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by

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The Permeable Boundaries of Empathy and Desire

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The Permeable Boundaries of Empathy and Desire

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Dedication

To my parents: Jean McManus and Carl Reisman.

To my brothers: Walker and Morgan.

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Abstract

The Permeable Boundaries of Empathy and Desire

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This thesis is an examination of the concept of permeable boundaries as it applies to character and setting in my plays *Catch the Wall* and *70 Secrets of Marmalade Kittens*. The thesis synthesizes each play and catalogues their creation process. It examines the way permeable boundaries can be used to create audience empathy and a wider invitation into the work. The full text of *Catch the Wall* and *70 Secrets of Marmalade Kittens* accompany the thesis essay.

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The Permeable Boundaries of Empathy and Desire

In the opening scenes of my play *Catch the Wall*, a school principal transforms into a hotel concierge, the actor changing her costume in front of the audience. Across the stage, a charter school founder trades his suit for a janitor's uniform and a state examiner throws off her skirt for the high cut shorts of a transient dancer. At the same time, a fierce hip-hop MC, imagined onto the stage by the play's two middle school protagonists, is killed with a bullet from a bounce track, transformed from a living hope into a memory and a ghost.

Much of my work explores permeability- the liminal, liquid spaces where one time or place or person blends into the next. I am fascinated by the permeability of character- how one character transforms into another, or multiple characters live inside a single body onstage. Though the connection between people and place is an underlying theme in all my plays, I have become increasingly interested in the permeability of place: the way one location suddenly crashes into another, or how two locations live on the stage simultaneously. Even in my earliest plays, I employed overlapping dialogue and duel conversations. I wanted to explore the way sound lives multi-dimensionally around us and the way dialogues can be composed like a symphony, layered on each other to create an emotional, rather than an informational understanding. In *Afternight Seating*, my second full-length play written in 2002, conversations overlap constantly- bouncing off each other from neighboring booths at a 24-hour college town diner. Though there is a unity of place here (we never leave this diner) the play explores ideas of shared consciousness and the interconnection between people. In the play that followed, *Brian*

and Shevat, shared consciousness becomes shared bodies, as a couple moves through their relationship playing themselves and everyone else they know, trading costumes to become a best friend, a landlady, a mysterious corndog vendor, or occasionally, each other.

A decade after these early exercises, I have made large strides in refining my craft: sewing these ideas in the basic fabric of my plays. The concept of permeable boundaries, of the thin difference between my mind and that of my neighbor, or the bodies of two strangers, is something I come back to in my writing again and again. It is a method for opening empathy in my audience and myself, a fundamental prism for how I view the world.

During my time at The University of Texas at Austin I have written three one-act plays- *Drift*, *Stockpile* and *Cricket Pizza*, three full-length plays- *Catch the Wall*, *70 Secrets of Marmalade Kittens*, and *The Panama Limited*, and one collaborative piece- *Slip River*. All these plays include elements of permeability, from the overlapping dreams of a boat and a teenage girl in *Drift*, to a hotel room and a boxcar living on top of each other in *The Panama Limited*. In this thesis, however, I will focus on the ways *Catch the Wall* and *70 Secrets of Marmalade Kittens* both explore these concepts of the permeable character and the permeable setting. I will chart how these plays have laid the groundwork for my continued growth as a playwright and theatre maker.

The Logic of Permeability

Catch the Wall follows two middle school girls, Cleo and Justice, as they navigate the shifting cultural landscape of their neighborhood and their new charter school, and try

to craft a story they can claim as purely their own. The play opens with a pair of administrators, Mrs. Darby and Mr. Bechet, discussing the state mandated improvements the school is beginning to implement. Simultaneously, in a classroom across the stage, Cleo, Justice, and their friend, K'wonn are deep in practice for standardized testing. The girls decide to imagine up Benefit (Justice's cousin and their favorite bounce MC) and the play explodes into a bounce show led by the conjured rapper. This conceit continues throughout the play. Cleo and Justice drive the story with their desires, but run up against the imagined dream worlds of their teachers, the crushing responsibilities of their school, and the loose, random danger that echoes through their neighborhood.

70 Secrets of Marmalade Kittens seems at first completely antithetical to *Catch the Wall*. Set on a small farm near Iowa City, the play follows a young family as they try to build a life for themselves as hog confinement farmers. The play jumps back and forth in time, from the days before the mother, Quinn, decides to leave her family, to ten years later when her now grown children, Maggie and Tracy, are faced with the continued fallout of their mother's absence and the possibility of losing the family farm. Bridging both times are a pair of ceramic kittens who voice Quinn's growing desires, and appear to Maggie as a haunting, a gathering mystery.

Both *Catch the Wall* and *70 Secrets of Marmalade Kittens* are based in the logic of permeability. In *Catch the Wall*, multiple characters cast each other in their performed fantasies while Benefit inhabits others as a ghost in search of a larger life after death. Classrooms erupt into dance clubs, schoolyards transform into imagined music video shoots, and the fourth wall is broken again and again as the audience is encouraged to

dance, call and respond with the characters, or join in a final second line funeral parade. In *70 Secrets of Marmalade Kittens*, ceramic figurines speak the buried wants and fears of an unhappy mother, but also speak right to the audience, wooing them, flattering them, and trying to get them to buy timeshares. The embodied voices of the figurines jump from the past to the present. From a diner booth in the present, Maggie and Tracy hear their house phone ring from the past, and the stage makes way for two times to exist simultaneously. In the logic of permeability time is inconstant, a creation of those living inside it. Characters move from body to body. Performers and audience share the same intimate spaces. Borders are loose and lightly drawn.

Synopsis of *Catch the Wall*

After an iconic bounce MC named Benefit is killed in the opening moments of the play, 6th graders Cleo and Justice process their loss by weaving her into an ongoing story they tell to each other. Through the story they introduce Kevin, a first year Teach for America teacher at Believe Academy. Believe is a transformation charter school in New Orleans that is taking over an existing school grade by grade, replacing the older, local teachers with young transplants as it grows. Though Cleo and Justice are telling the story, their imagination at times leaps into the experiences and fantasies of the other characters. In the midst of a lesson, Kevin's classroom bursts apart into a dance club. The students scatter as Melonie, a white bounce back-up dancer who was once Benefit's lover, twerks onto the stage. Melonie introduces Kevin to bounce, a hyper-localized form of hip-hop dance music originated in New Orleans.

Outside of school, Cleo, Justice, and their friend K'wonn's neighborhood is plagued by errant gun violence from ongoing incidental feuds. All three children have personal connections to the violence- family stories of death and loss. Though they share these stories with each other they do not dwell on them or live inside them, like the fantasy worlds they create throughout their play.

Cleo and Justice decide to show their commitment to honoring Benefit by making an imaginary music video for her. They want to bring her the national prestige and the notoriety that she never received in her lifetime. They recreate Benefit from their memory, but in doing so they bring back her ghost, who appears full of desire and unspent life, determined to somehow return to the living. The ghost of Benefit is sure that if she leaves her legacy up to the loved ones she's left behind, she will be misremembered, or simply forgotten until she gradually dissolves into nothing.

Meanwhile, Kevin and fellow first year teacher, Ariyel, are trying to get their bearings, and balance the expectations of their students with the rigid demands of their school. Melonie shows Kevin secret, decrepit parts of New Orleans, but he can't see what she loves about the ruins. At the same time, Benefit grows more and more hungry for autonomy. She breaks away from Cleo and Justice's imagination and searches for a vessel to carry her back into the world. When she hears Kevin and Ariyel discussing moving to New York, or Paris or San Francisco when their Teach for America commitment is over she flashes through the two teachers, testing her ability to spiritually possess them.

As Believe Academy becomes more restrictive in an effort to raise test scores, the students and their young teachers get to know each other better. Ariyel shares a story from her TFA teacher training. Kevin learns K'wann cannot read, and stumbles upon Justice's birthday party. By the end of Act I, Benefit surges into Kevin and Ariyel, making them momentary puppets, as she tries to speak to Melonie.

In Act II, Benefit moves through Kevin and Ariyel freely. She takes over Kevin's classroom for a moment, and inhabits Ariyel, bringing her out on an all night bender. The barriers between dreams and reality begin to break down. Cleo and Justice can see the chaos Benefit's possession is causing but they don't know how to counter it, hoping instead she'll come back to them and finish the video. Meanwhile, teachers leave Believe Academy for less stressful jobs. Mrs. Darby and Mr. Bechet battle about whether or not to invite the teacher's union into the school, and the gunshots of the neighborhood grow increasingly closer. Determined to finish the video with or without Benefit, Cleo and Justice film a scene in the schoolyard. It explodes into a dance fantasia, epic and sprawling. Ariyel catches the children filming and sends them to work detention. As they are picking up trash outside the school, Justice is killed by a stray bullet, meant for K'wann's cousin.

At the moment of Justice's death, the play slides into a pure dreamscape. Cleo, Justice, and K'wann momentarily become characters in Cleo's grandmother's story of her childhood. As the scene shifts back into the present, her grandmother receives the phone call from Cleo's school about the shooting, Cleo and K'wann are projected into another nightmare where they pull a slumping Justice to a t-shirt printer who seems to hold her

fate in his hands. As hard as they try, they fail to make it before Justice's memorial shirt is finished, and their friend is carried away from them.

At school, students and teachers are in shock over the death. Kevin and Ariyel argue about whether to stay or go from New Orleans. Benefit, the ghost, wants them to leave so she can leave with them and see the rest of the world. But she herself is pulled in multiple directions, unsure of her role as a spirit. Melonie tries to convince Kevin and Ariyel that they have a responsibility to the city. She says that their participation, that the participation of everyone, is what makes New Orleans so generous and resilient.

As Justice's funeral parade begins, Justice returns- a ghost like Benefit, to view the scene and say a final goodbye. She convinces Benefit to come with her and they rise into the sky for places unknown. As Justice and Benefit sail off, the second line parade, where anyone can join in behind the band and procession, starts in earnest. The characters invite the audience up from their seats and into the moving party.

Constructing *Catch the Wall*

Catch the Wall was begun in a playwriting class with guest Professor Octavio Solis in the Spring of 2011. Using the methods of avant-garde playwright and director, María Irene Fornés, Solis encouraged an exploration into our own subconscious to discover the characters hidden in the subliminal. The play began as an accumulation of scenes surrounding a charter school in New Orleans. It was an unpacking of my time as a teaching artist in New Orleans in the years before attending UT. Scenes between students, teachers and guardians all flashed my mind and memory and I recorded them with no initial plan for how they would fit together as a story. A large part of my writing

process was to hear the play initially rather than plot it. As it was with my past plays, at the beginnings of this process, I only know information as I discover it. A play appears in flashes of dialogue or visual image. During these times, I work like a TV antenna—recording any transmission I receive without judgment or initial editing.

By the end of the Spring semester, I began to organize these discovered scenes into a sort of arc and figure out how they all lived together as a story. The following Fall I developed the play further through an independent study with Playwriting Professor, Kirk Lynn. I had brought in a new character over the summer—Messy, the outspoken ghost of actual slain bounce MC Messy Mya. Bounce music had also become more integral to the play. Characterized by popping rhythmic beats, a hypersexual dance style, and call and response participation typical of Mardi Gras Indians, bounce emerged in New Orleans in the early 1990s. It is in many ways the sound of New Orleans in the 21st century, played everywhere from clubs to two year olds' birthday parties. The music is ubiquitous in certain neighborhoods, but incredibly unwelcome in others. It is beloved by New Orleans school children, but heavily discouraged by their schools. For most of the Fall 2012 semester, I struggled to figure out how bounce framed *Catch the Wall*, as well as how to wrangle Messy, whose influence and energy threatened to overtake the entire piece.

Even in these early drafts, *Catch the Wall* lived most clearly in its transitions, where scenes would shift in an instant. A classroom burst apart into a bar. One character pulled another directly from a school meeting into a date on an abandoned beach. The fluidity of the transitions in *Catch the Wall* marked a huge change in my writing.

In previous plays, it was difficult for me to separate my playwright self from my director and producer self. Because I have such a history in production and in building plays from the ground up, I would almost always try to visualize how the play I was writing would actually live in time and space. Where would it be best staged? How would the actors show shifts in location? What materials might be used to construct the set and how would it all be financed? Though I think it's important for playwrights to consider these things, to have a general awareness of them, *Catch the Wall* was the first time that I was able to turn my director/producer brain off and write with the feeling that anything was possible.

Over the winter of 2011-12, *Catch the Wall* received an initial reading at the Allways Lounge in New Orleans under the direction of Chris Kaminstein, a deviser, director, and actor. Kaminstein was also a teaching artist, working at the charter school I had taught in before attending UT. Kaminstein had expressed initial enthusiasm for developing the script before the first draft was completed. This first reading illuminated scenes that needed to be trimmed, and helped shape a major shift for *Catch the Wall*.

In the spring of 2012, it was developed in the Professional Development Workshop with Professor Suzan Zeder. In the first days of the workshop, I wrote a drastically different draft of the play. Messy became a new ghost- a fictitious MC, Benefit, who was less self interested than Messy and had stronger ties to Cleo and Justice. The rest of the semester was spent trying to clarify the "ghost logic" of how Benefit moved in the play. With MFA directing student Will Davis serving as dramaturg, Daniel Alexander Jones was brought to campus to workshop the play in March 2012.

Daniel Alexander Jones introduced me to the concept of the theatrical jazz aesthetic. Formed in the early 1970s through the Black Arts Movement in the Sound in Motion Harlem dance studio, jazz aesthetics infuse music with movement and the spoken word. In her essay, “When the Ancestors Call,” UT Professor Omi Osun Joni L. Jones says of the jazz aesthetic:

A theatrical jazz aesthetic borrows many elements from the musical world of jazz — improvisation, process over product, ensemble synthesis, solo virtuosity — and disrupts the traditional conventions of Western theatre, including a single narrative with a throughline and causal relationships that rely on psychological coherence, individual characters performed singly by performers, and identifiable places and spaces. A theatrical jazz aesthetic uses gestural language as counterpoint to the verbal text. This gestural language is a blend of modern dance, contemporary dance, popular idioms, and everyday physical references. (Jones)

Looking at *Catch the Wall* in the context of a jazz aesthetic felt like a homecoming for the play. This concept contains everything that the play naturally wishes to be — unstructured by single narrative, free to have multiple characters live in single performers. The fact that a vocabulary existed for this sort of work felt reassuring, though communicating this aesthetic to collaborators would still be a major challenge, particularly as the play moved into production.

Just as I have never written a play that lives so strongly in its transitions, I have never written something that has transitioned so much through the course of its making. *Catch the Wall* has been through countless rewrites, large and small. For all of my plays I keep a scrap folder of scenes that are cut but not entirely forgotten. The scrap folder for this play is as long, if not longer than *Catch the Wall* itself. Writing *Catch the Wall* felt as

if I were lying on the edge of a cliff and writing over the side. A large amount of trial and error went into the development of this piece. As the play began to get the response of a wider audience, I knew that process of trial and error was really just beginning.

In June 2012, The NOLA Project produced a workshop of *Catch the Wall* at the Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans. The workshop exposed more about the play's production potential- about what was working and what wasn't onstage. The enthusiasm of the cast and producing company carried into planning a showcase production of the piece for the following year.

Over the summer of 2012, I saw *Fela!*, a musical about Nigerian Afrobeat star and activist, Fela Kuti, in New York. This play employs the lens of a concert as an invitation into the piece. The *Fela!* audience learns how to dance and is instructed by Kuti about the context of his music and how it lived in Nigerian politics in the 1970s. The frame of *Fela!* heavily influenced my summer rewrites of *Catch the Wall*, as did a number of bounce shows I attended in New Orleans, and the continued insistence from director Chris Kaminstein to develop the play's teacher characters.

In March of 2013, The NOLA Project presented a showcase production of *Catch the Wall* at Dillard University in New Orleans. The producer and production manager recruited a team of designers who began meeting in the fall to discuss the eventual production, slated for March 2013. About half the cast of the workshop was able to remain for the showcase production. I attended rehearsals intermittently throughout the spring, sometimes Skyping in to runs. As part of the development process we held

teacher feedback sessions, where groups of New Orleans schoolteachers watched a rehearsal and discussed what they were seeing in the play.

I returned to New Orleans at the beginning of March 2013 to participate in rehearsals and help open the showcase of *Catch the Wall*. It was not an easy process. There were issues with designer adeptness and actor morale. The space, a 200-seat traditional proscenium theatre, was swallowing the play, rather than featuring it. Though I had brought up serious concerns about the staging and use of the space before rehearsals began, my fears had fallen on deaf ears. I, in turn, had forgotten to bring the issue back up with the director when we began in the rehearsal room in January 2013.

I felt the fluid nature of the play should be brought to life through a collaborative process- with all members of the cast and crew giving input on all areas. Though this freedom existed in some capacity in the workshop, the showcase production was far more stratified. Though incredibly adept collaborators and devisors, the director and production manager seemed insistent on instituting a fairly rigid hierarchy for how input could be given. *Catch the Wall* is a complicated play- sprawling and ethereal and messy. The production team felt that strong organization and clearly defined roles was the key to molding the show into something powerful and understandable. But the resulting rigidity, as well as a collective failure to either truly embrace or reshape the oversized performance space, led to a production that felt far from what I had envisioned for this play.

Catch the Wall walks a difficult line- between reality and absurdity, between the magical and the political. Most of the characters are African American, many are poor or

working class. I understood that, as a white writer, there were critics who would always see my involvement with the material as problematic, no matter how strong the work became.

In 2011 and 2012 I followed the critical reception of the films *The Help*, and *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. *The Help* tells the story of several black maids in Mississippi in the 1960s, and a wealthy, white college graduate who wishes to write about their lives. *Beasts of the Southern Wild* follows a young girl and her father in a fictional community on the Louisiana gulf, as they try to rebuild their lives in the wake of a devastating storm. Both films were written and directed by white writers and feature African American protagonists. After *The Help* was released, I reasoned that if *Catch the Wall* was “accurate” enough, if its characters used the *exact* vernacular of my students and neighbors, I could make the play safe from the harsh criticism that had landed on the film. A year later, seeing *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, I had the sinking fear that I was doing it all wrong. Perhaps I should have created something outside of our world- a fantasy similar to *Beasts*- if I wanted anyone to see the issues at the core of my play. But much of the criticism of *The Help* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, though they were radically different films, was nearly the same. Their content was deemed objectionable because of the authorship, and the history of privilege attached to those who created the pieces. Whether it was a romanticized re-telling of history or a fable grounded in a very real depiction of poverty, the issue of *who* told the story outweighed the discussion on the authenticity or effectiveness of the story itself.

Reception to the showcase of *Catch the Wall* followed a similar path. The majority of audience members responded positively. Veteran classroom teachers and young Teach for America corps members both felt it was an extremely accurate portrayal of their experiences. Post-show talkbacks yielded rich discussions about audience members' personal experiences with the restructuring of New Orleans's public schools since Hurricane Katrina. But a handful of audience members left the show deeply angry, ostensibly not at the content itself, but at my intensions for making the work, or my right to make the work at all. The discussions on authorship that followed on the play's Facebook forum became quickly heated.

The issues and characters in *Catch the Wall* live incredibly close to me. The concept of permeable boundaries is more than a craft tool that I use in my writing. It is the cornerstone of my own personal belief in the multiplicity of the self and a capacity for shared narrative as a uniting factor among all people. I believe that the greatest social change is enacted as a result of empathy. People push for better social systems when we are able to empathize, and imagine ourselves in each other's shoes.

Apart from the debate on authorship, some critics of *Catch the Wall* felt that my own opinions on the issues of the play were not presented clearly enough. Was this play in favor of charter schools or opposed to them? Were these young teachers destroying the education system or improving it? Since *Catch the Wall*'s beginning, I set out to write a script that was itself composed of questions, not solutions. I wanted the audience to be pushed to find their own solutions to these questions *through their empathy*, not through any policy that I prescribed. The robust debate that resulted from *Catch the Wall* makes

me suspect that at least in this intention the show succeeds. The play is indeed made of questions. The audience must carry those questions with them into the world and try and sort of where they sit inside themselves.

Synopsis of *70 Secrets of Marmalade Kittens*

In the opening lines of *70 Secrets of Marmalade Kittens* two small ceramic Kittens ask the audience, “Where would you go, if you could go anywhere?” The kittens extol the wonders of traveling the world. They seduce the audience with exotic locals. They suggest they should all buy vacation packages. The play jumps from this theatrical “Kitten Time” to a farm outside Iowa City. Nineteen-year-old Maggie digs hole after hole in the goose pen outside her house, looking for these now-lost Kittens and unsettling Frank, the family’s aging pet goose. Frank is full of bluster but he cannot fly. He was made lame with a blow from a shovel years before.

Time changes with a crash of thunder and suddenly, in a jump cut akin to *Catch the Wall*, it is morning ten years earlier. Quinn, Maggie’s mother, sits at the dining room table. Maggie, now 9, and her brother Tracy, now 11, run past her on the way to the bus. Quinn and her husband Jim have been living on the farm for the past few years, attempting to run a small hog confinement operation. Jim raises pigs in high density, air-conditioned barns on derelict land they inherited from his uncle. Quinn resents the new family business and looks for any excuse to leave the isolation of the hog farm. The Kittens are a childhood memento of hers. They speak to Quinn like a devil on her shoulder, whispering her desires for escape, adventure, and infidelity.

The play jumps back and forth in time, from a present where Maggie and Tracy are young adults, then back ten years to the weeks before Quinn vanishes, and finally to a theatrical time-out-of-time, where the Kittens and Frank the Goose address the audience directly. In the present, we learn that Tracy and his neighbor, Shawn Hemmingway, have been planning to sell the confinement operation. Shawn's family owns the hogs and equipment, and contracts with Jim and Tracy as operators- raising the hogs on their land and getting a cut of the sale in return. Jim is fervently against selling the operation, insisting the farm will be Tracy and Maggie's legacy. Meanwhile, Maggie has become obsessed with finding the ceramic Kittens that Jim destroyed in a fire a decade before. Maggie is sure she has seen the Kittens haunting the farm and her work. She decides the Kittens have returned as an omen of her vanished mother, and begins to scour the internet for her whereabouts.

Ten years earlier, Quinn struggles to balance her desire to see the larger world with her duty to her family. She and Jim become strangers to each other as their physical communication breaks down. On a sweltering August morning, the electricity fails on the farm, leaving nearly 300 hogs confined without air conditioning and in serious danger of death. As Jim tries to repair the system, he and Quinn argue about their relationship, and their differing plans for the future. Quinn hits a breaking point and drives off as if she is going to the store. She abandons her family, and never returns again. When Jim realizes Quinn is gone, he burns all her belongings, the Kittens included, in the barrel they use for destroying dead hogs.

In the present, Shawn and Tracy finalize their plans to sell the business without consulting Jim. They plan to move to Chicago within the month. After a night of drinking, Tracy, Maggie and Shawn return to the farm. Maggie discovers a box of containing years of returned letters that Jim has been writing to Quinn and sending to random addresses. Tracy confronts Jim about selling the hogs and equipment. The two have a falling out and Tracy leaves that night for Chicago. After ten years of absence, Quinn calls the house and talks to Maggie, but the conversation is not what either of them hoped. As the pigs leave the farm for good, Maggie finds the Kittens hidden in Frank's goose pen. Instead of charming her as they did Quinn, they confront her with questions about her own worth and desire. She smashes them, and goes to call back her mother. From their shards, the Kittens speak to the audience about the mendable nature of relationships.

Constructing *70 Secrets of Marmalade Kittens*

70 Secrets of Marmalade Kittens was begun in visiting Playwriting Professor Sherry Kramer's Magical Objects class in the Spring of 2012. Kramer was fascinated with the way objects in stories can be imbued with magic, taking on symbolic and dramaturgical significance. Using August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* as an example, Kramer charted the ways the Charles family's piano can be tied to both their ancestral mythology and present financial necessity. This piano means something different to each character that touched it. The pull of those different meanings on a single object was what drives the engine of the play.

I had a difficultly initially in finding a play to write for the class. I was not fascinated with objects in the same way Kramer was. No single *object* seemed valuable enough to hold my characters' interest. In my own life I am drawn to people and places, and the relationship between place and identity. These interests are echoed in the desires of my characters and the stories that drive my plays. I felt like I could only invest in an object if it were also a character. One of Kramer's initial exercises involved describing a special object from childhood, then choosing another student's object and writing about that instead. The Kittens, remembered by MFA Fiction student Flynn Berry, emerged from that exercise. The story became grounded in Iowa though in my desire to write about a location from my childhood, something that held resonance for me in the same way objects held resonance for Kramer.

The hog farm in *70 Secrets of Marmalade Kittens* is constructed from very vivid memories of the Iowa hog confinement farm where my family lived while I was in second grade. Frank the Goose is very much the goose who lived on that farm. But we did not own the land, as the Crowders in *Kittens* do. After a year in Iowa, my father was fired from his job managing the deli at New Pioneer Food Co-op, for giving everyone raises at once. We moved back to Illinois that summer. Although there are shades of my childhood, and my own current desires in the play, the Crowders are their own fictitious family.

70 Secrets of Marmalade Kittens was also heavily influenced by Professor Steven Dietz's Time class, in which students chart the way time is used in different contemporary plays. In most of my plays time moves forward but is purposely vague. In

Catch the Wall, for example, we know time has passed between scenes, but how much is rarely pinned down- a day, a week, and hour? In *70 Secrets of Marmalade Kittens*, I wanted to focus on how time would jump backwards and forwards, and how one time could mirror another as a new method for exploring the permeability of location.

I finished a skeleton draft of the play for Kramer's class and continued to develop it at The O'Neill Theatre Center over the following summer. I wrote and then scrapped page after page at the O'Neill, with very little forward motion. In these initial drafts Quinn was never present on stage and existed only in backstory. In the play's past, Maggie and Tracy were in their teens, five years into their mother's absence. In the play's present, ten years later, Maggie had been absent from the farm for a decade, living in Iowa City and pretending to be an avid traveller, when in truth she had never left town. The play was about the desires and misplaced dreams of Jim, Maggie, and Tracy. The farm was in jeopardy of being sold. But the relationship between the two times felt fuzzy. Maggie's desires and motivations felt unclear, as did her relationship to the Kittens.

In the fall of 2013, I hammered out an initial full draft to submit to the UT New Theatre Festival. A script conference with Steven Dietz exploded the play in exciting ways- giving solid, simple solutions to many of the script's big time/urgency problems. As a result of that conference, Quinn was brought into the play and the time we saw the Crowders in the past was moved to right before Quinn leaves. In this iteration, Maggie and Tracy are 9 and 11. Ten years later when the Kitten resurface, the hog operation is about to bottom out, forcing everyone to make hard choices. These changes transformed the play in a critical way, giving it a new sense of urgency and focus, and letting the two

separate times live in conversation in a way they could not before. Quinn's active desire to flee made Jim's resolve to keep his farm so much stronger when both ambitions were pitted against each other.

In November, 2012 I workshopped *70 Secrets of Marmalade Kittens* at the Iowa Playwright's Workshop, as part of the initial Iowa/Austin Playwrights' Exchange. The playwriting cohort was extremely helpful, asking character-focused questions about the piece that allowed me to better sharpen issues of urgency in the play. University of Iowa Professor Tlaloc Riva's direction of the reading was also insightful. Rivas suggested that the Kittens bounce their lines back and forth as a chorus or a round, not present them in constant unison.

It was also helpful for me to revisit the geographical inspiration for where the play's setting. I had not returned to Iowa City in nearly two decades, and it was fascinating to see the city I remembered as it came to life in the play. Driving past the actual farm where we lived when I was in second grade, the play felt like a prophecy. The small hog operation was gone and the breeding fields around the house were covered over with grass.

Rehearsals for *70 Secrets of Marmalade Kittens* as part of UTNT began in January, with MFA candidate Jess Hutchinson directing. Rewrites have mostly focused on clarifying Maggie's desires in the present, discovering how the Kittens are used, and strengthening and expanding the ending of the play. We played with the permeability of the Kittens throughout the rehearsal process. For much of the rehearsal they served as the voice of young Maggie and Tracy while the adult actors mimed the actions of the

children. Though this was interesting, it was ultimately too unclear to be useful. The voice of the Kittens was pruned to more clearly represent Quinn's subconscious desires. The Kittens continued to echo the family in smaller ways though- singing a line of a song along with Jim, or creating a soft chorus of hog calls when Jim and Maggie load up their pigs for market. This was a way to expand the Kittens' permeability, to have them not only be the voice of Quinn's subconscious, but reverberations of her influence on the family in the years since she left.

Permeability of Character

The way characters are doubled in single actor bodies, or doubled among themselves, brings a great specificity to the way permeability lives in the world of my plays. In *Catch the Wall*, Mr. Bechet, a charter school founder and CEO, is played by the same actor who plays Sidney, the school's janitor. One issue I wanted to touch on in *Catch the Wall* was a trend I noticed in several charter schools where I taught in New Orleans- the valuing of jobs that required a college degree high over those that didn't. In many traditional/non-chartered schools I visited, the head custodian was one of the most respected figures in the building. But at the multiple charters I worked in, teachers (and students who learned by example) did not show their custodians that same level of respect. This practice of devaluing blue collar jobs- many of which were unionized before New Orleans's public schools were remanded to the state's Recovery School District- seemed aimed at distancing students from their parents and families, who were far more likely to work as a janitor than a charter school CEO. In addition to Mr. Bechet and Sidney, *Catch the Wall* also doubles Mrs. Darby, Believe Academy's principal, with Ms.

Terry, Cleo's grandmother who works as a hotel concierge. It also shows Ms. Dyer, a state examiner and consultant, living right inside Melonie, an under-employed dancer and bon vivant. Through this doubling, I wanted to interrogate these notions of status and present a world where CEO and janitor were one and the same- where both could hold equal value.

Permeability also comes into play in Benefit's possession of Kevin and Ariyel. In the script this is shown with a slashed character heading. The first time Benefit possesses Kevin and Ariyel, she does not speak through them, but the next time, her voice blends with theirs. With the slash, all characters speak together as a single force. In performance, they are usually connected, with Benefit holding Kevin or Ariyel or the three moving in a sort of a dance:

BENEFIT: Tell me how they could leave out of here and not sail up off the ground?

KEVIN/ARIYEL: Melonie-

BENEFIT: Hey! Melli Mel, you could see me?

MELONIE: Y'all sounded just like...

BENEFIT/ ARIYEL/ KEVIN: Girl why you wildin out with so much success? And what are you hanging around him for?

KEVIN: Hey.

BENEFIT/ ARIYEL/ KEVIN: You can see me now? (112)

Different than two characters in the same body, this doubling of a ghost character and one or sometimes two living characters speaking in the singular serves as a key force for

momentum in the play. Each time Benefit moves through Kevin or Ariyel, they are more pulled in by the ghost, tied deeper and deeper into her personal desires.

Meanwhile, Benefit also acts at times as a projection of Cleo and Justice's own desire for visibility- a voice that can be heard by the larger world. Throughout *Catch the Wall*, characters live as actors in each other's imaginations. Cleo and Justice seem to be controlling/telling the story most consistently. They cast the other characters in their fantasies or break into the character's own fantasies/ruminations to question or shake up the story. When they imagine the home life of their teacher, Ariyel, their fantasy blends into Ariyel's own self doubts, before being commandeered again by the girls:

CLEO: I think she live in a nice apartment Uptown. She say-

ARIYEL: Look at these beautiful drapes. They the prettiest drapes I ever had bought.

JUSTICE: She don't sound like that.

ARIYEL: My apartment is so big an clean. Cause I don't have nooo children. I'm just young an beautiful. I'm gonna eat a lil roast beef, me. Out a Kenner City.

(She sits to eat a roast beef po-boy. Her voice begins to change from CLEO's idea of her into her own.)

I'm gonna eat this lil roast beef alone. I've gotten real good at cooking for one. I didn't imagine it like this, when I was in college. I planned and I studied and I could *see*- I knew what I'd be when I grew up. Some hopeful, powerful life.

(JUSTICE and CLEO step from the porch into ARIYEL's imagined kitchen. They watch her.)

I can't see what's coming next anymore. I plan for hours and hours, and my lessons unravel as soon as they hit the kids. And I'm trying. Like turning the key in a car that can't start. Again and again and the engine is flooding. I'm like Sisyphus and the rock and I'm failing.

JUSTICE: You not failing, Ms. Williams.

CLEO: Yeah, we learn a lot in your class.

JUSTICE: Then Drake comes in. (136-37)

It is never made explicitly clear whether or not Ariyel or others are aware of their appearance in Cleo and Justice's fantasies. Because the play is framed as a story the girls are telling each other, a story that often times seems to escape them or careen out of their control, it is possible that all the other characters in the play are simply the creations of these two middle school protagonists.

In *70 Secrets of Marmalade Kittens*, the Kittens serve alternately as the devil in Quinn's ear, the remembered voices of Maggie and Tracy, and motivational speakers/travel agents who speak directly to the audience. At a loud college bar they convince Quinn to discreetly smell the back of undergrads' heads on a crowded dance floor. The Kittens pull her in with a combination of temptation and bullying. From the opening of the play they are happy to dole out advice, reciting a long, unorganized list of secrets to personal success and happiness:

Secret 4: Make love last with a romantic weekend out of the heat.

...

You should try everything twice.

...

Secret 46-

You could walk right over that ridge.

Slip the car into neutral and go into town.

Maybe there's a midnight movie somewhere.

Or some dark bar.

...

Secret 17: You have the power to get what you want. (181, 185, 218, 222)

The odd combination of banality and sensuality in these secrets gives way to something sinister, an undercurrent of danger that continues throughout the play. It is as if we are placing our faith in something dubious: relationship advice from the internet, or timeshares in places impossible to reach. In the final third of *70 Secrets of Marmalade Kittens*, the secrets begin to shift to something more introspective and ethereal. In one of their final monologues, after Tracy has disregarded Maggie's pleas to wait, and has left the farm for Chicago, the Kittens set aside their timeshare salesman act and directly question the audience about their own memories:

KITTENS: Hey, what's the hungriest you've ever been?
In your whole entire life?
Were you walking on a trail with no trail mix?
Or working all day?
Or were you riding on an endless bus trip?
Were you in prison?
Secret 61: Remember the best meal you ever had.
Who were you with?
What did you eat? How did it taste when it landed first on your tongue?
Was it dorado, pulled right out of the sea? Or cornmeal lavender wedding cake?
Was it tomatoes?
Are you still trying to think of it?
Just clear your head and it'll come.
Remember? (255)

When Maggie finds the Kittens near the end of the play, their secrets no longer sound like Quinn's desires, but like Maggie's personal fears.

KITTENS: Secret 47:
Every day you're closer to death.
...
You want to join with your herd or your flock? Stay in the center where nothing can harm you? No wolves or foxes to pick you right out.
...
Secret 51:

Everything migrates eventually.

...

You want your hair done in a tight French braid. You want someone to clean and salve your scraped knees. Someone to pull you up by your arms and hold you small in their large, warm lap.

...

Would you even be a better mother? Would you ever have the gall to find out? (258-60)

The Kittens serve alternately as id and superego for whichever characters invest in them.

In the present, Maggie relentlessly searches for the Kittens. But when she finds them, she immediately destroys them, a final attempt to claim her life for herself.

Permeability of Setting

The search for home is a thematic thread that, like permeability, is very much sewn through all of my work. Questions of how we seek out and claim the places we call home, and how we balance our geographic homes with the homes we build in other people, have always been a core conflict in my plays. In *Catch the Wall*, Kevin and Ariyel must decide if they want to make a home in New Orleans, and in their careers as teachers. Benefit, as a ghost, seeks a home in living people to give her the weight she's lost in death. In *70 Secrets of Marmalade Kittens*, Quinn's wanderlust is in conflict with Jim's commitment to turn the farm into their home. Tracy's desire to see Chicago is pitted against his sister's fierce loyalty to the home they're in line to inherit. Often however, permeable settings have less to do with a search for home than with an intertwining or overlapping consciousness of the characters in each setting.

Early in *Catch the Wall*, Melonie shows Kevin an abandoned beach on Lake Pontchartrain. As Kevin bemoans its desolation, his students and Benefit appear, across

the stage, on a street in New Orleans' 9th Ward. Their conversations run simultaneously in separate spaces. But when Kevin and Melonie leave the beach, Benefit calls out to Melonie, through space and time. Calling to Melonie is a shift for Benefit. She snaps out of the girls' control, telling them exactly what death is like when they playfully ask her. She then suddenly vanishes, a spirit let loose on the world.

Sometimes, I use permeable location as a way of building dramatic tension. When Believe Academy must cut electives to make more time for iLEAP prep, we hear the news both from Ariyel in the classroom, as she informs her students, and from Mr. Bechet in the principal's office as he delivers the mandate to Mrs. Darby. We see the frustration from both students and Mrs. Darby concurrently:

K'WANN: I thought we had Spanish now?

MRS. DARBY: You want this effective immediately?

ARIYEL: We replaced Spanish
with iLEAP prep class.
Just until testing is over.

MS. DYER: We cut all
electives for iLEAP prep
classes.

JUSTICE: But then it's the end of the year.

MRS. DARBY: We promised the parents electives.

CLEO: Man, I liked Spanish.

K'WANN: Yeah me gusta mucho.

MR. BECHET: We promised the parents a school that stays open. You miss that baseline, your scores sink—

JUSTICE: This bullshit. (79-80)

In the classroom, the mandate leads to a riot as students stand on desks and throw down their books in protest. Mrs. Darby, though she might wish to react similarly, is pulled from her meeting to chastise the class. In a strictly logical chronology her administrative meeting must have actually occurred before this classroom scene. Ariyel would have been told about the schedule change before her class began. But in the logic of permeable settings, the audience sees the news played out simultaneously, reinforcing its impact on students, teachers, and administrators.

Settings also run concurrently in *Catch the Wall* as a way of expanding two scenes into something larger. While Cleo talks with her father on the phone, Justice and K'wonn, appear in an abandoned yard around the corner. They take baby steps towards adulthood as Justice dares K'wonn to feel up her shirt. The juxtaposition of Cleo's pleading with her father, played against Justice and K'wonn's musings on vampires and early sexual exploration, helps show the doorway the three students stand in: the hazy, unclear path between childhood and adulthood.

Occasionally I move through time and space in *Catch the Wall* using a kind of theatrical jump cut. The action leaps from one place into another, often into a dream-space, only to have that space broken or reversed a moment later. After the squabble about electives, Ariyel's students ask her how she became a teacher. She tells them she went to camp at Teach for America's Summer Institute in Atlanta. Immediately the scene shifts from the classroom and we are transported into the institute, where Ariyel endures the same discipline system she'll have to use on her students.

MS. DYER: And as we do this, I do not want to hear any, “Why we gotta do this again? Ms. Dyer be mean.” Because that is not how you speak like scholars and that is not the directive.

K’WANN: That’s how they talked t’ *you*?

MS. DYER: Before we even start line practice we need to check ourselves. Check now. Is your shirt tucked in? Is your belt right? Are you representing Atlanta Corps like a scholar?

JUSTICE: They gotta teach y’all how to be mean, huh?

MS. DYER: We’re going to walk to the end of hallway then we’re going to turn around and walk back. Straight. Silent. Serious.

ARIYEL: They were teaching us how to give directives. (84)

The way characters can slide in and out of each other’s imagined spaces reinforces the notion that the play itself is an imagined conceit, springing from the minds of Justice and Cleo.

70 Secrets of Marmalade Kittens also uses overlapping dialogue when characters are in the same space, like when Quinn talks to her children about their lunches for school while Jim talks on the phone about hog feed. As opposed to being an orchestrated overlap, these conversations happen directly on top of each other, forcing the audience to choose who they listen to and when. I use this oversaturation of information as a tool for creating a landscape verbally, rather than conveying specific plot points. The audience understands the chaos, and can grab bits of each conversation to construct a full picture of the family’s morning ritual.

Similar to *Catch the Wall*, *70 Secrets of Marmalade Kittens* also sees moments of one location blending or joining with another momentarily. While Tracy and Maggie

have drinks at the bar in town, their father drinks alone at the farm's dining room table. When the phone rings at the farm, it stops the conversation in the bar as Maggie and Tracy glance over, across space and time, to check who might be calling. This device alludes to the frequency of the calls. This is a thing that happens often. It also shows how these calls weigh on Tracy and Maggie's minds with the same heaviness that they weigh on their father's. The desire to know who's on the phone, and the hope that it might be Quinn, is so powerful that it bridges the distance between the bar and the farm and lives in the shared subconscious of the entire family.

Both *Catch the Wall* and *70 Secrets of Marmalade Kittens* explore the permeability of the fourth wall. Cleo, Justice, and Benefit break the wall to address the audience as though they were at a bounce show. They pull audience members up from their chairs in the opening moments of the play and teach them how to dance, or to demand a call and response. In *70 Secrets of Marmalade Kittens*, the Kittens speak directly to the audience from the start. But there is an air of presentation, rather than participation to their interaction. The relationship of the audience to both plays- the frame or invitation into the plays and the way that invitation continues is something I've been thinking a lot about the past couple years. I believe attention to a play's continuing invitation is essential in opening a space for empathy, and sheer delight in an audience.

Conclusion: Invitations, Empathy and Permeable Spaces

In April 2013 I saw Will Eno's *Gnit* at the Humana Festival of New American Plays in Louisville. *Gnit* is an adaptation of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. Early in the play, at an empty wedding reception, a disconsolate man, masterfully played by actor Danny

Wolohan, says simply, “Sometimes I get so drunk, I think I’m a whole city” (*Gnit*).

Wolohan then proceeds to play all the townspeople and auxiliary characters in the entire play at once, shifting cleanly from several wedding guests, to an angry mob to a family of violent real estate agents. There was something so delightful in the performance, and so playful. It made me want to lean into the ways permeable character and permeable place cannot simply be a device to disorientate, as it often is in my work, but to delight, to carry us along on the journey of the play.

Working on *Catch the Wall* and *70 Secrets of Marmalade Kittens* these last two years has taught me much about the practice I wish to pursue as an artist. The shortcomings I saw in the showcase of *Catch the Wall* were in part from my own lack of preciseness in the language I used both in the script and when discussing the play with my collaborators. Playwrights often talk about “director-proofing” our scripts. I believe this sentiment misses the mark. We cannot “director-proof” our plays- build a script so impenetrable or perfect that no one can do it poorly. But we can be clearer in conveying our intentions for the plays we write. By paying closer attention to the way my words live on the page, I believe I can better show the ethos of the play itself. I can provide a clearer guide for how the production might be made in a similar ethos.

Immediately after opening *Catch the Wall*, I returned to Austin to open *Slip River* as part of the 2013 Cohen New Works Festival. *Slip River* was a collaborative journey play that led audience members underneath the Payne stage in the Winship Drama Building at UT. The audience followed the actors from place to place, beginning in a classroom and winding their way through a series of small, shifting spaces before ending

up on the stage itself and joining in a final dance party. The play was flexible, intimate, urgent and sweet. It was shaped and shared by everyone who touched it- writers, actors, designers, dancers, and audience. After *Catch the Wall*'s stratified production process, it was so wonderful to participate in a show that was produced in the same aesthetic as it was written. The creation process of *Slip River* felt like an enacting of the jazz aesthetic. After a year of throwing around ideas, fellow MFA playwrights Katie Bender, Abe Koogler, and I constructed a simple draft of a script and expanded/refined it with our cast. There was room for improvisation and movement work as a mode to build the story, and a space for new ideas to be brought into the piece throughout its entire run. The process was so rewarding that we plan to work together on another collaboration in the next year. We will synthesize some of the most successful parts of our process and look at similar models of director/writer/performer collaborative teams who make site-specific plays and often develop work long distance, such as PearlDamour.

One of the most exciting parts of *Slip River* was figuring out how the audience would move through the play and interact with the space itself. In an interview with Richard Goldstein of BOMBlog in 2011, director Katie Pearl talked about the audience journey in their installation piece *How to Build a Forest*. In *How to Build a Forest*, operators build then disassemble an intricate fabric forest over the course of eight hours. Audience members can stay in the forest as long as they want, wandering through or watching from the side. Pearl says, "Making the kind of performance work PearlDamour does gives me a chance to craft an experience that has room for people to find their own private experience within—but because we're doing it together, there's a tacit

communalness to it” (Pearl). This sort of interactive work makes for another type of permeability: the permeability of actor/audience space and experience, and a permeability of ownership over a work. When a play is made for a particular space, and when the audience experience of that space is more intricate than simply sitting and bearing witness for two hours, the capacity for shared narrative and permeable ownership expands.

In the final moments of *Catch the Wall*, Benefit speaks with Justice about her fears for floating off into the unknown. The concern moves like a current through Benefit, Justice and Cleo:

BENEFIT: If I let go of you,

BENEFIT/JUSTICE: could I live free in your minds?

CLEO/JUSTICE: Could you take my memory with you? (169)

Just as Benefit and Justice dwell on the shards of themselves that they leave in the living, I seek to make plays that lodge themselves in their audience as a fire or a light long after the play has finished. By creating clear invitations into my work- a place for audience to home themselves- I can expand the capacity for shared narrative between the presenter and the viewer. With that shared narrative comes, perhaps, an expanded capacity for empathy, and an expanded capacity for the boundaries between audience and story to become passable and permeable.

CATCH THE WALL

a play in two acts

Draft 5.3: March 2013

Beat up little seagull/ on a marble stair/
Trying to find an ocean/ looking everywhere.
-Randy Newman, "Baltimore"

No don't "Fuck me". Fuck *like* me.
-Messy Mya

Characters:

CLEO- A 7th grader at Believe Academy.

JUSTICE- Cleo's friend and classmate.

K'WANN- Another classmate.

KEVIN- Their teacher, white. A first year Teach for America corps member.

BENEFIT- A lady ghost. Fallen but not forgotten.

MELONIE- Also a lady, white, pre-Katrina transplant from the Midwest, involved the Bounce scene.

MS. TERRY- Cleo's grandmother.

SIDNEY- K'wann's uncle. A janitor at Believe.

ARIYEL- Another first year in Teach for America. Kevin's team leader at Believe.

MRS. DARBY- Believe Academy's principal. Played by the actress who plays MS. TERRY.

MR. BECHET- Director of New Hope Charter Management, Believe's managing company. Played by the actor who plays SIDNEY.

MS. DYER- A Louisiana state examiner and consultant. Played by the actress who plays MELONIE.

Setting:

New Orleans. 2010.

Note:

// represents an overlap of the line that precedes it

(The entire set is nearly liquid. There are porch steps, a classroom, a principal's desk. Images and textures are projected across the stage. The stage and the audience meld into each other somehow: seamlessly, quietly. We are not quite sure where one stops and the other begins. It is a space in flux, transitioning quickly from one thing to the next. Yet everything that does appear seems well worn.)

Now, MRS. DARBY and MR. BECHET sit at MRS. DARBY's desk, skimming through paperwork.)

MR. BECHET

We just want to make sure you're on track.

MRS. DARBY

We've been prepping for it since September. Doing the sample tests, and iLEAP planning in their cohort groups. We've been stepping up school culture as well.

MR. BECHET

I wanted to ask you about culture.

MRS. DARBY

We have Spirit on Fridays now, and celebrations.

MR. BECHET

They like the celebrations? Is it affecting behavior?

MRS. DARBY

The little ones like it, but with middle school--

MR. BECHET

You get them acting right, their scores go up. You read that book I gave you huh? They say right in chapter four—

MRS. DARBY

Antoine, calm down.

MR. BECHET

Man we're competing with vouchers now- you don't get those scores--
You think you can meet the baseline?

MRS. DARBY

Nobody's meeting the baseline.

MR. BECHET

That isn't // an answer.

MRS. DARBY

I think we're on track.

(iLEAP test questions are projected above them. Lights rise on JUSTICE, CLEO and K'WANN, sixth graders between 12-13. They sit at desks, filling in scantrons. MS. DYER reads the questions in shadow.)

MS. DYER

Darken the circle next to the correct answer. In question 25 and 26 look for mistakes in standard English usage and choose the answer with the same letter as the line containing the mistake. Question 25.

- A. I must have left
- B. my new gloves somewhere. They
- C. aren't in my locker.
- D. (No mistakes.)

(The students consider the question, fill in the scantrons.)

MS. DYER

The graph below shows the number of sandwiches sold at Tom's Deli. Find the mean number of sandwiches sold over 6 months in Tom's Deli. Round your answer to the nearest whole number.

JUSTICE

(To herself.)
419 divided by 6. Is 69...

CLEO

(whisper)
justice!

JUSTICE

what?

CLEO

tell the story with Benefit in it.

JUSTICE

now?

CLEO

yeah, now. this boring as hell.

JUSTICE

ms. williams could hear us.

CLEO

tell it quick then. About how she's gonna ask us to join her.

JUSTICE

Alright.

(to CLEO)

so Benefit's all like, "Follow me camera!" cause she the best at pounchin, like better than ShakeTeam. But she gotta find some other shakers, like us--

(BENEFIT flashes onto multiple screens across the stage, overpowering the iLEAP. She is muscular, powerful, a dancer and an MC in her 20s and dressed too cute. Something like 5th Ward Weebie and Big Choo's "I Wanna be Where U Are"- the gutta bounce mix- plays. BENEFIT twerks it, circling as the video jumps all over her. The beat pops and she's live on stage. She pounces. JUSTICE and CLEO are drawn to her like a magnet. BENEFIT stops suddenly, she turns to the audience. She improvises.)

BENEFIT

Who in the building tonight? Hmm?

Stand up y'all!

We gonna find some new shakers, or we gonna train 'em.

Stand up.

(She motions for JUSTICE and CLEO to help her and they spread out, signaling the audience up.)

Stand Up!

There you go, yeah!

Now bend your knees and arch out your back.

We' gonna show y'all how ya booty goes clap!

Clap, clap, clap-

Shake your legs now. Don't lock those kness, don't lock 'em!

(She demonstrates. CLEO and JUSTICE help demonstrate too,
perhaps they show people individually.)

Squat like you're sitting, no don't sit!

Yeah catch that chair. Go down.

There you go!

Pop, pop, pop-

Catch the chair

Catch that man,

Pop. Pop. Pop.

You catch the floor if you can- Go!

Wiggle wiggle wobble-

Wobble wobble-

Yeah! Y'all getting' it now!

(She moves through the audience.)

Flip up ya booty, girl.

Don't lock those knees-

Get it!

(The song swells. The projections multiply over the stage, the
audience. BENEFIT, CLEO, and JUSTICE dance from wherever
they are. The audience shakes it. K'WANN joins them and the
song pops.)

When I say Benefit, you say Humanity

Benefit-

(Humanity)

Benefit-

(Humanity)

When I say Benefit, you say Calamity

Benefit-

(Calamity)

Benefit-

(Calamity)

I didn't say to stop shakin'

Whop waba whop-

I remember when Benefit collided with Humanity,

You know I be there still by Pleasure, Treasure, and St. Anthony.

JUSTICE and CLEO

She holding down the 7th Ward with Pleasure and insanity!

(MS. DYER pulls off her work uniform, becoming MELONIE. She joins BENEFIT and they twerk and wobble as a team, continue to coach and encourage the audience. JUSTICE and CLEO dance on either side of them. Everyone pops in unison.

From her desk, MRS. DARBY and MR. BECHET snap along to the Jackson 5 part of the track. The music glimmers. Everyone dances.)

We gotta lot a shakers here tonight!
Y'all think you good enough to join my team?
Boy you could possibly never.
I'm just playing.
Y'all diamond!
Pop, pop pop pop-

(Pop! Gunshot, in the bounce track. BENEFIT falls to the floor. MELONIE, JUSTICE, and CLEO are cut like a record scratch. They move to her. The music continues.

Behind them, MR. BECHET trades his suit and tie for a janitor's uniform becoming SIDNEY. MRS. DARBY dons a hotel concierge blazer and hat, becoming MS. TERRY.

SIDNEY comes down, taps K'WANN on the shoulder and the two of them hoist up BENEFIT and carry her offstage.

JUSTICE and MELONIE follow behind.

MS. TERRY crosses down to her granddaughter. She adjusts her hat as the music floats off.)

MS. TERRY

You ready?

CLEO

I'on't have my school sack.

MS. TERRY

You miss that bus I'm not driving you.

CLEO

Uugh!

(She goes to collect her bag.)

MS. TERRY

I walked twice as far when I was your age. You children is spoilt.

CLEO

We not spoilt.

MS. TERRY

You think they gave us those nice clear book sacks? I had to carry my books in a pillowcase.

CLEO

I wanted a Roxy bag but they won't let us have things that other kids ain't have so.

MS. TERRY

Y'mama call you?

CLEO

No ma'am.

MS. TERRY

Ain't she a tramp. I saw her by the Fresh Mart. I said she should call you.

CLEO

She don't have a phone.

MS. TERRY

Walk with me baby, you gonna be late.

(They walk out onto the banquette.)

CLEO

Mr. Hamilton said we goin' to the orchestra Friday.

MS. TERRY

Your daddy said he'd call too. He comes home next week, I tell you that? How that man work out there-

CLEO

Graw-ma! We gonna go to the orchestra but you gotta sign my paper.

MS. TERRY

Oh I'm sorry baby, where's it at?

(CLEO gives her the paper to sign.)

An' they want eight dollars? You didn't say that.

CLEO

I could go? Everyone else got they form in.

MS. TERRY

We gonna have to do this later. How my hat look?

CLEO

It's fine.

MS. TERRY

You put in that lip now little girl. Put that away. And here your bus is. Gimme a kiss.

(CLEO kisses her on the cheek. MS. TERRY exits as CLEO covertly puts in ear buds.)

JUSTICE and K'WANN enter, running to greet CLEO. KEVIN and ARIYEL enter, straightening the desks, setting up for the day.)

JUSTICE

Hey Nequi.

CLEO

Good morning.
You alright?

JUSTICE

Yeah.

CLEO

You had got to stay at that second line late, huh?
Cause she was your cousin?

JUSTICE

Lemme see your mp3.

(CLEO gives JUSTICE her mp3 player. They share the headphones between them- Big Freedia's "Na Who Mad" or

something similar is faintly heard. JUSTICE dances to it, she mouths along silently. In memoriam.)

JUSTICE

(Soundless.)
Yaka yaka yaka yaka yaka yaka yak-
(She twerks it.)

CLEO

My grawma said they got someone for it.

K'WANN

What y'all listenin' to?

JUSTICE

"Na who mad! I got a Calliope boy she be all in my face try'n ta sit // on the floor-"

ARIYEL

Justice Henry, is that how we speak like scholars?

K'WANN

(Taking an earphone.)
Aw, Big Freedia be Gucci. No homo.

CLEO

You heard that Justice? They had got someone?

K'WANN

You know Freedia a sissy.

JUSTICE

Why you listenin then.

K'WANN

My sister say he the best.

CLEO

Messy Mya the best.

JUSTICE

Messy Mya! Shit. It's Benefit, an Gotti Boy Chris, an Freedia, an Nobby.

K'WANN

My sister said she saw Nobby at Club Caesar's doin' somethin' real nasty.

JUSTICE

What she say?

(K'WANN whispers in her ear. CLEO listens in.)

Oooo!

CLEO

What that is?

JUSTICE

K'wann I'm a tell your auntie you be talkin' like that.

CLEO

What that is, Justice?

(A tone sounds. ARIYEL exits.)

KEVIN

That's the first tone!

JUSTICE

Girl, you don't need to know.

CLEO

K'wann, tell me.

JUSTICE

Hey we gotta keep tellin' our story today.

CLEO

But with Benefit--

JUSTICE

If she... we just gotta make it anyway. Or we gotta have her come back.

CLEO

Come back how?

K'WANN

What story.

JUSTICE

I'm a put Believe in it too.

So yeah, Believe Academy where Jujee and Nequi were from, before Benefit found 'em and we all made it big in her video.

CLEO

How she could find us if she passed?
floor still

K'WANN

It's not all Believe cause the top
Forten. Seventh an eighth grade in
Forten.

JUSTICE

Seven an eighth grade not in the story!
She just find us.
K'wann, this our story about how we get famous.

K'WANN

Man, y'all trifling. Think somebody could care about y'life.

(JUSTICE punches K'WANN in the arm. A tone sounds.

They file to the door of KEVIN's classroom at Believe Academy.
A first year teacher in his early 20s, he shakes each student's hand
as they enter.)

KEVIN

(To K'WANN.)

Good morning K'Shawn. Are you ready to be a scholar?

K'WANN

Good morning sir.

KEVIN

Good morning Cleonique. Are you ready to be a scholar?

CLEO

Yes sir.

KEVIN

Thank you Cleonique.
(He moves on to JUSTICE.)

CLEO

Cleo.

KEVIN

What?

CLEO

It's Cleo.

KEVIN

That's right, I'm sorry. You told me that. Cleo.

CLEO

It's ok.

KEVIN

Good morning Justice.

JUSTICE

It's Justeece.

KEVIN

Justeece.

JUSTICE

No my bad, its Nicki now. Like Nicki Minaj.

KEVIN

Justice do it right or you go down to blue.

JUSTICE

Good morning Mr. Hamilton.

KEVIN

Are you ready to be a scholar?

JUSTICE

Ugh!

(She stomps to her seat.)

KEVIN

All right! Right now the expectation is that you should be taking your homework folders out and passing them to your team leader. I need to see all homework folders out and passed to the front in 30 seconds. Who will be the first team to win the first challenge of the morning? K'shawn, can your team keep their title from yesterday?

JUSTICE

(Hissing to K'WANN.)
Thas not your name.

K'WANN
Shhh.

KEVIN
We have 9 more seconds. Who will be the new homework folder speed champions?

CLEO
(To an invisible student behind her.)
Come'on!

(JUSTICE walks slowly up to KEVIN with a stack of clear folders.)

KEVIN
Oh, the Tigers have beat out the Buckeyes to claim Homework Folder Victory!

K'WANN
Man.

KEVIN
(Looking through the folders.)
Justice you didn't get yours signed.

JUSTICE
Yeah she did.

KEVIN
This is for yesterday. // You need to get it signed every day.

JUSTICE
No, she did sign it too that's bullshit.

KEVIN
Move your clip down to blue.

JUSTICE
Man, fuck this. Ugh!

CLEO
Mr. Hamilton we going to the orchestra all day Friday?

KEVIN

Cleo thank you for raising your hand but you need to wait for me to call on you.

(CLEO raises her hand.)

We'll just be at the orchestra in the morning.

K'WANN

We gonna eat lunch there?

JUSTICE

(To K'WANN.)

We ever eat lunch there?

KEVIN

Stop. No. We'll eat lunch back here on a shortened day schedule.

(Students make various noises of disappointment.)

You must get your forms in by Thursday. No form by Thursday and you'll be sitting with Ms. Kim in the office. All right? Awesome. Now I have your morning message right up here. Justice sit down. But I want you to copy this into your journals today. Your green journals. Ok?

So everyone should have their green journals out right now. Crystell that is not your green journal. I need at least five sentences as a response. Remember: sentences have verbs. Sentences have beginning, middle and ends. And compound sentences have conjunctions. Conjunctions are words like "and" or "as well as". Words like "because" or-

(Bounce FILLS the space. Sissy Nobby's "Spin it Like a Spinning Top." and MELONIE comes in, twerking, popping, they go further and further down, faster and faster. KEVIN is transfixed, pulled away from the classroom. He's never seen anything like it.

She is projected over the stage- upside-down on the ground, omnipresent. A melodic break in the music.

KEVIN approaches her as she sweats through her fraying tank top. Her hair is pulled messily up, kept in place with found trinkets. Her shorts are cut high, they look lived in.)

KEVIN

That was crazy.

MELONIE

(Wiping away sweat.)
Woo! How are you in that shirt still?

KEVIN

I've never seen anybody do that before. Who's your friend?

MELONIE

What friend?

KEVIN

I thought I saw...

MELONIE

(Looking around.)
Was there // who?

KEVIN

It musta been...

MELONIE

You said you've never seen this?

KEVIN

Like my kids play it on their phones. And on the street and stuff. Like at parties by there.
I'm Kevin.

MELONIE

Hi Kevin.

KEVIN

How'd you do that?

MELONIE

Um, you sort of arch your back and then you go up on your toes.

KEVIN

I mean how'd you learn--

MELONIE

I watched a lot of Youtube videos.

KEVIN

For real?

MELONIE

Mostly. And from going out. And I had a friend, she showed me stuff. But she passed.

KEVIN

I'm sorry.

MELONIE

Yeah well.
Well.

KEVIN

I like your // tattoo.

MELONIE

Where are you from?

KEVIN

Work, that's why // I'm dressed like an English teacher.
(Unbuttoning his shirt.)

MELONIE

I mean where in the country?
Are you an English teacher?

KEVIN

Oh, Philly. Pennsylvania but. I was at U Penn. And then Germany. I'm with Teach for America. Like a teaching corps but they pay you.

MELONIE

Where you teach at?

KEVIN

Believe. It's sixth graders. Reformation.

MELONIE

Reformation? // Scary.

KEVIN

Transformation, sorry. Is the type of school it is. Like they're taking over a school that exists, grade by grade. It's an RSD charter? It's nothing though.

MELONIE

You like it?

KEVIN

Yeah? I mean I like the kids. It's hard? And this city...

MELONIE

This city. Yeah.

KEVIN

You just stand on your tiptoes, and arch your back?

MELONIE

You want a lesson?

KEVIN

Does that mean I have to like--

MELONIE

You wanna buy me a drink?

KEVIN

What was your name?

MELONIE

Melonie.

KEVIN

Hi Melonie.

MELONIE

Kevin.

(They shake hands.)

I'm not from here either.

KEVIN

I won't tell.

MELONIE

You look better with your school shirt off.

KEVIN

What d'you want to drink?

(JUSTICE, K'WANN and CLEO pass them as the two walk off towards the bar. It's day, after school. JUSTICE holds a three-pound bag of crawfish.)

K'WANN

Come'on Justice gimme one.

JUSTICE

Boy you wait!

(They sit. JUSTICE opens the bag of crawfish and they snap them apart, pulling out the tail meat. JUSTICE and K'WANN suck the heads, CLEO does not. They throw the empty shells on the ground.)

CLEO

That lady was crazy.

JUSTICE

Shit, she always like that. "Ownee won peh-son a time! One *chile* a time- You- you no come in my stow. You no come!"

CLEO

(Laughing.)

Girl quit, you gonna make me use it.

JUSTICE

She is though! I'm like, I'm no *chile*. What you want? Now.

K'WANN

"How man crawfeesh you wan? You-you, how man!"

JUSTICE

See, she always be yellin.

CLEO

Her son be nice though.

That man? He do be nice.

JUSTICE

He cute too.

CLEO

He not cute!

JUSTICE

Ugh!

K'WANN

He is cute.

CLEO

If you like... like, I don't think so.

JUSTICE

He fat too.

K'WANN

Shut up chicken leg.

CLEO

(Pop pop pop pop pop. Pop. pop. Pop. Gunshots. Blocks away. All three pause, look towards the noise.)

Where that at?

K'WANN

It sound like Desire.

JUSTICE

(Stillness like rabbits. They listen.)

You heard how Keethan's cousin got shot.

CLEO

Shh.

JUSTICE

K'WANN

That was wrong. His momma saw him get did too. She was comin' to the door when they got him.

JUSTICE

I saw when they got my uncle.

CLEO

Nu-uh.

JUSTICE

Mm-hm. When I was real little. That's why my grawma say I be blessed. Cause I saw that.

(SIDNEY walks past them.)

SIDNEY

Mm-hm. I know you heard that.

JUSTICE

That was Desire?

SIDNEY

You gonna give me that crawfish?

JUSTICE

No.

SIDNEY

K'wann y'mama lookin' for you.

K'WANN

I told her-

SIDNEY

She say she wants you back at the house. Now.

K'WANN

Man..

SIDNEY

You tell her I'm comin' back too. Gotta get me a cold drink.

K'WANN

I can come with you?

SIDNEY

Boy get yourself home!

K'WANN

Tsch.

(He runs off in the opposite direction as SIDNEY exits towards the store.)

JUSTICE

Why you don't suck the heads?

CLEO

I don't like it.

JUSTICE

Thas where the juice is! Try it.

CLEO

You remember you uncle's for real?

JUSTICE

A little. Like he was by the car, then he gone. My cousin Benefit was there, we was playin. But we was both little. He got to the door, his car door then BAM. Like bam, bam. He on the ground... Benefit had grabbed me. We hid under the house for a Long time.

CLEO

It was nasty, huh? Under that house?

JUSTICE

Girl, you gonna make me sad.

(She snaps a crawfish, offers CLEO the head as she peels the tail-)
Try this.

(CLEO sucks the head briskly.)

You get it?

CLEO

I got some.

JUSTICE

It's good huh? Here, try again.
(She hands her another crawfish.)

(Police sirens in the distance.)

You saw the video from Benefit's second line?

CLEO

The one 87 had made?

JUSTICE

Yeah but afterwards, at the party.

CLEO

Oh where they got you pounchin by the swingset? That was tight.
87 said you did good too, an she never say that.

JUSTICE

Remember we saw her up at Bunny Friend?

CLEO

87?

JUSTICE

My cousin!
Before we even started the story. She was up there for Raven's baby shower.

(BENEFIT appears, disorientated. Blood runs down the front of
her shirt.)

CLEO

Oh yeah, I remember that.
She said-

BENEFIT

Bop-bop one eye, bop-bop one eye-

JUSTICE

No she didn't, she didn't even do that song.

BENEFIT

Bop, bop, bop, bop, bop- this a Beat!

JUSTICE

No, she did her new one that time!

BENEFIT

Can it be I stayed away too long and made you dip?

CLEO

Oh yeah, that one was tight.

BENEFIT

Did I leave your mind when I was gone and caught a fit?

JUSTICE

But after. Cause she saw us pounchin and was like

BENEFIT

Oh snap! Y'all should be in my video. My next one!

CLEO

That's tragic.

JUSTICE

We gotta make her next one.

BENEFIT

We gonna film *downtown*.

(BENEFIT searches for other phrases to say. She does not want to just be saying this one thing. Where is she? Is that Justice? Nothing comes out.)

JUSTICE

You heard me? We should make up that video with her. Cause she never got to.

CLEO

She passed.

BENEFIT

Can it be I stayed away too long and made you dip?

Did I leave your mind when I was gone, and caught a fit?

JUSTICE

Yeah girl, that's why. We're gonna make like a real, national video for her. In our story. We'll imagine she comes back and make a new video and we all get famous.

BENEFIT

Oh snap!

CLEO

With us in it?

JUSTICE

Yeah. Like we *all* up in it. Cause we featured. Like in the car, and on stage. We at every location.

CLEO

An we got a bunch of locations.

JUSTICE

Like nice ones.

BENEFIT

We gonna film *downtown*.

CLEO

How she say it then?

JUSTICE

What?

CLEO

When she comes back.

JUSTICE

Oh, she say...

Uh, I don't know what she say.

(BENEFIT vanishes.)

CLEO

No, no, she say // Justice- you could hear me?

(BENEFIT reappears.)

BENEFIT

Justice! Hey! You could hear me?

JUSTICE

(To CLEO.)
Oh yeah, what else?

BENEFIT

This some phantom-of-the-afterlife *bullshit*, baby. Talkin' about reaching-out-ta-people, an they can't even see you, or hear you. Y'heard me? I'm hardly a memory, a whisper, not even a whimper.

JUSTICE

A what?

CLEO

Like what animals do when they sad and quiet.
Follow // me--

BENEFIT

Follow me baby! You could possibly never.

(CLEO and JUSTICE look over at BENEFIT. She is suddenly more than a voice. Do they scream? Do they just come up and look at her?)

JUSTICE

Is that how you imagined her?

CLEO

Not so bloody.
What we say next?

JUSTICE

B, we hear you!

BENEFIT

Can it be I stayed away too long // and made you dip!

JUSTICE

Remember when we was at Bunny Friend? You had just seen us shakin, you said we was fire.

CLEO

Y'all // should—

BENEFIT

Y'all should be in my video.

JUSTICE

We miss you.

BENEFIT

My next one.

(JUSTICE offers BENEFIT a crawfish. It falls though her.)

CLEO

We wanna be in your story still.

JUSTICE

We tell the story but it's like a video. Like it's about your video. Like about how we make it an get famous.

CLEO

We could make a video with you now?

(They wait for BENEFIT to respond. She is silent, a memory on pause.)

JUSTICE

We wanna remember you right, B.

CLEO

It's // gonna be--

BENEFIT

It's gonna be diamond.

(K'WANN enters.)

K'WANN

Hey Cleo, your grawma lookin for you.

CLEO

Your mama lookin for you.

K'WANN

No, I had just been home.

JUSTICE

Remember when you told us that, B? It was at Raven's party, an you had just done that-

JUSTICE, CLEO, BENEFIT

Can it be I stayed away too long and made you dip?

Did I leave you mind when I was gone and caught a fit?

BENEFIT

Y'all remember where Benefit collided with Humanity?

I be up there still by Treasure, Pleasure and St. Anthony!

JUSTICE

K'wann, you could see her?

K'WANN

See who?

BENEFIT

Oh, snap!

K'WANN

Why you always talkin to made up people?

BENEFIT

Y'all should be in my video.

K'WANN

Hey Cleo, your grawma say—

CLEO

I heard you!

BENEFIT

My next one.

K'WANN

I'm a tell her I told you.

(He exits, running through BENEFIT. She parts like air around him.)

JUSTICE

This what you want, right B?

CLEO

We could Beyoncé it all up. Like Countdown, but like set in New Orleans. It would be like exuberant--

BENEFIT

Oh snap! Y'all should be in my video. My next one! We gonna film *downtown*.

It's gonna be diamond too baby, y'heard me?

We gettin these dazzling outfits. Not some stuff from Rainbow neither but *cute* stuff from that shop on Canal. And we got a ridiculous editor. This white man who did Katey Red's video said he would do it for free.

I need some more shakers though.

(CLEO and JUSTICE touch BENEFIT's face and her wrists, her neck and her legs, her wrists and again. She is still only trapped in their memory.)

JUSTICE

We could help you get heard.

(They pull BENEFIT off as KEVIN and ARIYEL cross to meet MRS. DARBY in her office. The two young teachers compare notes- discipline systems, performance tracking charts- with a near giddiness. BENEFIT sees them pass, she pulls slightly against the girls.)

MRS. DARBY

We're going to move Friday Spirit back to 1:45 so we can get in more time for iLEAP prep, yes? You both got that email?

ARIYEL

We both got that email.

MRS. DARBY

How is your Trek testing?

KEVIN

I'm still waiting on K'yanna Richards. She's been absent so.

MRS. DARBY

You talk to her father?

KEVIN

The number I have isn't // working.

MRS. DARBY

Ask Ms. Kim in the office. Oh, we have guests in the building on Thursday, from New Schools and somewhere else. Debbie Bouchoux said she would organize this. Just make sure your classes are at a hundred percent. You got that?

KEVIN and ARIYEL

Got it.

MRS. DARBY

I'm told there's been some graffiti on the boys' toilet walls. Mr. Hamilton?

KEVIN

Um, someone wrote F all you Ns.

MRS. DARBY

So sad. Mr. Sidney thinks he knows the offender. So please be on the lookout, and check the scholars' pockets on your noon bathroom break.

KEVIN

Sorry, you want me to check all their pockets?

MRS. DARBY

I'm sure y'all know we have the state board here next week. I'm a tell this to the other teams as well, but make sure you have your GLEs up on the door and you check them off as you go. We need those GLEs. Ms. Williams, I think I saw yours were falling off.

ARIYEL

Trevon keeps tearing them down.

MRS. DARBY

Mm. Don't let him do that.

ARIYEL

I won't.

MRS. DARBY

All right, what else do I have on here?... Oh. Would your team be interested in having UTNO come and talk with you?

ARIYEL

United Teachers?

KEVIN

Can we do a union as Teach for America?

MRS. DARBY

It's just something... When I worked as a teacher I found them invaluable. And as far as your staying power...

You saw we left those sheets in your mailboxes, on whether or not you'd be returning again. And your plans after your corps service ends.

ARIYEL

Do we have to decide--

MRS. DARBY

I think I said in my initial interviews that we were looking for long-term commitments, that we can best track our progress...

Although ultimately jobs will be merit based and that's up to Mr. Bechet at New Hope, since they're now our managing operator.

Ms. Williams, you have PE today, yes?

ARIYEL

PE, I thought they have yoga.

MRS. DARBY

I thought that woman quit.

(MELONIE enters, cupping her hands over KEVIN's eyes.)

KEVIN

Ah!

MELONIE

I wanna show you something.

(She leads him up downstage, still blindfolding him with her hands.)

KEVIN

I can't ride my bike like this.

MELONIE

We're driving. Did you get that tomato bush I left on your porch?

KEVIN

Yeah, that was sweet.

MELONIE

They're drought resistant, and heat resistant, and also if it rains too much too, which it will. You'll love this place. We found it last week on the trash raft, but then I figured out where it was from the road.

(They arrive at Lincoln Beach. On the edge of Lake Pontchartrain, it is the barest shell of the amusement park it once was. The remains are only half structural, ghostly, and overgrown, like iron turned to driftwood. An expanse of trash-covered beach is projected across the stage.)

KEVIN

Is this... where you go to murder people?

MELONIE

Shut up, it's a jazz club!

KEVIN

This is not a jazz club.

MELONIE

No it was one, in the 40s and 50s. Lincoln Beach? Like a black version of Pontchartrain Beach but less kitschy? Check out these pilings.

KEVIN

(Of Pontchartrain Beach)
Where?

MELONIE

What was down the street, there was like an amusement park there. Just like here. And a pool and stuff. But this closed when they desegregated the pools. Isn't it awesome?

KEVIN

Like in an end of the world sort of way.

MELONIE

I know!

KEVIN

Do you not.. This is your aesthetic, huh? Like everything being fucked up?

MELONIE

It's not fucked up, it's just dormant. It's cool, see. People are having fires out here. We should totally have a beach party. We could roast a hog, bring out a generator.

KEVIN

It feels so lonely. Like it was better loved at some point.

MELONIE

Well yeah, it obviously was.

KEVIN

Like it's stopped waiting for people to come back.

MELONIE

You're missing the point.

KEVIN

There's nobody even to pick up the trash.

MELONIE

You swam in the lake yet?

KEVIN

I didn't think you could swim, in that lake.

MELONIE

Yeah of course, come'on.

KEVIN

No what is that like a dead alligator there?

MELONIE

No, it's a piece of wood-
No. Oh. It is a dead alligator.

(They stare at it.)

KEVIN

It's like it was baked by the sun.

MELONIE

We'll just go around. If we go in down there by where the column's pushed over, I think it's shallow-

KEVIN

No, let's go back. This isn't.

This lady I work with is having a crawfish boil. Up by Napoleon? We could go over there for // a drink first.

MELONIE

This freaks you out.

(JUSTICE and CLEO pull BENEFIT on a street in the 9th Ward.)

KEVIN

It doesn't freak me out, I just don't see what's so nice about it.

MELONIE

We could make anything here. We *have* all this space to make whatever we want. Everywhere is like this here. It's freedom.

KEVIN

Doesn't seem like anyone's using it.
(They stare.)

MELONIE

You're not seeing its potential.
All of this is potential.

KEVIN

Right.

MELONIE

I'm serious.

KEVIN

Thank you for showing me.

(MELONIE sucks her teeth.)

Come on, drinks are on me.

BENEFIT

Y'all should be in my video.

JUSTICE

Where you think we could?
get a camera?

CLEO

My cousin might have one.

BENEFIT

We gonna film it *downtown*.

CLEO

Do you remember some *other* things she had said?

JUSTICE

Umm...

BENEFIT

Mel?

Mel!

Did you see that girl shakin?
She moves too good for a

(They move to exit.)

white girl, huh?
Mel-Mel-Mel-Mel! Do it
Melli do it!

JUSTICE

That's when they had that girl poppin—

CLEO

I remember.

(BENEFIT pulls towards MELONIE but CLEO and JUSTICE
hold on to her wrists.)

JUSTICE

You could imagine her something new?

CLEO

Um.. // Look, if you--

BENEFIT

Look if you do this video- even if I'm like a broken record of memory or whisper or
whimper or nothing, this video gotta be diamond. Y'heard me?
Like some sharp piece that could touch into everyone. Into all the hearts of the people
that knew me.

JUSTICE

We gotta find you a camera first.

CLEO

Hey you know what song you want us t' shake to?

(BENEFIT says nothing.)

JUSTICE

What she say next?

BENEFIT

Diamonds.

CLEO

Um, it's gonna--

BENEFIT

It's gonna be my new track an it a be so fly! Y'all heard that new song, right?

JUSTICE

What from Raven's party?

CLEO

Yeah--

BENEFIT

Yeah, That shit was straight trade.
You know Benefit's for *everybody*
after that come out.

JUSTICE

You imagine her good when you get going huh?

CLEO

I guess...

JUSTICE

Hey B, what it's like to be dead?

BENEFIT

Y'all should be in my video!

JUSTICE

Come'on, you could tell us.
Nequi make her talk.

CLEO

It's like a

CLEO/BENEFIT

Balloon.

CLEO

Ha! Like a party balloon, or a hot air balloon?

JUSTICE

Or like a balloon skirt?

BENEFIT

A run-off whisper balloon. Y'heard me?
I had run out of gravity and I'm falling upwards, backwards, battling weightlessness,
helpless, Help me!

JUSTICE

You make her say that?

(CLEO shakes her head.)

BENEFIT

I'm grasping! I'm scraping to stay on the ground and there's nothing, baby. I'm chained here as a memory, living in darkness till you call me up-
I had always thought they were tryin' to fly into the sky- balloons- but they're not.
They scared as shit and praying for gravity. Struggling-

JUSTICE

Stop.

BENEFIT

Y'all are forgetting me. Every time you remember my songs, and what I said at the park, and my face on that ug-a-ly shirt. I'm more and more your memory and less and less myself. Weightless-

JUSTICE

Make her tell us about the video. Our outfits-

BENEFIT

You feel that? Y'heard me? Y'all couldn't even recognize me if you saw me now as your neighbor or dreams, you could // possibly never—

JUSTICE

Can it be // I stayed away too long,

CLEO

Can it be // I stayed away too long--

BENEFIT

Can it be I—Justice // let up!

JUSTICE and CLEO

And made you dip.

BENEFIT

I'm stuck in y'all's history. Help me!

JUSTICE and CLEO

Did I loose my mind when I was gone, and caught a fit?

(BENEFIT pulls against the girls' hold.)

JUSTICE

B, talk about our outfits. When we make this video, you gonna be seen. Everyone in America a know who you are! We gonna remember you right!

BENEFIT

I gotta be more than a memory.
(She vanishes.)

JUSTICE

B?

CLEO

I didn't make her to say that.

JUSTICE

Yeah...

CLEO

I'm sorry.

JUSTICE

No, we alright. We a still make the video. When we get that camera we'll remember her back. She a love it.

CLEO

Diamond. We still telling the story?

JUSTICE

Yeah. Yeah, next, we back in the classroom. And we got visitors in class today. And we doing reports on our real live heroes.

(KEVIN and K'WANN enter with school desks. MRS. DARBY, MR. BECHET and MS. DYER enter too, helping to set up the classroom.)

CLEO

I didn't do no one.

JUSTICE

Oh.

(Taking out a folded note from her shoe.)

Here you go.

(She takes a seat.)

CLEO

Yeah, son.

(She reads from her paper.)

Um, so my dad work for Cleco. Which he like the most. He a *Derrickhand*.. who has to climb to the top of the rig to help with the mud systems. They must be especially a-dept and Har-dy individual to get the many challenging jobs done.

KEVIN

Very good Cleo. Does anyone have questions for our presenter?

K'WANN

Yeah. Thas why you never see your dad? Cause he on the rigs all the time?

CLEO

Yeah he do 14/ 21. Like 14 days on an 21 off. But for half of that 21 he has a second job as a pipefitter so. I do see him sometimes.

KEVIN

Very good. Ok, who else?

K'WANN

You miss him?

CLEO

Yeah. But he taking care of my grawma an me. An my mom too so I can go to college.

KEVIN

Very good. Right? That's right. Good job. K'wann? Do you have a presentation?

K'WANN

I didn't have no one to interview.

KEVIN

Well why don't you.. just tell us about your role models, ok? Who do you admire?

K'WANN

Uh, my cousin Kentrell cool. He went to Southern and he work at the Superdome now.
And his car got Lucky Charms all over it.

CLEO

Oo, I seen that Lucky Charms car!

JUSTICE

Kentrell your cousin? That nigga fine as hell.
(She clasps her hands over her mouth.)

MRS. DARBY

Justice Henry.

KEVIN

Ok, so.. he's a success. Because he went to Southern. And the Superdome? Cool, right?
And you have your uncle. Mr. Sidney.

JUSTICE

Mr. Sidney the janitor.

K'WANN

So. Your mom work at Popeye's.

JUSTICE

My mom work for Lakeside Apartments!

K'WANN

She work at Popeye's, I seen her there. She said
(Falsetto)
"Hi K'wann, how your day was? You want to try my biscuits for free? "

JUSTICE

Shut up with your starburst face!

KEVIN

Justice retain and remain! Settle yourself.

MRS. DARBY

How about we do the U Penn cheer. Or Believers cheer. U Penn would you like to do
our very best Believers cheer for our guest dreamkeepers?

CLASS

Yes ma'am.

MRS. DARBY

Ready Mr. Hamilton?

KEVIN

What? Right. Um, where are we going?

KIDS

We're going to college!

MR. BECHET

(Under his breath.)
Loud and proud.

KEVIN

Uh- Loud and proud! Straighten up when you say it. K'wann- tuck in that shirt. Justice-pull up that lip. Where are we going?

KIDS

We're going to college!

KEVIN

That's right. And who are we?

KIDS

We are Believers!

KEVIN

And if we believe, what can Believe do for us?

KIDS

Give us the tools to succeed!

KEVIN

What are those tools?

KIDS

(Slightly disorganized, like a round that is off.)
Respect.. discipline, perseverance.

KEVIN

Say it again!

KIDS

Respect, discipline, and perseverance!

MR. BECHET

Very impressive!

KEVIN

I think I'm gonna be sick.

(KEVIN runs from the classroom as it dismantles itself, students and administrators scattering.

ARIYEL enters with a pop-up bar and a stack of Bulldog pint glasses. KEVIN vomits offstage. He wipes his mouth with his tie, then realizing what he has done attempts to take the tie off.)

ARIYEL

You ok?

KEVIN

Man, I think I just hit it too hard last night. There was this bounce thing, in this abandoned warehouse on St. Bernard. Like a bakery or something?

ARIYEL

How do you have the energy to go out? You're a madman.

KEVIN

I know. It's this girl. You want another?

ARIYEL

Did you see Justice Henry booty poppin' at lunch today?

KEVIN

Oh my god, no.

ARIYEL

Ms. Bouchoux broke it up, but not before her cousin from Forten ran straight across the blacktop and decked her for it.

KEVIN

Jesus. She wrote the craziest story for our writing prompt yesterday. It was like, it was raining, and her dad was supposed to come get her from school but he couldn't hold an umbrella cause he had no arms.

ARIYEL

Didn't they just have a death in the family?

KEVIN

Yeah, I think. It was like a sister, or a cousin or something? I think she was famous.

(BENEFIT appears, disorientated.)

BENEFIT

What is this, Uptown? Who called me up here?

(She sees KEVIN and ARIYEL and waits for them to remember her something to say. They don't see her.)

Oh y'all could possibly never.

ARIYEL

Have you turned in your commitment sheet for next year?

KEVIN

Not yet. I got a buddy at Pride who was talking about an opening.

ARIYEL

You wanna stay in the same place though, to really have an impact. I mean unless it's totally unmanageable.

KEVIN

This isn't unmanageable?

ARIYEL

My friend at Success has a student she's gotta sit on at least once a week.

BENEFIT

Y'all remembered me here then you not gonna talk about me?

ARIYEL

He stabbed her in the leg with a compass on Tuesday.

BENEFIT

Talk to me!

KEVIN

Jesus. You know what you're gonna do after?

ARIYEL

What? This is the after. Right. I went to school. I made a choice.

KEVIN

To get stabbed with a compass?

BENEFIT

Hey. Lil'boy!

ARIYEL

Why, what are you doing?

BENEFIT

Fine I'm a peace out if you dumb-ass not gonna--

KEVIN

I was thinking about Paris.

BENEFIT and ARIYEL

Paris?

KEVIN

Yeah, or New York. I thought I would move there after UPenn, then I did that Fulbright.

BENEFIT

New York, huh?

ARIYEL

Right.

Y'all could just float away.

KEVIN

This place is wild. But to live, to have kids here?

ARIYEL

Yeah but to say you did something. I mean, it's gonna change. Their scores are going up and that's going to make this huge... like in five or ten years. To say, that was me. Or they could come back. Be like, Ms. Williams, that was you. You changed my life.

KEVIN

They're not gonna say that.

ARIYEL

No, they're not gonna say that. They're total fucks. No they're not.

KEVIN

I'm picturing you as a spinster schoolmarm.

ARIYEL

Shut up.

KEVIN

You ever been to Paris?

BENEFIT

Take me with you.
You heard me, son?

ARIYEL

I'm not gonna be a spinster.
I got all this, I got options.

KEVIN

You work eighty hours a week.

ARIYEL

You're seeing someone.

BENEFIT

Hey look I wanna live inside your what else.

KEVIN

I like the energy here. Kids too. // It's kind of electric.

BENEFIT

Where else have you seen, son?

KEVIN

I looked too, into like educational consulting. I got friends in the Bay Area--

BENEFIT

Show me!

(She touches the teachers' cheeks. Their spines grow cold and their chests fill up
with helium.)

ARIYEL

Huhg!

KEVIN

Nguh!

BENEFIT

Show me how to move like that. Y'all can just dance on out of here huh? Y'all could be
my compass I bet. You feel that? Hear me. Help me!

(She vanishes. KEVIN and ARIYEL fall in on each other.)

ARIYEL
What was that?
Shit.
I think my boob fell asleep,
can they do that?
You smell that?

KEVIN
You alright?
That was like a...
I feel like my heart stopped.
My heart didn't stop did it?
You want another?

(They stumble off with the bar as Fly Boy Keno's "Buckle dem Shoes" begins, softly.

Payless Shoes. JUSTICE enters with shoes on her hands.)

JUSTICE
Camera phone camera test. This a test video, for 87 an Reedy an Meaka an Ro—

CLEO
(Offstage.)
And Ms. Bouchoux!

JUSTICE
And Ms. Bouchoux too. Cause you the best language immersion teacher ever! You could possibly never!

("Buckle Dem Shoes" grows louder. JUSTICE dancing in Payless is projected onto MS. TERRY's front porch. JUSTICE twerks it, circling, with the shoes. She dips down, pops.

Shoes fly at her from offstage. CLEO dances on, shoes on her head. She shakes it, they laugh, more shoes are thrown.

K'WANN dances on, they all dance with the shoes.)

OFFSTAGE STORE CLERK
I KNOW you didn't just throw those shoes out the boxes!

(JUSTICE, CLEO and K'WANN drop the shoes, they run off as fast as they can.

A barge horn sounds from the river.

SIDNEY crosses the stage with a push broom, sweeping up shoes. He sweeps them offstage and re-enters almost instantly as MR. BECHET.

He crosses to MRS. DARBY's office as JUSTICE, CLEO and K'WANN run back in to the classroom, shepherded by ARIYEL.

MRS. DARBY and MS. DYER join MR. BECHET in the office.)

ARIYEL

All right. Take out your study guides and we're on page 34.

K'WANN

I thought we had Spanish now?

MRS. DARBY

You want this effective immediately?

ARIYEL

We replaced Spanish
with iLEAP prep class.
Just until testing is over.

MS. DYER

We cut all electives
for iLEAP prep classes.

JUSTICE

But then it's the end of the year.

MRS. DARBY

We promised the parents electives.

CLEO

Man, I liked Spanish.

K'WANN

Yeah me gusta mucho.

MR. BECHET

We promised the parents a school that stays open. You miss that baseline, your scores sink—

JUSTICE

This bullshit.

K'WANN

You bogus.

ARIYEL

K'wann, that's enough. Open your booklets to page 34. Informational Resources.

MS. DYER

You had 70% below basic last year.

MRS. DARBY

Forten had 70%! We didn't have 5th and 6th yet, so how you could say // that they-

MR. BECHET

They need to catch up. You want them to be competitive.

ARIYEL

Suppose you are researching Biomes.

JUSTICE

This bullshit.

ARIYEL

Look at the list of sources on the left and identify the book that would have the most information. Is it A. // *The World of Biology*?

JUSTICE

I don't wanna do this!

ARIYEL

This isn't optional. Get out your booklets-

K'WANN

Me gusta no!

ARIYEL

K'wann, move your card down.

MS. DYER

You still need to strengthen school culture.

CLEO

How come they didn't ask us?

MRS. DARBY

Band strengthens school culture, and Spanish. Electives.

JUSTICE

They liars!

ARIYEL

Enough!

MR. BECHET

Raised test scores and raised confidence build school culture. We get better scores we can get brighter students. // They could achieve-

K'WANN

My friend Darren at Hynes,
he say they got beaucoup stuff.
They got band and theatre, and
they learn all in French.

Yaka yaka yaka yaka
Yaka yaka yaka yaka yaka yaka
Ya yaka- This hoe here done // made me mad
I'm a take her outside...

CLEO

Ms. Williams I'm sick. I
gotta go to the office.

JUSTICE

Yeah, Ms. Williams. I'm sick
too. You gotta get me out this
classroom before I hurt
somebody.

MRS. DARBY

(Hearing the ruckus.)
Excuse me.
(She leaves her office and heads to the classroom.)

ARIYEL

You are not sick. Sit down.

(The din of the classroom grows greater.)

K'wann, no- Stop. Get out your study guides- three seconds. Crystell! I can see you!

(The melee grows as the class begins to bicker. CLEO stomps in
her chair. JUSTICE pushes her book to the floor as MRS. DARBY
enters the room.

Sudden stillness. MRS. DARBY surveys them with calculated
disgust.)

MRS. DARBY

How sad. You are the oldest scholars in this school. You should be an example to everyone else but here you are, acting like babies.

K'WANN

(under his breath)
Eighth grade the oldest.

MRS. DARBY

Eighth grade and seventh grade are in Forten! Upstairs. That's not our school. We are Believe. Believers are scholars. Your little brothers and sisters know Believers are scholars cause they been in this school longer than y'all have. K'wann. I might have to pull your little brother in here so he can show Dartmouth how they could act right. Hm? What you think?
Put Your Hand Down!

(The class holds their breath.)

You see how they act up in Forten? Why you think they're getting replaced? It is an *honor* to be a Believer. And if I ever see you being so disrespectful again- to Ms. Williams or *any* teacher in this school, y'all will be running the stairs for the rest of the week. No Spirit. No parties. Do you understand?

CLASS

Yes ma'am.

MRS. DARBY

Ms. Williams.
(She leaves the classroom. Silence.)

CLEO

Ms. Williams? They really replacing those children upstairs?

ARIYEL

She means that Believe Academy is replacing Forten. The scholars will remain the same though, next year. Unless they go to a different school.

K'WANN

But they not scholars up there, huh?

JUSTICE

Ms. Williams, my cousin in Forten. Will she be ok?

ARIYEL

They're—fine. They'll all be fine. It's a different school, we've just got different methods of teaching.

K'WANN

They get Spanish up there?

ARIYEL

I don't know.

JUSTICE

Ms. Williams, how you learn to be a teacher?

ARIYEL

Um, I went to camp.

K'WANN

Camp?

ARIYEL

In Atlanta.

CLEO

What was your camp like?

(KEVIN, BENEFIT and MR. BECHET enter as participants in Teach For America's Atlanta Summer Institute. They stand behind ARIYEL, in a line. MS. DYER enters as a TFA trainer.)

MS. DYER

Straight silent serious. That is what we are practicing. We will march in this line and we will march correctly until it is absolutely flawless. Straight, silent and serious are the criteria for a good line. Until we get it right and until we have one hundred percent we will practice in this hallway. Is there something funny Mr. Hamilton?

KEVIN

Uh, no ma'am.

MS. DYER

Good. Now tuck in your shirt.

(KEVIN does so.)

And as we do this, I do not want to hear any, “Why we gotta do this again? Ms. Dyer be mean.” Because that is not how you speak like scholars and that is not the directive.

K’WANN

That’s how they talked t’ *you*?

MS. DYER

And before we even start line practice we need to check ourselves. Check now. Is your shirt tucked in? Is your belt right? Are you representing Atlanta Corps like a scholar?

(To MR. BECHET.)

Young man, your eyes are tracking me right now. We will practice tracking once we finish practicing lines.

JUSTICE

They gotta teach y’all how to be mean, huh?

MS. DYER

We’re going to walk to the end of hallway then we’re going to turn around and walk back. Straight. Silent. Serious.

ARIYEL

They were teaching us how to give directives.

MS. DYER

Are you tracking me Ms. Williams? Eyes on me when I’m talking. All right. Go ahead.

(The teachers walk down to the edge of the stage then double back.
Straight, silent and serious.)

CLEO

Was it scary?

ARIYEL

It was lonely.

MS. DYER

You got to close in those gaps.

ARIYEL

But they worked us so hard.

MS. DYER

This is what success looks like.

ARIYEL

They were getting us ready, they said, for the hardest thing in our life. They said teaching would test all our skills and our limits. We'd be out of our comfort zone. Fighting to close the achievement gap in the darkest pockets of American poverty.

(BENEFIT breaks from the line. She sits on a desk and listens to ARIYEL. JUSTICE and CLEO see her. They play it cool.)

They said we'd be living as missionaries and foreigners. But they couldn't explain what it'd be like. How hard, how tired, how lost in you all--

MS. DYER

Stop right there. This is a good point, if they're still not acting right and meeting the expectations you've set, to up the stakes. And don't be afraid to point out an individual. Like, Ms. Williams. Ms. Williams we're waiting for you now. And we're still waiting. Look, check yourself. Are you on the line? Are you being silent and serious? Are you showing AGAPE? Are you *proud* of yourself? It looks like we're gonna be practicing our lines during recess today. And recess tomorrow as well. Just because we couldn't *all* meet that simple criteria. We're gonna have to do better next time. Turn to a fellow scholar and tell them next time we'll have to do better.

KEVIN

(To MR. BECHET.)

Next time we'll have to do better.

(MR. BECHET stifles a laugh as ARIYEL begins to cry. She sucks in her tears, trying to control herself.)

KEVIN

Are you ok?

MS. DYER

(To MR. BECHET.)

It's not funny. And there was no expectation to laugh.

KEVIN

Ariyel.

(ARIYEL tries to talk, sucking in gasps of air, sniffing. Tears roll down her face. She cannot speak.)

MS. DYER

Ms. Williams, do you need to step out of line?

ARIYEL

(Gasping.)

If- I- yes-

K'WANN

(Handing her a Kleenex.)

Here-

MS. DYER

Young man she does not need your help.

JUSTICE

But she cryin.

MS. DYER

You will have lots of situations like this. You cannot let other scholars break from the directive-

JUSTICE

She's not a scholar!

(The tone sounds. BENEFIT and The Atlanta Institute scatter. ARIYEL tries to collect herself. The students line up to shake her hand.)

ARIYEL

Um, alright. So, just remember we have practice testing in the morning tomorrow. So you need to be on time. You'll be in here in the morning for math and science, and then Ms. Bouchoux and // Mr. Hamilton--

CLEO

Ms. Williams, I hope you feel better.

ARIYEL

Thank you, um.. Tell me one thing you learned today.

CLEO

I had learned... just cause you grown doesn't mean you get treated grown.

ARIYEL

Um, Justice-

JUSTICE

Buenos tardes, amigo!

ARIYEL

Will you have your mom sign that paper I gave you? You're gonna need it if we wanna put you in advanced math.

(JUSTICE nods.)

Great.

JUSTICE

Getcha getcha getcha getcha getcha getcha-

(Deja Vu's "Getcha Getcha" is heard, grainy and blown out, as if played off of somebody's phone. KEVIN enters.)

K'WANN

Buenos noches, amigo!

KEVIN

K'wann, you still owe me your reading response.

K'WANN

Man.

(K'WANN slumps into a desk as JUSTICE and CLEO move out of the classroom. KEVIN sits at a desk, grading papers.

ARIYEL goes off to make copies.)

CLEO and JUSTICE

She bout ta getcha getcha getcha g-g-g-getcha.

She bout ta getcha getcha getcha

(JUSTICE dances in a little circle to the song. CLEO holds the mp3 player above her head. They swiggle. CLEO catches the wall as JUSTICE raises her school skirt.

They dance in the hall, for a moment in unison.

MRS. DARBY, MR. BECHET and MS. DYER enter.

The girls see them a second too late. JUSTICE drops her skirt down and CLEO pockets her mp3 player. They stand very still.)

MRS. DARBY

Give it to me.

(CLEO hands her the mp3 player.)

Do you have a reason to be in this hallway now?

(The girls shake their heads. They shuffle away, their steps quickening to a run.)

MR. BECHET

If that's an example of school culture...

MRS. DARBY

That's an example of school being out. You want me to make 'em not shake on their own time?

MR. BECHET

I want you to teach them about self-respect. If I saw my daughter do that.

MRS. DARBY

Your daughter goes to Dominican. I've suspended plenty a girls who ended up there so don't tell me they saints neither. They're children.

MR. BECHET

I mean we had that when I was coming up- DJ Jimi, and Jubilee. And nobody danced like that.

MRS. DARBY

(To MS. DYER.)

You want to show me that portal connection on the state's site?

MS. DYER

Yeah, real quickly.

(MS. DYER and MRS. DARBY exit. ARIYEL enters with her copies.)

MR. BECHET

Ms. Williams. You saw my email?

ARIYEL

Um, about the Aspiring Principal Program?

MR. BECHET

New Hope would very much like to see you in the vetting process.

ARIYEL

You need a year of being team leader, right?

MR. BECHET

You're a team leader now.

ARIYEL

Our whole section is new.

MR. BECHET

Look we have the opportunity to expand with the RSD in two years. We're going to be looking for founders.

ARIYEL

I mean I've only been teaching for six months. My classroom management--

MR. BECHET

We're not looking for classroom leaders. We're looking for founders. You're motivated, and bright. You've shown a commitment to this city. We need innovators of color, people who can deliver results. Looking at your Trek scores--

ARIYEL

They just had the room they could grow. I didn't // do anything.

MR. BECHET

No, no baby, now don't give me that. You gotta take credit where credit is due. Applications are due in a week, alright? I'm expect to see yours on top of the pile.

(He exits.)

ARIYEL

Shit.

(She exits in the opposite direction.)

(In the classroom, KEVIN grades papers. He eats baklava.
K'WANN stares at the blank paper on his desk.)

K'WANN

What that is?

Baklava.	KEVIN
What baklava is?	K'WANN
What. Is.	KEVIN
What is baklava.	K'WANN
It's a dessert.	KEVIN
I can have some?	K'WANN
<i>Can I-</i>	KEVIN
Can I have // some?	K'WANN
No. You're in work detention.	KEVIN
Tch, man.	K'WANN
You want me to make it longer? Write your response.	KEVIN
It taste good?	K'WANN
Is that a question or a statement?	KEVIN
Tch, man it do though? It look crunchy.	K'WANN

(KEVIN does not respond. K'WANN puts his head on his desk. Silence. KEVIN works. K'WANN stares at his hand as it goes over and below and over the edge of the desk. ARIYEL enters.)

ARIYEL

Hey, are you going to that TFA social hour?

KEVIN

Are you?

ARIYEL

Yeah, I--

(lowering her voice)

You remember that guy from Science and Math, like that alum who gave the opening address?

KEVIN

From last June? No.

ARIYEL

He was from Houston, he had these amazing- anyway. My friend Keisha who's there said he was going-

KEVIN

So what you want me to be your wingman?

ARIYEL

He did a Fulbright too, to like Nairobi to learn about folk customs or social justice blah blah blah. You could talk about the program. And then me, and how great I am.

KEVIN

My program was totally different.

ARIYEL

Come on!

KEVIN

I'm gonna take my own car.

ARIYEL

Yes!

(She leaves.)

K'WANN

You and Ms. Williams goin' on a date?

KEVIN

No.

K'WANN

Oh, cause she goin' on a date with that swoll man she say. Ms. Williams married?

KEVIN

That's not your-

K'WANN

You like her?

KEVIN

She's my friend.

K'WANN

You can't let girls be your friend, for real. My dad say. Cause pigeons will drop you. Pigeons is-

KEVIN

Stop! Show me what you have so far.

(K'WANN brings him his paper. He has only copied the prompt from the board.)

KEVIN

Really? This is it? You didn't write anything here.

K'WANN

I wrote what's on the board.

KEVIN

That's not-

K'WANN

I didn't know what to say.

KEVIN

Go home.

K'WANN

No come on Mr. Hamilton. I didn't know.

KEVIN

You didn't do it.

K'WANN

I didn't know what to...

KEVIN

Fine. Look.

(Reading.)

In chapter 3, Ponyboy tells Cherry how it bothers him when Darry bosses him around. Can you think of a time you felt bossed around or bossed around others? How did it make you feel?

(Beat.)

K'WANN

When my brother Shrivell play football he always tell me I can't play. Even when I say I'm a give him my chip money.

KEVIN

And how does it make you feel?

K'WANN

Mad. Cause I'm real good at football. I'm better than his is. You seen me right?

KEVIN

So why don't you write that down.

K'WANN

You seen me outside? I can throw it so far. I'm like Brees or Vilma. Like y'all don't even notice me, then bow!

KEVIN

K'wann, write that down.

K'WANN

How?

KEVIN

With the first thing you said. About your brother. Write that.

K'WANN

Yeah but how?

KEVIN

The first sentence. What did you say?

K'WANN

My brother don't let me play football with them.

KEVIN

(Writing the sentence on the board.)
Like this.

(K'WANN copies it.)

K'WANN

Then what?

KEVIN

Why does that bother you, or how does that make you feel?

K'WANN

Mad. Cause I'm better than him.

KEVIN

So- That. Makes. Me. Mad. Go ahead.

K'WANN

I can't.

KEVIN

What d'you mean? That. Makes...

K'WANN

I don't know it.

KEVIN

You don't know how to write it?

K'WANN

I don't know what it look like. You can put what it looks like?

KEVIN

You need to do it.

K'WANN

But how it look?

KEVIN

Spell it. Start with the first...

K'WANN

Just show me how you do it. You do it right.

KEVIN

K'wann. Do you not know--
You know how to... write.

K'WANN

I just need to know how it look. Cause I won't do it right.

KEVIN

Just use... brave spelling. Think how it sounds. That. Th. Th-at.

(K'WANN stares at him.)

K'WANN

Just show me how it look. My auntie coming to get me soon. She gonna be mad if I-

KEVIN

How are you.. How did you pass the fifth grade?..
Do they really not know?

K'WANN

Mr. Hamilton, please!

KEVIN

(Writing.)
That Makes Me so Mad.

(Bounce refrain: "*You-you-you-you-you-already know!*")

K'WANN breaks from the classroom to JUSTICE who enters with balloons. 10th Ward Buck's "It's Your Birthday" plays. MS. TERRY'S front porch.

CLEO enters with cake. MS. TERRY follows her as SIDNEY pushes on a DJ set up. As the MC, he sings along with the beat.)

SIDNEY

Give it up for the birthday girl!

(JUSTICE beams. A bouquet of dollars is pinned to her chest.)
Go. Go. Go. Go. Go.

MS. TERRY

Happy birthday baby.
(She hands her some cake.)

(Across the stage, MELONIE enters. She kisses KEVIN passionately and takes off his collared school shirt. She puts on a well worn one, a little ripped. She undoes his belt.)

K'WANN

Justice, what you get for your birthday?

KEVIN

Whoo!

JUSTICE

I got skinny-legs from my mom.

MELONIE

Come on boo.

JUSTICE

An this Love hoodie from my daddy.

CLEO

Oh thas cute.

(KEVIN kisses MELONIE, passionately. She pulls off his kakis, revealing a pair of jeans, ripped.)

JUSTICE

You wish you had one huh?

SIDNEY

Here you go lil mama.
(He pins a \$10 bill to her pile.)

K'WANN

You gonna be rich.

(KEVIN spins MELONIE around.)

KEVIN

You want some breakfast?

(They walk to breakfast, passing the party.)

CLEO

Look, Mr. Hamilton! Mr. Hamilton!

(They run to him.)

JUSTICE

Mr. Hamilton, it's my birthday!

KEVIN

I see that.

MELONIE

I see that.

(She pins a dollar to JUSTICE's pile of bills.)
Happy birthday. What'd you make?

JUSTICE

Twelve.

MS. TERRY

Good afternoon.

CLEO

Grawma, this is Mr. Hamilton.

MS. TERRY

Girl I know, we met. How are you doing?

KEVIN

Good. We were just walking.

K'WANN

This your wife, Mr. Hamilton? You his wife?

MELONIE

No....

KEVIN

This is my girlfriend Melonie.

MELONIE

Oh-

KEVIN

I mean. Or my friend.

MS. TERRY

Ms. Terry Martin. Nice to meet you. Will you stay for some cake?

KEVIN

Um...

MELONIE

Sure!

K'WANN

Where you stay at?

MELONIE

Over on Bartholomew.

K'WANN

Oh, my cousin Kentrel stay by there. You know Kentrel?

(KEVIN and MELONIE follow MS. TERRY over and take some cake. They watch the party apart from the others.)

SIDNEY

(To MS. TERRY.)

Who that white man is, you givin' all my cake to?

MS. TERRY

Tch, go ahead. Thas Cleonique's teacher.

SIDNEY

That man there? He don't look like a teacher.

MS. TERRY

Mmm-hmm. At Believe. He from Chicago, she say.

SIDNEY

Look like a hobo.

MS. TERRY

(Laughing.)

Boy you quit. Make me drop my cake.

SIDNEY

I know that lady though.

MS. TERRY

Mr. Hamilton! Y'all come an meet somebody.

(KEVIN and MELONIE come over.)

This is Mr. Sidney Liles. He works at Believe with you all.

SIDNEY

How you do.

KEVIN

Oh great, are you with the Forten team? The eighth grade?

SIDNEY

No, I'm with Solutions United. In custodial.

KEVIN

Oh of course- Mr. Sidney. You're K'shawn-

SIDNEY

K'wann's uncle.

MS. TERRY

You been there awhile huh?

SIDNEY

Bout fifteen years 'cept for 05 and 06. Solutions new though. I had been with NOPS before the storm. Custodial union they had up in there. We got the summers off then. Benefits too. How you doin' young lady?

MELONIE

How you doing. I'm Melonie.

SIDNEY

Melonie, I can ask you, you go to Club Caesar's? Sorry, I don't mean to bust y' out in front of your husband.

MELONIE

I used to go over there. With--

SIDNEY

That's right. With that uh... that lady MC. Yeah, y'all was real... yeah. Hey, I'm sorry for your loss.

JUSTICE

(Running up to them.)

Hey uncle, you could play Bop-bop One Eye?

SIDNEY

For real, you wanna hear that mess? Don't want some Warren Mayes? Maybe some Ernie K // Doe-

JUSTICE

No!

SIDNEY

Lawd, I'm just messing with ya. Alright, for your birthday.

(He flips through his ipod, puts on Cheeky Blakk's "Bop Bop One Eye", remixed.)

KEVIN

You were saying you got the summers off before Katrina?

CLEO

(Running up to JUSTICE.)

Juji come here!

(CLEO pulls JUSTICE around the corner from the party, onto the side of an abandoned house and into its decrepit back patio- dusty brick covered with vines. Cat's claw crawls over the house, whose back hangs partially open.)

JUSTICE

(Valley girl.)

Uh, like Cleo. What are you doing? I was totally talking to my teacher.

CLEO

Look what I got.

(She pulls out a flip cam.)

JUSTICE

Ooo, thas for me?

CLEO

So we can film it.

(Bop Bop One Eye plays louder.)

JUSTICE

Yeyah!

(She twerks it, going lower and lower. The beat shifts.)

CLEO

Get it!

JUSTICE

Bop bop bop bop bop bop

(CLEO films JUSTICE, dancing lightly as she films. JUSTICE gets farther and farther into the music, she raises her skirt, dips lower, pouching. The beat stands in for her backbone.

What CLEO films- JUSTICE in a lush, decrepit backyard- is projected on a single screen, somewhere across the stage.)

JUSTICE and CLEO

Bop bop bop bop bop- this a beat!

JUSTICE

We should call her back now!

CLEO

Yeah, how?

JUSTICE

Remember her like last time.

When I say Benefit-
-you say Calamity!

CLEO

CLEO and JUSTICE

Benefit.

CLEO

Calamity!

JUSTICE

Benefit!

CLEO

(raising the audience)
Calamity!

JUSTICE

When I say Benefit, you say Humanity!

CLEO and JUSTICE

Benefit.

CLEO

Humanity!

JUSTICE

Benefit!

CLEO

Insanity!

JUSTICE

Y'all should be in my video!

CLEO

(BENEFIT rushes through CLEO as if pulled from somewhere else. She wears drum major's hat and holds two majorette uniforms, with matching batons, out to the girls. She seems disorientated.)

BENEFIT

My next one~

CLEO

Yeah! This video gonna look right now.

BENEFIT

We gonna have like these dazzling outfits.

(The girls throw on the majorette uniforms. CLEO perches the camera on the porch.)

JUSTICE

Ready?

BENEFIT

Not some stuff from Rainbow neither...

(BENEFIT's song BUMPS- from the birthday party? Or from the past? It surrounds them.)

CLEO

Can // it be—

BENEFIT

*Can it be I stayed away too long and made you dip?
Did I leave your mind when I was gone and caught a fit?
Y'all remember where Benefit collided with Humanity?
I be up there still by Treasure, Pleasure and St. Anthony!*

CLEO and JUSTICE

She holdin down the 7th Ward with Pleasure and Humanity!

(They twirl batons, then catch the stage and twerk. They are a force.)

(BENEFIT commands the stage. She dances with the audience. JUSTICE and CLEO shake behind her, in unison, lower and lower. Footage of them dancing multiplies across the stage- from various angles, in different locations, powerful.)

BENEFIT, CLEO and JUSTICE

We runnin' round Gentilly Park with Treasure and insanity!

(K'WANN bursts into the backyard. The music falls.)

Ha! K'WANN

Ah! CLEO

JUSTICE
Get out of here K'wann, you ruining it!

K'WANN
What you doing- filming yourselves in these people's backyard?

CLEO K'WANN
Ain't no one live here. You nasty.

JUSTICE
Shut up K'*Shawn*.

K'WANN
You stole that?

CLEO
No my cousin had borrowed it to me. Cause she work in the media room.

K'WANN
At the library?

JUSTICE
Lent. Your cousin had lent it.

CLEO JUSTICE
I know. You so ghetto.
Shut up.

K'WANN
I can see?

(CLEO shows him what they have filmed. The projection returns, perhaps on another part of the stage. In the video we see there are no majorette uniforms, no BENEFIT, only the girls in the yard.)

K'WANN

You good Justice.

JUSTICE

You lie.

K'WANN

No you is.

CLEO

Why she not in it now?

(CLEO and JUSTICE take off the majorette uniforms as they watch the footage. BENEFIT slips away.)

K'WANN

Mr. Hamilton had left.

JUSTICE

Good. His girlfriend too nosey.

K'WANN

She gave you a dollar.

JUSTICE

I'own't care.

Tst, my mama had invited Ms. Bouchoux to come, but she had to go to her daughter's ballet recital.

K'WANN

You think you'd get in trouble, you go up in that house?

JUSTICE

You woulda got in trouble. Or get cut with tetanus.

CLEO

Or get bit by a vampire.

JUSTICE

There's no vampires here!

CLEO

Yuh-huh. My mama said.

JUSTICE
When you see your mama?

K'WANN
Your mama a busket.

CLEO
NO. *K'shawn*. She had come by Tuesday.
But that's why she got those marks on her arm. When she was my age she stayed up by the Melph, and she was out too late and she saw a vampire.

JUSTICE
You lie.

CLEO
She said it grabbed her from behind and sucked on her arms. Sucked her till she was white almost, till she shriveled up, like an ole lady. Then it dropped her right on the court an went foop! Up in the air.
We got cousins in Melphamene. But my mama won't ever go visit them.

K'WANN
How she know it was a vampire?

JUSTICE
How she survive then, if she had got bit?

CLEO
Cause she strong. Sometimes her arms look real bad. But she says it's her war scar.

MS. TERRY
(Calling from the party.)
Cleonique!

CLEO
Dang!

(The adults of the birthday party disperse. MS. TERRY cradles a phone on her shoulder as she clears away cake plates.)

MS. TERRY
Cleonique Martins!

JUSTICE
What about the video?

CLEO
We could film more tomorrow. K'wann, you wanna be our cameraman?

K'WANN
Yeah.

JUSTICE
No! He gonna mess it up.

(CLEO runs to MS. TERRY.)

MS. TERRY
Here. Your father on the phone.

CLEO
(Taking MS. TERRY's phone.)
Hey daddy. You coming home next week?... When he say he gonna let that rig go?

(K'WANN and JUSTICE stare into the abandoned house.)

K'WANN
You think vampires live up there?

JUSTICE
Maybe. Or squatters.

K'WANN
What's squatters?

CLEO
It was dangerous?

JUSTICE
People who live in abandont houses.

K'WANN
Like hobos?

CLEO
You miss me?

JUSTICE
You stupid.

CLEO
Cause I missed you... Mm-hmm. My mom had come by. She say she gonna have a job soon. I could stay with her if she have a job?

MS. TERRY

Cleonique! Don't bother your father about that.

JUSTICE

I give you a dollar, you go up in there.

CLEO

She getting a job in the Quarter she say.

K'WANN

You can't touch those dollars till your birthday finish.

CLEO

No she didn't say where.

JUSTICE

S' my money.

CLEO

They like her.

K'WANN

Give me five dollars then.

JUSTICE

No!

CLEO

Yeah-I like livin' with
Grawma. But my mama had
said...

JUSTICE

You gotta go in there and eat something for five. Eat somethin' an show me.

CLEO

Said she getting a place on Elysian Fields maybe. With furniture in it.

MS. TERRY

She gettin' a room in a flop house.

CLEO

Nuh-uh!

MS. TERRY

Help me clean up these // cake plates.

K'WANN

Gimme the money first.

JUSTICE

Go ahead.

(K'WANN goes to unpin her clump of dollars. He slides his hand over her breast.)

CLEO

I can stay with her if she get a place?

JUSTICE

MS. TERRY

Well.

No.

(JUSTICE stares down K'WANN.
Unsure, he grabs her other breast.)

K'WANN

Here I go.

(Neither of them move. K'WANN slips his hand under JUSTICE'S shirt.)

CLEO

No, cause she ain't have a phone.

(K'WANN pulls his hand out from under her shirt. They stare at each other. JUSTICE goes to kiss him but he drops the money and runs offstage.)

CLEO

But she said she gonna take care of me.

We just gotta go find her first.

JUSTICE

Dad?

Lil bitch.

Because when she leave,

I don't know where she goes.

MS. TERRY

Here baby, take out the garbage.

(Lights shift to KEVIN and MELONIE. Blocks away, they wait for breakfast.)

KEVIN

MELONIE

God those kids were being so good.

(To herself.)

Like so nice. And Sidney said he like
played with the Meters. The Meters!
Crazy.
Why aren't they like that with us, huh?
Mel?

*Can it be I stayed away too
long and made you dip.
What?
Did I leave your mind when I
was gone and caught a fit?*

(ARIYEL enters.)

ARIYEL

Hey, sorry I'm late.

KEVIN

Hey! Guess where we went.

MELONIE

*Remember when Benefit
collided with Humanity.*

ARIYEL

Hi, I'm Ariyel.

KEVIN

By Cleo Martin's house for Justice's—

MELONIE

Hi, Melonie.

KEVIN

Oh! Sorry. She's the dancer.
Are you ok?

MELONIE

*I be up there still, by
Treasure, Pleasure...*

ARIYEL

Oh you're like- like with the— oh no way!

MELONIE

Yeah I had this friend, I did it with.

(BENEFIT appears.)

BENEFIT

Mel-Mel-Mel-Mel!

(MELONIE hears BENEFIT as an echo.)

ARIYEL

Yeah, I saw Big Freed-i-a?

Do it Melli do it!
She moves too good
for a white girl, huh?

MELONIE

Big Freedia.

ARIYEL

Yeah at like the Brooklyn Bowl last year?

BENEFIT

Oh yeah. Y'all the ones
who could go anywhere.

MELONIE

You hear that?

KEVIN

You should come out to a show.

ARIYEL

I cannot dance as fast as the women down here. It's like they have their booty on fast
forward.

BENEFIT

Hey Mel.

MELONIE

You just gotta practice a lot.

BENEFIT

Melli Mel.

MELONIE

I'm teaching him.

ARIYEL

Shut up.

KEVIN

That's a lie.

MELONIE

No, here.

(She plays 5th Ward Weebie's "I Wanna be Where U Are" from her phone, goes
up on her toes.)

KEVIN

Mel--

MELONIE

No, just try it. Brace yourself on the table there. Then you're up on your toes.
It's like a hurricane.

No, I dunno why...

BENEFIT

It's like a beat moving through you.
Like-
(She dances.)

It's like a beat moving through you
*Like a like a like a like a like a like a
like a hurricane. Beat so big it's in
your heart an you be going insane!*

(BENEFIT touches ARIYEL and KEVIN. They gasp in like ice.)

BENEFIT

Girl free me.

KEVIN/ARIYEL

What are you?

BENEFIT

Tell me how they could leave out of here and not sail up off the ground?

KEVIN/ARIYEL

Melonie-

BENEFIT

Hey! Melli Mel, you could see me?

(MELONIE sees them, arrested.)

MELONIE

Y'all sounded just like...

BENEFIT/ ARIYEL/ KEVIN

Girl why you wildin out with so much success?
And what are you hanging around him for?

KEVIN

Hey.

BENEFIT/ ARIYEL/ KEVIN

You can see me now?

(MELONIE touches ARIYEL and KEVIN's face, their wrists and
their neck. With her fingers she lightly looks into their mouths.)

MELONIE

You're not here.

BENEFIT

Yeah I am, boo.

BENEFIT/ ARIYEL/ KEVIN

My cousin wanted to honor me. She had me trapped in a memory. Trying to make me...

ARIYEL

But I'm a break free.

BENEFIT/KEVIN

I'm gonna be

KEVIN

everything

BENEFIT/ ARIYEL/ KEVIN

y'all are.

BENEFIT

Cause y'all have so much weight.

MELONIE

Weight?

ARIYEL/ KEVIN

These bodies could hold me to the ground

BENEFIT/ ARIYEL/ KEVIN

Forever.

BENEFIT

An we could travel all over. To Brooklyn, or Paris.

MELONIE

I still remember you every day- like you're stuck in my lungs--

BENEFIT

Boo, don't remember me-

BENEFIT/ ARIYEL/ KEVIN

See me! I'm all gravity now.

(MELONIE touches through KEVIN and ARIYEL. She reaches BENEFIT.)

BENEFIT

Touch me. You feel that?

BENEFIT/ARIYEL/KEVIN

I can't sail away.

END ACT I

ACT II

(KEVIN and BENEFIT stand center stage, her arm round his waist. CLEO, JUSTICE and K'WANN watch them from their desks.)

KEVIN/ BENEFIT

I wanna give a shout-out to all the people who brought me up in this world. Who had schooled me right on music and life.

KEVIN

I'm talking about you Magnolia Shorty, Vockah Redu and Ms. Keedy Black. Katey Red, Big Freedia the Queen Diva, Cheeky Blakk and Nicky Da B. I'm saying Messy Mya, Hot Boi Johnny, Deja Vu an Polo-Tee.

BENEFIT

Crowd Mova Crystal, Fly Boy Keno, Hotboy Ronald and Chev off the Ave. We got Monsta Wit da Fade and Jubilee. DJ Jimi, DJ Smurf, Q, and 9th Ward Tea!

KEVIN

5th Ward Weebie, 6th Ward Queenie, 7th Ward Keith, and 10th Ward Buck.

BENEFIT

We got, Ms. Tee, Tim Smooth, Tre 8 and Lucky Lou.

BENEFIT/ KEVIN

And of course, the greatest, that's Ya Boy Big Choo!

(Lights rise in the classroom. KEVIN/BENEFIT is on a role.)

KEVIN

And another thing,
babies,
I know you call us dreamkeepers
But I don't want to keep your dreams.

BENEFIT

Babies,
I know you call your teachers dreamkeepers,
I want you to have them all the time.

KEVIN/ BENEFIT

You make your dreams baby!

BENEFIT

And I'm a make my dreams too.

KEVIN/ BENEFIT

Lil girl, what you want your dream to be?

CLEO

Um, I wanna be the number one shaker with my girl Jujee, and I wanna have my mama and daddy live with me, and I wanna go to college and be a anthropologist. Or a pharmacist.

KEVIN

A pharmacist? Ok. How about you lil boy?

K'WANN

I wanna have my own football team.

KEVIN

See, an that's all right! My girl Justice, I bet you could show me your dream.

(Nicky Da B's "Beating Down Ya Block" trails up from somewhere right inside JUSTICE. The class watches her as she slowly comes out of her seat. The beat grows louder. She swiggles and pops. She busts for a second into a ballet.

KEVIN and BENEFIT shake their shoulders. CLEO and K'WANN keep time on the desks. Suddenly BENEFIT breaks away. She dances with JUSTICE, a duet back and forth. They shimmy across the stage.

The track pops. BENEFIT vanishes. KEVIN falls to the floor.)

JUSTICE

Mr. Hamilton-

K'WANN

Mr. Hamilton are you ok?

KEVIN

Yeah. Yeah.

(A tone sounds. K'WANN, and JUSTICE roll on the computer lab. CLEO offers KEVIN a hand up before joining the others.)

CLEO

Why you think she was messing with him?

JUSTICE

She was talking to us.

CLEO

You think Mr. Hamilton had knew her too?

(JUSTICE doesn't answer. She stares at her teacher as the kids take their seats at the computers, their backs to us. KEVIN sits behind the computers, absorbed in his ipad.

K'WANN plays a fantasy football game. CLEO plays on Stardoll. JUSTICE clicks around Wikipedia pages on snakes.)

JUSTICE

Hey, how'd you get on there?

K'WANN

You gotta use kaylaproxy.net.

JUSTICE

Did I ask you?

I thought they had blocked it.

K'WANN

It had got unblocked. Obrowser work too.

JUSTICE

Yeah son.

KEVIN

Ok, you guys should have picked a snake and have at least two sources by now. So, fifteen minutes. Raise your hand if you need help finding a snake still.

CLEO

I think he's imagining her too.

JUSTICE

Youtube work?

K'WANN

On obrowser.

JUSTICE

Yeah son!

KEVIN

Justice what snake are you doing?

JUSTICE

King snake.

(To CLEO.)

You see this picture of a king snake? He look mean, huh?

CLEO

Oh, thas pretty. Hey you see this Monsta Wit da Fade one?

JUSTICE

Tst that's old. "Lil roast beef, lil cheeseburger, lil double roll oh!"

CLEO

Lil roast beef, out of Gert Town, lil roast beef, out of Kenner City.

KEVIN

Cleonique, I can hear you.

CLEO

(In a low tone.)

Don't blame it on the lettuce.

(They giggle.)

JUSTICE

Mr. Hamilton, I could go to the bathroom?

KEVIN

You should have gone on your lunch break.

JUSTICE

I did but now I gotta go again. I got lady problems.

K'WANN

Ugh.

KEVIN

Take the pass. Make it fast.

(JUSTICE takes the pass and skips out of the room.)

CLEO

K'wann, you wanna be our cameraman?

K'WANN

What, for y'all's video?

CLEO

We makin' one with Benefit.

(KEVIN listens discretely.)

K'WANN

That's that MC who got killed in the East?

CLEO

She had come back, or we brought her ghost back. She wanna make something diamond. Sometimes she kinda crazy--

KEVIN

Cleo and K'wann, what snake are you doing?

CLEO

I'm doing a green snake.

K'WANN

Cobra. I got my pages found too.

KEVIN

A green snake? Was that on your list?

(JUSTICE runs into the room.)

JUSTICE

Ms. Bouchoux just quit!

KEVIN

What?

CLEO

What you mean?

K'WANN

How you know that?

JUSTICE

I just saw her in the hallway with a box of her books! She said she leaving to work at another school. In the office.

K'WANN

But I was supposed to go to her for language enrichment.

CLEO

Mr. Hamilton, you gotta teach language enrichment now too?

JUSTICE

She couldn't even say goodbye to us!

KEVIN

Justice, calm down.

JUSTICE

But she had just left!

(JUSTICE flings herself into her desk.)

K'WANN

You gonna leave too, Mr. Hamilton?

KEVIN

What? No. No, I'm gonna stay here with you all.
I gotta hear these reports on venomous snakes.

K'WANN

That was a joke, huh?

CLEO

You gonna be here next year?

KEVIN

Um, maybe I will.

K'WANN

He a leave too.

KEVIN

I have a year left.

CLEO

Whatchou mean, a year left?

(Shots. Bam bam. Like something across the street. The sound ricochets over the room. Bam. The students sit very still.)

K'WANN

That sound like it was from BJ's.

KEVIN

It was probably a car backfiring.

CLEO

What do you mean "a year left"?

JUSTICE

It always from BJ's.

CLEO

Shh!

KEVIN

You remember how I said I'm not from here?

K'WANN

Yeah, you're from the University of Pennsylvania.

(MRS. DARBY pops her head in the room.)

MRS. DARBY

Mr. Hamilton, we're now on lockdown.

(She exits.)

KEVIN

Shit.

CLEO

You could get down the big map and show us?

(KEVIN goes to check the door. Silence. Sounds of sirens in the distance.)

KEVIN

Print out what you have on your snakes.

(In MRS. DARBY's office, MRS. DARBY and MR. BECHET stand over a pile of papers. MRS. DARBY on her phone.)

MRS. DARBY

Let me know when they clear it upstairs.

All right. No I think I saw them across the street. I just didn't see where he went.
Lord.

(To MR. BECHET.)

Sorry, what were we talking about?

MR. BECHET

You can't bring her in.

MRS. DARBY

Antoine, no.

MR. BECHET

Did they ask for it? They say they want a representative?

MRS. DARBY

The union is coming back-

MR. BECHET

Bullshit. // It's a ghost.

MRS. DARBY

They need a network of colleagues.

MR. BECHET

No, they need better classroom management, and greater incentive programs.
And a culture that isn't this, do you know what is happening?

MRS. DARBY

NOPD just said they would call us right back.

MR. BECHET

They should send an officer over // here too.

MRS. DARBY

I know you remember Capdau in the 90s. The system was crumbling--

MR. BECHET

That was the issue. And that was the 90s! That bargaining system could not work, even when we were all members!

MRS. DARBY

They gave us support. In a time of *intense* corruption.
And now, in a transformation school especially.
I've had two teachers walk out this semester because they felt unsupported. A union //
would-

MR. BECHET

Support is your job.

MRS. DARBY

No it can't be mine alone. Not if I'm on this side of the desk.

MR. BECHET

The ones who quit mid-year are the ones we didn't need in the first place.
And New Hope has offered support.
I got you a whole new set of math and science books donated. For every class. We've had
Kaboom come out for the playground, brought you four new teachers who you say you
love.

MRS. DARBY

Just because I *like* them, and we needed them, doesn't mean they're gonna stay put.

MR. BECHET

I got those smart boards when I said I would too.

MRS. DARBY

Smart boards don't teach children competent teachers // teach children! Collective
bargaining would-

MR. BECHET

We're teaching competent teachers.
Not career teachers, maybe. But they're motivated. And we pay better than the RSD and
half of NOPS.

MRS. DARBY

And you could dismiss them at any time.

MR. BECHET

You could dismiss them too. That's the freedom that—

MRS. DARBY

(On her phone.)
Hello?

MR. BECHET

You want to bring back your girlfriends from John Mac?

MRS. DARBY

They were shooting into the air? Ok. // Thank you.

MR. BECHET

You want those lazy, ignorant women that have been in UTNO for 30 years // and are just waiting it out.

MRS. DARBY

Oh no- *Those* women taught you!

MR. BECHET

Put a call out! Cause as far as I know they all moved on to Houston. And Baton Rouge. Left their houses empty // and didn't care--

MRS. DARBY

No they left their houses cause the state laid them off.

MR. BECHET

The state laid you- Mnn.
I have a meeting at Akili.
They said it's been cleared? You should go tell your teachers.

MRS. DARBY

Antoine, you know how hard we worked at Capdau-

MR. BECHET

Belinda you know how hard I worked to get you this school? My board wanted nothing to do with someone // who's-

MRS. DARBY

Someone who's from here? Who's worked in // education-

MR. BECHET

Who was a union foreman in the 1990 teacher's strike.

MRS. DARBY

You were on the picket line with me.

MR. BECHET

I was a child teaching children then.

MRS. DARBY

And these teachers are not? I think half of them couldn't grow a beard. They were still on their parents' insurance.

MR. BECHET

Well we needed it then! But they don't need it now. *These* teachers have other options.

(He exits, passing BENEFIT and ARIYEL who run on, holding a bar top. They prop it up and set up several empty drinks and several more and a drink that isn't empty which ARIYEL drinks from. BENEFIT moves through ARIYEL like a spell of something, or a shiver. They are connected and not and connected again and they both get drunker in a sort of a dance.)

ARIYEL

When I grow up I wanna be a jazz musician.

BENEFIT

When I grow up I wanna be a teacher.

ARIYEL

A teacher.

BENEFIT

I wanna be Tina Turner.

ARIYEL

I wanna be Michael Jordan. And a doctor and a golfer.

BENEFIT

When I grow up I wanna family and some babies and a rich husband.

ARIYEL

A cute husband.

BENEFIT

A honest husband.

ARIYEL
A kind husband.

BENEFIT
A smart husband.

ARIYEL
And some cute, smart, kind, honest babies.

ARIYEL/ BENEFIT
Babies who love me!

BENEFIT
When I grow up I want another.

BENEFIT/ ARIYEL
Bring me another!

ARIYEL
A double!
I wanna dance.

BENEFIT
I wanna go night swimming.

ARIYEL
When I grow up I wanna be loved- well. Not // by some fool.

BENEFIT
I wanna be loved- well.

ARIYEL
I wanna be remembered. As a jazz musician. As a teacher. As a jazz musician.

BENEFIT
I wanna be where you are

ARIYEL
I wanna live here forever? What is that smell?

BENEFIT
I wanna see Paris.

ARIYEL

Jasmine?

BENEFIT

Brooklyn. London, Madrid. I wanna ride the rails like a hobo.

ARIYEL

What do I wanna...

BENEFIT

I wanna...

ARIYEL

I wanna be my father.

BENEFIT

I wanna..

ARIYEL

When I grow up I wanna be // able to change people.

BENEFIT

When I grow up, I wanna be a ghost.

(BENEFIT vanishes. ARIYEL falls to the ground. K'WANN, CLEO and JUSTICE enter. The girls wear majorette hats like the one BENEFIT had when they imagined her in back of the house. They idly twirl batons.)

K'WANN

Where you get those uniforms from?

JUSTICE

We in band now.

K'WANN

Quit lyin. Those Warren Easton uniforms?

CLEO

Justice's cousin had lent them to us.

(Seeing ARIYEL.)

Oh snap, thas Ms. Williams.

Ms. Williams, you ok?

(K'WANN smiles at JUSTICE provocatively.)

JUSTICE

Quit smiling at me. With ya lil gold-capped baby teeth.

ARIYEL

I'm fine, thanks. I just tripped.

(A tone sounds.)

That's the first tone.

(A staring contest between JUSTICE and K'WANN. JUSTICE goes to fake K'WANN out and he grabs her baton, runs from her.)

CLEO

You got mud on your skirt.

JUSTICE

Oh my god.
K'wann!

K'WANN

(Fey)
Ooo, I'm a majorette sssuperstar. Just *wait* till you see how I twirl baton!

JUSTICE

(Laughing)
You do that too well!

K'WANN

What you mean?

(JUSTICE tackles him. She pins him to the ground.)

CLEO

Ms. Williams we got the iLEAP today huh?

ARIYEL

The iLEAP. Right. Right, are you ready? Did you eat your breakfast? You gotta eat your breakfast...

(CLEO takes off her majorette hat and tosses it aside.

K'WANN struggles to free himself from JUSTICE. He tries to kiss her. She punches him in the rib.)

CLEO

Justice!

We gotta put that test in the story.

(A tone sounds.

JUSTICE pulls off her majorette's hat and lets K'WANN up. MS. DYER and ARIYEL set up the classroom.

Across the stage, SIDNEY clears away the bar and the hats in his janitor's uniform.

The students take their seats as ARIYEL hands out scantrons.

iLEAP. MS. DYER reads off test questions, which are projected over the stage. ARIYEL watches the students.)

MS. DYER

Darken the circle next to the correct answer. In questions 26 and 27 look for mistakes in standard English usage and choose the answer with the same letter as the line containing the mistake.

Question 26.

- A. Mr. Perkins told
- B. them children his store opened
- C. at ten o'clock.
- D. (No mistakes)

(The students think, they look up at the question.)

K'WANN

For ten o'clock.

MS. DYER

The table below shows the number of calories and grams of protein in different kinds of bagels. Kenyatta keeps track of her calories to grams of protein intake for nutritional purposes. Simplified into lowest terms, what is the ratio of calories to protein in a cinnamon raisin bagel?

CLEO
Kenyatta?

K'WANN
Why they call it bagel? Bagel bagel bagel bagel.

JUSTICE
360 over 12 is 30 to 1. C.

MS. DYER
Which is a constitutional requirement for becoming President of the United States?

JUSTICE
I could go to the bathroom?

ARIYEL
Not till we're finished.

MS. DYER
A. Being male.
B. Being wealthy.
C. Knowing how to talk right.
D. Being over 35.

CLEO
Hmmm.

JUSTICE
But Ms. Williams, I gotta use it.

MS. DYER
What best describes the job of an anthropologist?

K'WANN
Oh, I know this one.

MS. DYER
Is it
A. Someone that collects things?
B. Someone that places rare objects in museums?
C. Someone that studies primitive, indigent, yet fashionable cultures?

ARIYEL

Justice sit down.

JUSTICE

No-

MS. DYER

According to the graph on page 5, what are the statistically greatest consequences for children who don't go to college?

- A. They die.
- B. They become pregnant and/or go to jail.
- C. They get signed to Cash Money Records.
- D. All of the above.

JUSTICE

I can't hold it.

ARIYEL

You know I can't let you go.

MS. DYER

Why did you steal that candy-bar from BJ's Corner Store the Friday before last?

CLEO

What?

MS. DYER

I saw you take it. Was it because

- A. You are selfish.
- B. You are stupid.
- C. You are poor like your chicken-head mother or
- D. All of the above.

CLEO

Ms. Williams!

ARIYEL

Cleo, I can only clarify questions about the directions. If this isn't about the directions then-

CLEO

It ain't fair!

(She runs from the classroom.)

JUSTICE

I can't hold it!

(She runs from the classroom.)

(Baby Erin's "Basketball" plays into transition. K'WANN finishes his scantron as ARIYEL clears the classroom.

KEVIN walks onto the playground flanked by BENEFIT. MRS. DARBY stands, on recess duty.)

KEVIN

Mrs. Darby.

MRS. DARBY

Yes baby.

BENEFIT

We gotta keep this quick.

KEVIN

I'm trying to get an IEP, or special ed records for K'shawn // Baudon-

MRS. DARBY

You mean K'wann-

KEVIN

K'wann Baudon, right, from the SPED Co-op? But they said they didn't have them.

BENEFIT

We gonna conquer the world me and y'all. We could go anywhere.

MRS. DARBY

We didn't work with SPED Co-op last year. What was his Trek level?

BENEFIT

Like Paris or Dallas, Atlanta!

MRS. DARBY

Miranda Jones I *know* you're not pushing that lil girl off the slide!

KEVIN

I think he's emergent.

BENEFIT

The world is our oyster!

(She pulls on KEVIN's sleeve.)

KEVIN

Quit!

MRS. DARBY

Emergent. Have you had his eyes tested? Lots of middle schoolers end up just needing glasses.

(BENEFIT grabs KEVIN around the chest. He breathes in like ice.)

KEVIN/ BENEFIT

He could read off the board.

BENEFIT

I want you to be my weight

(KEVIN struggles with her.)

BENEFIT/ KEVIN

but we gotta do what *I* need sometimes.

MRS. DARBY

He and his little brother came last year from Donaldsonville. I don't think he was at risk for retention. His teacher from Forten's not with us this year.

KEVIN

She took her records--

BENEFIT

We can say bye to Mel then we out!

(She pulls KEVIN.)

MRS. DARBY

Miranda! Go stand on the wall! She thinks I didn't see that.

KEVIN/ BENEFIT

Mrs. Darby-

MRS. DARBY

If you think he's an emerging reader and he has no records, then please make an IEP for him. Talk to first grade.

KEVIN

I'm not trained for this.

MRS. DARBY

Oh, no she.

(On her phone.)

Ms. Kim, call Miranda Jones's mother.

KEVIN/BENEFIT

I'm not trained for this!

BENEFIT

I don't even know // where ta...

MRS. DARBY

Baby, nobody's trained for this. Go talk to first grade.

KEVIN

No, Mrs. Darby--

BENEFIT

Oh you just the same as when I went here, huh. And that was-

BENEFIT/ KEVIN

Like last millennium, baby.

KEVIN

Wait-

MRS. DARBY

Miranda!

BENEFIT/ KEVIN

Come on!

(She grabs him and they swoop off, half against KEVIN'S wishes.)

(Afternoon. MS. TERRY's front porch. CLEO and JUSTICE sit with a bag of hair ribbons between them. They seal up the ends with a lighter, organizing them into piles. JUSTICE watches for BENEFIT.)

CLEO

Your mom make hair ribbons good, huh?

JUSTICE

(To herself.)
Y'all could be in my video...
My next one.

CLEO

Justice!

JUSTICE

How come she's not coming?

CLEO

Maybe we both gotta do it.

JUSTICE

When I say Benefit, you say Calamity,
Benefit-

CLEO

Calamity!

Benefit-

Calamity!

Y'all should be in my video.
My next one.

*Can it be I stayed away too long
and made you dip?*

We're gonna film it *downtown*.

We're gonna film it *downtown*.

It's gonna be diamond too,

Did I loose my mind

We're gonna have like these

when I was gone

Dazzling outfits.

and caught a fit?

Not some stuff from Rainbow // neither

But cute stuff.

From // that shop on Canal

From that shop on Canal.

Oh // snap.

Oh snap.

Mel—

...Mel.

CLEO

Maybe she's got other angel business.

JUSTICE

She's not an angel, she's a ghost.

CLEO

What you think Ms. Williams would do if they had her quit her job like Ms. Bouchoux?

JUSTICE

Be a model.

CLEO

She's too dark to be a model.

JUSTICE

No she ain't.

CLEO

I think she'd be like a politician. Not like president, but like--

JUSTICE

Like senator?

CLEO

Yeah. She could be like a senator. For New Orleans.

JUSTICE

You think she got kids?

CLEO

Nope. I think she live in a nice apartment Uptown. She say-

(ARIYEL enters. She talks in the funny falsetto of CLEO's imagination.)

ARIYEL

Look at these beautiful drapes. They the prettiest drapes I ever had bought.

JUSTICE

She don't sound like that.

ARIYEL

My apartment is so big an clean. Cause I don't have nooo children. I'm just young an beautiful. I'm gonna eat a lil roast beef, me. Out a Kenner City.

(She sits to eat a roast beef po-boy. Her voice begins to change from CLEO's idea of her into her own.)

I'm gonna eat this lil roast beef alone. I've gotten real good at cooking for one. I didn't imagine it like this, when I was in college. I planned and I studied and I could *see*- I knew what I'd be when I grew up. Some hopeful, powerful life.

(JUSTICE and CLEO step from the porch into ARIYEL's imagined kitchen. They watch her.)

I can't see what's coming next anymore. I plan for hours and hours, and my lessons unravel as soon as they hit the kids. And I'm trying. Like turning the key in a car that can't start. Again and again and the engine is flooding. I'm like Sisyphus and the rock and I'm failing.

JUSTICE

You not failing, Ms. Williams.

CLEO

Yeah, we learn a lot in your class.

JUSTICE

Then Drake comes in.

ARIYEL

What?

(K'WANN enters as DRAKE, unless Drake himself is available, or it makes sense for SIDNEY or BENEFIT to do it.)

DRAKE

Ms. Williams, I'm gonna take you away from this mess. I'm gonna lay you down and feed you chocolates like you a princess.

(He picks up ARIYEL and carries her over to the porch, laying her down.)

ARIYEL

Oh Drake, kiss me all over. Take me away with you.

JUSTICE

Take me to Toronto.

CLEO

Toronto?

JUSTICE

Thas where he from.

DRAKE

Baby I'm a take you to the moon tonight.

CLEO

Then they got candles around them.

(She lights several of the hair bows on fire, laying them around DRAKE like candles. They burn like plastic. DRAKE kisses ARIYEL as the girls watch with glee. MS. TERRY enters, tired from work.)

MS. TERRY

Cleonique Martins! What are you doing to my porch!?

(DRAKE and ARIYEL run from the porch. JUSTICE tries to make herself smaller as CLEO stamps out the fires.)

MS. TERRY

You coulda burned down my house! // On my porch too, *what* were you thinking?

CLEO

We was just playin.

JUSTICE

We was just sealing the ribbons but those ones caught fire.

MS. TERRY

Girl get home before I wash your mouth out for lying!

(JUSTICE runs off with the bag or ribbons.)

You too old to act like you crazy. What'you think I do all day? Think I'd be able to care for you and your daddy if our house burnt down? You'd go live with your crazy mama in some smack-head flop house. You listenin? You wanna turn out like your mama // all strung out and bald headed-

CLEO

I would wanna live with my mama cause my mama nice and she *love* me, not like you when you-

(Slap. MS. TERRY slaps her.)

MS. TERRY

Go get the mop. You gonna scrub those burn marks off a my porch!
Then we're going to dinner at Piccadilly.
Maybe get a movie from Redbox later.
You could choose. Shit.
(She exits.)

(CLEO kicks a burnt hair ribbon from the porch. BENEFIT runs up to her, KEVIN in tow.)

BENEFIT/ KEVIN

Where's Justice.

CLEO

We had just been calling for you.

BENEFIT/ KEVIN

I got a body now.

BENEFIT

A compass.

KEVIN

No you don't.

CLEO

Mr. Hamilton?

BENEFIT

Come on, baby. I'll help you know this city for real.

CLEO

When we gonna finish that video?

BENEFIT

We don't need to finish it, y'heard me. Cause I'm back! // I don't need to be remembered.

KEVIN

How can you help me know this city?

BENEFIT/KEVIN

Secrets, son.

CLEO

We need you in our story still, B. If we don't make it, an we don't get famous...

BENEFIT

Hey you could tell Justice for me?

(BENEFIT and KEVIN vanish.)

CLEO

B?

(A barge horn from the river. Lights shift to evening, then later.
Night.

MELONIE stumbles across the stage. KEVIN follows her,
shadowed by BENEFIT.)

MELONIE

That cop was being an asshole.

KEVIN/BENEFIT

You can't have that party every week and not get in trouble.

MELONIE

Man fuck that!

KEVIN

Calm down.

MELONIE

That was police bullshit- you know that's what it... you hear what he said to me, that
short cop- We don't have a permit?
We need a fucking permit!

KEVIN

It's an unlicensed bar.

MELONIE

It's a party.

KEVIN

That you have every week, that // you sell booze at.

BENEFIT

You gotta make nice with your neighbors Mel. // You got your neighbors on board..

MELONIE

Who has a fucking permit here? What is this, Akron- or fucking Seattle or Austin?
There are no rules!

BENEFIT/ KEVIN

No, there are so rules.

KEVIN

Noise ordinances, and health permits.

BENEFIT

Make nice with your neighbors.

MELONIE

No this is the Wild West! Where anyone can come- I could come- or you- and make whatever I wanted and // I could be free!

KEVIN

This isn't the Wild West, this is blight. This is what happens when nobody cares.

BENEFIT

No that's bullshit. // I care.

MELONIE

I care. She cared, I cared so much I could cry. Every day I could sob like a baby because I've never loved anything or anyone much as I fucking love this.
There are no guarantees here. I mean people could just randomly...
So then, to say it's no beer at second lines- No brass bands on Bourbon, or I can't have a party in my friend's fucking backyard?

KEVIN

It's Sweating the Small Stuff, what they're doing.
They do it at KIPP.

MELONIE

This is a city not a fucking charter school.

KEVIN

I'm just saying what it's called. It's like you make sure everyone sits in SPARK or whatever and they start to act right. Or test scores go up.

MELONIE

Making New Orleanians tuck in their shirts or turn down their stereo

(BENEFIT moves through MELONIE like a shock.)

MELONIE/BENEFIT

won't make people stop shooting each other!

KEVIN

I'm not saying it would.

MELONIE

What was that?

KEVIN

But like what else is anyone trying? Believe is trying, for better or worse. And the police-
-

MELONIE

But it's just as illogical. It's just as random and we pay a cost. We pay a high fucking price to live like this so just let us // fucking live.

BENEFIT

Yeah she right. I paid a high

BENEFIT/ KEVIN

Fucking price. But still, this city don't owe me nothin baby.

MELONIE

B?

KEVIN

You're saying the price for you to live like this is-

BENEFIT/ KEVIN

Worth my life.

MELONIE

Is she in there?

(She goes to KEVIN, gently opens his mouth with her thumbs. She peers inside.)

KEVIN

Stop!

BENEFIT

Girl I'm here! I told you Mel.

MELONIE

Make her touch me.

KEVIN

Make her get out.

MELONIE

B, what are you doing?

Are you gonna stay here?

BENEFIT/ KEVIN

I can't shake it.

BENEFIT

I don't know the way to anywhere else.

MELONIE

Tell her to touch me.

KEVIN

No.

MELONIE

Can you feel her in there?

KEVIN

I'm not your medium.

MELONIE

It wasn't fair. It isn't fair. You didn't do anything. You were just there, right? You didn't even... so why should you be the cost--

BENEFIT

Some of us are paying more than the rest.

MELONIE

Tell her to touch me.

KEVIN

Just, forget it. It's like a virus, if I can just keep her out--

MELONIE

What's it like to be dead?

BENEFIT/ KEVIN

A balloon.

MELONIE

Touch me.

KEVIN

No-

(MELONIE touches KEVIN's face. She rushes under his arm and into BENEFIT. It lasts only a moment. MELONIE falls back and KEVIN catches her.)

Pop pop. Pop! Gunshots, blocks away. The three of them freeze. They listen like rabbits.)

MELONIE

Take me home with you.

KEVIN

Who are you going for?

(MELONIE searches for BENEFIT in KEVIN.)

MELONIE

I don't wanna walk back alone.

(They all three exit together.)

A tone sounds. MS. TERRY enters, handing CLEO her backpack. She goes to meet JUSTICE in the schoolyard.

BENEFIT's song plays quietly, CLEO and JUSTICE plan with their hands. Recess. They find a secluded corner.)

JUSTICE

Thas like you saw that man Skip, on *So You Think You Can Dance*?

CLEO

But everyone saw that.

JUSTICE

And they was hatin' on him.

CLEO

How they hatin' if he went on to the final?
He went on to Vegas.

JUSTICE

Yeah, but they were talking down to him. Like, “We discovered this amazing new style of dancing.” Like they’re some anthropologists. I’m like, bitch, you didn’t discover shit, we had been here!

CLEO

An that’s like the test?

JUSTICE

That’s just like the test! “Mr. Perkins told them children.” Like I should feel bad or something.

CLEO

It still matters though.

JUSTICE

Whatever.

CLEO

(She pulls out the flip camera and her mp3 player.)
You think they can see us?

JUSTICE

No, give it here. Benefit coming?

CLEO

Naw.. we should just start it without her. Just the two of us.

JUSTICE

Alright.

(JUSTICE takes the camera. We see CLEO projected, behind a school building.)

JUSTICE

Ready y’all?

CLEO

(Taking a deep breath.)
This is to my girl Justice-

JUSTICE

Shh- don’t say my name!

CLEO

I mean Juji, I mean to my girl Nicki Minaj. And to Tamika too, an' to Nicki's cousin Tuti cause she always wanna buck.

JUSTICE

Walk alot ain't havin that!

(JUSTICE starts the mp3. BENEFIT's song Fills the stage.

CLEO quickly pulls down her school skirt, revealing a pair of short-shorts. She twerks it.

Benefit bumps, tremendous.)

JUSTICE

Git it girl! Git it. Show me y'magnolia!

CLEO

Ugh!

JUSTICE

Haha! Keep goin'. Yeah, you got it-

CLEO

Here, lemme see it.

(She takes the camera, films JUSTICE.)

(JUSTICE shakes it. Down. She catches the wall or a planter, the ground.

K'WANN and MELONIE appear behind them. They move through the audience, coaxing people up, pulling them out to the isles. A chorus of dancers. Everyone dances. They pop in unison.

The single, projected image doubles itself, triples itself, a kaleidoscope over the stage. Projected we see the girls in the majorette uniforms. They are downtown on Canal St, at the river, on St. Charles and the 9th Ward- so many locations.

BENEFIT pushes on ARIYEL. They dance for a moment as one before BENEFIT spins ARIYEL off like a bird and vanishes.

ARIYEL dances, inside the music. She can't move like BENEFIT but she feels her ass, hands, she pops it, and drops to the ground, up, and again, her breasts. She turns, seeing where she is.

The schoolyard. Embarrassed. She storms up to the girls.)

ARIYEL

What in the name of-

(CLEO pulls up her skirt. Everyone scatters but her and JUSTICE.)

JUSTICE

We was filming something for Mr. Hamilton's class.

ARIYEL

I know Mr. Hamilton does not have you shaking them short shorts as part of his class. Where did you get that camera?

JUSTICE

We brought it.
Daaang!

CLEO

Got it from the library.

ARIYEL

Give it to me.
Is this how we represent ourselves as scholars?
What do you think those boys over there think when they look at you dancing like that?
Do you think they respect you?

JUSTICE

But thas how we dance.

CLEO

Boys dance like that too.

ARIYEL

Did you—Do you know how dangerous it is to be doing what you two were doing? We want to protect you at school. It is our mission to protect you.

JUSTICE

We wasn't doing anything dangerous!

ARIYEL

If you- You don't even? Ugh!

Go see Mrs. Darby. Now!

(Big Freedia's "Rock Around the Clock" plays off of someone's phone. CLEO and JUSTICE don fluorescent orange vests. They wear over-sized plastic gloves and carry garbage bags. After school, active detention. K'WANN follows them. He helps pick up trash.)

K'WANN

You gotta do this all day? When you get off at?

CLEO

Mrs. Darby said 4:30.

K'WANN

That's forever.

JUSTICE

Boy shut up, that's in fifteen minutes.

K'WANN

You wanna come by my mom's house after? She said she might give me money to go see a movie. An my brother could give us a ride to Chalmette.

JUSTICE

Tsch. Just cause you got movie money don't mean we got movie money. Unless you gonna pay for me.

K'WANN

No.

JUSTICE

Aw, come on K'wann. You don't wanna take me to the movies?

(She hangs on his arm.)

Pleazzze.

K'WANN

Ask your mom. My brother could drive us.

JUSTICE

Like my mama's gonna give me movie money I tell her I got in detention.

CLEO

Mrs. Darby said they calling our parents.

JUSTICE

See. My mama's gonna give me a Slap! Slap! on my head. Gonna hit me so hard she gotta keep me home from school.

K'WANN

Shut up girl, your mom don't hit you.

(JUSTICE throws a can at him. He chases her around CLEO.)

CLEO

Quit! Mrs. Darby gonna make it longer.

JUSTICE

You think it was Mrs. Darby that had fired Ms. Bouchoux like that?

K'WANN

I heard them say it was that man who always smilin' at everyone. Who always wear suits.

JUSTICE

Mr. Bechet?

K'WANN

Yeah.

JUSTICE

That man think he too special. I'm like, you suit-wearing, sidewalk-face-havin kinda bitch. You need to get off your pedestal--

CLEO

Ms. Bouchoux just left. She didn't get fired. She just didn't wanna be here no more.

JUSTICE

Ah. It's cause y'all some terrible children. That's the truth.
Shit, we should finish that video now.

CLEO

You crazy. They had took back that camera.

JUSTICE

We gonna film it in our minds then.

CLEO

You stupid.

K'WANN

I could still be your cameraman, if you film it in your minds?

CLEO

He said—

JUSTICE

Yeah. Yeah, you could. We should imagine up Benefit.
(She closes her eyes.)

CLEO

She not comin'. Juji. I had seen her yesterday.

JUSTICE

Imagine her!!

(BENEFIT appears, linked still with KEVIN.)

BENEFIT/KEVIN

What the hell?

JUSTICE

Alright, you ready to finish it? We gotta film one more scene with you.

BENEFIT

I thought your girl told you. I don't need to be remembered.

JUSTICE

But we do.

K'WANN

Mr. Hamilton, we could see your phone? Please. I just need to borrow it for a second.

BENEFIT/KEVIN

Kwann, no. I don't think I should be filming my students like that.

K'WANN

You not filming it, we are.

CLEO

You not gonna dance with us?

KEVIN

We can't do this on school grounds.

BENEFIT

Now's not the right time. Why don't you turn in your school vests and--

JUSTICE

We're gonna make something to break into everyone's hearts!

(BENEFIT's song is heard, perhaps a later part than before.
JUSTICE pops her shoulders.)

K'WANN

That looks fire.

KEVIN

K'wann, come on.

BENEFIT/KEVIN

I gotta go.

(BENEFIT exits through KEVIN. He looks around for her,
startled. A car is heard, screeching, and then parking across the
street. K'WANN pauses filming.)

CLEO

Hey that's K'wann's cousin.

K'WANN

Oh yeah, thas Kentrell!
Kentrell!

CLEO

He got the Lucky Charms car too. That's too cute.

KEVIN

Hey, why don't you guys come over here..

JUSTICE

Kentrell! He didn't hear me.

(JUSTICE runs towards Kentrell.

A second car. K'WANN and CLEO can hear it first and they turn, like snapshots, a camera flash to react.

JUSTICE hears it, a flash later. Heart skips. Her feet move forward while

K'WANN pushes CLEO to the ground. JUSTICE rushes across the street and Kentrell-

Shots. So Loud.

BOW. Bow.

JUSTICE is hit in the crossfire. KEVIN drops and moves towards her as

More shots.

Kentrell falls, unseen. JUSTICE falls with him in real time.

CLEO claw towards JUSTICE. K'WANN holds her down by her legs but she kicks.

KEVIN comes to. He sees where he is, the school, his students, the street. He kneels down, his lungs fill with sulfur. Michael Jackson's "I Wanna be Where You Are" plays, muffled. KEVIN takes his phone from the ground. He silences it. Lights down. They do not move.

MS. TERRY's front porch, it is sunny. MS. TERRY and SIDNEY sit out on deck chairs. They drink beer.)

MS. TERRY

I ain't never got in trouble like that girl gets in trouble. Not written up, suspended.

SIDNEY

They woulda just whooped you when you was in school.

MS. TERRY

Well I didn't get whooped neither. I had the fear of God in me.

SIDNEY

You lie.

MS. TERRY

I got whooped one time. But it was my brother Ernest. He used to play card games by Forten, back when Forten was still Monroe. He would play tonk and pitty-pat.

(K'WANN moves from the tableau, an imagined ERNEST. He starts laying down cards.)

K'WANN

I would play for pennies.

MS. TERRY

The principal hated him. He was going to Nicholls, officially. But was he always at cards. And selling click-ems to children.

(CLEO rises, as the PRINCIPAL.)

CLEO

That Ernest is no good, // God rest him.

MS. TERRY

God rest him.

SIDNEY

Click-ems was nasty.

(He offers MS. TERRY a cigarette.)

MS. TERRY

So I was there on the schoolyard with him. I was better than him so he always gave me pennies to play.

SIDNEY

And y'all got caught playin'--

MS. TERRY

No! Marie Loutrel had t'go tell on us.

(JUSTICE rises as the imagined MARIE.)

She always wanna tell on everybody. She was way light-skinned, had that-

SIDNEY

Oh I remember Ms. Loutrel.

MS. TERRY

Yeah she an her husband used to live by your mama on Piety. So Yellowman Marie went to go rat us out. She said-

JUSTICE

They gonna kick you out a school an send your brother to Angola!

MS. TERRY

She had this nice hair, her real hair in plaits down to her back. And I cut one with some scissors I' took. Cut it right at the top made her bald on one side.

SIDNEY

Oh! I know you didn't!

JUSTICE

No she didn't!

MS. TERRY

Mm-hmm.

She screamed.

An the principal was right up on me.

An my brother flew up like he'd

never even been there. Principal said-

(JUSTICE, CLEO and K'WANN
act this out while she says it.)

CLEO

Theresa Robinson you are nothing but a disappointment.

MS. TERRY

They whooped me right for that one. I couldn't sleep on my back for a week.

(Her phone rings.)

Hello?

Yes.. this is she.

(MS. TERRY and SIDNEY scatter. JUSTICE collapses and CLEO and K'WANN catch her. Lights shift, everything runs sideways, textures layered over projected textures: an imagined dreamscape. Bounce bumps from a car stereo blocks away. There are horns somewhere- a marching band practice or a second line? It's faint, from an unknown direction.)

K'WANN

What happens next? Cleo, what happens next?

CLEO

Uh, next... I dunno.

K'WANN

She's gonna be alright?

CLEO

We gotta see still.

We gotta take her there.

(They hold JUSTICE up, she is still limp.)

(MELONIE and ARIYEL enter in giant soundsuits- they look like Mardi Gras Indian costumes built out of trash- Big Shot, Chee-wees and Hubig's pie wrappers shake in place of feathers. They're beautiful and terrifying. They chant quiet the first strains of "Indian Red.")

She's gotta go up and ask for her life back.

(The t-shirt shop forms at the top of the stage. MS. TERRY is lit as if by a computer screen, a dream T-SHIRT VENDOR. Smoke swirls from her cigarette. She stares, through glasses, pulls in graphics for JUSTICE's memorial shirt on a screen behind her. The screen shifts for people's suggestions.)

T-SHIRT VENDOR

What you want it to say?

SIDNEY

(Entering.)

"In loving memory."

CLEO

No!

K'WANN

Say like "Heaven holds my heart."

CLEO

No! Justice tell 'em! Ask her if you could come back.

(They pull JUSTICE toward the T-SHIRT VENDOR, the INDIANS dance in front of them, blocking the way.)

KEVIN

(Entering.)
“Gone but not forgotten?” Or like, “gone too soon?”

T-SHIRT VENDOR
Yeah, “Taken too soon.” Write it down.

CLEO
Justice, get up! Say that shirt’s not for you, girl. That shirt’s not for her!
(She pushes JUSTICE forward but the Indians block her.)

(BENEFIT enters.)

BENEFIT
Little cousin?

T-SHIRT VENDOR
Write how you want her name on there. You could put the dates too if you want.

CLEO
Say you not ready to go yet. We weren’t gonna tell this story this time.

SIDNEY
I’ll need four of ‘em.

T-SHIRT VENDOR
Write down the sizes.

CLEO
(To BENEFIT.)
Help me bring her.

(BENEFIT tries to make it to JUSTICE. She is blocked.)

T-SHIRT VENDOR
I only got extra large left till tomorrow.

SIDNEY
That’s fine.

K’WANN
Justice?

CLEO
156

Ask her!

T-SHIRT VENDOR

(Completing the design.)

That's \$15 each. I'm sorry for your loss.

(The T-SHIRT VENDOR vanishes. SIDNEY swoops JUSTICE away from CLEO and carries her off with the INDIANS.)

A tone sounds. CLEO, K'WANN and KEVIN move to set up the classroom halfheartedly.

The three of them sit.

Silence.

Maybe CLEO coughs, K'WANN rests his head in hands. KEVIN stares at his phone, watches a video clip, the sound at a whisper.)

KEVIN

When my grandfather um, passed, we had his memorial at this really.. stiff funeral home. The funeral directors looked like they never smiled, like they couldn't smile. But my family played all this Caribbean music, because my grandpa had lived in the Caribbean? And they didn't like know what to do. And then, my cousin and I went outside and we threw rocks through all the basement windows. We smashed them all out.

CLEO

Why'd you smash out all of the windows?

KEVIN

I dunno. Because we were mad. Or sad. We were sad I guess.

K'WANN

You get in trouble?

KEVIN

No.

(Silence. KEVIN watches the video again.)

K'WANN

Mr. Hamilton?

KEVIN

Yes?

K'WANN

What' you watching?

(KEVIN gets up from his desk. He shows the phone to CLEO and K'WANN like an offering, like an object he's found. They all three look at the clip.)

CLEO

You could put that on Youtube?

KEVIN

I don't... I think there's all kinds of legalities. She's not..

CLEO

She would like it.

(KEVIN stops. He tries for a minute to upload it, then hooks his phone up to his computer. He attempts to go to Youtube.)

KEVIN

Firewall. I can't—

K'WANN

You just gotta go around it. Like see if Obrowser work, like this.
(K'WANN types in a proxy site. Youtube pops up.)

KEVIN

What should we call it?

CLEO

Call it University of Pennsylvania All-Star Shake Team Catch the Wall Super-famous Superstars Class of 2022.

KEVIN

Will that all fit in there?

(A tone sounds.)

CLEO

You could title it then.

(She and K'WANN exit.

KEVIN watches the video again.

MRS. DARBY, MR. BECHET, MS. DYER and ARIYEL enter.
They sit around him, a faculty meeting. For a moment they just sit.)

MR. BECHET

I think we should start with a prayer.

MRS. DARBY

Yes.

MR. BECHET

Lord, bless this meeting. May we see eye to eye and may our decisions be fair and just.
And Lord, bless...

MRS. DARBY

Justice Henry.

MR. BECHET

Lord, please bless Justice Henry. Council her family in this time of loss. And lay protection on all the children of New Hope Charter Network—

MRS. DARBY

And the city.

MR. BECHET

And this city, so that no more should be sent to meet you, their father, so long before their time amen.

ALL

Amen.

(An uncomfortable silence.)

MR. BECHET

I told Melissa Dyer here she was welcome to sit in on this meeting. We'll be discussing postvention services. And Mrs. Darby has some news on the test scores.

ARIYEL

Could you clarify what you mean by postvention?

MR. BECHET

The management of the tragedy. How do we address issues of personal safety and get students the facts without glamorizing this.

KEVIN

How do you *glamorize* // this?

MRS. DARBY

New Schools said they'd pay for a grief counselor.

MR. BECHET

Good.

MRS. DARBY

They asked, also, if we could hire another security guard. Someone for the front door and someone to patrol.

MR. BECHET

Have you looked at your budget yet?

MS. DYER

I'm sorry, am I right that the girl was under your watch at the time?

KEVIN

I was there, but--
So--

ARIYEL

I'd assigned her to active detention.

MS. DYER

So you weren't running the detention lab that day?

MRS. DARBY

Active detention is monitored by a roaming staff member, as different scholars are assigned different tasks. These girls were picking up // trash-

MS. DYER

I know that. I'm just confused as to how they were able to get out on the street if they were still under school authority.

MRS. DARBY

They are allowed on the school sidewalks.

ARIYEL

We were following procedure.

MR. BECHET

Ms. Dyer is only trying to get a grasp on the policy. So she can report to the state.

MS. DYER

I'd like to look at your rules for active detention.

MRS. DARBY

Of course.

(Silence.)

MR. BECHET

We should mention that Believe had an eleven point jump in math and six in reading for LEAP and iLEAP this year...

That's the biggest jump of all three New Hope schools.

MS. DYER

Congratulations.

MRS. DARBY

Right. Well. We should offer them some reward. Hm? A sock hop? Or would that be promoting the culture of the streets? Should we even be celebrating during this time of "postvention?"

MR. BECHET

Belinda, criticizing best practices is not the most effective // way of...

MRS. DARBY

Well neither is discussing test scores when a little girl...

Excuse me.

(She exits. Silence.)

MR. BECHET

Have you talked with her family?

KEVIN

That afternoon. I mean right after. But not, like..

MR. BECHET

I want you to listen to your students this week. And our families too, alright. Really try and be listening. Open.

MS. DYER

You have that detention policy on hand?

ARIYEL

I could show you.

(She gets up to leave with MS. DYER.)

MR. BECHET

Ms. Williams- could we--

ARIYEL

I'm going to withdraw my application.

MR. BECHET

Looking at the application pool...

ARIYEL

I can't make the commitment. I'm not qualified and I don't know // if I'll be here.

MR. BECHET

New Schools, and New Hope both would.. I don't want you to feel like it's our decision. New Hope might not even get a charter-

ARIYEL

It's fine.

(She exits with MS. DYER.)

KEVIN

Mr. Bechet, I think we should organize a... dance. A sock hop, or something.

MR. BECHET

A dance is not in line with New Hope values.

KEVIN

That's nuts, that's not- Every school has dances. At least the older grades.

MR. BECHET

Mr. Hamilton, I would think that if I were a teacher who witnessed a student get murdered in front of the school, I would not be sticking my neck out over a middle school dance.

(MR. BECHET exits. KEVIN is left. He takes out his phone, watches the video clip of CLEO and JUSTICE dancing. He Google searches jobs in Paris.

ARIYEL and MELONIE carry on the bar set up and set it down in front of him. They are several drinks in.)

ARIYEL

I'm gonna go join the Peace Corps. I'll leave the U.S. so I can't fuck it up. Or I'll move to a monastery, or a nunnery or something.

KEVIN

It's not about you.

MELONIE

Do y'all want another?

ARIYEL

I'll go back to Brockton and live with my parents.

KEVIN

They're not firing you. If they're not firing me and I was there, they're not firing you.

ARIYEL

I can't stay.

(BENEFIT enters.)

KEVIN

You could. You should. You should, I mean. I am, I think.

BENEFIT

No I need y'all to be my compass. My weight! You can't be touched by this.

MELONIE

Barkeep! Can we get another? Three others? Can we get three more?

ARIYEL and KEVIN

This was my fault.

BENEFIT

Bullshit.

(As she speaks through the teachers she grabs them in a partner dance, trading and trading.)

BENEFIT/KEVIN

This that boy's fault who wanted to just pop off at everybody.

KEVIN

You can't do that shit.

BENEFIT/ARIYEL

If you gonna get somebody you gotta get 'em. Bow! You can't be shooting at children.

MELONIE

Why do you have to get anybody? Can't you just // solve it—

KEVIN

Can't you just call the police?

MELONIE and BENEFIT/ARIYEL

Ha!

BENEFIT

You really don't know

BENEFIT/ARIYEL

huh son?

BENEFIT

You gotta *fuck like you, fuck like you, fuck like you dance.*

BENEFIT/ARIYEL

That little girl was some tragic accident.

BENEFIT

But the people who got me?
Baby when I tell you...

ARIYEL

I'm so tired. I'm so tired here sometimes.

BENEFIT/MELONIE

You gotta participate.

MELONIE

Hey!

BENEFIT

Let me, please.
No, I'm serious.

BENEFIT/MELONIE

You gotta make this city yourself. Every day. You gotta get up and Be this city.

BENEFIT

Thas the secret.

(Brass strains of "Just a Closer Walk with Thee" are heard.)

You hear that?

BENEFIT/MELONIE

That's the call. You gotta come outside your door. Onto the street, y'heard me? You gotta make that.

(They roll the bar off as CLEO enters in the black, oversized memorial shirt to JUSTICE.

MS. TERRY and SIDNEY enter in black church clothes. They pass a pint in a paper bag between them.

A nice jazz funeral second line, paid for with donated funds.)

MS. TERRY

You gonna walk behind the car? Her mama said you could.

(K'WANN enters in his Sunday best. He stands, self-consciously.

MELONIE, KEVIN, ARIYEL and BENEFIT come down behind him, ready to start the procession.

JUSTICE appears, like a curious tourist. Blood runs down her chest. Only K'WANN sees her.)

K'WANN

Help!

(K'WANN runs from JUSTICE who grabs him up from behind.)

JUSTICE/K'WANN

Quit smiling at me. With ya little—

(She releases him.)

JUSTICE

-Gold-capped baby teeth.

K'WANN

You a vampire?

Justice!

(He reaches for her.)

JUSTICE

I'm a-

JUSTICE/K'WANN

balloon.

JUSTICE

You could feel me?

K'WANN

You feel like the wind.

JUSTICE

What band did they get?

K'WANN

Lil Seven, I think.

JUSTICE

Where's Nequi at? Nequi!

(She runs over to her.)

Nequi! Girl, feel me. K'wann said I feel like the wind.

(CLEO does not hear her.)

Thas my shirt? Tsh, my mama would have to

use that picture.
Cleo!

K'WANN
Cleo!

CLEO
Yeah?

K'WANN
Justice talking to you.

CLEO
She's here?

K'WANN
She a vampire.

JUSTICE
A balloon!

K'WANN
A balloon.

CLEO
Where?

(BENEFIT sees JUSTICE, she comes down to her.)

BENEFIT
Lil cousin.. I tried to come // for you but--

CLEO
You can see her? Why I can see you but not--

JUSTICE
Here! I'm right here.

CLEO
Juji this ain't how the story goes.

JUSTICE
Yeah girl. Remember? We told it before. Nearly the same, every time. You can see me now?

BENEFIT

Touch // her.

JUSTICE

Touch me!

(JUSTICE touches K'WANN who grabs onto CLEO. They all breathe in deep.)

CLEO

Oh- You're so light.

JUSTICE/K'WANN

I'm made out of memories. Like all the things you knew about me had made up my skin and my hair. And it's shifting all the time.

CLEO

You could stay here?

JUSTICE and K'WANN

An it's getting thinner and thinner. Till I weigh nothing.

BENEFIT

Till you look just like me.

JUSTICE

I look how you remembered me?

BENEFIT

Not with the blood there.

CLEO

I saw my mama this morning. We went by her place.

JUSTICE/K'WANN

Was it nice?

CLEO

It was clean. Her neighbor downstairs like to yell, but...
My dad gonna get her a phone.

JUSTICE

Benefit, you gotta come with me!

BENEFIT/KEVIN

I dunno where I'm going.

JUSTICE

I dunno where I'm going.
But it could be an adventure.

BENEFIT/ARIYEL

No!

BENEFIT

I wanna be more than a memory. I wanna live on.

JUSTICE

You could.

JUSTICE/K'WANN

You'd just be inside of everyone else. All the hearts of the people that knew me.

JUSTICE

Like diamonds.

CLEO

Juji, I feel you lifting us up.

JUSTICE/K'WANN

Cause I'm weightless.

CLEO

Don't go!

JUSTICE

B, you gotta come with!

BENEFIT

If I let go of you,

BENEFIT/JUSTICE

could I live free in your minds?

CLEO/JUSTICE

Could you take my memory with you?

KEVIN
Wait, what am I remembering? Which part of you—

BENEFIT
Take me to Paris!

MELONIE
New York.

K'WANN
Atlanta.

JUSTICE
Toronto!

SIDNEY
They're about to switch out now. You wanna start?

MS. TERRY
You do it baby.

(The brass band switches to "I'll Fly Away.")

SIDNEY
Fly away
Fly away, oh,

SIDNEY, MS. TERRY, MELONIE, ARIYEL
I'll fly away.

JUSTICE
Shake with my just one more time.

(Big Choo's "I Wanna be Where U Are" starts up under the brass.)

SIDNEY, MS. TERRY, MELONIE, ARIYEL
When I die, Halleluiah by and by,
I'll fly away.

(As they sing they move through the audience, getting people up, pulling them into the second line. Maybe someone appears selling Heinekens. They guide the audience into a mass over the stage, singing, surrounding JUSTICE and CLEO.)

The bounce track rises. BENEFIT, JUSTICE and CLEO shake it. MELONIE and K'WANN maybe join them and the five pop it, low and lower. They catch the ground, they are upside down. ARIYEL films with her phone.

The video, rough, is projected multiply across the stage, over the audience. The five of them, on the street. In some projections, BENEFIT and JUSTICE cannot be seen. In others, we see only them.

The five now are pounchin faster than ever. Rhythmic, cosmic, a single force.

The song peaks, the beat breaks. BENEFIT and JUSTICE burst suddenly away, floating out like unstrung balloons. The others chase after them, watching them rise.)

BENEFIT

Follow me baby!

JUSTICE

Keep my memory in you!

(They are gone.

MS. TERRY goes CLEO, as SIDNEY offers MELONIE the pint. She takes it. Michael Jackson's "I Wanna Be Where You Are" replaces the bounce track, blended into the brass. They gather together to lead the second line. Lights down.)

CURTAIN CALL

(Bits of BENEFIT's video plays behind the cast. The scenes they have shot are cut together with other more opulent ones- a table of fresh boiled crawfish, Drake, clouds, disco balls. It looks like a rain of diamonds, tremendous. The cast bows and joins the parade. "I'll Fly Away" morphs into "Casanova" somewhere in the distance. The video continues.)

End of play

70 SECRETS OF MARMALADE KITTENS
a play in one act and a two different times

Draft 2.9.5 April 2013

She said she saw the ghost
Of a woman staring at me.
I told her not to worry,
But in the morning when I woke up, she was gone.
-Jim White, "Still Waters"

We are wine bottles.
I'm at work!
- Maddy Kelly, *Kittens, Inspired by Kittens*

Characters:

MAGGIE- A girl at 9 and 19.

TRACY- Her brother at 11 and 21.

JIM- Their father, greying quickly. Mid 30s and 10 years older.

QUINN- Their mother, who later goes missing. Very early 30s.

FRANK- A goose.

2 KITTENS- Ceramic, small, possibly sinister. Voiced by 2 actors, maybe one male and one female. We see these voices most of the time, floating right past QUINN's shoulder. Sometimes they speak directly to us.

SHAWN HEMMINGWAY- Whose family Jim raises pigs for. Their closest neighbor. About TRACY's age.

Setting:

A hog farm just outside Iowa City. Right now and ten years before.

Note:

// represents an overlap by the line that follows it

... represents a pause, a thought, an absence

The KITTENS do not really speak in unison the entire time. Rather, their lines are a chorus- a sharing back and forth that the KITTENS can play with as they wish- dividing, teasing, overlapping. Their words are a game.

(Lights up on a pair of ceramic marmalade kittens. The KITTENS resemble saltshakers. They are joined at the ankle and about the size of one's palm. They speak in unison.)

KITTENS

Where would you go, if you could go anywhere?
Somewhere with lots of sand, schools of fish and fevers of stingrays and drinks made of fermented coconut flowers?
Or somewhere with lots of ice? Somewhere with reindeer?
Would you like to dine with royalty?
Watch the Grand Prix with the prince of Monaco?
Sail to Gibraltar? Or Malta? Or Crete?
We want you to. We like you.
Secret one:
It's not so hard. You just pack up and you go.
We have vacation packages available.
Very good rates.
Great flexibility.
Jakarta, Stonehenge, Branson, the Dead Sea.
You could see anything.
You could be anyone.
Anywhere.
Secret Two: A pre-show announcement.
We're so pleased you came here tonight.
Did you remember to turn your cell phones off?
And unwrap your candies?
And notice the all the exit signs?
Did you consider contributing an extra donation to this fine theatre program?
UT would love it if you set up an endowment.
A few words of warning about this production:
Imaginary fire will be lit.
Imaginary pigs may be kicked.
Real bacon will be eaten. Some of it might get thrown on the floor.
A man will pretend to be a goose. He is not really a goose though. Please don't be frightened.
Also, there will be jumps in time.
Actors will pretend that they are young children.
The kitten figurines might not make it.
You wanna check your phone again?
Smile and nod to your neighbor?
Good. Great.
Here you go.

(Lightening. The KITTENS are gone. Iowa, the goose pen, night. Past the pen, a row of hog confinement barns glow softly. There is always, under everything, the shuffle of pigs, quiet snorts and squeals, the smell of shit and hay and feed and shit and water, the soft hum of exhaust fans. MAGGIE is digging a hole with a kitchen spoon. She is looking for something. She digs like a retriever, shallowly in one spot, then another, and another. There are lots of little holes.)

MAGGIE
Fucking come on!

(FRANK THE GOOSE watches her. He is displeased.)

FRANK
Stop. Stop. Stop, stop-it. You're taking all the grass away. Hiss!
(He comes over to her, hisses.)
Quit. Quit it, this is my place to dig. That is my grass.

MAGGIE
You've seen them over there.

FRANK
It's the middle of the night.

MAGGIE
If I was 9 when they // left—

FRANK
You should be asleep.

MAGGIE
If I was 9—

FRANK
You should be in the house under your straw or watching your box of light.
(Flapping up at her.)
Stop!

MAGGIE
Ah! I'll get the shovel.

FRANK

This is my place to dig!

(He charges at MAGGIE. She grabs a shovel and shoves it at him. He cowers in fear.)

Help! Help! Help, help! Shovel! SHOVEL!

MAGGIE

Shut up!

(She shoves the shovel at FRANK's head.)

FRANK

Shriek!

(He faints.)

MAGGIE

Fuck. Frank?

(She shakes the goose. He is limp.)

Dad!

(Thunder crashes as lights shift to ten years before. QUINN sits at the dining room table. The goose pen is outside, as are the barns. QUINN is in her early 30s. She carefully eats from a plate of bacon as the room fills with early light. MAGGIE at 9 and TRACY, her brother, at 11 call from offstage.)

TRACY

Mom!

MAGGIE

Mom!

TRACY

Mom!

JIM

(entering)

I was thinking that night about Elv--
Coffee?

QUINN

I couldn't find it.

JIM

You could pick some up today?

QUINN

I got fired.

JIM

... How?

I don't- did they just call you?

QUINN

Yesterday. // Yeah, I can get coffee.

JIM

What? What'd they say? Why didn't you say?

QUINN

I gave everyone a quarter raise. Here, take some bacon.

JIM

Weren't you were supposed to give raises? Didn't they say?

TRACY

Mom!

QUINN

I was.

I dunno.

I guess just not all together or something.

JIM

That was it?

MAGGIE

Mom!!

QUINN

Come in here if you wanna talk to me!

JIM

You gotta fight it. Call them up in Cedar Rapids.

QUINN
Fuck 'em.

MAGGIE
Dad!

JIM
You can get unemployment.

QUINN
I could.

MAGGIE
Dad!

JIM
Don't yell at me from another room!

QUINN
Get dressed you guys, the bus is coming!

(MAGGIE and TRACY enter like twisters. MAGGIE
slams the KITTENS down on the table. The phone rings.
JIM gets it.)

TRACY
Mom, Maggie took my soda out my lunch.

JIM
Yup?

MAGGIE
No I didn't!

Yup.

We had two bushels left.

QUINN
Nobody's getting soda for lunch.
Maggie, give it to me.
Take some money for milk. // White milk only.

We gonna have to pay for that too?

Yeah. This morning.

MAGGIE
The bus is at the ridge!

Yeah I did the finishers.

No, the Lincomix.

TRACY
Bye!

Alright.

MAGGIE

Bye, I love you!

(They are gone. JIM hangs up the phone.)

JIM

They said Farmland's got a proprietary feed. They're gonna switch us over to that.

QUINN

Hm.

JIM

You could help out here for a while.

QUINN

It isn't my job.

JIM

Just to help. You used to like it.

QUINN

I liked the fields. I like being out by the fields again. It's pretty.
Everything else is your farm.

JIM

It's all our farm.

QUINN

He was your uncle. It was your idea // coming out here.

JIM

Whatever's mine is ours.

QUINN

I told you-
I wanted to stay in Davenport.
At least we had--
We had jobs.

JIM

Would you of stayed in
Davenport?
There was no jobs there.
What working for Bond-o?
The putty factory?
This is better.

QUINN

I think I might go into town.

JIM

We own this.

QUINN

We own the house. You're just renting the livestock.

JIM

Six of one is a dozen of another.

QUINN

That's not the phrase.

(They stare at each other. JIM eats some bacon.)

JIM

Wanna help me move that feed to the nursery barns?

QUINN

I think I might go into town. For the smell.

JIM

The wind's blowing south today. // You can't even...

QUINN

Just for a break.

JIM

It doesn't bother the kids.

QUINN

They don't say it, is all.

JIM

I don't even know how you can still smell it.

QUINN

I'll make up a grocery list.

JIM

That putty was a disaster. Remember how it got in the foreman's lungs? And it was all up in your hair. And those little hairs on the edge of your cheeks. Or the back of your arms.

(He looks for ways to touch her little hairs lightly. Maybe with his nose.)

QUINN

We didn't have to sleep in the putty factory.

JIM

Call them in Cedar Rapids.

(He grabs some bacon and exits.)

KITTENS

Take us wind surfing in Cabos San Lucas.

QUINN

That's not an option.

KITTENS

Feed us grilled oysters with plantain and cream. Or go into space like a millionaire!

QUINN

Hush!

KITTENS

Remember when we went to San Francisco?

QUINN

Like when we were twelve?

KITTENS

Wasn't it marvelous?

QUINN

Yeah, we were twelve.

KITTENS

The sea lions?

QUINN

Yeah, I remember.

KITTENS

You had the longest hair.

(QUINN touches her hair.)

KITTENS

You should take us with you more often.

Not leave us to sit lonely, waiting on the dresser.

Or being carted around by your children.

QUINN

I don't have anywhere to take you.

KITTENS

Secret 4: Make love last with a romantic weekend out of the heat. Visit the Bay of Fundy.
Or St. Andrews by the Sea. Take a break.

(QUINN puts her head between her knees. She tries to control her breathing. She looks up.)

KITTENS

Take a trip.

QUINN

You wanna go into town?

KITTENS

Secret 8: Let your destination stay flexible.

QUINN

You can't talk at me if I take you to town.

KITTENS

Secret 19-

QUINN

Quiet.

KITTENS

Always see the glass as half full of champagne--

(QUINN pockets the KITTENS and exits.

Lightning, thunder. Ten years later. The dining room table. MAGGIE and TRACY are 19 and 21. MAGGIE is covered in dirt from digging. A 24 pack of Coors sits on the table. TRACY drinks beer, dabs at his nose with a used handkerchief.)

MAGGIE

What if I killed him?

TRACY

You didn't kill him. Or maybe you killed him. I dunno. Maybe gave him a heart attack.

MAGGIE

Shut up.

TRACY

He's an old goose. He's like three hundred years old in goose years. Right? When did we get him?

MAGGIE

He came with the farm.

TRACY

I thought dad won him in a poker game.

MAGGIE

Did he? Dad!

I don't think he won him.

TRACY

So he's even older than that. Shit, maybe geese are like parrots or something. I'll have to like, leave him ta my children.

MAGGIE

What children?

TRACY

I could have children.

MAGGIE

I saw them.

TRACY

Nope.

MAGGIE

They were right there when I was walking past. I went to grab 'em.

TRACY

He threw them away. I remember you throwing a fit. You were upset.

MAGGIE

I'm not making it up.

They were there in the grass and then they weren't, then they were there by the doghouse, and by his water dish and the corn.

TRACY

...

You should change your shirt or something. Or wash your hands.

MAGGIE

Maybe they came back. Like walked back.

TRACY

They're figurines. Figurines don't walk.

MAGGIE

You think he's alright? The goose?

TRACY

...

You wanna go into town tonight? I was supposed to meet Shawn at The Union.

MAGGIE

The Union's for asshats.

TRACY

You got your ID?

MAGGIE

It got taken.

(She looks discreetly around.)

TRACY

They're not here.

MAGGIE

I'm just gonna...

TRACY

Don't fuckin' turn the house upside down. If you think you're gonna start looking for them again, then like, tie your hands to a chair.

Just don't be so crazy or something. Don't make a mess.

(He stuffs a couple cans of Coors in his pockets.)

I'm going to town.

(MAGGIE takes a beer and opens it. A flash of lightening.

Lights shift to ten years before. The Union Bar. Paul Anthony's "Get Down" or something similar plays. QUINN takes a swig of a beer. She clutches the KITTENS and looks around the dance floor.)

QUINN
Everyone's five in this bar.

KITTENS
Who's That?

QUINN
What that child over there? He's five.

KITTENS
He looks like a magazine.

QUINN
No, gross.

KITTENS
Like someone carved him from butter and oceans.

(QUINN stares.)

QUINN
I should go home.
Jim's gonna be pissed.

KITTENS
A butter ocean angel.

QUINN
Quit.

KITTENS
Smell him.

(QUINN takes several steps towards an unseen co-ed.)

QUINN

I think we're out a toilet paper. Is the Hy-Vee // still-

KITTENS

Smell him!

(QUINN leans in, discreetly smelling the back of his head.)

KITTENS

Oh.

QUINN

That isn't it.

KITTENS

It smells like hormones and Irish Spring.

QUINN

I gotta go.

KITTENS

Wait, no.

Do one more!

QUINN

No.

KITTENS

Look, who's that? Feed us a whiskey.

QUINN

Whoa. She's cute.

KITTENS

Bushmills. Smell her.

QUINN

No. I'm not gonna...

(She takes a few steps over. She loses her head in the music.)

KITTENS

You should try everything twice.

QUINN
I gotta go.

(An enormous Clap of thunder. The goose pen. FRANK
lies unconscious.

JIM enters, singing a bit of Gillian Welch's "Elvis Presley
Blues." He stares at the fainted goose, bends down to find
FRANK's pulse through his feathers.)

JIM
And he shook it like a chorus girl,
He shook it like a Harlem queen
He shook it like a midnight rambler, baby.
Like --yep, you're fine.
Just scared.
Remember when you two used to be friends? Maybe she was nicer to you then.
...
Frank?

TRACY
(Offstage)
Dad!

JIM
He's fine!
She just shocked him.

TRACY
(Entering, beer still in hand.)
You should watch her.

JIM
You goin' out?

TRACY
She says she saw the // figurines in the goose pen.

JIM
She told me.

TRACY

It's like that time where she couldn't find her hoody. How she was looking and looking, and pulled out the fridge.

JIM

She knows they're gone. I know she knows. She was there when we threw it all out.

TRACY

I know! So just.

I'm gonna go into town.

JIM

The Hemmingways talk to you about Farmland?

TRACY

Yeah. Just Shawn.

JIM

What'd he say?

TRACY

He doesn't know for certain yet.

JIM

Is it the Hemmingways that wanna cancel the contract or Farmland?

TRACY

It's... you saw the letter.

JIM

We've always done right by them.

TRACY

I mean it's the size, for Farmland. Cause they want just a few big producers, so if there's an influenza or something they could find the source sooner.

JIM

That's what the letter // said.

TRACY

Well that's what Shawn said too.

(He blows his nose.)

JIM

The business is fine. His dad built it to be fine.
They cancel the contract that's our machinery, feed, all our breeding stock.

TRACY

...You could change it. Try chickens?

JIM

Chickens are dumb as bricks. You can't run 'em like hogs, gotta grab them up by the feet.

TRACY

What if we went specialty? Plant alfalfa in the side field? Get a breeding herd that's organic. Or you could lease out the land.

JIM

You can't keep organic hogs in those low barns.

TRACY

You ever thought about leasing the fields?

JIM

The breeding fields? Land's full of nitrates.

TRACY

If you planted alfalfa--

JIM

Talk to Shawn Hemmingway. We've always done right by them. Just tell him.

TRACY

I'm going t' town.

(MAGGIE enters.)

MAGGIE

How is he?

JIM

You spooked him.

MAGGIE

Frank?

JIM

You remember I threw them away, right?
Maggie?

MAGGIE
Yeah, sure.
(She searches around the pen.)
The garden's a mess.

JIM
You could weed it tomorrow.

TRACY
You can't just weed it at this point, it's nothing but weeds.

MAGGIE
I told Ronnie I'd work for her.

JIM
You thought more about registering for Kirkwood? Be a good thing for you to take a couple classes? I think they start up pretty soon. You could go to part time at the Bread Garden.

MAGGIE
What's happening with the Hemmingways?

JIM
Nothing.

TRACY
It's fine.

MAGGIE
I saw the letter from // Farmland.

JIM
We're working it out.

MAGGIE
You think you could contract with someone else?

JIM
Your brother'll straighten it out.

(TRACY exits.)

MAGGIE

I think I might sleep out in the yard.

JIM

That's... No, come inside first. We could watch Columbo.

MAGGIE

I'm fine.

JIM

Just for a second? You can pick it out.

(MAGGIE follows JIM inside.)

A crack of thunder. Lightning across the stage. Lights shift to 10 years earlier. FRANK rises and shakes out his neck. QUINN stumbles to the goose pen, still holding the KITTENS. Thunder.)

FRANK

Hey!

QUINN

Goose, you up?

(Distant thunder.)

FRANK

Hey!

Who's there?

QUINN

Dear Goose.

FRANK

Quinn?

QUINN

Dear Frank. Did you knock over your water?

FRANK

The rats knocked over my water.

QUINN

Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and think you're being eaten. Sometimes I think there's a coyote outside who's pulling you apart.
Frank.

FRANK

Fill up my water.

QUINN

Sometimes I think you're protecting us all. You stay up all night and guard us from ruin. From starvation and poverty and coyotes and bankruptcy.
Frank. Who hit you with that shovel before we arrived?

FRANK

Fill up my water.

QUINN

Do you ever sleep? Do you stay up all night with your broken foot honking to scare away failure?
Come here.

(She goes clumsily to pat his head. FRANK dodges and snaps at her.)

FRANK

Stay back! I'm huge!
(He opens his wings and flaps.)

QUINN

Why don't you ever go in that house we got you?
Oh you think I could weed now? It's so dark.
(She stumbles over the garden's low fence and tries to see what's a weed and what isn't. She's a little drunk.)

FRANK

That is a doghouse. No goose house.

QUINN

Dear Frank...

FRANK

Geese don't sleep in houses.

QUINN

Hey look at this // is this a weed?

FRANK

We sleep under our wings like feathered // rocks.

QUINN

I can't fucking...

(Pulls something up, feels it.)

FRANK

When it lightnings no one sleeps.

QUINN

No, that's a beet.

FRANK

All of us keep watch.

(Thunder.)

Hey!

QUINN

Watch out Frank it's coyotes
and bankruptcy!
Boom!

KITTENS

Watch out Frank it's coyotes
and bankruptcy.

FRANK

There's no need to be cruel.

(QUINN puts the KITTENS in her pocket.)

QUINN

Right.

Here.

(She takes a hamburger bun from her purse.)

Here. Don't tell Jim. He thinks it'll give you angel wing.

(FRANK inhales the bun.)

QUINN

It doesn't smell as bad at night huh? It's the heat. The sun on the barns.
Frank,
Can you smell? Can geese smell?

I think it's in our hair, and all our clothes.
When we leave here we still smell like hog shit I bet. And everyone's too nice to mention it.

JIM
(Calling from the house)
Quinn!?

QUINN
...I'm here!

JIM
(entering)
I thought you crashed the car or something.

QUINN
I just had to stay late.

JIM
Where?

QUINN
I was job hunting. Then I got a drink.

JIM
Jesus, you need to call! We made dinner, and waited--

QUINN
You said I could have Me Day once a week.

JIM
I said once a month.

QUINN
Every two weeks, and I haven't.

JIM
You wanna go show the kids you're not dead?

QUINN
They awake still?

JIM

Where were you?

QUINN

I told you. In town.

JIM

What are you doing out here?

QUINN

Feeding the goose.

(JIM steps into FRANK's pen.)

FRANK

Hiss!

JIM

Stop.

QUINN

Frank stop it.

(JIM goes to the garden. He wraps his arms around QUINN and lifts her over the low garden fence. They stand for a moment, entwined. QUINN kisses him, sudden. JIM kisses her back and holds her hard, and harder. QUINN bites his arm full force.)

JIM

Owe! Damnit!

QUINN

Sorry. I'm sorry.

JIM

I'm going to bed.

(They exit. Thunder crash. Lights shift to ten years later. FRANK is still fainted from the shovel incident. The KITTENS appear by the doghouse. To the audience:)

KITTENS

Hey. Do you have a passport?

Everyone needs a passport now, even to go to Canada.

Get one. It's not too hard.

You just have to go on the internet.

We've been seeing great deals to Aruba, Antigua, Bermuda and the Canary Islands.
Quit your job. Sell your car.
Book a trip!
Payment plans are available.
It will make you so happy.
Secret 54: It will make you a better lover.
Don't. Wait.
Or wait only if you're waiting on your passport.
There. Do you have it?
Do you have it?

(Lightning flash. The Union Bar. TRACY discreetly takes a beer from his pocket. LMFAO's "Party Rocking" plays. MAGGIE enters.)

TRACY
You made it.

MAGGIE
What?

TRACY
They check your ID?

MAGGIE
I think the dude went to the bathroom or something. Shit this sucks.

TRACY
It gets better later.

MAGGIE
What?

TRACY
Here.
(He passes her a beer from his pocket.)
Dad let you take the truck?

MAGGIE
He went to sleep. Where's Shawn?

TRACY
He's coming.

MAGGIE

I'm gonna find her.

TRACY

What?

(MAGGIE pulls him away from the music.)

MAGGIE

I'm gonna find her. I think that's what they want.

TRACY

What, the figurines? Maggie, they //don't--

MAGGIE

No, I'm gonna look on the people search websites. I looked on some already, after dad passed out. Have you been on there before? You can find people's address, or like phone records and shit. Like anywhere in the country.

TRACY

You're Columbo.

MAGGIE

I'm serious. I think there's a couple better one's but you have to pay 30 bucks. Can I borrow your card when we get home?

TRACY

You have a bank account.

MAGGIE

There's no money in there, I just keep it in cash in my drawer.

TRACY

Really?

MAGGIE

Yeah just in case- So it's real, y'know. It's not real if it's not... So you can see it. You'll let me see your card right?

TRACY

She might not have the same name.

MAGGIE

We could hire a detective. Does that cost a lot? You think there's like a reality show that would pay for it for us? There must be right. Shit did he ever do that? A detective? How come he never looked for her?

TRACY

(Of his phone.)
That's Shawn.
Yo.

MAGGIE

Tracy.

TRACY

Seriously? I been here for like two hours now.

MAGGIE

Did he call Uncle Mike? What even happened to Uncle Mike, did he just...

TRACY

No, you said The Union. I said The Airliner.
Well now I'm not hungry.
Uncle Mike- No. He totally —
Well fine. No, dude. It's your problem.
(He hangs up.)
Ugh. You done with that, you want another?

MAGGIE

What? // No.

TRACY

I'll buy you another.

MAGGIE

What happened to Uncle Mike?

TRACY

You don't..? He stopped taking our calls. After she left. Grandma too.

MAGGIE

I thought Grandma Larkins died.

TRACY

I dunno. Maybe by now she did.

MAGGIE

What!? See! That's why we gotta look for her.

Grandma too! You remember her number? We still have that address book?

TRACY

It got pitched.

I'll get you a beer and a shot. Fireball? Let's do a Fireball.

MAGGIE

This website, the good one, has like years of info on it. I bet if we paid extra we could do it by social security. You think we still have her social somewhere? Dad knows it // right?

TRACY

Hey I'm moving.

Here, take this-

(He hands her a shot.)

MAGGIE

What- Moving where?

(Back at the house, JIM stumbles into the dining room. He sings "Elvis Presley Blues" and tries to pick his way through it on guitar. He plays mostly to a whiskey bottle.)

TRACY

Don't tell Dad, ok?

Toston!

MAGGIE

Toston.

JIM

*I was thinking, that night about Elvis
Day that he died.*

(They cheers.)

Day that he died.

TRACY

Chicago.

*I was thinking, last night about Elvis
Day that he died*

MAGGIE

Chicago? Why?

Day that he died.

TRACY

I'm gonna tell him. Like soon so

*Just a country boy
Combed, his hair.*

MAGGIE

What would you do, in Chicago?

*Put on a shirt his mother
made and he--*

TRACY

Move furniture. Work at a bar.
I dunno. Shawn's got somebody--

(The phone in the dining room rings.
TRACY and MAGGIE look towards
the house. JIM hurriedly jumps up to
get it.)

JIM

Hello? Hello?

....

Hello?

(He hangs up the phone. He exits the
dining room.)

TRACY

What would you even say to her?

MAGGIE

Hello.

TRACY

That's it?

MAGGIE

No. I'd say. "What makes you--"

I'd say, "You left all your clothes! You missed my birthday I want a pony I want a
birthday cake!" No.

What would you say to her?

(TRACY blows his nose.)

TRACY

I have nothing to say.

MAGGIE

I think if I found them // I'd know what to say.

TRACY

Get off it.

MAGGIE

I didn't make it up! They were right there.

TRACY

He threw them away.

MAGGIE

I saw them in the olives at work too. Two days ago. They were on them, then in them. And I dumped the whole cambro out on the floor and checked the rest of the salad bar, and back behind the cold cut shelf but they had just left.

TRACY

How do you not get fired from there?

MAGGIE

I don't steal stuff. Pretty much everybody steals stuff.

TRACY

...

One time I thought I saw them in the south field. They're tiny though. It was just the sun.

MAGGIE

It wasn't the sun.

TRACY

She might be dead.

MAGGIE

She's not dead.

TRACY

She might have a different name.

MAGGIE

Just let me use your card when we get home.

TRACY

Detectives are super expensive. And looking for people who left on their own--
You want another shot?

(Lights shift to the goose pen. FRANK rises. He tries to remove a crick from his neck. He shakes his head over and over.)

FRANK

Owe. Owe.

Damn age. Damn age and ground and Shovel fear.
And foot.

I don't usually mind it, my leg-foot. My leg-foot that moves like a dead tree limb cause of a fight-Fight with a shovel.

I won that fight.

I'm huge!

(He limps.)

Last week a flock of the most beautiful geese came down into my pen.

They had brown-cream bodies and black secret heads. They were all politeness and grace.

They said, "Hello. Hello, we saw your pool from the air. From hundreds of feet in the air. It is the finest pool around. Finer than the pool of the cows on the ridge or the pigs. And then we saw you, in the green, green grass and said, 'Of course, of course this fine pool would be run by such a fine gander.' And may we use it, to cool our heads and wash over our backs before we journey further?"

And of course I let them.

The entire flock, all stood in my pen. And preened. And bathed their heads and chatted happy and I showed them where the corn was too, and the deepest parts of the grass, where crickets live.

All of these curving, brown and cream secret geese right here in my pen.

Right here. And here.

And they shared shimmering stories, about lakes that go for miles. Cool lakes with mist. Full of marsh grass and minnows and no dogs, anywhere.

And they talked of all the things they saw from the air, and of flying and flying all night and day up, up where the air is thin like vapors and only yours.

And then it was time to go.

"It's time to go," they said.

"It's time to go. Would you like to come with?"

And a glimmer of life with them flashed over my pond and my water bowl, and over the house and hogs and road with the metal ox. Me with all of them, bathing our heads together in a cool, endless secret lake.

All of us tucking in our heads at night. Like Feathered Rocks in a tight, safe circle.

Then one Flap-flapped up like air, and another flap-flapped behind her.

And I stood on my brick saying, "Wait!

Wait, wait I'm almost ready."

I opened my wings and I'm huge.

I opened and closed and opened and closed, and my dead tree foot-leg weighed on my wing, on my muscles I felt it pull.

I could not leave the ground.

And then they were gone.

(FRANK flap-flaps up on his brick, hoping maybe this time he will fly. He cannot.)

(Lightening crash. Ten years before. The breakfast table. QUINN eats from a plate of bacon in front of her. She shakes a piece at the fields out the window.)

QUINN

Ya see that pigs? Yesh. Fuckin delicious.
(She eats the bacon.)

(JIM enters and sits at the table. QUINN pushes the plate of bacon to him. He eats some. They stare at each other for a good minute. QUINN reaches out and touches JIM's face, not sweetly so much, more just to check if he's there. JIM let's her.)

QUINN

The coffee's in the kitchen.

JIM

Thanks.

QUINN

You can use syrup. We're out of straight sugar.

JIM

That was nice last night.

...

Was it good for you?

(QUINN stands. She goes to JIM's lap and sits. She sits a different way. JIM is unsure if he should hold her or not.)

QUINN

(Grabbing her stomach)
Do you notice this podge here? From Maggie still?

JIM

That's skin.

MAGGIE

(Offstage)
Mom!

QUINN

It's not just skin.

JIM

I don't notice it.

MAGGIE

Mom!

QUINN

You used to touch me differently.

MAGGIE

Mom!

QUINN

Don't yell at me from another room!

JIM

Come in here, Maggie!

JIM

I don't think — I don't know what I'm supposed to do here. If you want to tell me how to make you happy--

QUINN

I saw those pigs in the yard this morning. You gonna light up the incinerator?

JIM

I'd try something if you wanted me to. Or we could go talk to somebody.

QUINN

I'm gonna go into town.

JIM

What do you do, all // day?

QUINN

I go to the library for the classifieds. Sometimes when everyone's walking around outside I go walk around campus and pretend I have somewhere to be. I'm applying to jobs.

(MAGGIE runs in, KITTENS in hand.)

MAGGIE

Mom, we're gonna make volcanoes today.

JIM

You got those figurines glued to your hand?

MAGGIE

I just have to keep an eye on them.

JIM

You know they're antique? Came from Japan.

QUINN

From Greece.

JIM

That's right. Your grandfather?

QUINN

My great aunt, gave 'em to me when I was younger than you.

JIM

So don't break 'em.

MAGGIE

I could take them to class today?

QUINN

Leave 'em here, baby.

MAGGIE

It's show or tell.

JIM

Let her take 'em.

QUINN

Go wake your brother up.

MAGGIE

Tracy!

QUINN

Go wake him in person.

MAGGIE

Can I bring them to school? I named them Pepper and Kevin. Kevin's stronger than Pepper.

QUINN

That's not their // names.

JIM

Just wrap 'em in paper. She tears around here with 'em enough.

QUINN

Let me see them. Go wake your brother.

(MAGGIE gives QUINN the KITTENS and tears off.)

QUINN

You think we could go to Chicago for the weekend? Or Galesburg?

JIM

You know who we'd get to watch the barns?

QUINN

Arthur Hemmingway.

JIM

It's not his problem.

QUINN

They're his stock in part, right? It's not a problem. Just say we have to go to a funeral or something.

JIM

Wasn't your sister gonna get married? We'll go up to Rockford for that.

QUINN

That isn't Chicago. The kids have never been.

KITTENS

Where would you go, if you could // go anywhere?

QUINN

Babe where would you go, if you could // go anywhere?

JIM

You asked me that last night.

(He moves to touch her somehow- her collarbone or her hair.)
It's not doing anything for us. Maybe we wait till you have a job?

QUINN
Just tell me.

TRACY
(offstage)
Agh! I'm gonna kill you!

MAGGIE
(offstage)
Ahh!!

QUINN
Hawaii? Bali? You said you wanted to go to Germany, right?

JIM
When we were 19.

TRACY
I'm gonna kill you!

MAGGIE
Eee!!

JIM
Tracy Michael leave your sister alone!

TRACY
She plugged up my nose!

QUINN
I told her to do it cause you wouldn't get up!

JIM
Both of you get ready cause the bus comes in ten!

QUINN
In five!

MAGGIE

Mom!

JIM

Get dressed!

(to QUINN)

I still wanna touch you, every day. I know that hasn't changed.

QUINN

Where would you go?

JIM

I don't.. Where would you go?

QUINN and KITTENS

Um.. I'd buy a camper and drive around the country and go everywhere I wouldn't think I'd like. Like Las Vegas or Cleveland

QUINN

or Panama Beach.

QUINN and KITTENS

Then I'd trade the camper for a boat and sail to Argentina.

JIM

Will you stay today? Stay home? I could use your help with the garden.

QUINN

I'm just gonna go to the library. I could still weed the garden.

JIM

The things that need doing here keep adding up.

QUINN

(Glancing out the window.)

Shit, guys the bus is at the ridge!

(MAGGIE and TRACY, as adults, come running past their parents. TRACY grabs the plate of bacon from the table as lights shift, 10 years later, The Airliner. He sets the bacon down, takes a piece. He waits. SHAWN enters.

As they speak, JIM goes to tidy the goose pen. He changes the water in the kiddy pool, or gets FRANK fresh water and

corn. At some point, he climbs into the overgrown garden and places several letters down somewhere where we cannot see. We probably don't notice this though, because we're trying to pay attention to TRACY and SHAWN and be good audience members generally and not just think about what we're gonna eat later. FRANK shadows JIM as he cleans.)

TRACY
Hey.

SHAWN
Is that all you're eating?

TRACY
It was here when I came. You want some?

SHAWN
Ugh. I'm trying to cut out the meat.

TRACY
Seriously?

SHAWN
It's bad for my chai.

TRACY
Like the tea?

SHAWN
My being.

TRACY
Your chi?

SHAWN
You talk to your dad?

TRACY
Yeah... He needs some more time.

SHAWN
He got that letter though?

TRACY

Yeah, Dave sent it. He send you a copy?

SHAWN

“Farmland’s raising the quota, no more small producers, blah, blah, blah.”

TRACY

Did.. Y’know maybe we should talk to ConAgra?

SHAWN

We talked about this.

TRACY

I know, I know--

SHAWN

You were the one who talked us into it, dude. You told Farmland.

TRACY

I know!

SHAWN

You tell your sister?

TRACY

No. I dunno.

SHAWN

She seeing that dude at her work still?

TRACY

No.

(He blows his nose. They stare at each other.)

SHAWN

I told you about Roscoe Village right?

TRACY

You really think you’d just sell the land?

Couldn’t you like rent it out first and see?

SHAWN

We talked about this. Land, equipment, all the herds.
I looked at Peoria yesterday, they got a great price for cattle right now. Great price for hogs. Hasn't been this high since we were in high school.
Tell your sister.

TRACY
I talked to him about chickens.

SHAWN
Chickens? I thought you were gonna tell him to sell. Or lease out the fields.

TRACY
He's not down, anyway.

SHAWN
You guys got chickens you'd just have to stay. You don't wanna stay.
Call your sister.

TRACY
He's just been doing it so long.

SHAWN
No, you came out here when what, you were twelve?

TRACY
Nine.

SHAWN
From like Davenport?
So he hasn't been doing it his whole life.

TRACY
Well his- like my great uncle had it.

SHAWN
But *your dad* hasn't been here his whole life.
I mean my dad, no way. He was born here, and I was born here, and my dad's dad was born here and his dad played like stick ball with Herbert Hoover. So, forever. It's like a dynasty.

TRACY
Maybe you should just lease out the house. And the fields.

SHAWN

We're selling! It's my call anyway.

Call your sister.

I'm a need a deposit too for the place. I told you about that, right? He said Roscoe Village? It's above this bar but it's supposed to be badass. With like, windows up front, and like- ceilings. The whole neighborhood. Where is our waiter?

TRACY

I think that's her over there.

(SHAWN waves at an unseen waitress. TRACY waves too. They stand alternately, throwing up their arms. Maybe they make small yipping noises. No one comes. SHAWN eats some of the bacon. TRACY blows his nose again.)

SHAWN

That's gotten worse.

TRACY

It's fine.

SHAWN

You got that rag with you all the time.

TRACY

It's just a summer cold.

SHAWN

That you had since when? Two years ago? You should move, dude.

TRACY

When do you need that deposit by? I think I gotta move some stuff around first.

SHAWN

Call your sister.

(Lights shift to the goose pen. JIM continues to clean. FRANK watches.)

FRANK

Where are all the other geese?

In a park? On a goose farm? Safe on a lake in a big, wide forest and when they look they only look at geese, and water grass and little fish and sky?

Am I the only goose left?

(JIM rakes old hay from nearby FRANK.)

FRANK

Hey! Hay! I'm huge!

JIM

I have to do this.

FRANK

I had a whole life before this life. Bigger. I kept guard, on a goose farm. Guarding the geese *and* ducks.

Watch goose. Guard goose. Guarding for foxes and dogs, and rats.

Then a man came to shovel-shovel us.

I bit him, Hard. Snap- Snapped his leg and hand! But he hit me Hard like stinging, sprawling caterpillars Everywhere and my body went limp, my wing went limp, my leg foot became a tree and died and hey! HEY! Stay back!

JIM

Frank, calm down.

FRANK

The garden's less nicer now, with the woman gone! She moved in big, flowing skirts like tricky cotton clouds that I could snap, snap at and she wouldn't care. She laughed, all the time until she quit.

(He cocks his head and tries to laugh, searching for it, as if trying to swallow a bolt or a battery. Nothing comes.)

She never used the shovel.

JIM

Now your pool is better, check it out.

FRANK

She came to me. She said, "Goodbye. Goodbye, watch my children. Watch the children like they were your own little goslings and keep them in line, make sure they go to school and love each other and love the world and here's a slice of apple, some fresh spring onions from the garden, my treat, take them, here" and geese need jobs! Geese need to guard and count and measure and check the fence- My fence, my grass, and guard the garden, guard the children, guard my Jim!

JIM

Frank, look at your pool.

FRANK

Geese are always vigilant! Geese—

(He dips his head in the pool. Blue light trickles over him. Everything else is forgotten.)

hey.

(He dips his head.)

hey, hey. here.

JIM

You're welcome, buddy.

(Lights shift back to The Airliner. MAGGIE enters.)

SHAWN

Sweet, you're here.

TRACY

How was work?

MAGGIE

It was work. The POS system got stuck in Spanish so they let us all go home early. You guys order?

(SHAWN and TRACY stand and wave at an unseen waitress. MAGGIE waves too then gives up.)

SHAWN

Did Tracy tell you yet?

TRACY

No--

MAGGIE

What? About Chicago? Is that like a real thing?

TRACY

Did you look on that people search site?

MAGGIE

Yeah, like three of them. I found a utility bill with her name in like Albany. And one in Phoenix and one in Grand Bluffs for all at the same time. So. I've been dreaming about them every night. Pepper and Kevin.

SHAWN

Who?

TRACY
It's nothing.

MAGGIE
In all the dreams, we're like in a clan- a Scottish clan with them and dad and her and like Frank. Our faces are painted like a movie.

SHAWN
What like Braveheart?

MAGGIE
Yeah! And we're all running down a hill together and fighting off invaders in a big mass. Or taking over a castle.
You remember when they used to talk, right?

TRACY
They never talked.

SHAWN
I'm gonna go order a burger.
(He leaves)

MAGGIE
When mom would let me keep them in our room. I'd wake up sometimes and I'd hear them. It wasn't like conversational though, it was more like a radio frequency. Like AM talk radio on quiet. Like it was coming from them, like a transmitter.

TRACY
... That was from the radio in the kitchen. It'd get turned on.

MAGGIE
It wasn't! I could feel it, right there on the nightstand. I can feel them transmitting again, like they're close.

TRACY
When I had just got my phone in high school, y'know I had that number that'd belonged to the old lady?

MAGGIE
Sandy Anderson.

TRACY

Yeah, Sandy Anderson. And that other old lady used to call it every week cause she had Alzheimer's or something and couldn't remember it was mine?

MAGGIE
Ms. Beverly.

TRACY
Yeah, Ms. Beverly. "Is she at the store?"

MAGGIE
(a reluctant game)
Wrong number Ms. Beverly.

TRACY
"Is she taking a nap?"

MAGGIE
No, ma'am. I think your friend got a different number.

TRACY
I think your friend died.

MAGGIE
Oh my god.

TRACY
"Will you tell her I called, honey? I'm just checking up on her hip operation."

MAGGIE
What's your // point?

TRACY
Those things have been gone. For a long time. He threw them away, and even if they were like secretly radios- you're being a total Ms. Beverly!

MAGGIE
I saw them in the goose pen.

TRACY
"Did she run out to church?"

MAGGIE
I'm gonna start calling random numbers like that.

TRACY

That's stupid. She didn't call random numbers, she only called me.

MAGGIE

I'm gonna start calling every number. All the people search listings and everyone else. Just numbers at random, I'll ask for her.

TRACY

You can't call every number.

There's like hundreds of millions of numbers. You'd have to make like, ten thousand calls a day. For the next fifty years. And then you could get her and she's like, "No, that's not me."

MAGGIE

I'd remember her voice.

TRACY

You were nine.

MAGGIE

So.

You don't know.

Maybe hearing's like smell, and she'd smell me over the phone and there'd be a space there. She wouldn't hang up.

TRACY

I'm moving to Chicago on the 30th.

I already put money down on a place.

MAGGIE

Wait, for real? Not for real.

TRACY

Farmland raised the quota on hogs.

MAGGIE

What, since when?

TRACY

Um, just lately. Just recently, they did. We'd be too small. But me and Shawn figured--

MAGGIE

We had a contract with them. And with Shawn. Shawn has a contract.

TRACY

You gotta tell Dad it's ok.

MAGGIE

No. He said you would fix it.

TRACY

I'm- we did fix it. We're fixing it. We can do what we want this way. Shawn's getting out of livestock completely. And his sister and mom- they're all gonna sell.

MAGGIE

Would they take the equipment back? Weren't we just leasing the tractor? They just put in those feed mats too, and the medicators--

TRACY

We could do something else. Shawn said the price of hogs right now--

MAGGIE

What would he do?

TRACY

He can take a vacation with the check that he'll get. Selling everything at once. Then he can lease out the fields. He'll be fine.

MAGGIE

Where's your math?

TRACY

I looked it over with Dave from Farmland. And Shawn.

MAGGIE

They don't live with us!

TRACY

That's why they can do the math!

(MAGGIE pushes the plate of bacon onto the floor. They stare at each other. They both get down and gather up the mess.)

MAGGIE

I'm gonna use the internet at the library.
Let me know when you're ready to drive back.

TRACY

She doesn't wanna be found. I mean, seriously, there's no way of knowing--

MAGGIE

Fuck off.

(Thunder crash. Lightning across the stage as lights shift to 10 years before. The goose pen. QUINN stands on the doghouse. She holds the KITTENS to her head. She puts them on her arm, her other arm, up in the air, and some other place. She moves them like an old TV antenna, waiting for her picture to improve. FRANK sleeps, his head tucked under his wing.)

KITTENS

We feel like a lightning rod.

QUINN

We're not tall enough.

KITTENS

Why are you standing out here?

QUINN

I'm making it work. It's nice out at night.

KITTENS

You could go anywhere.

QUINN

I thought if we moved here I'd hear the corn growing again. We would hear it detasseling, when we were kids. Lots of little popping sounds.
What'd it be like to grow so fast you made noise?

KITTENS

Secret 46-

QUINN

No.

KITTENS

You could walk right over that ridge.

QUINN

No!

KITTENS

Slip the car into neutral and go into town.

Maybe there's a midnight movie somewhere.

(QUINN loses her breath. It floats for a moment,
suspended close to her mouth.)

KITTENS

Or some dark bar.

Make us a snack.

(QUINN catches it.)

QUINN

I gotta go back to bed.

MAGGIE

(from offstage)

Mom?

QUINN

...

Yeah?

MAGGIE

Mom?

(FRANK stirs in his sleep. He honks, hisses and tucks his
head under his other wing.)

QUINN

I'm right here babe.

MAGGIE

(entering)

The grass is wet.

QUINN

What are you doing out of bed?

You have a bad dream?

MAGGIE

Dad said to come find you.

Why are you standing up there?

QUINN

I'm just clearing my head.

MAGGIE

Can I come up?

QUINN

Just to sit.

(She pulls MAGGIE up.)

MAGGIE

You took those off my dresser.

QUINN

I thought... I'm sorry.

Here.

(She gives MAGGIE the KITTENS. MAGGIE holds them up to her ear.)

KITTENS

Your hands are sticky.

QUINN

We can share them, ok.

MAGGIE

Are you upset you got fired? Is that why you're out here?

QUINN

No. It was just a job.

MAGGIE

Dad said they fired you because you gave everyone raises at once.

Are we gonna move again?

KITTENS

Yes!

QUINN

Do you want to?

MAGGIE

Maybe back to Davenport. Because Lila and Breeda still live there, and all my other best friends.

QUINN

Oh babe. I don't think we'll go back to Davenport.

MAGGIE

Do you miss your friends too? In class today Ms. Herberger poured vinegar baking soda into the paper mache volcano and it exploded all over the table.

QUINN

Cool.

MAGGIE

We put Lego people and houses and the bottom and the vinegar lava just covered them.

QUINN

Did it melt them like lava?

MAGGIE

No, it was vinegar baking soda.
Why don't you ever go in the barns?

QUINN

That's you guys' job. And your father's.

MAGGIE

It's not so bad in there. There's just a lot of grower pigs there.

QUINN

I know.

MAGGIE

Sometimes one's sick and it gets in the aisle. But mostly they just hang out.

QUINN

Would you want me to go in there with you?

MAGGIE

There's one in Barn 2 with a spot on his face. Whenever we go by, he turns around in circles a lot. But not like he's sick. You know they go in circles sometimes when they're sick, right? He just does it for fun. You want me to show him to you?

QUINN

Sure. Yeah sure, tomorrow.

MAGGIE

Dad says if I keep helping him I can have one and raise it for show.

QUINN

You're a regular farmer, aren't you?

MAGGIE

No.

Dad didn't tell you about that? That we were gonna have pigs for show? Tracy says Shawn Hemmingway says show pigs are different and you have to order them separate, but Dad says these ones'll work.

QUINN

...

MAGGIE

Mom?

QUINN

Come on. Let's get us to bed.

(They exit. The KITTENS appear downstage.)

KITTENS

Do you ever feel lonely?

Do you ever feel like a single soul on a wind-burnt frozen field?

A car left after closing in an enormous, empty parking lot?

Most of us do sometimes.

Secret 17: You have the power to get what you want.

Treat yourself to French champagne.

Drunk off the stomach of a Balinese dancer

in a raised bamboo cabin surrounded by sea.

It's beautiful, yes?

It's attainable.

Affordable.

So near in your future that you can taste it.

We have a vacation club just right for you.
We're waiting to help you.
We're waiting.

(Daylight. There is a sudden silence that we haven't heard before, followed by the rising shuffles and squeals of pigs: a muffled unrest.

An alarm rises, at first sounding like a clock radio alarm but growing louder and louder. The KITTENS vanish as JIM enters the dining room in boxers and boots.)

JIM
Quinn! Shit. Call the Hemmingways.

QUINN
(offstage)
Is that the new system?

JIM
The fans are out. Call MidAmerican.
Tracy!
Fuck, it's the house as well. It's all the power.

QUINN
(entering)
Don't you have a generator?

JIM
It's gonna need gas.
Tracy!

(TRACY enters, rubbing sleep from his eyes.)

TRACY
Dad, the alarm.

JIM
Go get a gas can from the Hemmingways. Babe, call up there.

QUINN
Don't they have the alarm up the road?

JIM
They're gonna—

(The phone rings.)

JIM
Hello?
We heard it.
Tracy's coming to get gas up there could you--
Tracy, get your bike.

(TRACY runs off.)

JIM
Have Shawn fill it up then.
No, because of the methane. No *you* said-

QUINN
You want me to drive over there?

JIM
Because we'll loose 'em, Arthur. We're already under count.
Well if you'd a bought the right AC unit in the first place.
Maggie! Where is she?

MAGGIE
(offstage)
Dad turn the alarm off!

JIM
Get dressed and help me get the hose on 'em.

QUINN
I can do it.

JIM
It's not--
It's gonna be dark in there.

QUINN
Maggie, get the flashlight from under the sink!

JIM

Call MidAmerican first. I'll be in the finisher barn.

QUINN
Is that-

JIM
Barn 3.

(Lights shift. The near black interior of the hog barn. It's hot, and the smell of shit is nearly overwhelming without the fans. There is the sound of hooves on concrete, waves of snorts as sonar. JIM enters with a flashlight. QUINN follows behind.)

JIM
They coming?

QUINN
They said it'd be an hour.

JIM
Jesus. We'll start loosing 'em in 40 minutes with this heat.

QUINN
You couldn't get the generator to work?

JIM
It needs gas.
It's hot as holy balls. Here, take this.
(He hands QUINN his flashlight. Sound of a hose. JIM spays down the hogs in the dark.)

QUINN
When did you learn all this? In two years. Where have I been?

JIM
You were at the library.

QUINN
Is it genetic or something? You just know how to do all these things.

JIM
You figure it out. Talked to Arthur Hemmingway. Figure. It's like anything.

Check the creep feeder, see if it's full?

QUINN

I think you talk different since we got here.

JIM

Shit this would have to happen in August.

QUINN

You talk like your work since we got here. And it's all- you put an AC in the hog barn but not in the house.

JIM

Pigs don't sweat.

QUINN

It's all for them.

JIM

You. It's all for you.

QUINN

I don't need this like you need this. And if you would have told me—

JIM

Did you check the creep feeder? Lemme see the flashlight.

QUINN

Like we speak different languages.

JIM

Well if you'd tried to speak--

QUINN

One brushed my leg!

JIM

Knock him away. (QUINN kicks at the darkness. A pig squeals.)

We'll put him back in the
pen when there's lights.

Hya pig! Giddy! Get!

QUINN

How'd he get out?

JIM

They climb. Sometimes they get pushed through the bars. I bet I know who that one is. He's a troublemaker.

QUINN

This isn't a way to live.

JIM

(Stopping the hose.)

Us, or them?

If you came in the barns when the system was on it'd be better. Smell's better.

QUINN

Why'd you say yes? When Arthur asked you-- When we got here, you could have had anything.

JIM

There was no equipment.

QUINN

If we had just sold the land, bought a house in town.

JIM

We're not having this discussion now. You told me, and told me--
Give me the flashlight.

(QUINN hands him a flashlight. He goes across the barn
and adjusts something in the dark.)

JIM

This is their legacy. You said that too. It's something they can value, something for decades. You were on board. You never said you didn't want it.

QUINN

It's eaten you up. It's all you do everyday, all the time. When you touch me sometimes I can feel you still thinking about this. I can see the inside of the barns in your face- it's in your hands and your hair. That's why I never come in here.
It's always with us, with the flies- the dead pigs in the yard when you're washing dishes. The smell of the pit or the smell of the incinerator. It isn't a job, a job is something you leave. This is your everything.

JIM

You are my everything!

QUINN

No! I'm- What am I then! What am I?
What do I look like in the dark?

JIM

You are why- And the kids.

QUINN

You never asked us though, did we want this. You told us like it was the only thing--

(TRACY enters in the dark with a gas can.)

TRACY

Dad! I got it.

JIM

Good, great. Let's fill her up quick.

QUINN

Why did you choose this?

JIM

I told you, for you.

QUINN

Leasing the livestock from somebody else? Living hand to mouth- hoof to mouth after two years. Still-

JIM

The longer I work the better it's going to get. We could build another barn.

QUINN

This is a white elephant. Ah!

(She kicks at a pig in the darkness. A squeal.)

JIM

Hya!

TRACY

Giddy!

JIM
Hya!

TRACY
Dad come on.

JIM
A white elephant's still an elephant. And it's ours. And no one can take that away.

QUINN
Wait-

(He exits. QUINN turns off her flashlight.

The chugging of a generator is heard, followed almost instantly by the rising hum of exhaust fans. Outside the barns, MAGGIE and TRACY play a game with the empty gas can. MAGGIE clutches the KITTENS, making them jump off the gas can, off of TRACY's shoulder. QUINN drifts towards them as JIM crosses with his guitar.)

QUINN
Wait.

JIM
I'll be in the nursery barns. Till MidAmerican comes. It calms the sows down, guitar. The generator makes 'em buck in their pen. They crush the babies.

QUINN
Wait.

(JIM reaches QUINN at her ribs. They breathe, suspended. He moves to kiss her neck but she ducks away like a reflex. He leaves.)

QUINN
Wait.

(She follows after him, but stops at the goose pen. FRANK stares at her.)
I'm sorry.

(FRANK goes back to pulling up grass.)

QUINN

It isn't enough for you, is it?

FRANK

(to himself)

hey, hey. where-hey.

QUINN

I'm sorry we put the garden in your pen. I don't even know why...

FRANK

Raccoons.

QUINN

And look at it, still. The tomatoes are getting destroyed.

FRANK

Hornworms. yup.

QUINN

You wouldn't even eat them, would you?

Frank?

Did we fail you? Did I fail you?

If I stayed in your pen looking east all the time it'd be the best place in the world. We could live just right here.

(She sits for a moment next to FRANK and looks at the view. Suddenly, she loses her breath. It's fallen somewhere in the grass or the garden. FRANK stares at her warily. She struggles to her feet, braces herself on the doghouse. She looks for her breath like a contact lens or a pearl on a darkened dance floor- a controlled franticness. It intensifies. FRANK makes room but she bends down and whispers him something.)

Keep them like that.

(She breaks from the pen and beelines off to the car.)

MAGGIE

Mom!

QUINN

Play fair.

MAGGIE

Are you going into town?

QUINN
Yeah.

TRACY
Can I come?

MAGGIE
Oh! Can I come?

QUINN
No. No, you two stay here. Watch your father.
(She takes the KITTENS from MAGGIE.)

KITTENS
Secret 61: On two tanks of gas you could be in Toronto.
You could be anything- a flight attendant, a secret agent, a hairdresser to the stars.

QUINN
Enough.

TRACY
What?

MAGGIE
Mom, what?

QUINN
You'll watch these for me too.
(She hands the KITTENS to MAGGIE.)

KITTENS
Quinn, wait! Are you going, so soon?

QUINN
Listen to them.

KITTENS
Bake us some cream puffs.

MAGGIE
Mom!

QUINN
But don't give them everything always.

KITTENS
Hey! No! Let us watch Law and Order! Make us cheese sandwiches!

TRACY

Wait!

KITTENS

Keep us in your pocket for always.

QUINN

I'll get you a Twix bar to share.

(She is gone. TRACY and MAGGIE chase after her for a second. They watch her drive off. They vanish in the opposite direction.)

Thunder crash. Ten years later. JIM sits at the dining room table with his guitar, a couple cups in.)

JIM

He took it all, in black and white

Grabbed his hand in his other hand- No.

Grabbed his wand in his other hand,

And he held on tight.

And he shook it like a hurricane

He shook it like to make it rain.

He shook it and he

Beat that steam drill

(He stops, looks around.

There is no one.)

Baby, with his soul at stake,

Soul at stake.

Soul at stake--

KITTENS

(unseen)

Beat that steam drill

(The phone rings. JIM lurches up, answers it.)

JIM

Hello?

....

Hello?

...

Hey! Hey!

fuckin.

(Lights to the KITTENS who stand on MAGGIE's hands ten years ago, still in the yard. She watches QUINN drive over the ridge.)

KITTENS

Secret 36: there's never a want that you can't overcome.

Liquor, cigarettes, or addiction to love? Gambling or lying or candy or coke?

Just take these desires from your heart and stomach, your lungs and your liver and throw them into the slough.

Remove them from your body, burn them in a trash fire or leave them at the bus station, with no ticket back into your life.

Forget them.

Find something else to take their place.

Yoga, religion, or lots of black coffee.

Zumba or golf or Reiki retreats.

You alone hold the secret to happiness.

To your own destiny.

Secret 48: Always move towards adventure

Be a passenger on a cargo ship.

Or drive with your eyes closed down a steep hill.

Go rock climbing. Go roleplaying. Go skydiving—

Maybe pick up a stranger in a strange bar, go down to a beach after dark and start a dance party and a fire in the sand drink warm beer and spinning, swim naked in sparkling dark phosphorescents and live.

Live.

Get started already.

(Lights shift back to ten years later. The phone rings. JIM grabs it up as SHAWN, TRACY and MAGGIE tramp drunkenly across the yard. They play a game similar to the one they were playing with the KITTENS and the gas can earlier, but with empty beer cans instead.)

JIM

Stop it! Stop it, stop it already!

Hello?

...

Hello?

(He slams the phone down as TRACY and SHAWN stumble into the dining room. MAGGIE trips in the yard. She staggers over, trying to regain her balance.)

JIM

Dad, you're up.

SHAWN

Who's callin' ya so late?

JIM

Nothing. It's nobody.

SHAWN

Crank calls. You remember crank calls? Kids still do that? Must not be as fun if you have your own phone. God phones, look at that phone. I miss phones. I miss not having a phone.

JIM

I'm going to bed.

(He shuffles off with the guitar.)

SHAWN

(a thick whisper)

Dude!

TRACY

I'm not doing it tonight.

It's fuckin' complicated, man. What's your mom say?

SHAWN

She doesn't want it anymore.

TRACY

Nuh-uh.

SHAWN

My dad's will was crap last year. Split the assets three ways?

She doesn't wanna live there with him gone. And you know how hard it is to take a girl from the bar when they gotta follow you twelve miles on a gravel road.

TRACY

Uh, yeah.

SHAWN

Yeah! You wanna do this for the rest of your life? Right? Does he? Where's your sister?

TRACY

I think she's outside still.

SHAWN

And like, you can't leave him to do it himself-

TRACY

He could hire someone.

SHAWN

-Cause he's just gonna think you're deserting him. You gotta sell it as a plus. Sell selling it // as a plus.

TRACY

I know.

SHAWN

You want something to drink? You got Coors still?

(In the goose pen, MAGGIE sits on the doghouse. Looking up at the moon. FRANK sleeps, his head tucked under his wing. Distant thunder.)

MAGGIE

Hey!

I want it to be summer all the time.

I want that moon to stay a big moon but just get brighter and brighter.

I want... Hey Tracy! Tracy! This moon is fucking crazy.

Frank, what do you want? You wanna fight with me?

I want t' take that fence down.

(She begins to pull up the low fence that separates the goose pen from the overgrown garden in its center.)

(FRANK wakes, it takes him a moment to assess what is happening.)

FRANK

hey.

Hey, Hey!

MAGGIE

Shh. It's gonna be so much better this way.

There'll be new weeds for you. Herbs gone to seed and all sorts of delicious- Look, is this wild cilantro?

FRANK

No. I'm guarding it still.

MAGGIE

I'm giving it back to you.

FRANK
No, it's not mine!

MAGGIE
Come, on. Come into it.

FRANK
Jim!

MAGGIE
Shh. No, come on goose, come here. Just see.

FRANK
No. NO. Hiss!

MAGGIE
Frank come on.

(She grabs at FRANK who dodges and flaps up his wings.
She trips backwards over something, spilling into the feral
garden.)

MAGGIE
Agh!

FRANK
Maggie?
Maggie?

(He limps a little ways into the garden, only to see she's alright.)

MAGGIE
I cut my ankle.
(She pulls a metal box from the weeds.)

FRANK
Hey. Hey that's not yours.

(MAGGIE opens the box. It is stuffed with letters,
addressed to Quinn Crowder and all marked red with
Return to Sender. MAGGIE tears one open.)

MAGGIE
Dear Quinn,

FRANK
Don't read it.

MAGGIE
My head is full of your nose still.
(She stops, looks around.)
This is Dad's.

JIM
(offstage)
My head is full of your nose still.

JIM
And the way your mouth loves over your teeth,
(JIM appears in a separate light. Maybe he's in the barn in boots and boxers.
Maybe he sits right next to TRACY at the table though they don't see him. He
writes.)
Like a curtain being pulled up. -
Sometimes I wake up thinking I smell you.
Or sometimes, I can feel your hand on my thigh.

FRANK
Put it back!

MAGGIE
We can't read this.

JIM
Slender, like
Hands a deer would have, if deer had hands.
-Does that make sense? -

JIM and MAGGIE
Sometimes I think

JIM
you'll come back to me in my sleep. And snap my neck with your slender deer hands.
I have dreams where you're an astronaut. Flying above the barns.
But I'm still here in the front yard and thinking about your nose.
I'm-

JIM and MAGGIE
not the reason you left.

JIM
The kids are good, growing bigger. And everything still misses you.
James.
(JIM vanishes.)

MAGGIE

There's so many of them.

FRANK

Put them back. He wants them to stay planted.

MAGGIE

They never talked like that. He never even talks about her, ever.

FRANK

You don't know your father.

MAGGIE

Would he miss us like that if we left?

FRANK

You people always love what's left you most. Ingrates, all of you! Not me. Not me I know how to appreciate what I've got.

My pool. My grass and crickets and corn.

Put the fence and the box back now. You don't need anything new.

(Thunder smash. Lights shift to ten years before. JIM storms across the yard with a loose bundle of QUINN's belongings. He throws them in the incinerator- a rusted barrel with a top panel cut out. TRACY and MAGGIE flank him. MAGGIE clutches the KITTENS to her ear. There is a nearly indistinguishable sound of AM talk radio.)

JIM

Alright. There's room. Get the rest of it. Tracy- bring me her pile from the coat closet.

(TRACY shakes his head. MAGGIE presses the KITTENS against her ear.)

JIM

Come on!

Maggie.

MAGGIE

No.

(JIM grabs the KITTENS from her and throws them into the barrel.)

MAGGIE
NO!

(She breaks towards the barrel but TRACY catches her and pushes her back awkwardly. He looks away from her, off into the field as he slowly makes ground.

JIM takes off his wedding ring, throws it into the barrel and lights the pile ablaze. It catches flame fast, much quicker than dead pigs burning. They are all taken a little aback.

MAGGIE stops pushing. She watches. TRACY goes off and returns with a pile of coats. He hands them to JIM who sets them gently in the barrel. They watch it all burn.

Lightning across the sky. Ten years later. SHAWN and TRACY have taken over the table. They're drunker than before and they pass JIM's bottle of whiskey back and forth. They're watching an old episode of *Columbo*. Maybe the one where John Casavetes plays the evil pianist. We hear remnants of Peter Falk.)

TRACY
This is the best episode.

SHAWN
Ok, once when he says, "Just one more thing."

TRACY
Sure.

SHAWN
Once when he puts a cigar in his mouth.

TRACY
That's all the time!

SHAWN
What else?

TRACY

Once when he mentions his wife. And twice if he gets an autograph for her.

SHAWN

You should tell him tonight.

TRACY

Cigar.

(They both drink.)

SHAWN

Y'know? Like a band-aid, dude.

TRACY

Twice if his dog solves the crime.

SHAWN

You hear me?

TRACY

I don't think he's up.

SHAWN

Jim!

TRACY

Shh! Would you stop?

SHAWN

They didn't do the dog thing till season 3.

(MAGGIE enters with the metal box of letters. She sets them on the table.)

TRACY

Once if the rich guilty person catches them in their house and he plays it off. And twice if he falls asleep in their house. And plays it off.

SHAWN

Wife. Jim!

TRACY

SHHH!

(They drink.)

MAGGIE

Once when he puts a cigar in his mouth.

SHAWN

We said that.

(MAGGIE pushes the box of letters across the table to TRACY.)

TRACY

Was-this?

MAGGIE

They were in the garden.

SHAWN

He's sleeping in the house.

(They drink twice.)

MAGGIE

He wrote to her. Look. All the addresses are different. They all came back.

SHAWN

That's a lot a letters.

TRACY

Why'd he put 'em in the garden?

MAGGIE

He knew where she was. He knows.

TRACY

No.

SHAWN

Cigar cigar.

(They drink.)

TRACY

If he knew where she was then why'd they come back? Who doesn't want their mail? Only people who don't live where they live get their mail sent back. And sometimes not even that.

(The phone rings. TRACY stumbles and answers it.)

TRACY
Hello? ...
Hello?

SHAWN
Crank call, man. Fuckin crank call.

TRACY
You remember we got all that mail for that lady that used to live here? Sandy Anderson?
No. That wasn't it.
I don't think we ever returned it.

MAGGIE
What if he's seen her since then? Maybe he learns where she lives and he writes and it always gets there just after she's left. But he knows every address.

TRACY
Yeah. That's a lot of letters.
I gotta go for a minute.
(He stumbles outside, vomits next to the goose pen.)

SHAWN
Awe. Buddy?

(He follows TRACY outside, watches. TRACY finishes, rests against the doghouse. They both kinda stand for a minute.)

SHAWN
You got it out, dude?

TRACY
I couldn't even finish Columbo.

SHAWN

This is why you should tell your dad sooner. Cause you can say whatever when you're toasted and you say it totally eloquent. Remember when you convinced that chick from ISU that you were on Wheel of Fortune? Everyone believed you. *I* believed you.

TRACY

This isn't a game show.

SHAWN

I know, dude.

TRACY

Why can't we just sample it out first? Like for a month. Like sample feed. Sample hybrid. Plant just a bit in Chicago. Just like a corner acre.

SHAWN

That's not how it works.

TRACY

We should just sleep on it. Sleep with it. Sleep on it. Shawn?

JIM

Sleep on what?

(JIM appears in his nightclothes, walking up from the barns. He surprises them.)

SHAWN

What?

JIM

Were you sick on yourself?

TRACY

I'm fine. Fine.

JIM

I thought I left the feed latch open. I didn't.

TRACY

Dad, you gotta..

(He finds a way to get himself up. He's still pretty trashed.)
The truck's gonna come early tomorrow.

JIM

What? We still got three weeks on the finishers.
You want your herd underweight?

SHAWN

The price of hogs // is real high right now...

JIM

Phooey the price of hogs! You sell 'em for less than market weight you're shooting us all in the foot. You straighten it out with Farmland?

SHAWN

Um...

JIM

Or you talked to somebody else? Hormel maybe—

TRACY

Dad, we're too small for // Hormel.

JIM

-Or ConAgra? Tracy? You talk to ConAgra?

SHAWN

The thing about it—

TRACY

They'll only offer us seventy percent. Sixty percent. They'll only offer us fifty percent of what we have now and then in two years—
It's not worth it. It's time to get out.

JIM

No, we still have the hundred growers and the babies coming up. We got six months at least to find a new buyer.
You boys want some coffee? I'll make you // some coffee.

SHAWN

No, I called a guy in Benton County who's gonna buy the whole stock.

JIM

What?

SHAWN

He's coming on Tuesday.

TRACY

What? Wait to take everything?

SHAWN

That's what you asked for.

JIM

Tracy?

TRACY

I didn't--

SHAWN

The truck's coming tomorrow then he said he'd come Tuesday to get it appraised.

JIM

You can't just sell off my herd.

TRACY

To take the everything all at once?

SHAWN

That's what you asked for! And it's not- it's not *your* herd. You are a contractor. Jim-- Mr. Crowder. It's not your herd.

JIM

I'm not selling.

TRACY

When were you gonna tell me?

SHAWN

You don't own it.

JIM

I'm not selling!

TRACY

Dad-

JIM

I'm keeping the tractor.

SHAWN

We bought the tractor! I'll give you a greater cut of the hogs cause I know it seems sudden. But Tracy // was--

JIM

Garbage.

Garbage! You're a snake!

TRACY

Dad, dad, dad--

(He blows his nose, it's worse than before.)

SHAWN

Dude, you see. See?

JIM

Ok, so we'll just get a loan. I'll call ConAgra myself.

If he's gonna sell, we need a lawyer. We're gotta sort out what's theirs from what's ours. Start up again and build something that's bigger and stronger, more foolproof and streamlined till your family will wish // that they--

TRACY

Wait, wait. Dad. You don't--

SHAWN

He can't start it up again cause he's moving.

(The phone rings again in the dining room, louder than before, as if ringing in stereo.)

MAGGIE answers the stereo phone. QUINN appears somewhere far away- the very back of the theatre, or the edge of a field.)

MAGGIE

Hello.

QUINN

Margret?

MAGGIE

...

QUINN

Maggie?

That you?

MAGGIE
Hello.

QUINN
You sound like a lady.

MAGGIE
Oh.

QUINN
How are you?

MAGGIE
Um
I'm fine.

QUINN
I was just gonna leave a message. I didn't think anybody'd be up so late. Are you visiting there? Or you live there still?
You going to school? Your dad always wanted.. It's your first year, right?
You in at UI?

MAGGIE
Sure.

QUINN
Maggie that's great. Um. What are you studying?

MAGGIE
Kinesiology.

QUINN
Oh. Are you tall? Or?
What do you look like--

MAGGIE
I cut off my hair.

QUINN
I bet you look beautiful. Sometimes, I look online for you guys. But I'm not very good at it.

MAGGIE

Where are you?

QUINN

How's your brother doing? He in school as well?

MAGGIE

He's gonna move to Chicago.

QUINN

Chicago? Did he get a job there? He go to UI as well?

MAGGIE

Where are you?

QUINN

I just wanted to leave a message. I just wanted to see if this number was still... Funny how I can't remember any new number now but I still know every number from before there was cell phones. Does that happen to you?

MAGGIE

Just tell me the state.

QUINN

I had wanted to call. I think about you.

MAGGIE

If you don't say, I'm just gonna press star six nine.

And I can do a reverse cell phone search on pipl.com if you pay \$60 I can get your billing address so I'll know where you live right now and I'll go come and find you and see if you have another family that's better than us and see if your life is better or richer or way more fun or more adventurous if you look how you look in my head cause we burned all your pictures.

QUINN

Is your father doing alright?

MAGGIE

I'll get him!

QUINN

No! no.

I'm just checking in.

Do you still have the goose?

MAGGIE

...

QUINN

Maggie, you still have the goose?

Remember how I told you how we got him?

In a poker game? And he was so feisty.

When your dad brought that shovel to the garden and we didn't know.

MAGGIE

You got him from someone who got him in a poker game.

QUINN

Right, that's right.

You still have the garden?

Y'know that fence is there so he doesn't fall on it. He'd eat some of it too but it's mostly there because he was falling on it before.

You still feed him greens, right? Along with the corn?

Maggie? Maggie-

MAGGIE

He doesn't miss you.

(She slams down the phone. She stops, dials *69. She writes down the number on the wall. The sound of AM talk radio. MAGGIE runs to the yard.)

JIM

I'm not talking to you till I get a lawyer. Tracy, go get the contract.

TRACY

No, dad look--

JIM

Contractors still have rights. I worked with your father for 13 years. There's a *time* allotment for changing the terms. Half a season.

TRACY

Dad, I'm // moving.

MAGGIE

Dad, she called.

JIM
What?

MAGGIE
She called.

SHAWN
We got—

JIM
Like to live there?

TRACY
I did the math.
If you lease out the fields, without the overhead you'll be fine. If you drain the pit and rent the barns as storage, you could retire.

MAGGIE
Dad!

JIM
This is your legacy. You and me.

TRACY
Shawn's selling his farm. Like the whole thing over there- all of their acreage.

JIM
Your mother says that's what she wants?

SHAWN
She doesn't wanna run the elevators by herself. We're gonna get her a condo in Coralville.

MAGGIE
The phone rang, like it does and I picked it up and it wasn't no one it was her. It was her!

JIM
Why didn't you tell me you wanted this?

MAGGIE
Dad, I hung up on her.

JIM
What do you mean, you're moving?

TRACY
I got a place in Chicago.

(TRACY blows his nose.)

JIM

Who wanted to cancel the contract?

SHAWN

Look, it's our contract, ultimately.

TRACY

It's all headed in that direction.

JIM

Was it them or was it Farmland? You or Farmland?

SHAWN

You saw the letter from // Dave.

JIM

You or Farmland? Huh? Was it you?

TRACY

I think this'll get better if I go.

JIM

It's a summer cold.

TRACY

It's not a cold! I can feel it under my eyes at night. It's growing, down, into my throat. I don't know what I'm made of here. I don't know what it is to not be here even. I wanna live by people, or cars. Be just surrounded by people.

You say this is our legacy but why, dad? For what?

I wanna give this to someone?

Maggie- you wanna give this to someone?

There's all this pressure, between my nose and my brain. Like a collection of pins in my head. I know it's not me here. I'm from here, but the lines of me and the lines of this farm don't all go the same way all the time like they seem to with you. Even if I *know* it--

JIM

Tracy, you're being dramatic.

TRACY

We're gonna come back. For Christmas, or like, way more than that. It's only four hours and if you just tried something else.

I talked to this guy in town at the free clinic? He said, sometimes it's lifestyle. Life choices. Things like this- the pressure right by my eyes and my throat. If you just change how you live...

I can show you the math.

(JIM exits into the house.)

MAGGIE

Tracy what the hell.

SHAWN

Good job dude, how are you feeling?

TRACY

Let's go.

MAGGIE

No!

SHAWN

Not like now.

TRACY

Let's just drive over there.

SHAWN

It's like three in the morning. And I'm up to my face in whiskey.

TRACY

We'll get there by sunrise.

MAGGIE

You can't just spring it on him // and leave.

TRACY

Give you the keys.

MAGGIE

No! Tracy wait.

SHAWN

Wait, let's wait.

TRACY

Let's go. Let's see it. I wanna see it.

You can come and visit. You wanna leave too? You could come and stay with us, right?
She could crash on our couch? Till you find somewhere.

MAGGIE

He's not gonna have enough hands without you.

TRACY

He'll be fine.

Dude, give me your keys.

MAGGIE

Tracy--

TRACY

Give me your keys!

We'll call you this week.

(He exits with SHAWN. JIM sits at the table. The whiskey is nearing empty. The muffled sound of hogs.)

JIM

(Calling pigs)

Get.

get. get.

MAGGIE

(Sitting on the doghouse.)

Giddy.

Get.

Giddy.

Pig!

get.

get.

Get

Get.

(The rumbling sound of an 18 wheeler- an aerated trailer ready for hogs. It shakes the farm. JIM and MAGGIE rise to it. Daybreak.)

MAGGIE

Dad? The truck's // here.

JIM

I see it.

MAGGIE

Want me to get the paperwork?

JIM

Those finishers are gonna be so small.

MAGGIE

I'll get the paperwork.

(MAGGIE and JIM form a makeshift hog run- running the pigs up into the truck.

A hundred invisible hogs run from the confinement barn out into the air. Breath after breath as they hit the outside for the first time. The invisible pigs move like a river of muscle. The air shakes. The ground shakes. Like four hundred hooves running over a pallet.

The sound is immediate- right in front of them, and around them. They brace themselves against the river.)

JIM

Get.

MAGGIE

Giddy.

JIM

Hyah!

Get!

g'won.

Giddy.

get. get. get.

(The KITTENS call with them from offstage.)

KITTEN

Get!

Giddy

up

Giddy

Go

Hya!

get

Pig

Giddy

Up

MAGGIE

go on!

Pig!

giddy

go

giddy

Pig!

go on!

come on

get on

up

JIM

Up pig.

Up, up.

pig, pig!

go

up pig!

hya!

Pig, come on

up, up.

giddy

up

KITTEN

Get

Hya!

Go on!

go, go!

G'won!

Come on!

up, up!

Get

up

up

go on	up	go on	up
up			up
	go on	come on	
get on			giddy
up	hya!	move on	giddy
giddy	get!		get!
come on		pig, pig!	get
pig	get, get!	up	up
up	up	up	get
get	get	get	get
get			get
	get	get	
get	get	get	get
get, get	get, get	get, get	get, get
get	get	get	get

(The truck drives off. They watch it go. They go inside and clear the table, setting it for breakfast.

The KITTENS approach the audience. Maybe they sit on the edge of the stage, maybe they're looking right at us. Their presentational quality is absent right now. There's something casual. Like we've caught them smoking a cigarette out behind the theatre. Like they're really just asking us.)

KITTENS

Hey.

What's the hungriest you've ever been?

In your whole entire life?

Were you walking on a trail with no trail mix?

Or working all day?

Or were you riding on an endless bus trip?

Were you in prison?

Secret 57: Remember the best meal you ever had.

Who were you with?

What did you eat? How did it taste when it landed first on your tongue?

Was it dorado, pulled right out of the sea? Or cornmeal lavender wedding cake?

Was it tomatoes?

Are you still trying to think of it?

Just clear your head and it'll come.

Remember?

(Breakfast. JIM and MAGGIE sit at breakfast. The letters sit on the table.)

MAGGIE

Dad-

JIM

Do you think I don't do this well?

MAGGIE

I don't think—I think you do great.

I'm not going to Kirkwood. I could help out here if you want, or get another job and help to cover the difference. But I don't wanna go.

JIM

Do what you want.

MAGGIE

Why are there so many letters?

JIM

You want some coffee?

MAGGIE

Why did you send them to so many places? Only people who don't live where they live get their mail sent back. Did she move and you knew? Did she talk to you or tell you where?

JIM

I don't have an address.

I think of numbers I thought she might like. Cities that sound like she'd live there.

They're gambles. Just, ideas. Not all of them come back.

MAGGIE

Is Grandma Larkins dead?

JIM

I don't know Maggie, I haven't seen her in a decade. You want some coffee?

MAGGIE

I'm not leaving.

Dad?

I'll get two jobs.

JIM

You can do what you want.

(He exits towards the barns.)

(MAGGIE stays at the table. She looks through the letters.
Lights shift to the goose pen. FRANK pokes around his
pen. He checks the sky. He cocks his head and listens.)

FRANK

Right when they go it's so quiet-quiet.

Everything hums the same, still.

The fans in the barns.

The crunch-crunch from the breeder field. From the nursery barn and the grower pigs.

The soft snorts underneath.

You hear there's something missing. Something less. Less!

Hear?

A hundred less living bodies pressed against us all. Up against each other in those hot,
low barns and now they're out. Now they're sailing in an enormous, metal ox. Down a
fast freeway, all wind all around them, metal under their feet and bumpy shifting road
towards what's next and what's unknown and new.

Hear it? Room!

Room more room for me. More air for me, and I can hear it. Hear it?

(He listens.)

She said, "Where would you go, if you could go anywhere? Hm?"

I said nothing.

She said, "I want to turn into a comet. I want to be made out of light, so nothing can
touch me and I can move fast anywhere, over enormous distances to places I didn't even
know I was going and no one will even miss me."

But really though. I know really. Really.

Comets are rocks.

Not made of light.

They crash into the fields, or sink in the ocean and stay.

(At the table, MAGGIE has been reading through the
letters, half a dozen or so open.

She finds something in her reading. She starts, up from the
table and stumbles down into FRANK's pen.)

FRANK

Hey.

MAGGIE

Frank..

(She crawls inside of the doghouse. She backs out of it with the KITTENS in hand. They're covered in dirt and charred from the burning barrel.)

KITTENS

You have the power to get what you want.

MAGGIE

I knew it.

FRANK

Hey!

KITTENS

You want to be held so tight you can't breathe? You want to fall asleep in the back of the car and have somebody carry you inside?

FRANK

Maggie, I told you- keep them buried.

KITTENS

Secret 47:

MAGGIE

They used to be bigger.

KITTENS

Every day you're closer to death.

FRANK

Put them back. He put them in there, put them back!

KITTENS

You want to join with your herd or your flock? Stay in the center where nothing can harm you? No wolves or foxes to pick you right out.

MAGGIE

Give me another.

(The shadow of Canada geese flying overhead. FRANK hears them.)

FRANK
Hey!

KITTENS
Secret 51:

FRANK
Hey! Hey, it's me!

KITTENS
Everything migrates eventually.

FRANK
Stop! Stop, pool- my pool, grass!

KITTENS
Sometimes you simply aren't built for each other.

FRANK
Hey. Hey! HEY!
(He's managed to climb on top of the doghouse, flapping at the sky.)

KITTENS
You want your hair done in a tight French braid. You want someone to clean and salve your scraped knees. Someone to pull you up by your arms and hold you small in their large, warm lap.

FRANK
Look, look! Crickets and corn!

KITTENS
You want to be smaller.

MAGGIE
No-

KITTEN
Secret 64:
We'll always be marked by where we're grown.
Sown from the soil like hybrid seed corn.

FRANK
Hey!

(From the house, JIM sees FRANK in distress. He crosses quickly.)

FRANK
I know that flock, they're all my friends!

JIM
Frank- Stop. Calm down.

FRANK
Hiss!

KITTENS
68:

MAGGIE
That's enough.

JIM
Frank come on.

FRANK
Stay back!

(In the house, the phone begins ringing. The geese get louder. The sound of the AM radio rises.)

KITTENS
In the end we all move like magnets, drawn and repelled with no real loyalty.

MAGGIE
No, that's not true.

KITTENS
Would you even be a better mother? Would you ever have the gall to find out?

FRANK
Look, look!

MAGGIE f
I have my whole life ahead of me.

FRANK
Here!
I'm down here!

KITTENS

You could be anywhere.

JIM

Frank, let me get you!

MAGGIE

I want to be here!

FRANK

Here! Please!

KITTENS

Where do you keep that tacit resilience?

FRANK

Look, wait!

MAGGIE

You can't have it!

(JIM grabs FRANK who struggles ferociously.)

KITTENS

Set us inside your desire. Right in the center.

Let us into the pit of your heart till it can't help but wander lost and looking.

Till you fly off to join with a skein of geese, a murder of crows, a lost fever of stingrays-

(JIM plunges FRANK into the kiddie pool as MAGGIE
throws the KITTENS to the floor. They smash into shards.)

FRANK

Where are they going?

JIM

Here you go buddy.

FRANK

hey.

JIM

There you go.

FRANK

hey. Jim.

(He dunks his head and water streams down his back.)
Jim. jim.

JIM
There you go.

FRANK
hey.

(JIM kneels, putting his arms in FRANK's pool.

MAGGIE goes into the house. She looks at the number on the wall and dials. QUINN appears in a different location. Perhaps she's incredibly close. Sitting on the doghouse, or steps from the table. Maybe she's out in the south field, though maybe it's just the sun.)

QUINN
Hello?

MAGGIE
I have something to send you.

(Lights black, except for a spot on the shards of the KITTENS. They speak from the pile.)

KITTENS
Secret number 70:
Everything in the world is held together with super-glue and porcelain paint.
And chewing gum and framing nails.
To a slightly lesser degree.
Nearly everything is mendable, yes?
As long as you don't mind the cracks.
Seventy one, a bonus secret:
Anywhere you go in this wide blue world,
someone will be there waiting for you.
Even if they don't know it yet.
You wanna meet them, don't you?
Don't you?
They really are the greatest.
Go on then. Go meet them.
Meet them.
Go.

End of play.

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