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Musical Logic: An Alternate Theatrical Language

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Musical Logic: An Alternate Theatrical Language

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Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2014

Dedication

To my parents, Bill Koogler and Joyce Victor.

To my grandmother, Polly Victor.

Acknowledgements

With incredible gratitude to Kirk Lynn and Suzan Zeder for their mentorship, and with particular gratitude to Steven Dietz for the many conversations that led to this thesis, and for championing *Advance Man* from the very beginning.

Abstract

Musical Logic: An Alternate Theatrical Language

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2014

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This thesis is an examination of the concept of musical logic as a theatrical language, with my play *Advance Man* as a case study. This thesis synthesizes the play, and outlines the principles of musical logic, which is defined by the use of rhythm, repetition, and resonance. These concepts are illustrated with examples from the initial creation, revision, and UT production of *Advance Man*. The full text of *Advance Man* accompanies the thesis essay.

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| I. Introduction | 1 |
| II. <i>Advance Man</i> : A Summary | 3 |
| III. <i>Advance Man</i> : Background..... | 5 |
| IV. <i>Advance Man</i> : First Draft to Production..... | 8 |
| V. Defining Musical Logic | 13 |
| VI. Introducing an Audience to Musical Logic | 18 |
| VII. Revising <i>Advance Man</i> : Musical Logic in Action | 20 |
| VIII. Conclusion | 23 |
| <i>Advance Man</i> | 25 |
| Works Cited | 94 |

I. Introduction

When I was 23 I moved to New York City, where I spent two years studying acting at a Meisner-based studio in Midtown. Like every student of the studio, I learned its motto by heart: “live truthfully under imaginary circumstances.” Most of the scenes we worked on in class were from naturalistic plays about psychologically complex characters. Think Miller, O’Neill, Labute.

As an actor in these types of scenes, I often failed to be “truthful” in the way the studio valued: I had trouble becoming genuinely angry, genuinely sad. Yet I was very good at *scoring* scenes—at figuring out when to raise or drop my voice, when to speed up and slow down, how to use words to their full effect. I loved scenes that allowed me to use these skills. I did well as Algernon and excelled at any Shakespearean character.

These were early clues.

During the long year after acting school, when I was beginning to realize that life as an actor was not going to make me happy, I came across a copy of Wallace Shawn’s *Our Late Night* in the Drama Bookshop on 40th Street. The play was expressionistic and dream-like and unlike anything I could remember reading. I was particularly struck by the final stage direction, in which a man and woman lay in bed together after a party:

They freeze. Lights down. Lights up, and Annette is asleep and Lewis awake. Lights down. Lights up again, and Lewis is asleep, and Annette awake. Lights down again. Lights up, and Annette is asleep, Lewis awake. And so on, ad-lib, until the final blackout. (30)

This stage direction didn’t make literal sense as a conclusion to the play. But then the play itself

hadn't made literal sense. It was an expression of a feeling, a state of being. I didn't know what that final image meant, but its rhythm—awake, asleep, awake, asleep—made me feel something that I couldn't put into words.

As I read more of Shawn's work, I was also struck by the opening scene of *Marie and Bruce*, in which Marie berates her husband Bruce in an epic monologue broken up by only occasional interjections from Bruce. The monologue is repetitive and overwhelming. Marie continues to insult Bruce long past the point when it would be realistic for her to stop. Why hadn't Shawn edited this speech down? As a reader, I had understood the point of the speech very quickly, so there was no narrative reason for it to continue—unless the play was operating according to a different kind of logic, a logic of repetition and resonance, of sound and silence: a musical logic.

During my three years of graduate school at UT, I've come to believe that musical logic is a central element of my work, as important as narrative logic. In this thesis, I'll provide my own working definition of musical logic, a definition that I refined while working on my play *Advance Man*. I'll discuss the challenges of presenting musical logic to an audience expecting narrative logic, using the UT New Theatre (UTNT) production of *Advance Man* as a case study. Finally, I'll touch on the why of it all: what does music do that narrative cannot, and what do I hope to contribute to the theatre by embracing musical logic?

II. *Advance Man: A Summary*

A small town called Bear Creek hears a rumor it's going to receive a visit from the President. The townspeople, a five-person Greek chorus of sorts, tell us how they feel about the President (they like him), and why they're excited about the President's visit (something in their world has been shifting or changing, and they're looking for some answers). The townspeople seem to have trouble expressing themselves, speaking in vague and often contradictory statements, repeating unimportant words like "like," "um," and "sure."

The townspeople introduce us to the play's principal characters: Marcy, a spunky high schooler and budding reporter, Michael Henry, Marcy's dad and editor of the town newspaper, Frank, a grumpy farmer planning to protest the President's visit, Ella, an art teacher who loves the President, and Roger, a homeless man who lives in the woods and spouts conspiracy theories,

Marcy, tasked by her father with finding out more about the President's visit, sees a man in a dark suit, very plainly not from the town. He eats a bird. This is Advance Man. Advance Man tells Marcy he works for the President, and shows her a secret hole in which the subconscious whispers of the townspeople can be heard. Advance Man promises Marcy access to power if she'll help him spy on the townspeople. Marcy says she'll think about it. As Advance Man takes a nap, the President appears to Marcy in shadow and encourages her to take the job.

Back at home, Marcy asks her dad, Michael Henry, if he's happy with his "small" life. Michael Henry says yes, and Marcy, realizing that she's destined for something bigger, calls Advance Man and accepts the job. The townspeople and Marcy sing a song—they're all dreaming about the President. Meanwhile, Advance Man dreams of leaving his job and

becoming a bird or a tree, but is reprimanded by the President, again in shadow.

The next day, Marcy spies on the townspeople as Advance Man watches. When Roger appears and expresses suspicion about the President, the Advance Man threatens him, but Marcy intervenes and Roger escapes. This angers Advance Man, who asks Marcy to eat a bird to prove her loyalty. Marcy does so with great difficulty, and the Advance Man leads her away just as the townspeople hear a helicopter circling overhead. It's the President! The townspeople accelerate their preparations and then assemble in a line to wait.

In the expectant silence, a memory is unleashed: Frank and Ella return to the night in the field, some forty years earlier, when they were both in high school. They loved each other, and we see Ella beg Frank to stay with her in Bear Creek, not to go off to war. But as the lovers sleep in the field, the President appears to Frank and convinces him to go. When Ella wakes up in the field, Frank is gone. She rejoins him in the present, as they and the townspeople realize the President is not coming, and that all the birds are gone from the sky.

Marcy and Advance Man appear again. Advance Man says goodbye to Marcy, and leaves. The townspeople approach Marcy. She is different somehow. The townspeople, unsettled, wonder about what's happened to Marcy and why the birds are gone from the sky. They leave. Marcy, alone, hears whispers. She steps towards them, listening. She's become an advance person.

III. *Advance Man*: Background

Advance Man was the third full-length play I wrote at UT, after *Giggletree* and *Kill Floor*. I had been wanting to write something based on Nikolai Gogol's *The Government Inspector*, a comedy about a small provincial Russian town that hears a rumor it will be receiving a visit from a government official, but is instead visited by a con artist who assumes the mantle of said official to scam the town. The play is a devastating portrayal of the way people change their behavior in the presence of (perceived) power. It can be read as a pure satire, but for the final stage direction, in which Gogol instructs his actors to stand in tableau for a very long held moment, a moment that continues until the laughter dies and the theatre becomes quiet. The stage direction is unexpected, has no aesthetic precursor in the play, and turns the comedy into something deeper.

I'd also been thinking about the idea of an "advance man," someone whose job it is to arrive before the President to prepare a location for his visit: set up photo ops, check for security threats, find locals to stand behind the President while he speaks. A bit like Gogol's government inspector, but with a more expansive mission. My work is often about ideological transfer: the way in which ideas are passed from one generation to the next, or from one group of people to another. An advance man seemed like a perfect vehicle through which to personify that transfer. The guy whose job it is to ensure the safe passage of the President, or perhaps of a certain set of political ideas, or perhaps of power itself.

Finally, I wanted to write about a place very much like my hometown. Vashon Island, Washington, is a particular variety of community, variations of which can be found up and down the West Coast. It attracts like-minded individuals: organic farmers, pottery people, environmental lawyers, part-time carpenters. People who protested the Vietnam War and have

done their best to embody the values of that time through the decades that followed. I remember heated debates in the *Vashon Beachcomber*, our weekly paper, about whether the local VFW should be allowed to drive a historic tank in the annual Strawberry Festival parade. Most islanders were against this flagrant display of militarism.

This is the place that shaped my consciousness, and I wanted to pay tribute to it even as I satirized it, albeit more gently than Gogol had skewered his craven, shallow townspeople. Bear Creek, *Advance Man's* fictionalized version of Vashon Island, is a good place. Its inhabitants try—and largely succeed—to live lives in line with their values. But their attempts to make sense of their larger political context are often frustrated: by their own lack of information, and by the slippery nature of political language, which slides so easily into cliché.

So I had my content, what about form? By the end of my first year of graduate school, I'd reached an aesthetic breaking point in my work. I wanted to tap deeper into that dark wild beauty, that illogical power, I'd first encountered with Shawn. I wanted to write a dream rather than a bedtime story.

So in the summer between my first and second years at UT, I put myself on a personal course of study, reading a bunch of plays that I felt might influence me. I developed a highly rigorous test for classifying a play: could I dip in and out of it on the 7 bus down to the UT gym, and still enjoy it? If so, I determined that it was a narratively-driven play—a relatively easy read. The plays that had a particular influence on me that summer—by Samuel Beckett, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Enda Walsh, among others—were not easy reads. They weren't bus plays. To take pleasure from them, I had to read them more than once. And, more importantly, I had to read them out loud. I had to first enjoy the sound and feel of the words in my mouth, as well as the

passing images or moments those words called into being. Story emerged from sound impressionistically, its crucial elements repeated in multiple ways, multiple times.

As I absorbed these plays, my own writing came to reflect them. When I wrote scraps and scenes that summer, I found what emerged both strange and exciting. I mostly stopped writing character names—tried, instead, to capture the rhythm of lines as they emerged on the page, and figure out which character they belonged to later. The energy of my writing became frenetic. Locations and topics shifted suddenly; words devolved into sounds.

Throughout, I found myself returning to the writers mentioned above, speaking their words out loud as I read. I was particularly influenced by the velocity of the speaker in Beckett's *Not I*, and by the devastating phrase at the end of his *That Time*, which still gets under my skin with its musical evocation of loss:

what was it said come and gone was that it something like that
come and gone come and gone no one come and gone in no time
gone in no time. (235)

In this single phrase were the tools I'd use to build *Advance Man*: rhythm, repetition, and resonance.

IV. *Advance Man*: First Draft to Production

Advance Man began as an exercise in Steven Dietz's playwriting class, which I took in the fall semester of my second year. Professor Dietz asks his students to write a full-length play in twenty-five pages, by which he means: write a play that has all the story moves of a full-length, but do it in twenty-five pages.

As the day approached to share our initial pages in class, I wrote two first scenes. The *first* first scene was "normal." It began with a husband and a wife sitting on a couch, in a recognizable living room, discussing an understandable situation: their son's decision to protest the President's visit to his school. The *second* first scene was not normal. It was in keeping with the writing that had been emerging from me that summer: a whirling collection of an unknown number of voices, changing topics frequently and with great velocity. Not having shared this style with anyone, I agonized over which scene to bring in: the second one was more exciting to me. But would it seem like nonsense when read out loud?

I brought in the second scene, which would become the beginning of *Advance Man*. It was clear right away that this new style would be a fruitful one. My classmates seemed excited rather than confused by the whirling energy. Moreover, the essential story points *were* emerging from the sound. My classmates understood the basics: the President was coming, and the townspeople were excited about his visit.

I wrote the rest of that initial draft fairly quickly, allowing myself to work intuitively. The basic structure was clear: the townspeople would get all geared up for the President's visit, but the President wouldn't come. Meanwhile, Marcy would be taken and changed by the *Advance Man*. The two storylines would intersect in the final moments of the play, when the townspeople

would confront the loss of Marcy. At the climactic moment of the play, I inserted a scene between Frank and Ella in which they returned to the moment that Frank left Ella for good to go to Vietnam. I wasn't sure why the scene belonged at the climax of the play. It just felt right.

That Spring I took the Professional Development Workshop (PDW), taught by Kirk Lynn. This is a class that all second-years are required to take, in which graduate playwrights work with graduate directors to develop a previously written play, culminating in a public reading directed by a guest artist. My graduate director was Will Davis, a skilled third-year who'd previously directed me in a production of Lisa D'Amour's *The Cataract*, and my guest artist was Ken Rus Schmoll, an NYC-based director.

I made small revisions during the PDW, but found it difficult to do any serious reworking prior to the public reading of the play, in April. I'd never written a play like this before, and I couldn't decide which parts of it were in need of revision. Some of my classmates told me the play was finished. Others had narrative questions and a desire for more clarity from the story.

Around the time of my PDW reading, a divide became apparent. I'd submitted the play as part of my application to become a Core Apprentice at the Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis. In (gracefully) rejecting my application, the Center had sent me feedback on the play from an anonymous group of readers. These readers were by and large mystified by the play. They complained that the characters were indistinguishable, and that the narrative was hard to parse. Here are a few of the responses I received:

I understand from his proposal that he is trying to do something different and new, and that he is planning on working on the characters' voices and relationships. There were some interesting thoughts about life in some of the monologues, but they didn't really go anywhere.

By having everyone talk in strategic vagueness and everybody's sentences crashing into each other, it creates a monotony. Everybody starts sounding the same so it impedes character development and slows the story.

Abe is already strong on his idea and the language of the script, so I don't know if a workshop would improve it. But if it focused on character and story, I think it would really help Abe and the script become much more audience-friendly.

These readers were clear that the play was an experiment in language; many noticed that I was making a point about the way we speak now. But they weren't connecting with the piece or its themes beyond that. Moreover, many of the narrative strands already present in the script were not evident to them on a first read.

The audience at my PDW reading in Austin seemed to have a different reaction to the piece. They laughed a lot, which was heartening. And they also reported a deeper and more varied experience of the themes of the play. Here is a sample of some of the written feedback I received after the PDW reading:

To me this play is about perceptions of authority, taking a view of what it means to be politically active, with a dose of Hunter S. Thompson.

To me, this play is about the ways our hope shifts (while glimpsing the metronome underneath that hope that holds a continuous force).

This play is about being against the wall of history—a small piece of a nation with limited perspective to see the wholeness of things.

How we are ultimately disappointed even when we don't want to be. How memory is more important than what actually is.

To me this play is about a loss of certainty, oh—and also growing up.

And lastly:

These characters are so lovely!

Advance Man was functioning like a piece of music. Its notes could be seen on the page. But it needed to be heard to come alive.

That didn't mean, of course, that it was finished. Both the Playwrights' Center readers and the PDW audience had expressed some confusion about narrative. My housemate had enjoyed the play but had no idea that Marcy had been "indoctrinated" by the *Advance Man*. Others reported similar haziness about what had actually happened over the course of the play.

I knew that I wanted to improve the play's clarity by highlighting its existing narrative elements, such as Marcy's change from innocent girl to advance person. I knew, as well, that there were narrative elements that I wanted to add to the play. I was curious to explore the relationship between Marcy and Michael Henry, and between Frank and Ella. I wanted the audience to connect with these characters, and I wanted these characters to have a fairly traditional narrative arch.

At the same time, there were certain pitfalls to correcting for narrative. In some pre-PDW revisions of the play, I had *over*-corrected for narrative, causing the play to lose some of its musical characteristics, the very things that made it unique. What were those musical characteristics? I'd need to define them if I wanted to retain them.

Advance Man has a distinctive sound--the "ums" and "ahs," the whirling run-on sentences. I could easily clarify the narrative while retaining that sound. But to do so would be to assume that the musicality of the play was superficial, that music was style while narrative was content. I had a sense that *Advance Man* was musical not just in the way it sounded, but in the

way it made meaning. The play didn't just have a superficial musicality; it operated according to a musical logic.

V. Defining Musical Logic

Musical logic, as I have come to define it, is a way of making meaning through rhythm, repetition and resonance.

The first, rhythm, is perhaps the most important to me. When I am writing a play from my gut and not my mind, it's a physical experience—I'm feeling the rise and fall of the words in my body. If I'm having a good writing day, this rhythm overtakes my rational brain and carries me towards something unknown. And it produces a play that is itself highly rhythmic.

It might seem strange to claim that a rhythm can mean something. Yet we carry rhythms around with us our whole lives: the rhythms of songs we love, of tasks that we do, of ambient sounds in our environment. In my dreams, I hear the rhythm of the L train from Manhattan to Brooklyn. The lap of the ocean against a dock. The back-forth back-forth of my father rocking me to sleep when I was young. The rhythms that speak to me stay with me.

Every writer I admire has created or helped to shape a rhythmic tradition. These rhythms mean as much as the content used to create them. They are a part of a writer's legacy. Pinter left us the pause. Beckett left us the ceaseless, unending monologue. Shakespeare honored or broke iambic pentameter as it served him.

Advance Man's rhythm borrows quite a bit from Beckett. Its characters speak without ceasing, like Lucky in *Waiting for Godot* or Mouth in *Not I*. Once they start, it's hard for them to stop. They're like birds: alighting on a potential source of meaning, and then flitting to the next, without pause, as in Ella's speech to Marcy about the President:

ELLA

I remember when many decades ago the similar but also kind of glowing in his sort of and that smile! Big the hair and of course we know he's and it's but still it's and on the one hand if I see a if there's a cereal box on the television that is very pretty very nice I mean we all know it's there are people who there's a lot of thought that and sure I know about the and I listen to the all the on the kind of more radical and I know I know but you know nothing in my life I mean I'm not no church and it's like a man in the sky? A MAN? (71)

My contribution to this Beckettian rhythmic tradition, I believe, is the *communal* nature of the speech throughout the play. The townspeople are not just spinning their own individual wheels: they're co-creating the surging waves of speech that carry the play forward. Even the individual speakers, like Ella above, are continuously in dialogue with an imagined listener, revising their statements and shifting subjects in response to the listener's (imagined) objections. The overall effect is of continual revision.

There's something particularly modern that I'm after here as well, something that Beckett could only have imagined. It has to do with the rhythm of the internet age. To those who find *Advance Man's* unending barrage of statements about an ever-shifting array of topics confusing or overwhelming, I say: you're right. It is confusing and overwhelming. It mimics the way we consume information online. Leap, leap, stop. Leap, leap, leap, leap, leap, stop. This is a disorienting way to be in the world; it fractures our attention and forces us to increase our effort if we hope to find the connections and the systems underneath the noise.

Musical logic also makes meaning through repetition. Repeated words and phrases are one of the first and most obvious markers that a play is musical. So why repeat? Why not communicate something once and then move on?

Last summer a friend taught me a type of meditation that involves repeating a mantra

again and again until you enter a sort of trance state. The effectiveness of this technique in shutting down my rational brain got me thinking about the other instances in which repetition is used to great effect: in songs, of course, and also in church services and at political rallies and marches. Repetition, of a melodic phrase or a slogan or a word, is designed to do exactly what that mantra did: bypass the rational mind and create a physical or emotional response in the listener *and* the speaker.

Repetition is also a way of creating narrative. If a playwright wants to make sure that something is understood, repeating that thing is a good way of ensuring that the audience gets the point. This repetition becomes particularly important in a musical play, where an audience, encountering a dramatic structure that is unfamiliar, may have difficulty figuring out what has value.

Throughout *Advance Man*, there are examples of narrative being constructed through repetition. The townspeople repeat again and again that The President is coming, so it's clear that his visit is important, even if it's not clear *why*. Same with the birds: the townspeople mention them again and again, teaching the audience that the birds matter. And then there's the phrase "we voted," which is repeated several times in the final moments of the play:

LIBRARIAN

And so it was, it was it was, no it was, sure it was, and sure we did, sure sure we did, sure we *voted*.

BAKER

We *voted* sure

EXERCISE TEACHER

Sure sure we *voted* that winter sure.

SCIENCE TEACHER

We *voted* that winter, sure we *voted* and it was like but I don't know but we all kind of and there was a sort of that it wasn't—

(92)

The play will not explain explicitly why the townspeople are talking about voting. But the repetition of the phrase is designed to encourage an audience to incorporate the idea of “voting” into their construction of narrative. What might it mean for the townspeople to talk about voting as Marcy stands slumped in front of them, so obviously changed for the worse? What might this tell us about what has “happened”?

When I think of resonance, the third pillar of musical logic, I imagine a tiny stone being dropped into a pool of water, the ripples spreading outwards. My job as a playwright is to drop a certain number of stones in a certain combination that to me, have meanings: a big stone and then a small stone, and then several small stones, and then a big stone and a small stone again, and then a medium-sized stone, and etcetera. The ripples from these stones, as they spread, will touch me in a certain way. They may touch my audience in an entirely different way.

When I talk about “resonance,” I’m talking about a type of meaning-making more commonly associated with dance and music than with theatre. Professor Lynn talks about his appreciation of the way that dance invites your attention to wander. If I’m viewing a dance piece, a particular movement phrase might cause me to think about something in my own life that is triggered by but unrelated to the dance. I can think about this thing for as long as I’d like while still remaining immersed in the aesthetic of the dance. I’m grateful that the stone dropped by the choreographer has triggered this ripple, and I’m eager for more stones and more ripples. These ripples may *seem* unrelated to the piece at the time, but they cause me to have an emotional or

intellectual experience as I sit there, an experience triggered by the piece.

In a play with several melodic lines running concurrently, different stones will cause different ripples for different people. *Advance Man* invites the multiplicity of reactions evident in those PDW responses. It purposefully carries multiple themes and multiple pathways, both narrative and musical. At certain key moments, I want the audience to have a shared experience; at many others, I am content for them to have a diversity of experiences, to be feeling and thinking entirely different things.

VI. Introducing an Audience to Musical Logic

Many audience members enter the theatre with purely narrative expectations. They want a good story, well told. So a playwright employing musical logic must take care to welcome them, as much as possible, into what may be a new type of experience.

The primary way to do this is to set expectations right away. The first scene of *Advance Man* lays the groundwork for the play that follows. Because it is so hard to pin down what exactly the townspeople are talking about, the audience must search for other ways to make sense of the play. They have no choice but to surrender to the barrage of contradictory information, and to allow meaning to emerge from rhythm, repetition, and resonance. The highly specific rhythms of this first scene, if it is well directed and well performed, will let the audience know that there is an intentionality behind the play, that what they're watching is not random, that their attention will be rewarded.

Another way to welcome an audience to a musical play is by making them laugh. Or by giving them a moment of striking theatricality. By theatricality I mean a moment of shift, in which the tools of the stage—lighting, sound, movement—are put to new and surprising use. During the UTNT production of *Advance Man*, the first appearance of the whisper hole was a huge theatrical moment. As *Advance Man* lay on the ground with his ear to the hole and his hand raised, the stage darkened and the sound of whispers rose to an almost deafening level. It was a clear shift in the play, a darkening. And it was a shared ripple

The final way to welcome an audience to a musical play is by inserting clear narrative benchmarks; by providing them a series of narrative stepping stones through the play. This is the

main type of revision I made to *Advance Man*. Some of these changes were simply a line: Advance Man now says to Marcy, clearly and simply, “I want you to come work for me.” (52) Other changes were about altering the balance of repetition in the play, so that Ella now mentions the night in the field more often, allowing the audience to better understand the flashback.

Used effectively, these tools can create a shared reaction, a ripple that passes through every audience member. The most effective shared ripple in *Advance Man* comes at the end of the first scene. This was a highly effective moment because it combined humor, theatricality, and a narrative benchmark. The audience has just been subjected to a barrage of information. They’ve met nine characters. They are probably having a variety of reactions, thinking a variety of thoughts. Then, suddenly the stage is empty except for Marcy and a new character, Advance Man. He’s wearing a dark suit and sunglasses, and looks unlike anyone we’ve met so far. It’s very quiet. Advance Man sees a bird on the ground, walks towards it, picks it up, and eats it.

During the UTNT production, this moment was always accompanied by total silence, and then gasps and laughs when Advance Man ate the bird. It succeeded in getting the entire audience back on board, rebuilding interest that may have dissipated during the barrage of information and sound that is Scene One.

VII. Revising *Advance Man*: Musical Logic in Action

When given a note about *Advance Man*, I now try to determine: first, whether the note should lead to a revision, and second, whether that revision should employ narrative or musical logic.

There are certain types of confusion that are helpful to the play. Thematic confusion is a given. “What does it mean?”-type questions are welcome. If an audience member wonders about the birds, and what they mean, that is fine with me—as long as the emotional progression of the birds from abundance to loss is clear. I want audience members to *feel* the loss even if they do not understand it.

There are certain types of confusion that are *not* helpful to the play. If an audience member is confused about the emotional dynamics of a scene (i.e., if they don’t understand that *Advance Man* changes Marcy for the worse) then something is in need of a fix. If a logistical question (i.e. does *Advance Man* work for the President or not?) is preventing an audience member from fully engaging with the play in a particular moment, that may be worth addressing. And if audience members are not picking up certain ideas or narrative arcs that I believe to be present in the play, and that I want them to understand, then something may be off-balance.

Once I determine whether a particular note is worth pursuing, I have two options: find a *narrative* solution, or find a *musical* solution.

Narrative solutions are comparatively easy. Often what is needed is simply a clearer narrative benchmark. Sometimes a larger section of text should be added. (During rehearsal for the UTNT production, I added whole scenes as a means of clarifying certain narrative arcs: the

scene between Marcy and Michael Henry at dinner, for example, further develops their relationship, and makes clearer the choice Marcy is struggling with: between Bear Creek, and the big bright powerful future offered by Advance Man.) Or extraneous text must be removed to clear space around a narrative moment that already exists in the play. Sometimes the director or designers must work to highlight narrative.

In working on the UTNT production I often chose narrative solutions. It's easier to spot a narrative problem and easier to apply a fix. I want to get better at identifying situations in which a musical solution might be a better fit. I think there are three types of musical solutions, aligned with the three pillars of musical logic.

Rhythm: does the play *sound* right? Does it move and stop in the right way, both on the page and in production? Is the rhythm serving to highlight the narrative elements in need of highlighting? Sometimes a perceived narrative problem may in fact be a rhythmic problem. Are there moments where the rhythm itself is the content, and therefore in no need of narrative clarification?

Repetition: are the melodies that matter to me repeated and built upon in a way that will lead people to register them? If I'm asking my audience to pay attention to the melodies that are repeated, which melodies are repeated? Are they the ones I intend? Sometimes a problem of narrative is a problem of repetition: a certain melody is not being repeated enough for it to register with an audience.

Resonance: a given moment may have multiple meanings that vary based on the audience member. Are the moments that I want to have a *singular* resonance, or a single meaning, reading as such? Thinking in terms of resonance may also prevent me from over-solving the play. Am I

allowing the play to resonate—in other words, to acquire more meaning as it is encountered more than once? To remain, in certain permanent ways, resistant to explanation?

Finally, it's important to state that *Advance Man* will never please every audience member, because it will never fully deliver a “good story, well told.” It employs elements of narrative logic, but its primary logic is musical. Rhythm, repetition, resonance.

Some audience members will not enjoy being asked to make meaning in this way. They'll find the play frustrating. Yet I believe some of their frustration could be mitigated if they encountered the play like music. My ongoing challenge as a playwright is to ensure that the play *can* be encountered that way. Its sounds and movements must be precise enough, and beautiful enough, to invite a different kind of attention. And its emotional progression must be clear. *Advance Man* begins in a place of hope and expectation, and ends in a place of loss. Audience members should feel that, even if they can't understand it.

That's why sound, lighting, and projection design are absolutely crucial to future productions of *Advance Man*, inasmuch as they give the audience a felt sense of the emotional progression of the play. Take, for example, the birds. The birds are everywhere throughout *Advance Man*—their absence at the end of the play is meant to be a striking visual experience that is felt emotionally just as much, perhaps more than, it is understood logically. In the UTNT production, our projection designer was unable to create a projection of birds, so we projected the stage directions relating to the birds instead. This got the general idea across. But by projecting the words onto a screen, we created the expectation that there was something to *figure out* about the birds, rather than something to *see* and *feel* as part of the play's emotional movement from hope to loss.

VIII. Conclusion

Reactions to the UTNT production of *Advance Man* varied, as reactions to my work—if I continue to employ musical logic—will continue to vary.

When I first encountered Samuel Beckett and Suzan-Lori Parks and the other musical writers whose plays are difficult to read on the bus, I resisted them. I *wanted* a play I could read easily and understand immediately. I knew that these playwrights were asking something from me. Like most people, I go to the theatre to enjoy myself. I want to be challenged, provoked, moved, and entertained. I don't want to feel like I'm working.

In retrospect, however, I'm not sure that Beckett and Parks were asking me to work. I think they were asking me to surrender. Surrender means that you accept an experience on its own terms, that you allow it to make you feel however it makes you feel, and that you *don't* work too much. That you simply listen, watch, and experience whatever you're experiencing. And if in the end you're left with a feeling, rather than any clear ideas, that's enough. The play is not a story told around a campfire. It's a dream, a nightmare, a vision. It's a song.

A friend who saw *Advance Man* said there was a phrase from the play that she couldn't get out of her head for days. She kept repeating it to herself over and over. I felt so honored to hear that. I didn't need for her to say anything else to me about the play, I didn't need to know whether she'd understood the play as I intended, or even what the phrase was. It was enough to know that a rhythm had stayed with her, for reasons she couldn't understand. Awake, asleep. Awake, asleep.

My memories of my childhood are sensory memories of a seemingly vast natural world: the forest that surrounded our house, the ocean underneath the ferry boat we took to the city, the mountains in the distance on clear days. The endless rain. The deep darkness after the sun set. The woods whispering and shifting outside my window at night. I had a sense of a vast great organism all around me, of many systems moving in concert. There was a power there that I could not quantify.

I believe there is a gap between what we can understand, and the thing itself. My favorite artists stand at the edge of this gap, looking into it towards—what? Something moving in the trees, through the water. The thing that cannot be seen. Their light catches the edge of it, and then it's gone.

Music is the best way that I know to touch this mystery. I don't ask what music means. Instead, I encounter it as it is. If I let its rhythms and melodies work on me, it might carry me somewhere deep. Somewhere beyond understanding.

ADVANCE MAN

a play in one act

UTNT Production Draft

CHARACTERS – 3 M, 2 F, 6 M/F

MARCY, female, 16, a high school student

ADVANCE MAN, male or female, any age, wearing a suit and dark sunglasses

FRANK, male, 60s, a farmer

ELLA, female, 60s, an art teacher

ROGER, male, 20s-50s (this actor also plays THE PRESIDENT), a loner

MICHAEL HENRY, male, 40s, editor of the Bear Creek Bugle, and Marcy's dad

TOWNSPEOPLE (a chorus of sorts – all should be late 30s-60s ideally)

SCIENCE TEACHER, male or female

EXERCISE TEACHER, male or female

BAKER, male or female

LIBRARIAN, male or female

LOCAL MOM, male or female

SETTING

Bear Creek, USA.

An island, with a creek in it.

You've been there.

HOW TO READ *ADVANCE MAN*

I suggest reading it out loud.

Also, watch this: <http://vimeo.com/31158841>

A NOTE ABOUT PERFORMANCE

The townspeople create Bear Creek through a stylized movement that lives somewhere between the sublime, the frightening, the mundane, and the ridiculous.

Props can be mimed. Set should be ultra-simple. No chairs.

I.

Bare white stage.

*In shadow on the back wall, sparrows pick at things on the ground,
sometimes rising into the air a little bit before settling back down.*

A long moment.

*Then the townspeople run onstage and the birds rise into the air—
woosh.*

TOWNSPEOPLE

I was in the bakery (library/bowling alley/post office/grocery store) when I heard.

Everyone switches places.

TOWNSPEOPLE

I was in the bakery (library/bowling alley/post office/grocery store) when I heard!

SCIENCE TEACHER

He's coming. THE PRESIDENT.

EXERCISE TEACHER

To Bear Creek?

SCIENCE TEACHER

Just to visit, I heard. Overnight. He's staying on the ranch.

EXERCISE TEACHER

Bill Shepherd's ranch?

SCIENCE TEACHER

The only ranch we've got.

TOWNSPEOPLE

It spread around town.

EXERCISE TEACHER

Oh, sure. Heard this morning. They say the whole island's going to be bomb-sniffed.

LIBRARIAN

No one's sniffing me. I know my rights.

EXERCISE TEACHER

I wouldn't mind. For this President? Sniff away.

TOWNSPEOPLE

The buzz spread at the bakery, in the video store, and of course at the school, among mothers and fathers as they picked up and dropped off. Hum hum hum.

LIBRARIAN

I heard he's here to raise money.

LOCAL MOM

Big money.

BAKER

Money both big and small.

LOCAL MOM

If it's at the ranch, those are big money people. Probably coming over from the city. Get in the car, Sammy!

LIBRARIAN

There's going to be an event for large donors, and also an event for small donors, at the bowling alley.

LOCAL MOM

At our bowling alley? I doubt it. Sammy, we're going to be late to ballet!

BAKER

That's what this President is like! The kind of President who would hold an event, here, at our bowling alley.

TOWNSPEOPLE

Soon it hit the Bugle.

Enter MICHAEL HENRY, editor of the Bear Creek Bugle, FRANK, a farmer, and ELLA, an art teacher.

MICHAEL HENRY

(On the phone:) This is Michael Henry Maloney from the Bear Creek Bugle. I'm trying to get in touch with the President. "P" ... "R" ...

Yes, I'll hold.

Bear Creek.

No, it's an island. With a creek in it.

Yes I'll keep holding.

FRANK

The apples weren't growing right that fall, and I was concerned about the earthworms kind of shifting around wrong under the dirt. And what I wanted to do was to organize a protest for when the President came. I'd pour a bunch of apples out in front of his car, kind of a Tentamin-type Square situation.

ELLA

And I, of course, caught wind of this gesture, and it made me insane. To be, you know, to *this* President. Who represented so much that was *right* about this country. So I resolved to organize a counter-protest. The only problem of course was figuring out when he was coming. And then we could make signs that said—"Yes! Yes Mr. President! Yes Yes Yes!"

SCIENCE TEACHER

Some of us felt he was exactly like us. Just, you know, the way he spoke, and kind of all the policies and things, and even the font he used, and even if he wasn't—even if he didn't always—even if there were rumors sometimes that what he was doing didn't actually always

EXERCISE TEACHER

I just think, you know, that even if he sort of—I mean if that STUFF is actually going on that it must be something that—*(Retrieving his/her phone:)* oh hold on—

I don't think he really believes in it, in all that stuff, is what I'm—Hey Carol, I was just texting you—

ROGER, a loner, slinks onstage.

ROGER

And others of us felt that he wasn't like us at all, that in fact everything he was doing was in some way linked to the ()—and all the ()—and of course I'm not even going to say it, because you know what I'm talking about.

BAKER

And some of us just wanted to thank him

LIBRARIAN

And some of us wanted to say well hey you know fight a little harder, with the uh the uh you know the—go further with that.

Enter MARCY, a high school student.

MICHAEL HENRY

I'm on hold. With the President. So we'll have to do this INTERNSHIP INTERVIEW verbally. List your qualifications verbally, please.

MARCY

My mind is sharp as a knife, and I have tons of friends, and I'm editor of the high school newspaper.

MICHAEL HENRY

It's a very competitive internship.

MARCY

And I'm your daughter.

MICHAEL HENRY

You're hired. Get out there and see what you can find out about this presidential visit. And be back by seven if you want a ride home!

MICHAEL HENRY exits.

MARCY, excited, pulls out her reporter's notebook.

MARCY

First stop: the Bear Creak Bakery, to fuel up with a delicious chocolate chip cookie!

BAKERY

We're over here!

MARCY

The president! I'd watched his famous speech, at which he'd said, you know, *a humma humma humma*.

SCIENCE TEACHER

We all had. There he was, on television, standing atop the ()—his hair kind of—

EXERCISE TEACHER

It was a late afternoon sunlight kind of situation, the leaves just coming down around him

BAKER

And after all we had been through, the sort of kind of violence, and stuff

LOCAL MOM

And the wars, all the just the

LIBRARIAN

Fear, you know, or lack of fear, the sheer complacency

SCIENCE TEACHER

Not to mention the economically, both cresting up and kind of bottoming out

EXERCISE TEACHER

And then here in Bear Creek, of course, we had great hope.

LIBRARIAN

And also great fear, because the Chinese restaurant had shut down, and some

people said well everyone who ate there threw up, and others said well it must have been the economy.

LOCAL MOM

And *also* the mystery bookshop, and some people said well maybe an island of 8,000 people can't *support* a mystery bookshop, but others said no we were coming to the end of something, something was ending.

BAKER

So when The President said it, *a shoopa shoopa shoopa*, standing there, in front of all those cameras, we felt yes, yes, *a shoopa shoopa shoopa*.

LOCAL MOM

Yes, hesitantly, *a shoopa shoopa shoopa*

SCIENCE TEACHER

Yes, with total commitment, *a shoopa shoopa* yes.

LIBRARIAN

Although I heard a different speech, at which he said *ahumma humma humma*, but it was the same idea.

SCIENCE TEACHER

The idea being that something was kind of shifting into another thing, was my general sense, or some way in which what was happening now had also happened previously, or was entirely new. And of course we sensed that.

BAKER

Something was changing and it was like well what is this change? Are we going back to a previous time, or are we kind of leaping forward into a new time, because we'll either participate in it or fight it depending on what exactly it is!

SCIENCE TEACHER

I mean we all had our theories, sure we had our theories.

BAKER

It's the Mayan kind of with the temples and the lunar moon rocks and etcetera

EXERCISE TEACHER

I think it has to do with kind of recycling karma consciousness Dalai Llama

SCIENCE TEACHER

A mid-90s late 1930s sort of Great Depression type Economic Boom

LOCAL MOM

You know everything kind of getting warmer, and I know that I was often too warm, just personally

LIBRARIAN

And then of course there were the rumors about the () and all the sorts of things, you know, that we were hearing about, in bits and pieces, from far away.

LOCAL MOM

Hard to hear, sure. Hard to hear, sure.

EXERCISE TEACHER

There was something kind of going on over there, and possibly coming here, and of course that was upsetting, that it could come here, although what it was was, what it *was* was, what it was was hmmm.

BAKER

I think it had to do with the loss of our of uh of uh of uh of uh yeah so uh yeah so uh

LIBRARIAN

Something was being lost, that much was clear.

SCIENCE TEACHER

Because there was a time, right? There was a time back then, right, when uh, when we were when we would never

EXERCISE TEACHER

It was a really wonderful time, *that* time and we could all kind of look back and be like—*aaah*. And it was like well what happened to *that* time, you know, and what is *this* time we're in now because it seems very very ()

BAKER

It just seemed very very ()

LOCAL MOM

Nice, sure

LIBRARIAN

In *some* ways it was very nice, we had all of our electronically.

EXERCISE TEACHER

And in *other* senses it was like everything's humming everything kind of moving and it was like just *oooh* you know like I mean just what the hell? *You* know.

BAKER

And then on a more serious there was the loss of our sort of fundamental kind of

LIBRARIAN

Values, sure, our values sure which we had used to have had back in the time when we all lived in these homes, alright? And here's *mom*, and here's sort of *dad*, and it's—

FRANK

(*To Librarian:*) Bullshit. The time you're talking about when was that time. Because there was *another* time—

ELLA

(*To Frank:*) Bullshit. I mean during the time that *you're* talking about I mean let's be clear that there was all this I mean *that* was hardly the time

FRANK

Well what time are you talking about then?

ELLA

I'm talking about the time in the back of the field when you were that night when we

FRANK

That was in high school, when you and me were in high school. I'm talking about national kinds of times like the Depression or like

ELLA

Do you remember that night, Frank? In the field? Do you remember that?

Pause.

FRANK

No.

FRANK and ELLA exit.

LOCAL MOM

Raised in a time in which some of us were kind of like Hey, and others were sort of like *Hey*, and now you could catch nice documentaries on it, and it was like hey! We're not *that* old! Hahaha—

BAKER

And I mean we are good people here, most having come from elsewhere, determined to maintain a sort of, whatever our, just kind of to—after all the, in the, and sure we had been part of all the, had kind of now though of course shrunk our sort of you know, had settled for kind of after all the of the—*big* fans of puppetry, and recycling, *big* fans of vegetables, and hen's eggs

SCIENCE TEACHER

And then there were the youth, in whom despite all our failures and our uncertainty and the loss of all the everything we—in spite of all *that* we'd attempted to cultivate a kind of certainty that we had used to have had and missed now, that we had used to have had and missed now, that things could, that everything could, that if you *did* you *could*.

MARCY IN HIGH SCHOOL

(*Having arrived at the bakery:*) I'd like one chocolate chip cookie, please, to fuel me up for my internship.

BAKERY

Sure thing, Marcy.

LIBRARIAN

It was fall. Something was changing. The sparrows were everywhere, beautiful if you looked at them close, a nuisance if you passed them by.

TOWNSPEOPLE exit.

ADVANCE MAN joins MARCY at the bakery counter.

ADVANCE MAN

Cup of coffee, please.

A single bird flies across the sky—flap, flap, flap—and settles on the ground.

The ADVANCE MAN crosses to the bird, puts it in his mouth and eats it. Then he turns, sees MARCY, smiles.

ADVANCE MAN

Have to be careful about these birds.

II.

A little later that afternoon. Sunlight; birds.

MARCY

I couldn't really find out anything about the president's visit, so I was like—hmm. I really wanted to be a reporter but I was like how do you gather the facts, like how do you score hot tips? My dad thinks you just get on the phone and ask around, so I tried that. Ring ring.

LOCAL MOM

Ring!

MARCY

Hey Local Mom!

LOCAL MOM

Well hello there Marcy. Still in high school?

MARCY

Ninth grade! How's Sammy?

LOCAL MOM

Late to ballet, as usual.

MARCY

Hey, have you heard anything about the President's visit?

LOCAL MOM

What I've heard is very interesting the way people are just FREAKING OUT when it's like okay. He's a man, and he has power, and that's true. But I'm a woman, and I don't have power, so does that make me any less interesting? Does that make me any less important or whatever? And so it's like apples, and oranges. It's like half a dozen of one! I mean yes the President's coming to town but *I'm* coming to town too! I'm already here!

MARCY

I was more interested in any of the basic reporting facts that a reporter might be interested in—such as who how where what and when.

LOCAL

Well no I'm not sure about any of *that*.

MARCY

Alright.

LOCAL MOM

You'll never believe how long Sammy takes to get ready for ballet. Sammy we are going to be LATE!

MARCY

Bye now! Click. Hmm.

Ring ring.

ROGER

I don't own a phone because I live in the woods.

MARCY

Hey Roger.

ROGER

Oh hey Marcy.

MARCY

Are you still homeless and live in the woods?

ROGER

Lately I've been experimenting with methamphetamines do you have any money.

MARCY

I already spent my allowance what's metham-what-a-who?

ROGER

Oh nothing I DO have a beaver that I made friends with in the woods

MARCY

Uh-huh hey I'm just wondering if you've heard anything about the President's visit

ROGER

Such as why are you asking I mean yeah they say he's coming but why, why would they announce it in advance, are they trying to do something to us, or with us, to us or with us or against us, and that's always the like every single thing that comes out of these people's mouths is like targeted to sort of tease, and manipulate, or undermine, or fool, to fool, and it's like are we fools or do we sort of look at the blank space around the words, the what is not said, such as ALL OF THE BAD THINGS, you won't hear them say that, or talk about that, but you can find it in the white space around the words—if you listen, shh, they're talking about it now—.

MARCY

Right.

I was wondering more about kind of any facts I could report on to do well in my internship

ROGER

I don't know what an internship is because I didn't learn what it is

MARCY

Okay well I gotta go I'll see you around

ROGER

Okay well good luck at your internship Marcy you're gonna go far unlike me

MARCY

I appreciate it click

He's a nice guy you can be homeless and sort of threatening and still be a nice guy

I think ANYWAY Ring ring

MICHAEL HENRY

Michael Henry here, with the Bear Creek Bugle

MARCY

Hey dad I am not having much luck

MICHAEL HENRY

Well I am driving around in my car looking for a chicken

MARCY

Why are you doing that

MICHAEL HENRY

The newspaper industry is a growth industry Marcy and I made the right decision in my life career-wise

MARCY

Okay

MICHAEL HENRY

Hey maybe if you're not finding out much about the Presidents visit maybe you can— Ella's coming in I was going to interview her for my weekly column called "Interview with an Islander" my WEEKLY COLUMN CALLED "INTERVIEW WITH AN ISLANDER" and then Frank's coming in you can interview him too I have to find this chicken

MARCY

Oh okay alright

MICHAEL HENRY

Don't let any strangers in

MARCY

I already hung up click hey Ella

ELLA

Funny to see you outside of class Marcy I do love having you in my art class at high school you're the only one in it because no one else signed up it's like a private class for one person with me teaching it and you're the person in it.

MARCY

I like the glitter and the glue it's fun to play with I like doing collages I like reporting class too which is the class I have after you can sit down if you want.

They look around for a chair—there are none onstage.

MARCY

Or we can just stand.

A sudden shift – ELLA's been talking for a while now.

ELLA

To be out there on the streets, just kind of like Hey Hey Hey or sort of like just HEY or sometimes like Hey Hey with our kind of you know we had our signs and that was well I mean back then you certainly couldn't call me divorced, or a mom, or even a substitute teacher at the high school, a teacher of art, because back then I was just kind of a spirit! Just floating around and I'd sort of alight in San Francisco, and make love, and then I'd go back to Boston, and set something on fire, and then make love and then we'd all go to D.C. and just sort of gather together and scream at buildings and then make love.

MARCY

Uh-huh.

ELLA

And of course back then it was like at any moment—you know things could there was a real sense that uh in a very *real* way you could we could we really *could* that maybe in some way it could, you know it *really could*. And what I worry is that *now* I mean that *now* we're getting ourselves into a situation where just like there's not that that that that that that that that there's just not that uh you know that uh that uh you know what I mean.

MARCY

Oh look, here comes Frank.

ELLA

Well, I just think it's wonderful that you're doing this. "Interview with an Islander." It's a great idea for a column. (*Coldly:*) Hello Frank.

ELLA leaves.

FRANK

Ella. (*To Marcy:*) So, huh. Huh, okay. So um so where to start. I mean back then it was like oh Christ sure I mean anything, I thought anything, I'd so I'd be like just out there you know and the sort of big lights shining down on me flying and people going HEY HEY plus my name and the intercourse with Jannie and later Sandra and yes Ella, Ella and I had a sort of, it was, but anyway so and me and my buddies yeah we'd cruise around, sure we'd kind of drive, around in our cars, and then that was over and it was uh well here's this jungle and you better keep your head clean but get your hands dirty and the truth is that sometimes I sit straight up in my bed at night even now and just say to the air – *well am I here or am I there?*

In the distance, ADVANCE MAN enters. He's taking notes or measuring something or perhaps speaking quietly into an earpiece.

FRANK

And of course with the farming it's really simple you just gotta work a bunch of days like all the days your whole life and make sure the worms are happy and you can sort of tear at the ground with things or kind of be like hey, just relax, everyone just relax, and then you can kind of SPRAY IT WITH ALL THESE THINGS or not, it's up to you, and every Christmas you go to Bermuda.

MARCY

Great, that's great Frank, terrific thanks next?

ADVANCE MAN enters the office as FRANK leaves.

MARCY perks up.

ADVANCE MAN

"The Bear Creek Bugle." Great, great. Really important to have a vibrant press. Hey maybe you can uh I'm looking for what I want to kind of get a sense of is just like who everyone is in this town, where you all kind of stand on all the issues and

sort of where you all live and are there any kinds of things that someone like me should be aware of.

MARCY

Uh, maybe, I mean my dad just went to look for a chicken, so maybe—

ADVANCE MAN

Yes no sure but I'm interested in what you have to say. I think young people are really just the kind of—so there's the future, right? And some of us will make it there and others it's quite clear will not, I mean not in any bodily way, so what you have is younger people and you have older people. And we're all sort of progressing linearly forward in time, ideally, but the difference is that young people were born later and old people were you fill in the blanks and so what we have is a kind of situation where the older people will in all likelihood just kind of die first. And the problem is that one day there will literally be no old people around, not any of the current old people, and all you'll have is young people who've grown old, and what kind of people will those young people be, I mean will they honor their elders through their acts or will they I mean as you know there's a kind of like "we can do it better" or "totally differently" type situation that has a tendency to so what I'm interested in is just kind of the next generation and young people and hum hum hum hum hum. So what do you think?

MARCY

I think that like well I think that like
I think that like okay so I don't know
who you are but if you want to know
what I think what I think is that like
young people are like young people
are like that like young people are like
it's hard for me to express like usually
I'm like so like articulate so it's like

ADVANCE MAN

(Listening very intently:)

Uh-huh

Uh-huh Uh-huh

Uh-huh

Uh-huh Uh-huh Uh-huh

UH-HUH

UH-HUH UH-HUH

ADVANCE MAN

Let's go for a drive.

MARCY

Let me leave a note for my dad?

ADVANCE MAN

I'll pay you to leave right now.

MARCY

...

Okay.

They leave.

Meanwhile, ELLA rides her bike home. This should not involve an actual bike.

FRANK approaches.

FRANK

Ella.

ELLA

Frank.

FRANK

What are you doing.

ELLA

Well I am riding my bicycle home.

FRANK

Well that's just not uh that's you know not very safe out here with the

ELLA

Oh and since when do you you know, since when do you *you* know

FRANK

Since well it's just a public safety hazard that uh I don't you know I don't

ELLA

Right and of course the kind of fossil fuels and all the sort of just oil drilling fracking kind of scraping around down there to get at the last SCRAPs of when it's like okay: Just *change* your habits. Just change everything about the way you live and how you are in the world and we'll all be fine!

FRANK

I can give you a ride home if my uh my tractor is just uh

ELLA

And what does that get about five miles to the gallon it's just like and uh

FRANK

Since when did you get so angry?

ELLA

I'm not so angry! I mean you're the angry one I mean for god's sake to be just so oblivious driving around here and this protest you're planning for the President's visit that I caught wind of which is like

FRANK

Yeah but democratic! Sort of me speaking out we're all speaking out and isn't that the kind of that we all sort of

ELLA

If you're smart about it *I'm* just saying that

FRANK

Earthworms are not doing well they're not doing well and to me the only possible reason for that could be that we you know there's something

ELLA

Oh and of course it's the OF COURSE it's the you know the President's fault

FRANK

Well who else

ELLA

Kind of just like act globally think locally you know? Or sort of just like open your eyes and look around you for the sort of and take matters into your own and it's like I mean geez

FRANK

Said the woman who spent half the sort of like *back then* kind of out in the street with a sign

ELLA

But that was different *now* we have a President who he

FRANK

Ella I gotta go and the apples are falling all over the place and I gotta pick them up

ELLA

Yeah well *I* gotta go and get the glitter and fingerpaints ready for my art class so you're not the only one who

FRANK

I'll see you

ELLA

Fascist kind of HEIL HITLER just like

But he's gone. ELLA, in a huff, leaves with her bike.

LIBRARIAN and SCIENCE TEACHER are trying to keep up in a difficult exercise class led by EXERCISE TEACHER. Lots of dance moves.

They're simultaneously, of course, talking about what it means to live a good life.

LIBRARIAN

I mean I think I *am* good. I think I have lived a good life so and it's just like

SCIENCE TEACHER

Right but so and how do you define that so and I mean how do you define that

LIBRARIAN

Well I'm very good at my job.

SCIENCE TEACHER

Right...

LIBRARIAN

And I think that my job is important, you know, I think that my job *is* important, such as libraries.

SCIENCE TEACHER

And you think that without you there wouldn't be libraries, or?

LIBRARIAN

No, but I think I am helping kind of the library grow, and helping make it a welcoming place, and a special place, and helping people get excited about uh you know all the kind of knowledge, and things, and teasing that out, so I think that's pretty good, I mean I guess I could have had kids, and that probably would have done more good, maybe, but I never I never I mean sometimes sure I regret kind of I am very lonely

SCIENCE TEACHER

As for me: as a teacher all the kids are my kids and I definitely try and teach them about science, and some such, and values and such, scientific values and such, the environment, and some such, and I think I'm having an impact, I do I do and yeah I make sure I mean what I do is I make sure when I go to the grocery store that I only get things I believe in, such as products. Such as gentle eggs.

LIBRARIAN

And I definitely vote.

SCIENCE TEACHER

Oh, I always vote in the elections for candidates.

EXERCISE TEACHER bounces over.

EXERCISE TEACHER

As for me I think it's all about awareness, for example the body, and the mind, and just sort of calm, and relax, and *release*, and relax, and push it, and push it, and release, and let's move!

III.

An enormous flock of sparrows flies quick across the sky, pausing briefly to make a strange formation. Then they're gone. Woosh.

MARCY and ADVANCE MAN in the car.

ADVANCE MAN

Ticking bomb type scenario the bomb in this case being the fact that the President is arriving tomorrow and I was supposed to I mean the situation was that I was supposed to be around here a week ago sort of checking things out and getting things set up but I fell asleep and I woke up a week later and it's like holy shit, you know, so I caught a ferry out here and it's like there's not enough time to make sure it's so I really need your help or I could get fired and the President could die and the economy would collapse sending the whole world into a depression leading to global nuclear war full-scale destruction the annihilation of the human species and the literal implosion of the physical planet.

MARCY

One time I left my backpack at home and I didn't have any of my books but then it was fine because I just looked over people's shoulders.

ADVANCE MAN

I'm going to need you to steer.

MARCY

Oh. Okay.

ADVANCE MAN

I'll keep my foot on the gas.

MARCY

This is kind of fun but also I hope I don't hit anyone

ADVANCE MAN

So what do you do, Marcy?

MARCY

I'm in high school.

ADVANCE MAN

Me too. I mean I was. So what kind of subjects are you studying over there, history and all that?

MARCY

Yeah, history and English and I'm taking this journalism class—

ADVANCE MAN

Yeah history is really important it's really important to know your history I'm a big history buff, me I'm big into it The President is too we're all into history in a way I mean for god's sake, all the stuff that happened? Kind of getting it in order and just sort of sorting it out and figuring out well this is history and this is perhaps not history and the kind of prioritizing and things, very important, sure sure no sure sure sure, sure sure sure sure sure, no sure sure sure sure sure no definitely sure uh-huh yup yeah no sure I bet uh-huh suuuure.

Long pause.

MARCY

I actually have to be back at the office pretty soon because my dad is getting back, so—

ADVANCE MAN

Stop right here.

In one swift single clean motion, ADVANCE MAN kneels and put his ear to the ground, listening.

ADVANCE MAN

Uh hmmm. Okay, wait hmm. Ah yes, okay, yes yes yes. Uh-huh. Yup. No—wait. Okay, wait. Okay go go go go go go go put your own ear to the ground and then—yes?

ADVANCE MAN raises his hand like a tuning fork.

Whispers rise and rise and rise.

TOWNSPEOPLE

Whisper whisper whisper whisper WHISPER WHISPER

LIBRARIAN

A kind of scented flesh blanket with all the eyes in it just hmmm ahhh

BAKER

Apples everywhere, or honeydew melons, or even little chairs, or sumsquatch a willy-nilly

EXERCISE TEACHER

Zuchinnis, uh-huh and sort of, sure, lots of geese

LOCAL MOM

School board election and a lumber rain helmet ooh

SCIENCE TEACHER

Sweet little hens eggs with kind of their cheep cheap butts in the air

ROGER

All the wires all the whispers and it's like THE PRESIDENT, said Roger

ADVANCE MAN

You heard that?

ROGER

All the wires all the whispers and it's like THE PRESIDENT, said Roger

The whispers fade.

MARCY

I think that was Roger, he's homeless and he enjoys drugs I believe but he's pretty nice. This is a weird hole.

ADVANCE MAN

Roger. Yes. Interesting. Making a little note of it, writing, done. And that's the sort of – democratically? Definitely. Freedom of and you know it's just that okay, here is this person, right? The President. Very special person. And here we have all these other people, namely you and the sort of villagers in this place, the kind of settlers here, all of you people, and any one if you if we I'm not but *that's* the problem is that okay I'm thinking that what we have here is a where you will just sniff around, Marcy, and I will be sort of and you can find me and yes yes hum hum hum in my ear.

I want you to come work for me.

MARCY

Uh I don't know if I'm qualified to like and I'm pretty busy so uh sounds kind of weird?

ADVANCE MAN

Okay put your eyes on mine. I'm inviting you to sit in the History Chair which certain people choose to sit in and others kind of get invited to sit in and most people are just kind of like well we'll just stand over here by this wall and maybe write a book about the History Chair or kind of criticize it for being you know whatever. But the History Chair you have to understand the History Chair is high and firm and it supports your buttocks. But to sit in the first place you have to be like well do I sit in this chair or do I stand up against the wall and you can't kind of stand between the History Chair and the wall, you have to sort of choose, do you understand?

Let's listen some more are you in are we is it sure sure sure, right?

MARCY

Uh, I don't know.

ADVANCE MAN

Great, good, sure.

Flap, flap, flap – a bird lopes by overhead.

ADVANCE MAN

And then we'll deal with those birds.

ADVANCE MAN sleeps.

MARCY

On the ride home he slept soundly and my thoughts tumbled. On the one hand I thought well this is my town, I love these people, I trust these people, and I'm just in high school— I mean what the heck! But on the other hand I was thinking about the History Chair and how it might be nice to place my buttocks in it and get out of this old place called Bear Creek, and maybe they'll have a job for me in the White House as special assistant for recycling because I already know a lot about recycling because I run the recycling club at school. And so that sounded pretty good and I was like sure, whatever, I'll do it. But then I got confused, and I was like if the chair is history then is the floor kind of non-history, or is the whole room history, and what are all those people doing up against that wall, and why am I in the Advance Man's lap? And then I fell asleep.

*From the sky come the deep dulcet tones of THE PRESIDENT.
Do we see his form in silhouette against the back wall?*

THE PRESIDENT

Marcy.

MARCY

Mr. President!

THE PRESIDENT

Very proud. Very excellent. Spectacular. Rewarding you.

MARCY

But—I'm still deciding. I've got a lot on my plate. I'm events coordinator for the recycling club, and I'm in the musical, and I—

THE PRESIDENT

Highly deserving. Of all people, you—inspiring. The kind of – more of, these days. Young people and all the sort of just the kind of you know, so—yes, rewards

in your future, honors and recognition and special secret access and my ear. Giving you my ear. You tilt your mouth to the right, I'll bring my ear around to the left. We'll talk. You talk, I'll listen. Very promising. Very exciting. / A golden bird covered in jewels, resplendent.

MARCY

But Mr. President? You won't, I mean will you—I mean what if we—uh...

THE PRESIDENT

Not to worry!

Pause.

MARCY

I need a little time to decide.

THE PRESIDENT

Take all the time you need.

And Marcy? Advance Man. Be careful there. Keep an eye out. Let me know.

MARCY

I thought he worked for you.

THE PRESIDENT

Tentative. We'll see. It's all tentative it's all—

The ADVANCE MAN wakes up, rubbing his eyes.

ADVANCE MAN

Something wrong?

MARCY

No.

They walk.

MARCY

It seemed strange to have left the car behind, to be walking through the forest, but the Advance Man held my hand, and there were no apparent wolves, and all

seemed well, although the worms were shifting mumbling in the soil. Along the way—

We see ELLA eating dinner alone, FRANK eating dinner alone, ROGER eating dinner alone, SCIENCE TEACHER and LOCAL MOM staring at each other across a vast expanse, other townspeople doing various evening things.

ELLA

Ella

FRANK

Frank.

ROGER

Me

SCIENCE TEACHER AND LOCAL MOM

Us

EVERYONE ELSE

We

ADVANCE MAN

(To Marcy:) Until soon.

And he's gone.

MARCY joins MICHAEL HENRY at the dinner table.

MICHAEL HENRY

Dinner time/
eating dinner/
dinner time yum

MARCY

Dinner time I'm thinking if I want to tell
my dad what happened

MARCY

Dad?

MICHAEL HENRY

Yum.

MARCY

Do you ever worry that maybe your life that like—you've lived the wrong kind of life?

MICHAEL HENRY

What do you mean?

MARCY

Like Bear Creak is like and yeah like we have a good life but like

MICHAEL HENRY

Are you worried about

MARCY

I just like

MICHAEL HENRY

You're 15, Marcy, there's plenty of time to you know

MARCY

When Mom left I was like

MICHAEL HENRY

But that was a whole different sort of

MARCY

(An explosion:) That your life doesn't matter? That you're just like—nobody? I mean our lives are so so so I mean *your* life is just so--small.

Pause.

MICHAEL HENRY

I'm proud of my life.

MARCY

I know

MICHAEL HENRY

I've lived a good life

MARCY

But yeah but like

MICHAEL HENRY

I have a great job.

MARCY

I know.

MICHAEL HENRY

I have you.

Beat.

MICHAEL HENRY

I'm proud of my life.

MARCY

But don't you ever feel like you're just standing up against the wall? Kind of all bunched up? I mean didn't you ever want to sit in the History Chair?

MH

The what?

MARCY

The History—Chair. Nevermind.

MH

Like a historical chair?

MARCY

No...

MH

Are you interested in antiques now? Because I would love to go antiquing this weekend if you—

MARCY

No. Never mind.

MH

It's like what's bugging you? It's hard for me to you never I'm struggling to

MARCY

Never mind nothing no I'm mmm yum this is a delicious sigh

MH

Are you sexually active?

MARCY

AAAH I gotta do my homework I gotta sleep I'm tired I gotta clean my room I gotta find my shoes not these shoes my other ones I think they're in my room so night!

MARCY flees the dinner table.

MICHAEL HENRY

You didn't finish your dinner!

Sigh.

SIGH!

(Picking up the imaginary phone:) Ring ring.

MARCY

I walked up the stairs to my room. Time felt very slow for me everything was stretched out the stairs were kind of vibrating it was a BIG MOMENT for me, a decision moment—on the one hand, Bear Creek. On the other hand—history.

EXERCISE TEACHER

Ring.

Hello.

MICHAEL HENRY

Who is this?

EXERCISE TEACHER

Uh who is *this*? You called me, so—
And it's like...

MICHAEL HENRY

This is...
Another resident of Bear Creek.
I opened the phone book and I just dialed.

EXERCISE TEACHER

Okay...

MICHAEL HENRY

It's nighttime over here and I'm just about to have my sleepytime tea so

EXERCISE TEACHER

That sounds good so

MICHAEL HENRY

Do you want to come over and have some with me?
It's very good tea.

EXERCISE TEACHER

...

Who is this?

MICHAEL HENRY

This is...nobody. Nothing. Nevermind. Night.
Click.

EXERCISE TEACHER

Wait!

...

Click.

MICHAEL HENRY

Sigh.

*ADVANCE MAN walks on and hands MICHAEL HENRY his tea,
almost absent-mindedly.*

MICHAEL HENRY

My tea!

Thank you.

Mmmm.

This sleepytime tea is very good. It has valerian root in it. It always makes me so
sleepy makes me so sleepy so sleepy

MICHAEL HENRY sleeps.

MARCY calls ADVANCE MAN on the phone.

MARCY

Ring ring.

ADVANCE MAN

Hello.

MARCY

It's me—it's Marcy.

ADVANCE MAN

I can certainly tell—by your voice.

MARCY

By my voice yeah I

ADVANCE MAN

I recognize your voice because we spent time together earlier today.

MARCY

That's right.

ADVANCE MAN

So I know it's you.

Pause.

ADVANCE MAN

It's nice out here it's nighttime it's so peaceful now I am not working now I'm off hours I wouldn't eat a bird now I'm not a bad guy I like trees

MARCY

Uh

Yeah so uh so uh—that sounds good. Everything sounds good. The History Chair. I'll sit in it. What you were saying today. I'm into it. I'll come work for you. I'll do—whatever you want.

ADVANCE MAN

Oh.

Right.

Fantastic.

MARCY

Yeah?

ADVANCE MAN

Yes. Of course. Fantastic, yes.

It's a good choice.

He leaves.

TOWNSPEOPLE

Slump! Everyone slump! It's night!

IV.

The TOWNSPEOPLE sleep.

MARCY is still awake.

MARCY

(*Spoken:*) Bear Creek? Get out of town! I'm a big deal now! I'm getting out of this old cracker joint! I work—for the President now! He saw me and he said you're special he said you're special he said—you're not like them.

She sings:

MARCY

Glistening in the--and I climb the stairs!

They're running they the people with the notebooks they they're running they.

Say here comes Marcy here comes Marcy here comes here she comes here comes

Marcy here she comes—hey.

She's too busy to respond to your e-mails.

Send her a text! Oooh send her a text—she's busy!

She is the President.

She's President Marcy.

TOWNSPEOPLE

We-are-sleeping-this-is-a-dream

BAKER

Glistening oooh yeah I became the President oooh yeah.

Got my President pants on and I'm wearing my President mind thinking President thoughts oooh yeah.

Yes I live in the White House yes you can call me Mr.

Mr. President.

I'm the President.

TOWNSPEOPLE EXCEPT ROGER AND FRANK

In our white houses we live in a white house glistening

We too have people running we too have secret phones we too

We keep our thoughts clear we keep our mind clean

We think President thoughts
We're the President
We are the President
We're President--We!

ROGER AND FRANK
Alone in the woods.

*End of musical number. Everyone sleeps, except for ADVANCE
MAN.*

He is alone in the dark woods.

ADVANCE MAN
Did I want to be a bird? Yes. There have been times when I considered becoming
a tree.
Yes.

From the sky, we hear the deep dulcet tones of the PRESIDENT.

THE PRESIDENT
Do you think of me as...large.

ADVANCE MAN
Mr. President! Ah...yes.

THE PRESIDENT
Do you think of me as...also small.

ADVANCE MAN
Yes, sometimes yes.

THE PRESIDENT
Do you suspect that I contain multitudes?

ADVANCE MAN
Multitudes yes.

THE PRESIDENT
And yet am singular.

ADVANCE MAN
The one and only yes.

THE PRESIDENT
When you see me out on the street, or at the club, do you say...hello?

ADVANCE MAN
Yes.

THE PRESIDENT
If someone insults me at a party do you say...he's a good guy.

ADVANCE MAN
Yes.

THE PRESIDENT
What would these woods be like without me?

ADVANCE MAN
Dark and cold.

THE PRESIDENT
The child Marcy—be careful there. Keep an eye out. Let me know.

The night sky is suddenly alive with birds. They're everywhere. They come together in patterns, fly apart again. The noise is overwhelming.

V.

Then it's morning. A few calm birds.

TOWNSPEOPLE

Morning time!

MARCY tries to wake her dad up. He's looking very cozy, perhaps snoring.

LIBRARIAN

I go to the library

MARCY

Dad?

FRANK

Me, to the farm

MARCY

Dad, I'm going to school?

EVERYONE ELSE

Us to our various other locations

MARCY

Dad?

ELLA AND SCIENCE TEACHER

And we to school!

MICHAEL HENRY

Sleepytime tea gonna sleep in I'm sleepy today.

MARCY

I'm going to school.

MICHAEL HENRY

Have a good day and I'll—I—zzzz.

He's snoring again.

MARCY shrugs, leaves.

BAKER AND LOCAL MOM

We're at a coffee shop.

They are, indeed, at a coffee shop. This need not involve any actual furniture or props.

BAKER

I mean he's a good guy. The President.

LOCAL MOM

Oh, sure. Well. I mean how do you know?

BAKER

Know what.

LOCAL MOM

That he's, you know, that he's—

BAKER

Well there's all the policies.

LOCAL MOM

Like....

BAKER

Well there's the you know he's very very just I mean look at the guy! And there's all the kind of where he comes from and his background, that uh that uh

LOCAL MOM

No, I feel that. I agree with you there. But then there's all the stuff *now* that uh—I mean if you look kind of at what's *actually happening now*, or at least some of it

BAKER

Uh-huh. But that isn't, I mean you can hardly, I mean—

LOCAL MOM

Well.

BAKER

You know? I mean there was already so much kind of and you can't expect him to just like I mean patience! You know. "Patience, my son," or whatever.

LOCAL MOM

Yeah...but it's like. Okay. So it's like, uh yes. So no, yes, I understand what you're saying but. And hear me out here – but I feel like, I mean, we judge, like okay so we judge *you* based on what you *do*, right? Like if you like if you like okay if there's this thing that you're kind of secretly doing or not doing that is bad, then like *that's bad*. You're doing a bad thing. But then there's like all this other stuff that's good, then like—and I know you, you know? And I know that you're like *good*. But then there's also all this other stuff that you're doing that's *bad*. And the good. And so there's kind of the good, and the bad.

BAKER

But I'm good.

LOCAL MOM

Right.

BAKER

I do good things.

LOCAL MOM

No, right. But also like you killed that thing, you know, you killed it, for example, it's dead, you smashed it, you jumped on it, you kind of just like you *ate* it, you know. Let's say you ate it.

BAKER

My friend ate it.

LOCAL MOM

Let's say your friend ate it. But like, you know—you gave her permission. Or you told her to. You told her to eat that thing.

BAKER

Well, she was hungry.

LOCAL MOM

Yeah but like that's a given. I mean *I* get hungry I mean we all get hungry I mean for god's sake, *sure*. I mean I'll give you that. But it's like you can't it's what you

do with that you know is like what I'm is all that I'm and I'm just like – “good person” – I mean what does that even I mean how do we even

BAKER

Yeah...I just like him. You know? “The President.” I like saying his name, you know. “The President.” And there was that thing he did.

LOCAL MOM

Which thing?

BAKER

The thing. You know. *That* was good.

LOCAL MOM

No, sure. Yeah, no, sure. Sure. Uh-huh.

ADVANCE MAN and MARCY enter. ADVANCE MAN whispers in MARCY's ear, telling her how to take notes on the townspeople. During the following section, she does just that—sneaking around and note-taking as ADVANCE MAN watches approvingly.

EXERCISE TEACHER teaches:

EXERCISE TEACHER

And smack it! And swing it! And push it punch it tease it!
Aaaand rest.

She slumps over in “resting pose” as FRANK enters.

FRANK

And pick up an apple. And pick up an apple. And check up on the worms. And do a little weeding.

SCIENCE TEACHER teaches:

SCIENCE TEACHER

Protozoa, right? And kind of alright, so next. Floating along, right? Boom, explosion. Chaos. And just like mitochondria, and photosynthesis. Next, periodic

table of the elements. Monkey bones. Dissection, yes. Hypothesis, other hypothesis, synthesis, conclusion. Taking care of the environment. Paying attention to your environment. Proving it, you know? Prove it. Prove it to me. Take an idea? Bam – experiment on it. Do some science on it. Mix it up. This is science, people. It’s fun.

Questions.

Mmm. Mmm-hmm. Great. So check it out.

SCIENCE TEACHER diagrams the answer on the board.

LIBRARIAN shushes several sections of the audience in turn.

LIBRARIAN

Sssssssh.

Hey guys? Ssssshhh.

Hey, guys? I’m gonna need you to---shhhh. We’re in a—yeah. .

Hey, uh, ahahaha, yup. You guessed it. Plenty of places outside if you want to---

Ahem.

BAKER enters with a piping hot tray of cookies that no one seems to want.

BAKER

COOKIES!

COOKIES!

COOKIES!

...

Bread.

MARCY joins ELLA in art class.

ELLA

Art class!

Art class!

Art class!

So yes what is art? Is the great question is the great question I mean what do you think art is?

MARCY

I mean to me art is like art is like

ELLA

Take this glitter and throw it. Throw it. Throw it higher! Uh-huh! See we're *doing* it! This is what it means to make art is just like the *doing* of it!

MARCY

I mean to me I guess art is like art is like uh I mean it's like so there's all this weird stuff, right? Like let's say for example there's a guy who comes to your newspaper office when your dad is out and he gives you twenty dollars to go with him in the car and he works for the President you find out and then you stop at this kind of whisper hole and listen to all these whispers and then he's like hmm you should come work for me and you're sort of but he's and it's and the President's and like and now it's—and so maybe art is just like you shove people's faces in that kind of thing and kind of grind it around until their faces are all mashed.

ELLA

I guess uh-huh yes no sure I think you're right in a sense although but to me I guess art is about I mean for there is so much SO MUCH just kind of like you know and I mean the sun on the trees and kind of like the yes even the birds are beautiful and I bike home along the water everything bright in the just kind of like wow.

MARCY sees ADVANCE MAN through the window.

ADVANCE MAN

I watched her through the window, quivering yes ask her ask her ask her

MARCY

Ella? I'm just wondering if you've heard anything else about the presidential visit.

ELLA

Oh my god Marcy it's exciting it's I mean do you know when he's coming

because I ooh and you'll never believe what that do you know what Frank is oh
BUT

MARCY

Yeah, I'm just wondering kind of how you feel about it and everything.

ELLA

I remember when many decades ago the similar but also kind of glowing in his
sort of and that smile! Big the hair and of course we know he's and it's but still it's
and on the one hand if I see a if there's a cereal box on the television that is

very pretty very nice I mean we all know it's there are
people who there's a lot of thought that and sure I know
about the and I listen to the all the on the kind of more
radical and I know I know but you know

nothing in my life I mean I'm not no church and it's
like a man in the sky? A MAN? What I want is to not
dumb or hopeless or delusional but that actually has a
chance of and at one point he did say Hey with us and
even if now he's saying Hey in a different tone of
voice or sort of in a weird tone of voice where I'm like
Hmmm? And he's kind of like Ho. And I'm like Hey?
And he's like Ha. Even then I know that in his heart is
Hey, and maybe in his mind is Hey, but he has to say Ha
sure because people like Ha more than Hey, and someday he'll
say Hey, and if he never does then maybe for fuck's sake it
was never sayable in the first place and for god's sake
what the hell were we doing all those years, just what the
hell were we doing all those years screaming at buildings
and kind of making love like Hey when in fact what there
the
is is Ha. Ha ha ha ha ha.

MARCY
Yeah but
Hmm

Hey
Uh
Ooooh

My question is
Sure, no, but
No, but sure

Yeah

Okay here's

You're not

MARCY gives up, frustrated.

ADVANCE MAN

I met her outside.

MARCY

It's really hard it's—she won't stop talking it

ADVANCE MAN

Excellent no this is excellent I think we can she seems – bing! Cross her off and move on. Oh here comes another I'm hiding!

ADVANCE MAN hides as ROGER enters.

ROGER

Oh, uh, nothing.

MARCY

Oh yeah um hmmm sure no hey Roger I was wondering

ROGER

Yeah I mean sure I wonder why the wires why the whispers is that a wig is that your real hair? I'm concerned about the sparrows Marcy I am concerned where are they going why they're not so bad sparrows and sure I live behind the Thriftway sure I'm on food stamps sure I enrolled in an online university once and sometimes I hitchhike around the island carrying a chainsaw but that's just because I'm good at chopping trees, sometimes people need firewood out of trees and it doesn't mean I'm none of this means I'm what are you looking at who's behind that tree?

MARCY

Uh-huh, sure

Dang it

Yeah but

ADVANCE MAN steps out from behind a tree.

MARCY

Oh.

ADVANCE MAN

This is an interesting man an interesting person I'd like to get to know *this* person

better you have led me to this most interesting person and I appreciate that I love to meet new people and just find out how they're doing and what they're into.

ROGER

No.

MARCY

Oh—but--you're fine, right Roger? You're fine. Everything's fine. He's fine.

ADVANCE MAN

No I don't think so I we we should go for a walk him and me is what we should

MARCY

He's really he's

ROGER

See this was I always told you that no one listened to me but I was the wires YES the whispers YES the birds the birds something with the birds I don't know what but I can see the outlines of it / I can I can I can see the outlines of it things missing changing it's not right it's it's not right is it's not right it's MISSING GONE MISSING GONE MISSING GONE MISSING GONE

ADVANCE

Is what you should be quiet is you should be quiet you should be quiet is you shouldn't speak so loud you shouldn't I'll shhh, I'll shush you, I'll make you quiet it's so nice to be quiet IT'S SO NICE TO BE QUIET BE QUIET BE

In one swift motion—ADVANCE MAN puts his hand on ROGER's face.

A beat.

Then MARCY screams at the top of her lungs.

ROGER runs.

ADVANCE MAN looks at MARCY. He's furious.

MARCY

I mean I don't know I think there's like a lot of factors that we should consider I mean isn't it kind of a grey area like it's nice to like it's nice to like it's nice to like isn't there a way we can kind of like talk to people first to kind of see how they I'd say there's a lot of factors at play here and it might be nice to like get consent from like all involved parties or just kind of ask everyone if they're cool with like I don't know I'm only 15 so

Pause.

MARCY

I mean what exactly did I sign up for here?

ADVANCE MAN

Listen Marcy I'm gonna need to go deep incognito for the next few hours part of the deep background just sink into the earth kind of deal but and so I need you to not slack but actually redouble and what I need is a sort of nap, I'm going to nap and here's a twenty dollars when you what I a full report is what I'm go get to it no time to the President's calling.

ADVANCE MAN runs offstage.

MARCY

Had I done something wrong? The Advance Man seemed so mad at me and I thought well maybe he's right maybe I should maybe I'll just maybe I'm not trying hard enough is what it's the History Chair would be nice on my buttocks

A bird flies in, lands.

MARCY

Hey. Pretty pretty pretty pretty. (*She tries to put it in her mouth, but it sruggles and she takes it out.*) That's—oh I've hurt you. Here I'll—why don't you oh here rest in my pocket just kind of sleep sure and I'll be hmm.

ADVANCE MAN

I came back.

MARCY

OH MY GOD YOU SCARED ME.

ADVANCE MAN

I came back because I smelled a bird. I heard a bird, I saw a bird land, and then the bird was gone. Question being where did the bird go? Now if it got eaten it's I mean sure it's sad sure but do I know any birds? No, not personally. And so while I'm sad when there's one less bird it's also like okay so here you have these *us* kind of clear skies fruit in the trees unmolested and here you have all these *them*, and that's a tough language, bird, not speaking allegorically I've studied bird, they sent me to a special—and I've flown sure I've flown it's great yeah but I mean to be on the ground? Two feet I mean there's the happy with what I've—sniff, sniff, sniff.

He sniffs her, stopping at the pocket where she put the bird.

ADVANCE MAN

You didn't eat it.

MARCY

I wasn't hungry? I was going to eat it later I was I was I swear I was

ADVANCE MAN

Eat it now.

MARCY

No.

ADVANCE MAN

Eat it now.

MARCY

I can't.

ADVANCE MAN

Eat it now.

MARCY
It's not right.

ADVANCE MAN
Eat it now.

MARCY
But I like birds!

ADVANCE MAN
Eat it now.

MARCY
I'm not hungry I had a big lunch it's

ADVANCE MAN
Eat it now.

MARCY
It's a bird.

ADVANCE MAN
It's food.

MARCY
It's a bird.

ADVANCE MAN
It's food though. It's food. It is food. It's food now.

MARCY
It's a bird.

ADVANCE MAN
It *is* food.

Pause.

ADVANCE MAN

Eat it now.

*MARCY puts the bird in her mouth, eats it—slowly.
It's really hard for her to do. Perhaps she retches, keeps going—
swallows.*

ADVANCE MAN

Now come with me.

*ADVANCE MAN holds his hand out. MARCY takes it. They leave.
ROGER emerges from behind a tree.*

ROGER

Marcy?

Marcy in high school?

Marcy?

*ROGER hears whispering from a hole. He puts his ear to it and
hears:*

MARCY

The trees everywhere now darkness everywhere now the sky

ADVANCE MAN and MARCY

Yes indeed sure of course sure finally now yes now indeed now yes

ROGER runs.

VI.

Suddenly a helicopter can be heard overhead. Its dark shadow passes over the stage. The townspeople hear it and run off and onstage, agitated. Chaos from the birds.

LIBRARIAN

No!

LOCAL MOM

No!

EXERCISE TEACHER

Yes!

Pause – the helicopter circles – noise of blades –

SCIENCE TEACHER

Yes!

LOCAL MOM

No!

BAKER

Yes!

Then everyone's onstage, looking up at the sky.

BAKER

The president's coming

BAKER, EXERCISE TEACHER, LOCAL MOM

the president's coming

ALL TOWNSPEOPLE

the president's coming

LIBRARIAN

He's here!

Brief pause – then --

ALL TOWNSPEOPLE

Everyone get ready!

Frenetic activity – everyone runs on and offstage, getting ready.

Maybe the helicopter is still passing overhead but farther away.

ELLA

I raced home to grab my signs they said –yes Mr. President Yes yes yes

LOCAL MOM

The sparrows were agitated, or excited, or frightened, it was hard to tell

FRANK

Real quick I loaded up my truck up with apples so I could kind of just spray them all over the road

BAKER

I baked extra cookies I

LIBRARIAN

Shut down the library I

SCIENCE TEACHER

Cancelled classes I

LOCAL MOM

Put Sammy in the car I

EXERCISE TEACHER

Said everyone let's move!

All the townspeople plus ELLA and FRANK form an expectant line onstage.

Long pause—at any moment, The President might appear.

Then, a whispered chant to summon The President:

SCIENCE TEACHER

Hey.

SCIENCE TEACHER AND EXERCISE TEACHER

Hey HEY.

SCIENCE TEACHER, EXERCISE TEACHER, AND LIBRARIAN

Heyheyheyhey.

EVERYONE ELSE EXCEPT FRANK

HEYHEYHEYHEYHEYHEY!

A yell, pulled up deep from the earth:

LOCAL MOM

Oooha!

EVERYONE EXCEPT FRANK

Ooooha oooha!! Shoopa Shoopa Shoopa Shoopa! Aha ha ha!

In perfect harmony:

EVERYONE EXCEPT FRANK

And a llama llama llama and a llama llama llama and a llama llama llama llama
oooooh.

Everyone looks around for The President.

The birds are gone.

The “oooh” hangs in the golden air.

A moment of incredible expectation and possibility.

ELLA

Frank.

FRANK

Ella.

ELLA

What are you doing with those godamn apples.

FRANK

I'm going to spray them all over the road.

ELLA

Now that's just a stupid idea.

FRANK

You know being over in the jungle really fucked up my life and I've had just about enough of you people telling me I'm stupid

ELLA

Well maybe you I mean that was your choice to

FRANK

And just what are you, and what were you

ELLA

We were you were leaving and we were dating we had been dating, 18, I mean can you remember? And we had no idea, I mean *not to know*, to stand there on the kind of bright night in the field behind your house—I mean *do you remember?* You must remember you

FRANK

No

ELLA

You must remember you

FRANK

No!

ELLA
Time shift.

FRANK
No

ELLA
Forty years ago

FRANK
No

ELLA
High school

FRANK
No I don't want to go I have to go!

Time shifts.

*FRANK and ELLA are in a field, forty years earlier.
They laugh. They touch each other. They can't believe it.*

ELLA
Sleep with me one night I'm making a castle we'll sleep in a field don't mind the horses—they won't think we're hay, we're people! We're human beings we live here on this island

FRANK
I'm not afraid of horses

ELLA
What are you afraid of then what are you afraid of

FRANK
You have the most beautiful long hair

ELLA
You're just trying to get in my pants aren't you Frankie

FRANK

Don't call me that my dad calls me that. Call me Frank just Frank

ELLA

Then call me Ella just Ella

ELLA

Frank

FRANK

Ella

ELLA

There's a place where we can live where they won't find us of course there's castles there of course we can live there with a horse

FRANK

They'll hear us whispering they'll

ELLA

They won't—we won't speak, we won't whisper even, we'll just be quiet we'll plant fruit trees we'll have candles a warm bed at night we'll sign stories to each other with our hands. Who needs words? We'll say it with our hands!

FRANK

But history my dad says history

ELLA

Fuck history I don't what's history history is what they tell you when the big man wants you to

FRANK

I like that big man, we need a big man

ELLA

Man man always a man who's that man to me? I got you and I got my own two hands and let them come here I'll fight 'em with my hands. I'll give 'em fruit from the garden. We'll confuse 'em and then feed 'em. Everything's going to be

FRANK

History history history

ELLA

Me! Bear Creek. You and me. My hands. You. The horses in this field. We'll give them apples. What more do you need? This is it. Wake up. Wake up. Wake up.

Wake up. Wake up.

And then we were asleep.

They sleep in the field.

FRANK wakes.

From the sky we hear THE PRESIDENT.

THE PRESIDENT

You're no one special, you, you're like the rest of them, you, don't think you there's nothing, you, they'll find you they'll you'll whisper you'll why run from the chair is sit in it stand in it lots of us over here in the all your friends everyone it's obvious so obvious its so obvious shouldn't even be saying it no need to even speak it's a given its given so much given asking a little not selfish are you aren't selfish are you I'll be here you know I'm I wouldn't ask if I not asking commanding to you stand stand stand stand up like your dad would have grandpa would have brother mother even in factories wagons even in uniforms even rowing in boats the bottoms of boats even then on the prairie in over the ocean over through the mountains under on top of the dark fields stand stand stand stand stand stand up now STAND STAND STAND.

FRANK stands.

FRANK

But what if I—? Mr. President. Are you sure I'll—.

THE PRESIDENT

Not to worry!

FRANK looks at sleeping ELLA, leaves.

ELLA wakes up in the field to find FRANK gone. She calls out to him:

ELLA
Frank?

Nothing.

She's in past time, speeding towards the present.

The TOWNSPEOPLE remain in present time, waiting for the president. The day is ending – it's twilight.

ELLA
I waited and waited and waited.

TOWNSPEOPLE
We waited and waited.

ELLA
That day into the next and the next. No word from Frank—not nothing no nothing not nothing.

SCIENCE TEACHER
We waited in the road for the President. No nothing not nothing no President no—not.

ELLA
I waited by the phone for a by the mailbox for a I took a job at the I moved to California. Time passed. The 60s, 70s. The 1980s, the 90s. Moved back to Bear Creek, and there was Frank. Two thousand one, two thousand two. Oh-five, oh-six, oh-nine. 2010. Today.

LIBRARIAN
Night came, still nothing.

BAKER
I closed the bakery and put the cookies in the

SCIENCE TEACHER

We drove home the route we always drive looking out the window at the like
always we

EXERCISE TEACHER

I closed my phone and felt strange somehow as if I as if somehow I

ELLA

You know the hopes you you imagine you'll and then when you get there you and
looking back thinking well why didn't I just it's so obvious what the hell was I
wake up! Why didn't I wake up what was I sleeping about what was I—
anyway.

The day the President didn't come, I put my signs in the trash and walked over to
the Rusty Bear Bar.

She does, fully back in present time now.

FRANK is also at the Rusty Bear Bar.

FRANK

Ella.

ELLA

Frank.

FRANK

Beer?

ELLA

I'm drinking wine.

They sit near but not too near each other, drinking.

FRANK

“The President.”

He's not coming, I guess. Guess I'm going to have to deal with that earthworm
problem myself.

ELLA

(*As she sees something in the sky:*) Frank. Look up there.

FRANK

Looks like a copter to me.

SCIENCE TEACHER

A tiny dot, the whirring of blades. It hovered and dipped dark patterns in the sky. And then floating down, from way up high—something like words.

ELLA

(*Trying to repeat what she hears:*) Sssp sssp spp a ssspp ssspp spps

SCIENCE TEACHER

They rose and fell, rised and falled. But we couldn't—

ELLA

I can't. Can you?

FRANK

Not quite.

TOWNSPEOPLE

We can't. Can you?

SCIENCE TEACHER

I can't. Not quite.

They strain to hear the sound.

The faintest of whispers.

It's gone.

THE TOWNSPEOPLE

Surely we'd surely there'd be another we'd

FRANK

Ah well.

Pause.

FRANK
Hey Ella.

ELLA
What, Frank?

Pause.

FRANK
No, nothing. Nothing. It's always nice to see you.

FRANK and ELLA leave.

ROGER enters.

It's deep twilight now—almost dark.

ROGER
I came down from the forest the streets empty now the skies empty now no birds
anywhere now no birds.

And perhaps this is the first time the townspeople notice this too.

MICHAEL HENRY enters, yawning. He's missed the whole thing.

MICHAEL HENRY
Late in the day. Must have slept.
Marcy?

BAKER
No birds now. It was strange. But we were maybe it was the copter maybe the
blades of the copter.

MICHAEL HENRY
Marcy?

LIBRARIAN
No birds now anywhere, those pesky birds gone now everywhere, come and gone,

those pesky birds at least gone now, that was good now gone now quiet now nice
now although although

LOCAL MOM

Quiet now and nice now, in a way,
nice now, in a way, nice now.
In a way.

MICHAEL HENRY

Marcy?

Marcy?

MARCY!

VII.

Morning – bright and clear. No birds.

MARCY and the ADVANCE MAN driving.

MARCY is in the driver's seat now. Something is very different about her.

Long pause as they drive.

MARCY

Sure no SURE

ADVANCE MAN

Careful

MARCY

Yes and yes and so if you this was here and of course this was there and that's the really I mean who's to and yes yes no sure sure. (*Pause.*) Can I go home now?

ADVANCE MAN

Aaaah. This is why, you know. Clear air, kind of the—look at that blue sky that blue sky that clear blue sky clear as air the clear air just us here now just us here now juuust us.

MARCY

Maybe we can just drive me home now.

ADVANCE MAN

The ADVANCE PEOPLE. Never had kids but still and not in any weird way just proud. But be careful there's kind of grabbing at you hold tight and all your friends bring your friends you'll get there you will and it's President very proud and I so sleepy is it am I dying? Although to be honest I do wonder sometimes about those birds. Do they have houses what's it like to speak bird what does the earth look like from up there and how's it how do we what's it like to be a tree and how do the earthworms but it's NO it's two feet on the ground and I'm very firm and but NO my arms up and it's like hello I'm a cloud but it's *no no no no no* very

firm, on the ground, HUMAN BEING, not kind of drifting everywhere potentially everything two eyes no more eyes than that feet on the ground eyes clear my history very clear my future very clear and it's so sleepy although to be honest I did wonder I do wonder I always did wonder

He waves goodbye to MARCY. And then he's gone.

The townspeople enter.

LIBRARIAN

Marcy. Are you alright?

MARCY

Sure sure no sure sure sure sure sure no sure absolutely sure sure yes sure yes I'm sure sure sure sure sure sure sure sure s----

She chokes on something, pulls it out of her mouth.

It's a bird feather.

She falls to her knees.

The townspeople back away from her.

LIBRARIAN

Yeah but like

BAKER

Yeah I don't know but like

LOCAL MOM

Yeah but uh but I don't know but like

EXERCISE TEACHER

It's like uh it's like

SCIENCE TEACHER

Yeah so it's like

EXERCISE TEACHER

Uh yeah it was a I mean sure we thought we thought

LOCAL MOM

We thought that uh we wondered sure I mean sure we wondered we should we have could we still

BAKER

Yeah.

Pause.

And then, to the audience, as if in answer to a question:

LIBRARIAN

And so it was, it was it was, no it was, sure it was, and sure we did, sure sure we did, sure we *voted*.

BAKER

We *voted* sure

EXERCISE TEACHER

Sure sure we *voted* that winter sure.

SCIENCE TEACHER

We *voted* that winter, sure we *voted* and it was like but I don't know but we all kind of and there was a sort of that it wasn't—

Beat.

ALL THE TOWNSPEOPLE

It wasn't—

Beat.

LIBRARIAN

And we felt kind of—sure it was important, absolutely, but there was an unsettled kind of—the sparrows used to be everywhere, a nuisance if you ignored them but so beautiful up close but now no sparrows no sparrows anywhere no just

sometimes we'd—and sure we *voted* sure we *voted* sure sure we *voted* that year
like every year we voted sure, but—

The townspeople leave.

MARCY is alone onstage. She's listening for something.

*Then in one swift single clean motion MARCY walks towards the
audience, falls to the ground, and raises one hand like a tuning fork.*

Whispers rise and rise and rise.

They're deafening.

Lights out.

End.

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