last day, and Nina's first day. What a memory.

We all went for a hike. Jill, Nina, Pierre, and myself. Watching these two ladies walk, side by side, passing on nuggets of wisdom of arts leadership at the pinnacle of institutions and craft… watching two incredible trailblazers of Canadian Theatre: Jill was the first female AD of the NAC, and Nina will be the first WOC AD of the NAC. They laughed, they had different views of leadership and community building, different ideas of how to lead an arts organization. At one point, they were debating more efficient ways to fish. They come from different cultures and generations, and the way they perceive how to fish, is as different as they are as artistic leaders, as directors, as colleagues. But the love of theatre is there, and we are lucky for it.

We made pesto. We had dinner. We swam in Jill's pond. Nina would not dare get in the water. She laughed at my pasty white skin and said I was blinding her. Jill and I swam. What a way to end a summer. So much about making this art, is the people you meet. Both these women have been incredible mentors since my time as a theatre student. Our bonds deepen with each laugh, with each moment of trying to figure out how best tell a story. I am so grateful for their continued mentorship and tutelage, and this moment of seeing leadership in transition, across a beautiful landscape of blue skies and azure oceans.

At one point Jill said to Nina: "I always had a hard time mobilizing the Ottawa community, the local community, into the NAC. Nina, you might be the one who figures it out."

Nina said nothing. And that's exactly who I know her to be.

She doesn't need to say it. She'll do it.

She'll figure it out.

There is so much to figure out in life. So much to figure out in theatre.

Let's get to it.

Sept 22, 2022

Currently in New Jersey. Hotel sucks. Caught COVID last week. Sucks. Thankfully Ravi was still in town, so he had script on hand and played Ophelia hahahahah. I wish I could have seen it. Cast was telling me that he was MILKING all the moments, which is just hilarious. It'll be exciting to be back on stage, but I hope my lungs can hold up after this sickness.

Catching COVID was honestly okay, the sickness itself was okay. It was the isolation that was painful. Stuck in a hotel in Pennsylvania. No healthcare. Rest of the team at the theatre doing tech, or performing, or whatever. Trying to eat without the usual supports from home. Worst was knowing that *cockroach* was in previews at the Tarragon. Opening a new play is always terrifying. But opening a new play, while being away, while being sick and having nothing to do except think about the terror was… oof.

To keep myself busy, I went to the Tarragon website and counted every single seat that was available across the month's run and see how many tickets were bought. At first, I was absolutely petrified. Barely any tickets sold. It was my Tarragon debut! It was the first show of the season! Most shows before then were still dealing with COVID fall out! Will people come?! *Cockroach* is an absolutely weird play, will people hate it?! I'm not Hannah Moscovitch or whatever super playwright, and don't yet have a giant name to draw folks to a show! What's gonna happen?! Being in isolation with all that fear and insecurity was very hard.

Until, of course, it all turned out okay. Previews went well. Word of mouth started to happen. York University friends and faculty came out to support it. Then the reviews were stellar (PHEW), and then… Tarragon announced an extension. It was all okay, and I was so proud. Even though I wouldn't be able to see it until closing (being in the States and all). A wonderful thing to complain about. Faith goes a long way. Oh, how I wish to have been able to be there.

Tomorrow, I teach at Montclair University as part of an artist residency through *Prince Hamlet*. Speaking about adaptation as reclamation. I'm going to talk about Iffy, Antigone, and now, I get to talk about cockroach as well. How adaptation has been such a core part of my working life as an artist, both as a playwright and as an actor. How these classics, and their problems through a contemporary lens, are palettes to play with. How the differences across culture and generations and world views are all potential material to make theatre out of.

There is such a desire to "cancel" Shakespeare right now. And I totally get it. There are a lot of politics that surround it that are troubling, historically and presently. Yet, that exact conundrum is in itself, potential art to be made. I hope in these workshops that I teach, and in performing as Ophelia across the states, that I contribute to a conversation where we can nudge the dialogue towards that understanding – that things are complicated, yes, but complication and sitting with discomfort is very much useable tools in art making. It shouldn't be easy. I mean, it shouldn't be traumatizing, and it shouldn't ask for a sacrifice of health, family and happiness, but it can't be easy. Life isn't so easy now, it is?

October 12, 2022

So. What a freaky morning. I woke up, turned around in bed to check my phone for emails and texts – as I always do. And my phone has just like blown up. Like twenty texts. A bunch of emails, whatsapp messages. I'm like, what the fuck is going on?!

I open up a whatsapp, and it's from Mitch, and he's all like – congratulations, Jeff! How exciting for you to be nominated! And I was like, what the fuck?

I open my emails, and there it is – the announcement. Congratulations, your play *Iphigenia and the Furies (on Taurian Land) and Antigone* is a finalist for the 2022 Governor General's Award for Literature in the Drama Category.

I blinked a bunch. Then I flopped over to my right and began smacking the husband. Pierre woke up all groggily, I think may be the cats were on him. Pierre still had ear plugs on, and it doesn't matter cuz I wasn't my sentences weren't making any sense anyway. I'm blubbering by this point, like, oh my god, oh my god. I started crying and screaming, this

screaming cry. And he's all like, oh no! oh no! what happened?! And I'm like, I got a gg nom! I got a gg nom! And he's still waking up, so he's like, what the fuck are you talking about?

I got a governor general's nomination!!!

And it clicks in for him too. And he starts smacking me back, and we have this smacking war of love and joy and pride. So much joy.

It was early too, cuz we had to wake up to drive to UoT for a playwrighting teaching session with some students. And I'm gonna be late, I don't care, I'm gonna be late, cuz I'm too busy smacking and being smacked out of joy. The cats look very confused.

You see, I wrote Antigone when I was like, in my early twenties. And Iphigenia had a wonderful premiere, but the remount was cancelled twice, first by COVID, then it got omicroned, literally a day before we were to begin tech for the live remount in Feb, 2022. So it felt cursed, ya know? It felt like, it just wasn't supposed to happen again. And of course, when the pandemic hit, I lost like three productions of my plays, and lost all my acting work, including my dream dream dream role as Song Li Ling in M Butterfly at Soulpepper. So I had just been surviving, and doing whatever I could to make money, while doing theatre.

I mean I applied for my MFA because I was thinking I'd never work again. I'm grateful I did, I love my cohort, and I enjoy the classes, but it's very different from a career in the arts, ya know?

So this nomination… it reminded me of all the hard work, and the labour of love that went into these plays… the late nights of crunching procrastinated drafts. The day of vomit that produced the first draft of *Iphigenia.* Being up in the mountains when I got the invitation to adapt *Antigone.* Like… seven years of work into productions, into a book… to get that GG nom was like being seen by my own theatre community.

And it also helped me clarify my love of adaptations, that what I was doing with these Greek plays, was working artistically, that it was affecting some sort of shift in the worlds of classical adaptations. That a weird, queer, little Chinese writer like me had as much right to these stories, to be published, alongside some of the white academic peers who have largely been dominant adapters of these stories. It clarified that my act of mischief, and subversion, wasn't landing aimlessly into some void.

It made me so excited, especially to then go straight to UoT to speak specifically about adaptation. It felt like, yes, I might actually have something to say about this, and why I do it, and why I think you might be interested in interrogating these mythic works too – even if you have issues with them! My issues with them became their own plays!

I will never forget this day.

March 19th, 2023

Today was the last class of my Adapting Stories workshop with PARC, alongside Santi… what a group of writers! What amazing learners! Having spent a whole summer and fall teaching adaptation, and continuing that practise as a playwright, and so close to delivering a thesis that talks about adaptation… it just felt so right. And I feel more and more practised in being able to share that very personal process of adaptation into something that can be taught, to introduce toolkits that allow other writers to reimagine possibilities in adaptation.

We started with the curiosity list, of course. Bedrock of every workshop I lead. It just warms up the palette for one to see what's available in their psyche – the whimsical things, and the profound things, all at once.

Then we did an exercise that I learned from Erika, actually. Which is, to find two objects at home, or in whatever space you're in. Then you tell a story about the object in your right hand as if it were literally that object (a cup is a cup). Then you tell a story about the object in your left hand as if weren't that object (a cup is an elephant). This exercise actually feels to me, connected to adaptation. You find inspiration from these different source materials, these objects, and you fabricate and create imagined scenarios around them. You collide your creativity with a source material, and that is a very simple concept of adaptation.

I explained that as the source material get's more complex, then the adaptation work also get's more complex, but the simple fact of imagination, fiction, and personal influence resonates across adaptation.

Then this next exercise was a new one! And it's a keeper for future workshops! We had six participants, so everyone had to chime in. We spoke about fairy tales, how they're often ripe for adaptation. We created our own fairy tale communally. Each writer had to offer one plot point. They landed on this story about a paper bag princess in the rain forest, who get's caught in the rain, and her dress disintegrates. So she meets a spider who weaves her a dress of silk, but she's allergic to silk, so she builds a dress of bamboo and moves to the desert. Very simple story, with just six prompts. Then I sent everyone off for about an hour. They were all tasked to adapt this very simple story into theatrical form. Of course, every person came back an hour later with their own take. Some became sci – fi. Some made the spider an antagonist. The paper bag princess and her class inequality became a subject of exploration. Every single writer demonstrated their own passions, world views, thoughts, curiosities and questions through this exercise.

You could see the joy in their eyes as we debriefed and discussed adaptation. I offered an idea, one that only came to me in that moment, and one I'll hold in my thought as a mantra for my own practise:

When you adapt, you consider how the source material speaks to you, and then you figure out what you can speak through it.

April 10th, 2023

The lead up to this week has been a wild one. Lots of meetings with staff, lots of problem solving across the department, between the cohort, and inside each of our projects. It's been a lot. Plus the end of term, the assignments, the getting ready to graduate, the paperwork. The neverending fucking paperwork. BUT! It is exciting to start. And I've been in touch with my undergrads all week, leading up to this. Because they're largely working for peanuts (I was able to pay each of them fifty bucks for their work this week), some students will miss certain days due to their own work, or their own end of term stuff, which is all okay! But also, eek, lots of moving parts.

First days are always impressionable ones. It's how to build a community, quickly, and generously. And how to provide just enough context without rambling enough, and how to get folks out of their nerves and anxieties to trust me and go along for a creative process together.

Some folks already knew each other – either in the same year, or same program. And of course, plenty who don't know each other. So a round of introductions, land acknowledgements that hone in on our ancestry (the question of… what and who has brought us to this moment to gather together?) Then I gave context about the project, what the showings will shape like, and any other questions.

Really chill group, but also is a stressful time for them too. A few of the acting students had their one on one interviews, and they also had a show to perform coming up on Thursday. Others had essays or deadlines, so we took the time to get that all out, just to lay out what was stirring in us that day.

Then we got to the work. We began writing. And as always, as with everything I've facilitated over the past two years. I start with the curiosity list. None of it will be shared, I tell them. So safely, we began laying out our curiosities like a palette to paint with later. Following that, I gave them a prompt to write from:

"What does your heart need?"

Seeing the reactions on their face as they tried to digest the question was fun. It was surprising, and it also seemed a touch overwhelming. So I gently led with some suggestions, or that it doesn't entail trauma, necessarily, but a gentle question to offer up whatever you wish to write. There are no rules, I would repeat.

We wrote for a good while, and they then were tasked to rehearse it lightly to share it out loud. It was full of that first read energy – some nerves, the excitement of feeling words come alive, and that feeling of performing for a new group of folks for the first time. It was exhilarating. I would point out successes every step of the way, and encourage what was possible, or radical in what I heard, and I would offer tips or framing questions that could guide some of their own thoughts around their piece. I wanted to establish that judgement can often be a detractor from making art. We will always judge something we make, it's natural. But getting out of our own way is a lifelong pursuit, and we must remain an open channel to whatever is stirring inside us, creatively.

With that done, we rehearsed a little more, and I began curating and finding ways to connect the pieces together into some sort of structure for the weekend. It's work that I'll have to

do all week, curating process, and the rawness of new creation, into some presentable (but not polished – that's an important distinction). Then I sent them off on their merry way, as I did the work I needed to do to assemble the presentation.

I did prepare them with some homework. I asked them to come in tomorrow with a mythological or classical figure to adapt from. Some of them expressed they had other pre-existing adaptations that they wished to work on, so I welcomed those. I can't wait to dig in to creating from adaptation tomorrow – one of my favourite things to facilitate!

April 13th, 2023

The day before the sharings. Feeling such nerves, anxieties, and more problem solving across a departmental level, and within the cohort. The work itself with the undergrads have been going so great. So much laughter, joy, and truthful sharing of vulnerabilities and stories. So much created in such little time, and so many discoveries with each writer, and as a community. It really is possible to build fast collaborations, and I've found, when I'm an actor, or in a role that's not often in the creative or leadership team… that leadership, and how facilitation is run, dictates the energy and positivity of the room.

I'm not talking about fake, superficial qualities of positivity… the ceaseless smiles or the desire to sweep negativity under the rug. I'm talking about the positivity that we can trust each other even as we fall and fail, or the light that guides us even when we're exploring the darkest of materials. I'm talking about leadership with hope, rather than leadership in desire to only fix what is deemed wrong.

One of the most important lessons I've learned as a playwright so far is that a piece of new writing must be committed to in the fullest extent, so that the playwright can hear whether it actually works the way they intend. In playwriting workshops, or in some dramaturgical circles, there is a quick demand or a quick desire to "fix" a piece of writing because that actor, that director, or that dramaturge doesn't "understand" it. But that is a disservice to the raw intentions of a creator. Sometimes an intentional hiccup, or a moment of flaw, is exactly what's intended. And sometimes they are indeed wrong, BUT, a writer should get the chance to hear what they've tried before a team offers what they think is right and wrong. We will not tread radical grounds in creation by applying criteria of right and wrong – the world and the art in this world is too vast and too mysterious for any opinion to truly assess.

So I offer all that to the room. And I can see as the students work through that idea, to do their best to unlearn, perhaps, some of the ways that their training, or their education, or their own opinions of themselves and others are broadened. To understand that our roles as collaborators, and artists, isn't to destroy or make excellent someone else's art, or our own for that matter. It is to help witness, facilitate, and collaborate upon the fulfilment of one's own creative curiosity. To follow that impulse to the farthest extent, until we decide to turn the other way, or to grow upon it. We must allow ourselves, and each other, that space to discover – in all it's epiphanies, and in all it's errors.

By now, we have shaped quite a number of writings, and every decision that we've made for the presentation has been generally democratic. What flavour of cupcake to bring in for the sharings, for example, or if folks agree that the order I've proposed feels right for them. All

contributions were allowed. In between each day, I've gone home to type up a full script of what we've written, so I've also been writing light touches of transitions so that each speak can speak to the next in a very light structure.

I'm excited for tomorrow, for the sharing. I'm also so nervous. Our sharing isn't a show. It's not a production. It really is a sharing of process. And I feel my nerves draws from my own training, to produce product constantly. So, I have to constantly fight the urge to resist the desire to polish further, or to hone it towards a professional standard that I've come to live within out in the industry. I have to fight my own perfectionist personality, and trust that sharing process, and sharing works in progress, is exactly alright.

Fingers crossed!

April 14th, 2023

Sharing number 1! We started the day early at eleven. Throughout the past week, we had rehearsed in CFT 138, as Monica needed the performance space to rehearse and set up for Janice Almighty (which is going to be awesome!) so I wanted to make sure it was a smooth and available space for her. We entered the playing space for the first time as a group, so we quickly did some adjustments, so seating arrangements, and did a run through in the morning so that everyone felt confident in knowing their order, where they were seated, and how the proceedings will go.

After that first run, I send them off to lunch, as I run back over to CFT 139 to read stage directions in Maddy's piece – Snowbound. I was so thrilled and excited to be a part of Maddy's piece, in this small way that I could. Our cohort is very loving of each other, and in many ways, the discovery of facilitation, leadership, and new play creation was side by side with Maddy, Monica, and Daniella. And in some way, I feel like I've been a part of all of their pieces, as they have been a part of mine. And being directly in Maddy's piece, and myself being in Monica's set, feels like our pieces are in dialogue with each other, even if the contents of the plays or the research behind them are all totally different realms. It's nice to feel that same sense of community within my project, outside of it.

Maddy's piece was wonderful to read, and to hear it fully from start to end. The actor and musician she hired were great, and she is always such a captivating performer to behold. The stories she holds are so wonderful, and so striking in what a unique perception of this industry she has. Truly a pleasure to have gotten to know her through these last two years.

I run back to ACE, and warm up with my students and we roll around, get the nerves out, and all that, and we open the door for 2:30pm. A few students who didn't sign up, came in, and sat down in the audience area. I shared frankly that it's not a show, but a workshop, and they left. I found that a delightfully hilarious moment.

We needed to stack in a couple of extra chairs for the audience, and we begin! I have a ton of nerves, so I'm doing my best to stick to the script, and get through the opening preamble, which is on the longer side. About 15 minutes of an intro before we get to any sharings. But before we shared, of course I had to get everyone to write a curiosity list – it was a wonderful

moment to sit together with a larger group, writing for five minutes in silence… that silence of creativity is a powerful one. That focus, and that interior check in.

Then we started the sharing, and one after the other, the students read their pieces, with different degrees of nerves, confidence, and performance… I would beam at them with pride, and whenever they got nervous, they would look over at me, and through my eyes, I'd do my best to say, you're good, you're good, just keep reading. You're good. And they were. Each of them shared their heart, in the same way that I've tried to articulate my heart in my thesis over the last two years. It was a beautiful sharing. Lots of laughs for some of the funnier pieces. Lots of breathing and stillness for some of the pieces that touched on more personal, or heavier subject matter. And lots of hmmmm's. That's always a sign of resonance, so that was wonderful to witness.

In my own pieces, I tapped into my training as an actor, and did my best to honour the words I've written. I had a lot of fun reading aloud, something that I do often for new writing, and so I tasked myself to discover each word anew, and not to rush anything. To look every single community member in the circle, to make sure words were landing, and thoughts were navigated with eloquence and thoughtfulness. I also dropped into the present, the moment, the now of reading each piece, and allowed myself to go to emotional terrain wherever appropriate. It's always a fun elastic to bounce around.

Once we finished sharing, we bowed, and everyone went on their merry way. Faculty, friends, loved ones, and audience members came up to share how they were moved, or impressed by the undergraduate's writing, or what they took away from the workshop. It was very fulfilling to be able to witness mentors of mine feel moved, or be inspired in their own work towards facilitation or towards creation of their own work. I am grateful for the community that has supported me and allowed me to reflect on process.

Then I went home. Changed into pyjamas, and potatoed out. It felt like breath was finally leaving me, and I could relieve the stress of putting on an appropriate thesis. At one point, I told my partner, that preparing for this thesis felt more stressful than opening night as an actor, or debuting a new play as a playwright. There was something about this, may be because it's so personal, and so process drive, that scared me. It would almost have felt easier to display a polished work, something rehearsed, or something I've spent a good month on, like most rehearsal processes. I know I can deliver when I need to deliver, but to bravely trust that sharing process is something I'm coming to learn.

One more tomorrow!

April 15th, 2023

Here we go!!! Let's close this thing!!! Today was great because I could sleep in, didn't have to show up till Maddy's piece at 1pm to read stage directions again. Anyway, read in hers, celebrated her closing briefly, then ran right over to prepare for mine. In many ways, today feels much lighter, because it's already been done once, so now I just gotta stick the landing. I knew for a fact that there were going to be more people today, so we laid out more chairs to account for that.

Gaz unfortunately could not join us for today's rehearsal so we quickly rehearse her pieces with other readers. Emma will read her first piece, and Jobina will read her second one. It went great. I wish Gaz could see it, as there is such value in having a chance to hear the writing aloud by another actor. In either case, the undergrads feel good. I feed them cupcakes, and pay them, and offer my love and admiration. We have a few repeat audiences today which is really kind and wonderful, and so great for the undergrads. They have way more friends and loved ones coming today. Less faculty members, so they seem lighter.

The whole follows the same shape, intros are introing, all that. And when we share, that ease I noticed from earlier is evidently in their performance as well. Each of them dug deeper, or found new things, or fully improvised new writing in the middle of their sharings! They were finding impulses and following them through! They trusted their own creative voice and pursued it! That was wonderful to witness. It is hard to teach performers to trust their instincts, it's something one can't really teach, but can only facilitate and witness as it happens and nudge it on continuously. They certainly found their voice today, and for that, we are all enriched for it.

My own reading goes, and similarly, I follow my own impulses in the moment, and read for the room, making sure to connect with every single audience member. It's always lovely to be reading a particularly heartfelt moment, and connect with audience's watching as they smile back, or seeing in their eyes that something connects with them. That, in the simplest of ways, is the power of theatre. To share a story, an offering of art and artifice, and to facilitate truthful passage of emotions in the now. It'll be gone just as quickly as it came, but it's there, and it'll be a piece of our time on this Earth forever.

It finishes and I thank everyone, say my goodbyes to the undergrads, urging them to stay in touch. I hope they do! I hope they continue to grow into the artists they wish to be. We'll all be better for it. I am so grateful for all of their work and trust and writing, and I will never forget their generosity in this.

As I finish the day, and my thesis presentations, and all this academic paper work, and all this entire process… I feel… so much. I did a lot these past two years to keep myself, and my partner afloat. I am grateful that York allowed me to continue to work as an artist while being a student. Everyone that I crossed paths with this year, either in the industry, or at school – allowed me to be. And that is a gift. I had to miss the first two weeks of rehearsals for Hamlet while in Newfoundland… had to miss the majority of cockroach while doing Hamlet… I had so many moments of wishing I could be two places at once. But every single company and team, allowed me to navigate the crunchiness of scheduling so that I could be multiple places at once. As I arrive on this final day of my thesis, the culmination of two years of work… I have also traveled and performed in eleven cities. Taught at just as many places and beyond. Led a playwriting course at a company for two months. Taught at least a dozen workshops. Acted in three separate tours. Had my play produced. Dramaturged for five to ten different writers. Wrote new drafts for four other new plays, or continued development on it. Maintained a loving relationship. Hung out with friends and loved ones. Cuddled with cats. I am weary of burning out. And I'm certainly exhausted. But it's an exhaustion of doing the one thing I'm meant to do on this world… theatre. So I may be tired through being stretched, but my spirit feels more bright than ever. I get to share this love of theatre, either in doing it, acting or writing, or whatever, or by teaching it… I get to do theatre every day. And coming out of the pandemic, thinking about that first year of school online, or all that cancelled work, or all that worry for survival… I'm coming out of it, changed,

more confident, older, and most importantly. I feel like I'm kinder. Gentler on myself and on others. I did not emerge jaded. I emerged with a burning desire to keep on keeping on. I feel full in life, and I feel full of art.

As I think about what's next, what comes after this thesis. Doors are open, and things are already setting into motion. I look forward to honouring my own heart, and the hearts of others through this magical, ridiculous, and just awe inspiring art form.

Appendix C: Sample Lesson Plans and Course Outlines from *dear heart*

Theatre by the Bay – w/ Leah Holder

Adaptation as Reclamation Workshop

Jan 29th, 2022 (1-4pm)

Lesson Plan - Jeff Ho

Workshop Brief
Adaptation as Reclamation

This online course is an opportunity to connect, collaborate, and create with a community of playwrights, specifically around the theme of creation and adaptation. How do we wield adaptation through personal and political storytelling? How do we consider adaptation as accessibility? And what are the potential insights that writers, creators, and artists can glean from adaptation that can apply to other genres or methods of creation? Through group discussion, exercises, analysis, and sharing of work developed within the class, join us as we explore the process of playwriting through adaptation.

Workshop – Jan 29, 2022

Today's Key Objective(s): Introduce Adaptation as Reclamation / Curiosity List

Teacher Materials Needed: Zoom, Pen and Paper, Laptop

Student Materials Needed: Themselves, notebook, pens, writing material

Welcoming / Attendance / Check In (30 Minutes)
1pm – 1:30pm

1. Intro – Name / Pronouns / Land Acknowledgement
2. Disciplines – Self identify
3. Any thing about playwriting you might want to share as context for me to better tailor this class for you.
4. A question you might be bringing with yourself about adaptations.

Self Intro:

Playwright / Actor – adaptation at TPM, working on one for Stratford, and currently preparing for two productions in Montreal, and with Tarragon in Toronto for the fall. Actor as well. MFA candidate, based in Toronto. Company dramaturg at Outside the March in Toronto.

Warm-up - Curiosity List (15 Minutes)
1:30pm – 1:45pm

- **Curiosity List (10 minutes) –** creative and personal check in, writing down everything you're curious about today, to begin stirring up the imagination, internally.
- **Share (5 minutes)**

Exercise 1 – Generative Exercise (30 minutes)

1:45pm – 2:15pm

- **Curiosity List Exercise 1 (15 minutes) –**
  Connecting personal impulses, why now, how now, with an external source via act of adaptation.
  Write a monologue for ten minutes, relating 5 things from your curiosity list with a source material of your choosing (classical figure such as Shakespeare, Ibsen, etc).

- **Share** (5-10 Minutes)
- **Discussion –** How curiosity as material can be applied in many ways of creation and other writing.

Exercise 2 – Adaptation of Object Exercise (30 minutes)

2:15pm – 2:45pm

- **Object Exercise (20 minutes)**
  Find two objects in your home, at random.
  Tell a story about the object in the right hand as if it was literal (a cup is a cup)
  Tell a story about the object in the left hand as if were abstract (a cup is an elephant)

  Now take some time to write a scene between these two objects, while also weaving in three things from your curiosity list.

  This exercise is adapting and free associating literal objects with abstraction, adaptation and personal impulses.

Hones the imaginative ability to connect any material object, with any story, any themes.

Share (5 minutes)

Discussion (5 minutes)
Provide personal context and examples – how it applies in my own work – Antigone with Chinese history, Iphigenia with Indigenous and Black communities.

Break (15 minutes)

2:45 pm – 3:00pm

Exercise 3 – Free Association with Source Material(s) (45-50 minutes)

3:00pm – 3:45/3:50pm

- **Discussion** (10 minutes)
  Discuss source material chosen from the classical European canon – discuss thoughts and feelings around the source material, and curiosities.

- **Introduce Free Association Exercise (30 minutes)**
  Write a scene where the source material, or a character from the source material (for example, Juliet from R+J) is in first person. They are interacting with a concept of free association (Juliet is at Mcdonald's), this concept is to be drawn from the contemporary world – refer to curiosity list for inspiration.
  The scene must progress towards some conflict, and must be unresolved.
  No fixed number of external characters – up to the writer.
  No parameter of using curiosity list – but lean on it for inspiration for connecting personal impulse.

- **Sharing (5-10 Minutes)**

Check out /Closing (10 – 15 Minutes)
3:45/3:50pm – 4:00pm
What did you discover? How was the experience? Closing thoughts on adaptations and introductory ways to relate the self with a source material. Goodbyes, and check outs – sharing of feelings/thoughts/questions, etc.

Playwriting – Generating Pages Course Outline
Tarragon Theatre
with Jeff Ho

Generating Pages – this online course is an opportunity to connect, collaborate, and create with a community of playwrights. Whether coming in with a draft in progress, or a completely new idea waiting to be launched: sessions will be structured to provide space to create, revise, and share material week to week – honed around the theme of generating material, working against perfectionism, working around nurturing curiosity and joy in playwriting. Through an exploration of playwriting exercises, practical conversations around new play development practises and dramaturgical collaborations, and discussions and sharing of material – participants will experience new tools and access tailored to their writing practise. From bristling language, to diving into the messiness of new writing, to that detailed process of revising, join us each week as we create, laugh, share, and connect over playwriting.

PLEASE NOTE: Participants will be asked to write and read new material (monologues and short scenes) aloud throughout the course and to do assignments between classes. As this is a virtual course a reliable internet connection is ideal. If you do not have a reliable internet connection, and are interested in taking the course, please note it on your application. We are committed to finding an alternate way to facilitate your learning and participation in the course.

To Enroll

Artists are invited to submit a ONE page proposal around what they'd like to work on through the class to education@tarragontheatre.com
OPTIONAL: If it is a work in progress, feel free to share up to 5 pages of an excerpt of the piece.
An alternate format, either a voice or video recorded proposal can be submitted (no longer than 3 minutes).
Be sure to send it as a .pdf, or as an accessible link (vimeo or youtube link) for alternate formats.
For accessibility accommodations please email or call Heather Caplap
at education@tarragontheatre.com |(416) 531-1827 ext 249

Application deadline: February 5, 2023 .

Registration is limited. All applicants will be contacted by February 13th.

Cost

Equity/Artist Rate – **$250***
Regular Rate – **$300**
Subsidized Rate – **$100****
***** This artist rate is available to anyone who self identifies as an artist and/or is a member of Canadian Actors' Equity Association.

******Tarragon is pleased to offer 2 subsidized spots in this course. If you'd like to apply for a subsidized spot please note it in you application. You are invited, *but not required*, to include a few sentences about what it would mean to you to participate in the course at a subsidized rate.

Winter 2023
Dates & Times

Monday evenings, **7:00-9:00 pm EST, February – April**

- Feb 13
- Feb 20
- Feb 27
- March 6
- BREAK
- March 20
- March 27
- April 3
- April 10

Instructor

Ho Ka Kei (Jeff Ho)

Jeff Ho is a theatre artist, originally from Hong Kong. As an actor, he has toured as Ophelia in Why Not Theatre's *Prince Hamlet* across Canada and the United States over five years, and has performed coast to coast across the country.

As a playwright, his works include *cockroach*, *Iphigenia and the Furies (On Taurian Land)*, *Antigone: 方*, and *trace*. His work has been developed with the Stratford Festival, Tarragon Theatre, Young People's Theatre, Human Cargo, Factory Theatre, Cahoots, the Banff Playwrights Lab, Nightswimming Theatre. His plays are published by Playwrights Canada Press.

As an educator, Jeff has taught numerous playwriting workshops through theatre companies and schools including: Stratford, Shakespeare by the Bay, Tarragon Theatre, Young People's Theatre, Factory Theatre, 10×10 (Thunder Bay) Singing Out, the TDSB and YRSB. Jeff worked with the Paprika Festival as a Playwriting Facilitator for five years, and was a Resident Artist

Educator with Young People's Theatre. He is currently studying at York University, where he is an MFA candidate in Performance Creation.

Jeff is grateful to have been honoured with a Toronto Theatre Critics Award for Best New Canadian Play *(Iphigenia)*; the Jon Kaplan Legacy Fund Award for a Young Canadian Playwright; the Bulmash Siegel Playwriting Award (Tarragon Theatre); a Harold Award (House of Nadia Ross); finalist for the Playwright's Guild of Canada's Drama award *(cockroach)*; finalist for the Governor General's Literary Award *(Iphigenia and Antigone)*; finalist for the LAMDA Literary Awards in the United States (*Iphigenia and Antigone)*; nominated for four Dora Awards. He is a graduate of the National Theatre School.

Appendix D: ***dear heart compilation of written material***

dear heart

compilation of written material

by: Jeff Ho

Table of Contents

Seventeen Monologues for THEA 4030

Dear Allyson, Marianna, Miranda, Tito, Alex, Anton, Lonelle, Jordan, Owen, Tatyana, Jadyn, Tuna, Eliza, Trinity, Jessie, Pyper, Johnny,

It's bewildering to think how dangerous moments of meeting are – and I don't mean danger in the visceral, blood curdling potential of violence, but the way that when you meet someone, you risk it all, you risk the way that people can judge or misunderstand or you share your heart, or you share the way you believe or see the world. For four years you've all found a way to be as one, sometimes splintered, sometimes united, but still, as one class, and it's been an honour and joy to have been able to share this little time with you all. It is wild that we met as pixels on a screen, and am grateful that you've shared a bit of your world with me through this time in movement, live.

It is truly astounding, and I am perpetually grateful around the ways humans meet – the way we've shared footprints in the studio, that squeaky grip of soles on floor – and the way you've played with sticks or found ways to jump for joy, dive in dread, or worked together in mystery.

I wish for you, all the joy and mystery in the world as you venture out into the world post – university. It's a wild thing. It's grand and chaotic, and messy, and always unexpected. May your dreams come true, and may your dreams grow plenty more and that you find your way towards continued light. I wish for you fulfillment – which is not happiness, necessarily, but to sleep at the end of a long day feeling purposed and filled and full.

These monologues and scenes are snapshots of how my imagination was spurred by the movement work you did guided by our amazing Allyson. Thank you for igniting so much for us all, Allyson! You were all so brave, sometimes tired, always risking things, sometimes confused – and that's all part of it. These pieces of writing, I dedicate to the danger of each of you – in that brave, unleashed, ferocious, I OWN MY LIFE sorta way – and these snippets of writing attempted to capture an image, or a story that appeared between what you did, and how that fueled my imagination. These pieces are not at all a commentary on who you may be – you're far too beautiful and vast and mysterious for me to know. The genre, style, interpretation of your movement are all so diverse and varied – and so I resisted trying to unify the writing in one style.

So, enjoy! This was a pleasure to write, and thank you for letting me dream as you worked – I can't wait to continue, hopefully, many collaborations in the future, I can't wait to encounter you in the world beyond. All my love and admiration of who you are. You deserve the world! Seize it!

Love,

Jeff

For Marianna, Johnny and Alex –

Marianna

Sorry, now.

I'm not sure why I'm apologizing.

Sorry.

We've just met. First words out of my mouth. Sorry.

Not hello, or well hi, or sup, or how are you, or

Wow.

Which in any other world, would be the first words out of my mouth.

Wow.

I…

The things I read before coming here, before being here with you, at this,

On this super hot day, like I'm sweating out the soles of my feet, too much information for a first encounter, I know, but better you know now that I sweat out my feet when it's too hot, than later and you wonder why the carpet is perpetually wet.

The things I read before coming, arriving, for this… dinner.

You see,

Rules.

Corsets on how to court.

You see.

Johnny

Ask questions, let them talk.

And of course, obviously, you've not said anything yet, because I'm jabbering away, sorry, but there is a point to this jabbering, I promise, I promise, but of course – the rule is broken, I haven't yet asked a question, how ugly, how monstrous of me.

Alex

Second rule

Be confident,

And of course, I start with sorry, I start with an apology, an apology for breathing the same air as you, of seeing you, of being awe struck that you are. Of you. Can't believe this immense possibility of you. What fortune. And for someone like me, fortune strikes and misses every moment every day every second, and to be here, with you now, all I can do is apologize to apologize for existing in the same world as you.

Johnny

But never mind that, another rule broken.

Marianna

PLAY HARD TO GET.

That's the one, the one I keep forgetting. For in it, is this challenge that I fail at constantly, and in everything, in life, in work, with my pets, the cat that runs away from me as I chase it for a hug, or don't look like your desperate for a job interview as I stare and smile at the interviewer, like yea of course I want the job, that's WHY I'M HERE, why would I want to hide that? So playing hard to get, no, I just, it's not even a rule for me, it doesn't make sense. I'm physically incapable of being any thing other than what's humming through me.

Probably the worst first date you've ever been a part of, but nevermind that, it's not over, and there are plenty rules left to break.

Alex

For example, never talk about the ugliness.

Johnny

First date, don't bring up the shit. Like, family, drunk uncles, Christmas. That shit.

Marianna

Yea. Well.

Alex

Let’s get into it.

Johnny

I’m an exile.

I’m meeting you as an exile in my life.

An exile from my family, from my mother, from my language, from my home, from my body, from my clothes, from my skin, from my hair, from my age, from my wisdom, from my ancestors, from my humour.

And what’s in a name? What does exile mean? It’s such a fancy word, and gosh, what does it mean? Like, really mean?

Like it brings me back to the big bang, that moment in the stars, well before there were even stars, but that moment of all moments – when space dust and specks of things we wouldn’t even be able to comprehend came crashing colliding into some giant explosion, an explosion of all explosions, and out birthed stars, and out flowed space, out came life – and life and life, and we are surrounded by life, that pollen blowing against your ear, triggering your hilarious allergies, that squirrel running across the street gambling life or death for an acorn – my kingdom! My kingdom for an acorn! Sorry, I tangent a lot, but from the moment of the big bang, till now, even as we sit here, facing each other, we’re whirling around faster than fast on this earth, circling the sun, hurtling constantly through some void, as we hurtle and collide against gravity, as we sit and look up at stars so distant, yet they are our cousins, our parents, our everything – we are all stars, and yet we’re on this rock named Earth, and so aren’t we all, from that moment of the big bang till now, just exiles from the stars?

Alex

Sorry.

Got complicated.

Dictionary dot com says this about exiles:

An exile – a forced absence from one’s own country or home.

An exile – a voluntary absence from one’s own country or home.

And nevermind who you ask, who you see, there will be different definition of an exile.

And it’s very confusing, is it forced, is it voluntary, who said I’m exilic.

But of course, I do. I say so.

Johnny

I say I'm an exile.

Marianna

And so you're meeting me today, someone who's gone through a forced, or perhaps, most likely, I think, voluntary absence from my home.

Johnny

And you see.

Alex

The confusion of being an exile, of forgetting one's tongue, of forgetting the face of my father, the voice of my mother, or forgetting who I am as I prowl foreign lands – it's real, it's real, you must understand, not feeling like home, or craving to return home. But knowing how sometimes home doesn't want you back, or home isn't home any more any way, so what are you then? What are you?

Johnny

An exile.

Alex

And you see. Let's get into the shit.

I'm an exile.

And through this immense, sorry, don't know why I'm apologizing again, through this moment of meeting you, not with a hello, not with greeting or a sup, through this immense POSSIBILITY of you, existing, in front of my eyes. Real, beautiful, eyes green, plaid monstrosity for a shirt – don't worry your styling will get better some day, I promise, through the possibility of you.

And think about it – think about it – back to the big bang, back to that primordial pang, that thang, and how how we're here, star dust, exiles from space, somehow, between then, between that billions of years of void, of the elements, of grand swathes of life and flora, and walking fish and giant lizards, and extinction events, and then more life, and then that meme of that chimp who walks and stands becomes humanity flooding this rock we call earth, and there are billions of us, yet not enough to match the stars in the sky, but we are legion – and somehow, somehow,

in you, in this moment, a gravity is forming – we're breaking the FUCKING LAWS OF PHYSICS, we are gravity, as one, and I hurtle through light years to be here with you, I feel as if I /

Marianna

I am home.

And like all new homes, there are boxes left unpacked, or walls scratched up by demon tenants from years long past, or a new oven that sometimes works, and some times doesn't you configure yourself in it, you tailor your life to meet the new walls, the new floors, the new smell. And sometimes you flick on the wrong switch when you don't remember which switch turns on which lights at first, and sometimes you bump into a chair, and you whisper, oops sorry.

That's what this is, isn't it.

I grasp you darkly, through a whisper, as a new home,

I shed the exilic shell, drape a coat off a door,

I enter new halls,

I smell new air,

I rest easy

Will you be my home?

For Jessie

I mean I've tried it all,

Peloton, Pilates, Pills, Pushups, Pull ups, Pin Ups,

Anything with a p – I've done it, I've tried it.

And yo, none of that shit works.

None of it.

Truss me – none of it – I've seen it happen,

With like, three, may be four… uh, five of my friends,

They go to pilates for a week,

And their skin, my god, their skin – the glow of it, like sun kissed sun dried fucking tomatoes

No I'm not talking bout the wrinkle, but like that deep crimson blush of a shine, it's just

Stunning.

And their hair, like, some mermaid took a dive in it and made it home – so luscious, perpetually glossy,

And their laugh,

It's like they know, it's like they've struck gold, won the lottery, had octuplets I dunno, it's like they laugh this laugh

Full throttle, all cylinders fired cackle

AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHHAAHHAHAHAHAHAHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

And like,

I've tried.

I've tried it all

All the p's – did I mention the parkour? Fell off my balcony once, miracle I'm still alive.

I've tried.

And nothing.

No shiny hair.

No wax like skin

No newly fitted laugh

Just same ol' me.

And for a while,

I thought – damn, spent a shit load on those p's. Like, life in Toronto is fucking expensive, and I've tried, I've tried to do that self help shit.

I thought – what left? What else can I do?

Am I perpetually doomed to a life of dry ass skin and crumbly hair?

Will my friends, with their new found sheen, abandon me en masse, and go get twenty dollar kale and celery juices without me?

But then.

Eureka.

The moment that made me see the light.

I won't name names, cuz gossip is DISGUSTING – okay it's bitch ass betty brock – yea like it's all in the name, don't you just wanna punch someone with that name?

I'm like crying after pilates, on the floor, like broke my abs or some shit like that,

And Betty comes next to me and is like,

Girl, Pilates aint for everybody.

You're totally perfect the way you are.

Pilates aint for everybody.

And like my abs are broke, like I literally can't sit the fuck up.

And Betty brock is consoling me and shoving me deeper and deeper into the shit,

And I lift my arms,

And I look at betty, and this… this fire just lights up inside of me – I don't know what got over me,

Like don't tell me what I can or cannot do, Betty.

How dare you lie down next to me, with your sweatless perfectly perfumed pheromones wafting in my face?!

So I lift my arms,

Grip my fists together,

And I fucking.

Like.

I hammer my fists into her fucking face.

Broke her teeth,

And remember, I couldn't sit up, so I looked like a worm with a sledgehammer.

But my god,

It felt so. So. So. Good.

And I laughed.

Not that perfect laugh.

But I laughed like the universe was mine.

And Eureka.

Fuck the hair,

Fuck the skin

Fuck Betty,

I don't need whatever program of perfection you think I need.

I know the quiet power inside me, like a pigeon with a guillotine,

Come at me,

I dare you.

I'll snap your soul into bits.

For Trinity

And I dig and I dig and I dig.

You gods up there,

Bastards. Fuck tards. Bitches.

You see me, my claws for hands outstretched, sheathed into the ground,

The soil pooling around my fingers as I make way,

Oh you earth

I beg

Bury me as you've buried mine

You see, you fuckers up there.

You've wronged.

You've done nothing.

You watched as mine, all mine,

Were torn asunder, blasted to bits remnants of flesh bone dust – and shredded to such miniscule proportions that I could not like ash collect them in my palms.

You've refused me a right.

A right that dogs and cats and birds and trees and ants and whales receive – the right to bury our loved.

Whales sink to the bottom of the ocean, dogs and cats laid in the earth, ants recycled as mound and food, trees becoming soil becoming trees – all buried.

And mine, mine loved, mine beloved.

You've taken them from me, you've watched as they were blasted,

You did absolutely shit all fuck ton nothing, and I blame you,

I blame you,

I blame the injustices of this all on you, on you entirely,

And of course yes I blame the people who did the killing who blasted my beloved

They who actually did it,

But they did it all

They killed

They bombed

They did it all under your name, your name, your name alone,

God

All because of, of, of you.

O gods.

Why?

O Why?

O why?

Here I will stay,

For as long as your name remains, in breath and thought,

Here will I remain.

Digging graves for things I can no longer bury.

For Pyper

I mean, I dunno, I don't get it – like, like I'm stuck in some corner in a triangle.

How dare you single me out from my sisters!

Shut your mouth – I'm talking, don't dare interrupt me. Don't look at me like that, I said what I said – you got a weird face you fuggin weakling.

How dare you.

You cannot, you CANNOT single me out from my sisters –

I said. Shut your mouth –

What do you mean can't tell us apart?

Yea okay we triplets, that doesn't mean shit.

My eldest sister, she did it, I got nothing to do with this. It's SO easy to tell her apart, she's got this lip thing going on, it twitches, just go drive around, ask for a BRENDA, look for that twitching lip and arrest her, SHE DID IT, BRENDA DID IT.

What do you mean I look older? Fuck you you wrinkled cracker ass, I'm obvi the youngest. How dare you.

Let me go!

Take your hands off me.

You cannot arrest me.

They're the ones who burned the fuggin forest down, and

You're arresting ME?!

On what grounds?!

Yea okay I smoke, my sisters smoke, your mother probably smoked when she had you, we all smoke, doesn't mean shit, doesn't mean I started this – this – this fire, it makes no sense, YOU'RE making no sense.

AND WHO CARES?

It's a few trees, just plant another one, choose your pick, maple trees, or… or… uh… what other types of trees are there…? EVERGREENS, yea plant an evergreen, or whatever the fuck you wanna plant – none of my business.

TAKE YOUR HANDS OFF OF ME.

LET GO

LET GO LET GO

It’s gone! It’s gone – okay? Stop! I didn’t mean to, just, okay, I like lit one up – cuz like it’s fucking Brenda, okay, she’s just got this way about her, she looked at me wrong this morning, and I said fuck off, and she throws her hot coffee at me, and I’m like FUCK YOU BRENDA, FUCK YOU, so I go out for a smoke, cuz fuck Brenda, she can suck it, but I go out, and the biatch chases after me – she THROWS a bible at my head, and I’m like, BRENDA IN THE NAME OF GOD – DO. NOT. THROW. THE. BIBLE. AT. ME.

And she starts throwing pans and cups, and bricks, and spoons at me!

So like, okay, I was just trying to shield myself, and like, okay, may be the cigarette just… ya know…

And like… everything just… dry leaves, they just, they explode, ya know? Never seen it that quick, the whole thing, that whole patch of land just… combusts…

And Brenda, she….

Please, I beg you, look for her. She’s out there somewhere. She’s out there in the blaze. Please look for her.

I did it.

It’s my fault.

Blame me.

Save my sister.

For Anton

You were in a yellow shirt.

It was a terrible shirt.

Dreadful.

We burned that shirt two months down,

Cuz it was so UGLY.

But.

You.

I couldn't take my eyes off of you,

While trying my best to ignore that uggo shirt.

You looked like that yellow m&m

In a good way.

You didn't see me at first.

You were…

In line, waiting to take out this gigantic book.

What was it called again?

Geology across the ages,

Some shit about rocks and mountains and islands and rocks.

It was quite obvious, that you were a major, and I mean, MAJOR, nerd.

And you got to the cashier,

And you took out your wallet,

And you like, forgot to zip your coin purse,

And so you just let loose all your change,

While trying to hand over your book about rocks.

Everybody else kinda laughed, or just kinda ya know,
Got out of the way.

And you bent down and started picking it all up,
And that's when I
Came right up and started helping you.
But I held on to a penny.

Just to hold a little of you, in case you weren't queer,
Or if you weren't interested or whatever,
Just to hold a little of you,
So I'd never forget.

But thankfully,
You thanked me,
And you tried to hide your rock book,
And we shook hands,
And I wouldn't let go of it,
And I asked right then and there,
If you were free to have dinner that night.

I had never been so brave in my life.
But I knew.
I knew.
That I'd love you forever and a day.

Then I asked if we could burn your shirt.

For Tatyana

Holding on.

Holding you, holding me, holding all, holding the past,

Holding the now,

Holding what's in store these next seconds,

These next moments in time,

As if time was this infinite thing,

But of course it's not,

Let's not be silly.

Hold your thought,

Hold your question,

Hold logic for a second.

Listen here,

Listen to me,

I've not got much to say, except this:

Don't let go of life,

Hold on to it,

Wring every drop of joy in your days.

It's work,

It's fucking hard work.

Joy is work, but you deserve it, you have a choice,

Step by step,

To pursue joy.

And when I say joy,

I don't just mean happiness,

Or whatever cliché music video rendition of joy that exists.

Joy for you.
Whether that’s dancing the night away,
Whether that’s sitting, drink in hand,
Swaying to sweet sweet music,
Or whether that’s being with rain, being by trees,
Being alone, or being in a group,
Or whether it’s the meal that makes you soar,
Or the words you utter to the ones you love,
Or the way you buzz alive,
Or the way you sleep, sleep as much as you want, rest as you need,
Whatever joy is for you.

Don’t let go.
Hold it.
Please.
For me. For us.
There will be an end,
You know this, You do.
Deep in your bones, you know you’re not immortal.
So choose your mortal days wisely,
And you’ll make mistakes
You’ll fumble
You’ll break hearts
You’ll continue being flawed

That doesn’t mean you don’t deserve joy.

I implore you.

Beg you, on my knees, as I fall.

Hold on to joy.

Hold me, holding you,

Hold this second,

Before I go.

Hold joy.

For Tuna

It’s been hours.

Hours.

Hours.

Feels like weeks, months, years,

Feels like eternity.

Feels like heaven dragging on

Feels like hell crawling up my spine

Dragging me down and down and down

This spiral

Of waiting

Of dizziness

Of anticipation

I NEED A SMOKE

PLEASE

SOMEONE SEDATE ME.

WAKE ME WITH A PACK ALL LIT UP IN MY MOUTH

I’m just itching

Scratching at scabs on my arms

Grinding my teeth

Pulling at my hair

Crossing my eyes

Finding every which way to distract myself from the need for nicotine.

I know what the pro’s say.

DON’T THINK ABOUT IT.

You can get through it if you don’t think about it.

Think about anything else,

Like

Think about voices

Faces

Think about foods

Ice cream

Kimchi

Snow

Songs

Artists

Paintings

Clouds

Sun

Summer

Wind

Water

Seas

Oceans

Drownings

Breath

Breathing

SMOKING.

FUCK, there. Again. Thought about it again.

So begins the

itching

Scratching at scabs on my arms

Grinding my teeth

Pulling at my hair

Crossing my eyes

All over again.

A kingdom for a cigarette.

That’s all I ask.

Spare me.

Free me.

I brought this on myself.

I know.

But please.

LET ME SMOKE.

For Jordan

Puppies

Are so authentic

You always know what and how they feel towards you.

They're excited to see you.

They're excited to eat

Excited to poop.

And they're there to love, and be loved,

Always.

Best friends,

Constant companions,

Those words that express

Bonds deeper than words.

And dogs have been that for millenia.

While humans.

We've found every which way to disconnect from one another,

Ways to close connection,

To close communication.

To find ways to say you're that,

You're the other.

I'm superior,

You don't know better,

Or you don't know at all.

And it's…

Isn’t it sad when we can feel for dogs

Better than we can feel for humans?

And then to say I love you.

Dogs will always, constantly,

Express it.

Humans.

So complex and dense.

So many layers and filters and blocks

To get to that expression of

I love you.

The inherited familial baggage,

The nature vs. nurture of how to express words and emotions

The traditions

The patriarchy

The capitalism,

The materialism

The different ways of SHOWING I love you

But to just say it

Simply

To touch and stroke a cheek,

To land a kiss

To fix a hair

To admire in slumber

to spend those simple expressions of love.

That feels heroic,

Feels like the hardest thing to do.

So I dare you.

Say I love you.

Dogs can do it. So can you.

For Eliza

Holy effing shit

Holy mother effing mother what the

Shit

W----ooooo

WOW

Whoa.

Just

I mean,

My goodness

Deary honey sweet jebus

Bless my heart

Jumping hoops

Running laps

Skipping beats

Bless this heart

Lil heart of mine

And calm

Calm the eff down

Just –

NO/

Do not/

Play it cool/

I mean/

Play it NORMAL/

Just. ACT. NORMAL.

Just like breathe

Like in and out

In and out

In and/

HOLY FUCK.

They're –

My god,

I don't believe in angels

Heavenly things

Firm believer of earthly belongings and flaws and imperfections and

Like lower expectations

Like proper getting to know you

Getting to know me

Getting to know one another

But are they…

Are they

An angel?

Beautiful.

Stunning.

Radiant.

Those. Eyes.

Lips.

Cheeks.

Hairline.

That dip in the neck.

That crux of their shoulder

That that that

All of them

If you saw an angel in front of you,

Would you speak to them?

WHAT WOULD YOU EVEN SAY?

Like…

Hey…

Or like…

Sup…

Or like…

What's good?

WHAT DO I SAY?

No no no no

Keep mouth shut

Don't act a fool

Don't drool

Like no dog.

Keep peace

Calm heart

Quiet mind

Breathe.

For Miranda

The little joys

The finger that grasps for yours under the bed sheets

The brush of a hair over your face

The smell of fresh baked love in the air

The little joys

Carve our hearts into openness

Reveals the beauty that's possible

The little joys

That make us sing

That pushes us to dance

That allows a kiss and a hug

The little joys to live for

What's yours?

Share them with me.

I'd love to hear them.

Nothing more comforting

Through this dark whirlwind of a life

To share in those little joys

Tell me how you smile

Show me how you're tickled

And show me what makes you gasp for air in laughter

Show me what stars guide your every step.

Sometimes
It’s easy to forget
Through the fog
And anger
And grey
What it’s all for.

So think of those little joys
It won’t erase away it all
I can’t promise that
I’d be lying to you
But think of those little joys
And I dare you
Smile
You’ll be quite alright.

For Tito

Emojis are so damn confusing.

Like what are they even saying,

Just use words. WORDS.

Like the reverse smiley face, or the tear drop smiley face,

Are you saying that you HATED the date?

Or are you just laughing at something?

I don't know?!

Or like the first time I saw the eggplant emoji used I was like,

Okay may be they're vegetarian, I should book a vegetarian resto… but

Then I realized OH MY GOD.

Or like I don't know any number of emojis, and sometimes it's like

Multiple emojis in one,

Like the hand covering eyes monkey next to a clown next to a car… WHAT

Just WHAT ARE YOU SAYING?

Are you saying I'm a monkey clown car?

Are do you want me to drive you to the circus next to the zoo?

Just use words!

There's this one time, that I dated this person, and they would only insist with responding with emojis,

Like I'd write a whole date proposal, like let's go to Chez Pierre, for some French cuisine, like fancy pretentious French food, like foie gras, or like escargot, and grenouille.

And they just gave me this mouse emoji, with a cheese emoji, followed by a sushi emoji….

Like are you telling me yes?

No?

Are you saying you feel like a mouse eating cheese, but you're also open to sushi?

Why don't you pick a spot then?!

So I wrote back, again in words,

And I'm like, um

So are we on for Chez Pierre?

And they wrote back:

Moon emoji, sun emoji, cow emoji

And I'm like are you a celestial cow?

What are you saying?

So I straight up wrote,

WHAT ARE YOU SAYING, PLEASE.

And they wrote back, oh

I'm lactose intolerant, I can't have cheese and French food is a lot of dairy, let's get sushi instead.

And I'm like, you know what

I'm good, You have your sushi,

I'm just gonna go.

And they responded with a wave emoji.

And I was like.

BYE. JUST BYE.

For Jadyn

Miss me with your shit

Miss me with your lies

Miss me with your political contrivances

Miss me with your fangs

Miss me with your passive aggressive tone

Miss me with your rage

Miss me with your pity

Miss me with your condolences

Miss me with your hopes and prayers

Miss me with your flowers

Miss me with your letters

Miss me with your cards

Miss me with your calls

Miss me with your texts

Miss me with your tears

I am fine.

Leave me alone.

I’m grown.

I’m capable.

I’m strong.

I’ve walked this before

I’ve tread these dark hollows a lifetime ago.

I’ve seen it before

I’ve counted the number of times

These knees have kissed grounds

And couldn’t stand up quite quite yet

I've been there
And you've been there
And we've been there
And I'm sorry I'm sorry to say

Miss me with your compassion and empathy

You do not know what this feels like
Brick on face
Blood spilling between my tongue and teeth
Eyes so raw I'd rub it gone
Chest heaving
Arms wrapped
You do not know what this feels like

So don't try
Don't reach out
Leave me alone

Miss me with your care
I don't want to care
I don't care.

Just bring them back.
Miss me with your reality
I don't want to live there.
I want to be back a day before, with you
Missing me.

For Owen

So like, I'm out with a friend, who's all like

I know someone that you'd LOVE to meet, you two would be perfect together.

And I was all like, okay, yea, I'm open to surprises.

So I get set up on a blind date.

And it's ya know, it's a whole surprise, so who knows what to expect,

But I stay open, and I keep myself pretty prepared, like I put on nicer attire,

I spiffied up my hair,

I even did a mask the night before, ya know, just to get that little oomf.

And we go to a seafood restaurant,

Let's be real here, it was red lobster.

Nothing fancy, but fancy enough.

And we meet, and within the first five seconds, I'm like, okay, no, this is a no, but may be we can be friends, so I stick around.

Anyway, I think they felt the same way about me too, but we were both too polite to do anything about it.

So anyway, we order, and we both get some lobster and those cheese biscuits. And we just chat, and we chat about our friend who clearly is the worst matchmaker in history, and at this point we basically admit that this date is a bust.

But all good,

The lobster comes, we eat,

We have buttery goodness,

The best part of the evening.

But then, my stomach starts growling, and I feel an oncoming… ya know… I feel like I'm gonna have to go to the bathroom… and I'm like… uh oh.

But then, I see this look on their face, and I register the same thought.

And somehow, brazenly, I ask:

Do you feel… kind of… sick?

And they say,

Yea, yea, I feel terrible.

And I look around us,

And there's this kid barfing,

And their parents grasping their tummys.

Horrified waiters running every which way.

I look at another table,

And they too, start barfing everywhere.

And I look back at my date,

And we both, SPRINT. I mean, like Olympic record SPRINT to the bathroom.

And the worst part was, the bathrooms were next to each other,

So like…

We heard EVERYTHING.

After that, we both got out at the same time, and we said nothing,

We split the bill,

Waved good bye,

And literally, never ever spoke of that night again.

Ever.

Any time I eat a lobster, I can't help but think of waterfalls.

For Lonelle

Things unsaid stay unsaid
That's a given, I know. It's logic,
You can think it,
But if you don't say it,
It rots inside.

And what you say can be complete bullshit,
It can be against the logic of this world,
Free speech, am I right?
It can be utterly wrong.

Or it can be sheer beauty,
It can be the most poignant sound you've shaped.
It can be the message that sends inspiration spiralling through spines.

I'm not here to judge,
I don't know what you've left unsaid.
If it's hate you wish to speak,
Then speak it to yourself, till you heal, and shed the hate,
Time's too short to be so hateful,
And there's too many folks who don't get that chance to heal.
So do that for yourself, you deserve it.

If it's something left unsaid filled with love,
For that special someone,
That special baby,
That lovely soul,

Then please,

Say it.

Nothing’s lost,

Nothing’s gained,

If left unsaid.

I’ve only one thing I wish to say,

If you’re willing to spare a moment -

I don’t know you.

But I love you.

You don’t have to trust me, or even listen to me.

But ya know, I’m human, and life is far too short,

And well, we all go through different things,

But at the very least, we have being alive as a common thing between us.

And I can say, in confidence, that being alive is so very hard.

Life is up and down, this and that, surprises like bricks smashed against your gut, joy that springs you to the clouds, and pain that hollows you out.

Life is gorgeously ugly.

Life is painfully uncaring.

Life is meaningless poignancy.

The specks of star dust that we are – returns to the earth, to eventually be smashed into stars again, a billion years from now.

But you, all of you, hearing me, right this moment.

It’s a miracle, it’s a moment of fate.

So how can I not love you?

We’re bound in this exact moment,

And in this contract that we have, in this space, between each and everyone of us -

It cannot be left unsaid:

I love you. I love you. I love you.

Six Monologues for THEA 5210

Manifesto - JH

For David

Guys, honestly, I gotta say, y'all are being a touch.

Dramatic.

Or should we say –

Post-dramatic.

I really gotta say, and this is without judgement, truly, really, believe me –

Calm down.

Honestly.

It's just… 100 plays over like, 2 months, no big deal am I right?

Like, I dunno,

Read one while you're cooking your bacon,

Or tofu for you veggie heads amongst us – YOU KNOW WHO YOU ARE.

Oh, none of you?

Uh.

Well.

It was all an ironic commentary on the state of veganism in our contemporary discourse, a little bit of

Alienation effect – as big B would say.

Who am I talking about?

Pop Quiz!

Who's Big B?

Bernie?

Barack?

Britney – FREE BRITNEY – oh she's freed, learned about that from my daughter.

Bach?

Beyonce?

…

NO, it’s BRECHT ya dummies.

And yes I know, Mother Courage is a bit of a drag, but have you seen that cart in the original production?!

That woman really be dragging that cart – so least you can do is read!

Besides, many of these plays – like may be… ten? Outta the hundred, you’ve probably already read before…

Like, Lear.

Or the cherry orchard

Or August Osage County – and Meryl Streep just ate that role up, honestly, she did, you should all watch it, yea? But still read it, duh.

Or like the love suicides of sonezaki – very romantic, I recommend reading it to your loved ones, I mean valentines is coming up, am I right?

Anyway, so with that ten outta your way, it’s only about a few… uh… dozen… a few dozen more to go, yea.

And like, just spend a day, like one a day

What do you mean you gotta do other homework?

What do you mean you got KIDS?

Work? Pfft, this is THE THEATRE.

This is GRADDDD SCHOOL.

You get what you put in – that’s how the saying goes, yea?

Honestly, put it on like a podcast while you’re driving,

Or like, read it before bed, in the bathroom, while you’re commuting – I dunno,

It’s just words, after all.

Anywho, I’ve attached all the pdfs of the plays in our eclass –

Beat.

Oh shit, eclass is down.

Uh.

Thank you, Sean, for the dropbox. Yea, you can find it there.

I’ve also uploaded all the other readings there, it amounts to about…

Another 600 hundred hours of reading, so…

BETTER GET STARTED!

I don't get the fuss, just like, read it! Think about it! Pour it into your coffee! IV drip it into your veins!

Stop being so (post) DRAMATIC.

Okay, who's gonna start their presentation on Mother Courage?

For Monica

Hi guys,

It's Monica here, can you… oh shit…

Am I frozen?

I see Madeleine and Jeff shaking left to right again.

Okay, wait a moment.

Turn your camera off, Monica!

Yea, I know, I have to turn my screen off for a second, then like,

I unfreeze, ahahhaha

Anyway, I'm back!

Uh, technology.

Anyway it's Monica here, I'm gonna be talking about –

Your camera freezes again.

Oh shit.

I think, I'm…

Hello?

Can you hear me?

Oh you can!

Can you see me?

Yea I know, I can see you, but can you see me?!

Yea?

unfreeze

Oh I'm good now,

Phew,

Sorry y'all.

Anyway, I'm presenting my research presentation on Mother Courage as a…

Dance piece.

So, no words,

I'm gonna move.

I researched about the cart from the original production, and like, the stage was a revolve, so the actress playing Mother Courage had to literally like…

DRAGGGGGG the cart on and on and on,

And so I choreographed what a drag it was to read that play – whoops, I mean the dragging of the cart in conversation with contemporary questioning of the power of circus –

So like, here, I'm…

DRAGGING the cart,

And then ropes fall from the sky,

And like, suddenly I'm dragging the cart UP and UP and UP,

Like a commentary of Mother Courage ascending as a heroine in the narrative,

But then the ropes SNAP!

And whoaaaaaa,

The cart crashes kaboom kabaam flat, and Mother Courage crashes on the cart, and that's a commentary on like the sins of Mother Courage, and the EARTHLINESS of it all.

And then, of course, you all know me –

a…

Greek Chorus appears, in a Cyr wheel.

CYR.

You might know it better as a circus wheel – WHEEL OF DEATH.

And that's exactly it, the Greek chorus whirls in chanting

DEATH DEATH DEATH as Mother Courage keeps dragging her cart, up and down, up and down, forever and ever.

And every single time a grad student has to read this play, I hope they –

Camera freezes

Oh shit.

I think I froze.

CAN YOU HEAR ME?!

For Mattea

Hi guys,

Just a reminder - It's MATTea, not matAYA.

This conversation about Mother Courage is getting all very

Intimate, if I do say so myself, and if I may…

As an Intimacy Professional – it's often referred to as an Intimacy Co-ordinator in the industry,

Which is outrageous, truly.

From hereon out referred to as IP.

This conversation can serve to have that extra IP touch.

If I may,

Monica, when you speak about your Greek Chorus on your wheel of death, lying on top of each other – do you have an IP contracted to arrange that?

In particular, one must consider how exactly the Greek Chorus begins flopping on each other, and that's where I can come in, to guide, and make that a safe space.

I'm not being facetious here.

This is serious business.

Also, David – could you clarify for me when you joke about the love suicides of sonezaki and how that's romantic – do you have an IP in mind to hold space for conversations around that? In no way do I think that romanticism should be so conveniently aligned with that specific play. For some readers, that notion can be quite – triggering.

Whoop, sorry, not triggering.

As my teens, who are raised on the tik tok have told me about, triggering is not very accurate, and actually offensive. The preferred term these days is – ACTIVATED.

No, Jeff, not your activated almonds – fuck off with that.

Activated, as in your body, your sensations, your whole being is activated, alert to the activating event.

So anyway, David,

I'd like you to clarify for me your intentions in aligning Sonezaki with valentines?!

Lastly,

I have my own contributions to our Mother Courage conversation – and that is, I completely painted my imagined set for my vision of the play.

Yes,

Look at this square.

What story does this wood tell you?

You see these lines carved across?

That is the very story of the cart being dragged across the stage.

The very act of design, or at least, my vision in it, is to make it invisible, that it enhances and augments the storytelling in such a magical way – that it feels unseen.

And so, this line across the stage, the dents of the cart dragging and dragging along – that is an invisible touch of storytelling that creates magic.

And that magic is beautiful.

It’s quiet.

It’s intimate.

And as an IP, it’s certified intimate, so I exactly know what I’m talking about.

For Sean

Hey you.

Don't mind me – I'm a touch buzzed.

You thought I was drinking grape juice? Hell no,

It's a 1998 Chateau de Franc Beaujolais – special reserve.

Yes I'm fancy, and no, I'm not going to share – it's not a BYOB.

While I was day drinking and reading Mother Courage

I gotta say,

I got so bored.

And ya know, I'm a designer – so what are these words? Like who cares?

And this cart? The one that you all keep referring to?

I made a maquette of it, yea

Like I made a set, shaped like a cart,

And audiences will file in, and everyone will go on this cart ride as they watch Mother Courage.

I know, I'm brilliant.

The wine helps – you should try it.

The other thing that I changed was…

Honestly,

I looked at all the previous photos of productions of mother courage, the one where Meryl Streep was in – I don't know if it was natural or not, but her hair… it shocked me.

It looked like squirrels decided to nest their nuts in it.

So for my take on mother courage,

This cart is going to be woven out. Of. Hair.

And Mother Courage is going to have a state of the art, bullet proof, sweat resistant wig.

And I will make it myself,

With of course, the help of my wigmaker – who, in our last show, threw a bottle of wine in my face,

And I turned to her, and laughed cuz,

“HAHA the bottle’s empty, BETSY. “

Anyway, she got angry at me, because I need things to be PERFECT. That’s what you get when you hire me – PERFECTION.

Betsy and I are going to make the best mother courage wig you’ve ever seen.

It’s brilliant. I know.

Anyway,

I’m leaving the maquette of the cart made of hair in the grad lounge, if you wanna check it out.

As payment, feel free to drop off some wine – red, no white.

Thanks yall!

For Daniella

Hi everybody,

I'm so sorry, for being a touch late –

My computer, it just, it dies whenever the cable isn't connected,

So I like, sat down at my desk, and I think I just… accidentally shook the table a bit too much, and the cable wiggled out? And so, my computer just shut down!

So I reached down, and then re-attached the cable, but in doing so, I knocked over the router,

And then that went haywire,

And I had to reconnect that too,

And then, it just.. spiralled…

ANYWAY,

I'm so sorry for being late – I think I might have missed a few presentations on Mother Courage today?

Which I think –

Thank you David for putting the readings on e-class by the way, I'm just gonna pull them up now..

Oh shit.

Is e-class down for anyone else?

I can't seem to…

Beat.

Dropbox?

Um.

Do I?

How do I?

Wait – sorry - can someone explain….?

Beat.

Oh! I found it, thank you so much everybody for the help, it's honestly – today has been a lot – anyway, I'm here now, what did I miss?

Oh my god – I love that, Monica, the use of Greek Chorus, intersecting with the semiotics of the set design from Mattea and Sean – it's just brilliant, you are all. So. inspiring to me.

Oh my god? Me?

Jeff shut the fuck up.

I'm really not smart – I just have like ten million PhD's from every university you can think of – I didn't even break a sweat doing that, honestly,

And like 100 play exam?

I had a ten thousand play exam, so this is, no offence David, this is like an appetizer for me.

So y'all just let me know if you need any help or notes that I've taken throughout my PhD's, cuz I've got loads – I mean, shitloads, of notes.

I'll just put it up in e-class, I mean, drop the box. Drop box.

Um.

Could someone help me with… that?

Sorry,

Oh shit, the cable just unhinged, oh no, my computer is

DY----…….

For Madeleine

Here we go.

Okay.

I'm early.

Why am I always the first in these classes – where the f is everybody?

It's okay, I'll take notes.

Oh.

100 play exam.

Uh oh.

Uh oh.

Lear?

Yea, that's fine, I know it, yea yea.

Cherry Orchard?

Yea. I've seen it too, it's fun, yea.

August Osage County?

David likes Meryl Streep's performance in it?

She was dreadful. Dreadful!!!!

That movie RUINED the play!!!!!!

AHHHH

Oh no.

Can they see my disdain of the film on camera?

Smile, Maddy, smile.

Nod.

Yup.

If all looks bad,

Look at notes.

Never fails.

Beat.

Okay…

Mother Courage.

Hate that play.

Don't say that out loud.

Oh no, can they see it on my face?

Oh shit.

Smile.

We had to present something about it today?

Oh shit.

I can make a new slide for it, like really fast.

Give it my signature Maddy touch.

Black backdrop,

White text,

A picture from a Broadway production.

Oh shit, everybody's making fun of Meryl,

Better not use the Broadway production.

Ahhhh!

Monica is…

Wow.

Brilliant.

Aerial, circus wheeling, Greek chorus mother courage.

Wow.

Wow

Mattea and Sean – such visionaries – I LOVE how they think.

Gosh I'd love to wear that bullet proof, sweat resistant wig, that would literally save my day on set.

Daniella, girl, we got you.

Don't worry about it.

Oh my god, Jeff – you are rambling again – we don't care about your cat! Throw it off the balcony! That fern behind you has been dying throughout this whole term, please water it or put it out of it's misery!

Oh shit.

It's my turn?

Oh no.

I have to speak.

Okay.

Let's do this.

Finger on the unmute button.

YOU. GOT. THIS. MADDY.

Presses the unmute button.

Hi everyone.

Mother Courage.

It's…

It's a play.

END

One Scene for 5076 Scene

Cast
Erika
Keira
Monica
Daniella
Madeleine
Garrett
Sodienye

Reading Notes

/ is an interruption
Beat is a one count.
Pause is a three to five count.

Erika is leading Monica, Daniella, Madeleine, Garrett, Sodienye in an exercise.
Monica and Daniella is grouped together,
Garrett and Sodienye are grouped together.
Madeleine is walking the perimeters of the space, facing a wall.

Sodienye is on Zoom, so everything she does may be delayed or affected by virtual circumstances.

Erika
Now punch!

Monica
ARGG.

Daniella
HUUHH

Garrett
OOOOF

Beat.

Sodienye
(delayed on zoom – give this a 3 count.)
…. Kapow.

Monica, Daniella, and Madeleine can continue to

Vocalize punch sounds (like boom, pow, wooop in the background)

Garrett
D?

Sodienye
Yes, Garrett?

Garrett
Did you punch me?

Sodienye
Yea, I uh.
I kapow'ed.

Garrett
Oh sorry.

Sodienye
Could you hear me?

Garrett
There was a delay/

Sodienye
Oh I'm so sorry/

Erika
NO TALKING, JUST PUNCHING/

Garrett
Sorry, there was a / delay /

Erika
PUNCH/

Garrett
BOOM/

Sodienye
(*receiving the punch over zoom*)
AUUGHHH.
(*she punches)*
KAPOW.

Garrett
(*flies back as if hit)*

OOOF.

Erika
YES. PUNCH IT OUT.

Monica begins to twirl.

Daniella
(*punches Monica)*
HAIYA/

It misses

Daniella
(*tries again)*
AAIIIIII AIAIAIAIAI

It misses again because Monica is twirling.

Daniella
Um Monica /

Monica
(*twirls into a punch)*
KABLAM.

Daniella
(*receiving the punch)*
Whoa.

Monica
Oh my god, I'm so sorry,
Did I hit you? /

Erika
NO CONTACT.
PUNCH THE SPACE BETWEEN /

Monica
I'm so sorry!

Daniella
No no no no no, you didn't,
There was no contact /

Monica
Oh

Daniella
It's just,
That was… so beautiful,

I was so moved by your…
Like, I FELT it, like really FELT it.

Monica
Aw shucks.

Daniella
It's like, your choreographic mind takes over,
And your punches are just wrapped
In this veil of poetry. /

Erika
STOP DANCING SO MUCH,
PUNCH PUNCH PUNCH

Monica and Daniella continue to punch,
Garrett and Sodienye continue their hybrid format punches.
Madeleine is standing facing a wall.
She is not punching.

Erika
Madeleine, what are you doing?

Madeleine
Focusing.

Erika
You haven't thrown a single punch.

Madeleine
I'm… I'm imagining what to punch.

Erika
YOUR ENEMY !!!

Madeleine
Um
Beat.
Which one?

Erika
ANY OF THEM.

Madeleine
(*she throws a punch without much effort)*
… ha

Erika
MORE.

Madeleine
(*a slightly stronger punch)*
… Ha

Erika
FEEL IT.

Madeleine
I don't want to feel it!

Erika
FEEL IT THROUGH YOUR FINGIES/

Madeleine
My what?/

Erika
FINGERS.

Madeleine
(*she FEELS it)*
… HA.

Erika
YESSSSS.
Now keep going!
FEEL IT.

The whole class takes one or two more punches.

Erika
Alright everybody,
Let's take a moment to reflect
on this exercise.
Beat.
Anybody?
Beat.

Monica
I liked it!
I really, you know, it was hard at first to
Let go?
Yea, to let go of wanting to dance out my punches /

Daniella
So beautiful,
So poetic /

Monica
Thanks babe/

Daniella
You inspire me /

Monica
YOU inspire me /

Erika
Could you feel your heart rate change?

Monica
Absolutely.

Daniella
Like woof.

Garett
Yea.

Madeleine
… it took a little time.

Sodienye is delayed on zoom.

Beat.

Sodienye
Mmhm /

Erika
What's that?

Sodienye
Mmmmm.

Erika
Sorry?

Garrett
D?

Beat.

Sodienye
MY HEART IS VAST AND CAVERNOUS.

Beat.

Madeleine
(*bursts out laughing)*

Daniella
I feel you, I feel you.

Monica
YEAAAA, D!

Erika
And, gravity, did you feel how gravity shifts,
When you rev up your fist
And take that step forward,
Did you notice how gravity propels/

Garrett
Yea, it took a little time,
And it was hard, because I was sorta
Punching a screen/

Sodienye
It worked for me, brother.

Garrett
Yea, so like,
Yea, it took a little time to
Sorta work it out…
Took a little time to get out of my head about it, ya know?

Madeleine
Totally sympathize.

Erika
The trick is not to think.
Just MOVE.

Daniella
Honestly,
This exercise brought me closer to the cosmos.

Pause.

Erika
… how so?

Daniella
Like, with each punch I received,
And may be it's cuz Monica was,
Well, she did a lot of spins
Which were all fantastic,
Like as a mover, but I wouldn't call myself a choreographer,
Like I lack the technical understanding, but I definitely align
With being a mover,
Well she spun so much,
I saw stars.
And then thinking about the stars made me travel
To this existential plane…
Like,
Here we are, punching each other,
Sculpting our creative process into physical action,
Funneling creation into a singular motion,
And it made me think of how
Everywhere, every day, all at once,
Each step we take
Is a distillation of our souls, our life force in each gesture we offer,
A hug,
A slap,
A kiss,
They're all physically embodied declarations of existence,
That bridges us to our origins as star dust.

Madeleine
I punch, therefore I am/

Daniella
Yes!

Madeleine
There's some Descartes for you /

Monica
Gosh, you're both so smart.

Madeleine
I have a degree in philosophy /

Daniella
Oh my god, so do I!

Garrett
You do?

Daniella
It's one of my other PhD's.

Beat.

Sodienye
Mmmmm.

Madeleine
(*bursts out laughing)*

Garrett
What'd you say, D?

Sodienye
Mmmmm.
Made me think of one of the earlier things
I presented in class, like in the fall,
Remember when I sang some jingles?
Like

WHIP ONE OUT D! SING WHICHEVER COMES TO MIND!

Those jingles are an offering that connect me with the fucking STARS.

Daniella
Yes D, YES!

Monica
Yea!/

Sodienye
Wooooo Mon Mon!

Madeleine
Woo!
(*does a cheering gesture)*

Garrett
That's great.

Erika
Alright folks,
Remember, the next time you're stuck trying to create,
Or when you're in the studio,
And you're lying there like a potato,
Punch punch punch.
That'll get you going.
It's… 3:10 so let's take /

Monica
What're we doing next?

Erika
Gotta look at the handbook.

Daniella
Which one?

Erika
The one that Susanna sent you.

Madeleine
Which one?

Garrett
What are you talking about/

Erika
The handbook/

Sodienye
I don't have a handbook/

Erika
It's for the PC'ers,
I really have to think of a different name,

The MFA'ers?
The Performance Creators?
You guys? No, too gendered.
The creators?

Monica
I'm good with anything /

Erika
In any case, sorry Garrett and Sodienye,
We have a little housekeeping to do with the…
The…
MFA PC folx…
From the handbook /

Madeleine
Which one? /

Erika
The most updated one.

Monica
From… January?

Erika
I think so?

Daniella
I got one from Keira in February /

Monica
Oh.

Madeleine
I didn't get that one.

Monica
Me neither /

Daniella
I can forward it to you!

Monica
Which email did she send it to?

Daniella
The York one.

Madeleine
We have two York emails/

Garrett
What, why?

Madeleine
One for teaching, and one for… general use?

Monica
I thought you merged yours, Maddy?

Madeleine
The emails decide the destination, it's a free for all.

Monica
Yea, I have two as well /

Daniella
I can send it your gmail?

Monica
Yahoo, actually/

Daniella
YAHOO!

Madeleine
Me too please.

Erika
Yes, me too, you can send it to my York one… I just have one /

Daniella
Keira's coming to walk us through it right?

Sodienye
Mmmm.

Madeleine
(*bursts out laughing)*

Sodienye
I found the handbook.

Erika
It's a different one/

Sodienye
The dates are wrong?

Daniella
They are, Keira has an updated calendar for us/

Monica
Where is she?

Keira walks in to the studio with a SUITCASE.

Madeleine
Keira!

Keira
I'm so sorry you guys,
I've been figuring out this new commuting schedule
And I calculated it to a tee,
I thought it'd give me leeway to stop by the office,
And get at least 23 minutes of breathing space before teaching,
But you know,
The train then the bus then the subway then the walk,
It just,
I got the commuting all wrong.

Erika
We were just mentioning the handbook /

Keira
I sent it last night?

Madeleine
The email ended up in the ether/

Monica
We have… multiple emails /

Daniella
I'm emailing it right now, gimme a sec.

Keira
Oh my goodness, thanks Daniella,
Wait.
Beat.
Where's Jeff?

Garrett
He's late, as always.

Monica
Well his cat got a tummyache.

Daniella
Which one?

Erika
The orange one.

Monica
I thought it was the gray one.

Maddy
He has two cats?

Monica
Well, anyway, one of em is sick, so he's late.
He texted me.

Maddy
I thought it was something to do with his fern.
Beat.
It died.

Sodienye
MMmmMMMM oh no no.

Maddy
(*bursts out laughing)*

Daniella
About time, have you seen the state of that thing?

Monica
I thought it was his cat.

Erika
Anyway, he's absent.

Keira
Well he better explain why in his
JOURNAL.

Monica
Oh my god the journal /

Daniella
THE JOURNAL.

Garrett
Mine are essays.

Sodienye
Mine are voice recordings.

Madeleine
(*looks down at her notes)*

beat.

Daniella
Oh by the way, the handbook,
I sent it /

Monica
Got it!

Madeleine
Me too.

Keira
As part of the PC/

Erika
We're going with MFA PC foxes now /

Keira
Foxes?/

Erika
I mean folx/

Daniella
I don't mind being a fox!

Monica
I'm so foxy.

Madeleine
I hate foxes.

Garrett
Lots of foxes in northern Ontario,
Have I mentioned I'm from /

Sodienye
We know, Garrett.
Beat.
We're all very foxy.

Monica
YASSSS GIRL.

Madeleine
I hate foxes.

Keira
Anyway, there's a form to fill out,
Susanna sent it to Mary and Mary sent it to /

Monica
Which form?

Madeleine
We got twenty this morning /

Erika
Oh that was for the supervisorial petition for studio bookings in regards to thesis oversight /

Daniella
What the what now?

Monica
Which form?

Keira
The one to declare um, summer… summer plans?

Garrett
I'M OUT BABY /

Sodienye
WE'RE DONE, WOOOO!

Erika
Don't you have a practicum?

Sodienye
THE SQUARE BABY!

Garrett
I'm gonna do the fringe circuit this summer!
I'm free I'm free I'm free!

Daniella
School never ends, my friend /

Garrett
I'm FREE.

Sodienye
Woooooo!

Keira
Well, the PC – er
The MFA folks,
There's the form to declare your plans and course work /

Monica
And that's separate from the thesis pitch?

Keira
Yes.

Madeleine
I didn't get that form/

Keira
Email Mary /

Erika
No, email Susanna /

Keira
No Susanna is taking time off /

Erika
Right, email Mary /

Keira
Get them from Susnananaa – MARY,
And Erika and I, and the Faculty /

Erika
Is Jamie a part of this ? /

Keira
Yes /

Erika
Eric?

Keira
Yes /

Erika
Gwyneth?

Madeleine
Who's Gwyneth?

Monica
We haven't met her.

Sodienye
She's faculty /

Garrett
I met her during my undergrad,
She's great /

Daniella
Gwendolyn?

Keira
No, Gwyneth,
You know, I mentioned her residency the other week?

Erika
On the farm.

Keira
Yes, she's currently on the farm,
So she might look at the forms,
But she might be busy.

Monica
Farming?

Keira
No idea.
Anyway.
Then on labour day /

Erika
Before labour day /

Keira
Right before it,
We share your thesis pitches,
But the form lets us know what you're up to,
What your plans are /

Garrett
FRINGE, BABY, FRINGE!

Sodienye
I'll be BUSTING UP MY SQUARE
MMMMMMMM.

Monica
Honestly, I'm gonna be working on like a million projects /

Daniella
Me too,
And my Rutledge book is still in the works,
Here's a tip to remember friends,
Make sure the artists you interview are NOT ASSHOLES /

Monica
I'll be choreographing like, everywhere,
You'll be in the grocery store, the
Bag boy will start dancing,
And guess what, I'll have choreographed that too /

Daniella
I'm also gonna just, ya know, finish settling at home,
This year has just been a whirlwind, and I feel like
I'm tumbleweed crashing against a wrecking ball.

Erika
I'm going to Turkey/

Monica
What?!

Erika
I have a whole international tour,
Cuz you know,
I love you all,
But when school is done,
I'M OUT,
It's artist time for this fox.

Madeleine
I'll be… around.

Monica
In town?

Madeleine
I think so?
Depends on a few things.

Monica
Come soak in my hot tub!

Madeleine
I'd love that.

Monica
We have to finish grading first.

Madeleine
I hate that.
Anita made me regrade the whole term/

Monica
What?!

Madeleine
She said to give a sea of B's!
Now she's saying I'm grading too hard.

Garrett
We're DONE.

Sodienye
MMMMMM.

Daniella
The most important thing,
Is that you all rest, okay?
Find some time to rest your brains,
Your bodies,
Your hearts.

Monica
Oh I will.

Madeleine
I have three bottles of wine and a cheese plate ready.

Garrett
I have to produce my fringe tour…

Sodienye
I have to practicum still!

Keira
I have a curriculum to create!

Erika
I have to travel to Turkey!

Daniella
Yes, but
Enjoy it.
Enjoy it.
You know?
The cosmos will take care of you.

Madeleine
I was on set once with Meryl Streep /

Monica
August Osage County?

Madeleine
NO. hate the movie.
Beat.
On something else.
Anyway,
She would always say,
I want to feel my life while I'm it.

Daniella
That's so wise.

Monica
You're such a superstar.

Madeleine
Mmhm.
So.
That's what I'm going to do this summer.
Live.

Erika
And Feel!

Madeleine
I didn't say feel, I said live/

Monica
Yes. Live.
And D and Garrett,
You've been so amazing this term, like so amazing, so inspiring /

Garrett
Aw shucks

Sodienye
RIGHT BACK AT YOU MON MON

Monica
We'll miss you so much next year.

Madeleine
Absolutely.

Daniella
You're both… everything.

Monica
And once this term is over,
Like literally, TODAY.
Once it's over /

Madeleine
Grading.

Monica
ONCE GRADING IS OVER. /

Keira
The form /

Monica
ONCE THE FORM IS FILLED.

Keira
And your journals /

Monica
AND THE JOURNALS.
After all that.
Go, live,
Let the book down for just a second/

Erika
No, keep the handbook with you at all times/

Monica
Let it down for a sec,
It's okay.
Dance a little,
Soak up some sun,
Breath a little lighter.
We'll be back.

Daniella
We'll be back.

Erika + Keira
We'll be back.

Madeleine
We will?

Garrett + Sodienye
WE WON'T!!!!

ALL
We'll be back – TO BE CONTINUED!!!!!

One Monologue for 4290

For Nina

Listen, babes, you've got it all wrong.

Beat.

I'm Nina, of house Aquino,

The First of her name

Khaleesi of the Great Stages

Breaker of Pages

The Unburnt

Protector of PACT

The Mother of Dragons – erm, I mean, Directors, Playwrights, Dramaturgs, Administrators, blah blah blah blah.

Queen of the Broaches and the First…

Beat.

According to Kelly Nestruck, Chief Critic at the Globe and MALES – first of literally everything.

Beat.

And it's all true.

Beat.

First Queen of colour of a venued company,

First Queen of colour of the National Arts Centre.

First Queen of the Asians with Fu-Gen Theatre,

First Queen to watch Endgame a hundred times – IT SHOULD HAVE WON AN OSCAR.

The FIRST person to be wed telepathically to Benedict Cumberbatch. I've dumped his ass since then, so.

He's still not over it. Loser.

Beat.

In any circles of Asians, I am the FIRST to down a cup of milk tea, full sweet, full ice, double bubbles – ALWAYS.

I inhale those bubble like I churn out awards.

Again – I've lost count.

Beat.

Anyway, like I was saying, you've got it all wrong. And as breaker of pages, I gotta be honest with you.

Your play is…

I mean, dramaturgically speaking…

What the fuck is going on?

Beat.

And don't tell me it's because you think the staging is impractical – what is practicality??

THIS IS THE THEATRE!

Anything is possible!

If you can imagine it, then you can do it.

Release yourself from the shackles of naturalism!

Bust open those kitchen sink dramas,

And flood the stage with sewage,

Make it so real, so visceral, so RAW,

That we can literally smell the shit.

Beat.

Impractical, ha!

Free your imagination!

Beat.

Here…

Let me tell you a story.

Beat.

There was this… little seedling of a boy.

Very awkward kid,

Walked around with a buzz cut and a pony tail – yes, that was a hair style he thought was acceptable.

Literally, one of the first things I told this boy was –

Girl, you gotta get a hair cut.

Thankfully, he listened and he's looked like an acceptable human ever since.

Anyway,

There was this awkward little fucker.

Paper clips as earrings – I'm not his mother, I'm not gonna tell him what to put through his ears!

Anyway,

He came to me with this challenge.

One random day while I was teaching,

He walks up to me,

And he goes:

"Hi Nina, if you have a second,

I'd love to pull you aside and show you something."

And I don't know what got over me,

I felt… benevolent that day.

So I said yes.

Beat.

This boy, takes me into this studio,

Smelled like sweat.

And he proceeds to launch into this one man play,

His pony tail wagging around like seaweed caught in a tsunami.

And I look around the room while he's reading,

Wondering why there is no ventilation in this studio,

Cuz that sweaty smell is intensifying with each pony tail wag.

Then, I spot a piano.

And aha – Eureka,

I strike gold – like I always do.

Beat.

The boy finishes his little read,

And I say to him,

“You’re a writer. Now, rewrite your play, but with a piano in mind.”

And thankfully,

With time,

He cuts his hair,

And he writes.

As Queen of Broaches and Firsts, I also share my gifts so that others get that chance

Of writing their first plays.

Beat.

Anyway, again, eventually through workshopping, and a trip to Banff,

He finishes this play, and now it has two pianos.

We rehearse this unwieldy solo show,

And there are moments in this show, where he has to act while playing piano behind his back –

At times, this boy would go –

“BUT THIS FEELS IMPOSSIBLE.”

And I’d laugh,

I’d point at the page and say,

“ You wrote it, this is theatre,

Beat.

And again, that’s the thing,

Anything is possible.

Because, you see.

This boy,

Well, now he’s actually a writer.

I was the first to recognize that the seedling might grow into something with a little nurture, a little care, a little love.

And probably, right this moment,

I wanna slap him and say FUCK YOU, and tear his head off,

Because I'm practically allergic to sentimentality of any sort.

In this moment,

I, Nina Lee Aquino,

Protector of Stages,

Breaker of Pages,

I'm reading words from a script.

Pulled into this reading by the same boy,

Ten years ago,

Shamelessly

Asking me

"I'd love to pull you aside, and show you something."

So here I am again,

This time around, I'm reading, and he's sitting there, LAUGHING.

THAT FUCKER.

Beat.

I'm reading a love letter

And a thank you letter

In the form of a monologue,

And it's a funny thing,

Life

Funny in the ways we come into and out of people's lives,

Funny in the ways we meet and gather around art,

Funny in the ways how a small ripple can grow,

One small gesture can become a life changing moment,

Like when I told this fucker that he was a writer.

Funny in the ways I find myself the first of many things, and will continue to be.

Anything is possible.

Beat.

SO.

Don’t talk to me about what feels impossible,

Don’t mention how things may be impractical,

Don’t even think about limitations.

Create with boundless possibilities.

Accept the unknown,

Dive deep,

And create magic.

That’s the job.

Beat.

As for me, and my new fab job,

Well, I’m moving.

I’m going to continue climbing peaks of firsts,

I’ll keep on chugging bubble tea in Ottawa,

I’ll fly around the country and collect all the Broaches, see all the shows,

I’ll haunt Benedict Cumberbatch in his sleep…

And the community that I’ve built across this country,

Will be with me every step of the way,

They’ll hold me,

They’ll miss me in Toronto (I’M NOT GOING ANYWHERE).

And my students here at York will forever be a part of my life.

Beat.

I’m Nina Lee Aquino,

I’m literally

Queen of proving that anything is possible.

So don’t give me any excuses, you got that?!

Monologues for the Summer Term (for Jill and for Scott)

For Jill

Nope. Don't say that, Jeff, don't say that!

THIS is not a crisis, nope, nope, not a crisis at all /

Aside.

Okay, nope, Christopher, you cannot make the children do head stands, that's just, that's… Okay, no, NO BACKFLIPS. Yes, that's fine, thanks, that's fine. Simple choreography, Christopher, like, stand, sit, arms up, arms down, that sorta deal, k?

Back to centre.

Anyway, as I was saying, directing is just putting out fires, ya know? But there hasn't been any fires this experience, my god, this experience has been calm and peaceful as a /

Aside.

OH MY GOD ARE YOU OKAY? Kellie! That child's head is gonna explode, their faces are all red, I think we can take that song an octave down, yea? Yes I think VARUO or… is it ARA BATUR??? or… whatever the fuck, I mean, whatever the fudge Icelandic word that song is called. Yea! That one!

Back to centre.

ANYWAY, as I was saying… directing this has been… the smoothest experience of my life, honestly, it's like taking our dog, George, out for a hike in the early St Johns morning /

Aside.

OH MY GOD NEEMO! SOMEBODY GET HIM, WHY IS HE YELPING AT JOSIE? NEEMO, SIT.

NEEMO, DOWN.

Back to centre.

I had to send George to doggie day care cuz this rehearsal has just BEEN…

Ahem.

An absolute swim in a pond.

A swim. GOD, how I wish we could go swimming right now, this is like the hottest that St John's has been in… I don't even know, but the heat in here, the HEAT in here /

Aside.

Oh yes, Kai, I have a note for you, call the light on stage right after the choir arrives on page two of the music, before Scott raises his arms, and after Nathan looks out at the audience, and BEFORE Jeff sits down, and only after Lennox does his triple flips, BUT before he lands.

Got it?

Oh, and also, could you make a note to make sure we have popsicles in the rehearsal hall, cuz this HEAT, my god.

Oh, and talking about lighting, Bonnie, hm.

That light, right now, is it at a seven?

Yea?

Make it a ten, let it wash over the choir and then land it on Nathan.

Oh and NATHAN.

Nathan, remember to start speaking bar two of the music, pause at bar eighteen, wait till bar twenty four, when Bonnie's light lands on you, then continue the rest of the monologue, but then remember to braid this section – you and Jeff should Italian this – like another hundred times please – and make sure you look out and acknowledge the audience.

Back to centre.

ANYWAY.

Okay.

Jeff.

So this rehearsal, I know, must have felt like such a …

Hm.

I don't know.

But right now, I need you to stop worrying, okay?

Remember, your first day of school?

Counting together, as an ensemble.

Remember when I did that exercise with you all, that first day?

What did we call that class? Chorus.

Chorus.

This is like being in a chorus.

Every little piece, well not so little in this case,

But all these pieces – Christopher with his choreography over there,

Kellie and the music direction,

The accountability to care and access in the process,

Braiding text with your fellow castmate as if you're speaking like a singular voice,

And at the centre, with Scott, at the heart of this piece – with his agency and permission absolutely at the centre…

Aside.

Oh my god, I just got a text from Scott, there are TWO LINES ON HIS COVID TEST, KAI, SOMEBODY, CALL HIM, CALL HIM.

Oh my fucking god, he's pranking us everybody, he's PRANKING US, nobody panic, NOBODY PANIC.

Back to centre.

Anyway, this whole thing.

This whole thing will move as a chorus, it'll flow in and out of images, in relationship to precise measures of music, in tandem with the text – as one singular movement of theatre.

And it's a lot. I know, it's a lot to hold and remember. I know.

But darling, don't worry about it.

That's my job.

And that's my joy.

Getting us all to the finish line, ya know?

You.

You just let the theatre gods in.

Remember that.

They arrive only when are open,

When your heart is so vast that they come on in for a little visit.

And you'll know when they're there.

We'll know.

The audience will know.

When the theatre gods are with us – and also, sorry to make it religious, I'm not talking like in Catholic terms or whatever, I'm talking about the theatre gods, the ones that just lift the spirits on stage – when the lights land as the music sings as the actors look out into our eyes.

Then they're with us, it'll fill you up to the point that you have nothing else to worry about except to share that visitation with us.

That's it.

And you can't worry about how you look on stage, or whether or not you're doing good or bad, or any of that. You can't worry about what comes next or what came before. You just open up.

You just open up, and let in the gods. They'll take care of the rest.

And there are so many things in the way,

There's ego, of course,

And things like, when I direct Shakespeare, the feeling of when the authorities come in and say, follow the folio! Let's check the Lexicon! Or whatever, I don't care about any of that.

They get in the way of the spirit, channeling through and out.

I mean,

That's what's…

That's what I've learned over the years,

Ya know,

I do feel like I've been training my entire life to create this particular show,

And it's a funny feeling,

I walk up to the actor, and I open up my mouth, and I too, just let the theatre gods come through and let them guide the rest.

Ya know, training at York University, back in the day, and then ya know, the Honorary Doctorate from there…

Aside

HI YORK !

Back to centre.

And spending this career creating massive ensemble shows, distilling processes of Kaleidography, and teaching ensembles the mechanics of Choral work, and well, taking the time to dream bigger and bigger every single project.

I've come to really understand how to get out of the way, and allow the work, and the trust in that, even through the uncertainty.

So don't worry, Jeff, don't worry.

Trust me.

Trust in this piece.

And trust that when you do your twirls that you won't fall off stage, cuz you can't, you will not twirl off the stage.

Hm?

Me?

Am I worried?

Oh no, darling, not at all.

You know.

When this closes.

It's… it's a funny thing.

I'll be a new Jill, ya know?

Ten years of being the AD of the National Arts Centre, it's… and well, before that being AD of Artistic Fraud… now, after this, for the first time in a long time… I'll be…

And directing this show, this piece that I've been training for this lifetime, the feeling of reaching this point… well…

When you see me after this, I'll have climbed two summits, and on to the next enormous, beautiful, unforgettable adventure.

And this… this moment,

Well, this letter, it's funny.

It's a bit of a book end.

I taught you right before I took up the NAC, and I'm reading this just as I finish my final week there,

And this letter, well,

It's really made this rehearsal process sound like /

Aside.

WHAT? ROBERT?

YOU'RE CUTTING HOW MANY SCENES?

REWRITES?! NOW?!

NO ROBERT, NO!

Back to centre.

This letter really makes it sound like this process has been far more panicked that it actually was.

And in reality, it really wasn't.

Because, Jill.

You held space for all of us, with so much grace, humanity, generosity, love, care, wisdom, humour, heart, beauty, and trust.

Because, Jill.

You let the gods in, every day, and shared your gifts with all of us, every moment, from the choir, to the keyboards, to the choreography, to the actors, to the SM team, to the crew, and to the writing team, and to Scott.

Because, Jill.

You have been creating theatre of the grandest, most epic scale for so so so many years, a vision that you brought in your tenure at the NAC and beyond.

And this letter is a moment of the now, not the before, not the after,

Of the now, as we anticipate closing I Forgive You, as we celebrate your incredible achievements, and to cheer on your next adventures in theatre and in life.

This letter, Jill,

Is a thank you, from the bottom of my heart for being there in those first days as a student in theatre school, to getting a chance to share trace in Ottawa, to the now, getting a chance to share in Scott's story and your vision of it.

This impact that you've so generously shared, is one that I'll never forget, and the visitations of the theatre gods will always feel textured with your heart and soul and wisdom.

I'm Jillian Keiley,

And beauty and gratitude and congratulations will follow each and every moment of my next adventures in the theatre.

And.

I'll forever be cherished.

Dear Scott,

On September 29th, 2020, you'll log on to Zoom, cuz ya know, the pandemic and all that jazz.

You'll already have been working with Artistic Fraud: Robert, Jill, Sarah for three years leading up to that point. Collaborating on words and stories from your life.

You'll meet two actors – Andrew, and this moppy haired dude named Jeff.

You'll hear the shape of what is to come of a towering piece of theatre.

You'll know, and I hope you know, how dearly beloved you are.

What you may not know, is that that first read moved the moppy haired one so much that he sent a brazen, far too blunt email to Robert– thanking you for sharing your words, your heart, your humour, your horror. A far too direct ask, in the theatre world anyway, of wanting to be there every moment of the growth of that journey, process by process – his fingers crossed, his mind pocketed with a love for this piece, and for you.

Times passes – because ya know, time doesn't really care whether we want it to freeze, or stay put, or take a nap or whatever. Time does what it does, and it moves, and paths cross and uncross. And time flows differently in different bodies, as you've taught so many, but nevertheless – it pulses on.

You know all this, of course.

But in the summer of 2022, time will open up, carve itself for a pocket of indelible, delicious, transcendent, and hilarious memories.

You'll find yourself in rehearsals, and then, on stage – with a team of brilliant souls, an entire choir of angels, and two actors who will speak your words – a beautiful and sensitive soul named Nathan, and the other, the moppy haired nerdy piano boy named Jeff.

You'll teach this "I Forgive You" team of so many things – the idea of crip time, the practise of true care, the encyclopedia of music that you hold within you, the dark humour:

THE DARKEST HUMOUR – you'll play pranks on the team, you'll take a marker and pen in a faint line on your COVID test one rehearsal day, and scare the fuck out of our formidable director and music director.

You'll hear words that come from such joy, and such horror, from you – back at you.

You might think: that feeling is unlike anything else in the world.

Nathan and Jeff will say these words, while holding in their hearts how very real, how very raw it all is in your lived experience – and while speaking your words, they will always always hope that you are okay, and that you feel all the fucking love in the world.

On August 25th, 2022, it'll be opening night. A culmination of many years of work – a piece that has taken the theatre gods, the transcendence of music, and the grace of dance in collaboration. You'll be on stage, conducting those angels, and see innocent faces of children, singing music so dear to you. By your sides, you'll feel Nathan and Jeff sharing your story with an audience of hundreds. You'll feel the responses of the audience as your story washes over them.

The laughter in the face of your mighty wit.

The stifled sobs in the face of what you've had to face.

The breathlessness of when you needed most to breathe.

You'll speak directly to them, and tell of your moment to moment decision of forgiveness, and you'll share, in the most human, the most profound way possible what it means to grapple with forgiveness.

You'll open hearts.

You'll make us contend with the forgiveness in our lives.

You'll gift audiences with your whole humanity.

And you will experience an overwhelming wave of ovation and gratitude.

And you will feel love.

You are loved – beyond measure, beyond music, beyond words.

And on August 27th, 2022, the day of closing – I mean, what the hell, we just opened! But on this Saturday day, moppy haired Jeff will come to you with a letter. Again, how brazen, how direct, what a NERD.

And he'll ask you to read this letter, as part of this thesis around the people he meets, and his artistic responses to them.

And he'll be at a loss for words, for once in his life – he never shuts the fuck up!

He will forever be changed through meeting you.

He will forever hold this experience of collaborating with you so so so dear to his heart.

He will never forget the evenings spent listening to choral music, or playing the piano together, and being your PEDALIST – he doesn't even know if that's a word, but IT IS NOW – for all the music that you love to play. He will never forget looking up sheet music for Bach, or Beethoven, or Chopin, or the horrendous Debussy. He will never forget that day of bringing Neemo to the dog park, and working out the complexities of intersectional identities in the piece and in your

life, he will never forget being on stage with you and sharing little looks of grace and gratitude. He will never forget ranting about things with you and Nathan about omg rehearsal is SO BUMPY TODAY, or whatever the fuck drama ensues inevitably in a creative process. He will never forget introducing Pierre to you, and having to restrain Neemo from humping him. And above all else, he will never ever forget meeting you, Scott.

There are loves in this life that are inexplicable, beyond words, and roots itself into the heart of a life time. It is felt. It is this spot of sun, peeking through clouds, lighting patches of earth. It is the beauty of the Atlantic, and the wind and the rain. It is that gesture to our hearts before we take our first moments on stage together.

This letter is one of those attempts at putting into words a love that will never be forgotten – of this pocket of time, of this heart expanding project, and of you, Scott. And of you.

You are so loved.

You are so loved.

You are so loved.

Love always,

Jeff

Four Monologues for the Prince Hamlet Tour

1

What's the first word you spoke when you were born?

Beat.

Do you remember?
Would you remember?
How would you remember?

Beat.

Let me clarify that question.
What's the first sound you made when you were born?

Beat.

You probably don't remember that either.
But that doesn't matter, does it?
If you've ever been witness to a birth,
Then you likely know the answer: an explosion of vowels,
A guttural, first wail, or a cry, or a moan, or a piercing shriek…

Cry.
Moan.
Wail.
Shriek.

There are many words to describe our first sounds,
And just as many languages to wield as words,
As there are birds in the sky.

And like the way we can trace certain birds to dinosaurs,
The way we can explain how they formed wings, and we didn't,
There are explanations for the words that define our lives,
An etymological vibration that is allowing you to sit there,
And understand these sounds coming from my mouth.

Cry.

Moan.
Wail.
Shriek.

The evolution of a newborn's newfound powers in making sound,
Eventually coagulate, eventually they reach a desire to be understood,
To communicate
I shat myself,
Or I'm starving,
Or No more kisses,
Or Ma.
Or Pa.

Those sounds now form into words, and so we introduce vocabulary, we introduce
Little tunes, little jingles full of magical rhymes, fables of caution for a growing child.

We introduce books.

Think – you see some movie, film, tv show, or what have you about a child before bed,
And more often than not, you'll see a book, a story being read, something soothing, something comforting, something that binds our dreams.

In the simplest of terms, books are a collection of words. That's it really.
They're rather mighty things, aren't they?
There is a book out there that offends, or that scares, or that whispers gently to you.

Book comes from old English *boc*, meaning "writing, or written document," and *boc,*
Comes from the Proto-Germanic "*bok(o),* from *bokiz***,** meaning beech.

The word book draws back to the earth, to material, to the trees, as in, a beech forest.

And English is not alone in this relationship with words and the earth.

The German *Buch*, also comes from *Buche,* ie. Beech. Those beechy Germans.

The French *livre*, comes from latin, *librum*, the inner barks of trees.

In Chinese, it get's complicated, as there are two glyphs that represent the word book in Chinese, one simplified, one traditional.

书

Simplified Chinese is a newborn thing, less than a hundred years old – thought to be a main driver of modernising China, with intellectuals claiming that if traditional Chinese Characters are

not destroyed, then China will die. It is now the dominant written division of the language in China. This symbol of book derives from the traditional.

書

Traditional Chinese is the old thang, the elder, the thing that was culled and simplified, the obstacle of modernity. Far more strokes, far more extravagant and some say, superfluous, flourishes, but still alive – for now.

Shu – drawing from the symbol 聿, meaning to write, and that governs the meaning of *Shu* and colliding with 者, meaning the one who is involved in. So the word for book simply means, the person who is involved with writing. You see, Shu, stands for book, but when composed with myriad of other ideographs, become:

The Secretary – General,
The Clerk
The Scribe,
The High Official,
The Government Minister,
To read a book,
To study,
To go to school,
To document,
To write a letter,
A written imperial order,
A certificate
An edict,
A painting,
A studio,
A library.

Shu: a symbol that connects the order of learning, to a relationship with trees, to the governing clouds above our heads.

He looks back at the pile of books behind him.

Books can't defend themselves, can they?

He turns back to us.

A library holds the books that hold the words that hold the sounds we've shaped since the moment we were born:

Cry
Moan

Wail
Shriek.

To get rid of a book, is to get rid of words, to get rid of sounds that form our lives, to get rid of those tiny pieces of our memory, to get rid of a tiny piece of our understanding of the world.

To get rid of a book, is to let it die, disappeared, forever.

And you know, things die. It's natural.

What's unnatural, or we say it's unnatural, because who really knows, is when a death is too soon, or unexpected, or visited upon someone too young, What's unnatural is when we murder, to force death by our own hands.

What we're doing now, with these books.
Is this murder? Or is this the natural cycle of history begging for sacrifice?
If books could speak, what would be their dying words?

What's the last word you'll speak before you die?

Beat.

Let me clarify that question.

What's the last sound you'll make before you die?

2

Better now than never,
Better now than never,
Now or never,
Now.

We're in the middle of something, aren't we?
Wouldn't you agree?
The world, our world, your world,
Whatever world you're joining us from tonight,
Your world is in the middle of something, yea?

Like, you're out there, watching,
A break, a breath, a beat
In the middle of whatever the fuck you're going through.

That news report that quakes through your bones,
Changes the world in an instant,
Evaporates the feeling of security you've held on,
The thing that makes you go, aha, aha, this is an illusion,
This thing we're all living in,
It's always an illusion,
The tangible made intangible, moment to moment, by
By
A meeting with a teacher tomorrow, a call from your lawyer,
A call from a doctor, that suspenseful hope of an incoming job offer,
Or more likely, that easy understanding of some rejection – be it employment,
A date,
A vacation,
A whatever.

All that to say
I think we can all agree,
You're always in the middle of something.

And I'm not here to judge,
Really, I'm not.
I see you, in all that middling middleness of life.

My story has also reached it's middle point,
The centre,
Equal parts away from beginning and end.

You've seen what's come before,
All the books,
All the birds,
All those b's…

But, what does beginning mean? How do we truly, begin?

Let me explain.
Books
Birds
Beginnings,
Buts.
B's.

B: the second letter of the alphabet, drawn from the Greek, *beta*
And think of all the things we associate with beta –
Math things to be sure,
And B, as a grade of crushing mediocrity, as classification in education,
I wouldn't know, I've never received a B in my life.

Also, b-rate movies, b-list celebrities, b side of an album,
Beta – something we use for animals, and something we use for humans that are supporters, followers, subordinates.
There's a certain judgement with being a b, right bitches?

Let's go back further, *beta* is drawn from Phoenician, *beth*, which means house.
But before there can be a house, someone must build it, there must be a beginning to that house.
And like the letter b,
books,
birds,
beginnings,
buts,
builders,
bullies,
bombs,
bigots,
battalions,
beavers,
bees,
bellows,
buffets,
bidets,
businesses,
bowels,
this b and that b,

B is always in the middle of something,
Like you,
Like me,
It is always in motion,
It doesn't strive to be best, number one, the winner,
It is happy to get on by, and just be wherever it lands,
It is held between.
Pretty relatable, yea?

Well, not for me, other than the fact that I'm in the middle of this, this… this collision, but again, I'm no b, I'm not beta, never seen a b on report card since I was a babe – still am one.

Before the beginning, something must begin,
The beginning of anything:

The Alpha.
Alpha, the first in a sequence,
Alpha – all the humans that rule as our leaders, we attribute a certain degree of Alpha-ness to them, some uncanny power to lead, to rule, to wrestle with bears, to admire, to adore, to appropriate.

The brightest star of each constellation is an alpha.
From the Phoenician *Aleph,* comes the Greek *Alpha,* to the Latin *Alpha,* and all these Alpha hurtles down through history into the letter A.
The first in the alphabet,
The grade I bring home to my parents.
A-Listers – the Adeles of our world,
A – the note in music to which an orchestra is tuned around.
A side – the promotional material prioritized in marketing.

We are ruled by Alphas,
by A's,
by our leaders,
by laws made by powerful people to keep us in the middle,
the ones on top with enough money to drown you,
Those who wish for you to look below you and say, good god, at least we're not them, at least we're not like them.
We are ruled by those who shape our beginnings, uncaring for our ending.
And we're in the middle of their game.

And how did this all come to be?
How did the world come to be like this?
Look around you,
Take a second,
Ask yourself,
Now that you're in the middle,
Do you remember how you began?
Do you know what governs the words you use,
Or the books you read,
Or the things you censor, immediately upon the flash of inception.
Do you know what words are truly yours?

Do you know things will end?
Do you ever read the news, or hear of some trouble in the world and think
Oh no no, this won't end well.

From here, in the middle of this story,
I offer you this:
We are racing towards the end, together,
And I can't promise you that life will end the way you'd like it to.

But that's okay.
I'm glad we had this moment in the middle,
Better now than never,
Better now than never.

Curtain.

3

Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.
I think about that a lot.

How do you begin to identify who's friend, who's foe?

Do you keep track of them?

Like some spreadsheet, or some diary entry… like

"Betty laughed at me today, gonna drop her from rival to mortal enemy. Or like: "Travis smiled at me today, let's upgrade him to friendly foe. See how that tracks out tomorrow."

beat.

How do we decide what antagonizes us?
Did your parents whisper to you who you should grow up hating?
Does your flag?
Your television?

How do we choose when something has wronged us?
Is it when it threatens our lives?
Is it when something, someone, becomes such an easy scape goat, that it's easier to just join the mob and shout, YOU'RE BAD, YOU'RE EVIL, YOU'RE WRONG.

Doesn't even have to be human.

I mean, we can easily say, greed is an enemy, or sharks, floods, or earthquakes and volcanoes.
We can say, disease must be vanquished, or hate must be relinquished.
Or like bed bugs, or like yea, even birds.
Specifically, sparrows.

You see,
We've starved.
There, that too, hunger is our enemy, isn't it? Quite a universal one at that.
Anyway,
We've starved, we've been hungry.
I'm talking,
Human eating humans.
Starved.

Well not me,

But my mum,
My pop.
And through them,
They've starved me.

Beat.

They taught me about
The Four Pests Campaign,

A movement to eliminate things that were dirty, to get the population to a state of acceptable hygiene.
They were tasked to kill mosquitoes, flies, rodents, and sparrows, cuz they carried disease; they were our enemies.
But specifically, the sparrows… they were enemies because they'd eat seeds, fruits, grains… our food.

My mum told me, that as a child, she was tasked with carrying a pot and pan and just banging for hours straight, in hopes to stop sparrows from sleeping in their nests.

Millions of people went around shooting them down, setting up traps, cooking them, whatever.
They'd have to take shifts shoveling dead sparrows off the streets.

They were told that by killing these sparrows, they would spare their crops, and by doing so, nurture better yields. But it did the exact opposite.
Their crops began to die.
You see, in killing the sparrows, the locusts reigned free.
They swarmed the country.
They ate the crops.
And without the crops.
Humans ate humans.

It wasn't until later that they realized that the sparrows were needed to keep the locusts under control.

So the government called off the campaign – NO MORE KILLING SPARROWS.
And imported a quarter of a million sparrows from Russia to fill the void.
To eat the locusts.
To save the crops.
But plenty of people had died by then.

Pause.

My mum said at the peak of the famine, these officials came to town and asked what they were doing wrong. Why have their crops vanished? They couldn't report a deficit in their quota, or

else, their higher ups would vanish them too. So these officials imported healthy crops from a neighbouring village and placed them in a field. They gathered my mum, her sisters, her brothers, and all the town's children. They put a crate in the middle of this field of imported crops and asked the children to stand on it. They took a photo. They sent it in to their higher ups with a single sentence.

"Our crops are so dense that they're strong enough to hold up children."

Pause.

My dad doesn't tell me of his time during the hunger. Whenever I ask, he raises a glass of rice wine and shouts:

"Nothing cuts the taste. Nothing cuts the taste."

Pause.

My mum says to never speak of the hunger.

I've tried learning about it, I don't know, I think I was just curious what changed, or who realized that these sparrows, once our foes, now our friends. Most of the ones we see here now are probably descendants of immigrants, refugee sparrows, ya know?

I can never find anything about that time. It's always called the three years of difficulty. And I guess, that says it all.

But
Once my mum goes, once my dad goes.
Will the hunger have gone too?
Will difficulty be a thing of the past?
Because difficulty is our enemy, isn't it?

But when difficulty is thrust upon us, by the people who say they'll care for us…

What does that make them?

Friend or foe?

4

When you've been ravaged,
You ensure it never happens again.

When you've been humiliated,
You make others kneel and bow before you.

When you've been invaded,
You build a great wall to keep harm out.

We've been ravaged, humiliated, invaded.
You will never understand.

Comprehension is not a prerequisite to power.

We are in the midst of national rejuvenation.
And as in nature,
To rejuvenate,
We must shed.

We do not fear sacrifice to get where we must.

We dare the sun and moon to rise in our new days.
As for you.
Don't cry when constellations beg to burn.

One Monologue for 5077

For Ophelia

Oh Oph

Or Hophelia

Or whatever nickname stuck like weeds caught stuck in the throat

It's been a bit of a ride, my friend

And the things I've said to you

With you

Through you

Leaves me hanging,

Dangling for a breath

Puzzled mind thick with snot

O what a noble mind is here o'erthrown

If I had known

The way life moans

Groans

How the mind swivels in tones

Around nobility, mobility, sensibility,

Around the

The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's

Eye tongue sword

The anatomy of some love,

Think of a lover, think of a lover,

And how they've failed you,

Or you've failed them,

Think of the loves in a life

And recall a bit of them,

An ounce of their anatomy,

And you might remember a pinky, a toe, a sliver of hair,

You might not even remember a face,

Or what they sounded like,

But you can remember the way a nose grew aslant,

Or an eye green,

Or a patch of hair wild,

The expectancy and rose of the fair state,

The glass of fashion and the mold of form,

The observed of all observers – quite quite down

And I, learning to go up to go down,

The elasticity of ecstasy and grief,

And I, expecting some state,

Some mold of form,

Some shape of sadness in shattered glass,

And I, foolish little thing,

Across five years, of riding those lines,

Each moment on stage a practise of transparency and grace,

And I, five years ago, this little thing that'd fit in your costume just a bit better,

Innocent, naïve, conjuring all the hopes and expectation of hitting that exact note of,

That pitch of heartbreak required in your very state,

Oh Ophelia

You've taught me how to be, to be, to BE on stage,

How to wield this instrument – from down in my very gut, to up high in the clouds,

And I, of ladies most deject and wretched

I'm no lady, obviously,

But every time I let that out,

It was this whirlwind

Of all the moments of rejection, objection, dejection

Of all the moments my skin crawled

Or my eyes ablaze in seeing something within

So ugly,

So bothered

So wretched

And I'd have a moment, where my head bows,

My body sagging,

Hands trembling,

The heart loud

And I'd meet you halfway and continue on

That suck'd the honey of his music vows

All the sweet sweet nothings ever whispered

Remembering that, or riding that wave of love,

Of mon dieu tu es tres beau,

Some French pianist when I was a little more twinky

Or I'll be here forever,

And that's a straight up lie,

Nothing's forever,

You know this, right?

And of course, the music vows of love as it is now,

Of which, my god,

I'm in love!

I'm in love!

And so in love, that my dear pours a sweet whatever beverage, matcha or coffee, or what have you always with a dose of honey –

Oat milk and honey, the gesture of care from my beloved

And flashes of him stretch out across the five years that we've been together,

And it always strikes me how reasonable five years makes sense as a pocket of time,

A measure of love and reason,

But I

Now see that noble and most sovereign reason like sweet bells jangled,

Out of tune and harsh,

That unmatch'ed form and feature of blown youth,

Oh, Ophelia,

To be frank,

I've outgrown you,

Quite literally as I struggle to fit into the costume,

A little pandemic weight perhaps,

A little older perhaps,

A costume that's traveled the same five years perhaps, all torn, shredded up,

Thin like paper.

When I first embodied you, I was closer to your age,

And youth is something I thought I'd miss,

But it's not.

It's so much clearer to be now,

It's so much easier to handle the ups and downs

The irritants and the aggression,

Things feel settled in a way, unswayed by the smallest of things,

I like to think,

I grew up with you,

And in some weird way,

See myself grown, matured, evolved,

While speaking these same words over and over again,

As the world changes

Blasted with ecstasy,

And the courage to be in this world,

To be exactly who you need to be,

The strength it takes to just get on by,

To survive,

We survived, and are surviving a fucking pandemic!!!!

We got by,

We made money, we kept food on the table,

Dreams lost, and dreams vanished, and new ones found,

We find a way!

We must!

We cannot be defeated,

We cannot be defeated,

We will not be defeated,

We persevere,

I am one tenacious fucker,

And Ophelia,

You taught me the capacity to go so low,

To put on a show even when I just wanna go home,

To just keep on keeping on,

To capture so much in a single syllable

To grow

To sow

To flow from o to o to o to that very high of

O woe is me!

To have seen what I have seen,

And through you, Ophelia,

I've seen so much,

Faces of audiences stunned by a boy Ophelia,

Of a female hamlet,

A deaf horatio,

I’ve seen parts of the world I’ve never thought I’d get to see,

I’ve seen the dirt,

I’ve eaten dirt from far too many places in America and Canada,

I’ve seen mountains covered in snow,

I’ve seen cities decked out in technology,

I’ve seen feet splintered with thorns,

I’ve seen so much,

And through you,

With you,

Ophelia,

I’ve seen me,

I’ve seen myself grow, and go, and glow,

I’ve seen the bits of me that I’ve left behind,

I’ve seen the thorns fall off, thank god,

I’ve seen my own heart love so much more

I’ve seen this capacity to survive,

To just keep on keeping on,

I’ve seen how to say goodbye,

To say it’s time,

It’s time to go,

And I see that you

Your words,

This time of being with you, through you, beside you,

This time

This very moment,

I see you, dear friends, dear loves, dear cherished,

I see you,

And thank you

For seeing what I see

See what I see.

Appendix E:

Dear Heart Presentation Script

Featuring writing created by: Jobina Sitoh, Eric Trudell, Shaharah Gaznabbi, Mackenzie McCallum Mallory, Emma Ly, Antong Xu, Jeff Ho.

WELCOME

Jeff

Welcome to *dear heart!*

I'm Ho Ka Kei (Jeff Ho), he/him pronouns, and I am a playwright / performer and MFA candidate.

Thank you so much for coming out on a FRIDAY / SATURDAY to be a part of this significant step of my research for my thesis as part of my MFA here at York University.

It's been a huge pleasure to be a part of this MFA Cohort, including Madeleine Martin, Monica Dottor, and Daniella Vinitsky Mooney under the great guidance of Erika Batdorf, Jamie Robinson, Keira Loughran and the entire faculty and staff from the theatre department as well as the technical staff – Christina Cicko, and Robert.

Thank you to you, audiences, for agreeing to participate and witness this hybrid workshop.

Lastly, thank you to my incredible undergraduate collaborators for joining me on this rehearsal, and being a part of my research and reflection process within my thesis:

Introductions + Land Acknowledgements

Intros: Alphabetical order:

NAME / Pronouns / YEAR or STREAMING

Shaharah Gaznabbi
Emma Ly
Mackenzie McCallum Mallory
Jobina Sitoh
Eric Trudell
Antong Xu

Land Acknowledgement

Jeff

We are so grateful to be able to gather together and collaborate here at York university. I'm a settler originally from Hong Kong

SPACE FOR OTHERS TO SHARE THEIR POINTS OF ANCESTRY (optional) + Same order as intros

Gaz -> Emma -> Mackenzie -> Jobina -> Eric -> Antong

And it's a huge privilege to be able to make art, tell stories, and live here in Tkaronto, the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

An action of reconciliation.

Dear heart context

Originally, for my MFA thesis, I worked on a play entitled *cockroach*. That play ended up in production at the Tarragon Theatre last fall, 2022, and so I was invited to think on another project. While taking classes at York, and laughing and learning with Maddy, Monica, Daniella – I realized that for many of my class assignments, that I would respond to homework through playwriting – something that I do as part of my artistic hustle, and something that's instinctual and done through practise.

Erika and Keira gently invited me use this time in my MFA to reflect upon the specific and personal process of playwriting – like, how does one begin to put word on a page? How do I personally move through a writing process? And so the seeds of *dear heart* began to form. I created artistic responses to every single class that I took here at York, as well as writing responses to every city that I encountered as part of my primary research and tour as an actor across the United States and Canada last year.

But that was only one phase of my thesis – the deeper work was to consider, and to make conscious the subconscious way that I was creating those artistic responses… to reflect upon practise and process, so that I could put words to something very instinctual – and to make those words a shareable articulation, so that it could be experimented with, and collaborated upon with other creators and artists.

That's where these wonderful undergraduate collaborators, and you, the audience come in – as part of this last stage of my reflection. I invited these collaborators into my process, to guide these theatre artists through how I come to envision new work, and experiment and play in new work development. Through a rehearsal and creation period guided by some of these reflections, I invite you to participate and witness process – that deeply personal process of putting one word after another till it becomes a piece of theatrical writing – with the potential of further development and personal practise.

Curiosity List Exercise with the Audience (5 Minutes)

As part of our gathering together as strangers, friends, in this new spontaneous and temporary community – I invite you to join us in an exercise that has served as a foundational warm up both in my own personal process as a playwright, but also a collaborative exercise in playwriting.

Please take the paper and pen that you entered the space with / or by your chair, and we'll all take five minutes together to write down every single thing we're curious about today – it can be as simple and fascinating as why does my cat do SOMETHING STUPID?!!!!! And something as profound as SOMETHING SUPER PROFOUND!?!?!?!

You can write it in full sentences, as a list, as words, as images or songs, it can be anything.

It is a check in to see where you are, in this exact moment, and a warming up of the inquisitive spirit that rests in us all.

5 MINUTES OF WRITING

Thank you for your time.

You see, I use this exercise in everything I write, from my published and produced plays, through to the rewriting process, through to when I need to come up with new ideas – these curiosities help externalize and make conscious the unconscious way we process the world, and by doing so, we create a palette, sorta like for a painter, from which we can create from, and with.

From these curiosities, I'll apply them to more specific writing prompts, or a specific commission that I might be working on – say, an adaptation of the birds by Aristophanes, and allow myself to collide my day to day curiosities with a larger subject.

One of the writing prompts that have been a core part of this autoethnographic process, was to reflect upon how I, as an individual, encounter, meet, and write for other humans. How does my heart meet yours? How does my heart as a playwright, as an artist, become a shared experience of art with an audience? How does my curiosity, became a shared resonant moment for others. How do I share curiosity as a process for other artists? How do we nurture that collaboratively? How do we share our heart with each other?

What does your heart need? /

EMMA

I need to shit.

All the time

The moment an atom of capsaicin or cows titty milk dribbles on my burnt tastebuds my bowels intestinal lining all start have to steamy hot fucking sex and theres shit

everywhere.

It's hard

It's soft

It's liquidy

It burns

Im on the toilet

10 minutes MINIMUM

My ass has a circle imprinted on it

And my butthole looks like it just got lip injections

I tell my girlfriend

"I don't know what's wrong with me why can't it fucking stop?"

She holds my tummy and I cry

I shit it all out

It's in my pants

It's in my hair

It's on the floor

It's on you

Your ears your lips your eyes your nose hairs you smell it and you eat it.
You eat it all up
my shit
You take your notes
You let it coat your tongue and swallow it whole
“Mmhm this one tastes rather grainy today”
“Too much stomach acid this morning”
“Soup of the day I guess!”
Swalllow it whole
Eat my fucking shit
I know you like it
It’s different every day
But it’s still my shit
Every meal every beverage every word I’ve ever spoken
Every person I’ve passed on the street
Every thing that I am condescend into a cylinder of chunks and chinks and the Chinese food I ate last week
That I ate this morning
That I ate when I was 15
That I ate when I was 6
That I ate every single day in my mothers womb
That I ate when I looked like a girl
That I ate when I looked like a boy
That I ate when you send me a tiktok of some dyke Asian lesbian and say “ITS U”
Is it me?
Am I that person?
Okay.
Call me Ma
Call me ajumma
Call me o’bachan
Call me ka san
Call me mommy
Call me every slit eyed woman you see because that’s all I’ll ever be
Tiny pieces of shit
That are all identical to one another
Cause they all look the same!
Because you can’t tell the difference
But that’s okay
You still eat my shit
That’s good enough for me

Beat.
What does your heart need? /
Antong

Whenever I heard the word “heart”.

I will think about an image of a heart, a heart symbol you can find in many video games.

A red, heart icon. That will become empty / vanish / broken when you are struck by the enemy.

It needs health potions.

Or healing from a healing spell.

And then you are good to go, to the next adventure, battle, challenge, or whatever things that is designed in this game.

So, hearts are refillable. They can be used, by accident or on purpose. Then you can find ways to refill, your hearts. Hearts. …… I wish I have more than one heart.

So I wouldn’t feel as bad when I am damaged by, IDK, anything.

你的心真大啊。Your heart is so big, is a saying meaning that you are capable of ignoring so many things. Bad things, good things, important things… It’s like you have a bigger health pool, but there’s a price. You will be less attentive, less careful, like a warrior class in a RPG game. Do I have a big heart?

Sometimes it’s big, sometimes it’s small. I am very sensitive sometimes, and other times I would ignore almost everything, like I am a giant monster stepping on buildings and cars and not really noticing it because I got more important things to do, like beat the shit out of that hero, protagonist, whatever it is.

Big monsters have big hearts.

What does my heart need?

IDK.

When considering this question seriously, I could not process it, because I don’t know what is a heart. How is it different to my mind, my spirit, my soul. I know we do physically have a heart.

But that's not what the question is about, we are not asked to check our health, or nutrition that kind of stuff.

So all I could say is, I need health potions, or my heart needs companions or it just needs to grow, to a big big heart. Why? IDK, maybe forget about what I just said I don't know what I need.

I need to eat.

Antong + Emma
My heart needs…… /

GAZ
Need, Desire, Hope
Need, desire, hope,
Ungrateful appreciation of the underappreciated,
Grateful of those we have,
Guilty for losing what we had,
For feeling it wasn't enough when it was
Or the the time you called them out
Or weren't as forgiving
Or didn't plan things sooner
Need, Desire, Hope
Need, who needs? Need comes in the form
Of blood, coarse, mine
I'm too small to give my blood away
I am left with blood with cells filled with
Oxygen that breathes grief and sorrow
Yet I don't bleed, I can't see this
Blood with these contents of pain
Yet it courses in me like rapids
At Niagara falls where you know it's not
Peaceful and the water rushes like
Finding yourself in that stream would thrash you
In powerful blows, pushing you against
Rocks, scorns from the tears in your
Skin because of these rapids forcing you Into them.
Water is inherently benign.
Blood is so feared, people pass out at the sight of it

But why must all that blood
That courses through me,
This container for my sorrow remains unseen.
Need. Desire. Hope.
To be seen?
Acknowledged?
Remembered?
Fear of being forgotten, guilt of forgetting?
Hope that you don't forget too much in your attempt to forget just enough.

Antong + Emma + Gaz
Need. Desire. Hope. /

Jobina
Hi, hi all. Could I have your attention for a second? Hey… for those who don't know me, I am the best man tonight. And most nights.

He winks.

For those of you that do know me, I'm sorry.

Laughter.

Can I just say what an honour it is to be here celebrating my best friend marrying the love of his life? And when I say best friend, I mean brother. We've done it all together. We were young together, and God willing, we'll be old together, too. I could stand here and talk all day about how lucky you are to be marrying her, but it's pretty obvious to all of us that she got the shit end of this deal. Come on, she's beautiful, smart, kind, and for some unknown reason, loves him anyways. Do you guys know what she does for a living? She rescues puppies. Dude, what do you do for work? Stocks? What the hell does that even mean? This dude sits in an office looking at imaginary money all day. SHE RESCUES PUPPIES, MAN. Are you kidding me? So out of your league.

Laughter erupts throughout the theatre.

But jokes aside, he is going to be the best husband ever. Really. And I don't mean that this is going to be a perfect marriage, because no marriage is perfect, and there will be some nights that this man is going to have you in tears of happiness and anger and both at the same time because he can be a total fucking moron and I (*groans*) have been there, but… but as much as I hate to admit this, he is just… The best. (*beat*) I can't express to you how much I love you. I can try my best and I'll still fall short. I know you think you know, but you don't. You watched me grow.

You took care of me when I didn't know how to - still don't know how to - take care of myself. You were there for me. When we graduated high school, you were there. Every time I get my heart broken by some girl, you're there. Every time I needed a couch to sleep on, you were there. When my mom died, you were there. As long as the sun shines, you'll be there, man. In the days leading up to today, I just kept thinking about how lucky I am to know you. Knowing this guy is loving him.

The man has a realization. A pause.

So, congratulations to you. Both of you. May you have the happiest marriage. May you love each other as deeply as I… yeah.

Emma + Antong + Gaz + Jobina
Congratulations. /

Mackenzie
There is a dog chained up in the
Neighbours yard
He's pissing me off
Every hour of the day out here
Barking.
While they're away at work punching papers and writing lines
And doing lines and
Making lines
And lines
And lines
And lines

It's not the dog's fault, sure, he is just out there barking
Lonely
A lone
Woof
Barking at trees and squirrels and
Birds and
Woof
And six dollar shots and lines outside
Of bar clubs
Woof
Walking home alone at 2 am
Woof

“he sexy, you all by yourself”
Woof
“hey gorgeous, hey beautiful”
Woof
“hey you listening to me?”
Woof
“hey you some kind of faggot?”

Woof
Woof
Woof
There is a dog chained up in my neighbours yard.

Rabid dog
Rabid man

Mac + Antong + Emma + Gaz + Jobina
WOOF /

Eric
The best part about getting clean from your Adderall addiction is the sobriety cake.
God that is the best tasting cake in the world.
What a great way to celebrate getting sober.
Cake.
And it’s not just for Adderall, either.
Oh, no no.
You can have a sobriety cake for anything.
Mushrooms
Or coke
Or crack
Or ecstasy
Or alcohol.
The sobriety cake knows no bounds.
And the best part about it is when you go to the bakery at your local Walmart or Sobeys or whatever
And you tell the sweet old lady at the counter that you want a cake
And ask if she can write something on it.
And she says “yes” of course.
And you just watch her face as you ask her to write

“Happy One Year No Heroin”
And she walks into the back without saying anything
Because she wants to keep her job
But also because she is a nice lady
And she’s happy you’re doing better.
Ah, sobriety is so cool.
Oh, and then you go home
And you get your friends to give you the cake like you weren’t the one who bought it in the first place
And everyone cheers for you
And then you eat cake
Just because you’re no longer doing blow in the bathroom of the Dave and Buster’s you used to work at.
And you don’t just have to celebrate the big ones, either
Like a year
Or five years
Or ten years.
You can do it for a week
Or two days.
AA had it all wrong,
Giving you those stupid little coins
That just sit in your nightstand forever
But only after you agree to love God forever.
You know what doesn’t require devotion to God to celebrate?
Motherfucking cake.
It just requires twenty bucks and a knife
And even the knife is optional if your standards are low enough.
The anniversary of my sobriety is Valentine’s Day.
Isn’t that sweet?
But it means all the grocery stores are stocking pink and purple cakes
With flowers
And hearts.
And I can post about it on my Instagram without all of my family members getting worried
And not inviting me to their Canada Day barbecue.
I can just pretend like I’m in love.
And I am.
I’m in love with the person I’m becoming
And I’m going to give my love some fucking cake.

All

Love.

Jeff
Things unsaid stay unsaid
That's a given, I know. It's logic,
You can think it,
But if you don't say it,
It rots inside.

And what you say can be complete bullshit,
It can be against the logic of this world,
Free speech, am I right?
It can be utterly wrong.

Or it can be sheer beauty,
It can be the most poignant sound you've shaped.
It can be the message that sends inspiration spiralling through spines.

I'm not here to judge,
I don't know what you've left unsaid.
If it's hate you wish to speak,
Then speak it to yourself, till you heal, and shed the hate,
Time's too short to be so hateful,
And there's too many folks who don't get that chance to heal.
So do that for yourself, you deserve it.

If it's something left unsaid filled with love,
For that special someone,
That special baby,
That lovely soul,
Then please,
Say it.
Nothing's lost,
Nothing's gained,
If left unsaid.

I've only one thing I wish to say,
If you're willing to spare a moment -

I don't know you.

But I love you.

You don't have to trust me, or even listen to me.
But ya know, I'm human, and life is far too short,
And well, we all go through different things,
But at the very least, we have being alive as a common thing between us.
And I can say, in confidence, that being alive is so very hard.
Life is up and down, this and that, surprises like bricks smashed against your gut, joy that springs you to the clouds, and pain that hollows you out.
Life is gorgeously ugly.
Life is painfully uncaring.
Life is meaningless poignancy.
The specks of star dust that we are – returns to the earth, to eventually be smashed into stars again, a billion years from now.
But you, all of you, hearing me, right this moment.
It's a miracle, it's a moment of fate.
So how can I not love you?
We're bound in this exact moment,
And in this contract that we have, in this space, between each and everyone of us -
It cannot be left unsaid:
I love you. I love you. I love you.

All
I love you.

Beat.

ADAPTATION AS RECLAMATION
As we warmed up our hearts and collided our curiosities towards artistic material – into free form writing, I introduced another element from my autoethnographic research around playwriting – the role and capacity of adaptations, and reinventions of classics as part of our collaboration. Working with classical text has been a core part of my work as a performer playwright – such as BOOK + Prince Hamlet, and the influences were integral to my reflection and research – an active subversion of stories from the status quo, a way to question who gets the right to tell stories, and to actively collide that internal wrestling between my identity as a queer Chinese-canadian immigrant with the largely western dominated theatrical education I've received into an active and artistic form.
We are surrounded by adaptations, and it's something that consciously and subconsciously we can activate and nurture as writers, for example, you can hone in on a "canonical" figure that you're super compelled with, and as a writing exercise, collide five elements from your curiosity list with that figure and generate some free form writing – I promise you there will be nuggets of

theatre that you can continue to deepen from that alone. It's an experiment that we played with in rehearsal together:
I asked each of these fine talented artists to come into rehearsal with a mythological or classical figure to explore in our experimentation of adaptation together, working from each of our lived experience and intersectional identities, ranging from:

Jeff
马面

Antong
Prrrrrrrrrr.

Hi!! Demons, ghosts, monsters, evil spirits, fallen angels! I am glad to be invited to this annual hell conference! Really excited! Ahh. This is my first time aboard. Yeah! This is so good, so informative, so enlighting! I really like how you introduced this new way of torturing, what you do to those mass shooters? So, refreshing! We should do this in our place! Unfortunately we don't really have any mass shooters in China, so, yeah…

Oh! I forgot to introduce myself! I am 马面, the horse face, I am from Chinese hell :), or hell with Chinese characteristics. My job is to torture the desceased for every bad thing they've done, and my favorite torture is the tongue pulling, me and my buddy would pull their tongue out and sew it back to their moth for every single lie they've said. It's fascinating to see their face :0 Prrrrr!

Oh I usually work with my buddy 牛头, the cow head, but he's … he's uh… he's being reeducated for… something he shouldn't say. But it's good! It's good for him! Yeah!

Oh! How I learnt English? Yeah, yeah, yeah. Sometimes we got some English speakers sent to our place, you know, they died in China. Most of them are white male English teachers, and they would teach us English when they are waiting in the line for getting tortured, they think we would be nice to them if they could offer something to us. But no, :) :) :) We follow the orders, the rules, we always make sure things go as our 阎王爷, supreme leader says! Always.

You see, hell is fair, you get punished for the bad things you did when you were alive, and there's a clear record, clear law, everything is written, you get punished for a reason, valid reason, no matter who you were when you were alive. It's just so fair, I guess this is what people called utopia.

But (look around),things are getting more and more … intense nowadays. Like our supreme leader is obsessed with movements, reforms, reeducations. It's just … I am not saying it's bad, no no, it's awesome! But it's just … too much, I'd say? But, it's good, yeah. Uh … We were so busy with memorizing, painting all the slogans, filling the forms, parades, and then there's COVID! !@#!@$ I don't know what the hell was happening up there, there was this massive flow of the deceased coming down. It was this janurary? human calendar? Just sooo much work, so many things to do! Prrrrrr. I thought there was a war going on but no, it was just COVID, after 3 human years, they decided to let it be, to not get prepared, and just let virus kill all those humans. Who the fuck made this decision? They are even more cruel than our 阎王爷, supreme leader. Whoever made this decision, they're gonna come down here and answer to us, to me and my buddy! It was real torture for us! All the hard work we had to do because of them! Ahhhh!

You know what, it's not that fair, my buddy didn't really do anything but, he was thrown to the, e, e, school and get reeducated. Don't tell anyone I said this! This is a safe space, right? I love my 阎王爷, our supreme leader, no doubt.

Ummmm, eee, let's talk about something light hearted. Yeah before I came, I heard there are, what you called, first nation Gods and monsters in Canada? But I don't see any, Where are they?

Jeff + Antong
Kronos

Emma
KRONOS MONOLOGUE

Jeff + Antong + Emma
The Jersey Devil

Eric
Forgive me, Father for I have sinned.
It has been eleven years since my last confession.
I am not the same boy who used to sit in these pews.

I have stopped going to church.
I have started kissing men.
I'm not sure if I like it but I know that I want to do it.
I haven't tasted a drop of your wine in ten years
And not a single inch of my tongue misses it.
I do not miss the way it sours your breath and warms my cheek.
I have steadied my hands,

Wrapped them in old shirts
And baby blankets.
The blood is drying up.

I don't know why I am asking for forgiveness.

Forgive me, my father.
I no longer believe in the salvation you are offering me.
I want a chance to save myself.

I asked Veronica who it is that she prays to
And she says it's never the same person twice.
Sometimes he is a tall man with no face.
Sometimes she is a young girl with baskets for hands.
Sometimes it is a giant cloud hovering the front yard.
But is never the same man you tell he is.

The person I am is more than the reflection in the watery glaze of your eyes,
He is more than rumours you spread at family gatherings.
I want to stop apologizing for our fistfights.
I want to stop feeling bad for winning.
I want to pick up your teeth off the cement
And scatter the dust of their enamel across my garden.

I am tired of asking for forgiveness.
I do not want to live in this house you built for me.
I am unstaining the glass in my windows,
I am draining my bath.
I am tearing down the tiles in my kitchen
And letting the metal on my counter rust.
I don't want to be a butcher anymore.
It's not the fault of the goat for being made of flesh.
Not everything we don't understand needs to be consumed.
Some animals just have wings and hooves
And they are finding out what it is to wander the forest differently than their siblings.

You can put whatever monster you want inside of my stomach
And I will always set it free.
With knives or nails or splinters from the handle of your axe
The only thing I will carve any longer

Is my own torso.
I will rip every last shred of the ghost you left in me
And feed it to my herd.
I can hear the congregation outside.
They are screaming.
I can hear them trying to claw their way inside.
They are hungry
And the freezer has run out of meat.

Forgive me, my father,
But I will let myself starve
Before I slaughter one of my own.

Jeff + Antong + Eric + Emma
Scheherazade

Gaz (or Jeff)
What would I do if he were to come here?
Now she is lost.
In your jealousy there's rage, in rage there's not red but every colour from the fresh young blood that
you took from her to blood untouched for days like you left her darkening. Blackening.
Your blood is black no matter your state.
Your hands are weapons, your fingers are claws, you are not human
Your eyes, that of snakes, yellow, your breath abhorrent, repugnant your hair is tangled tainted
Within its strands are screams
With every brush a blood curdling shriek,
Every strand is wet with tears your hair is wet with the tears that you alone caused yet you are too
much of a so-called “Man” to admit that you are allowed to cry too.
Wet with others, fucking afraid of your own.
Why is that?
Your forced inability to cry, inability to cry forced upon you?
Was she crying? Is that why you did it because she was capable of expressing herself in ways you
never could. In words in tears, in the ability to actually have a heart and love?
Your black blood, your soiled rotted decayed heart, In a wasteland that is your abdomen where nothing should be able to take root in and live so you force people into it and drain and end them. Yet

you tell it as a paradise. It all lives and percolates in you? Manifesting in such a way that you would
go on and do this?
To a good girl, a girl who loved who wanted to love who was wanting to love who loved me.
In taking her life, appreciate the gravity of what the fuck you have done not to me but to all the women here.
Feel the gravity that this world will no longer feel by her weight on this earth.
Understand that the only reason we don't do what you did to her to you, is not a reflection of mercy
on behalf of our gender or even our trying to be the better fucking human being.
Put it in your skull that it's because…
…
Something like that.

Jeff + Antong + Emma + Eric + Gaz
Giselle

Mackenzie
When people say my emotions are too big I like to imagine they think of me as a naked man who walked into the room with a massive erection no one can take their eyes off of.
And then I take off my massive strap and start beating everyone with it.
I know forgiveness is supposed to be for yourself, but I don't want to let anyone off o the hook.
I want to know if you even want me to forgive you or if I'm supposed to want to forgive you because to tbe quite honest I don't fucking want to.
You haven't done anything except make me want to kill you because you're begging me to forgive you and I don't think it's because you're actually sorry because if you WERE actually sorry you'd turn around and walk away and I'd never have to see you again.
When you did what you did (and I will not be repeating what you did). I wanted to kill you.
Kill you doesn't sound intense enough.
I wanted to throw you in front of a garbage truck like a cartoon and watch all your guts get dragged around like an embarrassing poop smear.
I want you to get sunburned so bad that your skin starts blistering and you get heatstroke and they have to take you to the hospital where they find out you're allergic to penicillin and have to remove your appendix which leads to a complication where you start puking up your shit, straight up puking up your shit, and then your ex walks in.
And she's the doctor, and she's laughing at you, and all of your friends are laughing at you, and I'm laughing at you too.
May be you can't see me but I am
Emotional erection.
Fuck you.

I don’t want to forgive you.

Jeff + Antong + Emma + Eric + Gaz + Mac
Athena and Aphrodite

Jobina
Athena & Aphrodite:

He likes it when I wait for him. In bed and out of.

He likes that I’ve been waiting. In bed and out of.

He likes that I haven’t been touched before. In bed and out of.

So here I wait. I have been waiting. And waiting. And waiting.

Today the waiting ends. Today, we made promises to each other. Today, he says that enough time has passed. We exchanged the vows and the rings and the kisses. One day was as much waiting as he could handle, even though I have been waiting for him my whole life. Is a promise only kept when spoken out loud?

He says that waiting will be a gift. If I wait, I will be giving myself to him completely. I know the art of giving more and getting less all too well. If I wait, no one else would have been able to get their hands on me, my innocence will not be marred, and I will remain spotless. As if I am something that can be disfigured by touch. You would think that this marks a qualifier of the hands that commit the act, not of me.

No one told me purity would feel so unclean. So heavy. So lonely.

And yet, here I wait. For what, I’m not sure. Perhaps I wait because it feels like the only thing I can do on my own terms. Because rejection from what I desire would hurt more than giving in to something I don’t. Maybe it’s easier to disguise being unwanted underneath a veil of waiting. Of patience. And chastity. Purity. Right?

But in the waiting, there I find it. The desire to touch, to hold, to take as well as give. With the sheets against my skin, the warm air weighing over me, the secrets shared between breaths in the dark. (a building here)

orgasm…?

Where waiting is a means to an end and not an end itself.

Everyone except Jeff
Ophelia

Jeff
Oh Ophelia
Or whatever nickname stuck like weeds caught stuck in the throat
It's been a bit of a ride, my friend
And the things I've said to you
With you
Through you
Leaves me hanging,
Dangling for a breath
Puzzled mind thick with snot
O what a noble mind is here o'erthrown
If I had known
The way life moans
Groans
How the mind swivels in tones
Around nobility, mobility, sensibility,
Around the
The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's
Eye tongue sword
The anatomy of some love,
Think of a lover, think of a lover,
And how they've failed you,
Or you've failed them,
Think of the loves in a life
And recall a bit of them,
An ounce of their anatomy,
And you might remember a pinky, a toe, a sliver of hair,
You might not even remember a face,
Or what they sounded like,
But you can remember the way a nose grew aslant,
Or an eye green,
Or a patch of hair wild,
The expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mold of form,
The observed of all observers – quite quite down
And I, learning to go up to go down,
The elasticity of ecstasy and grief,

And I, expecting some state,
Some mold of form,
Some shape of sadness in shattered glass,
And I, foolish little thing,
Across five years, of riding those lines,
Each moment on stage a practise of transparency and grace,
And I, five years ago, this little thing that'd fit in your costume just a bit better,
Innocent, naïve, conjuring all the hopes and expectation of hitting that exact note of,
That pitch of heartbreak required in your very state,
Oh Ophelia
You've taught me how to be, to be, to BE on stage,
How to wield this instrument – from down in my very gut, to up high in the clouds,
And I, of ladies most deject and wretched
I'm no lady, obviously,
But every time I let that out,
It was this whirlwind
Of all the moments of rejection, objection, dejection
Of all the moments my skin crawled
Or my eyes ablaze in seeing something within
So ugly,
So bothered
So wretched
And I'd have a moment, where my head bows,
My body sagging,
Hands trembling,
The heart loud
And I'd meet you halfway and continue on
That suck'd the honey of his music vows
All the sweet sweet nothings ever whispered
Remembering that, or riding that wave of love,
Of mon dieu tu es tres beau,
Some French pianist when I was a little more twinky
Or I'll be here forever,
And that's a straight up lie,
Nothing's forever,
You know this, right?
And of course, the music vows of love as it is now,
Of which, my god,
I'm in love!
I'm in love!

And so in love, that my dear pours a sweet whatever beverage, matcha or coffee, or what have you always with a dose of honey –
Oat milk and honey, the gesture of care from my beloved
And flashes of him stretch out across the five years that we've been together,
And it always strikes me how reasonable five years makes sense as a pocket of time,
A measure of love and reason,
But I
Now see that noble and most sovereign reason like sweet bells jangled,
Out of tune and harsh,
That unmatch'ed form and feature of blown youth,
Oh, Ophelia,
To be frank,
I've outgrown you,
Quite literally as I struggle to fit into the costume,
A little pandemic weight perhaps,
A little older perhaps,
A costume that's traveled the same five years perhaps, all torn, shredded up,
Thin like paper.
When I first embodied you, I was closer to your age,
And youth is something I thought I'd miss,
But it's not.
It's so much clearer to be now,
It's so much easier to handle the ups and downs
The irritants and the aggression,
Things feel settled in a way, unswayed by the smallest of things,
I like to think,
I grew up with you,
And in some weird way,
See myself grown, matured, evolved,
While speaking these same words over and over again,
As the world changes
Blasted with ecstasy,
And the courage to be in this world,
To be exactly who you need to be,
The strength it takes to just get on by,
To survive,
We survived, and are surviving a fucking pandemic!!!!
We got by,
We made money, we kept food on the table,
Dreams lost, and dreams vanished, and new ones found,

We find a way!
We must!
We cannot be defeated,
We cannot be defeated,
We will not be defeated,
We persevere,
I am one tenacious fucker,
And Ophelia,
You taught me the capacity to go so low,
To put on a show even when I just wanna go home,
To just keep on keeping on,
To capture so much in a single syllable
To grow
To sow
To flow from o to o to o to that very high of
O woe is me!
To have seen what I have seen,
And through you, Ophelia,
I've seen so much,
Faces of audiences stunned by a boy Ophelia,
Of a female hamlet,
A deaf horatio,
I've seen parts of the world I've never thought I'd get to see,
I've seen the dirt,
I've eaten dirt from far too many places in America and Canada,
I've seen mountains covered in snow,
I've seen cities decked out in technology,
I've seen feet splintered with thorns,
I've seen so much,
And through you,
With you,
Ophelia,
I've seen me,
I've seen myself grow, and go, and glow,
I've seen the bits of me that I've left behind,
I've seen the thorns fall off, thank god,
I've seen my own heart love so much more
I've seen this capacity to survive,
To just keep on keeping on,
I've seen how to say goodbye,

To say it’s time,
It’s time to go,
And I see that you
Your words,
This time of being with you, through you, beside you,
This time
This very moment,
I see you, dear friends, dear loves, dear cherished,
I see you,
And thank you
For seeing what I see
See what I see.

OUTRO
Everyone stand – take a bow,
Thank the audience for joining us.
Eat cupcakes!